

Danielle German

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Dr. Elliot

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An In-Depth Examination of Albert Bandura's Socio-Cognitive Theory

The manner in which an individual learns, adopts, and behaves is much debated among psychologists, teachers, marketing directors, and other professional individuals the world over. Many theories have been postulated as to how best to reach an individual and what complex cognitive hoops need to be managed in order to permeate the grey matter inside a brain. Socio-cognitive theory provides a causal model that seeks to explain the determining factors of how an individual gains and disseminates knowledge. This theory “extends the conception of human agency to collective agency,” contending that humans do not do anything in a vacuum, and neither do they act solely on social influences (Bandura, p. 270). People are influenced and influencers. Learning a behavior and then performing that behavior is not a linear process; rather it is a bidirectional process involving a triad of personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants. Many factors are involved learning and disseminating learned behavior, including symbolizing capabilities, vicarious capabilities, abstract modeling, motivational effects, social construction, and social diffusion through symbolic modeling and personal influence. Socio-cognitive theory seeks to explain the interrelated, hierarchical relationships related to how society and media influence the individual and collective cognitive processes, as well as define those separate cognitive processes in and of themselves. In the following pages, the background of socio-cognitive theory is followed by an explanation of

symbolism as it relates to environmental determinants; the elucidation of personal determinants includes self-regulation and self-reflection, vicarious capabilities and models, and explaining bad behavior; finally, behavioral determinants consists of symbolic modeling, effects of technology, and information dissemination through social networks.

Background

Socio-cognitive theory grew out of social learning theory, first formulated by Neal Miller and John Dollard in 1941. These sociologists formulated a theory based on the idea that people are social creatures, imitating behavior learned from others. Albert Bandura began “connecting behavioral and cognitive approaches to learning” from a psychological standpoint in 1977 (Huitt, Monetti). Bandura shaped the socio-cognitive theory by combining the ideas that people act through imitation and that a person’s cognitive process shapes the way he or she acts. While many theorists operate using socio-cognitive theory, Bandura is the driving force behind the movement and has shaped it to date. Bandura’s operating principle for socio-cognitive theory is that people behave based on a triadic reciprocal causation model consisting of personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants. These three factors function in greater or lesser degrees to produce individual behavior. This model is representative of a complex system of hierarchical elements that establish each of the determinants. The first of these elements is symbolism.

Symbolism

A basic tenet of socio-cognitive theory is that people operate using symbolism. In the reciprocal triadic socio-cognitive model, symbolism is most related to environmental determinants since symbols “provide humans with a powerful tool for comprehending their

environment and creating and regulating environmental events” (Bandura p.267). People communicate and understand the world through symbols; therefore, symbolism touches all aspects of the socio-cognitive process.

Self-Regulation and Self-Reflection

The socio-cognitive theory is rooted in constructivist ontology, which argues that humans are influenced by others, but incorporates the concept of individual agency. Bandura emphasizes the fact that people are “self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulating” (Bandura p.266). This self-regulatory capacity is motivational in nature. People want to do well and be praised by others. They also want to feel good about themselves and attain their greatest potential. In this way, self-regulation “involves a dual control process of disequilibrating discrepancy production (proactive control) followed by equilibrating discrepancy reduction (reactive control)” (268). Through proactive control, an individual sets goals for himself and, when he attains them, sets new goals for himself. Praise or disdain from others provides reactive control. Both work to temper an individual’s behavior. Another tempering factor is standard of morality. Morality is an aspect of an individual’s personality that is not easily changed. It does not vary from week to week, and once adopted, will act as a regulatory influence that serves as “self-sanctions for actions that match or violate [an individual’s] personal standards” (268). Bandura explains that the “inhibitive form [of morality] is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form of morality is expressed in the power to behave humanely” (268). The ability to foresee future events will also act as motivator or regulator of present behavior.

