

Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Its Importance in the Organizational Psychology Context

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This systematic review is focused on the importance of the Bandura Social Cognitive Theory and its theoretical components such as self-efficacy in workplace of today. The themes have been described through the course of the decades. These theories have been utilized heavily in research and real-life case studies, have been further developed by Bandura and other researchers, and have been implemented in organizational psychology. During the past 10 years they have helped in reshaping Human Resources Development. Major latest contributions and applications are discussed touching even the recent outbreak of the pandemic. The influence of the theory is immense and the importance of self-efficacy in the workplace has been addressed and proven by research.

Keywords: Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy, workplace, managerial self-efficacy, leadership-motivation-performance, learning in the workplace

Introduction

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) evolved from the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) of developmental psychology that focused on people's learning by imitating or observing others through modelling influences. The theory later embraced cognition to further explain human behavior through a person's mental abilities such as information processing to respond to these modelling influences. Additionally, it is used to address how people are motivated and can motivate others, how they perform, how they go about learning new skills, and how they self-regulate. Furthermore, it explains how personalities can change through these processes and asserts that people influence others and are influenced by others. The Social Learning (Cognitive) Theory is on the other hand one of the most widely used learning theories, in the workplace and the human resource development field, to address and enhance adult learning (Gibson, 2004). Thus, Social Cognitive Theory can and has been used to explain how human behavior is shaped in the workplace.

In 1977 Bandura introduced the term self-efficacy which is defined as a "persons belief in their ability to produce desired results by their own actions" (p.). Later, self-efficacy and social cognitive theory was introduced to the workplace through extensive research on complex managerial decision making explaining the relationship of various factors impacting managers' behaviors in the workplace (Bandura, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Extensive research has proven that self-efficacy beliefs in relation to goals influence performance and motivation at work (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

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In this systematic review the concepts of the theory will be presented and related to the workplace today including how they have been utilized and combined with other theories. Furthermore, the relation to employee's behavior in organizational settings will be discussed including important constructs such as motivation, performance, and wellbeing.

Basic Concepts of the Theory

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura in his quest to address the human behavior wanted to give answers to questions such as "How do people acquire competencies, values and styles of behavior?", "How do people motivate and regulate their behavior?" (F. Davidson & J. Davidson, 2003). Research based on Social Learning Theory gave birth to the Social Cognitive Theory. This theory varies from psychodynamic and behaviorist theories as it encapsulates three factors to address these questions: personal influences, the behavioral influences, environmental factors and the interaction thereof. The model introduced to explain the relationship of the three factors is the "triadic reciprocal causation" model (Christiansen & Tett, 2013). Specifically, when referring to the person it describes personality characteristics that include beliefs, attitudes, knowledge (previous experiences), expectations, and goals people have. Behavior refers to skills, practice, and self-efficacy, while the environment refers to the social circumstances, immediate or broader societal contexts and influences (Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993). Furthermore, the theory emphasizes a person's ability to influence change in personality characteristics, behaviors, and capabilities, such as skills, through social interactions, such as using performance feedback and modelling persuasion. A person is therefore also able to change his "destiny", his course through life, by making decisions following the evaluation of chance life events. Additionally great importance is placed on a person's ability to self-educate, self-develop that involves change and self-regulation. Self-regulation entails guiding oneself by deciding how to act and what to circumvent while facing challenges and that encompasses moral conduct (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is coined by Bandura (1977) as a "theory of behavioral change" and describes a person's belief in himself, in his capabilities in his actions. It plays a significant role in the "triadic reciprocal causation" model influencing how people behave, make decisions, react to changes, cope with challenges, and accomplish things in their life (Bandura, 1977). The higher the self-efficacy, the easier it is for a person to deal with the challenges he will face in life, such as change, failure, or even more dramatic events such as dealing with health problems, trauma, or even death. Bandura coined this as "resilient efficacy". So how does one achieve self-efficacy? Efficacy expectations are those that related to how a person thinks that he will feel, the outcome that he will have if he follows a certain path of actions or behaves in a certain way. Bandura described four sources of efficacy expectations which include: "mastering past experiences" or "performance accomplishments" by relating previous experiences to triumphs and accomplishments and the action of performing itself, "vicarious experiences" which describe how people observe others that succeed and how they go about it, what behaviors get them to attain success (social modelling), "social persuasion" which refers to the power of other individuals, teams, or larger groups such as organizations to persuade others, for example by leading the way to success, or believing in others to perform or by using verbal persuasion and lastly by relating to one's "emotional states", understanding those capabilities and managing them effectively, or attributing

emotions to performance. Efficacy expectations can vary in magnitude based on the level of difficulty of the task, in generality and strength. Bandura further described that efficacy beliefs affect the way people function through four major procedures: the way they think, the way they are motivated in the sense based on the level of efficacy they will decide what they can achieve in life, the way they feel, affecting their emotional and mental wellbeing, and finally the decisions they make (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy and Learning

