Albert Bandura's concept of Self-efficacy

Albert Bandura'sconcept of Self-efficacy, or confidence as it is commonly known, is one of the most enabling psychology models to have been adopted into positive psychology.

Self-efficacy is an individual's optimistic belief in their innate ability, competence or chances of succesfully accomplishing a task and producing a favorable outcome.

Albert Bandura (buy his books from Amazon) defines it as a personal judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations". Expectations of self-efficacy determine whether an individual will be able to exhibit coping behaviour and how long effort will be sustained in the face of obstacles. Individuals who have high self-efficacy will exert sufficient effort that, if well executed, leads to successful outcomes, whereas those with low self-efficacy are likely to cease effort early and fail.

> **❝** Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right. Henry Ford

The Importance of Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura, there are two factors that influence whether or not someone engages in a particular behavior: outcome expectancy and self-efficacy.

In other words, our ability to achieve a goal or complete a task depends on whether we *think* we can do it (self-efficacy), and whether we think it will have good results (outcome expectancy).

Self-efficacy has important effects on the amount of effort individuals apply to a given task. Someone with high levels of self-efficacy for a given task will be resilient and persistent in the face of setbacks, while someone with low levels of self-efficacy for that task may disengage or avoid the situation. For example, a student who has a lower level of self-efficacy for math might avoid signing up for challenging math classes.

> **❝** Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny. Mahatma Ghandi

How we develop Self-Efficacy

People's beliefs about their efficacy can be developed by five main sources of influence. The most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences. Successes build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy. Failures

undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established.

If people experience only easy successes they come to expect quick results and are easily discouraged by failure. A resilient sense of efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort. Some setbacks and difficulties in human pursuits serve a useful purpose in teaching that success usually requires sustained effort. After people become convinced they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks. By sticking it out through tough times, they emerge stronger from adversity.

Performance Experience
The first and foremost source of self-efficacy is through mastery experiences. However nothing is more powerful than having a direct experience of mastery to increase self-efficacy. Having a success, for example in mastering a task or controlling an environment, will build self- belief in that area whereas a failure will undermine that efficacy belief. To have a resilient sense of self-efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through effort and perseverance.

Vicarious Experience
The second source of self-efficacy comes from our observation of people around us, especially people we consider as role models. Seeing people similar to ourselves succeed by their sustained effort raises our beliefs that we too possess the capabilities to master the activities needed for success in that area.

Social Persuasion
Influential people in our lives such as parents, teachers, managers or coaches can strengthen our beliefs that we have what it takes to succeed. Being persuaded that we possess the capabilities to master certain activities means that we are more likely to put in the effort and sustain it when problems arise.

Imaginal Experiences
Psychologist James Maddux has suggested a fifth route to self-efficacy through "imaginal experiences", the art of visualising yourself behaving effectively or successfully in a given situation.

Physical and Emotional States
The state you're in will influence how you judge your self-efficacy. Depression, for example, can dampen confidence in our capabilities. Stress reactions or tension are interpreted as signs of vulnerability to poor performance whereas positive emotions can boost our confidence in our skills.

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> If efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people can do routinely they would rarely fail but they would not set aspirations beyond their immediate reach nor mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances.   Albert Bandura

Self-Efficacy and the Activated Processes

Much research has been conducted on the four major psychological processes through which self-beliefs of efficacy affect human functioning.

Cognitive Processes
The effects of self-efficacy beliefs on cognitive processes take a variety of forms. Much human behavior, being purposive, is regulated by forethought embodying valued goals. Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them.

Most courses of action are initially organized in thought. People's beliefs in their efficacy shape the types of anticipatory scenarios they construct and rehearse. Those who have a high sense of efficacy, visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides and supports for performance. Those who doubt their efficacy, visualize failure scenarios and dwell on the many things that can go wrong. It is difficult to achieve much while fighting self-doubt. A major function of thought is to enable people to predict events and to develop ways to control those that affect their lives. Such skills require effective cognitive processing of information that contains many ambiguities and uncertainties. In learning predictive and regulative rules people must draw on their knowledge to construct options, to weight and integrate predictive factors, to test and revise their judgments against the immediate and distal results of their actions, and to remember which factors they had tested and how well they had worked.

Affective Processes
People's beliefs in their coping capabilities affect how much stress and depression they experience in threatening or difficult situations, as well as their level of motivation. Perceived self-efficacy to exercise control over stressors plays a central role in anxiety arousal. People who believe they can exercise control over threats do not conjure up

disturbing thought patterns. But those who believe they cannot manage threats experience high anxiety arousal. They dwell on their coping deficiencies. They view many aspects of their environment as fraught with danger. They magnify the severity of possible threats and worry about things that rarely happen. Through such inefficacious thinking they distress themselves and impair their level of functioning. Perceived coping self-efficacy regulates avoidance behavior as well as anxiety arousal. The stronger the sense of self-efficacy the bolder people are in taking on taxing and threatening activities.

Anxiety arousal is affected not only by perceived coping efficacy but by perceived efficacy to control disturbing thoughts. The exercise of control over one's own consciousness is summed up well in the proverb: "You cannot prevent the birds of worry and care from flying over your head. But you can stop them from building a nest in your head." Perceived self-efficacy to control thought processes is a key factor in regulating thought produced stress and depression. It is not the sheer frequency of disturbing thoughts but the perceived inability to turn them off that is the major source of distress. Both perceived coping self-efficacy and thought control efficacy operate jointly to reduce anxiety and avoidant behavior.

