

# **Toward a Psychology of Human Agency**

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*Albert Bandura, Stanford University*

## **Bandura**

Skinner and other classic behaviorists argued that human behavior is a product of environment. But even Skinner realized this could not be completely true, as humans do indeed exert some influence on their own behavior, and he urged people to shape their world by applying his operant-conditioning methods.

In his Award Address at the APS Annual Convention, Albert Bandura argued that it is a two-way street: people act as agents who intentionally regulate their behavior and life circumstances. Bandura received the 2003-2004 James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award in recognition of a lifetime of outstanding contributions to the area of applied psychological research.

In his talk, “The Psychology of Human Agency,” APS Fellow and Charter Member Bandura argued that humans “act on the environment; they create, uphold, transform, and even destroy their environment” in a “socially-embedded interplay between personal agency, and environmental influences.” In this view, humans are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. “They are producers of their life circumstances not just products of them.”

People use their sensory, motor, and cerebral systems as tools to accomplish tasks and goals that give meaning, direction, and satisfaction to their lives, said Bandura. “To make their way successfully through a complex world full of challenges and hazards, people have to make sound judgments about their capabilities, anticipate the probable effects of different events and courses of action, size up socio-structural opportunities and constraints, and regulate their behavior accordingly,” explained Bandura, Stanford University.

Bandura said that research on brain development underscores the influential role that agentic action

plays in shaping the functional structure of the brain. “It is not mere exposure to stimulation but agentic action in exploring, manipulating, and influencing the environment that counts. By regulating their motivation and activities, people produce the experiences that form the functional neurobiological substrate of symbolic, social, psychomotor, and other skills.”

This perspective points to new lines of research that can provide insights into the social construction of brain function. Bandura argued that this is an area of research in which psychology can make unique contributions to the biopsychosocial understanding of human development, adaptation, and change.

Many questions remain as to whether and how genetics or the environment influence specific behaviors. Bandura mentioned the theories of evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould, who argued that “the major explanatory battle is not between nature and nurture, as commonly framed; but whether nature operates as a determinist that has culture on a ‘tight leash,’ or as a potentialist that has culture on a ‘loose leash.’”

Bandura argued that “evidence supports the potentialist view,” in which humans have the potential to do almost anything; our genetic make-up is not necessarily the most determining factor. For example, people are biologically capable of committing aggressive acts. But cultures are markedly different in their aggression, and there are even wide differences in aggression within the same culture.

“People have changed little genetically over the past millennium, but they have changed markedly over the recent decades in their beliefs, mores, social roles, cohabiting arrangements, family practices, and styles of behavior. They have done so through rapid cultural and technological evolution.” Bandura said.

Anthropologist and geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky said that the human species was selected for learnability and plasticity of behavior, not for behavioral fixedness. People do not just react to changes in evolution; “they are prime players in the coevolution process.” Elaborating on this, Bandura said that “the uniqueness of humans resides in these self-directing and self-transforming capacities.” By acting as agents of their own development, people have “devised ways of adapting flexibly to remarkably diverse geographic, climatic, and social environments.”

Bandura believes that if Charles Darwin were writing today he would be documenting the overwhelming human domination of the environment. Many of the species on our planet have no evolutionary future because we are eliminating species, and the ecosystems that support them, at an alarming pace. Bandura argued that the current global ecosystem cannot sustain our current soaring population and high consumption of finite resources. He explained that social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the influence that both human agency and environmental factors have on behavior, could be used to address this urgent global problem.

Although humans are agents of their own actions and destinies, one person alone cannot change the world. People have learned to influence others who have the resources, knowledge, and means to secure the outcomes they desire. They have also learned that observational learning and modeling tactics can bring about changes in behavior.

Drastic changes that dislocate and restructure lives are not new in history. “What is new is the boundless scope and accelerated pace of human transactions, and the growing globalization of human

interconnectedness,” Bandura argued. Today’s society is undergoing drastic social, informational, and technological changes, and these “revolutionary advances in technology and globalization are transforming the nature, reach, speed, and the loci of human influence. These new realities present vastly greater opportunities for people to exercise control over how they live their lives,” Bandura said.