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Toward a Psychology of Human Agency: Pathways and Reflections

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Abstract
Social cognitive theory is founded on an agentic perspective. This article reviews the core features of human agency and the individual, proxy, and collective forms in which it is exercised. Agency operates through a triadic codetermination process of causation. Knowledge from this line of theorizing is widely applied to effect individual and social change, including worldwide applications that address some of the most urgent global problems.

This article addresses the evolution of an agentic theory of human behavior and its broad social applications. Over the years, theorists have engaged in spirited debates on whether the causes of human behavior reside in the individual, as the dispositionalists claim, or in the environment, as the situationists claim. As shown in Figure 1, social cognitive theory subscribes to a triadic codetermination theory of causation. In this three-way interplay, human functioning is a product of intrapersonal influences, the behavior individuals engage in, and the environmental forces that impinge on them. Because personal influences play an influential role in the casual mix, people have a hand in shaping events and the courses their lives take. To be an agent is to intentionally produce certain effects by one's actions. The different ways in which human agency is manifested will be addressed shortly.

Development of the agentic theory is rooted in experiences during my formative years. My parents migrated to Canada from Eastern Europe in 1900 with no formal education. They were the homesteaders who had to build their lived physical and social environment from scratch. This included manually converting heavily wooded land to farmland, building their roads, homes, schools, churches, and villages concurrently with scanty outside aid. They were remarkable agentic pioneers of the Canadian nation.

The evolving rural environment in Alberta where I grew up was woefully short of educational resources and services. The entire high school curriculum was taught by a few instructors, so I had to enroll in some required courses by correspondence. As a result, a good share of my academic learning was self-directed. Much of the course content was perishable but development of agentic self-directedness has been invaluable. The academic journey from the rural plains of Alberta to the balmy palms of Stanford University called for a great deal of agentic effort along the challenging route (Bandura, 2006a). Before commenting on the contribution of this article to psychological science and society at large, I will summarize briefly the main features of agentic theory.

Roots and Core Features of Agency

In the course of evolution, humans acquired an advanced symbolizing capacity that enabled them to transcend the social pressure of their immediate environment and made them unique in their power to shape their environment and life courses (Bandura, 2008). With the development of cognitive capabilities, deliberative thought, language, and other forms of symbolic communications, human ancestors became a sentient agentic species.

Social cognitive theory accords a paramount role in agentic properties in psychosocial functioning. The agentic portion of this theory is manifested though three main properties. They include forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. In *forethought*, people motivate and guide themselves by creating action plans, adopting goals, and visualizing the likely outcomes of their actions. A future state has no material existence so it cannot be a cause of current behavior. In this form of anticipatory self-guidance, behavior is governed by visualized goals

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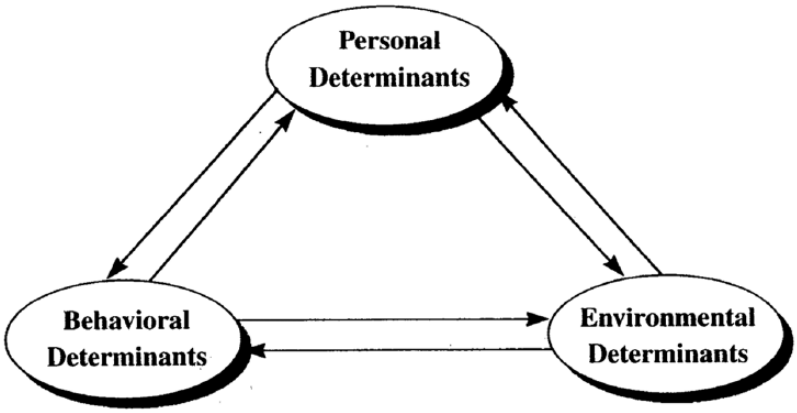

Fig. 1. Interplay of determinants in the causal model of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

and anticipated outcomes rather than being pulled by an unrealized future state. Forethought enables people to transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to shape and regulate the present to realize desired futures. When projected over a long-term on matters of value, a forethoughtful perspective provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one's life.

The second agentic property is *self-reactiveness*. Agents are not only planners and forethinkers. They are also self-regulators. Individuals manage their behavior by self-sanctions within a self-governing system. They do so by adopting behavioral standards against which they evaluate their performances. They respond with positive or negative evaluative self-reactions depending on how well their behavior measures up to their adopted standards (Bandura, 1991a).

