

— A FIRST LOOK AT —  
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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# *Social Learning Theory*

## *of Albert Bandura*

If you've taken an introductory course in economics, you're already familiar with the policy planner's dilemma of deciding whether to allocate limited resources for guns or for butter. The problem is usually posed to illustrate the impersonal market forces of supply and demand, profit and loss. Yet planners are people, and most individuals come to the war-or-peace decision points of life having already developed preferred responses. Northwestern psychologist Donald Campbell calls these tendencies "acquired behavioral dispositions," and he suggests six ways that we learn to choose one option over another.

1. *Trial-and-error experience* is a hands-on exploration that might lead to tasting the butter and squeezing the trigger, or perhaps the other way around.
2. *Perception of the object* is a firsthand chance to look, admire, but don't touch a pistol and a pound of butter at close range.
3. *Observation of another's response to the object* is hearing a contented sigh when someone points the gun or spreads the butter on toast. It is also seeing critical frowns on faces of people who bypass the items in a store.
4. *Modeling* is watching someone fire the gun or melt the butter to put it on popcorn.
5. *Exhortation* is the National Rifle Association's plea to protect the right to bear arms or Willard Scott's commercial message urging us to use real butter.
6. *Instruction about the object* is a verbal description of the gun's effective range or of the number of calories in a pat of butter.

Campbell claims that direct trial-and-error experience creates a deep and long-lasting acquired behavioral disposition, while perception has somewhat less effect, observation of response even less, and modeling less still. Exhortation is one of the most used but least effective means to influence attitudes or actions.

Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura agrees that conversation is not an effective way of altering human behavior, but he thinks that classical learning theory's preoccupation with trial-and-error learning is shortsighted. "Coping with the demands of everyday life would be exceedingly trying if one could arrive at solutions to problems only by actually performing possible options and suffering the consequences."<sup>1</sup> His social learning theory concentrates on the power of example.

## THE SPREAD OF TV VIOLENCE THROUGH MODELING

Bandura's major premise is that we can learn by observing others. He considers vicarious experience to be the typical way that human beings change. He uses the term *modeling* to describe Campbell's two midrange processes of response acquisition (observation of another's response and modeling), and he claims that modeling can have as much impact as direct experience.

Social learning theory is a general theory of human behavior, but Bandura and people concerned with mass communication have used it specifically to explain media effects. Bandura warned that "children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling."<sup>2</sup> George Gerbner (see Chapter 29) was concerned that television violence would create a false climate of fear. Albert Bandura cautioned that TV might create a violent reality that was worth fearing.

Bandura's warning struck a responsive chord in parents and educators who feared that escalating violence on TV would transform children into bullies. Although he doesn't think this will happen without the tacit approval of those who supervise the children, Bandura regards anxiety over televised violence as legitimate. That stance caused network officials to blackball him from taking part in the 1972 *Surgeon General's Report on Violence*.<sup>3</sup> It is doubtful whether TV sets will ever bear an inscription similar to that on packs of cigarettes: "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that TV violence may turn your child into an insensitive brute." But if Bandura had been picked as a member of the research team, the report would have been more definitive in pointing out the causal link between television violence and aggressive behavior.

Consider the case of Tyler Richie, a shy 10-year-old boy who has been raised on a Saturday-morning diet of superheroes. After school he's absorbed for an hour in helping Nintendo's Mario Brothers fight their way out of danger. He then catches the last half of a *Rockford Files* rerun on a local station and sees that even mild mannered James Garner regards violence as the best option when his Pappie is in trouble. After dinner, Ty laughs at the fake fighting of roller derby and wrestling on sports cable. He then slips a cassette of *Dirty Harry* into the VCR and settles back for some hard-core violence. "Go ahead and make my day," he drawls as Clint Eastwood appears on the screen.

The combined four hours that Ty spends in front of the screen represent a

typical day for boys in his class at school. Bandura considers "gentle" Ty a likely candidate to someday clobber his sister, shoot a prowler, or use criminal force to get his own way. Social learning theory postulates three necessary stages in the causal link between television violence and actual physical harm to another: attention, retention, and motivation.

### **Attention: "I Never Thought of That Before"**

Because advertising rates are tied directly to a program's share of the market, television professionals are experts at gaining and holding attention. Practitioners are committed to the drawing power of dramatized personal injury and physical destruction. According to Bandura, televised violence will grab Ty's attention because it is simple, distinctive, prevalent, useful, and depicted positively.

