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Self-Evaluation: A Theoretical Discussion of a Critical Self-Directed Learning Subfunction

Michael K. Ponton

Dept. of Higher Education and Learning Technologies, East Texas A&M University

P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, Texas 75429, United States

E-mail: Michael.Ponton@etamu.edu

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Abstract

Self-directed learning has been defined by the International Society for Self-Directed Learning as "an intentional learning process that is created and evaluated by the learner" (www.sdlglobal.com/about-us, para. 2). The purpose of this article is to discuss self-evaluation—a subfunction of self-directed learning—via a Bandurian sociocognitive framework that recognizes the interaction between the learner's characteristics, the environment, and the learner's behaviors.

Keywords: self-directed learning, agentic learning, self-regulation, self-evaluation

1. Introduction

The functional purpose of self-directed learning (SDL) is achieving self-chosen learning goals via self-created learning activities that lead to desirable outcomes in life. Self-evaluation (SE)—a subfunction of SDL—provides diagnostic feedback in determining the extent of satisfying learning goals that influences whether or not to continue in the activity, revise the activity, or pursue a different activity; thus, SE is an essential process in deciding not only the adequacy of one's learning but also future learning endeavors. As such, an understanding of SE is critical in supporting the continued development of SDL-related theorizing.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986) provides an agentic view of human functioning that recognizes humans as purposeful, intentional beings. Though even fortuitous events are recognized to occur, humans still exert a great deal of agency in deciding how to respond to unplanned happenings (Bandura, 1982; cf. Ponton, 2025). To a very great extent, individual human trajectories are shaped via personal agency in determining and prioritizing valued outcomes followed by decisions and engagement in activities that lead to valued ends; by so doing, individuals create individual life courses.

SCT rejects both radical environmentalist explanations of human behavior that discount the role of cognition as well as radical cognitivist explanations that discount the environment. Instead, SCT proposes that human functioning must be examined through the lens of triadic reciprocal causation (TRC; Bandura, 1986; see Figure 1) that considers the interaction of the person (i.e., cognitive, affective, conative, and somatic aspects), environment (i.e., everything external to the person), and behavior. This model of reciprocal determinism is not deterministic in the sense that human functioning can be completely predictable but rather that human functioning is predicated on how these three factors interact (see Ponton & Carr's, 2012, extensive discussion of autonomous learning through the conceptual lens of TRC). The goal of theorizing is, then, to understand major interacting determinants that help explain a great deal of variance in human functioning.

Human agency has four major characteristics: forethought, intentionality, self-reaction, and self-reflection (Bandura, 2006). Using an inherent ability to symbolize (Bandura, 1986), humans ideate and compare courses of action with anticipated consequences to determine desirable paths to pursue in order to realize valued outcomes. Self-efficacy (i.e., perceived ability in a given performance; Bandura, 1997) informs activity choices as humans do not typically choose to engage in futile endeavors. Thus, foresight is enlisted to decide action that, then, can be categorized as intentional. Of course merely deciding action is not the same as actual action; hence, the agent must self-react to plans and engage in a chosen performance. The agent then evaluates the actual consequences of the performance via self-reflection and SE then shapes the agent's thinking with respect to learning and future agentic action. Note that self-reflection facilitates SE, but it is not SE per se. SE represents an evaluative process

that compares the consequences of action against adopted standards of achievement. When the action is SDL, SE describes the learner comparing learning outcomes against learning goals (i.e., SE standards), and the adoption of SE standards will be discussed as well in the proposed interactional framework.

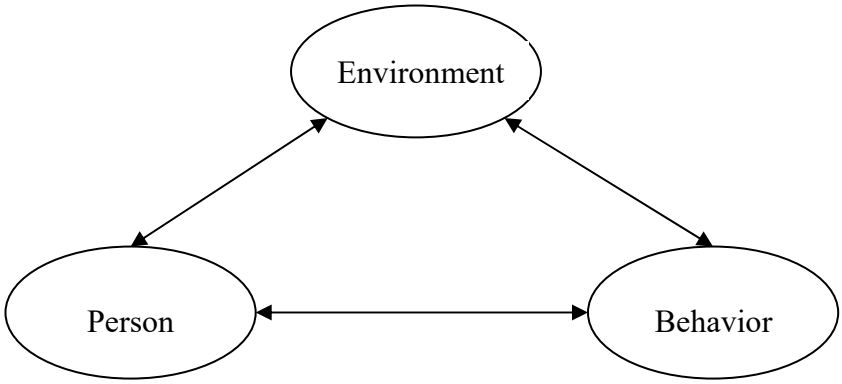

Figure 1. A Model of Three Interacting Determinants: TRC (Bandura, 1986, p. 24)

