

# Social Cognitive Theory

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Social cognitive theory (SCT) refers to a psychological model of behavior that emerged primarily from the work of Albert Bandura (1977; 1986). Initially developed with an emphasis on the acquisition of social behaviors, SCT continues to emphasize that learning occurs in a social context and that much of what is learned is gained through observation. SCT has been applied broadly to such diverse areas of human functioning as career choice, organizational behavior, athletics, and mental and physical health. SCT also has been applied extensively by those interested in understanding classroom motivation, learning, and achievement (Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; 1998).

SCT rests on several basic assumptions about learning and behavior. One assumption concerns triadic reciprocal-ity, or the view that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion. That is, a person's on-going functioning is a product of a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors. For instance, classroom learning is shaped by factors within the academic environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by oneself and by others. At the same time, learning is affected by students' own thoughts and self-beliefs and their interpretation of the classroom context.

A closely related assumption within SCT is that people have an agency or ability to influence their own behavior and the environment in a purposeful, goal-directed fashion (Bandura, 2001). This belief conflicts with earlier forms of behaviorism that advocated a more rigorous form of environmental determinism. SCT does not deny the importance of the environment in determining behavior, but it does argue that people can also, through forethought, self-reflection, and self-regulatory processes, exert substantial influence over their own outcomes and the environment more broadly.

A third assumption within SCT is that learning can occur without an immediate change in behavior or more broadly that learning and the demonstration of what has been learned are distinct processes. One reason for this separation is that SCT also assumes that learning involves not just the acquisition of new behaviors, but also of knowledge, cognitive skills, concepts, abstract rules, values, and other cognitive constructs. This division of learning and behavior is a shift from the position advocated by behavioral theories that defined learning stridently as a change in the form or frequency of behavior. It also means that students can learn but not demonstrate that learning until motivated to do so.

# HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF SCT

Born in 1925, Albert Bandura was trained and began his career in the mid-twentieth century when explanations of human functioning, including classroom learning, were dominated by behavioral models advocated by researchers such as B. F. Skinner, Clark Hull, Kenneth Spence, and Edward Tolman. In this context, Bandura, along with his students and colleagues, initiated a series of studies designed to examine social explanations for why and when children displayed aggressive behaviors. These studies demonstrated the value of modeling for acquiring novel behaviors and provided initial evidence for the separation of learning and performance. They also indicated the importance of the learner's perceptions of the environment generally, of the person modeling a behavior specifically, and of the learner's expectations regarding the consequences of behavior. In doing so, findings from this systematic research contradicted assumptions within behavioral models that learning was the result of trial and error learning or that changes in behavior were due primarily to the consequences of one's own actions.



*Children learn by observing others.*JENNY ACHESON/RISER/GETTY IMAGES.

By the mid 1970s these studies helped form the foundation for what Bandura initially called observational learning theory and then later social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This precursor to SCT established a viable model for understanding how people learned through observation of models. Additional work during this time expanded aspects of the theory dealing with abstract modeling, language, and conceptual learning. In the years that followed, SCT continued to evolve, spurred by the work of Bandura and his colleagues stressing the processes of goal setting, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. The evolution of SCT also drew ideas from information processing models of psychological functioning to describe the cognitive processes that mediate learning. Ultimately, Bandura noted in the preface to his 1986 treatise, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social-Cognitive Theory*, that, in an effort to be inclusive of these more motivational and cognitive processes, he was using the label “social cognitive theory” rather than social learning to describe his framework. Throughout this book, Bandura describes the philosophical and conceptual foundation for SCT and reviews empirical evidence for its main components. Hence, it provides a concrete

milestone for the birth of contemporary SCT. Since that time, SCT has continued to grow and expand especially with regard to the work on self-efficacy, self-regulation, and agency (Bandura, 1997; 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

## CORE CONCEPTS WITHIN SCT

SCT integrates a large number of discrete ideas, concepts, and sub-processes into an overall framework for understanding human functioning. Five of the central concepts are described below. For a more complete explanation of SCT, readers are directed to works by Bandura and to the relevant chapters within textbooks on learning.

**Observational Learning/Modeling.** From its inception one core premise within SCT has been that people learn through observation. This process is also described as vicarious learning or modeling because learning is a result of watching the behavior and consequences of models in the environment. Although observational learning is dependent upon the availability of models, who or what can serve this role is defined broadly. Live demonstrations of a behavior or skill by a teacher or classmate, of course, typify the notion of modeling. Verbal or written descriptions, video or audio recordings, and other less direct forms of performance are also considered forms of modeling. There also distinctions among different types of models. Mastery models are proficient when demonstrating a skills, whereas coping models struggle, make mistakes, and only eventually show proficiency. Abstract modeling occurs when the skill or knowledge being learned is conveyed only indirectly, and cognitive modeling occurs when a model verbalizes her thoughts while demonstrating a cognitive process or skill.

