

**Critical Analysis of an Original Writing on Social Learning  
Theory: Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models  
By: Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross and Sheila A. Ross  
(1963)**

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**ABSTRACT**

**This article provides a critical analysis of the 1963 paper by Albert Bandura and two colleagues titled *Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models*, which espoused the Social Learning paradigm as an explanation for aggression behavior. This critique of that document summarizes the foundation on which that theory is built and its classic ‘Bobo Doll’ experiment. In addition to lauding the merits of Bandura’s work, readers will learn of the shortcomings of that early study. Finally, the various areas to which the Social Learning theory can be applied will be elucidated with special emphasis on race/ethnicity, gender and age distinctions.**

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## Introduction

Daily, the news media abounds in its account of tragic misuses of human socialization. Waging wars, tactical terrorism, horrific homicides and aggressive assaults have now become a little too close for the average viewer's comfort. Given humanity's history of such atrocities, one ruefully thinks that violence would have plateaued or, at the very least, been denounced by all as repulsive and subsequently avoided. However after major onslaughts such as World War II, the Holocaust as well as the current Jihads in the Middle East that rage in Africa and Europe, the minds of academicians and laymen alike are piqued with interest about the 'how and why' of mankind's propensity aggressive behaviors.

## Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide readers with a critical analysis of the 1963 paper by Albert Bandura and two colleagues titled *Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models*, which espoused the Social Learning paradigm as an explanation for aggression behavior. This critique of that document summarizes the foundation on which that theory is built and its classic 'Bobo Doll' experiment. In addition to lauding the merits of Bandura's work, readers will learn of the shortcomings of that early study. Finally, the various areas to which the Social Learning theory can be applied will be elucidated with special emphasis on race/ethnicity, gender and age distinctions.

## History of Social Learning Theory

The answer to the question of mankind's propensity aggressive behaviors began with the prolific research and publications of Albert Bandura, a soon to be renowned neo-behaviorist. His emergence on the field of Psychology in the mid 1950s sparked insight about the genesis of aggression. Bandura's humble beginnings in a northern Canadian farming community was in no way predictive of the ongoing harvest of theoretical offshoots, behavioral intervention/management techniques and community redefinition projects that his (then novel) concept of Social Learning theory would have reaped over the years.

## Acquisition of Behavioral Repertoires

According to Bandura's postulation, individuals acquire aggressive responses using the same mechanism that they do for other complex forms of social behavior: direct experience or the observation-modeling of others. Aggression was defined by Bandura (1978) as intentional causal behavior that results in injury to a person or the destruction of property. Bandura was adamant in his assertion that a theory of aggression is only complete when it explains how aggressive patterns develop, identifies what provoked the action, and pinpoints what sustains it. He went further to advocate that forms of learning, which were previously thought to be tied to direct experiences, could also be garnered vicariously by observing the behavior of others and the ensuing consequences. It was this condensed form of learning was critical for survival and development (Bandura, 1978).

Social Learning theory is built on several assumptions: firstly aggression must be learned; secondly via observing a model the learning of actions transpires; and thirdly symbolic modeling via the media facilitates the social diffusion of ideas, values and behaviors occurs (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Hogben and Byrne (1998) concur with this and highlight the importance of the family, subculture and mass media as sources of social learning in the absence of objectively quantifiable rewards. From these learning is an inevitable outcome of behaviors that are repeated, realistically portrayed, distinct, functional and generally more salient. The element of reward is essential to the Social Learning theory of aggression. When a violent event is repeatedly met with some type of reinforcement (e. g. social approval, pleasantries, etc), the observer unwittingly ingests the situational factors at work in both the actor and the stage, then later regurgitates this when similar situations arise (Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

The etiology of aggressive and violent tendencies among youth is indeed as perplexing as it is multifaceted. Eyal & Rubin (2003) have identified three features that are essential for vicarious learning to occur under Bandura's Social Learning theory. They are the need for *homophily* (similarity between the actor and observer), *identification* (the observer being able to engage in perspective taking and share in the actor's experience), and *parasocial interaction* (a friendship/bond with the actor). However the strongest correlate to aggressive behaviors continues to be previous exposure.