The third agentic property is *self-reflectiveness*. People are not only self-regulators but also self-examiners of their functioning. They reflect on their efficacy to realize given challenges, the soundness of their thoughts and actions, their values, and the meaning and morality of their pursuits. It is at this higher level of self-reflectiveness that individuals address conflicts between alternative courses of action and competing values and favor one course over another. The metacognitive capability to reflect on oneself and the adequacy of one's capabilities, thoughts, and actions is the most distinctly human core property of agency.

Contributions to Psychological Science

Broadening the conception of human agency

Theorizing and research on human agency centered almost exclusively on agency exercised individually. However, this is not the only way in which people affect how they live their lives. I broadened this line of theorizing to include three different modes of human agency: individual, proxy, and collective. The individual form is confined to spheres of activity that are personally controllable. However, in many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, they rely on socially mediated proxy agency. They exercise this mode of agency by influencing others who have the resources, knowledge, and means to act on their behalf to obtain the outcomes they desire.

Many of the things people seek are achievable only by working together through group effort. In the exercise of collective agency, they pool their knowledge, skills, and resources and act in concert to shape their future. In this multiagent model of collective agency, participants achieve unity of effort for common purpose.

Cross-culture extension of agentic theory

Wrangling dualisms pervade our field, pitting autonomy against interdependence, individualism against collectivism, agency against communality, and agency against social structure (Bandura, 2008). It is often claimed that Western psychological theories lack generalizability to collectivistically oriented cultures because the former theories are individualistically oriented. The inclusion of collective agency in social cognitive theory extends its applicability to societies operating under a collectivistic lifestyle (Bandura, 2002b; Pajares & Urdan, 2006).

Cultures are diverse and dynamic social systems, not static monoliths. For example, there are generational and socioeconomic variations in communality in collectivistic cultures; younger and more affluent members adopt more individualistic orientations. Analyses across

activity domains further reveal that people act communally in some aspects of their lives and individualistically in many other aspects. Not only are cultures not monolithic entities, but also they are no longer insular. Global connectivity is shrinking cross-cultural uniqueness.

Successful functioning requires an agentic blend of the different modes of agency. The relative contribution of individual, proxy, and collective modes to the agentic mix may vary cross-culturally. But all of these agentic modes need to be enlisted to make it through the day, regardless of the culture in which one happens to resides.

In evaluating the cross-cultural applicability of a theory, one must distinguish between basic human capacities and how culture shapes potentialities into diverse forms. For example, social modeling is a universalized human capacity. But what is modeled, how modeling influences are socially structured, and the purposes they serve vary in different cultural milieus. In short, there is cultural commonality in basic agentic capacities and mechanisms of operation, but diversity in culturing of these inherent capacities. In this dual-level analysis, universality is not incompatible with manifest cultural plurality. Murray and Kluckhohn (1953) summarized eloquently the blend of universality, commonality, and uniqueness of human qualities: Every person is in certain aspects like all other people, like some other people, like no other person.

Contributions to psychological science guided by theory building

Theorists do not create a complete theory of human behavior at the outset given the plurality of determinants and the intricate and dynamic interaction between them. Rather, theory building is a long haul in which essential components are added incrementally. Each successive theoretical extension and refinement brings us closer to understanding the determinants of human behavior and its modification.

Forethought

In building the agentic theory, I conducted separate programs of research for each of the three agentic elements. The earlier investigations shed light on the exercise of agency by forethought as manifested through outcome expectations and goal aspirations (Bandura, 1991a, 1986). The work of goal theorists (Locke & Latham, 2013) and expectancy-value theorists (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) added to our understanding of the temporal extension of agency through forethought.

Self-regulation

Excursion into the exercise of agency through self-regulation clarified how individuals form personal standards and regulate their behavior by self-sanctions depending on success or failure to meet their standards (Bandura, 1991b). I extended the self-regulatory form of agency to the moral dimension of life. Traditional theories of morality focus heavily on the cognitive aspect of morality but have little to say about how moral reasoning gives rise to moral conduct and its endurance under pressure to behave otherwise. Agentic theory addresses the explanatory gap between moral thought and moral conduct. Moral reasoning is linked to moral conduct through self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in moral standards coupled with contingent self-sanctions (Bandura, 1991b, 2016). Abiding by one's moral standards supports positive self-regard, whereas violating moral standards rouses self-contempt. These self-sanctions keep behavior in line with moral standards.

Theoretical extension and refinement are well illustrated in my research on the agentic self-regulatory aspect to moral agency. A major share of research on self-regulation focuses on achievement behavior. Performance standards are raised as knowledge and competencies are acquired. However, in self-regulation of moral conduct, moral standards are not altered weekly or monthly. In addition, self-evaluative reactions are much stronger for violating moral standards than for falling short of performance standards. Although self-regulation is the mode of agentic control on both domains, they differ in some aspects of execution.

