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## IN MEMORIAM

### Albert Bandura (1925–2021)



Albert Bandura is internationally recognized as one of the world's most influential psychologists. Often compared in significance to Skinner, Freud, and Piaget, he is one of the most frequently cited psychologists of all time. His social cognitive theory of human functioning, emphasizing an agentic perspective toward self-development, adaptation, and change has had a profound effect across psychology, revolutionizing theories of behavior change and shaping education, public health, parenting, clinical health practice, and public policy. His commitment to using knowledge to improve the lives of people at the individual, community, societal, and global levels motivated his research. He was prescient at applying theory to the most urgent transdisciplinary challenges facing humankind, such as climate change and population growth.

Albert (Al) Bandura was born on December 4, 1925. He was the youngest of six children, raised by a Polish father and a Ukrainian mother in the immigrant farming community of Mundare, in Alberta, Canada. Al earned his degree from the University of British Columbia in 1949. In graduate school at the University of Iowa, he was ensconced in the theoretical and experimental world of behavioral psychology. Clark Hull's protégé, Kenneth Spence, served as chair of the Psychology Department, with the Hullian approach the dominant theory at the time. While there, Al met Virginia (Ginny) Varns of South Dakota, who was teaching at the nursing school, and they married in 1952. After earning his PhD, Al accepted a position at Stanford University in 1953, where he served on the faculty for 57 years and was awarded the David Starr Jordan Professor of Social Science in Psychology endowed chair.

Bandura's early research, made famous in his Bobo Doll experiment, focused on the role of observational learning and modeling. In this 1961 study, children who observed an adult hitting an inflatable doll, called Bobo, were more likely to reproduce the same aggressive behavior when later playing with the doll. His findings challenged the established behavioral doctrine that human behavior was the result of conditioning through direct positive and negative reinforcement and trial and error learning. With the Bobo doll experiments, Bandura showed a behavior such as aggression to be the product of a more complex observational process through which children could learn new patterns of behavior vicariously. His 1963 book, with Richard Walters, entitled *Social Learning and Personality Development*, explained social learning without reliance on Hullian and Skinnerian assumptions about the need for direct reinforcement, focusing on modeling as a powerful process that could account for diverse forms of learning. They also challenged the prevailing Freudian assumption about the role of unconscious impulses, identification, and catharsis in explaining behavior.

During the 1960s Bandura launched a program of research on children's development of self-regulatory capabilities with Walter Mischel, laying the groundwork for his development of an agentic perspective. His seminal research on modeling and guided mastery in the 1970s revolutionized the field of behavior change, leading to highly effective interventions to treat anxiety and debilitating phobias. In 1977, Bandura published *Social Learning Theory*, a book that dramatically influenced the field of psychology.

Bandura increasingly focused on the integral role of human agency, with the formalization of social cognitive theory (SCT) and the publication of *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* in 1986. This model of triadic reciprocal causation focused on processes that are influential across diverse areas of human functioning. In the model, personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in reciprocal fashion. Individual forethought, self-reflection, and self-regulatory processes wield substantial influence over outcomes and the environment. SCT illuminated the powerful role that perceived self-efficacy—people’s belief in their ability to exert control over their behavior—plays in motivation, perseverance, and behavioral change. Judgments of personal efficacy affect the choice of activities and selection of environments, shaping people’s expectations for outcomes, and the way they view obstacles and impediments. A resilient sense of efficacy is central to the ability to self-develop, achieve personal goals, and alter life trajectories.

His 1997 book, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, further elucidated the mechanisms by which perceived self-efficacy plays a central role in human functioning through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes. Methods of strengthening efficacy through vicarious learning, mastery modeling, and gradual mastery experiences have been used extensively to create robust interventions to promote positive change. Extending beyond individual personal agency, Bandura emphasized the role of collective agency—shared beliefs about capabilities to effect change—in addressing problems on the community and societal level. Bandura’s application of the principles of SCT across ecological levels from the lab to population health was dramatic. Remarkably open to collaboration, he extended and tested theory across disciplines, domains, and countries. His broad reach of students and collaborators spanned the fields of psychology, education, health care, public health, public policy, organizational behavior, media, law, computer science, and international studies. My own relationship with Al as mentor and collaborator began as a doctoral student in the late 1980’s with a study elucidating the mechanisms of empowerment through a self-efficacy analysis of a women’s self-defense class, and continued until his death.

