

## **Biblical Perspectives on Albert Bandura Theory of Observational Learning**

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### **Abstract**

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The social theories about behavioral modification, social learning, modeling, mentoring, and such like have been of great interest to both physical and social scientist over the ages. Albert Bandura built on existing theories with his groundbreaking theory of observational learning. His theory suggests the existence of four cognitive-mediational sub-processes comprising of attention, retention, motor reproduction, and the incentive-motivational reinforcement. Bandura posits that an individual can observe a model, covertly learn the new behavior, and decide whether or not to exhibit the behavior depending on the consequences associated with that behavior (Bandura, 1974). This theory needs to be further examined to elucidate its biblical perspectives. This is the focus of this paper. The Christian Scriptures suggest Bandura's theory's relevance in the area of children observational learning, adult observational learning, and observational learning from nature and the law.

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### **Introduction**

Professor Albert Bandura was Canadian Clinical Psychologist who became the President of the American Psychological Association. He was an advocate of social learning, being much influenced by the behaviorists. He agreed with Skinner that behavior, either good or bad, is learnt (Hagblom, 2002).

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The child, Bandura claims, has the ability of imitating a behavior even when no reward or reinforcement is attached. Much learning takes place by imitation or modeling. He shares the view that principles are sufficient to explain and predict behaviour and behaviour change (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

Bandura took the lead in proposing the stimulus Response Psychologists. He describes his theory in this way. Social Learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive behavior and environmental determinants. Within the process of reciprocal determinants there is the opportunity for people to influence their destiny as well the limits of self-direction. This conception of human functioning then neither casts people into the role of powerless objects controlled by environment forces nor free agents who can become whatever they choose. Both people and their environments are reciprocal determinants of each other (Bandura, 2006).

This paper is thus poised to expose the biblical perspectives on Bandura view of observational behavior. It proceeds by enumerating the major contours of this theory and then turns to the pages of the Christian Holy book. This paper would examine three (3) major texts each from the Old and New Testaments.

## **Bandura's Concept of Behaviour**

### Bandura's Concept of Human Nature

Bandura (1974) views people as partial products of past learning experiences. All human behaviour develops from past social-stimulus events such the nature and characteristics of the child's social models. However, the individual is not considered a helpless robot with respect to outside events. Responses are not triggered automatically by external stimuli. Rather, the reactions to these stimuli are self-activated in accordance with learned anticipations.

The individual is able to observe and interpret the effects of his or her own behavior and, in that way, determine which behaviours are appropriate in which situations. People are able to encode and symbolize environmental events and to anticipate that certain behaviour will bring a certain response. Thus, we choose and shape many of our behaviours in order to gain anticipated rewards or avoid anticipated pain.

Bandura believes that individuals can, in part, create their own environments and that abnormal behaviour are “bad habits” which create constraints on their capability to choose how they will respond to many situations (Bandura, 2006). Sometimes the constraints are very binding, allowing the person little, if any, free choice about how to behave. For example, a woman who cannot leave the house, or a person who must wash his or her hands 20 times each hour is not fully free. Such people are living within the constraints imposed by their own behaviour.

Bandura believes that bad behaviours are learnt from the environmental influence other than innate tendencies (Evans, 1989). This was established by allowing children to watch a video where a model aggressively hit a Bobo doll. After sometime, the children were placed in a room with attractive toys and also began to hit the toy. It is then concluded that observational learning had occurred. In the process, learning occurs when individuals observe and imitate others’ behaviour.

According to Henry & Charles (1982), Bandura feels that behaviour modification, a therapeutic technique, actually increases the person’s freedom. He argues that by removing these constraining symptoms, behaviour modification greatly increases the individual’s true freedom and allows more opportunity for personal growth. Learning through observation suggests that the link between stimulus and response cannot be as simple; some mediation involving the individual’s cognitive processes must be interposed between-the stimulus and the response.

In addition to investigating the variables that influence modelling, Bandura & Walters (1963) have found that the nature of observational learning is governed by four interrelated mediational mechanisms. These are:

- 1). Attention processes
- 2). Retention processes
- 3). Motor reproduction processes
- 4). Incentive and Motivational processes.

**Attention Processes:** This implies that modelling will not occur unless the subject attends to the model. Merely exposing the subject to the model does not guarantee that the subject will be attentive to the relevant cues, will select the most relevant stimulus events, or will even perceive the stimulus situation accurately (Allen & Santrock, 1993).

It is not sufficient for the subject merely to see the model and what it is doing; the subject must attend to the model with enough perceptual accuracy to acquire the necessary information to use in imitating the model. Various variables influence how closely the subject attends to the behaviour of the model. We are more attentive and responsive to some people than to others.