I mounted a program of research that further extended the theory of moral agency. It addressed a highly prevalent but largely ignored failing in moral self-regulation in which the self-sanctions that regulate moral behavior are neutralized or enlisted in the service of detrimental behavior (Bandura, 2016). In a pervasive moral paradox, individuals are behaving in ways that violate their moral standards but retaining a favorable self-regard and live in peace with themselves. They sustain the paradoxical adaptation with eight psychosocial mechanisms that disengage morality from their detrimental conduct and disavow responsibility for the harm they cause (Bandura, 2016).

Figure 2 presents schematically the eight mechanisms and the locus at which moral self-sanctions are disengaged. At the *behavior locus*, people sanctify harmful means by investing them with worthy social and moral purposes. Harmful conduct is also rendered benign or even altruistic through advantageous comparison, which portrays the harm one inflicts as minor

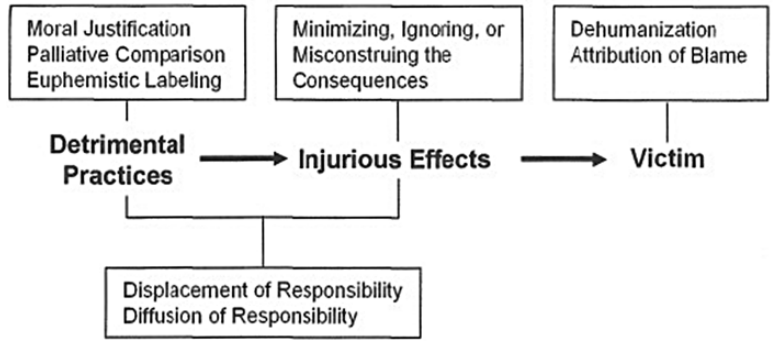

Fig. 2. Eight mechanisms through which the moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from harmful behavior at four points in moral self-regulation.

compared with the harm it prevents or that others commit. Euphemistic language in its sanitizing and convoluted forms cloaks harmful behavior in innocuous language and removes humanity from it. These three mechanisms are especially powerful because they serve a dual function: They engage morality in the harmful mission but disengage morality in its grim execution.

At the *agency locus*, people absolve themselves of personal accountability for harmful conduct by displacing responsibility to others and by dispersing it widely so that no one bears responsibility. At the *outcome locus*, perpetrators disregard, minimize, distort, or even dispute the injurious effects of their actions: There is no moral issue if detrimental practices are judged to be harmless or beneficial. At the *victim locus*, perpetrators exclude those they maltreat from their category of humanity by divesting them of human qualities or attributing animalistic qualities to them. The additional moral disengagement at the victim locus blames the victims for bringing the maltreatment on themselves or attributes it to compelling circumstances. These moral failings occur in all walks of life and in institutional, social, political, financial, military systems, and in environmental degradation (Bandura, 2016).

Moral disengagement is not a character trait that is assessed by a one-size-fits-all measure. Disengagement mechanisms operate across different aspects of life, but they are manifested differently depending on the sphere of activity (Bandura, 2016). For example, justifications for the death penalty focus on retribution, public safety, and preservation of the social order, whereas the tobacco industry justifies advertising campaigns that get youth hooked on nicotine in terms of freedom of speech. Some studies are being published with faulty trait measures. In the interest of well-founded tests of disengagement theory of morality, I developed guidelines for constructing valid measures for each mode of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2017).

Self-reflection

A major feature of the exercise of agency through metacognitive self-reflection is judgment of one's efficacy. This core self-belief is the foundation of human aspiration, motivation, and accomplishments (Bandura, 1997). Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the belief that one has the capability to produce effects by one's actions.

I launched a large-scale program of research that clarified the structure of this belief system; specified ways to build resilient individual and collective efficacy; explained how it operates through its impact on cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes; and provided guidelines on how to apply this knowledge for individual and social change (Bandura, 1997). The scope of the social applications will be considered later.

Self-efficacy plays a special role because it contributes to the operation of the other agentic elements. Self-regulation through goal setting is a good case in point. People's beliefs in their efficacy affect the type and level of goals they set for themselves and the strength of their commitment to them (Bandura, 2015). In my other article in the top 30 in APS journals, "Exercise of Human Agency Through Collective Efficacy," I addressed the nature, assessment, and role of collective efficacy in social development, adaptation, and change (Bandura, 2000).

