

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) builds on Bandura's earlier Social Learning Theory (SLT), which focuses on how new behaviors can be acquired through observing the behavior of others. SCT extends SLT to emphasize the importance of cognitive processes in learning, understanding, and predicting behavior. Further, SCT emphasizes individuals as active agents in shaping their environment, capable of self-reflection and self-regulation, rather than passive reactors to their environments.

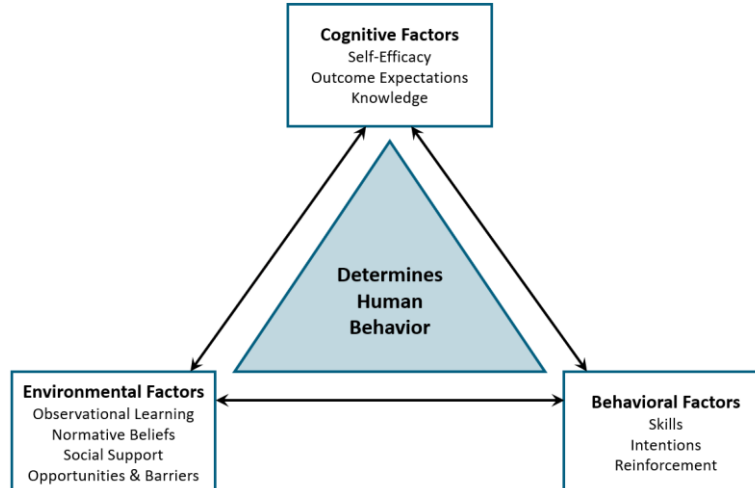
The central tenet of this theory is that learning occurs in a social context through continuous and dynamic triadic interactions between environmental, cognitive, and behavioral factors (*reciprocal determinism*). An individual's behavior is determined by a combination of these factors. SCT has been used to inform, enable, guide, and motivate people to adopt behaviors to promote health and general well-being.

Developer

Albert Bandura, 1986

Graphical Representation of Theory and Constructs

(Adapted from Kelder, Hoelscher, & Perry, 2015)



Cognitive Factors – Personal factors involving an individual's ability to process information, apply knowledge, reflect upon experiences, and self-regulate behavior.

- **Self-efficacy** – An individual's confidence in their ability to perform a behavior.
- **Outcome expectations** – An individual's ability to foresee or judge the likely consequences (positive or negative) of a behavior.
- **Knowledge** – An understanding of the risks and benefits of a behavior and the information needed to perform it.

Environmental Factors – Physical and social factors in the environment that promote, permit, or discourage individual behavior.

- **Observational learning** – Acquiring new information and behaviors by observing the behaviors of others and the consequences of others’ behaviors.
- **Normative beliefs** – Cultural norms and beliefs about the social acceptability and perceived prevalence of a behavior.
- **Social support** – Perceived encouragement and support a person receives from their social network.
- **Opportunities and barriers** – Attributes of the social or physical environment that make behaviors easy or hard to perform.

Behavioral Factors – Factors involving individual actions which enhance or compromise health or wellbeing.

- **Skills** – The abilities needed to successfully perform a behavior.
- **Intentions** – The active decision to add new or modify existing behaviors.
- **Reinforcement** – Behavior can be increased or attenuated through provision or removal of tangible or social rewards or punishments.

Application to the Precision Paradigm: Alignment of Theory Constructs with Mechanisms of Action Taxonomy

Mechanisms of Action (MoA), derived from theories of behavior, are the processes through which specific intervention techniques are expected to affect behavior. Interventions grounded in Social Cognitive Theory might include techniques to achieve specific changes in behavior by acting through any of these MoAs.