Self-reflection is another personal determinant that occurs through various metacognitive activities. An individual verifies his thoughts and ideas by checking them through enactive, vicarious, social, and logical means. Enactive verification “relies on the adequacy of the fit between one’s thoughts and the results of the actions they spawn” (269). Vicarious thought verification utilizes symbolic modeling to verify “experiences that cannot otherwise be attained by personal action” (269). Social verification happens when people “evaluate their views by checking them against what others believe” (269). Individuals use logical verification to deduce knowledge from known facts. One concern with these metacognitive activities arises when “erroneous beliefs...create social environments that confirm those misbeliefs” (269). Similarly, if a principle fact of logical verification is incorrect or the method of deductive reasoning is erroneous, an individual’s self-reflective process can be warped. Also, it is only through an individual’s belief that they have personal agency that self-reflection will be a determining factor of behavior. When people believe that “they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions,” they have incentive to act (270). Although vicarious verification can be used as a measuring point for self-reflective purposes, vicarious capabilities are also used as a social and cultural method of dissemination.

Vicarious Capabilities and Models

Culture and learning greatly depend on vicarious capabilities. They provide a model for every individual to adopt the “language, mores, social practices, and requisite competencies” in a given community (270). Models provide an opportunity for observational learning for which humans are uniquely adapted. It is important to note that enormous quantities of models are presented through the media. Bandura cautions, “A vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the

symbolic environment of the mass media” (271). Given the quality of most media outputs, this is cause for concern because “people act on their images of reality” (271). For example, the amount of TV shows that center around the theme of serial killers creates the perception that murderers lurk around every corner and office cubicle. In reality, the incidence of these killers is extremely low, but social perception of their high prevalence in society can affect behaviors. Electronic acculturation also provides influences that are “transforming how social systems operate and serving as a vehicle for sociopolitical change” (271). Symbolic modeling is adopted through observational learning, an essential tool in the socio-cognitive process.

Observational learning consists of four subfunctions: attentional processes, retention processes, production processes, and motivational processes. Attentional processes govern the ideas and behaviors that are “selectively observed in the profusion of modeling influences and what is extracted from ongoing modeled events” (272). Many factors go into determining what is observed and extracted. Personal preferences, preconceptions, attractiveness, functional value, and the “structural arrangements of human interactions” are just some of these factors (272). The second major subfunction in observational learning is the cognitive representational process, or the ability for an individual to remember, transform, and restructure modeled events for personal use. The behavioral production process is the third subfunction of modeling. Through this subfunction, “symbolic conceptions are translated into appropriate courses of action” by performing behavior patterns and then “comparing against the conceptual model for accurateness” (272). The final observational learning subfunction consists of adaptive performance, which “requires a generative conception rather than a one-to-one mapping between cognitive representation and action” (272). This means that an individual does not perform a

modeled action exactly as he saw it; rather, a vague, or abstract, construction of the action was formulated in his mind and performed with his own interpretation.

Abstract modeling greatly depends on adaptive performance. Models are not adopted and performed in the same way they were observed. Most of the time, “subskills must be improvised to suit varying functions” (275). An individual will learn a new behavior through observation, “extract the rule governing the specific judgments or actions exhibited by others,” and judge or generate new behavior based on the interpolated model (275). Bandura defines three processes for acquiring generative rules from modeled information: extracting the generic features from various social exemplars, integrating the extracted information into composite rules, and using the rules to produce new instances of behavior (275). Creativity happens when preexisting elements are remembered, refined, and synthesized into new procedures with novel elements added. Linda Flower and John Hayes use this concept in their theory of the writing process, later refined by Hayes in his essay, *Written Communication*. The writing model describes a three-level process consisting of a control level, a process level, and a resource level. When an individual writes, all three levels are working in tandem as the writer moves through specific processes within those levels. The resource level contains the long-term memory, in which observed models are stored. Models can also be found in the writing schemas at the control level. At the process level, synthesis occurs as the writer pulls from the control and resource levels and creates something new.

