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Chapter 17
Bandura: Social Cognitive Theory

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Define and give examples of the processes governing observational learning.
2. Define Bandura's concept of triadic reciprocal causation.
3. Explain and give at least one example of the effect that chance encounters and fortuitous events may have on a person's life path.
4. Define and discuss Bandura's concept of human agency.
5. Define and give examples of self-efficacy.
6. Describe the sources of self-efficacy.
7. Define and give examples of proxy agency.
8. Define and give examples of collective efficacy.
9. Discuss Bandura's concept of self-regulation through moral agency.
10. Discuss at least two ways in which external factors can affect self-regulation.
11. Discuss ways in which people justify their own actions through disengagement of internal control.
12. Describe Bandura's approach to understanding dysfunctional behavior.
13. Briefly describe some of the recent research generated by Bandura's theory.

Lecture Outline

I. Overview of Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's **social cognitive theory** takes chance encounters and fortuitous events seriously, even while recognizing that these meetings and events do not invariably alter one's life path. How people react to an expected meeting or event is usually more powerful than the event itself.

Social cognitive theory rests on several basic assumptions. First, the outstanding characteristic of humans is *plasticity*; that is, humans have the flexibility to learn a variety of behaviors in diverse situations. Second, through a *triadic reciprocal causation model* that includes behavioral, environmental, and personal factors, people have the capacity to regulate their lives. Third, social cognitive theory takes an *agentic perspective*, meaning that humans have the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of their lives. Fourth, people regulate their conduct through both external and internal factors. *External factors* include people's physical and social environments, whereas *internal factors* include self-observation, judgmental process, and self-reaction. Fifth, when people find themselves in morally

ambiguous situations, they typically attempt to regulate their behavior through *moral agency*, which includes redefining the behavior, disregarding or distorting the consequences of their behavior, dehumanizing or blaming the victims of their behavior, and displacing or diffusing responsibility for their actions.

II. Biography of Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura was born on December 4, 1925, in Mundare, a small town on the plains of northern Alberta. His high school had only two instructors to teach the entire curriculum. In such an environment, learning was left to the initiative of the students, a situation that well suited a brilliant scholar like Bandura.

After graduating from high school, Bandura spent a summer in the Yukon working on the Alaska highway. Several of his coworkers manifested various degrees of psychopathology. Bandura told Richard Evans (Evans, 1989) that his decision to become a psychologist was quite accidental; that is, it was the result of a fortuitous event. In college, Bandura commuted to school with pre-med and engineering students who were early risers. Rather than do nothing during this early hour, Bandura decided to enroll in a psychology class that happened to be offered at that time period. He found the class fascinating and eventually decided to take a psychology major.

After graduating from British Columbia in just 3 years, Bandura looked for a graduate program in clinical psychology that had a strong learning theory base. He completed a master's degree in 1951 and a PhD in clinical psychology the following year. Then he spent a year in Wichita completing a postdoctoral internship at the Wichita Guidance Center. In 1953, he joined the faculty at Stanford University where, except for 1 year as Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, he has remained.

Most of Bandura's early publications were in clinical psychology, dealing primarily with psychotherapy and the Rorschach test. Then, in 1958, he collaborated with the late Richard H. Walters, his first doctoral student, to publish a paper on aggressive delinquents. Bandura has held more than a dozen offices in prestigious scientific societies, including president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1974, president of the Western Psychological Association in 1980, and honorary president of the Canadian Psychological Association in 1999. Bandura currently holds the David Starr Jordan Professorship of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University.

III. Learning

One of the earliest and most basic assumptions of Bandura's social cognitive theory is that humans are quite flexible and capable of learning a multitude of attitudes, skills, and behaviors and that a good bit of those learnings are a result of vicarious experiences. Although people can and do learn from direct experience, much of what they learn is acquired through observing others.

A. Observational Learning

Bandura believes that *observation* allows people to learn without performing any behavior. People observe natural phenomena, plants, animals, waterfalls, the motion of the moon and stars, and so forth, but especially important to social cognitive theory is the assumption that they learn through observing the behavior of other people.

In this respect, Bandura differs from Skinner, who held that enactive behavior is the basic datum of psychological science. He also departs from Skinner in his belief that reinforcement is not essential to learning. Bandura (1986, 2003) believes that observational learning is much more efficient than learning through direct experience.

