Psychology pioneer Albert Bandura puts his theories to work helping people to believe in themselves and change their world.
Confidence

man

By Christine Foster
Photographs by Lenny Gonzalez
Albert Bandura keeps a special box tucked away on a shelf in a small storage room in Jordan Hall. Inside are yellowing index cards and letters grown thin with age. Most ask simply for a reprint of an article the Stanford psychologist wrote 45 years ago titled “Psychotherapy as a learning process” (Psychological Bulletin 58, 1962). But Bandura has saved them all these years because they were sent by some of the best-known psychologists of the day—Joseph Wolpe, Joseph Zubin, Hans Eysenck.

Those key thinkers recognized Bandura’s work as a turning point. It started a shift in the field of psychology to the idea that personality is shaped by the interaction of behavior, environment and innate psychological makeup—rather than any one of those factors being paramount.

As the originator of social cognitive theory, Bandura has been called the greatest living psychologist. He regularly receives fan mail from schoolchildren and prison inmates as well as undergraduates and professors. Now 80, he is almost as active as ever, applying his research to medicine, education, sports and public health and changing the lives of millions. Early this year, he already had 10 statewide trips booked for 2006, plus visits to France, Spain and Korea.

When Bandura was starting his career, a prevalent theory known as psychodynamics held that a person’s inner life of complexes and impulses was all-important in explaining behavior. Classic behaviorism developed concurrently, led by B.F. Skinner’s work showing how behavior is shaped by positive and negative reinforcement. But more and more, critics judged these theories insufficient to describe the psychological landscape, or to construct a workable framework for change. Psychologists developed social learning theory, which took root in the 1930s, to
explain how people acquired behaviors through external interactions—countering Freud's emphasis on the subconscious. Initial research concluded that people learned by trial and error.

Bandura accepted social learning theory but believed that the learning process was more fluid and less tedious. Shortly after arriving at Stanford in 1953, he began a field study of aggression in an unlikely group: boys from intact families in prosperous neighborhoods. He found that very aggressive boys typically had parents who exhibited hostile attitudes. At home, aggression was not acceptable, but the boys were encouraged to fight peers in disputes, and the parents were aggressive toward school authorities thought to be giving their sons a hard time. The boys imitated, or modeled, their parents' attitudes.

In the early 1950s, Bandura conducted a modeling study that became one of psychology's classics—the Bobo doll experiments. Researchers hit, kicked and verbally abused a 6-foot inflatable doll in front of preschoolers. The children later mimicked the adult behavior and attacked the doll. Surprising? Not to us today, perhaps, but at the time most theorists believed that rewards were the key to learning. These children bashed the doll just because they saw an adult do it. Further experiments exposed children to similar violent episodes on videotape.

Modeling has been at the core of Bandura's thought ever since. At first, he says, this research was "knowledge pursued for its own sake." But it led to his first opportunity to turn theory to practical use whenBandura was invited to testify before congressional committees about the effects of television violence on children. One result was that the Federal Trade Commission passed new advertising standards. Portrayals of children performing risky activities were no longer acceptable, and an ad for a headache medication that showed characters pounding each other with mallets had to be changed.

Debates about harmful media influences have only intensified since then, as video games, for example, now let children not just view violence but design it. Bandura says more work must be done to see what impact this is having on children. "Social change is not for the short-winded," he remarks.

An amusing example of the Bobo experiment's lasting influence can be found in Canada. University of Victoria education professor Cindy Brown so admires Bandura's work that one of her classes devised a Bandura-themed celebration for her birthday complete with a T-shirt emblazoned "Bandura is King," a Bobo doll, and a congratulatory e-mail from the psychologist. Writing to thank Bandura, Brown called him the Brad Pitt of the psychology world.

Along with his work on modeling, Bandura began to develop the idea that "belief" in one's capabilities, known as self-efficacy, also can influence one's environment and outcomes. He coined the term social cognitive theory, holding that a person's behavior, environment and inner qualities interact, rather than one of them being predominant in explaining how people function. The theory became the umbrella for much of Bandura's work, including mastery, or how people learn; the role that social persuasion and support play in encouraging behavior; and the ways people regulate their own behavior.

On a website he devotes to Bandura's work, Emory University psychologist Frank Pajares noted, "With social cognitive theory, Bandura has created one of the few 'grand theories' that continues to thrive at the beginning of the twenty-first Century."

One reason the theory remains influential, Pajares says, is that Bandura has continued to expand and refine it for more than four decades. "Most psychologists provide whatever contribution they think is valuable, they make that offering, they put it out to the world," he says. "Bandura keeps hammering that home. He adapts and changes. This is a man who doesn't offer his theory early in his life and just coast."

For example, projects relating to self-efficacy are under way in at least 60 countries. Bandura consults on some of the biggest issues of our time: improving the status of women in traditional cultures, preventing the spread of HIV, and increasing the use of birth control in certain areas. Several nonprofits, such as Population Communications International, produce serial dramas for television and radio aimed at influencing audience behavior. Much like soap operas, they feature engaging characters facing struggles that might be familiar to their viewers.

In one of the most compelling series, broadcast in India from 2002 to 2004, a 21-year-old character named Taru pursues an education and pushes aside more limiting cultural norms. In a documentary film about the drama, audience members talk about its influence. "I feel like she is my older sister giving me encouragement," a young woman says. In one town, some residents started a small school for underprivileged children modeled on the one in the show.

The series reached 25 million people in India alone. "In psychology, we are used to small samples," Bandura says. "If we have 100, that is big—no, that's huge!"