1. *Simple.* There's nothing very subtle about punching someone in the face. Drawn-out negotiations and attempts at reconciliation are complicated, but even a child can understand a quick right to the jaw. In order to avoid confusion, the good guys wear white hats.
2. *Distinctive.* The characters on the screen take risks that don't fit the ordered pattern of Ty's life. That's why Action Jackson pays his own way on commercial stations, while Mr. Rogers' ten-minute sweater change requires a subsidy on public television. Prosocial behavior like sharing, sympathy, control of anger, and delayed gratification appears dull when compared with violent action sequences.
3. *Prevalent.* Bandura cites Gerbner's index of violence (see Chapter 29) to show that television portrays "the big hurt." Over 80 percent of prime-time programs contain violent acts. That figure rises to over 90 percent for weekend cartoon shows. With Nintendo sweeping America and more than half of the nation's families owning a VCR, violence on demand is easy to arrange.
4. *Useful.* Social critics decry the gratuitous violence on television, but Bandura denies that aggression is unrelated to the story line. The scenes of physical force are especially compelling because they suggest that violence is a preferred solution to human problems. Violence is presented as a strategy for life.
5. *Positive.* On every type of program, television draws in viewers by placing attractive people in front of the camera. There are very few overweight bodies or pimply faces on TV. When the winsome star roughs up a few hoods to help the lovely young woman, aggression is given a positive cast.

Using violence in the race for ratings not only draws an attentive audience, it transmits responses that we, as viewers, might never have considered before. The media expand our repertoire of behavioral options far beyond

what we would discover by trial and error and in ways more varied than we would observe in people we know. The unthinkable no longer is.

### **Retention: "I Figured Out What I Was Doing Wrong"**

Bandura says it's fortunate that people learn from vicarious observation, since mistakes could prove costly or fatal. Without putting himself at risk, Ty is able to discover that a knife fighter holds a switchblade at an inclined angle of forty-five degrees and that he jabs up rather than lunging down. Ty can pick up this bit of "street smarts" from an admired Harry or a despised Scorpio, and learning takes place whether the fictional model is rewarded or punished for his action. We hope that Ty will never have an occasion to put his knowledge into practice. It's certainly unlikely that he'll walk out of the house and immediately mimic the action he has learned; instantaneous reproduction is uncommon. In contrast to classical learning theory, Bandura says we can learn novel behavior without any practice or direct reinforcement for its consequences. The action will lie dormant, available for future use, as long as we remember it.

Memory is a cognitive function, so Bandura's theory moves beyond mere behaviorism. Like most other communication theorists, he believes that the ability to use symbols sets humans apart from the limited stimulus-response world of animals. "Humans don't just respond to stimuli, they interpret them."<sup>4</sup>

Bandura says that we store events in two ways—through visual images and through verbal codes. Ty may have a vivid picture in his mind of Clint Eastwood leveling an unswerving Colt .45 Magnum revolver. If so, repeated instant mental replays (with Ty in the role of enforcer) will ensure that he remembers how to point a gun in the future. The more he exercises the image, the stronger the memory will be in the future.

Bandura is convinced, however, that major gains in vicarious learning

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come when the observer develops a conscious awareness of the technique involved. These insights are stored verbally. Ty will take a giant step toward becoming a dead shot when he can sort out the visual image of Clint Eastwood into generalized principles:

“Hold the weapon with both hands.”

“Don’t jerk the trigger; squeeze it.”

“Aim six inches low to compensate for the recoil.”

Bandura says that learning through modeling is more a matter of abstracting rules than mimicry. It’s not simply “monkey see, monkey do.”

The entire acquisition process described by Bandura is a spectator sport. That’s why television teaches violence so well. Ty doesn’t have to actually do the aggressive behavior; fantasy rehearsal in his mind will keep the act a live option for the future. If he ever does point a gun in anger, the act of force, after years of mental role-playing, will set his acquired behavioral disposition into granite. “The highest level of observational learning is achieved by first organizing and rehearsing the modeled behavior symbolically, and then enacting it overtly.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Motivation: “Why Not Do It? It Worked Out Fine for Them”**

We observe many forms of behavior in others that we never perform ourselves. Without sufficient motivation, Ty may never imitate the violence he sees on TV. Bandura uses the term *motivation* to refer to the rewards and punishments Ty imagines will accompany his use of physical force. Would he go to jail for blowing away an enemy, remain anonymous if he dropped a brick from a highway overpass, or gain status for punching out a jerk who was hassling a friend? Note that these questions concern potential outcomes rather than sanctions already experienced. Bandura cautions that “the widely accepted dictum that behavior is governed by its consequences fares better for anticipated than for actual consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

Most reinforcement theorists recognize that Ty’s expectations for future rewards or punishment come in part from external sources such as parents, friends, and teachers. Bandura says that the effects of TV violence will be greatly diminished if a youngster’s parents punish or disapprove of aggression. He contends that unconditional love and approval merely encourage self-actualized tyrants.