The core of observational learning is **modeling**. Learning through modeling involves adding and subtracting from the observed behavior and generalizing from one observation to another. In other words, modeling involves cognitive processes and is not simply mimicry or imitation.

Bandura (1986) recognizes four processes that govern observational learning: attention, representation, behavioral production, and motivation. Before a person can model another person, he or she must attend to that person. Also, the nature of the behavior being modeled affects one's attention—one observes behavior that one thinks is important or valuable to oneself. Verbal coding, however, greatly speeds the process of observational learning. After attending to a model and retaining what people have observed, they then produce the behavior. Observational learning is most effective when learners are motivated to perform the modeled behavior.

B. Enactive Learning

Every response a person makes is followed by some consequence. Some of these consequences are satisfying, some are dissatisfying, and others are simply not cognitively attended and hence have little effect. Bandura believes that complex human behavior can be learned when people think about and evaluate the consequences of their behaviors.

The consequences of a response serve at least three functions. First, response consequences inform people of the effects of their actions. Second, the consequences of people's responses motivate their anticipatory behavior; that is, they are capable of symbolically representing future outcomes and acting accordingly. Third, the consequences of responses serve to reinforce behavior, a function that has been firmly documented by Skinner and other reinforcement theorists. In summary, Bandura believes that new behaviors are acquired through two major kinds of learning: observational learning and enactive learning.

IV. Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Albert Bandura (1986, 1999b, 2001, 2002b) adopts quite a different stance. His social cognitive theory explains psychological functioning in terms of *triadic reciprocal causation.* This system assumes that human action is a result of an interaction among three variables—environment, behavior, and person. That is, cognition at least partially determines which environmental events people attend to, what value they place on these events, and how they organize these events for future use.

Bandura uses the term "reciprocal" to indicate a triadic interaction of forces, not a similar or opposite counteraction. The three reciprocal factors do not need to be of equal strength or to make equal contributions. The relative potency of the three varies with the individual and with the situation.

A. An Example of Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Consider this example of triadic reciprocal causation. A child begging her father for a second brownie is, from the father's viewpoint, an environmental event. If the father automatically (without thought) were to give the child a second brownie, then the two would be conditioning each other's behavior in the Skinnerian sense. The behavior of the father would be controlled by the environment; but his behavior, in turn, would have a countercontrolling effect on his environment, namely the child. In Bandura's theory, however, the father is capable of thinking about the consequences of rewarding or ignoring the child's behavior.

B. Chance Encounters and Fortuitous Events

Bandura (1998a) defined a **chance encounter** as "an unintended meeting of persons unfamiliar to each other." A **fortuitous event** is an environmental experience that is unexpected and unintended. The everyday lives of people are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the people they chance to meet and by random events they could not predict.

Fortuity adds a separate dimension in any scheme used to predict human behavior, and it makes accurate predictions practically impossible. However, chance encounters influence people only by entering the triadic reciprocal causation paradigm at point E (environment) and adding to the mutual interaction of person, behavior, and environment. Chance encounters and fortuitous events are not uncontrollable. Indeed, people can make chance happen.

V. Human Agency

Social cognitive theory takes an agentic view of personality, meaning that humans have the capacity to exercise control over their own lives (2002b). Indeed, **human agency** is the essence of humanness. Bandura (2001) believes that people are self-regulating, proactive, self-reflective, and self-organizing and that they have the power to influence their own actions

to produce desired consequences.

A. Core Features of Human Agency

Bandura (2001, 2004) discusses four core features of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. *Intentionality* refers to acts a person performs intentionally. An intention includes planning, but it also involves actions. People also possess *forethought* to set goals, to anticipate likely outcomes of their actions, and to select behaviors that will produce desired outcomes and avoid undesirable ones.

People do more than plan and contemplate future behaviors. They are also capable of *self-reactiveness* in the process of motivating and regulating their own actions. People not only make choices but they monitor their progress toward fulfilling those choices. Bandura (2001) recognizes that setting goals is not sufficient to attaining desired consequences. Finally, people have *self-reflectiveness.* They are examiners of their own functioning; they can think about and evaluate their motivations, values, and the meanings of their life goals, and they can think about the adequacy of their own thinking.