According to SCT, observational learning of novel behaviors or skills is dependent on four inter-related processes involving attention, retention, production, and motivation. Attentional processes are critical because students must attend to a model and the relevant aspects of behavior in order to learn. Retention refers to the processes necessary for reducing and transforming what is observed into a symbolic form that can be stored for later use. Production processes are necessary when students draw on their stored codes and make an effort to perform what they have observed. Finally, motivational processes are key for understanding why students engage in the prior sub-processes, including whether they ever attempt to use or recreate the new skills they have observed. Each of these processes, furthermore, are affected by factors such as the developmental level of the learner and characteristics of the model and modeled behavior.

Beyond new learning, modeling is also important for understanding when or why previously learned behaviors are exhibited. Students' may inhibit their engagement in a behavior if they observe a model suffer consequences they would prefer to avoid. For instance, if a teacher glares at one student who is talking out of turn, other students may suppress this behavior to avoid a similar reaction. In a related fashion, students may disinhibit or engage in a behavior they had initially suppressed when they fail to see any negative consequences accrue to a model. For example, students may refrain from shouting out answers unless they are called upon only until they see others do so without repercussions. Finally, through a process labeled response facilitation, models can simply prompt others to behave in known ways.

**Outcome Expectations.** Outcome expectations reflect individuals' beliefs about what consequences are most likely to ensue if particular behaviors are performed. For instance, children may believe that if they get a hit during a baseball game the crowd will cheer, they will feel good and will be admired by their teammates. These beliefs are formed enactively through students' own past experiences and vicariously through the observation of others. Outcome expectations are important in SCT because they shape the decisions people make about what actions to take and which behaviors to suppress. The frequency of a behavior should increase when the outcomes expected are valued, whereas behaviors associated with unfavorable or irrelevant outcomes will be avoided.

**Perceived Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy also has emerged as a prominent and influential concept within SCT. Self-efficacy reflects individuals' beliefs about whether they can achieve a given level of successful at a particular task (Bandura, 1997). Students with greater self-efficacy are more confident in their abilities to be successful when compared to their peers with lower self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has proven useful for understanding students' motivation and achievement in academic contexts. Higher levels of perceived self-efficacy have been associated with greater choice, persistence, and with more effective strategy use (Pajares, 1996).

Consistent with the tenets of SCT, self-efficacy is viewed as a product of individuals' own past performances, the observation and verbal persuasion of others in the environment, and individuals' on-going physiological state (Bandura, 1997). Rather than directly affecting their self-efficacy, however, these sources of information are weighed and filtered through a process known as cognitive appraisal. For instance, a prior failure may not be detrimental to self-efficacy if students believe there was some no-longer relevant reason for the poor performance (e.g., prior sickness). Interventions based on SCT and designed to increase self-efficacy in school-aged children have proven effective (Pajares, 1996).

**Goal Setting.** Goal setting is another central process within SCT (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1990). Goals reflect cognitive representations of anticipated, desired, or preferred outcomes. Hence, goals exemplify the agency view within SCT that people not only learn, they use forethought to envision the future, identify desired outcomes, and generate plans of action. Goals are also closely related to other important processes within SCT. For instance, models can provide goals in the form of specific behavioral outcomes or more general standards for acceptable levels of performance. Goals also are intricately related to students' outcome expectations and their perceived self-efficacy. Goals are a function of the outcomes students expect from engaging in particular behaviors and the confidence they have for completing those behaviors successfully. Finally, goals are an important prerequisite for self-regulation because they provide objectives that students are trying to achieve and benchmarks against which to judge progress.

**Self-regulation.** Research on self-regulation or, when applied to academic contexts, self-regulated learning, blossomed in the 1980s and continued into the early 2000s to expand. Explanations for students' management or control of their own learning behaviors have arisen from within many distinct theoretical perspectives (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Many of the most common models, however, have strong roots in SCT. SCT models of self-regulation assume that self-regulation is dependent on goal setting, in that students are thought to manage their thoughts and actions in order to reach particular outcomes (Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). SCT views of self-regulation initially emphasized three sub-processes (Bandura, 1986; 1991). Self-observation reflects students' ability to monitor or keep track of their own behaviors and outcomes. Self-judgment is the process through which students' evaluate whether their actions are effective and allow them to make progress toward their goals. Finally, self-reaction occurs when students' respond to the evaluations they have made by modifying their behavior, rewarding it, or discontinuing it.