## The Bobo Doll Study

The writing that serves as the premise for this critique, *Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models*, is a seminal piece in Bandura's schematic conception of vicarious learning. That article detailed the experiment known to many as the infamous "Bobo Doll study" in which he and two associates tested the hypothesis that children's observation of aggressive models would increase the likelihood that aggressive behaviors would be used during times of subsequent frustration. Findings of their previous experiments had proven that children readily

mimicked aggressive behaviors of a live model and generalized such responses to novel settings in the absence of that model. For this reason, Bandura and associates embarked on this research to see whether or not the media was as effective a transmission tool for learned aggression as were live models, and secondly to ascertain which mode of filmed aggressive portrayals (that of human models or nonhuman cartoon characters) was a more poignant facilitator of symbolic imitation (Bandura, 1963).

Despite the historicity of the piece, Bandura and associates are to be applauded for the empirical veracity and futuristic promise of their findings. Using three (3) experimental groups and a control group for 96 children, they were able to wisely control for potential intervening factors such as gender (in both the models and observers) as well as behavioral dispositions/personality of the participants. The researchers are also to be commended for clearly identifying at the onset which behaviors would be considered primarily aggressive in nature as well as imitative and non-imitative responses. Additionally, they delineated and quantified the various forms that violence can take (physical, verbal, etc) as well as the subjects' level of aggression inhibition prior to experimental exposure. With these variables under close scrutiny, this study brilliantly elucidated various factors and major principles at work in the Social Learning theory.

### **Critique of the Bobo Doll Experiment**

Admittedly though, the study falls short in its failure to address several threats to internal validity that are glaring as one reads the study. These were: selection bias, history, maturation and ambiguous temporal sequence. The subjects were selected from the nursery of Stanford University hence their parents, given the era of the study, tended to be white, upper - middle class and highly educated. On the surface, one may be tempted to overlook or dismiss this observation since the results bore out Bandura's hypothesis that film featuring human actors was most instrumental in eliciting and shaping greater aggressive imitation among the subjects. However, Bandura's theory later evolved to the "Social-*Cognitive* model of aggression" as it included highly sophisticated cognitive structures as explanatory devices for the acquisition and generalization of the observed aggression. For this reason the selection of these youngsters, sired by intellectuals, becomes an even weightier matter. Additionally, the racial and ethnic composition of the participants was never identified, yet Bandura and others have (over)generalized these findings to explain aggression and violence among minorities and lower socioeconomic communities.

Although the timeframe spanned by the research was never formally cited, by the authors' own admission, data for subjects in the real life aggression and control group conditions came from their 1961 study. This bears heavily on the threats to internal validity of history as well as maturation (of the participants). Events occurring concurrently with the experiment, in addition to those occurring naturally as a part of their aging process, could easily have been confused with observations/results of the 1963 study. Hence, one may concede to the threat of

ambiguous temporal sequence since the lack of clarification as to which variables/conditions occurred first causes confusion as per the true cause(s) and effect(s).

### **Social Learning Theory Applied**

Nevertheless, Bandura's theory of the Social Learning of aggression has proven immensely useful in understanding the variations of human aggression. Bandura's research on Social/Cognitive Learning theory has been applied to numerous social problems such as adolescent contraception, coercive sexual behavior, HIV-AIDS transmission and predatorial crime. On the premise that these behaviors may be purposively enacted without it ever having been directly reinforced, Hogben and Byrne (1998) remind us that cognitive elements work in creating expectancies about outcomes and these must be addressed since they serve as incentives and reinforcements for committing such acts.

The Social Learning theory has since evolved to focus on the cognitive activities of the observer while ingesting the message. In particular, vicarious learning from media forms (e. g. television, computers, video games, music videos, internet sites, print, radio, commercials, etc) is inexorably dependent on a series of mental processes including attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation (Bandura,1978). Proof of the role media plays in teaching aggression lies in the fact that once the ban on television was lifted in South Africa in 1975, the homicide rate increased by 130% (cited in Woods *et al*, 1998). They go on to report that one of the most salient forms of mass media indictable for provoking aggression is music videos because it is not only attention-getting but also emotive.