Observational learning satisfactorily describes the way in which humans understand, retain, adopt, and perform new concepts and behaviors. While this is only one aspect of the socio-cognitive theory, it is epistemologically important. Socio-cognitive theory breaks down the observational learning process in such a way that learning and implementation are separated

because “people do not perform everything they learn” (274). As with vicarious capabilities, “the observed detriments and benefits experienced by others influence the performance of modeled patterns in much the same way as do directly experienced consequences” (274).

Performance of observed behavior is largely based on how that behavior fits within an individual’s motivating factors, personal standards of conduct, and social and self-sanctions.

However, behaviors that do not fit within an individual’s specified personal determinants can be incorporated through motivational effects.

Explaining Bad Behavior

Motivational effects are determined mostly by their relation to possible outcomes when performing behavior. Most studies on vicarious motivational effects have been conducted with a focus on transgressive, aggressive, and sexual modeled behavior. According to Bandura, transgressive behavior is “regulated by two major sources of sanctions: social sanctions and internalized self-sanctions” (277). An excellent example of this phenomenon is exhibited in Gerry Philipsen’s *Speaking “Like a Man” in Teamsterville: Culture Patterns of Role Enactment in an Urban Neighborhood*. Philipsen describes a community of clannish men who have very strict cultural guidelines as to when and how they should speak. Philipsen defines three classes of situations that occur in Teamsterville: “those which are marked in the culture for a relatively great amount of talk by men, those marked for minimal talk by men, and those in which an emphasis of the verbal channel is proscribed for effective male self-presentation and for which other means of expression are required” (Philipsen p.14-15). In the first situation, men are culturally enabled to talk while around other men of equal age and cultural rank, and who have been friends for a long period of time. In the second instance, men talk to their children or their wives in small amounts. In any other situation, talking is proscribed, especially when a man is

confronted with an outsider or someone of lower cultural rank. When this occurs, a man is meant to act physically aggressively, and avoid talking as it lowers his status as a man. For Teamsterville men, “speech purchases an expression of solidarity or assertion of status symmetry,” something that needs to be earned (18). In order to restore manliness for a man confronted by outsiders or someone of lower rank, “an effective resource is physical fighting or a nonverbal threat” (19). While most people would not find violence the immediate reaction when talking to someone they have never met, in this closed community such behavior is socially sanctioned. Teamsterville men will not behave in a way that they or their friends find to be less than manly. To them, a simple act of talking to an outsider would be transgressive behavior. While Philipsen does not posit a theory as to how this behavior originated, some force caused the community to form these social guidelines. Many causes of such formation stem from the media. The mass media can have a major effect on perceived social sanctions. Like in Teamsterville, media portrayals of conflict show “physical aggression [as] a preferred solution to interpersonal conflicts; it is acceptable and relatively successful” (Bandura p.277). There are various ways in which can lead people to adopt lower moral standards.

An individual’s moral standards generally do not change, but there are a few cognitive processes that can lead an individual to perform bad behavior while still holding her moral values. She can do this by “selective activation and disengagement of internal control” (277). Moral justification is one set of disengagement practices. It can explain many acts, and is “widely used to support self-serving and otherwise culpable conduct” (277). One example of this practice is when people set off bombs at abortion clinics for what they claim are religious reasons. Often, people who utilize moral justification practices use “convoluted verbiage” to remove themselves from “a sense of personal agency” (278). Through moral justification comes