Yet Ty also shares a responsibility for his own actions. The latest version of social learning theory places increasing emphasis on self-regulation. Bandura is uncomfortable with any form of determinism. He doesn’t believe that people are “buffeted by environmental stimuli,” nor does he accept the notion that they are “driven by inner forces.” He sees external and internal rewards working together in a “reciprocal determination” to influence behavior. But social learning theory focuses on *vicarious* reward as a third factor which causes acquired responses to break out into action.

Television models do more than teach novel styles of conduct. When people on television are punished for being violent, that punishment reinforces society's sanctions against acting above or outside the law. But when other characters in the story accept or applaud the use of force, that approval weakens inhibitions the viewer may have about hurting people. Producers, writers, and directors are quick to argue that action sequences end up by showing that crime doesn't pay. Armed robbers, rapists, murderers, and terrorists are brought to justice by the final fade-out. But Bandura isn't worried about the bad guys glorifying violence. It's the aggression of the good guys that troubles him. Crime may not pay on television, but physical force does.

Consider the potential encouragement of violence offered by the 1989 motion picture *Batman*. In the first week of its release in the United States, over 10 million patrons watched the Joker's creative sadism amid squeals of delight in the theaters. While the average young male in the audience might have difficulty identifying with the bizarre Jack Nicholson, Michael Keaton looked like Everyman in his low-key portrayal of the wealthy young avenger. The producer, Jon Peters, wanted a story line that would provide "a great opportunity to have this guy kick some ass,"<sup>7</sup> which *Batman* does. In the end, Bruce Wayne gets the satisfaction of avenging his parents' murder, praise from the grateful mayor of the city, and the adoration of the adorable Kim Basinger. These vicarious rewards would seem to justify almost any vigilante action. The filmmakers would claim that *Batman* is mere fantasy; Bandura would probably call it an effective classroom for life.

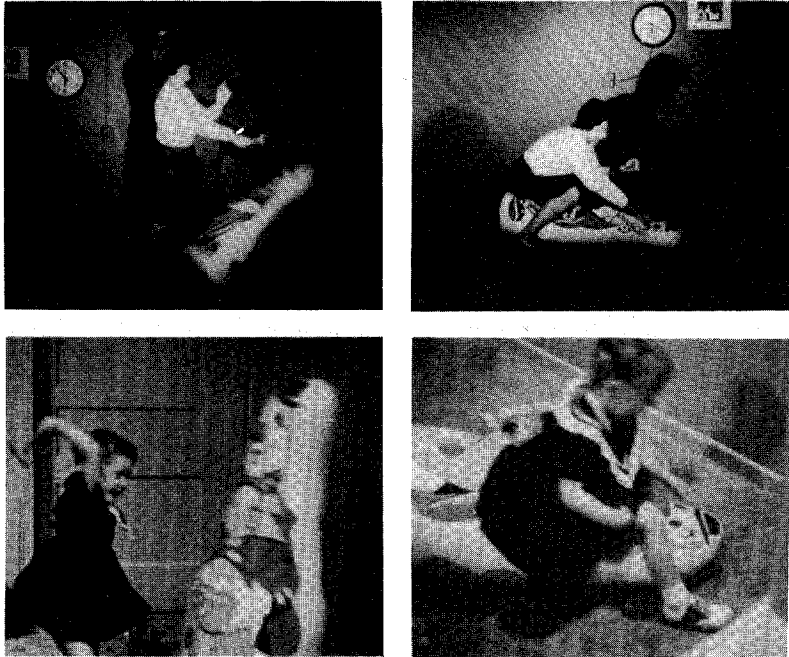
## "YOU BIG BULLY, QUIT PICKING ON THAT CLOWN"

Bandura and his students ran a series of experiments to study social learning of aggression through television. He used a three-foot-high inflated plastic Bobo doll as the potential victim. The clown figure had a heavy sand base that made it pop back up after being knocked down. Nursery school boys and girls saw a film in which an adult male or female model assaulted the clown. The kids themselves then had a chance to "play" with the Bobo doll without adult supervision.