Modeling and observational learning and the link to motivation. Bandura describes modeling and observational behaviors of people through the following process: (1) First the person picks up on a modeling behavior and the actions that are related to a specific activity, (2) then what has been observed is conceived through various cognitive processes in a certain way by the model, (3) following, the viewer attempts to translate his conceptions into actions, and (4) finally the person is motivated even more so if he receives positive feedback for his actions. This process on the one hand increases the self-efficacy of the achiever. On the other hand, when achievements are made by people with high self-efficacy, they tend to perform better (Bandura, 1977).

Contributions of the Theory in the Workplace

Self-efficacy in the Workplace

When referring to self-efficacy in the workplace, we look at the way a person performs a task or goes about achieving a goal. Within the work environment what influences his self-efficacy again includes: “past performance”, “vicarious experience”, “verbal persuasion”, and “emotional cues” (Bandura, 1986, p. 113). “The way an employee senses his capabilities will then have effect on his perception, motivation, and performance” (Bandura, 1997, p. 195). This affects the way an employee behaves in the workplace. An employee that has performed well on a task in the past will most likely feel that he has the ability to perform the task again or even one of more challenging magnitude. An employee who has not performed well at a task or a set of tasks will have low self-efficacy. Vicarious experience is related to when an employee who watches others complete a task will also sense that he too can complete a task especially if he has past experiences of achievements. Verbal persuasions relate to the workplace when peers or supervisors convince others that they can achieve goals. An employee will most likely feel that he has the capability to reach his goals and complete his tasks without difficulty if he is perceived by his supervisors and his peers that he can complete the job. Furthermore, when an employee feels that he cannot achieve a task, he experiences psychosomatic symptoms (Lunenburg, 2011).

Behavior Change in the Workplace—The Power of Vicarious Learning

Manz and Simz (1981) describe the power of vicarious learning in an organization and how the Modeling-Based Training (Goldstein & Sorcher, 1974) program for managers and supervisors relates to Bandura's modeling and observational learning theory and includes four steps: (1) The behavioral model referring to a desired behavior that an organization wants to model, (2) the rehearsal where the desired behavior is rehearsed, (3) the transfer training where the behavior is linked to specific job related actions, and (4) social reinforcement which includes the feedback that is received used to reinforce the behavior. Through this training program organizations could train their supervisors specific job related behaviors to transform them to role models for the organization.

New Findings of the Theory in the Workplace

Social Cognitive Theory and Human Resource Development

Gibson (2004) identifies the importance of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory in organizational behavior and management and examines how it has and can be further applied to Human Resources Development incorporating various aspects of the theory. Specifically, there are three areas of Human Resources Development where the theory has been heavily applied: (a) in relation to performance, training, and motivation, (b) in relation to cross cultural training, and (c) self-regulation and self-management. Examples include the combination of learning and work that is enhanced by self-efficacy, such as skills upgrading, the application of self-efficacy in organizational and individual performance such as selection, performance appraisal, goals, and incentives and has even been applied for career development and organizational decision making. Furthermore, Social Learning Theory and the processes of observational learning have been used widely to address challenges of globalization and cross-cultural training by incorporating cross-cultural factors in on-the-job training. Finally, the theory has been applied to enhance the self-management and capabilities of employees resulting to higher self-efficacy and behavior change.

Efficacy, Goal Setting, and Task Motivation

Locke and Latham (2002) summarize 35 years of empirical research on the theory of goal setting workplace and note the importance of self-efficacy as it reinforces goal commitment. Organizations can accomplish this by modelling behaviors to employees from the ones that they can identify with, by persuading them that they can accomplish the tasks or goals at hand or by training employees so as to master achievement and create those experiences that will further enhance and strengthen employees' beliefs about their capabilities. They refer to the motivation hub¹ which consists of personal goals, goal commitment, and self-efficacy. Specifically, they describe how when a challenging goal is presented to an employee self-set goals and efficacy are used as mediators to deal with the achievement at hand. Furthermore, this increases self-efficacy due to the perception that the supervisor believes that the person attaining the goal can achieve it. To conclude Latham and Locke state that goal setting theory and Social Cognitive Theory are related by the fact that they both recognize the importance of self-efficacy, the significance of attaining goals and achievements and performance motivation.