B. Self-Efficacy

How people act in a particular situation depends on the reciprocity of behavioral, environmental, and cognitive conditions, especially those cognitive factors that relate to their beliefs that they can or cannot execute the behavior necessary to produce desired outcomes in any particular situation. Bandura (1997) calls these expectations **self-efficacy**.

Self-efficacy is not the expectation of one's action's *outcomes.* Bandura (1986, 1997) distinguished between efficacy expectations and *outcome expectations.* Efficacy refers to people's confidence that they have the ability to perform certain behaviors, whereas an outcome expectancy refers to one's prediction of the likely *consequences* of that behavior. Personal efficacy is acquired, enhanced, or decreased through any one or combination of four sources: mastery experiences, social modeling, social persuasion, and physical and emotional states (Bandura, 1997).

The most influential sources of self-efficacy are mastery experiences, that is, past performances (Bandura, 1997). A second source of efficacy is social modeling, that is, **vicarious experiences** provided by other people. Self-efficacy can also be acquired or weakened through social persuasion (Bandura, 1997). The final source of efficacy is people's physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). Strong emotion ordinarily lowers performance; when people experience intense fear, acute anxiety, or high levels of stress, they are likely to have lower efficacy expectancies.

C. Proxy Agency

Proxy involves indirect control over those social conditions that affect everyday living.

Bandura (2001) noted that "no one has the time, energy, and resources to master every realm of everyday life. Successful functioning necessarily involves a blend of reliance on proxy agency in some areas of functioning." Proxy, however, has a downside. By relying too much on the competence and power of others, people may weaken their sense of personal and collective efficacy.

D. Collective Efficacy

The third mode of human agency is *collective efficacy*. Bandura (2000) defined **collective efficacy** as "people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results." In other words, collective efficacy is the confidence people have that their combined efforts will bring about group accomplishments. Bandura (2000) suggested two techniques for measuring collective efficacy. The first is to combine individual members' evaluations of their personal capabilities to enact behaviors that benefit the group. The second approach proposed by Bandura is to measure the confidence each person has in the group's ability to bring about a desired outcome. Collective efficacy does not spring from a collective "mind" but rather from the personal efficacy of many individuals working together.

Bandura (1998b) pointed out that different cultures have different levels of collective efficacy and work more productively under different systems. Bandura (1997, 1998b, 2001) lists several factors that can undermine collective efficacy. First, humans live in a transnational world; what happens in one part of the globe can affect people in other countries, giving them a sense of helplessness. Second, recent technology that people neither understand nor believe that they can control may lower their sense of collective efficacy. A third condition undermining collective efficacy is the complex social machinery, with layers of bureaucracy that prevent social change. Fourth, the tremendous scope and magnitude of human problems can undermine collective efficacy.

VI. Self-Regulation

Bandura (1994) believes that people use both reactive and proactive strategies for self-regulation. That is, they *reactively* attempt to reduce the discrepancies between their accomplishments and their goal, but after they close those discrepancies, they *proactively* set newer and higher goals for themselves.

What processes contribute to this self-regulation? First, people possess limited ability to manipulate the external factors that feed into the reciprocal interactive paradigm. Second, people are capable of monitoring their own behavior and evaluating it in terms of both proximate and distant goals.

A. External Factors in Self-Regulation

External factors affect self-regulation in at least two ways. First, they provide people with a standard for evaluating their own behavior. Standards do not stem solely from internal

forces. Environmental factors, interacting with personal influences, shape individual standards for evaluation. Second, external factors influence self-regulation by providing the means for reinforcement. Intrinsic rewards are not always sufficient; people also need incentives that emanate from external factors. The incentives to complete a lengthy project usually come from the environment and often take the form of small rewards contingent upon the completion of subgoals.

B. Internal Factors in Self-Regulation

External factors interact with internal or personal factors in self-regulation. Bandura (1986, 1996) recognizes three internal requirements in the ongoing exercise of self-influence:

- Self-observation
- Judgmental process
- Self-reaction

The first internal factor in self-regulation is *self-observation* of performance. The second process, *judgmental process*, helps people regulate their behavior through the process of cognitive mediation. Self-regulation also depends on how people judge the causes of their behavior, that is, *performance attribution*. The third and final internal factor in self-regulation is *self-reaction*.