**Retention Processes:** This second mechanism in observational learning requires the subject to retain and remember all significant aspects of the model's behaviour unless the subject is imitating the model's behaviour as that behaviour is taking place. If the subject cannot remember the behaviour, he will not be able to imitate it five days or five minutes after observing it. In order to retain what has been attended to, it is necessary to encode and represent symbolically what has been seen. The admission of cognitive or thought processes into their theory means that they recognize certain inner aspects of the person to be operative in the development and modification of behaviour.

**Motor reproduction processes.** Bandura & Walters (1963) proposed two internal representational systems, *imaginably* and *verbal* — as means by which the behaviour of the model is retained by the subject. In imaginably representational system, the subject forms permanent and easily retrievable images of what he or she sees while still observing the model. The images are formed through a process of conditioning, so that any reference to event previously observed immediately calls forth a vivid image or picture of the physical stimuli involved, even though they are no longer present.

The verbal representation system is similar to image formation and involves a verbal coding of something we have previously observed. During the original observation, a subject might verbally describe to himself what the model is doing. These verbal descriptions (codes) can later be rehearsed internally, without an overt display of the behavior. These verbal codes provide cues at a later time when the subject wishes to perform an already observed skill.

These two presentations, images and verbal symbols, together provide the means by which we store observed events and rehearse them for later performance. The translation of the two symbolic representations into overt behaviour is what is involved in this third mechanism of observation learning.

Even though a person may have carefully formed and retained symbolic representations of model's behaviour and silently rehearsed that behaviour many times, he or she still may not be able to perform the behaviour correctly. This is particularly applicable to highly skilled acts that require many individual component behaviours for their skillful performance, such as driving a car. Actual practice in performing the motor movements (and feedback on their correctness) is needed to refine such behavior. Nonetheless, observing and silently rehearsing some behaviours definitely help in learning and performing the necessary movements on the basis of his or her retention of what had been earlier observed.

**Incentive and Motivational Processes:** We need sufficient incentive or motivation to attend to, retain the behaviour of a model, and to perform that behaviour. When sufficient incentives are available, modeling or observational learning is quickly translated into action. We do not pay as much attention to something when no incentive implies us to, and when little attention has been paid, there is little or nothing to retain.

One way in which incentive to attend to, retain and perform certain behaviours may be influenced is through the anticipation of reinforcement or punishment for doing so. The reinforcement is thus experienced vicariously during the observation, after which the subject can anticipate that his or her performance of the same behaviour will lead to the same consequences.

### Summary of the Theory

Stimulus -----> Observer -----> Response  
 (Attention)  
 (Retention)  
 (Motor Reproduction)  
 (Motivation)

### Biblical Concept of Behaviour

The philosopher Hegel is quoted as saying: "The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history" (Duguid & Hughes, 2006, pg. 157). This is so true of many people.

We too often fail to apply the life lessons from others, only to repeat the same mistakes over again. In consonance with biblical evidence, "social learning theory sees a person as an active, rational agent, responsible for actions and able to change behaviors yet ever subject to the influences of the social environment" (Benner & Hill, 1999, p. 1139).

The Bible adjures that one must engage the whole being in the learning process: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5). Fully attention is non-negotiable in acquiring lessons needed for success. One must cultivate "attending behavior," which includes all the nonverbal parts of conversation: eye contact, facial expressions, and body posture. Attending behavior is a powerful skill and tool that lets someone know they are being taken seriously (Self, 1990). This is critical for maximum impartation.

### **Children Observational Learning**

Children's minds are like sponges; they soak-in everything. They learn mostly by modeling. They innocently imitate what adults around them do. This is the crux of Bandura's theory. The process of observing and imitating another person's behavior is referred to as social modeling (Benner & Hill, 1999). Modeling is key to infants' early verbal imitation and future lexical development (Masur, 1995; Benner & Hill, 1999). In typical parent-child interactions, parents provide the model for the appropriate behavior, yielding spontaneous mutual imitations and helping the child to be able to perform the behavior without prompting cues by the parent (Holt, 1931).

The most critical prayer offered in the Hebrew family is called the *Shema*: "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6:6-9).

The Jews take this very literally, and correctly so. In order to impress the commandment on the young minds, they talk, taught and demonstrated it in every way at home in the morning and night and everywhere outside the house (work, play, travel, etc.). The devout practicing Jews have the *phylacteries* and called *tefillin* worn during prayers.

These contain tiny parchment scrolls with the Hebrew texts of Exodus 13:1-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21 inscribed on them and put in a tiny box as a reminder of the whole of the Torah. The *tefillin* are fitted with leather straps and are attached above the forehead and on the left upper arm to face the heart (or right, for a left-handed person) according to a prescribed ritual (Myers, 1987). Furthermore, they put the *mezuzah* on the side posts of a city gate, door of a building, or a window. This is usually a glass or metal receptacle containing a parchment also containing Hebrew words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21 (Grisanti, 2000).

