

# Social cognitive theory goes global

Albert Bandura spoke to a packed audience at Friends House on 22 April about how he is abating urgent global problems by psychosocial means

Soaring population growth tops the list of global problems. Even with the present population of 6.7 billion we have outgrown the earth's carrying capacity, but we are heading toward a population of 9 to 10 billion by mid-century. We are destroying ecological systems that have evolved over aeons, and that keep our planet cool and habitable.

Burgeoning population growth also fuels civil strife. Around 80 per cent of the violent conflicts are in countries with large youth populations that are uneducated, unemployed, living in poverty and under autocratic, corrupt rulers. Such youth are easily recruited for violent activities.

How are we responding to the crisis? With token gestures. We are like the guy who jumps off a tall building, and as he passes the 30th floor he thinks, 'So far, so good!'

Diverse social forces stifle acknowledgement of this problem. Religious doctrines, contentious immigration issues, draconian population control measures that violate human rights, powerful lobbyists... all have rendered population stabilisation a taboo subject. Population growth has been lobotomised from the formula for ecological destruction. But our battered planet is in deep trouble unless we break the stranglehold. Billions more consumers will overwhelm any benefits from green, clean technologies. We have only 40–50 years to clean up our act, to prevent the irreversible collapse of entire ecological systems.

We need to fight not only time, but social practices that disengage moral sanctions from environmentally destructive activities. How can we do this, at a truly global level? First, we need a theoretical model: one that specifies the determinants of psychosocial change, and the mechanisms through which they work. This knowledge provides the guiding principles. Next, we need a translational model. This converts theoretical principles into an innovative operational practice.

With my lifetime of work in modelling and self-efficacy, we had a good theory, and Miguel Sabido, at Televisia in Mexico, provided a creative translational and implementation model. But we lacked the expertise and resources to disseminate it widely. We needed a social diffusion model, of how to promote adoption of psychosocial programmes in diverse cultural milieus. Enter Bill Ryerson and David Poindexter at the Population Media Center, who work worldwide using entertainment-education for social change. They recognised the effectiveness of this approach, and became our worldwide dissemination system. Many applications of this creative format – in Africa, Asia and Latin America – have promoted personal and society-wide changes that are bettering people's lives.

The serial dramas we have produced with Population Media Center encourage evidence-based, positive behaviour change among massive TV and radio audiences. These dramatic productions are not just fanciful stories. The plotlines portray people's everyday lives, and the impediments they face. They help people to see a better life, and provide the strategies and incentives that enable people to take the steps to realise their hopes. Hundreds of episodes, over several years, allow viewers to form emotional bonds to the models, who evolve in their thinking and behaviour at a believable pace. Multiple, intersecting plotlines can address different aspects of people's lives, at both the individual and social level.

Take the example of a serial we used in the Sudan. Here, the plotlines included

the benefits of family planning; educational opportunities for daughters; the injustice of forced marriage; the risks of early childbearing; and HIV prevention. A special theme centred on the devastating consequences of the widespread practice of genital mutilation. Most people in the country favoured this brutal practice. We found that our programme reversed this social norm.

This kind of pernicious gender inequality is a frequent target for our plots. In too many societies, women are marginalised, devalued, disallowed aspiration, denied their liberty and dignity. The fastest way for societies to enhance their human capital is to educate their women. A drama for India, with an audience of about 125 million, illustrates some of the psychosocial principles behind our attempts to do this. A mother challenges restrictive cultural norms for her daughter Taru, and promotes her education. Taru raised the academic aspirations and pursuits of teenage listeners, who had little access to education. The episodes include

positive models (exhibiting beneficial lifestyles), negative models (exhibiting detrimental ones), and transitional models (changing from detrimental to beneficial styles of behaviour). This contrast modelling highlights the personal and social effects of different lifestyles.



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Viewers are enabled, and inspired, by seeing others change their lives for the better.

Of course, efforts at social change challenge power relations and entrenched societal practices. Success does not come easily. Social change requires development of resilience to adversity. There are several ways in which modelling is used to build resilience. The plotlines model prototypical problems and effective ways of overcoming them. They also model how to manage setbacks and recover from failed attempts. They show people how to enlist social support for personal change, and epilogues and other guides provide the essential environmental support, linking to self-help groups and other community resources. Seeing similar others succeed through perseverance strengthens staying power.

We also use vicarious motivators. Unless people see the modelled lifestyles as improving their welfare, they have little incentive to adopt them. The benefits of the favourable practices and the costs of the detrimental ones are vividly portrayed.

