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Social Cognitive Theories of Personality

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Bandura and Mischel

How is personality developed? There are many theories that attempt to give us a clear, logical answer to this fundamental question. One category of these theories is the social cognitive theories by Bandura and Mischel. Let us examine each theorist's views on personality.

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Personality and Bandura

In his social cognitive theory of personality, Bandura included the concept of observational learning as one of the main theoretical points. He argued that reinforcement does not simply work as a mechanism, but it is actually the provider of information of the next reinforcement to be given once the behavior is repeated. Bandura pointed out that in order for the individual to repeat an agreeable behavior, he must include his intellectual processes, in contrast with Skinner's belief that thinking only occurs inside a "black box". In this sense, Bandura agreed that environment causes behavior, but behavior can also cause environment. This chief concept in his theory is called reciprocal determinism. Bandura's approach to personality can be gleaned by this situation: Suppose an adolescent shows his aggressive personality trait because he is maltreated by his peers. When this person expresses his aggression by way of violent acts, he can trigger either a higher level of aggression or fear inside his peers' minds, therefore changing his environment.

After theorizing that personality as revealed in his behavior and environment belong to a two-way process, Bandura later proposed that there is a third factor that must be considered in this kind of interaction- the person's psychological processes. He said that our capacity to process language and images and other sensory stimuli in our minds have an effect on how we behave, how we develop our personality traits, and thus, how we affect our environment. When he introduced this concept, he became included in the behaviorist-cognitivist circle of psychologists.

Personality and Mischel

Somehow similar to Bandura's proposal, Walter Mischel's Theory of Personality states that an individual's behavior is influenced by two things- the specific attributes of a given situation and the manner in which he perceives the situation. In contrast to the traditional social cognitive theories, Mischel argued that a person only behaves in a similar manner whenever these actions are highly probable to yield into the same results. He emphasized that we have individual differences, so our values and expectancies must be consider in predicting a person's behavior and personality.

According to Mischel, there are five person variables that contribute to the conditions of a specific situation. They are used in predicting how a person will most likely behave.

1. **Competencies** - our intellectual capabilities as well as social skills.
2. **Cognitive Strategies** - the different perceptions of a specific event. For instance, what may be "threatening" for you may be "challenging" to another person.
3. **Expectancies** - the expected results of different behaviors that are realized by the person inside his mind.
4. **Subjective Values** - the respective value of each possible outcomes of various behaviors.

5. **Self-regulatory systems** - the groups of rules and standards that people adapt to in order to regulate their behavior.

In the end, Mischel believes that personality per se does not exist, and that our traits are merely cognitive strategies or things that we do for us to obtain the kind of reward we want.

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