Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication

In Albert Bandura’s publication, “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication,” he theorizes mass communication within the framework of the social cognitive causal model of triadic reciprocal causation. Bandura proposes that most psychological theories were developed long before the rapid emergence of technology communication. As a result, modeling influences were confined to one’s physical environment. With advances in video delivery technologies, observers can transcend the boundaries of a physical environment, thereby increasing the range of symbolic models that society is exposed to. Unlike learning by doing, which requires trial and error experiences, observational learning can be attained with a single model, conveyed simultaneously, to large populations in dispersed locations. This has radically altered social diffusion processes. Electronic media is increasingly contributing to transcultural change. “Because the symbolic environment occupies a major part of people’s everyday lives, much of the social construction of reality and shaping of public consciousness occurs through electronic acculturation. At the societal level, the electronic modes of influence are transforming how social systems operate and serving as a major vehicle for socialpolitical change.” (Bandura 7)

Social Cognitive Theory has its roots in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Interdisciplinary Traditions, and Communication research traditions. Albert Bandura, Linda Flower, John R. Hayes, Mary Abrums and Gerry Philipsen are among the contemporary theorists.

Social Cognitive mass communication theory postulates that two codeterminants, personal agency and social structure, operate within an integrated causal structure, rather than as a disembodied duality. Here we can see the influence of Martin Hollis, The Philosophy Of
Social Science: An Introduction, “Humans construct meaning, with no obvious parallel in physics and little parallel in biology”. (Norbert 25)

Bandura asserts that humans attain meaning, form, and experiential continuity through symbols. Human beings rely on symbols to process transient experiences into cognitive models. These cognitive models serve as guides for action and judgment. We can also see that Social Cognitive Mass Communication Theory demonstrates an ontological constructionist position of intersubjectivity. According to Robert T. Craig, “In the semiotic tradition, communication is typically theorized as intersubjective mediation by signs. Communication theorized in this way explains and cultivates the use of language and other sign systems to mediate between different perspectives.” (136)

The epistemological perspectives of social cognitive theory hold that knowledge is acquired and shared through symbolic intersubjective experiences.

In “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication”, Bandura writes “People gain understanding of causal relationships and expand their knowledge by operating symbolically on the wealth of information derived from personal and vicarious experiences.” (3)

According to Bandura, behavior can be learned through social prompts. Values are learned through human modeling behavior, demonstrating the axiological assumptions of social cognitive theory. “Modeling influences serve diverse functions—as tutors, motivators, inhibitors, disinhibitors, social prompters, emotion arousers, and shapers of values and conceptions of reality.” (19)

Social cognitive theory is influenced by the research tradition of the Humanities. As a theory itself, its axiology is the study of the expression of human values and ethics, attained
through observational symbolic learning. “A vast amount of information about human values, a style of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media.” Bandura (7)

The taxonomy of observational learning is governed by four classifications that Bandura refers to as “major sub functions”. They include Attentional Processes, Retention Processes, Behavioral Production Processes and Motivational Processes. These four classifications are the universal taxonomy for observational learning and provide a sequential process for researching observational learning.

1. The Attentional Processes

Observers experience a profusion of modeling influences. A number of factors influence which information is assimilated into the learning experience of the observer. For the observer, these include cognitive skills, preconceptions, and value preferences. Attributes of the modeled activities may also affect information assimilated, such as functional value, salience, and attractiveness. Also, the types of models that observers are exposed to are largely determined by the structural arrangements of human interactions and associational networks.

2. Retention Processes

Information retention is necessary for observational learning. Humans must remember the observed events in order to be influenced by them. Retention is an active process. The observed information must be transformed and restructured into memory codes. Memory code symbols may be affected by biases and preconceptions. Recall is not simply a retrieval process; it is a reconstructive process.
1. Behavioral Production Processes

For observed learning to be actualized, symbolic conceptions must be translated into action. A concept matching process facilitates the information construction to actions and behaviors. Corrective adjustments perfect behavior adjustments, as perfect initial behavior construction is rarely achieved.

4. Motivational Processes

The fourth subfunction of observational learning is Motivational Processes. In social cognitive theory, acquisition and performance are distinguished. This is because people do not actualize everything they learn. Three major types of incentive motivators influence performance of observationally learned behavior: direct, vicarious, and self-produced. People are motivated if the results will have a valued outcome. The vicarious observation of the benefits or detriments of the behavior of others can also motivate action. Finally, motivation may be self-produced. People choose activities that give them a sense of worth and self-satisfaction. Personal standards and self-censuring reactions also factors in the motivational process.

The taxonomy of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication gives us insight to the observational learning process of individuals. Bandura further extends this theory into a mass communication discourse by identifying video technology as a major disseminator of symbolic environments. Electronic media is an increasingly influential, driving force of transcultural change. “The more people’s images of reality depend upon the media’s symbolic environment, the greater is its social impact” (S. Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur 7).
Bandura’s theoretical framework for psychosocial functioning is the causal model of triadic reciprocal causation. This conceptual framework postulates the relationships of three variables that influence each other in a unidirectional dynamic: Personal Determinants, Behavioral Determinants, and Environmental Determinants.

Bandura’s theoretical framework, Dual Pathway of Influence, explains how communications systems influence large scale behavioral changes. Bandura proposes that communication systems operate through two pathways: direct and mediated. When communications systems operate through the direct pathway, behavioral changes are initiated by informing, enabling, motivating, and guiding participants.

In a socially mediated pathway, desired change is accomplished by media influences that link participants to social networks and community settings that provide natural incentives and continued personalized guidance.

By transcending the limitations and boundaries of immediate environments, electronic media can socially diffuse new behavior patterns rapidly, to a global population. The practical implications of this are:

1. The fostering of creativity as exposure to new perspectives, which weaken conventional mindsets
2. The mobilization of stronger social influences
3. The potential to foster a globally distributed consciousness.

“New ideas, values, behavior patterns, and social practices are now being rapidly diffused worldwide by symbolic modeling in ways that foster a globally distributed consciousness.

(Bandura, 1986, 2001a)” (Bandura 7)
Cited Works