To change deeply held beliefs and social practices also requires strong emotional bonding. We have found plenty of evidence of that. In India, 400,000 viewers sent letters supporting, advising, or criticising the various models in the drama. One wrote:

There are moments when I feel that Taru is directly talking to me. Usually at night. She is telling me, 'Usha, you can follow your dreams.' I feel she is like my elder sister... and giving me encouragement.

Our model of social change doesn't just operate on this direct pathway, promoting changes by informing, enabling, motivating and guiding viewers to improve their lives. In addition, the socially mediated pathway links people to social networks and community settings. These places provide continued personalised guidance, natural incentives and social support for personal change.

Failure to address the psychosocial determinants of human behaviour is often the weakest link in social policy initiatives. Simply providing ready access to resources does not mean that people will take advantage of them. One of our dramas promoted a national literacy programme in Mexico. The government had launched a national self-study programme. People who were skilled at reading were urged to organise small self-study groups to teach others how to read. It was a good idea, but there were few takers. Our survey identified three impediments to participation: a critical period barrier (believing that reading is learnable only when one is young); a low self-efficacy barrier (believing that they lacked the ability to master such a complex skill); and a self-unworthiness barrier (feeling that an educated person wouldn't be interested in devoting time to them).

In our drama, a popular star played the role of the literate person. She persuades characters representing different segments of the population to join the self-study group (diversity builds perceived similarity). They voice their self-doubts, and the instructor corrects their misbeliefs and persuades them that

## Cultural sensitivity

Our TV and radio serials are not foisted on nations by outsiders. They are created by invitation, from nations seeking help. The Population Media Center works in partnership with the media personnel in the host countries, to create a serial drama tailored to their culture.

Extensive cultural and value analyses are conducted before programmes are developed and implemented. This formative phase identifies problems of major concern. These interviews provide the culturally relevant information for developing realistic characters and engrossing, functional plot lines. This 'value grid' is vital, because if you present in abstract, you are fuelling controversy. People will inevitably dump emotional baggage into the abstraction.

I am occasionally asked 'Who has the authority to say what should be modelled as "good"?' But the dramatisations are grounded in the internationally endorsed values, codified in United Nations covenants and resolutions. The values embody respect for human dignity; equity of opportunities; and support of human aspirations. These countries have signed up to these, but don't follow the practices. Does laissez-faire morality have no limits? Is it alright for despotic regimes to prohibit education for women, and spray girls with acid on the way to school? What is the moral dilemma in creating a culturally sensitive model for improving people's lives?

Also, we cannot afford to be casual or cavalier about the demographics involved here. Take the figures from Tanzania [see main article]. They need help.

they have the ability to succeed. We modelled how to manage setbacks.

The day after one epilogue, by an admired movie star, 25,000 people showed up to enrol in the self-study programme. Viewers were more informed than non-viewers about the literacy programme, and had more positive attitudes about helping each other to learn. Enrolment was 90,000 in the year before the televised series, and about one million during the year of the series. In the year following the series, another 400,000 people enrolled, suggesting a second-order influence: as people develop competencies that improve their lives, they serve as models, inspirations and even tutors for others.

Tanzania provided a unique opportunity for an experimental comparison of the effectiveness of dramas. In Tanzania the fertility rate is 5.6 children per woman. The current population of 36 million is projected to soar to 60 million in 25 years, and 88 million in 50 years. No economic development can cope with this. Our radio drama was broadcast in one large region of the country, with the remainder serving as a control.

The programme raised people's belief in their efficacy to control their family size. Before, many believed that their deity ordained the number of children they will have, or their husbands decreed it. The broadcast area had a substantial increase in the number of new families adopting contraceptive methods, compared with the control region. Adoption of contraceptive methods also increased when the programme was later broadcast in the control region.

There was also a graded exposure effect: the greater the exposure to the dramatic series, the more the marital partners discussed the need to control family size, and the higher the adoption of family planning methods. A similar programme aired in Mexico, and contraceptive sales increased by 23 per cent in that year (compared with between 4 and 7 per cent in the two previous years).

Another major issue in Tanzania is the spread of the AIDS virus. We devote an enormous amount of effort and money to treating the ravages of AIDS, but pitifully few resources to preventing the disease. In Tanzania AIDS is transmitted heterosexually, by long-distance truckers,

## event

in truck stop hubs, with hundreds of prostitutes. About 60 per cent of them are infected, along with a third of the truck drivers. Our programme quickly debunked false beliefs: that mosquitoes transmit the virus, that sex with young girls is safe, and that having sexual intercourse with a virgin cures AIDS. Again, contrast modelling was used. There was a large increase in condom use in the broadcast area after the programme, and viewers also reported reductions in the number of sexual partners and the sharing of razors and needles. In Ethiopia, our serial drama was distributed as an audio cassette to truckers and sex-workers, who lined up eagerly each week for the new episode.

