



STANFORD UNIVERSITY

PROFESSOR: Albert Bandura believes people are resilient.

A contrarian's view on human resilience

By Paul Van Slambrouck
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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TIS the season for joy, but also worries, we are commonly told.

Stress from too much shopping, overindulgence from too much celebrating, and depression for those feeling left out of the festivities are as typical this time of year as packages under the tree.

But among those whose profession it is to help people cope with these and other common ailments, there is a contrarian strain of thinking that humankind actually does an amazingly good, and vastly underappreciated, job of adapting and overcoming these and other ills on its own.

Albert Bandura, author, Stanford University professor, and acknowledged heavyweight in the field of psychology, is a prominent voice for this more optimistic view of humanity. And while he may still be swimming against the popular current, he says he is "pretty optimistic" a more positive view of the human condition is emerging. "At the conceptual level as well as the research level, this

A celebration of people's 'can do' spirit

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more positive view has been accelerating in the fields of health, education, child development, athletics, and even political efficacy," says the Canadian-born psychologist.

Though jocular by nature, Dr. Bandura is not beyond giving a good scolding, which he did to the American Psychological Association last year. As a past president and chairman of the board of that group, he had the stature to win applause despite a roundhouse swing at the profession's general orientation.

In his words: "The field of psychology is plagued by a chronic condition of negativity regarding human development and functioning."

Key ingredient: self-efficacy

A principal originator of the concept of "self-efficacy" and author of two scholarly books on the subject, Bandura is a firm believer that people can and regularly do overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties. The key ingredient is self-efficacy, or the conviction that action will produce results.

"People have the power to influence what they do and to make things happen," noted Bandura in his speech to the APA. Still, he says, human behavior continues to be commonly explained — not

only by psychologists but also sociologists, educators, and doctors — as the result of uncontrollable factors, whether genes or the neighborhood environment.

Of course, most experts in these fields regard human behavior and health as a combination of factors, some within a person's control and some not. But Bandura has spent much of his career attempting to nudge the balance back toward greater appreciation for people's ability to overcome problems.

It's not just a point of emphasis that concerns Bandura but, ultimately, the models by which doctors, educators, social scientists, and therapists of all stripes address prevalent social and individual ills.

For instance, he says, while researchers have in recent years pointed to physiological links between stress and a degradation of the immune system, there is also a body of research showing that stress coupled with a conviction that a problem can be overcome actually strengthens the immune system.

Using a broader example, Bandura points out that it's also commonly accepted that children growing up in im-

poverished, inner-city neighborhoods will become involved in crime or drugs or will simply be too psychically impaired to lead a normal life.

"In fact," he says, "most of the children make it through the many developmental hazards." So, which outcome is more instructive in understanding how to break such cycles of despair and impoverishment?

'Psychology is plagued by a chronic condition of negativity regarding human development.'

— Albert Bandura

Traditionally, the focus has been on the risk factors or negative influences of such an environment. Bandura suggests studying, as he has, the ingredients that lead the bulk of children out of their disadvantaged surroundings.

In work published in 1997, Bandura found

that the path of success was forged by families who closely monitored their children's activities and developed links with local churches and other social organizations that exposed their children to positive models.

"These social ties compensate for meager neighborhood resources and protect against a neighborhood's dangerous aspects," says Bandura. "In short, by exercising their sense of efficacy, the parents don't let their dismal environment defeat them."

Pointing to another common social ill, Bandura says prevalent theories on drug abuse and smoking focus on why people are powerless to break addiction rather than understanding why many millions are able to break free on their own. Of the 40 million people who have quit smoking, says Bandura, those that relapse "are but a tiny ripple in the vast sea of successes."

Idea gains acceptance

Bandura's self-efficacy theory is rapidly gaining interest and acceptance. His 1997 book "Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control" is going into its third printing and Bandura has been asked to speak about his theory to groups that include the Association of Applied Sports Psychology, the Association of Educational Research, and the Academy of Behavioral Medicine.

Self-efficacy is partly a natural human response to challenges, but it can also be taught. Confidence that action will yield results in one field, say at home or in relationships, doesn't mean it automatically exists in other fields, Bandura says. But there are a range of techniques that can be used to make the concept operate in new spheres, both individually and socially.

Its effectiveness is already being put to the test internationally. It is being used as a model for improving literacy in Mexico and spreading family-planning practices in Africa.