

Social Cognitive Theory of Human Development

Theories of human development differ in their conceptions of human nature and what they regard as the basic determinants and mechanisms of personal adaptation and change. This entry analyzes human development from the perspective of social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986). Development is not a monolithic process. Human capabilities vary in their psychobiologic origins and in the experiences needed to develop and maintain those capabilities. Human development, therefore, includes many different types and patterns of changes. Diversity in social practices produces substantial individual differences in the competencies, interests, and values that are cultivated and those that remain underdeveloped.

1. Model of Causation

Prior to an analysis of the capabilities that govern human development, the model of causation on which social cognitive theory is founded is reviewed briefly. This theory explains human adaptation and change in terms of triadic reciprocal causation. In this causal model, environmental influences, behavior, and cognitive, biological, and other personal factors operate as interacting determinants that alter each other. Through this process of two-way causation, people are both producers and products of their environment.

When human development is viewed from a life-span perspective, the influential determinants include a varied succession of life events that differ in their power to affect the direction lives take (Brim and Ryff 1980). Many of these determinants include age-graded social influences that are provided by custom within familial, educational, and other institutional systems. Some life events involve biological conditions that contribute to the course of human development. Other life events are unpredictable occurrences in the physical environment. Still others involve irregular life events such as career changes, divorce, migration, accidents and illnesses.

Social and technological changes alter, often considerably, the kinds of life events that become customary in the society. Major sociocultural changes that make life markedly different, such as economic adversities that alter livelihoods and opportunity structures, military conflicts, cultural upheavals, new technologies, and political changes that modify the character of the society can have strong impact on life courses. Life experiences under the same sociocultural conditions at a given time will differ for people who encounter them at different points in their life span (Elder 1981).

Whatever the social conditions might be, there is still the task of explaining the varied directions that personal lives take at any given time and place. This

requires a personal, as well as a social, analysis of life paths. In addition to the prevailing sociocultural influences, people are often brought together through a fortuitous constellation of events that can shape the course of their lives (Bandura 1982). There are many fortuitous elements in the events people encounter in their daily lives. Indeed, some of the most important determinants of life paths often arise through the most trivial of circumstances.

Psychology does not have much to say about the occurrence of fortuitous encounters, except that personal attributes and particular social affiliations and milieus make some types of encounters more probable than others. However, psychology can provide the basis for predicting the nature, scope, and strength of the impact that fortuitous encounters will have on human lives. Many chance encounters touch people only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others thrust people into new trajectories of life. The power of fortuitous influences to initiate enduring personal changes is determined by the reciprocal influence of personal attributes and social factors. These interactive determinants have been extensively analyzed elsewhere (Bandura 1982).

In social cognitive theory, people are neither driven by inner forces nor shaped and controlled by the environment. As already seen, people function as influential contributors to their own development and psychosocial functioning within a network of reciprocally interacting influences. Individuals are characterized within this theoretical perspective in terms of a number of basic capabilities, which are reviewed next.

2. Symbolizing Capability

Social cognitive theory assigns a central role to cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes in human development and functioning. The remarkable capacity for symbolization provides humans with a powerful tool for comprehending their environment and for creating and regulating environmental conditions that touch virtually every aspect of their lives. Most environmental influences operate through cognitive processes. Cognitive factors partly determine which environmental events will be observed, what meaning will be conferred on them, whether they leave any lasting effects, what emotional impact and motivating power they will have, and how the information they convey will be organized for future use. It is with symbols that people process and transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for reasoning and action. With the aid of symbols, people give structure, meaning, and continuity to their experiences.

People gain understanding and expand their knowledge by operating symbolically on the information derived from personal and vicarious experi-

ences. The remarkable flexibility of symbolization enables people to create ideas that transcend their sensory experiences. Through the medium of symbols they can communicate with others at any distance in time and space. However, in keeping with the interactional perspective, social cognitive theory devotes much attention to the social origins of thought and the mechanisms through which social factors exert their influence on cognitive functioning.

