

COMMENTARY

On the Psychosocial Impact and Mechanisms of Spiritual Modeling

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Psychological theories have traditionally emphasized learning from direct experience. If knowledge, values, and competencies could be acquired only by trial and error, human development would be greatly retarded, not to mention exceedingly tedious and hazardous. Moreover, limited time, resources, and mobility impose severe limits on places and activities that people can directly explore to gain new social perspectives and styles of thinking and behaving. However, humans have evolved an advanced cognitive capacity for observational learning that enables them to shape and structure their lives through the power of modeling.

CAPACITY FOR SPIRITUALITY

In the agentic perspective of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999, 2001a), social modeling operates within a larger set of distinctly human attributes that provide the capacity for becoming a spiritual being. These supportive attributes are reviewed briefly before addressing the role of modeling in the development and practice of spirituality. They include the capacity for symbolization, abstract vicarious learning, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection.

The power of symbolization, in which social modeling is rooted, supplies the basis for other distinctly human capacities. Symbolic means provide humans with a powerful tool for comprehending their environment and for creating and managing environmental conditions that touch virtually every aspect of their lives. Through the medium of symbols, people transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for reasoning and action. By symbolizing their experiences, they give structure, meaning, and continuity to their lives. The capacity for forethought enables people to transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to construct and regulate the present to fit a desired future. Future events cannot, of course, 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. In this form of anticipatory self-guidance, behavior is motivated and directed by projected goals and anticipated outcomes rather than being pulled by an unrealized future state.

The future-time perspective manifests itself in many different ways. People set goals for themselves, anticipate the likely consequences of prospective actions, and 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. When projected over a long time course on matters of value, a forethoughtful perspective provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one's life. As people progress in their life course, they continue to plan ahead, reorder their priorities, and structure their lives accordingly. Awareness of one's own mortality also becomes a force in shaping the nature of one's life.

People are not only symbolizers and forethinkers. They are also self-reactors with a capacity for self-direction. After they adapt personal standards and develop self-evaluative capabilities, self-demands and self-sanctions serve as major guides, motivators, and deterrents. They do things that give them self-satisfaction and self-worth, and refrain from behaving in ways that produce self-censure. The motivational effects do not stem from the standards themselves but from the evaluative reactions to one's own conduct. Standards provide the behavioral guides; the anticipatory self-evaluative reactions serve as the motivators that keep conduct in line with personal standards.

People are not only agents of action but also self-examiners of their own functioning. The metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself, one's sense of personal efficacy, and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions is another distinctly core human feature of human agency. Through reflective self-consciousness, people evaluate their motivation, value commitments, and the meaning of their life pursuits. It is at this higher level of self-reflectiveness that individuals resolve conflicts in motivation, examine the meaning of their activities, and order their priorities.

People do not come fully equipped with these agentic capabilities. They must develop them. Observational learning operates as a key mechanism in this process

of self-development, adaptation, and change. Through the power of modeling, people acquire lifestyles, values, self-regulatory standards, aspirations, and a sense of personal and collective efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

NATURE OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING

For years the power of observational learning through social modeling was trivialized by portraying it as simple response mimicry. In social cognitive theory, social modeling operates at a higher level of learning and serves much broader generative functions. Modeled judgments and actions may differ in specific content while embodying the same principle. For example, an individual may see others confront moral conflicts involving different matters but apply the same moral standard to them. Modeled activities thus convey principles for generative and innovative behavior. In abstract observational learning, observers extract the principles or standards embodied in the thinking and actions exhibited by others. Once they acquire the principles, they can use them to generate new instances of the behavior that go beyond what they have seen, read, or heard.

Much human learning occurs either designedly or unintentionally from the models in one's immediate environment. However, in contemporary society, ideas, values, belief systems, and lifestyles are constructed from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment, which occupies a major part of people's lives. With the revolutionary advances in communications technology, lifestyles are being modeled and rapidly diffused worldwide (Bandura, 2001b). A major significance of symbolic modeling lies in its tremendous scope and multiplicative power. Unlike learning by doing, which requires shaping the actions of each individual through repeated consequences, in observational learning a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to vast numbers of people in widely dispersed locales.