2.2 Intentional Action

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) described the relationship between cognition, affection, conation, and intentional behavior (see Figure 2). In their model, humans develop beliefs about myriad objects—an object is any focus of discernment (e.g., a person, place, tangible item, behavior, etc.)—via assigning attributes to them (cognition) that coalesce into an attitude regarding such objects (affection) based upon previously developed attitudes toward the attributes (i.e., the attributes themselves serve as objects of discernment; e.g., a person may have an attitude toward the color blue based upon blue being an object with its own attributes that influences additional attitudes regarding blue objects). Attribute assignments are used to characterize and differentiate objects in addition to developing aggregate attitudes. The resultant attitude influences further object-attribute assignments in a reciprocal interplay; for example, a favorable attitude toward an object can influence further attributive assignments that support this attitude (i.e., the favorable attitude predisposes the agent to assign additional favorable attributes). Fishbein and Ajzen developed theories of reasoned action and, later, planned behavior (cf. Ajzen, 2002) that model the development of behavioral intentions (conation) from affection with resulting intentional behavior based upon motivational and control determinations by the agent. Ponton and Carr (1999) extended this simple behavioral model to a more comprehensive model of SDL that differentiates learner self-directedness (a cognitive and affective process) and SDL (a conative and behavioral process).

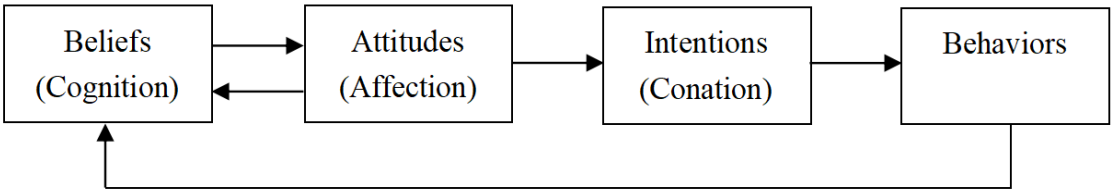

Figure 2. A Simple Behavioral Model (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1985)

2.3 SDL

Incorporating Bandura's (2006) agency theory, Ponton (2009) conceptualized autonomous learning as agentic learning that "can be manifest in imposed, selected, or created learning environments and exercised via collective, proxy, or individual agency" (p. 70; see Figure 3). SDL represents a special category of autonomous learning in which the learner exerts individual agency in creating and, thus, controlling all aspects of the learning activity. Ponton (2021) presented a teaching strategy to develop learning agency in students based upon this model of autonomous learning.

		Learning Environment		
		Created	Selected	Imposed
Mode of Agency	Collective	AL	AL	AL
	Proxy	AL	AL	AL
	Individual	SDL	AL	AL

Figure 3. Opportunities for Autonomous Learning (AL) With SDL as One Manifest Type

The conceptual framework adopted for this article is that the self-directed learner acts alone—individual agency—in exerting total control; that is, the learner chooses what and how to learn, evaluates the learning, and decides how to move forward afterward (i.e., conclude, continue, or modify the learning activity; or create a new learning activity). This definition comports with that offered by the International Society for Self-Directed Learning: "self-directed learning is an intentional learning process that is created and evaluated by the learner" (International Society for Self-Directed Learning, 2021, Self-Directed Learning section, para. 2). Ponton (2022) asserted the following:

> Individual control to further personal interests and accomplish self-selected goals is how the use of SDL as a mechanism for human development enables each individual to create

a unique narrative both personally and professionally. Quite simply, SDL is how people create individuality (p. 31).

2.4 Interactional Considerations

The work of Bandura (1986) and Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) support the basic premise of this article's conceptual framework: an understanding of SE can only be furthered through the lens of interactional dynamics. That is, SE is not an isolated subfunction of SDL that can be studied as an independent, cognitive appraisal of resultant learning and the adequacy of a given learning activity. Rather, SE must be discussed through the lens of interactional dynamics that reflects both the elements of TRC (Bandura, 1986) and interpersonal dynamics (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; see Figure 4). This article will discuss how several factors interact with SE in order to develop a more complete understanding of major interacting determinants that influence the appraisal process.