Aspects of constructs in **Social Cognitive Theory** correspond to the [Mechanisms of Action taxonomy](#) as follows:

Theory Construct	Corresponding Mechanism(s) of Action
Self-efficacy	Beliefs about Capabilities
Outcome Expectations	Beliefs about Consequences
Knowledge	Knowledge
Observational Learning	Social Learning/Imitation
Normative Beliefs	Norms
Social Support	Social Influences
Opportunities and Barriers	Environment & Resources
Skills	Skills
Intentions	Intentions
Reinforcement	Reinforcement

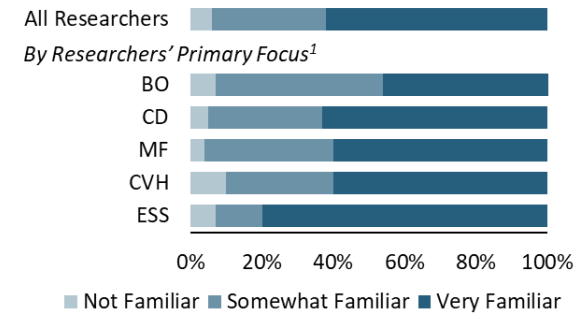
Examples of Use of Theory in Intervention Development/Research

Phelan, S., Brannen, A., Erickson, K., Diamond, M., Schaffner, A., Munoz-Christian, K., Stewart, A., Sanchez, T., Rodriguez, V. C., Ramos, D. I., McClure, L., Stinson, C., & Tate, D. F. (2015). Fit Moms/Mamas Activas’ internet-based weight control program with group support to reduce postpartum weight retention in low-income women: Study protocol for a randomized controlled trial. *Trials*, 16, 59. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-015-0573-9>

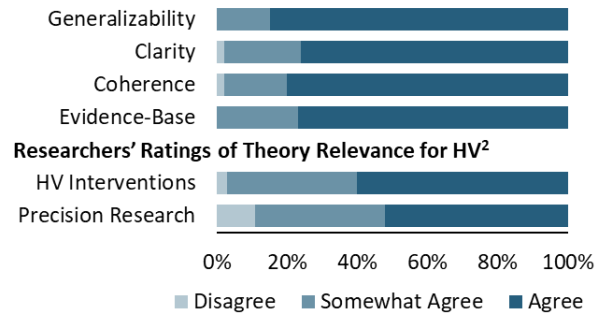
Sanders, L. M., Perrin, E. M., Yin, H. S., Bronaugh, A., Rothman, R. L., & Greenlight Study Team (2014). "Greenlight study": A controlled trial of low-literacy, early childhood obesity prevention. *Pediatrics*, 133(6), e1724–e1737. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-3867>

Key Results from Intervention Researcher Survey

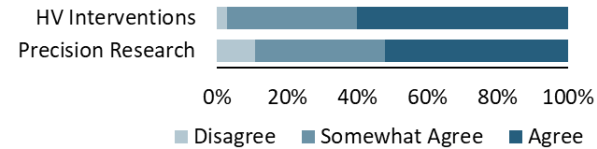
Researchers' Familiarity with the Theory



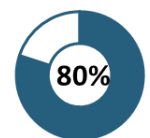
Researchers' Ratings of Theory Quality²



Researchers' Ratings of Theory Relevance for HV²



High Quality³



High Relevance⁴



¹Intervention researchers' primary or secondary area of research; BO=Birth Outcomes; CD=Child Development; MF=Maternal Psychosocial Functioning; CVH=Cardiovascular Health; ESS=Family Economic Self-Sufficiency

²Of those who indicated they were familiar with the theory. Those answering 'Not Sure' to the quality and relevance items were excluded from the denominator.

³Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to all four quality items.

⁴Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to both relevance items.

Methods for the intervention researcher survey can be found [here](#).

Theory Citations

Bandura, A., & National Institutes of Mental Health (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>

Kelder, S. H., Hoelscher, D., & Perry, C. L. (2015). How individuals, environments, and health behaviors interact: Social Cognitive Theory. In Glanz, K., Rimer, B. K., & Viswanath, K. (Eds.), *Health behavior: Theory, research, and practice* (5th ed., pp. 159-181). Jossey-Bass/Wiley.