moral restructuring, a new moral house-of-cards construct that portrays the bad behavior as something to be admired. Another disengagement practice is “obscuring or distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause” (279). This practice is most famously used by the Nazi’s to justify their crimes against humanity. Distortion of cause and effect happens when “a legitimate authority sanctions [a person’s] conduct and accepts responsibility for its consequences” (279). By this logic, because a Nazi was under orders to treat people in the concentration camps horribly, they “are not the action agent of their actions, and are spared self-prohibiting reactions” (279). The fact that the other Nazi soldiers were also engaging in the bad behavior furthered the feeling that no one person was morally responsible. The last set of disengagement practices distorts the view of the recipients of the act. When people see the recipient of a detrimental act as human, it “enhances empathetic or vicarious reactions through perceived similarity” between the perpetrator and the victim. This is why law enforcement is trained to always call a victim by name in hostage or kidnapping situations; it helps the perpetrator to see the person as human. When an individual attributes blame to the person receiving the bad behavior, he is participating in disengagement practices. This type of disengagement is common among abusers, who often claim that they were provoked into abusive behavior by the victim. Cognitive restructuring of behavior through moral justifications can explain most crime and bad behavior, including crimes against humanity. Cognitive restructuring is helped along by mass media productions, which “morally justify injurious conduct, blame, and dehumanize victims, displace or diffuse personal responsibility, and sanitize destructive consequences” (280). With these social and media-produced tools “it is self-exonerative processes rather than character flaws that account for most inhumanities” (280).

It does not take much research to find a bevy of inhumane behavior examples. In addition to the Nazi war crimes there were the Tuskegee experiments that studies poor black men who were suffering, untreated, from syphilis. Another instance is exemplified through Mary Abrums' essay "*Jesus Will Fix It After Awhile*": *Meaning and Health*, in which she describes a community of poor, black, religious women and their attitudes toward and experiences with a white-dominated health care system. Abrums prefaces the results of the study by declaring that attitudes toward black people in the health care industry are molded through observational learning. They are formulated through statistics and then adopted by health care workers. These workers then disseminate the bad behavior by teaching it to other clinicians. The modeled negative and dismissive attitudes towards health care for black people have become pervasive in society, helped along by media portrayals. During the course of her study, Abrums discovered acts performed by health care workers on these women and their families that can only be described as inhumane, including an instance of substandard medical attention for a child in surgery. The cognitive restructuring for moral justification of these attitudes and acts shows many of the points mentioned above. Through statistics and medical analyses, racist attitudes are couched in complicated medical verbiage that serves to sanitize the nature of the information. Medical professionals, who are already inclined to see patients in a clinical view, synthesize the information and, knowingly or unknowingly, adopt a negative racial viewpoint. Abrums also points out that in a relationship in which there is a superior (doctor) and an inferior (patient), it is human nature "for those in power to be absolved of the responsibility for the condition of the inferior group and thus the victim is blamed for his/her own victimization" (Abrums p.90). The situation is not helped by the long history of racial suppression and dehumanization in America, as exemplified by the Tuskegee experiment. Modeled events have set a standard for mistrust.

Vicarious experiences have established an “extensive history of experimentation, on receiving the worst care from student doctors in the poorest segregated wards, on the stories of black bodies being stolen from graveyards by ‘night doctors’ for study, and on fears of deliberate genocide from exposure to syphilis, to AIDS, and to drugs within black communities” (91).

With these experiences in mind, it is no wonder that writers such as bell hooks describe white domination as a terrifying, oppressive giant. The need to seek help from that giant while in an incredibly vulnerable state combined with the perversion of medical care for black people can only contribute to modeled experiences of this warped paradigm. As evidenced by the black health care history, these affective dispositions can “acquire lasting attitudes, emotional reactions, and behavioral proclivities towards persons, places, or things that have been associated with modeled emotional experiences” (Bandura p. 281). The socio-cognitive framework through which negative behavior and attitudes can be examined provides a typology that can explicate the cognitive process behind morally unjustifiable acts. Mass media effects often exacerbate or provide positive motivational reactions to negative behavior and attitudes.

Symbolic Modeling

The mass media provides an extensive amount of models that are not often representative of the true state of human affairs; however, “heavy exposure to this symbolic world” may make them appear to be so (281). It is not only the amount of exposure, but also the type of content that people watch on TV that will lead to false constructions of reality. While Bandura focuses on televised models, the pervasive nature of technology in today’s society gives opportunities for models presented by mass media to be adopted through any medium at almost any location. The advancement of mobile technologies has exponentially increased the consumption of mass media, and therefore the exposure to mass media models. Collective illusions about

"occupational pursuits, ethnic groups, minorities, the elderly, social and sex roles, and other aspects of life" are constantly portrayed (282). Not all learned behavior is performed in the same way, if at all. Selected activation of behavior can be activated by social prompting.