The modeling of committed parents in the midst of family love and intimacy constituted “the most powerful educational design ever devised” (Richards, 1991, p. 123). Baby Moses had only a few years of this with his biological parents; but enough to make permanent impression upon him when he got to Pharaoh’s palace with its pagan influences (Heb 11:24-26). Young Timothy had observational learning with his mother, Eunice and grandmother, Lois. In return, Paul admonished Timothy to demonstrate both courage and a readiness to suffer and note worthy examples of traits to imitate and to avoid (2 Tim 1:5-18; Lea & Griffin, 1992).

The wise man calls: “My son, give me your heart” (Prov 23:26a). The Hebrew term “heart” refers to a person’s center of thought and commitment; hence this is a clarion call for the young person’s careful and close attention to him. He continues: “let your eyes observe in my ways” (Prov 23:26a). The appeal to the young person is really to “learn from what I do” or “follow my example” “let my life be your example” and “gladly follow my example” (Reyburn & Fry, 2000, p. 503-504).

The young must observe and learn from the ancients. Bildad argued that Job’s and his compatriots’ knowledge was limited and their lives were short. They are bound to learn from their ancestors whose words come from their understanding, and not words merely from their mouths (Job 8:8-10; Zuck, 1985). The good advice is: “Stand at the crossroads and look: ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jer 6:16). This calls for observational learning in the moral science of life, as in physical science. The characters and lives of others are actually sources of instruction, admonition, example, and practical truth. All must “know how to note facts and trace laws and draw conclusions, to know how to learn and to turn what is learnt to good account” (Spence-Jones, 1909, p. 176).

Many children learned misdeeds and wickedness from their parents who now turn around to beat and chastise them for observing, learning, and perfecting what they taught them (Bunyan, 2006). This is a solemn reality. Even patriarch Isaac emulated the constant bickering in Abraham's family. Isaac was preferred over Ishmael as the favorite child of promise. No surprise then: Isaac and Rebekah also chose favorites among their two sons: Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:19–34). Even though Isaac was yet unborn when Abraham put his wife Sarah's life at risk by passing her off as his sister and sold her to a foreign king to protect his own back (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18), Isaac did the same for his wife Rebekkah (Gen 26:7–11). He must have learned the tactics from him. In the same way, Isaac imitated his father's faith in building an altar and calling upon the name of the LORD (Gen 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:23-25; Strassner, 2009).

Children observe their parents, more than by any other, as their daily book of lessons. Their selfish, hard, formal, and worldly actions would neutralize all their verbal coaching or professed insincere religion. Children despise parent's hypocrisies whereby parents restrain themselves in public but give freedom to unhallowed feelings in private (Spence-Jones, 1909). Dorothy Knolte's poem captures this perfectly:

Children learn what they observe.

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn and be judgmental.

If children live with hostility, they learn to be angry and fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy and withdrawn.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with acceptance and friendship,

They learn to find love in the world (Lawrence, 2005).

## Adult Observational Learning

The most powerful statement exemplifying the importance of modeling is Jesus': "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14–15). Our best bet is: "Looking to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of your faith" (Heb 12:1-3). Long observation of a person, thing, or process changes us: "Beholding, we are changed" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Paul copied Christ's model by presenting himself unequivocally as the sterling example worth imitating: "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle. . . not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow" (2 Thess 3:7, 9). "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). These biblical passages provide the basic tenets of social model learning.

The enigmatic proverb reads literally in Hebrew: "As the water, the faces to the faces thus the heart of the man to the man" (Prov 27:19). This means that a man sees his reflection in water, so one's character is reflected in others (Lennox, 1998). A wise person should learn a lesson by observing the punishment that befalls the incorrigibly evil, merciless, or insolent persons and mockers even though they themselves refuse to learn (Prov 21:10-13; Garrett, 1993). Proverbs 24:30-34 points to the lessons from a sluggard who neglects his field.

At some level, peer modeling is powerful (Werts, Caldwell & Wolery, 1996). People model others throughout life, and one's characteristics do influence the degree to which modeling takes place (Marvin, 1980). Different people learn differently. "Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke the discerning, and they will gain knowledge" (Prov 19:25). In this proverb, there are three types of people: the *scorner* with a closed mind, the *simpleton* with an empty mind, and the *discerning person* with an open mind (Kidner, 2009). The simpleton learns by observing a scoffer being punished, even if this teaches where the traps are and how to avoid them. Unfortunately, this punishment of the scoffer will have no effect on the scoffer. The discerning person will learn from verbal rebukes. The Midrash puts it succinctly: "For the wise a hint [*r'miza*], for the fool a fist [*kurmezo*]" (*Mishle* 22:6).

