

Self-Efficacy Theory

Author: Frank Pajares

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In 1986, when he put forth a social cognitive theory of human functioning, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, psychologist Albert Bandura painted a portrait of human behavior and motivation in which individuals' self-beliefs are critical elements. His subsequent work, *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control* (1997), advanced the discussion. Of all the beliefs that people hold about themselves and that affect their day-today functioning, and standing at the core of social cognitive theory, are *self-efficacy beliefs*, which can be defined as the judgments that individuals hold about their capabilities to learn or to perform courses of action at designated levels. In essence, self-efficacy beliefs are the self-perceptions that individuals hold about their capabilities.

According to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment: Unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. These self-perceptions touch virtually every aspect of people's lives—whether they think productively, self-debilitatingly, pessimistically or optimistically; how well they motivate themselves and persevere in the face of adversities; their vulnerability to stress and depression; and the life choices they make. Self-efficacy is also a critical determinant of the self-regulatory practices in which individuals engage as they go about the important task of self-correcting their actions and cognitions.

Self-efficacy beliefs should not be confused with outcome expectations, which are people's judgments of the consequences that their behavior will produce. Typically, self-efficacy beliefs help foster the outcome one expects. Confident individuals anticipate successful outcomes. Students confident in their social skills anticipate successful social encounters. Those confident in their academic skills expect high marks on exams and expect the quality of their work to reap academic benefits. The opposite is true of those who lack confidence. People who doubt their social skills often envision rejection or ridicule even before they establish social contact. Students who lack confidence in their academic skills envision a low grade even before they begin an exam or enroll in a course. The expected results of these imagined performances will be differently envisioned: social success or greater career options for the former, social isolation or curtailed academic possibilities for the latter.

When self-efficacy belief and outcome expectation differ, the self-efficacy belief is more likely to determine the behavior. Students may well realize that strong academic skills are essential for obtaining a

good SAT score and being admitted to the college of their choice, and this, in turn, may ensure a comfortable future lifestyle. But if students lack confidence in their academic capabilities, they may well shy away from challenging courses, will approach the SAT with apprehension and self-doubt, and may not even consider college attendance. In the social interaction, individuals may realize that pleasing manners and physical attractiveness are essential for attracting the attention of others, which is the first step toward building long-lasting relationships. If, however, they have low confidence in their social skills and doubt their physical attractiveness, they may hesitate to make contact and hence miss potentially promising opportunities.

Because individuals operate collectively as well as individually, self-efficacy is both a personal and a social construct. Collective systems develop a sense of collective efficacy—a group's shared belief in its capability to attain goals and accomplish desired tasks. For example, schools develop collective beliefs about the capability of their students to learn, of their teachers to teach and otherwise enhance the lives of their students, and of their administrators and policy makers to create environments conducive to these tasks. Organizations with a strong sense of collective efficacy exercise empowering and vitalizing influences on their constituents, and these effects are palpable and evident.

SOURCES OF SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS

Individuals form their self-efficacy beliefs by interpreting information primarily from four sources: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasions, and physiological reactions. For most people, the most influential source is the interpreted result of one's own performance, or mastery experience. Simply put, individuals gauge the effects of their actions, and their interpretations of these effects help create their efficacy beliefs. Success raises self-efficacy; failure lowers it. Students who perform well on mathematics tests and earn high grades in mathematics classes develop confidence in their mathematics capabilities. This sense of efficacy helps ensure that they will enroll in subsequent mathematics-related classes, approach mathematics tasks with serenity, and increase their efforts when a difficulty arises.

In addition to interpreting the results of their mastery experiences, young people form their efficacy beliefs through the vicarious experience of observing others perform tasks. Observing the successes and failures of peers perceived as similar in capability contributes to beliefs one's own capabilities (i.e., “If he can do it, so can I!”). Although this source of information is usually weaker than is mastery experience, when adolescents are uncertain about their own abilities or have limited previous experience, they become especially sensitive to it. If there is one finding that is incontrovertible in education and psychology, it is that young people learn from the actions of models, and so this is a prominent area of research in the study of self-efficacy. Vicarious experience also involves the social comparisons that individuals make with each other. These comparisons, along with peer modeling, can be powerful influences on self-efficacy beliefs. In situations in which young people have little experience with which to form a judgment of their competence in a particular area, peer models are especially useful.