Bandura differentiates social prompting from observational learning and disinhibition because some behavior is already learned, just never implemented due to lack of opportunity. Modeling in social situations can prompt selective activation of behavior due to motivational factors. These learned behaviors are activated when the actions of the models "are good predictors for observers that positive results can be gained by similar conduct" (282). Advertisements in particular utilize this type of modeling by implying that their desired behavior will bring an individual wealth, sex appeal, and luck. In this way, modeling can be an extremely lucrative device.

Modeling serves a myriad of purposes in influencing human behavior. It functions as a "tutor, motivator, inhibitor, disinhibitor, social prompter, emotion arouser, and shaper of values and conceptions of reality" (283). While each modeling influence can be seen on its own, often there are various modeling influences working in tandem. Novel examples of modeling "both teach and prompt similar acts" (282). Modeling works through mass media interaction with people, and through people interacting with people. Because of this, an important aspect of how information and behavior is disseminated is through personal influence and social circles.

People are influenced by models, but behavior that is performed comes from a variety of personal determinants. It has long been thought that influence "operates through a two-step diffusion process" wherein an influential person adopts an idea from the media and passes it on to those in his social group (283). The actual process is not so clear-cut. While media influences

can create new behaviors, they can also alter existing ones. Every person has an already constructed system of personal determinants, to which every new behavior is weighed against and incorporated into. Therefore, "the relative contribution of any given factor in a pattern of influences can change depending on the nature and strength of coexisting determinants" (284). This viewpoint explains atypical behavior by considering that other personal determinants in an individual worked in concert to produce the performance. If any one factor were absent, the behavior would not have occurred.

Television, and its often negative effects, has become so ubiquitous that any individual can be altered "directly by televised modeling without having to wait for an influential intermediary" to adopt the idea first (284). Behavior is not automatically adopted and implemented. Any novel behavior that requires time or resources or for which the motivational effects can be negative will require the individual to verify that the behavior is acceptable and valuable before adoption. People will also look to sources of modeled information that are easily accessible and that fit with their already established views. Models do not necessarily have to be correct or good so long as they are accessible and interesting to the adopter. Models influence through two conduits. In the direct pathway, "communications media promote changes by informing, enabling, motivating, and guiding participants" (285). The second pathway is socially mediated. Through this conduit, "media influences are used to link participants to social networks and community settings" (285). Early adopters experience models through mass media and diffuse the behavior through positive reinforcement of the adopted behavior. The early adopter will spread the idea through her social system, the people she interacts with on a daily basis.

The extent to which the media impacts society can be seen when viewers subsequently discuss ideas the media presented. The media has then “set in motion transactional experiences that further shape the course of change” (286). Tailored media messages have been shown to have more effect on influencing behavior than general messages. By exploiting tailored messages, the media can sway national cognitive processes. The media can also link like-minded people, causing information dissemination between people that would not normally interact. Media influences vary in how they affect learned modeled experiences and interpersonal influences. Sometimes the media directly affects individuals; sometimes individuals affect each other with no media interaction involved. Even in behavior that comes from mass media models, an individual must believe that he has the personal agency to achieve the desired outcomes of the behavior.

Effects of Technology on Behavioral Determinants

Modeling does not only come from individuals or the media, it also can be diffused on a social scale. One element of social diffusion is technology, which not only brings the mass media to people but also brings people together. Technology has “radically altered the social diffusion process” (287). Now, people can influence others anywhere in the world, or on a global scale. Bandura identifies elements of social diffusion for new behavior patterns: “the acquisition of knowledge about innovative behaviors, the adoption of these behaviors in practice, and the social networks through which they are spread and supported” (287). Diffusion of behavior practices generally experiences a specific pattern of adoption. Early adopters influence others and show a new behavior’s positive motivational effects. The adoption becomes widespread and then “either stabilizes or declines, depending on its relative functional value” (287). Media sources are the most likely source for learning new behaviors. In widely dispersed