Self-regulation is a prominent and increasing aspect of SCT that exemplifies the underlying assumptions regarding agency and the influence of personal factors on behavior and the environment. As noted above, self-regulation is also dependent on other processes within SCT, including goal setting and self-efficacy. Unless students have goals and feel efficacious about reaching them, they may not activate the processes needed for self-regulation. Modeling can also affect students' self-regulated learning. The skills needed to manage one's behavior, as well the beliefs and attitudes that serve to motivate self-regulation, can be obtained through modeling.

## **TELEVISION: EDUCATOR'S FRIEND OR FOE?**

From its inception, television has been considered a behavioral stimulus (Vos Post, 1995). Factors that

impact research on the influence television has on behavior include socio-economic status and rural versus urban settings, as well as factors that are pertinent to the nature and culture of the local society. Is a “shoot 'em up” cops and robbers television programming any more violent than a news report of a suicide bomber in the Middle East? Should children be shielded from viewing either or both of those programs on television? The social cognitive theory of behavior learned through observation expounded by Bandura (2001) has been related to television as well as to the classroom and home environments. Young children are particularly unable to discriminate between the fiction of television and real life. Research shows that they are likely to apply the aggressive behaviors they have seen on television to the playground as early as nursery school age. According to Ortiz (2007), they internalize behaviors that they observe even though they have not experienced them directly.

In 1995 Aronson defined aggression as “behavior causing harm or pain.” In that same year, Vos Post added that “we still have no widely-accepted, clear-cut, and scientific definition for either the aggressive acts on television or those purportedly caused by television by its audience.” In the mid-1990s researchers counted an average of 18 acts of aggression per hour during the Saturday morning cartoons that continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be popular with young children. George Gerbner has reported that violent acts take place five or six times per hour during prime time and Saturday morning television. In addition, eight of ten television programs include some sort of violence.

Vos Post (1995) stated that programming on U.S. television was no more aggressive than it had been historically. He went on to report that television programming in Japan had a much higher level of violence than television programming in the United States. However, there are considerably lower rates of aggression in Japan than in the United States, which contradicts the argument that aggressive behavior is learned or encouraged by viewing violence on television.

When Bandura's social cognitive theory, which suggests that children learn through observation, is extended to television viewing, it would seem to indicate that children would learn aggressive behavior through observation of violence on television. It also means that if children observe positive behaviors in television programming, they should emulate those behaviors as well. Bandura's theory states that when children see behavior modeled, they will accept it and use it when they deem it appropriate. It also explains the need for positive role models on television for children.

According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, when children see family members or friends working together on a television situation comedy to resolve a problem, it follows that they will try to resolve problems with their own family members or friends peacefully, by working together, instead of fighting with them. Research on the results of this type of modeled behavior is reported to be difficult, with inconclusive results.

According to Hoffner (1996), Bandura's theory of behaviors learned by observation means that young viewers have to identify with the characters to model either pro-social or violent behavior. In other words, if a child observes television characters that she or he perceives as being similar to herself or himself, that child will be more likely to behave in a manner similar to those characters.

Educational programming is based on Bandura's theory of modeled behavior. To be effective with prosocial behaviors, television programmers have to conduct extensive research and make sure characters and events portrayed in their shows have a relation to real-world situations. They also have to carefully create characters who are positive, with good results from their actions; negative, with undesirable results from their actions; and transitional, who start the show as negative characters but change because of decisions made and actions taken, so they become positive role models by the end of the show.

Violent acts in regular television programming have more of an effect on children's behavior than sports

programming. The results of research on the effect that violence on television has on students generally are in agreement that children who observe violence in prime time television or on Saturday morning children's shows that do not include sports programming will behave aggressively whether or not they had were pre-disposed to behave aggressively.

A real concern with the effects of television violence and aggressive behavior learned by observation of incidents of violent programming is that this learning has been proven to continue through adolescence and into adulthood. Vos Post (1995) concluded: "Not only because television violence is a reality, and aggression is a fact of life, but because an effective social psychology understanding of the relationship between television and behavior may help to not only reduce socially unacceptable aggression, but may actually enable us to increase socially desirable effects."

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

One strength of SCT is that it provides a clear foundation for classroom interventions designed to improve students' learning. In this section, several general implications for instruction derived from the key concepts described above are described. More complete treatments of the instructional implications of SCT readers are available elsewhere (e.g., Linares et al., 2005; Paris & Paris, 2001; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996).