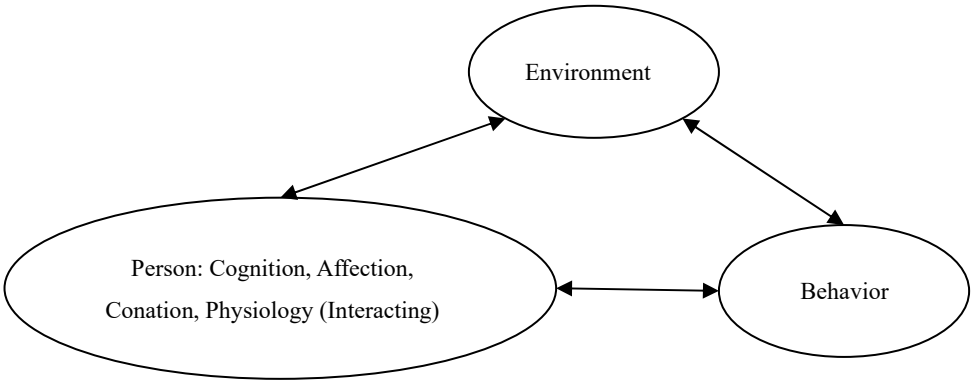

Figure 4. An Interactional Model That Includes the Models of Bandura (1986) and Fishbein and Ajzen (1975)

3. Discussion

3.1 TRC Factors

Though SE is a cognitive process, the environment and behavior—as per TRC (Bandura, 1986)—interact with SE in influential ways. Note that this discussion will address direct effects rather than mediating ones. For example, both the environment and behaviors provide efficacy information (cf. Bandura, 1997) that can influence SE (i.e., self-efficacy works as a mediating process); however, the discussion in this section will be limited to how the environment and behaviors directly influence SE.

3.1.1 Environmental Influence

The environment influences the creation of interests and learning goals of individuals. People and situations can stimulate not only personal interests in given topics but also the relative

extent of desired learning across topics. On the spectrum from very low to very high learning aspirations due to relative levels of interest, SE standards will fall on a similar spectrum from very low to very high.

Models also influence SE via adopted standards for intended learning. A learner who aspires to levels of achievement that align with exemplars will be influenced to adopt standards of learning that align with the models' achievements. When desired achievement represents excellence, high standards for SE will likely be adopted; in contrast, when aspirations are lower so are SE standards.

The environment offers varying degrees of situational and structural impediments or opportunities for learning. When impediments exist, SE standards may reflect lower aspirational levels that appropriately relate to the reduced opportunity to learn thereby avoiding dissatisfaction; however, when facilitative opportunities exist, SE standards may reflect higher aspirations due to higher expectations for achievement.

Impediments and opportunities include the availability of learning resources; that is, the environment provides the learning resources required for SDL, which can be objectively vast or limited or subjectively interpreted as either. The perceived availability of resources will influence an agent's expectation of potential learning, and this expectation will influence SE. In an extreme case of very limited learning resources, a learner's evaluative standards will likely be quite low; however, when learning resources are abundant, higher SE standards may be adopted. Using a sociocognitive framework, Ponton and Dondlinger (2022) provided an extensive discussion of learning resource selection via subjective determinations.

Humans engage in many learning activities directed by others. In developed countries, such learning is manifest in formal education (i.e., learning from the direct instruction of professional teachers); in less developed countries, such learning is manifest in nonformal education (e.g., learning from the direct instruction of experienced others). Regardless of the type, direct instruction often includes an evaluative component that is also learned. Thus, when a self-directed learner engages in SE, their appraisal is influenced by evaluative processes learned via previous tuition.

The environment also provides situational demands that require given levels of learning. As examples, a broken home appliance provides value in adopting a skill standard for a homeowner to learn the associated repair, and a student's question provides value in adopting a knowledge standard for a teacher to learn what is required to provide an adequate response. In both examples, SE by the homeowner and teacher is influenced by a need created in the environment for an adopted standard of learning.

Note that the environmental influence is still subject to interactional dynamics. In this regard, individuals with disparate knowledge, attitudes, values, interests, etc. are influenced differentially by environmental factors; that is, even when people are in similar environments, they are influenced differently by similar environmental cues. As examples, (a) if two people watch the same program on Egyptian pyramids, one may be interested in learning more whereas the other may not; (b) one person may choose Mother Teresa as a model whereas

another chooses Adolf Hitler; and (c) a broken water pipe leads one person to learn how to fix it whereas another chooses to hire a plumber. TRC-related interactional dynamics discounts prescriptive one-way determinism, and this interpretive framework should be used when considering all ensuing discussion.