3. Vicarious Capability

Psychological theories have traditionally emphasized learning through the effects of exploratory actions. If knowledge and skills could be acquired only by direct experience, human development would be greatly retarded, not to mention exceedingly tedious and hazardous. A culture could never transmit its language, mores, social practices, and adaptive competencies if they had to be shaped laboriously in each new member by response consequences without the benefit of models who exemplify the cultural patterns. The abbreviation of the acquisition process through modeling is vital for survival as well as for human development because natural endowment provides few inborn skills, and errors can be hazardous. Moreover, the constraints of time, resources, and mobility impose severe limits on the situations and activities that can be directly explored for the acquisition of new knowledge and competencies.

3.1 Primacy and Scope of Modeling Differences

Humans have evolved an advanced capacity for observational learning that enables them to expand their knowledge and skills rapidly on the basis of information conveyed by modeling influences. Indeed, virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning resulting from direct experience can occur vicariously by observing people's behavior and its consequences for them (Bandura 1986, Rosenthal and Zimmerman 1978).

Much learning occurs either deliberately or inadvertently by observation of people in one's environment. However, a vast amount of information about human values, thinking skills, and behavior is gained from models in the mass media. A major significance of symbolic modeling lies in its wide-reaching influence. Unlike learning by doing, which requires shaping the actions of each individual through repeated trial-and-error experiences, in observational learning a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to many people in widely dispersed places. People's conceptions of social reality depend heavily on vicarious experiences, by what they see and hear (Adoni and Mane 1984, Signorielli and Morgan 1990). The more their images of reality rely upon the media's symbolic environment, the greater is its social impact (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976).

Most psychological theories were formulated long before the advent of the enormous advances in the technology of communication. As a result, they ignore the increasingly powerful role the symbolic environment plays in present-day human lives. Whereas previously, modeling influences were largely confined to the behavior patterns exhibited in a person's immediate environment, televised modeling has vastly expanded the range of models to which members of society are exposed day in and day out. By drawing on these modeled patterns of thought and behavior, observers transcend the bounds of their immediate environment. New ideas and social practices are now being rapidly diffused by symbolic modeling within a society and from one society to another (Bandura 1986, Rogers 1982). Because television occupies a large part of people's lives, the study of acculturation in the present electronic era must be broadened to include electronic acculturation.

3.2 Subfunctions of Observational Learning

Observational learning is governed by four subfunctions. *Attentional processes* determine what is observed and extracted from the profusion of modeling influences. People cannot be greatly influenced by models if they do not remember what they have seen. A second major subfunction governing observational learning involves *cognitive representational and memory processes*. In the third subfunction in modeling—the *behavioral production process*—symbolic conceptions are translated into appropriate courses of action. This is achieved through a conception-matching process in which conceptions guide the construction and execution of behavior patterns. Skills are then perfected by corrective adjustments until actions match conceptions. The fourth subfunction in modeling concerns *motivational processes*. People do not perform everything they learn. Performance of observationally learned behavior is influenced by three major types of incentive motivators: *direct outcomes*, *vicarious outcomes* of observed consequences of others, and *self-evaluative outcomes* toward one's own conduct.

Modeling is not a process of behavioral mimicry. Rather, modeling influences convey rules for generative and innovative behavior. This higher-level learning is achieved through abstract modeling in which observers extract the rules governing the modeled judgments and action. Through abstract modeling, people acquire linguistic rules of communication, standards for categorizing and judging events, thinking skills on how to gain and use knowledge, gender role conceptions and personal standards for regulating one's own motivation and conduct (Bandura 1986, Rosenthal and Zimmerman 1978).

3.3 Diverse Effects of Modeling

The discussion thus far has centered on the acquisition of knowledge, cognitive skills, and new styles of behavior through observational learning. Modeling has diverse effects, each governed by different determinants and underlying mechanisms. In addition to cultivating new competencies, modeling influences can strengthen or weaken restraints over behavior patterns that have been previously learned. Modeling affects restraints by the information it conveys about the probable rewarding or punishing consequences of modeled courses of action (Walters 1968).