Self-Efficacy and Performance in the Workplace, the General Model

Many researchers have introduced process models to explain the relationship between personality and performance. In 2008 Johnson and Hezlett (Christiansen & Tett, 2013) incorporated "perceived behavioral control" in Ajzen's 1985 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as an additional determining factor of one's intention to behave in the workplace. Perceived behavioral control is related to ones' perception of how difficult a behavior will be and the control that he will have over that behavior. Self-efficacy was incorporated to relate to the perception of difficulty and autonomy was included to relate to the control one had over the behavior that he would follow. Furthermore, it was concluded that the higher the self-efficacy, the greater the belief of the person that he controls his behavior. This model is known as the General Model and maps in detail the various personality influences on performance.

¹ Motivation Hub, Locke (1991), "the place in the organization where all the action is".

Self-Efficacy, Job Crafting, and the Job Demands Resources Model

The importance of self-efficacy in the workplace is such that plethora of research attempts to implement interventions to increase it. The term “job crafting” was first coined by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), as a way for employees to change their job proactively to give more meaning to their work, a type of individual job redesign. Later on, Tims and Bakker (2010) introduced a new perspective to the model by incorporating “job crafting” in the JDR, Job Demands Resources Model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) which explains the relationships between work characteristics and wellbeing outcomes such as the stress that is induced on employees when the job demands supersede the job resources and the ways to mediate the stressors by increasing or making use of more job resources. Job resources can be categorized as personal or organizational resources. Personal resources are resources that represent those personality characteristics that support people to deal with strenuous demands in the workplace and include self-efficacy. Heuvel, Demerouti, and Peeters (2015) discuss the importance of job crafting behavior in increasing self-efficacy which is a vital resource in the JDR Model. Companies organize job crafting interventions, as training sessions, to support employees to increase their ability to make changes in the way that they complete a job or a task. The Social Cognitive Theory is also implemented in job crafting as it is related to self-monitoring which gives employees the ability to evaluate their course of actions and receive feedback from the environment on their path to achievement or reaching a goal. Setting these goals or achievements in return increases the efficacy beliefs. Therefore, job crafting develops self-efficacy. The finding though suggested that self-efficacy builds with time.

Personality Traits, the Big Five Model and Self-efficacy

A lot of research has been conducted concerning the effects of the Big Five Traits and self-efficacy on performance. Stajkovic et al. (2018) test three models and present the results of these effects on academic performance, which can also be related to future work performance. The three tests involved the trait model where self-efficacy partly mediated the effect of Big Five traits on performance, the independent model where the Big Five and self-efficacy influenced performance independently, and the interpersonal model where Big Five traits were fully mediated by self-efficacy. The results showed that the trait model is saturated while independent and interpersonal model are not and their fits to the model design could be calculated. It is evident from the results that self-efficacy has a positive influence across all models. Furthermore, individual differences are likely mediated by self-efficacy as well. While conscientiousness and emotional stability are the only traits directly related to performance, the results relating to the interpersonal model are promising for students and learning as self-efficacy can be a useful resource to improve performance.

Self-efficacy and the Construct of Ethical Leadership

Research shows that leadership plays a significant role influencing employees' behavior in the workplace in relation to helpful and counterproductive way. Mayer et al. (2009) referred to the trickle-down model of ethical leadership and discussed the influence of the Social Learning Theory on ethical leadership. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) defined the construct as the “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through a two-way communication, reinforcements and decision making” (p. 120). Brown's explanation of the ethical leadership not only incorporates traits that characterize ethical leaders but is also heavily influenced from the Social Cognitive Theory as it used to explain why employees follow leaders. Research conducted on

904 employees and 195 managers showed the following: Top management ethical leadership is positively related to supervisors' leadership, while ethical leadership influences employees in the workplace through the "modeling process" as employees tend to imitate supervisory behaviors. Furthermore, leaders impose a type of control on the behavior of their team members as they either reward or punish unwanted behaviors. Research showed that both top managers and supervisors influence employees' behaviors while supervisors tend to mediate the influence of top management downwards to the employees. Ethical leadership is also interestingly related to negative or "deviant" behavior of employees as what a leader does can affect multiples employees simultaneously.