3.1.2 Behavioral Influence

After SE standards have been adopted, the inability of a chosen learning activity to further learning goals can influence such standards. For example, if a learning resource is chosen to achieve a desired level of learning but the learner has difficulty understanding the information contained within, it would be futile to adhere to a previously-defined standard of learning. A change in SE standard is a likely response if the learning resource is unchanged.

In contrast, perceived satisfactory advancement toward learning goals can also influence SE. Much human advancement is based upon the development of challenging goals that provide motivation (Locke & Latham, 1990); the motivation arises from the anticipated self-satisfaction of goal accomplishment (cf. Bandura, 1997). To further maximize motivation, goals must also be specific (Locke & Latham, 1990) so that SE can provide a diagnostic mechanism of achievement; that is, an adequate comparison of current and desired future states. When a learner perceives satisfactory levels of development (i.e., learning goals are being adequately approached), loftier goals may be adopted with concomitant higher standards set for SE.

While distal goals provide long-term directions for effort, proximal subgoals provide short-term indicants of progress toward distal goals; thus, the adoption of subgoals is important to maximize motivation as well as strengthen self-percepts of efficacy to accomplish distal pursuits (Bandura, 1997). In addition, when a distal goal requires enormous time and energy and extends far into the future, challenging subgoals that represent significant achievement must be adopted regularly so that the distal goal is realized in a timely fashion. To maximize motivation toward the distal goal, people often reward themselves with self-incentives contingent upon the accomplishment of proximal standards; thus, the creation and award of contingent self-incentives influences the creation of proximal SE standards that represent challenging—hence motivating—levels of achievement. Interestingly, the control of self-incentives rests with the agent; that is, the agent can give them self the reward at any time (Bandura, 1986). Thus, making the award of self-incentives contingent upon a given level of accomplishment is an exercise of Rosenbaum's (1989) reformative self-control subfunction of delay of immediate gratification.

3.2 Interpersonal Factors

Factors related to the learner them self also interact with SE. Cognitive, affective, conative, and somatic interpersonal factors can influence adopted SE standards, persistence, and hence ultimate levels of achievement. As such, interactions between interpersonal factors and SE must be considered.

3.2.1 Cognition

A learner's perceived ability to learn via considered SDL activities (i.e., self-efficacy; Bandura, 1997)—that is, learning activities from which one has yet to be chosen but are being considered for selection—is a cognition in which the object is the learner and the attribute is a level of perceived ability. The level of perceived ability (i.e., self-efficacy strength) is informed by several factors extensively discussed by Bandura (1997): mastery experiences (i.e., successes and failures of similar activities and the perceived causes of either), verbal persuasion (i.e., the influence of others whose opinions are valued), vicarious experiences (i.e., the perceived abilities of similar others), and physiological/emotive arousals (i.e., somatic feedback as a consequence of engaging in similar activities and their perceived causes). A strong sense of efficacy leads to choosing an SDL activity that coincides with challenging SE standards, which are typically attainable due to the enhanced effort and persistence exercised due to a high sense of personal capability. A weak sense of efficacy may not only lead to less challenging SE standards but also less perseverance if desired learning becomes difficult.

Another cognitive appraisal focuses on the learner as the object and extant levels of knowledge or skills as the attribute. In this regard, extant knowledge can influence SE standards for acquiring new knowledge. In addition, the appraisal of available learning resources and their correspondence with existing personal knowledge can also influence SE standards. For example, a learner who is new to a given topic with access to an advanced text may set a low standard of learning from this resource due to the anticipation that presented content will be too difficult to comprehend. Of course in contrast, an expert in a topic who has access to an introductory text may also set a low standard of learning from this resource for a very different reason: the resource is anticipated to offer very little, if any, new knowledge.

