Albert Bandura: Learning, Modelling and Self-Efficacy

LEARN · SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

How we learn from others, and how belief in ourselves shapes what we try

Albert Bandura (1925–2021), of Stanford University, showed that much of what we learn comes from watching others, not only from our own rewards and punishments, and that beliefs about our capabilities shape what we attempt.

01 Why behaviour isn't learned only through direct experience

observational learning

DIRECT EXPERIENCE
learning by doing

I act (I try something myself) → a consequence follows (reward, relief, or a cost) → I learn (more or less likely next time)

OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING
learning by watching

someone acts (a parent, peer, or screen) → I watch (and notice what follows) → I learn (without having acted myself) → I may act later (when it seems useful or safe)

In the well-known "Bobo doll" studies, young children who watched an adult behave aggressively towards an inflatable doll later reproduced much of that behaviour, even when the adult was no longer present (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961). Learning had happened *before* the children ever acted.

02 Modelling: from watching to doing

four processes in observational learning

1 **Attention**
We have to notice the behaviour, and what follows it.
Who and what do I tune in to?

2 **Retention**
We hold it in memory, as images, words or rules.
What did I take away from it?

3 **Reproduction**
We need the skills to turn what we saw into action.
Can I actually do it myself?

4 **Motivation**
We act when it seems worthwhile, often judged by what happened to the model.
Will it be worth doing here?

Learning isn't the same as doing. Seeing a model rewarded or penalised (vicarious reinforcement) mostly affects whether we act, not whether we learn.

03 Two ideas that changed psychology

self-efficacy and reciprocal determinism

SELF-EFFICACY

"Can I do this?"

Belief in our capability to carry out what a particular situation requires. It is task-specific, and different from overall self-worth.



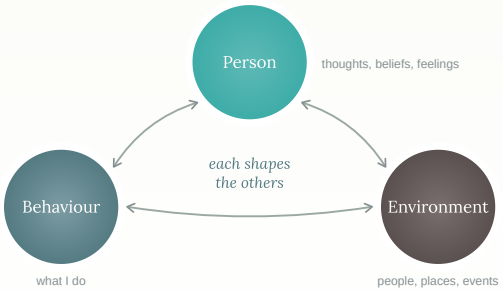
Line weight reflects Bandura's view that mastery is usually the strongest source.

A person can feel worthwhile yet doubt they can give a presentation. *Small, achievable successes usually build belief more than reassurance alone.*

RECIPROCAL DETERMINISM

A three-way influence

We are neither simply products of our surroundings nor entirely self-directed. Person, behaviour and environment continually shape one another.



Anxiety (person) leads to skipping a class (behaviour), so there are fewer chances to practise (environment), which strengthens "I can't". *A change at any point can shift the others.*

We are shaped by what we see around us, and we help shape what others see.

04 Reflect

notice your own models and beliefs

Who did I learn from?
a habit or reaction I picked up by watching

Where do I doubt myself?
one task where my self-efficacy is low

One small mastery step
achievable this week, to build belief

What do I model for others?
something I'd like others to see me do

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Bandura proposed four sources of self-efficacy, with mastery generally the most dependable (Bandura, 1977b); the idea now informs work in health, education and therapy. The Bobo doll studies were landmark experiments but measured short-term imitation in young children, so they say less about everyday, long-term behaviour.

SOURCES

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