C. Self-Regulation Through Moral Agency

Bandura (1999a) sees moral agency as having two aspects: (1) doing no harm to people and (2) proactively helping people. One's self-regulative mechanisms, however, do not affect other people until one acts on them. Bandura (2002a) insists that moral precepts predict moral behavior only when those precepts are converted to action. In other words, self-regulatory influences are not automatic but operate only if they are activated, a concept Bandura calls **selective activation**.

By justifying the morality of their actions, people can separate or disengage themselves from the consequences of their behavior, a concept Bandura calls **disengagement of internal control**. With *redefinition of behavior,* people justify otherwise reprehensible actions by a cognitive restructuring that allows them to minimize or escape responsibility. A second method of avoiding responsibility involves *distorting or obscuring the relationship between the behavior and its detrimental consequences*. Third, people can obscure responsibility for their actions by either *dehumanizing their victims or attributing blame to them*. The fourth method of dissociating actions from their consequences is to *displace or diffuse responsibility*. A related procedure is to *diffuse responsibility*—to spread it so thin that no one person is responsible.

VII. Dysfunctional Behavior

Bandura's concept of triadic reciprocal causation assumes that behavior is learned as a result

of a mutual interaction of the following factors:

- The person, including cognition and neurophysiological processes
- The environment, including interpersonal relations and socioeconomic conditions
- Behavioral factors, including previous experiences with reinforcement

A. Depression

High personal standards and goals can lead to achievement and self-satisfaction. However, when people set their goals too high, they are likely to fail. Failure frequently leads to depression, and depressed people often undervalue their own accomplishments. The result is chronic misery, feelings of worthlessness, lack of purposefulness, and pervasive depression.

Bandura (1986, 1997) believes that dysfunctional depression can occur in any of the three self-regulatory subfunctions:

- Self-observation
- Judgmental processes
- Self-reaction

B. Phobias

Phobias are fears that are strong enough and pervasive enough to have severe debilitating effects on one's daily life. Phobias and fears are learned by direct contact, inappropriate generalization, and especially by observational experiences (Bandura, 1986). They are difficult to extinguish if the phobic person simply avoids the threatening object. Unless the fearsome object is somehow encountered, the phobia will endure indefinitely. Once established, phobias are maintained by consequent determinants, that is, the negative reinforcement the phobic person receives for avoiding the fear-producing situation.

C. Aggression

Aggressive behaviors, when carried to extremes, can also be dysfunctional. Bandura (1986) contended that aggressive behavior is acquired through observation of others, direct experiences with positive and negative reinforcements, training, or instruction, and bizarre beliefs.

Once established, people continue to aggress for at least five reasons:

- They enjoy inflicting injury on the victim (positive reinforcement).
- They avoid or counter the aversive consequences of aggression by others (negative reinforcement).
- They receive injury or harm for not behaving aggressively (punishment).
- They live up to their personal standards of conduct by their aggressive behavior (self-reinforcement).

- They observe others receiving rewards for aggressive acts or punishment for nonaggressive behavior.

VIII. Therapy

According to Bandura, deviant behaviors are initiated on the basis of social cognitive learning principles, and they are maintained because, in some ways, they continue to serve a purpose. Therapeutic change, therefore, is difficult because it involves eliminating behaviors that are satisfying to the person. The ultimate goal of social cognitive therapy is self-regulation (Bandura, 1986). To achieve this end, the therapist introduces strategies designed to induce specific behavioral changes, to generalize those changes to other situations, and to maintain those changes by preventing relapse. The first step in successful therapy is to instigate some change in behavior.

Bandura (1986) has suggested several basic treatment approaches. The first includes *overt or vicarious modeling*. In a second treatment mode, *covert or cognitive modeling*, the therapist trains patients to visualize models performing fearsome behaviors. A third procedure, called *enactive mastery*, requires patients to perform those behaviors that previously produced incapacitating fears. Bandura has demonstrated that each of these strategies can be effective and that they are most powerful when used in combination with one another.

IX. Related Research

The social cognitive theory of Albert Bandura continues to produce a great deal of research in several domains of psychology, with the concept of self-efficacy alone generating several hundred studies a year. Self-efficacy has been applied to a wide variety of domains, including academic performance, work production, depression, escaping homelessness, coping with terrorism, and health-related behaviors.