Biblical observational learning tools include visual inscriptions, memorials and monuments. The people of Israel were called by God to be holy (Exod 19:6; Deut 7:6; Isa 62:12). As a constant reminder, God instructed that the words: "Holiness to the LORD" to be engraved on the High Priest's mitre (Exod 28:36; 39:30) and on bells of horses, on pots and bowls (Zech 14:20). There were also grave-markers and gravestones with messages on them as observational reminders for the living, as was the tomb of the disobedient young Judean prophet (1 Kings 13:1-33; 2 Kin. 23:17). Jacob set up a pillar at Bethel (Gen. 28:18; Gen. 31:13; Gen. 35:14); at Mizpah (Gen. 31:45-9); and near Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19-20). Moses set up twelve stone pillars (Exod. 24:4). The Pharisees adorned the monuments of the righteous (Matt. 23:29).

The names of all the tribes of Israel were on the High Priest's shoulders and on his breast-piece as memorials (Exod 28:12, 29; 39:7). The beaten plates were to remind the Israelites that "no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers" (Num 16:40). The tassels were a reminder of the Lord's commands (Num. 15:39-40). The gold spoil from the defeated Midianites was a memorial for the Israelites before the Lord (Num 31:54). The stones obtained from the Jordan riverbed constituted a memorial for Israel (Josh 4:7).

It was a herculean task for Joshua to succeed Moses as the great leader of the nation of Israel. However, Joshua had the unique blessing of direct and intentional observational learning from Moses, his mentor for more than forty years. Joshua was chosen to lead the soldiers of Israel into battle against Amalek. Joshua learnt the battle is won on our knees. It was only as Moses, assisted by Aaron and Hur, held up his hands, Israel's soldiers prevailed in battle. "God could have given Israel victory apart from Moses holding up his hands . . . But the God who does not need people has, in his wisdom, chosen to use people as his instruments. The sufficient Lord uses people" (Exod 17:9-14; Ellsworth, 2008, pg. 16).

Joshua had first-hand view of the glory of God on the "mountain of God" for forty days, right beside Moses, while all the other elders stayed down the valley (Exod 24:13-18). As Moses' personal aide and mentee since youth, he remained in the tent of meeting to behold the glory of God in the descended cloud, even at times when Moses had leave to visit the camp. He saw and heard God speaking to Moses face to face (Exod 33:7-11). He learnt from Moses how to intercede for hard-hearted Israelites in the experience of the molten calf (Exod 32:1-35).

He imbibed the unparalleled humility of Moses who would that “all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them!” No room for jealousy in the work of God (Num 11:16-29).

### **Observing the Law and Nature**

Nature’s language teaches moral lessons. The heavenly objects are signs and vehicles of ideas about God and life. “The universe is God’s telephone system, His grand signal system by which He flashes messages from the heights above to the deepest valleys below” (Bryant, 1997, pg. 16). The fact of nature reveals the being of God; its vastness shows His Immensity; its uniformity declares His Unity; its regularity discloses His unchangeableness; its variety manifests His exhaustlessness; its adaptations unveil His wisdom; and its happiness displays His Goodness (Bryant, 1997).

God makes himself known through the natural order (Job 36:24-26; Psa 8:1-4; Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-28; Rom 1:18-21; Manser, 2009). “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hand” (Psa 19:1). The Psalmist chose to “to gaze on the beauty of the Lord” (Psa 27:4). These embroil full attention, retention and motivation. We are also to observe, watch, reflect on, and learn wisdom from lower animals: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” (Prov 6:6). Similarly, Job advised his friends to learn from the birds and animals (Job 12:7; Prov 30:24-28; Reyburn & Fry, 2000).

The Psalmist prays: “Open my eyes to see your law” (Psa 119:18). The law of God must be a studied, meditated and acted upon for maximum benefit. It will bring about constant renew of one’s minds (Rom 12:1-3) and aid in all behavioral modifications. “Repentance and commitment would assure life and the blessings of God. Rebellion would result in their death as a nation. The choice was theirs (Clendenen, Block, & Smith, 2000, p. 416).

### **Conclusion**

Bandura’s theory of observational learning distances itself from environmental determinism but realizes the fact people are influenced by what or who they keenly observe in their environment.

While allowing for the sub-process of motivation, Bandura does not believe that reward or reinforcement must always be present before one's ability to imitate a behavior can be activated. He has presented balanced principles for understanding social learning which are invaluable for explaining and predicting behaviour and behaviour change.

This paper attempted to show that Bandura's observational learning theory is consistent with the biblical mandate and evidence especially in the areas of child observational learning, adult observational learning, and learning through nature and the law. Several biblical passages were used to illustrate observational learning. The Bible insists that one must engage the whole being in the learning process: whole heart, soul, and strength. Full attention is critical for maximum impartation. This theory continues to be relevant in many circles.

Further case studies would be needed on different people groups and different social and cultural settings to demonstrate this biblically consistent theory of observational learning.

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