The models upon whom people pattern their behavior come in diverse forms and sources. Some involve behavioral modeling in informal everyday activities or formally structured social arrangements. There is another aspect of modeling in the symbolic environment that magnifies its psychological and social effects. During their daily lives, people have direct contact with only a small sector of the physical and social environment. Consequently, their conceptions of the social realities with which they have little or no contact are greatly influenced by vicarious experience—by what they see, read, and hear—without direct experiential correctives. The more people's conceptions of reality depend upon the symbolic environment, the greater is its social impact.

The salient symbolic modeling through the electronic media pervades people's daily lives. Verbal modeling is another source of instructive and inspirational exemplars. In this mode of symbolic modeling, values, lifestyles, and guides for

daily living are personalized in idealized exemplars in treatises, biographical writings about past visionaries and reformers, abstracted storied characters ascribed valued attributes, myths, and religious scriptural prescriptions that offer models of behavior.

People are exposed to a profusion of modeling influences in these diverse forms and sources. There is wide variation in the lifestyles being modeled and discrepancies between what is practiced and what is preached. Hence social modeling is not a matter of wholesale incorporation of a given model nor scripting specific behaviors for particular circumstances. Rather, modeling is a social construction in which elements from one's constellation of experiences are synthesized into a distinct lifestyle pattern.

DEVELOPMENT AND EXERCISE OF SPIRITUALITY

In their article, Oman and Thoresen (this issue) masterfully document the paramount role of spiritual modeling in the development and exercise of spirituality. They provide a breadth and depth of richly nuanced analysis of spiritual modeling that has rarely been applied to the metaphysical aspects of life. Their conceptual analysis offers fresh insights into a variety of linkages of basic knowledge about the determinants and mechanisms of observational learning to spiritual beliefs and practices. The prevalence of spiritual modeling has, of course, been richly documented in descriptive analyses of how transcendent exemplars throughout history and religious traditions have served as guiding spirits in people's lives. The article by Oman and Thoresen is conceptually illuminating and provides valuable guides for programs of research that can add greatly to our understanding of spiritual modeling.

Most people acknowledge a spiritual aspect to their lives, in the sense of seeking meaning and social connectedness to something greater than oneself without being tied to a formal religion or deity. In such instances, they embrace spirituality but not religiosity. Ours is a spiritually diverse society. Oman and Thoresen's analysis broadens the scope of spiritual modeling in ways that can encompass secular forms of spirituality and how they are expressed in daily living. The generic modeling mechanisms they present are applicable to the growing pluralization of spiritual interests and manifestations as well as to ecclesiastical systems.

Analyses of spirituality tend to focus heavily on spiritual beliefs and the quest for spiritual meaning. Oman and Thoresen underscore the importance of linking spiritual beliefs to spiritual practices. This connectiveness is in keeping with the social shift in emphasis from "contemplation to service, from preaching to practice, from a flight toward heaven to an embracing of mankind" (Kinget, 1975, p. 216). It is the spiritual commitment that gets expressed in daily living that makes a difference in people's lives.

Much of the formal spiritual modeling is at an abstract level in systems of doctrines. It is a common finding that abstract principles alone are poorly applied in particular situations (Bandura, 1986; Nisbett, 1993; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). Without concrete exemplars, people remain in a quandary on how to apply the abstractions. Religiosity is socially grounded rather than just an intrapsychic self-engagement with a Supreme Being. Congregations provide multiple models of behavior and reinforce lifestyles patterned on them in close associational networks.

Religious commitment and participation serve diverse functions. One must distinguish between intrinsic religiosity from extrinsic religiosity that is more utilitarian in nature (Allport & Ross, 1967). In the intrinsic commitment, people spend time in religious thought and meditation, interpret their secular experiences in terms of their religious beliefs, and essentially live their religion in their various dealings in life. In the more extrinsic form, people turn to religion for the sense of security, solace, and sociability that church membership provides and to establish themselves in the community.