areas or for very new ideas, technology is the most likely medium from which early adopters will learn. These early adopters are therefore “among those who have had greater access to media sources of information about innovations” (288). In using models, the media will play on “people’s beliefs in their self-regulative efficacy” to promote and sell new behaviors (289). When people believe they will be successful at a new activity, they are more likely to perform it. People will continue to perform this behavior when they experience positive motivational effects. The media, as well as advocates of new technologies, will “create expectations that they offer better solutions than do established ways” (289). This process can have a negative effect on people’s beliefs about an innovation as well. Even lukewarm reception to a new concept will not create interest in possible adopters. As anyone who has ever encountered advertisements for very expensive items can attest, status is also a great motivator for behavior. However, if the high cost of a product, or any other aspect related to a new behavior, is incompatible with the “prevailing social norms and value systems,” it is much less likely to be adopted (290). Just as an individual can restructure his moral compass to circumvent negative moral feelings, so can other entities such as the media. Influential entities “change appearances and meaning of new practices to make them look compatible with people’s values” (290). It is important to note that the positive effects of adopting a new behavior will be weighed against the resources they require. People are less likely to adopt a behavior that necessitates greater resources.

Adopted innovations can be disadvantageous, and resistance to useful innovations is not essentially abnormal. The positive motivational reactions towards adopters and non-adopters depend on the success of the behavior. Bandura identifies adjectives for these classes of people. For “innovations that hold promise,” venturesome is used to describe early adopters, while laggards fall behind the trend (290). In adopting “innovations of questionable value,” early

adopters are gullible, whereas resisters are astute (290). Adoption, whether early or late, good or bad, must disseminate through social networks.

Dissemination of Information through Social Networks

Every person is part of a social network; most people have circles through which they travel consisting of different types of people. New behaviors or ideas flow through social links, comprised of “clustered networks of people with various ties among them, as well as persons who provide connections to other clusters through joint membership or a liaison role” (291). In each cluster, there is a hierarchy that can play an important part in which behaviors are adopted and which are ignored. Also, clusters that are linked by certain commonalities are more likely to adopt behaviors related to those commonalities. For example, an individual’s college creative writing club is more likely to read the new Stephen King book that she just bought than is her Bible study group, even if she holds a high place in both circles. If the behavior is modeled in more than one group with social ties, the behavior is more likely to be adopted.

Modeled behavior can circumvent social ties entirely through direct messages in mass media. Bandura cites an example of televangelists who teach people how to “behave in situations involving moral, social, and political issues” (292). While the media connects to an enormous amount of people, the people do not connect to each other. Political and mass marketing techniques also perform in this way. Conversely, technological innovations have enabled disparate people to come together to share information. Global social networks extend social ties geographically, which allows innovations to spread in groups that are loosely connected. The mass media and technology operate hand-in-hand to distribute information faster and more widespread than ever before.

Conclusion

Albert Bandura seeks to define the individual cognitive process, the social cognitive process, and the ways in which those processes influence each other in the socio-cognitive theory of communication. The triadic reciprocal causation model for this theory consists of personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants. Environmental determinants operate through the use of symbols, which people use to give meaning to the world. Personal determinants emanate from a synthesis of self-regulatory capabilities, self-reflective capabilities, and vicarious capabilities. Vicarious capabilities are used to inform individuals of the culture that surrounds them through models and observational learning. Constructivist ontology is used to explain the behavioral determinants of the socio-cognitive model. In this portion of the model, people's behaviors are determined through social influence and social diffusion through symbolic modeling. Technology and mass media greatly affect both personal and behavioral determinants. They bring models to individuals and provide mediums through which social diffusion can occur. The socio-cognitive theory illuminates the cognitive processes of individuals and of society, and synthesizes personal agency and collective agency in order to better understand the nature of communication.

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