**Observational Learning/Modeling.** The most basic instructional implication of SCT is that students should be provided frequent access to models of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they are expected to learn. For example, teachers should model the behaviors and cognitive processes they want students to learn. Effective instruction, moreover, should include multiple types of models (e.g., teacher, peers, parents) and various forms of modeling (e.g. cognitive, verbal, mastery, coping). The inhibitory and disinhibitory effects of modeling, further, necessitate that educators administer rewards and punishments in a careful and consistent manner.

More specifically, instruction based on SCT should support students' engagement in each of the four sub-processes of observational learning. Students' attention can be increased by using models that are viewed as competent, prestigious, and similar to themselves. Students also pay closer attention when the skill or material being demonstrated is considered more personally relevant or interesting. Instruction should support students' retention by facilitating the creation of verbal labels or images through the use of mnemonics, graphic organizers, or other similar learning strategies. Opportunities for rehearsal, both in the form of

repeated exposure to models and in the form of time to reflect on the material or skills also assist retention. The effective use of models depends on providing students multiple opportunities to practice the behaviors or skills they have observed. This process will be improved if students are provided feedback about their efforts that is specific, more immediate, and insightful about what the learner is doing well and what needs improvement. Teachers should support the motivational aspects of observational learning through the purposeful use of rewards and punishments. These consequences, further, should shape students' behavior when they are provided either to the learner or to a model. To improve motivation, teachers should also model attitudes that they want students to adopt such as enthusiasm or interest in the material.

**Outcome Expectations.** Instruction should help students to see that classroom learning and the demonstration of that learning leads to personally valued or important outcomes. Students must believe that, if they complete learning tasks successfully, the outcomes they achieve are meaningful, useful, or worthy of the effort necessary to reach them. To encourage these beliefs, teachers should create lessons that emphasize real-world applications and the relevance of material to students' own lives. Decontextualized instructional practices that obfuscate the benefits of learning should be avoided.

**Perceived Self-Efficacy.** Students will be more active, effortful, and effective learners when they are confident in their ability to complete academic tasks successfully. Hence, instruction should be designed in a way that helps them to develop and sustain their self-efficacy for learning. Most simply, tasks should be moderately challenging so that students do well and make progress when providing reasonable effort. Teachers should ensure that students have the prerequisite knowledge and strategies needed to be successful at more complex and rigorous tasks. In this way, students will develop a pattern of success that fosters positive levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can also be improved when students are exposed to peer models who initially struggle but who ultimately are able to complete tasks effectively (i.e., coping models). Finally, teachers can make direct statements to learners or models as a way to boost their confidence. Such statements, however, must be credible or they will be discounted or ignored by learners.

**Goal Setting.** Instruction should help students to set effective goals by addressing the properties found in the most effective goals (Schunk, 1990). Instructional practices should promote students' efforts to set attainable goals that are clear, specific, and moderately challenging. In order to show progress and to maintain self-efficacy, learning goals should be attainable with moderate levels of effort. These goals will also reduce disappointment and frustration that students might feel if they fail to reach their goals. Specific goals are more effective than general or vague goals in spurring students to action and in guiding their behavior. Students should have both distal and more short-term goals for their learning in school. However, proximal goals are more effective at guiding behavior because they allow for more immediate feedback about progress. Finally, goals that students set or endorse themselves have a bigger impact on their behavior than goals that are assigned. Hence, instruction should help students develop the ability and willingness to form their own academic goals.

**Self-Regulation.** According to SCT, all students should be supported in their efforts to be self-regulated learners. In addition to fostering self-efficacy and effective goal setting, teachers should help students become skilled at self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction (see Zimmerman et al., 1996). Teachers can promote self-observation by helping students learn how to monitor different aspects of their academic behavior. Practices such as journal writing, checklists, and time for self-reflection help students develop these skills. For self-judgment, students must learn how to evaluate their performance in light of the goals or standards they have set. Teachers can facilitate this process through modeling and by supporting students' own efforts to compare their performance to both absolute and normative standards. Teachers should also help students see the value and relevance of the standards in order to encourage their self-judgment. The self-reaction process depends on students' ability to respond adaptively both when they are making progress and when they are not. For the former, instructional practices should assist students in learning how to self-administer reinforcements for their own efforts using both concrete and internal rewards. For the latter,

instruction should support students in their efforts to evaluate and modify their learning strategies in order to improve progress. As with all skills, students can develop these self-regulatory abilities vicariously and with guided opportunities to practice them firsthand.

See also: [Bandura, Albert 1925-](#)

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