Perceived self-efficacy is not a global trait but a differentiated set of self-beliefs linked to distinct realms of functioning. Therefore, self-efficacy measures should be tailored to the selected actuary domain rather than cast as a one-size-fits-all trait. Multidomain measures reveal the patterning and degree of generality of

people's sense of personal efficacy. To ensure the soundness of self-efficacy measures, I created a guide for constructing them (Bandura, 2006c). The guide provides instruction on how to conduct conceptual analyses to determine the appropriate types of self-efficacy for a given sphere of functioning, and how to scale the items in terms of gradations of challenge.

Studies were being published with faulty measures and misconceptions of self-efficacy theory. I published a set of lengthy commentaries that addressed not only methodological and conceptual issues regarding self-efficacy theory but also broader topics regarding the role of intrapersonal determinants in causal processes (Bandura, 2012, 2015; Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Some of the commentary centered on alternative conceptions of personality in the field of psychology. They include Big Five trait theory (McCrae & Costa, 1999) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1999). The five-factor trait theory characterizes personality in terms of five clusters of decontextualized habitual behaviors. However, this five-fold inventory has little to say about the intrapersonal and social determinants of the behaviors grouped in the clusters, or how to change them. Social cognitive theory acknowledges that human behavior is socially situated, discriminatively contextualized, and conditionally manifested. The theory conceptualizes personality in terms of intrapersonal factors that serve as motivators and regulators of behavior. The agentic factors are a vital part of the causal mix. Because these factors are modifiable, agentic theory provides principles for effecting individual and social change.

Social Modeling as a Source and Vehicle of Agency

When I began my career, most of our prominent psychological theories were developed long before even the advent of television. They focused mainly on direct influences operating in the immediate physical and social environment. In this line of theorizing, behavior was shaped and regulated by response consequences and paired association. The predominant focus on learning by direct experience was at variance with pervasive observational learning through social modeling in everyday life. This was an inhospitable atmosphere in which to promote a mode of observational learning that requires neither performance of responses nor contingent reinforcement (Bandura, 2006a).

As explained earlier, during the course of evolution, humans developed an advanced cognitive capacity that enables them to enlarge their knowledge and competencies. They could do so rapidly through information conveyed by the rich array of models. Direct experience is a tough teacher. Learning from example shortcuts laborious and costly trial and error. Many ages ago, Voltaire heralded the benefits of social modeling: "Is there anyone so wise as to learn by the experience of others?"

I established a program of research designed to shed light on observational learning through social modeling. It focused on different forms that modeling takes, the mechanisms through which it works, the different functions it serves, and the ways in which the information on modeling can be applied for individual and social change (Bandura, 1986).

In this brief review, I focus on two roles modeling plays in development and exercise of human agency. In the first role, in conjunction with other sources of influence, it contributes to the development of the different properties of agency (Bandura, 1986, 1997). In their daily lives and pervasive mass media, models exhibit attitudes, values, coping strategies, and styles of behavior. Acquisition of knowledge and competencies through modeling raises viewers' beliefs in their efficacy. Modeled events portray not only behavior but also its accompanying outcomes. Favorable outcomes instill positive outcome expectations; adverse ones serve as disincentives. Models are not only enablers, but also motivators and inspirers through their hopes and aspirations. Through the aspirational and moral standards they convey in their behavior, models contribute to the development of self-regulatory capabilities.

Social modeling also plays a ubiquitous role as a vehicle for agentic action (Bandura, 2002a). Revolutionary advances in communication technologies vastly expands the opportunity to exercise both individual and collective agency. People nowadays spend most of their waking hours in the symbolic environment of the cyberworld. This enables them to transcend the confines of their physical and social environment. A major advantage of social modeling lies in its tremendous reach, speed, and instructive power. Unlike learning by doing, influential models can transmit via mass media new ways of thinking and behaving to people worldwide. People now manage the major share of transactions in their everyday lives through the Internet by drawing on the vast information readily available in the cyberworld. With the meteoric growth of social media, people promulgate their views and ideas unbridled by gatekeepers to large audiences in efforts to rally support for their social and political causes. How people use their agentic capabilities, within societal constraints and opportunity structures, depends, in large part, on their social and moral commitments (Bandura, 1997).

Social Applications

In the early 1960s, there was growing awareness that the psychodynamic theories that dominated the clinical

psychology field and popular culture were of questionable predictive and therapeutic value. These disappointing outcomes ushered in a paradigm shift in causal models and modes of treatment in the form of psychosocial and behavioral approaches. This transformative change also focused on modifying detrimental practices of social systems, not just the treatment of human casualties of such practices (Bandura, 1969, 2004).