Social support reduces distress and despondency, and improves health. However, social support provides these adaptive benefits only to the extent that it enhances people's beliefs in their efficacy to manage taxing events (Bandura, 1997). Enabling social supporters can raise personal efficacy by modeling effective coping strategies for managing difficult situations, demonstrating the value of perseverance, and providing positive incentives and resources for efficacious coping.

MODELING IN THE CULTIVATION OF PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

The discussion thus far has centered on the influential role of modeling in transmitting values, spiritual belief systems, and spiritual lifestyle practices. Modeling also serves as a major vehicle in the cultivation of personal and collective efficacy. Competent models convey knowledge, skills, and strategies for managing different live circumstances. By their example in pursuing challenges, models foster aspirations and resilience to adversity. Seeing people in similar circumstances succeed by perseverant effort in the face of difficulties raises observers' beliefs in their personal and collective efficacy to change their lives for the better and to shape the social future (Bandura, 1997, 2000).

Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think optimistically or pessimistically; the courses of action they choose to pursue; the goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them; how much effort they put forth in given endeavors; the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce; how long they persevere in the face of obstacles; their resilience to adversity; how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands; and the accomplishments they realize.

Leaders of reform efforts, such as Gandhi, King, and Mandela, acted on strong moral convictions to contest societal injustices and inhumanities. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1958) modeled the civil rights movement on Gandhi's (1942) doctrine of nonviolent collective resistance. Through his inspiring and principled modeling, King raised people's beliefs in their capabilities to confront and eliminate social injustices. This movement served as a model and source of efficacy for others to remove entrenched detrimental social practices.

Social cognitive theory distinguishes among three modes of agency. In *personal agency* exercised individually, people bring their influence to bear on their own functioning and on environmental events. In many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over conditions that affect their lives. In such instances, they turn to *proxy agency* by influencing others who have the resources, knowledge, and means to act on their behalf to secure the outcomes they desire. Children turn to parents; marital partners turn to their spouses; and citizens turn to their elected representatives to get what they want. Those devoted to religious faith often appeal to proxy agency, especially in times of crisis or physical and emotional distress, through prayer to divine agency to alter the course of detrimental events. People do not live as isolates. They have to work together to manage and improve their lives. In the exercise of *collective agency*, they pool their knowledge, skills, and resources, and act in concert to shape their future.

An issue of interest is whether reliance on divine proxy agency enhances or detracts for a sense of personal efficacy. The direction of the self-efficacy effect may depend, in large part, on people's conception of divine agency, the part they play in it, and their faith in the efficacy of prayer in the proxy relationship. If the proxy relationship involves displacement of control to divine agency to solve one's problems, it can foster dependent passivity that detracts from the development and exercise of personal efficacy.

The detracting effect is illustrated in the story in which a dam cracks flooding a hamlet in a mountain valley. A passing guardsman in a rubber raft yells to a man standing on the windowsill to hop in. He replies serenely, "Go away. I put my trust in the Lord." Moments later a passing guardsman in a motorboat yells to the man now standing on the roof with water lapping at his feet to hop in. He replies, "Go away. I put my trust in the Lord." A few moments later a guardsman in a helicopter lowers a rescuer rope ladder to the man now standing on the chimney with water rapidly rising. He shouts back, "No, go away. I put my trust in the Lord." The man awakens at the Pearly Gates where he angrily confronts God. "What happened? I put all my trust in you." God shrugs and replies, "I sent you a raft. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more do you want?"

It is a different matter if divine agency is viewed as a guiding supportive partnership requiring one to exercise influence over events in one's life. Partnered proxy agency can serve as an enabling belief that strengthens a sense of personal

efficacy, buffers stress and despondency in times of difficulties, and buttresses resiliency to adversity.

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