Social Learning Theory and Extreme Life Events—The Pandemic

Virtual mentoring is a new tool that has been heavily used to support employees with the challenges of extreme remote work and social distancing due to the outbreak of the pandemic. The question that remains is how employees cope with having to work remotely, while continuing to grow as professionals, gaining new skills, and developing during working from home conditions. Certain impactful events can influence people's behaviors, learning abilities, and cognitive responses. Such an event is the 2020 outbreak of the pandemic. The impact of this large global life event was such on the workplace as employees all over the world were simultaneously affected in unprecedented ways. Symptoms included depression, low job satisfaction burnout, and phenomena such as the "great resignation". According to research by Krumholtz, learning and career development are highly impacted by such life events. The role of Human Recourses Development is colossal in how such events and their consequences can be managed by employees in the workplace. Even more so in the face of unexpected events. This refers to the Human Resource Development responsibilities to create virtual solutions to deal with virtual challenges. Technology can be a powerful resource in supporting these challenges. How does social learning and influences develop in a virtual environment since employees need to observe others to improve performance? How can the absence of social interactions be replaced or mimicked virtually? Research supports mentoring as a solution as it has the capability to create high quality connections between mentors and employees. The research showed emerging positive themes such as enhanced self-efficacy and self-empowerment playing an important role in the way people dealt and are still dealing with the pandemic. Employees had to basically empower themselves to cope with the negative emotions created by isolation, lack of belongingness, and other remote specific work characteristics such as the endless online meetings with no breaks or informal interactions with peers and supervisors in the corridors. In fact, they had to rely on their personal resources to get things done such as their self-efficacy. Mentoring can be used to develop employees but also to enhance communication. Organizations on the other hand can create new rewards for employees that show self-empowerment.

Managerial Self-efficacy

Fast, Burris, and Bartel (2014) discuss the relations of low managerial self-efficacy, of managers having low perceived ability to deal with their managerial responsibilities, and tend to "stay in the dark" with employee voicing. This as a result impacts employees voicing at the workplace and leads to managers creating negative perceptions of employees who express their beliefs. In fact, "improvement-oriented voice" (Burris, 2012) refers to that voice of employees who speak up to propose improvements to existing processes. Research suggested that managers may have a low sense of self-efficacy even if they are capable in other roles, referring to the difference between objective and subjective competence. The absence of high managers' self-efficacy

may have detrimental consequences on employees and the work itself since they perceive employee voice as a threat. Results show that voice-averse managers feel that their ego and capabilities at work will be threatened and at risk. On the positive side managers with high levels of self-efficacy welcome improvements by their team members and have strengths such as openness and inclusiveness that in return result in increased employee voice in the workplace. The personality of managers in an organization is vital and self-efficacy is an underlying power and a light in the darkness of managers with low self-efficacy.

Critical Analysis and Discussion

The social learning approach takes thought processes into account and acknowledges the role that they play in deciding if a behavior is to be imitated or not. As such, Bandura's Theory provides a more simplistic explanation of human learning by recognizing the role of mediational processes and variables.

For example, Bandura's Theory is able to interpret many more complex social behaviors (such as gender roles and moral behavior) than models of learning based on simple reinforcement or other variables.

However, although it can explain some quite complex behavior, it cannot adequately account for how we develop a whole range of behavior including thoughts and feelings. We have a lot of cognitive control over our behavior and just because we have had certain experiences does not mean we have to reproduce such behavior.

It is for this reason that Bandura modified his theory and in 1986 renamed his Social Learning Theory, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), as a better description of how we learn from our social experiences.

Some criticisms of social learning theory arise from their commitment to the environment as the chief influence on behavior. It is limiting to describe behavior solely in terms of either nature or nurture and attempts to do this underestimate the complexity of human behavior. It is more likely that behavior is due to an interaction between nature (biology) and nurture (environment).

Social learning theory is not a full explanation for all behavior. This is particularly the case when there is no apparent role model in the person's life to imitate for a given behavior. The same applies also in the workplace.

The discovery of mirror neurons has lent biological support to the theory of social learning. Although research is in its infancy the recent discovery of "mirror neurons" in primates may constitute a neurological basis for imitation. These are neurons which fire both if the animal does something itself, and if it observes the action being done by another.

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