Self-efficacy beliefs are also influenced by the verbal messages and social persuasions individuals receive from others, whether these are intentional or accidental. These messages can help one to exert the extra effort and persistence required to succeed, resulting in the continued development of skills and of personal efficacy. Or they can be powerfully disheartening. Persuaders play an important part in the development of an individual's self-efficacy beliefs. But social persuasions should not be confused with knee-jerk praise or empty inspirational homilies. Effective persuaders must cultivate people's beliefs in their capabilities while at the same time ensuring that the envisioned success is attainable. And, just as positive persuasions may work to encourage and empower, negative persuasions can work to defeat and weaken self-efficacy beliefs. In fact, it is usually easier to weaken self-efficacy beliefs through negative appraisals than to strengthen such beliefs through positive encouragement.

Physiological and emotional states such as anxiety and stress, along with one's mood, provide information about efficacy beliefs. Typically, optimism or a positive mood enhances self-efficacy, whereas depression, despair, or a sense of despondency diminishes it. As with the other sources, it is not the intensity of the physical indicator or mood state itself that is important, but the individual's interpretation of it. Adolescents with strong self-efficacy will view the emotional state as energizing, whereas those beset by self-doubt may regard it as debilitating.

MOTIVATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS

Self-efficacy beliefs can enhance human accomplishment and well-being in countless ways. They influence the choices people make and the courses of action they pursue. Individuals tend to select tasks and activities in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not. Unless people believe that their actions will have the desired consequences, they have little incentive to engage in those actions. How far will an interest in medicine take a student who feels hopeless while studying anatomy? Whatever factors operate to influence behavior, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the capability to accomplish that behavior.

Self-efficacy beliefs also help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, and how resilient they will be in the face of adverse situations. People with a strong sense of personal competence approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. They have greater intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities, set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them, and heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. Moreover, they more quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks.

Self-efficacy beliefs also influence an individual's thought patterns and emotional reactions. High self-efficacy helps create feelings of serenity in approaching difficult tasks and activities. Conversely, people with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, a belief that fosters anxiety, stress, depression, and a narrow vision of how best to solve a problem.

Human motivation, cognition, and behavior are influenced by many factors. The success or failure that people experience as they engage the myriad tasks that comprise their life naturally influence the many decisions they must make. Also, the knowledge and skills they possess will certainly play critical roles in what they choose to do and not do. But people must invariably interpret the results of their attainments, just as they must make judgments about the quality of the knowledge and skills they possess. Imagine, for example, two students who receive a B on an important mathematics exam. In and of itself, a B has no inherent meaning, and certainly no causal properties. How will receiving such a grade affect a particular student? A student accustomed to receiving A's in math class and who worked hard throughout the term and studied for the exam will view the B in ways quite dissimilar from those of a student accustomed to receiving C's and who worked equally hard. For the former, the B will be received with distress; for the latter, the B is likely to be received with elation. The student accustomed to receiving A's is likely to have bruised self-efficacy; the C-acquainted student is sure to have boosted self-efficacy.

SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS AND ACADEMIC ATTAINMENTS

Self-efficacy has been the focus of research in areas as diverse as business, athletics, medicine and health, media studies, social and political change, moral development, psychiatry, psychopathology, and international affairs. In psychology, it has been the focus of studies on clinical problems such as phobias,

depression, social skills, assertiveness, smoking behavior, and moral development. Self-efficacy has been especially prominent in educational research, where scholars have reported that, regardless of previous achievement or ability, self-efficacious students work harder, persist longer, persevere in the face of adversity, have greater optimism and lower anxiety, and achieve more. Students who believe they are capable of performing academic tasks also use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies than those who do not. Academic self-efficacy influences cognitive strategy use and self-regulation through the use of metacognitive strategies, and self-efficacy is associated with in-class seatwork and homework, exams and quizzes, and essays and reports.

In psychology, intelligence (in the form of IQ) has typically been acknowledged the most powerful cognitive predictor of achievement. But when researchers tested the joint contribution of self-efficacy and intelligence to the prediction of achievement, they found that students' self-efficacy beliefs made a powerful and independent contribution to the prediction of their academic performance. Self-efficacy is also a critical determinant of the life choices that students make and of the courses of action they pursue. Typically, they engage in activities in which they feel competent and avoid those in which they do not. Doing so is particularly critical at the high school and college levels, where young people progressively have more academic options.

Students with high self-efficacy engage in more effective self-regulatory strategies at differing levels of ability, and self-efficacy enhances students' memory performance by enhancing persistence. In studies of college students who pursue science and engineering courses, high self-efficacy has been demonstrated to influence the academic persistence necessary to maintain high academic achievement.