Motivational Processes
Self-beliefs of efficacy play a key role in the self-regulation of motivation. Most human motivation is cognitively generated. People motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily by the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do. They anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions. They set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures.

There are three different forms of cognitive motivators around which different theories have been built. They include causal attributions, outcome expectancies, and cognized goals. The corresponding theories are attribution theory, expectancy-value theory and goal theory, respectively. Self-efficacy beliefs operate in each of these types of cognitive motivation. Self-efficacy beliefs influence causal attributions. People who regard themselves as highly efficacious attribute their failures to insufficient effort, those who regard themselves as inefficacious attribute their failures to low ability. Causal attributions affect motivation, performance and affective reactions mainly through beliefs of self-efficacy.

Motivation based on goals or personal standards is governed by three types of self influences. They include self-satisfying and self-dissatisfying reactions to one's performance, perceived self-efficacy for goal attainment, and readjustment of personal goals based on one's progress. Self-efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation in several ways: They determine the goals people set for themselves; how much effort they expend; how long they persevere in the face of difficulties; and their resilience to failures. When faced with obstacles and failures people who harbor self-doubts about their capabilities slacken their efforts or give up quickly. Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities exert greater effort when they fail to master the challenge. Strong perseverance contributes to performance accomplishments.

The discussion so far has centered on efficacy-activated processes that enable people to create beneficial environments and to exercise some control over those they encounter day in and day out. People are partly the product of their environment. Therefore, beliefs of personal efficacy can shape the course lives take by influencing they types of activities and environments people choose. People avoid activities and situations they believe exceed their coping capabilities. But they readily undertake challenging activities and select situations they judge themselves capable of handling. By the choices they make, people cultivate different competencies, interests and social networks that determine life courses. Any factor that influences choice behavior can profoundly affect the direction of personal development. This is because the social influences operating in selected environments continue to promote certain competencies, values, and interests long after the efficacy decisional determinant has rendered its inaugurating effect.

Career choice and development is but one example of the power of self-efficacy beliefs to affect the course of life paths through choice-related processes. The higher the level of people's perceived self-efficacy the wider the range of career options they seriously consider, the greater their interest in them, and the better they prepare themselves educationally for the occupational pursuits they choose and the greater is their success. Occupations structure a good part of people's lives and provide them with a major source of personal growth.

Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control

According to psychologist Julian Rotter, self-efficacy is inextricable from the concept of locus of control. Locus of control refers to how an individual determines the causes of events. People with an internal locus of control see events as being caused by their own actions. People with an external locus of control see events as being caused by external forces (e.g. other people or chance circumstances).

After succeeding at a task, an individual with an internal locus of control will experience a greater increase in self-efficacy than an individual with an external locus of control. In other words, giving yourself credit for successes (as opposed to claiming that they happened because of factors beyond your control) is more likely to increase your confidence on future tasks.

Applications of Self-Efficacy

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) has had considerable influence on research, education, and clinical practice:

Treating Phobias
Bandura conducted research related to the role of self-efficacy in treating phobias. In one study, he recruited research participants with a snake phobia into two groups. The first group participated in hands-on activities directly related to their fears, such as

holding the snake and allowing the snake to slither on them. The second group observed another person interact with the snake but did not participate in the activities themselves.

Afterwards, the participants completed an assessment to determine whether they were still fearful of snakes. Bandura found that the participants who had directly interacted with the snake showed higher self-efficacy and less avoidance, suggesting that personal experience is more effective than observation when it comes to developing self-efficacy and facing our fears.

Academic Achievement
In a review of the research on self-efficacy and education, Mart van Dinther and his colleagues write that self-efficacy is linked to factors such as the goals students choose for themselves, the strategies they use, and their academic achievement.

Healthy Behaviours
Health psychologists have found that we are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors when we feel confident in our ability to successfully carry out those behaviors. For example, having higher levels of self-efficacy may help us stick to an exercise routine. Self-efficacy is also a factor that helps people adopt a healthier diet and quit smoking.

In the field of health psychology, for example, the construct of self-efficacy has been applied to behaviors as diverse as:

- Self-management of chronic disease

- Smoking cessation

- Alcohol use

- Eating

- Pain control

- Exercise

> People's beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property; there is a huge variability in how you perform. People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failure; they approach things in terms of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong. Albert Bandura

Conclusion

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives.

Beliefs in personal efficacy affect life choices, level of motivation, quality of functioning, resilience to adversity and vulnerability to stress and depression. People's beliefs in their efficacy are developed by four main sources of influence plus the one suggested by psychologist James Maddux. They include mastery experiences, seeing people similar to oneself manage task demands successfully, social persuasion that one has the capabilities to succeed in given activities, inferences from somatic and emotional states indicative of personal strengths and vulnerabilities, and visualizations of being successful in completing a certain task. Ordinary realities are strewn with impediments, adversities, setbacks, frustrations and inequities. People must, therefore, have a robust sense of efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed.

Succeeding periods of life present new types of competency demands requiring further development of personal efficacy for successful functioning. The nature and scope of perceived self-efficacy undergo changes throughout the course of the lifespan.