Al was a man of great kindness and humility with an easy distinctive laugh. He enjoyed conversation and had a way of treating everyone with respect, attentiveness, and curiosity, no matter their professional background or status. He made others feel that their research was important and worth pursuing, and he took the time to talk about ideas, often for hours. He lived his theory of self-efficacy by instilling confidence for successful experiences. He set proximal and attainable goals with students, and anyone who collaborated with him is familiar with his detailed pencil edits on the article page.

With disarming geniality and steadfast dedication to scholarship, Al was committed to utilizing psychological theory as a vehicle for social change. Early in his career as an untenured professor, Al’s federal testimony about the implications of the Bobo Doll experiment strongly influenced efforts to protect children from the negative effects of televised violence, subjecting his research to scrutiny and criticism by the television industry. He served as President of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1974 at a time when psychologists were facing negative publicity about the dangers of behavior modification and Nixon administration cuts in funding. He presided over the founding of the Association for the Advancement of Psychology, seeing it as a vehicle to utilize psychological knowledge in developing public policy. His final book, *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves* (2016), describes the psychological mechanisms employed by

individuals, corporations, and government to persuade themselves and/or others that their actions are not harmful.

Beginning with television and extending to the revolutionary advances in technology, Al foreshadowed the importance of symbolic environments exerting influence beyond one's own lived experience. He developed collaborations to harness the power of vicarious learning and modeling to enhance self-efficacy for collective behavior change. This work included developing mass media programs and telenovelas with filmmaker Miguel Sabido and the Population Media Center to address global issues such as climate change, social injustice toward girls and women, family planning, improving literacy rates, and public health crises. In his later years, he embraced opportunities to think about ways to utilize innovative technology to improve health, including our research collaboration to integrate social cognitive theory into artificial intelligence (AI) gaming technology.

Bandura has been recognized with honors across disciplines and around the globe. He received 19 honorary degrees, was elected to the Academy of Medicine, and earned awards from the APA in 1980 and 2004 for his outstanding lifetime contributions to psychology. In 2015 he received The Order of Canada, one of the country's highest civilian honors; and in recognition of his important contributions to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of behavioral and social sciences, he was awarded the National Medal of Science by President Barack Obama in 2016.

Al loved living in California, hiking in the Sierras with his family, exploring restaurants, enjoying "the noble grape" in wine country, attending the opera, and single-handedly tending to his prolific vegetable garden into his 80s. In a surprise "Bandurafest" honoring Al around the time of his 65th birthday in Napa, I was one of four of Al's early-career mentees who composed a "Self-Efficacy" song to the tune of the Beatle's song "Yesterday." Al enjoyed the riff on his great theory so much so that he kept a framed copy of the lyrics in his office and posted a video of the performance on his website.

At a core level, Al's theory of human agency is an optimistic one. It instills belief in our ability to navigate life's challenges to alter life and societal trajectories for the better, emphasizing personal and collective empowerment. Over the course of his long career, his guiding motivation was to foster practices that lead to human betterment. His clarity in applying theory to the pressing challenges of our world well into his 90s was astounding.

Until the final months of his life, he was immersed in writing about the importance of empowering youth to save the earth. Al Bandura died on July 26, 2021, at his family home. He was preceded in death by his wife and is survived by his two daughters, Mary Bandura, a psychologist, and Carol Bandura Cowley, a nurse practitioner; and his grandsons Timothy and Andrew Cowley.

"May the Efficacy Force be with you" was Al's mantra that he would write when autographing books. A favorite transition phrase when ending a lengthy conversation was "Onward and Upward." His efficacy force has forever shaped us. Onward and Upward Al.

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