Figure 31.1 shows two of the attacks the female model performed, with typical matching behavior of a girl who saw the film. Since children in the control group didn't normally say and do these things, the experiment demonstrated that the youngsters had acquired the new, aggressive behavior by watching the film.

Some children saw a version in which the adult model was rewarded with candy, soda pop, and praise for being a "strong champion." Others heard the model scolded: "Hey there, you big bully, you quit picking on that clown." As the adult retreated, he or she tripped and fell, and then received a humiliating spanking with a rolled up magazine.

Consistent with social learning theory, Bandura found that children ex-



**FIGURE 31.1**

Child's Imitation of Adult Aggressive Behavior as Observed on Film (From Bandura, Ross, and Ross, "Imitations of Aggressive Film-Mediated Models.")

hibited more aggression when the adult models were rewarded for their attack on the Bobo doll than when they were punished. Yet given enough inducement by the experimenter, most children were able to copy the hostile actions. Bandura concludes that reinforcement doesn't affect the learning of novel responses, but it does "determine whether or not observationally acquired competencies will be put into use." He discovered that the same antisocial learning took place when the aggressor was a cartoon character (Herman the Cat), rather than a human model. In other studies he discovered that removal of restraint is greatest for boys when the model is male and greatest for girls when the model is female. Consistent with traditional gender-based roles, boys were more violent than girls.

## AROUSAL OR DRAINED: TWO ALTERNATIVES TO IMITATION

Although Bandura discusses television violence in terms of modeling, there are alternative interpretations of the effect that dramatized aggression has on an audience. Dolf Zillmann and other instigation theorists agree with Bandura that viewers are aroused when they see simulated violence on the screen.<sup>8</sup> But arousal researchers note that people also get excited watching suspense, comedy, or sexy bedroom scenes. If a viewer turns on the set

feeling somewhat angry, the emotions these programs stir up can fuel a full-blown hatred that may spill over into physical aggression. According to instigation theorists, it's the *arousal* in the violent programs that stimulates aggression, not the imitation processes Bandura emphasizes. Instigation is an idea which sounds plausible, but an appeal to arousal fails to explain how viewers learn new techniques. Nor can it account for a violent action breaking out years after it was modeled on television.

Favored by media apologists, catharsis theory, on the other hand, suggests that the depiction of physical force actually reduces aggression.<sup>9</sup> The theory maintains that many viewers are filled with pent-up anger, hostility, and tension. Like excess steam vented from a boiler, these destructive impulses are safely drained off through exposure to fantasy violence. (The catharsis theory sees Rambo and psychiatric counselors as serving the same function.) The notion that violent drama can be healthy traces back to Aristotle's belief that Greek tragedy served to purge feelings of grief and fear. The problem with the catharsis claim is that there is no evidence to support it. Most efforts to demonstrate that a heavy dose of televised violence reduces aggression end up showing the opposite. People may *feel* better, but they *get* worse.

### CRITIQUE: A POSITIVE, BUT WEAK, CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP

Bandura states that "theories must demonstrate predictive power." Social learning theory's claim that fantasy violence teaches and encourages real aggression tests out splendidly in the laboratory, where other factors can be held constant, but only passably in the field. One ten-year study tracked 460 third-grade boys until they were 19 years old.<sup>10</sup> The young men in the study who had watched a great amount of televised violence as children were more aggressive than those who had been occasional viewers. However, those who were more aggressive as kids showed no tendency to watch more televised violence when they grew up. The twin findings support Bandura's claim that fantasy aggression leads to the real thing. But childhood viewing habits accounted for only 10 percent of the difference in later aggression.

Although this 10 percent figure may sound rather small, even a small effect from media violence can add up to a significant social problem when a program has an audience of 30 million people. If only 1 out of every 10,000 viewers imitates an act of violence, the fictional drama had produced at least 3,000 new victims.