People are easily aroused by the emotional expressions of others. What gives significance to vicarious emotional arousal is that observers can acquire lasting attitudes, emotional reactions, and behavioral proclivities toward persons, places, or things that have been associated with modeled emotional experiences. Individuals learn to fear the things that frightened others, to dislike what repulsed them, and to like what gratified them (Bandura 1986). The actions of models can also serve as social prompts that activate, channel, and support previously learned behavior. Thus, the types of models that prevail within a social milieu partly determine which human qualities, from among many alternatives, are selectively encouraged. In sum, modeling influences serve diverse functions as tutors, inhibitors, disinhibitors, social prompters, emotion arousers, and shapers of values and conceptions of reality.

4. Forethought Capability

Another distinctive human characteristic is the capability for forethought. People do not simply react to their immediate environment, nor are they steered by their past. Most human behavior, being purposive, is regulated by forethought. The future time perspective manifests itself in many different ways. People anticipate the likely consequences of prospective actions, they set goals for themselves, and they plan courses of action that are likely to produce desired outcomes and avoid detrimental ones. Through exercise of forethought, people motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily. The capacity for intentional and purposive action is rooted in symbolic activity. Future events cannot be causes of current motivation and action because they have no actual existence. However, by being represented cognitively in the present, foreseeable future events are converted into current motivators and regulators of behavior.

Human behavior is extensively regulated by its effects. Behavior patterns that produce positive outcomes are readily adopted and used, whereas those that bring unrewarding or punishing outcomes are generally discarded. However, external consequences are not the only kind of outcomes that

influence human behavior. People profit from the successes and mistakes of others as well as from their own experiences. As a general rule, they do things they have seen succeed and avoid those they have seen fail. However, observed outcomes exert their influence through perceived similarity that one is likely to experience similar outcomes for similar courses of action and that one possesses the capabilities to achieve similar performances (Bandura 1986). People also influence their own motivation and behavior by the positive and negative consequences they produce for themselves. This mode of self-regulation will be considered later.

Because outcomes exert their influence through forethought, they have little or no impact until people discover how outcomes are linked to actions in their environment. This is no easy matter. In everyday life, actions usually produce mixed effects, they may occur immediately or far removed in time, the same behavior may produce different effects depending on where, when, and toward whom it is performed, and many situational factors influence how actions affect the environment. Such causal ambiguity provides a fertile ground for misjudgment. When belief about the effects of actions differs from actuality, behavior is weakly controlled by its actual consequences until repeated experience instills realistic beliefs. Yet it is not always one's beliefs that change in the direction of social reality. Acting on erroneous beliefs can alter how others behave, thus shaping the social reality in the direction of the misbeliefs (Snyder 1981).

5. Self-regulatory Capability

People are not simply knowers and performers. They are also self-reactors with a capacity for self-direction. Successful development requires the gradual substitution of internal regulation and direction for external sanctions and mandates. Once the capability for self-direction is developed, self-demands and self-sanctions serve as major guides, motivators, and deterrents. In the absence of internal standards and self-sanctions, individuals would behave like weather vanes, constantly shifting direction to conform to whatever momentary influence happened to impinge upon them.

The self-regulation of motivation, affect, and action operates partly through internal standards and evaluative reactions to one's own behavior (Bandura 1991a). The anticipated self-satisfaction gained from fulfilling valued standards provides one source of incentive motivation for personal accomplishments. Self-dissatisfaction with substandard performances serves as another incentive motivator for enhanced effort. The motivational effects do not stem from the standards themselves, but rather from the fact that people respond evaluatively to their own behavior.