A storyline in the Kenyan drama illustrates how we tailor to particular cultural values. It revolved around the inheritance of land – in Kenya, only sons can inherit property – and the impoverishing effect of large families. Following the drama, contraceptive use increased by 58 per cent, as did preference for smaller families. The more people watched the programme, the more they talked to their spouse about family planning and the higher the rate of adoption of contraceptive methods.

Could such large effects really be down to our drama? Charles Westoff, a demographer at Princeton, conducted the assessment. He applied multiple controls for ethnicity, religion, education, rural-urban residence, life-cycle status and number of wives. The serial drama remained as a major contributor to Kenya's declining birthrate, and reduction in the rate of population growth.

And so the impacts mount up. In India, we addressed equal educational opportunities and career options for women; gender bias in child rearing; the detrimental effect of the dowry system; community development; and much more. The young woman in our drama



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summit in Hollywood for writers and producers in the entertainment industry. We explain how social cognitive theory uses the power of enabling storytelling for human betterment. We also present awards for dramas that include plotlines which help viewers to manage difficult problems. Recent awardees include *Boston Legal*, for dramatising a lawsuit against the government for neglecting medical care of veterans injured in the Iraq war; the leading Hispanic network, TV Mundo, for dramatising the causes and prevention of diabetes; and *Sesame Street*, for having Waldo model physical activity, and healthy eating. We also give awards to political cartoonists who have managed to distil complex issues into memorable images that can have a powerful impact on public opinion.

Finally, we have addressed the environmental costs of unbridled consumption. Most people don't have the foggiest idea of how their consumption practices affect the environment. If they are to adopt environmentally sustainable practices, they need to understand the ecological costs of their consumption practices. They need to be enabled, and motivated, to turn enlightened concern into constructive behaviour. With this in mind, a creative team including Alexandra Paul and Michael Tobias produced a video, 'The Cost of Cool', for distribution to schools. It focuses on the buying habits of teenagers, tracking the ecological costs of the manufacture, distribution, sale and disposal of everyday items. It has sobering impact on teenagers. As one of them put it, 'I'll never look at a T-shirt, in the same way'.

Global problems instil a sense of paralysis in people. They feel that there is little they can do to reduce such problems. The mantra 'Think globally, act locally' is an effort to localise the global. Our global applications increase the scale and scope of social cognitive theory in promoting personal and social changes. They illustrate how a collective effort, combining the expertise of different players, can have a worldwide impact on seemingly insurmountable problems.

As a society, we enjoy the benefits left by those before us who collectively worked for social changes that improved our lives. Our own collective efficacy will determine whether we pass on a habitable planet to our grandchildren and future generations.

So, as you bring our knowledge, and your personal influence to bear, on saving our battered planet: May the efficacy force be with you!

became adored nationally. Her death in childbirth produced an outpouring of 170,000 letters, concerning the tragedy of forced child marriages. The programme sparked serious public discussions about the broadcast themes. But it went beyond talk, to collective community action. One village sent a letter to the broadcast centre, signed by its inhabitants, stating that they will work to eradicate the practice of dowry and child marriages, and support education of girls. School enrolment of girls rose from 10 per cent to 38 per cent.

We are using a variety of other means, for bettering people's lives and promoting environmentally sustainable lifestyles. The popular, prime-time telenovelas on TV Globo, in Rio de Janeiro, dubbed into different languages, reach about 900 million people worldwide. Our Media Center helps in creating social themes, that can be easily incorporated into the telenovelas.

To reach teenagers, the Media Center created radio mini-dramas written, produced, and hosted by youth. They enjoy high popularity. Each programme begins with a street poll of adolescents for the relevant topic. It is then explored in a brief mini-drama that helps teenagers to make informed choices for healthier, and safer lives. The episodes, on issues such as drug abuse, teenage sexuality and pregnancy, are followed by listener call-ins. Invited guests provide further guidance, and referrals on where to go for information and help.

Each year, we also hold a

## Resources

This is an edited version of Professor Albert Bandura's talk for the British Psychological Society's London and Home Counties Branch at Friends House, London, on 22 April 2009. A DVD of the event, plus an extended interview with Professor Bandura, is available: enquiries to amandarose58@hotmail.com.

For Professor Bandura's publications and much more information, see:

<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/Bandura>  
[www.populationmedia.org](http://www.populationmedia.org)