The consequences of one's learning also influences SE. As learning is a continual process during a learning activity, cognized indicants of achievement not only in comparison to adopted goals but also with respect to expended effort and rate of learning provide feedback that can influence whether or not desired learning goals (distal or proximal) are maintained or modified. Even in activities that are chosen without the specific goal of learning, perseverance in overcoming failures is greatly related to self-efficacy to learn the given performance rather than merely self-efficacy in the performance itself (Ponton et al., 2014). Note that cognitive interpretations of effort expenditure and rate of development coupled with concomitant physiological or emotive arousals affect continued efficacy appraisals with such interpretations influenced by existing self-efficacy levels. For example, a strong sense of efficacy to learn supports a dynamic concept of ability (i.e., ability can be acquired); as Weiner (1985) stated, "ability may be perceived as unstable [dynamic] if learning is possible" (p. 551). Thus, extensive effort and difficult progress are interpreted by efficacious persons as indicants of expanding capability that further strengthen efficacy with associated arousals as temporary stressors (Bandura, 1997). A weak sense of efficacy to learn is exacerbated by a static concept of ability (i.e., ability is fixed); thus, extensive effort and difficult progress are interpreted by inefficacious persons as indicants of an inability to learn thereby lowering

expectations, SE standards, and persistence.

3.2.2 Affection

As already mentioned, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) characterized affection as an attitude toward a given object based upon the assignments of attributes where such attributes provide evaluative standards that facilitate differentiation between myriad objects. One object of discernment is the learner them self. Research suggests that persons who view themselves with an unfavorable attitude (e.g., due to low self-esteem, poor mood state, or depression) tend to evaluate themselves more harshly and self-disparagingly than those who view themselves in more favorable lights (cf. Bandura, 1986). In addition, those with low opinions of themselves may also create unrealistic standards of achievement that are perceived to align with more worthy others; when predictably unachieved, such lofty standards exacerbate lowly feelings of self-worth thereby furthering the influence of affective states on SE via harsh self-disapproval.

3.2.3 Conation

Conation refers to the intention to engage in an action (i.e., behavioral intention) that is purposefully chosen in order to reach a desired future state (i.e., state intention). The intention to engage in SDL—an intentional behavior (Ponton & Carr, 1999)—is created due to the learner's desire to satisfy a learning need; Knowles (1980) stated the following:

> Learning is described psychologically as a process of need-meeting and goal-striving by the learners. This is to say that individuals are motivated to engage in learning to the extent that they feel a need to learn and perceive a personal goal that learning will help to achieve; and they will invest their energy in making use of available resources (including teachers and readings) to the extent that they perceive them as being relevant to their needs and goals. (p. 56)

Note that the specific learning outcome desired by the learner influences learning goals and SE standards of achievement. There is a continuum of standards that span the spectrum from loose to rigid depending upon the intended instrumental value of the learning. As examples, a random curiosity of a topic may be adequately satisfied from reading an unvetted internet source accompanied by little effort toward long-term learning whereas a desire for expertise may require an extensive, multiyear study using highly-vetted literature with extensive, continual diagnoses of comprehension and knowledge retention. Hence, the state intention of the learning—from mere personal, subjective satisfaction to more objective standards of expertise—influences SE standards of achievement.

3.2.4 Somatic State

A person's somatic state can influence SE via adopted standards. When a learner is physically ill, cognitively impaired, or simply tired, the learner may adopt SE standards in an SDL activity to a level that better matches the self-perceived learning capacity. Whether such standards are proximal or distal may be affected by the permanency of the somatic state; that is, a temporary state may affect proximal standards whereas a permanent neurological

disorder may affect distal standards. As engaging in an SDL activity is at the complete discretion of the learner, their perceived ability to learn as affected by wellness (whether permanent or temporary) will likely influence not only performance but also adopted indicants of achievement. In this regard, the learner controls the degree to which they desire to push them self toward individually-decided development.

4. Conclusion

At its rudimentary level, SE in SDL involves a comparison between current and desired states. A classroom analogy of testing would lead to theorizing that SE is an evaluative process against objective standards created by a subject matter expert. However, SDL is fully controlled by the learner; as such, the learner them self performs the evaluation, and the learner can vary from novice to expert while being subjectively influenced by myriad factors. The previous discussion suggests that SE can only be understood in light of factors that influence not only the SE process itself but also desired levels of achievement. Such influences are related to environmental, behavioral, and interpersonal factors—consistent with SCT—with interactions that vary individually, temporally, and situationally (Bandura, 1986).

The major aim of this article was to foster the notion that self-regulatory subfunctions like SE must be studied not in isolation but in concert with other self-regulatory subfunctions. The complexity of understanding SDL in particular and human agency in general must be framed in light of interacting determinants that vary by person, time, and situation. The characteristics of an SDL activity and the motivation to engage in the activity are within the individual learner's discretion; such discretion also includes the creation of SE standards of appraisal.

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