5.1 Motivational Standards

Most theories of self-regulation are founded on a

negative feedback system. In this view discrepancy between one's perceived performance and an adopted standard motivates action to reduce the disparity. However, self-regulation by negative discrepancy tells only half the story and not necessarily the more interesting half. In fact, people are proactive, aspiring organisms. Human self-regulation relies on discrepancy production as well as discrepancy reduction. People motivate and guide their actions by setting themselves challenging goals and then mobilizing their skills and effort to reach them. After people attain the goal they have been pursuing, those with a strong sense of efficacy set higher goals for themselves. Adopting further challenges creates new motivating discrepancies to be mastered.

5.2 Social and Moral Self-regulatory Standards

In areas of functioning involving achievement strivings and cultivation of competencies, the internal standards that are selected as a mark of adequacy are progressively raised as knowledge and skills are acquired and challenges are met. In many areas of social and moral behavior the internal standards that serve as the basis for regulating one's conduct have greater stability. In other words, people do not change from week to week what they regard as right or wrong or good or bad. After they adopt a standard of morality, their self-sanctions for actions that match or violate their personal standards serve as the regulatory influences (Bandura 1991b). People do things that give them self-satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because it will bring self-disapproval. Self-sanctions thus keep conduct in line with internal standards.

Moral standards do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct. Self-regulatory mechanisms do not operate unless they are activated, and there are many processes by which moral reactions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct (Bandura 1986, 1991b). Selective activation and disengagement of internal control permits different types of conduct with the same moral standards. One set of mechanisms disengages moral control by moral justification. What is culpable is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral purposes. Self-deplored acts can also be made righteous by advantageous comparison with more flagrant inhumanities. Euphemistic language provides another convenient device for masking reprehensible activities or even conferring a respectable status upon them.

Self-sanctions are activated most strongly when personal causation of detrimental effects is apparent. Another set of disengagement practices operates by obscuring or distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause. This is achieved by displacement of responsibility for detrimental conduct to others, or by diffusing responsibility through

division of labor, group decision-making and group action. Additional ways of weakening deterring self-sanctions operate through disregard or distortion of the consequences of action. As long as the detrimental results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, distorted, or disbelieved there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.

The final set of disengagement practices operates on how perpetrators view the people they harm. Self-sanctions against cruel conduct can be disengaged or blunted by dehumanization, which divests people of human qualities or invests them with bestial qualities. Attribution of blame to victims is still another expedient that can serve self-exonerative purposes. By blaming victims or circumstances, not only are one's own actions excusable but one can even feel self-righteous in the process. Because internalized controls can be selectively activated and disengaged, marked changes in moral conduct can be achieved without altering people's personality structures, moral principles or self-evaluative systems.

6. Self-reflective Capability

The capability for self-reflection concerning one's own thinking and personal efficacy is another attribute that receives prominent attention in social cognitive theory. Effective cognitive functioning requires ways of distinguishing between accurate and faulty thinking. In verifying thought by self-reflective means, people monitor their ideas, act on them or predict occurrences from them, then judge from the results the adequacy of their thoughts, and change them accordingly. Judgments concerning the validity and functional value of one's thinking are formed by comparing how well thoughts match some indicator of reality. Four different modes of thought verification can be distinguished: *enactive*, *vicarious*, *persuasive*, and *logical* forms.

6.1 Modes of Verifying the Adequacy of Thought

Enactive verification relies on the adequacy of the fit between thought and the results of one's actions. Good matches verify their reasoning; mismatches tend to refute it. In the vicarious mode of thought verification, observing other people's behavior and its effects serves as a way of checking the correctness of one's own thinking about what leads to what. The persuasive mode of thought verification relies on comparing one's thoughts to the judgments of other. When experiential verification is either difficult or impossible, people evaluate the soundness of their views by checking them with what others believe. This mode of verification often arises in matters involving specialized knowledge or beliefs concerning things with which one has little or no contact. In the course of development, people acquire rules of inference. This enables them to detect certain errors in thought by logical verification. By reasoning

from what is already known, they can derive knowledge about things that extend beyond their experience and check the validity of their reasoning.