Intervention at the initial signs of aggressive responses at early ages should be a priority. A longitudinal study from 1960 to 1982 found that when children, who at age 8, demonstrated a positive relationship between their levels of television watching and aggression were reassessed at ages 19 and 30 those males with the highest rates of television watching at age 8 now had a significant history of aggression, alcohol use, abusive parental practices and convictions or serious crimes (cited in Rich, Woods, Goodman, Emans and DuRant, 1998). Given the underdeveloped frontal lobe of children, they are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. For this reason they are very susceptible to unwittingly adopting media portrayals as reality and generalizing those behaviors, attitudes and circumstances presented in the media (Bar-on, Broughton, Buttross, Corrigan, *et al*, 2001).

As one examines the racial and gender implications for the aggression that the media incites, it gives one cause for concern. All too often, black males are depicted as the aggressor in the media but it is at a rate that is twice the actual frequency and exceeds this group's actual representation in America's population. White females are also overrepresented as victims which can lead to desensitization among male viewers to violence against women as well as a declining sense of empowerment among women. This potential effect can be even more alarming when one considers that adolescents, who at the peak of forming their normative experiences, tend to be the major consumers of media products (Woods *et al*, 1998).

Any discourse on aggression would be incomplete without an examination of the gender differences. Petersen and Davies (1997) endorse numerous sources which assert that males and females are differentially engineered in their preparedness to learn violence which results in lower rates of aggression among women. Among the various reasons for this is the fact that a female's size and strength puts her in a position where acts of aggression are usually not reinforced with successful outcomes. Yet another is that boys and girls are socialized differently; females are reared to engage in caring/close interpersonal relationships while the male role has an inherent rough/aggressive script that must be enacted or he risks losing machismo. They further suggest that females exhibit aggression in less physical ways such as name calling, defamation, snubbing, etc. Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible and Meyer (1999) support the Peterson and Davies research and found that females rank higher on sympathy which has been proven to be an inhibitor of aggression. They further delineated sympathy into empathic concern (feeling the concern for one in need) and perspective taking (being able to understand the viewpoint of another).

Bar-on *et al* (2001) offer a plausible explanation for the continual escalation of violence even among those who previously did not demonstrate aggressive predispositions. In the wake of the media's embellishment of the prevalence of violence, society may now have fallen prey to the '*mean world syndrome*'. Arising from this phobia is the unrealistic perception that society is a dangerous place; this motivates persons to carry weapons or be the initiators of aggression before they themselves are aggressed. The recent advent of interactive video games has also been met with much concern as they offer children repetitive exposure to violent behavioral scripts with semi-realistic rewards for aggression (e. g. points, advance standing, cash, etc). Bandura's 1963 study underscores the role that reinforcement plays in increasing the learning effect. Research is still underway as per the long term effects this can have on a youth's lifetime behavioral repertoire and his/her subsequent enactments when faced with similar situations or other wise frustrated. However early evidence shows that it promotes a desensitization to the pain of others, the development of increased feelings of hostility, the expectation that others will behave aggressively, and the likelihood that one will respond to others with violence (Bar-on *et al*, 2001).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, children learn behavioral patterns and scripts which can be developed via tangible experiences or vicarious learning. The goal of this article is to highlight the immense contribution that Bandura's early work played to our understanding of how one learns aggression behaviors. Since his Bobo Doll experiment on the effects of film portrayals of aggressive for eliciting/shaping the behavior of youngsters, there has been a plethora of research in this area.

Social scientists and laymen alike are indebted to Bandura for his innovation and forethought in the development and continual refining of the social learning theory of aggression. However by reading Bandura *et al*'s original writings and those of others cited in this paper, readers have no doubt become aware that research needs to be done on imitating media

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presentations of the corollary of aggression: pro-social behaviors. One begins to wonder if there indeed too few examples of this type of behavior in the media to merit investigation or if there is an obsession with the problem rather than seeking prospective solutions.

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