

Social Cognitive Theory

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In this essay I will discuss what I have learned about social cognitive theory. I will give an overview of the main functional components of the theory and discuss how social cognitive theory can be applied to understanding exigent situations described in various readings on this topic.

Social cognitive theory accounts for the social origin of human thought and action. Albert Bandura, Ph.D. developed social cognitive theory (SCT) in the 1980s. In *Social Foundations of Thought & Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* Bandura writes that SCT expands the scope of its precursor, *social learning theory*, by encompassing “psychosocial phenomena that extend beyond issues of learning” (*Foundations* xii). He distinguishes SCT from social learning theory by explaining the two-part meaning of the new label. “The social portion of the terminology acknowledges the social origins of much human thought and action; the cognitive portion recognizes the influential causal contribution of thought processes to human motivation, affect, and action. The relabeling carries no claim of theoretical parentage” (*Foundations* xii).

From the SCT perspective, human functioning is influenced by the reciprocal interaction of various behavioral determinants, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events (*Foundations* 18). Humans exercise certain capabilities within this reciprocal framework to function successfully. The capabilities are symbolizing, forethought, vicarious, self-regulatory, self-reflective, and inherent.

- **Symbolizing capability**—the human capacity for symbolizing affords freedom from the onerous and sometimes dangerous trial-and-error process of learning from experience. Symbolizing allows abstract thought through which the individual can conceptualize possible experience and test it out with rational thought.
- **Forethought capability**—Most human behavior is purposive and therefore “regulated by forethought” (*Foundations* 19). Forethought can entail weighing probable consequences of actions, establishing goals, and planning courses of action (*Foundations* 19). Symbolizing is a tool for carrying out forethought. It enables the individual to conceptualize a behavior and its outcome and create motivation or inhibition to guide the selection of a course of action.
- **Vicarious capability**—A person can learn a behavior by observing the actions of others and the consequences of those actions. The human capacity for learning vicariously also precludes the need for the trial-and-error, learning-by-action approach to achieving behavior. Humans learn many important activities by modeling observed behavior—language, for example, or driving a car. The human capability for vicarious experience is fed by burgeoning mass communications outlets that provide a rich symbolic environment that expands modeling opportunities.

- **Self-regulatory capability**—Individuals use a combination of personal and societal standards to evaluate their behavior and change it as necessary. This self-monitoring can have a motivational or inhibitory impact when a person is considering action
- **Self-reflective capability**—Through self-reflection, people evaluate their behavior and make adjustments to it according to the consequences of the behavior and its compliance with internal and external (society) standards. This “metacognitive activity” is integral to the individual’s perception of their self-efficacy, or competence. Bandura points out that self-reflection can also produce faulty thought patterns (*Foundations* 21).
- **Human nature** — “Genetic factors affect behavioral potentialities” (*Foundations* 22). Human action is a combination of learned cognitive abilities and inborn psycho-physiological factors.

Also, key to SCT are the concepts of agency and self-efficacy. In “Social Cognitive Theory in Cultural Context,” Bandura writes, “Successful functioning requires an *agentic* blend of individual, proxy, and collective modes (“Cultural”, 269). The individual is an agent who intentionally influences his own life. In some instances, an individual may need to call upon another individual or institution for help if he or she does not have access to certain resources of influence that the other individual or institution does have (proxy mode). Collective agency is achieved when individuals in a society pool their resources to affect a desired result.

Agency implies the ability to conceive of and affect action---cognition and behavior. SCT holds that self-efficacy is a determinant of how well an individual thinks and performs. Self-efficacy is the extent of the individual’s self-confidence in their competence to cope with various levels of challenge. “People tend to avoid tasks and situations they believe exceed their capabilities, but they undertake and perform assuredly activities they judge themselves capable of handling” (*Foundations* 393).

STC identifies the determinant variables that influence social cognition and demonstrates how they interact. Bandura writes that “theories are interpreted in different ways depending on the stage of development of the field of study. In advanced disciplines, theories integrate laws; in less advanced fields, theories specify the determinants and mechanisms governing the phenomena of interest. It is in the latter sense that the term theory is used in this book (*Foundations* xii).

Understanding the interaction of the determinant variables listed above promotes insight into behavior. In “Speaking Like a Man” in Teamsterville: Culture Patterns or Role Enactment in an Urban Neighborhood,” boys on a field trip, with an adult male leader from a different subcultural structure, experience dissonance because of the leader’s stated preference for talk over violence in responding to a threat to his girlfriend. SCT accounts for the dissonance and the boys’ rejection behavior toward the leader. The boys have modeled the behavior of the adult males in their neighborhood, a model that calls for a violent reaction to a perceived threat to their peers’ perception of their manhood. So, the field trip leader’s role as a leader *does not compute*. The boys cognitively determined model does not allow for the variable represented by the would-be leader.

In another situation, the agentic approach of SCT accounts for the variance in ways agency is employed in Teamsterville, for example. When dealing with persons outside their socioeconomic status, Teamsterville men consult with others whose status affords access to resources of influence that they do not have. These others serve as proxy agents on behalf the Teamsterville man whose status proscribes dealing with a particular person of influence directly (Flower and Hayes 16).

In “Jesus will fix it after awhile”: meanings and health,” a group of urban, poor and working class black women of a particular church congregation employ social cognition (modeling and faith-based reasoning) to prevent themselves from feeling and behaving as if they are objects rather than subjects when dealing with the healthcare system. Their culture makes a distinction between education and the intelligence derived from experience—they discount education in the process. This concept is collectively modeled and reinforced within their church’s social structure. The concept eliminates the idea that the women’s capacity for functioning may be deficient because of lack of formal education. It serves to help them ward off the self perception of being objects in the face of an objectifying healthcare system (Abrums 97-104). In this way, they can maintain their sense of self-efficacy, and assume control of their situations. Self-efficacy greatly mitigates the stress of dealing with the objectifying health system while impaired by illness. The patient feels less vulnerable.

The writing process described in “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” serves as a microcosmic model within which the interaction of cognitive determinants in writing is observed by the authors, who studied the verbalized mental activities of writers in the act of composing. “In the act of writing, people regenerate or recreate their own goals in the light of what they learn” (Flower and Hayes 381). Also, Bandura writes that goal setting and self evaluative reactions to one’s own behavior is a form of self-motivation that “operates largely through a cognitive comparison process” (*Foundations* 467). To satisfy the demands of a discourse project, the writer sets a series of goals and creates new goals as the others are realized and provide new insights. This involves modeling writing that is already accomplished, evaluating and comparing the product to that which is modeled, monitoring progress, reflecting on the product’s quality, and creating new goals (writing behaviors) based on new ideas generated during the writing process (rewriting/editing). This cognitive writing act occurs within the social structure and is informed by the standards of practice and available information within that structure.

In “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication,” Bandura focuses on how the mass media serves to disseminate information about new behaviors. Individuals are not dependent on persons of influence to mediate and impart information to them. New behaviors and their potential consequences can be portrayed, observed and modeled on a vast scale via television or the internet. So, symbolized behavior is observed, cognitively examined and evaluated, selected for motivation, and tried. If the behavior proves useful it is adopted, if not, it will be inhibited.

Social cognitive theory, which was developed about 20 years ago, still stands as an operational model for studying human behavior, even in today's rich symbolic mass media environment, which offers myriad opportunities for behavioral modeling.

Works Cited

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