Social learning theory shares the problem of almost all reinforcement theories—it doesn't predict what the learner will regard as positive. Ty may be turned off by the machismo of John Wayne ("A man's got to do what a man's got to do"), yet relish the lean intensity of Clint Eastwood. Forecasting taste is risky business. Bandura's theory is also vulnerable to the charges of Stuart Hall, which were presented in the previous chapter. Bandura's research epitomizes everything in the American media-effects tradition that

Hall disdains. Yet social learning theory is relevant to many of the crucial cultural issues Hall and other social theorists discuss.

Modeling clarifies why highly publicized suicides and drug overdoses (Marilyn Monroe, Ernest Hemingway, Janis Joplin, John Belushi) are followed by sharp upswings of self-inflicted death.<sup>11</sup> It also helps us understand why political assassinations (Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X) occur in clusters. Vicarious observation explains the spread of Gandhi's innovative tactics of militant nonviolence to racial and antiwar protest.

The theory predicts that publicizing airline hijackings and terrorist kidnappings will result in increased political violence. It implies that news coverage of urban riots will promote further disorder when it shows video clips of joyous looters rather than the human misery of a destroyed neighborhood.

Social learning theory also has useful observations about the antisocial results of pornography. Vicarious reinforcement explains how men can maintain a "rape myth" in the face of overwhelming evidence that women are angered and sickened by the mere idea of sexual assault. The pornographic portrayal of abducted females stirred to sexual ecstasy by their captors encourages men to hang on to a dehumanizing rationalization that women secretly want to be taken by force. Although sexually explicit films are used beneficially by dysfunction clinics to lower inhibitions and teach foreplay technique, Bandura warns that continuous exposure to erotic fantasy may hinder sexual satisfaction. The simulated wild passion portrayed in every encounter sets up an unreasonably high expectation that normal lovemaking can't match.

Bandura doesn't advocate tight artistic censorship or governmental controls on news reporting, but his concern with these issues shows social learning theory's usefulness in matters of death, power, and passion. Bandura doesn't claim that television is the only way people acquire behavioral dispositions. But he has established that the media are an important ingredient in the formative mix. Ty is learning today; perhaps he will be acting out tomorrow.

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Effective modeling requires *attention*, *retention*, and *motivation*. How does *cognition* play a part in each of these steps?
2. How do you respond to the claim that television doesn't promote *viewer violence* because villains are *punished* rather than *rewarded* for their cruel behavior?
3. If you were designing a further *Bobo doll study* with children, what else would you want to explore about *modeling* or *imitation*?
4. Is it possible that both Bandura's *social learning theory* and Zillmann's *excitation transfer theory* could be right at the same time?

## A SECOND LOOK

*Recommended resource:* Alexes Tan, "Social Learning of Aggression of Television," in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1986, pp. 41-55.

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*Acquired behavioral dispositions:* Donald Campbell, "Social Attitudes and Other Acquired Behavioral Dispositions," in *Psychology: A Study of a Science*, Vol. 6, S. Koch (ed.), McGraw-Hill, New York, 1963, pp. 94-172.

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*Bobo doll study:* Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Imitations of Aggressive Film-Mediated Models," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 66, 1963, pp. 3-11.

*Longitudinal study:* M. Lefkowitz, L. Eron, L. Walker, and L. Huesmann, *Growing Up to Be Violent: A Longitudinal Study of the Development of Aggression*, Pergamon, New York, 1977.

*Pornography:* James Check and Neil Malamuth, "Pornography and Sexual Aggression: A Social Learning Theory Analysis," in *Communication Yearbook 9*, Margaret McLaughlin (ed.), Sage, Beverly Hills, Calif., 1986, pp. 181-213.

- 1 Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977, p. 27.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 3 Robert Liebert and Joyce Sprafkin, "The Surgeon General's Report," *The Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth*, 3d ed., Pergamon, New York, 1988, pp. 79-107.
- 4 Bandura, p. 59.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 7 "Batmania," *Newsweek*, June 26, 1989, p. 71.
- 8 Dolf Zillmann, J. L. Hoyt, and K. D. Day, "Strength and Duration of the Effect of Aggressive, Violent, and Erotic Communications on Subsequent Aggressive Behavior," *Communication Research*, Vol. 1, 1974, pp. 286-306.
- 9 Liebert and Sprafkin, pp. 75-77.
- 10 M. Lefkowitz, L. Eron, L. Walder, and L. Huesmann, *Growing Up to Be Violent: A Longitudinal Study of the Development of Aggression*, Pergamon, New York, 1977.
- 11 See Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence*, 2d ed., Scott, Foresman, Glenview, Ill., 1988, pp. 135-143.