A. Self-Efficacy and Diabetes

One of the ways in which Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory has had the greatest impact on the daily lives of many individuals is in the promotion of health and the prevention of disease. Diabetes presents people with a variety of physical challenges, but it also is associated with significant mental health challenges. Indeed, the prevalence of depression among those with diabetes is double that of the general population (Anderson, Freedland, Clouse, & Lustman, 2001).

Sacco and his colleagues (2007), therefore, sought to explore the role of self-efficacy as a variable that could increase adherence to the disease management plan and decrease negative physical and mental health symptoms. In order to test their prediction, Sacco and colleagues recruited a sample of adults who had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. The results of this study clearly demonstrated just how important self-efficacy is to the management of chronic disease. Higher levels of self-efficacy were related to lower levels

of depression, increased adherence to doctors' orders, lower BMI, and fewer and decreased severity of diabetes symptoms.

B. Moral Disengagement and Bullying

One area of pressing social concern relevant to moral disengagement is that of bullying among youth. People commonly think of "bad" or aggressive kids as lacking in moral reasoning that enables them to understand right from wrong. But recall that Bandura argued that self-regulation of our behavior involves more than *reasoning*; moral behavior is enacted through a series of self-regulatory mechanisms that enable children to develop a sense of moral agency. Bandura described mechanisms of moral disengagement that fall under the following categories:

- Redefine or reconstruct the nature of the behavior itself.
- Minimize, ignore, or distort the detrimental consequences of one's behavior.
- Blame or dehumanize the victim.
- Displace or diffuse responsibility.

Bandura and colleagues have developed self-report scales to measure proneness to moral disengagement that capture these mechanisms, and these scales have been modified for use in a variety of populations (e.g., the Moral Disengagement Scale [MDS]; Bandura et al., 1996). Other studies have explored how bullying can be carried out not just by individuals but, more typically, by groups of friends. This is known as collective moral disengagement, where classmates or teammates influence each other in a puzzling way; somehow the group moral disengagement is greater than all the individuals' perspectives added together. The results of this study showed that both individual and student-perceived collective moral disengagement were uniquely predictive of aggressive behavior toward peers.

C. Social Cognitive Theory "Goes Global"

Albert Bandura's most recent work is taking social cognitive theory in brave, new applied directions to find solutions to global problems such as soaring population growth. In collaboration with the Population Media Center, a group who brings entertainment-education for social change to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Bandura has helped to produce serial dramas that encourage evidence-based positive change behaviors for television and radio audiences to model via observational learning. These mass media productions have been shown to improve viewers' perceived efficacy to determine their family size, increase the use of contraceptives, and promote the status of women in family, social, and educational life (Bandura, 2002c). Newer work in this collaborative team is exploring the efficacy of similar serial dramas to improve environmental preservation practices.

X. Critique of Bandura

Albert Bandura has evolved his social cognitive theory by a careful balance of the two principal components of theory building—innovative speculation and accurate observation. The usefulness of Bandura's personality theory, like that of other theories, rests on its ability to generate research, to offer itself to falsification, and to organize knowledge. Bandura's theory has generated several thousand research studies and thus receives a very high rating on its capacity to *generate research.* Bandura and his student colleagues have conducted much of the work, but other researchers, too, have been attracted to the theory.

On the standard of *falsifiability*, critics rate Bandura's theory high. On its ability to *organize knowledge*, Bandura's theory receives a high rating. How *practical* is Bandura's social cognitive theory? To the therapist, teacher, parent, or anyone interested in the acquisition and maintenance of new behaviors, self-efficacy theory provides useful and specific guidelines.

Is the theory *internally consistent?* Because Bandura's social cognitive theory is not highly speculative, it has outstanding internal consistency. Bandura is not afraid to speculate, but he never ventures far beyond the empirical data available to him. The final criterion of a useful theory is *parsimony*. Again, Bandura's theory meets high standards. The theory is simple, straightforward, and unencumbered by hypothetical or fanciful explanations.

XI. Concept of Humanity

Bandura sees humans as having the capacity to become many things, and most of these things are learned through modeling. People have the capacity to store past experiences and to use this information to chart future actions. Bandura's theory rates near the middle on teleology versus causality and high on free choice, optimism, conscious influences, and uniqueness. As a social cognitive theory, it rates very high on social determinants of personality.