In general, researchers have established that self-efficacy beliefs and behavior changes and outcomes are highly correlated and that self-efficacy is an excellent predictor of behavior. The depth of this support prompted Graham and Weiner (1996) to conclude that, particularly in psychology and education, self-efficacy has proven to be a more consistent predictor of behavioral outcomes than have any other motivational constructs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

The first and major implication that arises from research findings on the role and function of self-efficacy beliefs in academic contexts is that teachers do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-efficacy beliefs of their pupils, for it is clear that these beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences. Bandura has argued that beliefs of personal competence constitute the key factor of human agency, the ability to act intentionally and exercise a measure of control over one's environment and social structures. As children strive to exercise control over their world, their first transactions are mediated by adults who can empower them with self-assurance or diminish their fledgling self-beliefs. Because young children are not proficient at making accurate self-appraisals, they naturally rely on the judgments of others to create their own judgments of their capabilities. Teachers who provide children with challenging tasks and meaningful activities that can be mastered, and who chaperone these efforts with support and encouragement, help ensure the development of a robust sense of efficacy. Effective teachers know their students' capabilities. They also know that trying very hard and continually failing can have a devastating effect on one's confidence. For this reason, they are careful to assign work that will indeed be challenging but that they are sure can be accomplished with proper effort.

An incontrovertible finding in educational research is that students learn from the actions of models. Different modeling practices in school can differently affect self-efficacy beliefs. For example, when models make errors, engage in coping behaviors in front of students, and verbalize emotive statements reflecting low confidence and achievement (such as "Gosh, I seem to be having some trouble with this,

don't I?"), low-achieving students perceive the models as more similar to themselves and subsequently experience greater achievement and self-efficacy under their tutelage. Social cognitive theorists recommend that teachers engage in effective modeling practices and that they select peers for classroom models judiciously so as to ensure that students view themselves as comparable in learning ability to the models. Peer models should also share similar attributes to the students for whom they are serving as models.

Children inevitably compare themselves to other children, and these social comparisons are critical to the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Social-comparative school practices that emphasize standardized, normative assessments, involve ability grouping and lock-step instruction, use competitive grading practices, and encourage students to compare their achievement with that of their peers work to destroy the fragile self-beliefs of those who are less academically talented or prepared. As Bandura (1997) has noted, these are practices that can work to convert "instructional experiences into education in inefficacy" (p. 175).

When classroom structures are individualized and instruction is tailored to students' capabilities, social comparisons are minimized and students are more likely to gauge their academic progress according to their own standards rather than compare it to the progress of their classmates. In cooperative and individualized learning settings, students can more easily select the peers with whom to compare themselves. Individualized and cooperative structures that lower the competitive orientation of a classroom and school are more likely than traditional, competitive structures to increase self-efficacy. Similarly, classrooms that emphasize a mastery goal orientation, which is to say that they emphasize the view that learning is an enjoyable activity and should be undertaken for its own sake rather than for extrinsic or performance oriented reasons, also have beneficial effects on students' self-efficacy beliefs.

Some researchers have suggested that teachers should pay as much attention to students' perceptions of competence as to actual competence, for it is the perceptions that may more accurately influence students' motivation and future academic choices. Assessing students' self-efficacy beliefs can provide teachers with important insights about their pupils' academic motivation, behavior, and future choices. For example, unrealistically low self-efficacy, not lack of capability or skill, can be responsible for maladaptive academic behaviors, avoidance of courses and careers, and diminishing school interest and achievement. Students who lack confidence in skills they possess are less likely to engage in tasks in which those skills are required, and they will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty. In such cases, in addition to continued skill improvement, schools must work to identify their students' inaccurate judgments and design and implement interventions to challenge them. Researchers have identified various ways in which self-efficacy perceptions can be challenged. For example, teachers can set goals for students that are close at hand rather than goals that require a large investment in time. Teachers can also provide frequent and appropriate feedback as students are engaged in a task. Of course, it has been amply shown that effort-focused feedback (such as "Well done, you're working hard.") enhance students' self-efficacy and performance to a greater degree than does ability-focused feedback (such as "Well done, you're so smart.").

It seems clear that many of the difficulties that people experience throughout their lives are closely connected with the beliefs they hold about what they can and cannot do. Sound research evidence suggests that students' academic failures in basic subjects, as well as the misdirected motivation and lack of commitment often characteristic of the underachiever, the dropout, the student labeled at risk, and the socially disabled, are in good measure the consequence of, or certainly exacerbated by, the beliefs that students develop about their ability to exercise a measure of control over their environments.

Empirical findings have amply strengthened the claim of social cognitive theorists that self-efficacy beliefs play an influential role in human agency, and they support the contention of theorists and researchers that students' self-efficacy beliefs in academic areas powerfully influence their subsequent motivation and performance in these areas. Clearly, researchers and school practitioners should continue to look to students' beliefs about their academic capabilities as important predictors and determinants of academic achievement,

for they are critical components of motivation and behavior.

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

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