Self-reflectivity entails shifting the perspective of the same agent rather than reifying different internal agents or selves regulating each other. Thus, in their daily lives people act on their thoughts and later analyze how well their thoughts have served them in managing events. But it is the one and the same person who is doing the thinking and later evaluating the adequacy of his or her knowledge, thinking skills, and action strategies. The shift in perspective does not transform a person from an agent to an object; one is just as much an agent reflecting on one's experiences as in executing the original courses of action.

6.2 Self-efficacy Appraisal

Among the types of thoughts that affect human development and functioning, none is more central or pervasive than people's judgments of their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. The self-efficacy mechanism plays a central role in human agency (Bandura 1986). People's beliefs in their efficacy influence how they think, feel, act, and motivate themselves. Such beliefs influence what people choose to do, how much effort they invest in activities, how long they persevere in the face of obstacles and failure experiences, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-enhancing, and how much stress and despondency they experience during anticipatory and actual transactions with the environment. A high sense of self-efficacy pays off in performance accomplishments and personal well-being.

Beliefs of personal efficacy are based on four principal sources of information. These are: (a) performance mastery experiences; (b) vicarious experiences for judging capabilities in comparison with performances of others; (c) verbal persuasion and related types of social influences that lead to the belief that one possesses certain capabilities; and (d) physiological states and reactions from which people partly judge their capableness, strength, and vulnerability. These different sources of efficacy information must be cognitively processed, weighted, and integrated into self-beliefs of efficacy.

Different periods of life present certain prototypic competency demands for successful functioning. Changing aspirations, time perspectives, and cultural variations over the course of the life-span alter how people structure, regulate, and evaluate their lives. Normative changes in required competencies with age do not represent lock-step stages through which everyone must inevitably pass. There are many pathways through life and, at any given period, people vary substantially in how efficaciously they manage their lives.

Each of the distinctive human capabilities

reviewed in the preceding sections requires certain conditions for its development and undergoes characteristic developmental changes over the course of the life-span. Analysis of the developmental determinants and mechanisms of these capabilities falls beyond limits of this entry, but are reviewed elsewhere in considerable detail (Bandura 1986).

7. Characteristics of Human Nature

Viewed from the social cognitive perspective, human nature is characterized by a vast potentiality that can be developed by direct and vicarious experience into a variety of forms within biological limits. To say that a major distinguishing mark of humans is their endowed plasticity is not to say that they have no nature or that they come structureless. The plasticity, which is intrinsic to the nature of humans, depends upon specialized neurophysiological mechanisms and structures that have evolved over time. These advanced neural systems, which are specialized for processing, retaining, and using coded information, provide the capacity for the very characteristics that are distinctly human, that is, generative symbolization, forethought, evaluative self-regulation, reflective self-consciousness, and symbolic communication.

Most patterns of human behavior are organized by individual experience and retained in neural codes, rather than being provided ready-made by extensive inborn programming. Although human thought and conduct may be developed largely through experience, innate endowments enter into every form of behavior to some degree. Genetic factors and neural systems affect behavioral potentialities and place constraints on capabilities. Because behavior contains mixtures of inborn elements and learned patterns, dichotomous thinking, which separates activities into innate and acquired categories, is seriously inaccurate.

Humans have an unparalleled capability to become many things. As life-span theorists have observed (Baltes and Reese 1984), human development is a heterogeneous phenomenon that encompasses different types of abilities that follow different trajectories of change and are modifiable throughout the life course. The human qualities that are cultivated and the life paths that realistically become open to members of a society are partly determined by the nature of the cultural agencies to which their development is entrusted. Social systems that cultivate competencies, create opportunity structures, provide adequate resources, and permit leeway to develop diverse aspects of personal potentialities, increase the likelihood that people will realize what they wish to become.

See also: Lifespan Development: Learning across the Lifespan, Development of; Learning Theories: Historical Over-

view and Trends: Learning Processes and Learning Outcomes

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