In Ethiopia, where two shows produced locally by the Population Media Center were broadcast between 2002 and 2004, requests for contraception increased 157 percent and the fertility rate fell from 3.4 to 4.3. More than a quarter of those coming to health clinics said the shows were the primary motivating factor. "We literally changed social norms, based on role modeling, based on Bandura's theory," says the nonprofit's president, Bill Ryerson.

During the past decade, Bandura also has worked with Stanford physicians Bob DeBusk, '60, MD '64, Kate Lorig, Halstead Holman and Barr Taylor on research into how his theories can be applied to improve health management and disease prevention. One project has looked at how to improve the recovery of patients after a heart attack. An interesting finding: a wife's belief in her husband's cardiac efficacy has a big impact on his recovery. Six months out, the best predictor of his health is their belief in his efficacy. Bandura explains that when a woman
A wife’s belief in her husband’s cardiac efficacy has a big impact on his recovery.

believes her husband has a delicate heart, she discourages the kind of exercise that might help the recovery of minor heart attack victims. “In this case, social support is actually a negative,” he says. Similar research is being done with patients suffering chronic pain, such as those with arthritis.

Bandura is his own best argument for self-efficacy. He was the youngest of six children born to Eastern European immigrants in a small farming community near Edmonton, Alberta. His father farmed and helped build a railroad, while his mother worked at a general store. The two most important institutions were the pool hall and the church. (Bandura likes to say that his mother was deeply religious and his father drank holy wine with the priest.) Neither parent was formally educated, but both could see beyond the confines of tiny Mundare and they encouraged their son to do the same. “You have a choice,” Bandura remembers his mother saying. “You can work in the field and get drunk in the beer parlor, or you might get an education.”

Bandura enrolled at the University of British Columbia, where his choice of concentration came by chance. He commuted with students who all had early-morning classes. While waiting for his English class to begin one day, Bandura thumbed through a course catalogue and saw a psychology class that would fill that early-morning void. He enrolled and was fascinated; his life’s course was set. Bandura continued on to the University of Iowa, psychology’s mecca, and received his PhD in 1952. There he met his future wife, Virginia. The pair arrived at Stanford in 1953 for Bandura to take a one-year spot as an instructor, but before the year was out he was offered a tenure-track position.

More recently, Bandura has been studying how people turn off the self-regulatory mechanism that normally keeps their behavior in check. Working with Lisa Bero at UC-San Francisco, he is looking at companies dealing in products that cause injury—think weapons dealers or cigarette manufacturers. “Those who trade in human destruction do not do it alone,” Bandura wrote in a 1999 paper. “They depend heavily on the moral disengagement of a network of reputable agents managing respectable enterprises.” His findings show that through euphemistic labeling (where bombing missions become “servicing the target”) and displacement of responsibility (Nazis who “just followed orders”), among other techniques, normal people can do extraordinary harm. Bandura is doing similar work with Alfred McAlister, PhD ’76, and Michael Ososky, ’03, MA ’03, on people involved with capital punishment and on those who justify war.

Given all these efforts, Bandura’s biggest challenge is time management. “Because the theory touches countless areas, all kinds of people want a piece of your time,” he says. He usually writes at home in the morning (after a short jaunt on the Nordic-Track) to avoid distractions and then comes into the office after lunch. A typical afternoon might include working on endorsements of books, preparing for a lecture at a medical school, and writing a reference letter. The seminars he continues to teach are so oversubscribed that students sometimes sit on the floor.

Bandura doesn’t use a computer, but a casual e-mail correspondent would never know that. One of his three assistants, Katie Bramlett, prints out his e-mails—up to 100 a day—and he writes responses for her to type back in. For the more common questions, he simply writes a numeric code on the e-mail and she sends a prepared response. (He often signs e-mails, “May the efficacy force be with you.”) He writes his journal articles in longhand on yellow notepads.

It’s the same routine for all of Bandura’s work, Bramlett says. “It’s absolutely his vision. His product is his product. I am like a translating cable between him and his computer.”

Somehow Bandura manages this without driving Bramlett or other staff crazy: he is the antithesis of the absent-minded professor. His office is filled with perfectly arranged stacks and neat file drawers, and he can immediately put his hands on nearly anything. “There is not a blind spot, there is no fuzzy area,” Bramlett says. “I can’t change the oil in my car and my husband does the taxes: I have a lot of fuzzy areas. I have a feeling he doesn’t have any.”

Although Bandura works hard, he is far from a workaholic. He and his wife “don’t allow work to intrude on what we do,” he says. He is typically home by 5 p.m. They eat out regularly—Thai food is a favorite—and enjoy trips to Napa, Calif., and concerts. When their two daughters were young, they often spent the weekends hiking. On weekends he spends four or five hours tending the yard in his large Stanford home. He grows otorico tomatoes, enough to share with all the neighbors. “I love to plant things and see them grow. When you look at them and see them grow, you have a sense of accomplishment,” Bandura says.

Even as those he trained early in his career are enjoying their own retirement, Bandura keeps going strong. Only a few things, like long backpacking trips in the Sierras, have had to be put aside as the couple has grown older. “This is almost surreal to me. I look back 40 years and I don’t feel any different now than I did then,” Bandura says. “I am just busier.” His stamina and good health are remarkable, Pajares says. “He behaves like he is 30. He looks 55 or 60, but he behaves 30.”

Bandura’s attitude probably promotes his longevity. A die-hard optimist, he’s never afraid to poke fun at himself and has a quick, dry wit. On his birthday last December, he looked at the inferno of a dessert and laughed. “Social cognitive theory can do a lot,” Bandura told his well-wishers, “but how the hell did you get 80 candles on your cake?”

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