During this time, we were developing psychosocial approaches that enabled people to improve their lives through guided mastery experiences. This enablement mode of treatment eliminated tenacious phobias, diminished autonomic arousal to stressors, reduced excitatory neurotransmitters, and transformed dream activity from nightmarish to benign forms. As a severe snake phobic gained mastery, for example, she dreamed that a boa constructor befriended her and was helping her wash dishes! In follow-up assessments, participants not only remained free of their phobias but also reported generalized transformative changes in their lives. Eliminating, by guided mastery, lifetime phobic dread and tormenting nightmares instilled a resilient sense of efficacy that they could take greater charge of their lives. They tackled activities they had avoided with delight over their successes. Formal empirical tests verified that self-efficacy operates as a common mechanism through which diverse modes of treatment affect behavior (Bandura, 1997).

I redirected my program of research to shed conceptual light in the nature of this agentic belief system. Findings from diverse lines of research clarified the structure of self-efficacy, specified how to build it, explained the mechanisms through which it works, and provided guidelines on how to better people's lives by strengthening belief in their individual and collective capabilities. The theory diffused rapidly to different fields of psychology and across disciplinary lines. In the book *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (Bandura, 1997), I document widespread applications of the theory to the fields of education, health, athletics, the corporate world, and social and political change.

My recent book, *Moral Disengagement* (Bandura, 2016), is a call to action on how to restore moral self-regulatory agency. These measures take a variety of forms. Regardless of whether social practices are carried out individually, organizationally, or institutionally, it should be made difficult for people to strip humanity from their detrimental behavior. A public that is well-versed in the modes of moral disengagement can see though these self-exonerative practices, making it harder for wrongdoers to use them successfully. At the broadest social level, human cruelty can be reduced by developing a sense of shared humanity with moral engagement toward an inclusive, socially just, and humane society.

The most ambitious applications of social cognitive theory for social change through agentic development address some of the global threats to preserving a sustainable environmental future (Bandura, 2006b). This large-scale model of change had a novel origin. One morning, I received a call from Miguel Sabido, a gifted producer and dramatist at the Televisia broadcasting system in Mexico. He explained that he extracted a number of modeling principles from the Bobo doll studies and used this information to produce long-running serial dramas that were accomplishing notable societal changes.

These dramatic productions are not fanciful stories. The storylines portray the realities of people's everyday struggles and the impediments they face. The dramas help people to see a better life and inform, enable, and guide them to take the steps to realize their hopes and dreams. Hundreds of episodes spanning several years allow viewers to form strong emotional bonds with the models, whose thinking and behavior evolve at a believable pace. In the words of one viewer, "This is our story." Viewers comment on their similarity to the models in the storylines struggling to better their lives: "I recognize myself in the character of Francois." Viewers are inspired and enabled to improve their own lives.

Multiple intersecting storylines and subplots address different aspects of people's lives, rather than focusing on a single issue. For example, the storylines in the serial broadcast in Sudan included the benefits of family planning, educational opportunities for girls, the injustice of forced marriage, the risks of early childbearing, prevention of HIV infection, and the harm of entanglement in drug-related activities. The flexibility of this format contributes to its generalizability, versatility, and power (Bandura, 2006b).

Fostering society-wide changes requires three major components. The first component is a *theoretical model*. It specifies the determinants of psychosocial change and the mechanisms through which those determinants produce their effects. The second component is a *translational and implemental model*. It converts theoretical principles into an innovative operational model. It specifies the content, strategies of change, and their mode of implementation. We often do not profit from our theoretical successes because we lack effective means for disseminating proven psychosocial approaches. The third component is a *social diffusion model* for adopting psychosocial programs to diverse cultural milieus. Population Media Center, which works with host countries in developing culturally relevant programs, serves as the diffusion system implementing the programs worldwide.

The serial dramas are not social programs foisted on nations by outsiders. Rather, they are created only by

invitation from countries seeking help with intractable problems. Population Media Center works in partnership with media personnel in host countries to create serial dramas tailored to their cultures and addressing the types of benefits they seek.

These productions are reaching millions of people around the world. For example, applications in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are raising literacy levels, enhancing the status of women in societies in which they are marginalized and denied their freedom and dignity, reducing unplanned childbearing to break the cycle of poverty and stem the soaring population growth, curtailing the spread of the AIDS epidemic, mobilizing communities to clean contaminated water supplies that are the leading cause of death and illness worldwide, and promoting environmental conservation practices, such as sustainable foresting and farming, land conservation, and natural resource and wildlife habitat preservation.

These diverse programs of individual and social change reflect my abiding commitment to applications of the scientific knowledge we achieve.

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