

EXPLANATIONS OF MEDIA INFLUENCES ON ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

'There can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behaviour, crime and violence in society.' (Eron, 1992)

Many people believe that watching aggressive content on TV or in films leads to aggressive behaviour, especially in children. This belief is enhanced by high profile media coverage of incidents such as the 1987 'Hungerford massacre'. In this, Michael Ryan murdered 16 people using a rifle having been influenced, it is claimed, by seeing the character 'Rambo' in the film *First Blood*.



The first study looking at the association between watching aggressive television and anti-social behaviour was conducted by **Bandura et al (1959)** using very young children as the participants. These researchers showed that there *was* an association between the two variables, and since 1959 literally hundreds of studies have been conducted in this area. These include laboratory experiments, field experiments, natural experiments, and longitudinal studies using correlational analysis.

Some of these studies have replicated Bandura's findings, and found a link between watching television and anti-social behaviour. For example, **Huesmann et al (2003)** studied the relationship between exposure to violent TV over the previous 15 years and levels of physical aggression in adults. This was a longitudinal study originally involving 550 children aged five to eight. The study controlled for socio-economic status, IQ, parental education and initial levels of aggressiveness. 400 of the participants were followed up in their early twenties, and their levels of aggressiveness were measured again.

The researchers found a *positive correlation* between the amount of violent television watched in childhood and how aggressive the participants were as adults. For men, this included both physical and verbal aggression. For women, the correlation was only found for verbal aggression. The researchers concluded that: '*We need to be aware that media violence can affect any child from any family.*'

However, other studies (e.g. **Charlton, 2000**) have *failed* to find an association between watching television and anti-social behaviour. Charlton studied children living on the remote island of Saint Helena, none of whom had ever seen television. Of all the 9-12-year-olds on the island, only 3.4% had behavioural problems, the lowest ever recorded for any age range anywhere in the world.

When satellite broadcasting was introduced, the islanders were able to access television, and Charlton monitored the children's behaviour. He found that pro-social behaviour, defined as helping others and playing amicably, was not only maintained since television was introduced, but had actually *improved* slightly.



Children from Saint Helena

In a *meta-analysis* of 217 studies conducted between 1957 and 1990, **Paik & Comstock (1994)** showed a highly significant association between watching television and anti-social behaviour, in adults as well as children. The most significant effects were found for pre-school children, especially boys. According to Paik and Comstock, violent media accounts for about 10% of the variance in societal violence. So, it is certainly something that needs explaining.

A large number of explanations have been proposed. In no particular order, these include the following:

- **Sponsor Effects**

- **Justification**
- **Desensitisation**
- **The Cultivation Effect**
- **Cognitive Priming**
- **Social Learning Theory (Observational Learning and Imitation)**

Note that some of the explanations account for why people behave aggressively *immediately* after watching television, but then return to 'normal' shortly afterwards (e.g. Cognitive Priming). Others are concerned with accounting for why peoples' behaviour changes over the *long-term* (e.g. Social Learning Theory and Desensitisation).

Social learning Theory as an explanation of anti-social behaviour

According to **Bandura (1965)**, aggressive behaviour is **learned**, either through **direct experience** or by **vicarious experience** (seeing others behave in a particular way). Learning by direct experience is derived from Skinner's principles of operant conditioning: if a behaviour is reinforced then it will be repeated in the future; if a behaviour is punished then it will not be repeated in the future. Learning by vicarious experience is also called **observational learning** or **modelling**. This occurs when, for example, a person sees another person behaving in a particular way and **imitates** that behaviour.



The four component processes in observational learning are:

- (1) **Attention** (A behaviour can only be learnt through observation if the observer is paying attention to the model's behaviour)
- (2) **Retention** (A behaviour can only be reproduced if it must be stored and retained in long-term memory, so that it can be retrieved later on)
- (3) **Production** (The observer must be physically or psychologically capable of producing the model's behaviour)
- (4) **Reinforcement** (The observer must *expect* to receive reinforcement for imitating the observed behaviour, so that they are motivated to producing the behaviour themselves)

SLT is supported by a study conducted by **Bandura, Ross & Ross (1963)**. Children were shown a short film in which a model behaved aggressively (both physically and verbally) towards a Bobo doll. There were three conditions:

1. **'Model-reward'**: The model was given sweets and lemonade and called a 'strong champion' after behaving aggressively towards the Bobo doll
2. **'Model-punishment'**: The model was told off for 'picking on the clown'
3. **No consequences**: Only the film of the adult behaving aggressively was seen

After seeing the film, the children were again 'mildly frustrated', and then allowed into a playroom which contained a Bobo doll and the implements the adult had used to behave aggressively towards it, along with other toys. Each child was observed for ten minutes. The results were clear cut: children in the 'model-punished' group produced significantly fewer imitative aggressive behaviours than children in the other groups. Most imitative aggression was seen in children in the 'model-rewarded' group.



Imitative aggression

Although the 'model-punished' group produced least imitative acts, Bandura found that the model's behaviour had been *acquired* by the children in that group. When *all* of the children were offered sweets for repeating the model's behaviour, there were no differences in how much imitative aggression they produced. This shows that children in the 'model-punished' group had *learned* as many aggressive acts as children in the other groups, but had not displayed them because they were not *motivated* to do so.

Bandura's experiments were laboratory-based and therefore highly controlled. However, critics have argued that because they were laboratory-based, the setting was highly artificial (it lacked *ecological validity*). Additionally, the film was only ten minutes long, and included no justification for the aggression displayed. Bandura's critics have also

pointed out that a Bobo doll is not a living person, and does not retaliate when hit. This raises the question of whether Bandura's studies actually tell us that much about the imitation of aggression towards real people.

It has also been pointed out that the sample of children all came from one University nursery, and therefore might not be representative of children in general. It was also found that some of the children claimed that they felt they were expected to behave aggressively. This raises the issue of *demand characteristics*. Finally, there are important *ethical issues* in (a) 'mildly frustrating' children, and (b) 'encouraging' them to behave aggressively.

In fact, it is unlikely that the children learned their aggressive behaviour merely from watching the film. For example, **Johnston, et al's (1977)** study showed that the children who behaved most aggressively towards the doll were also rated by their teachers and peers as being most violent generally.



Are violent children more influenced by violent media?

However, there is other research that is taken as support for SLT. For example, **Philips (1983)** examined crime statistics for the 10-day period following televised heavyweight boxing contests, and found a significant rise in the number of murders during that period. However, there was no such rise after televised American football games.

In general, though, SLT is not actually that well supported by research despite its influence in psychology. For example, **Noble (1975)** wrote that: "*In my own studies, where children watch media violence in small groups, I have rarely found more than 5% imitation after viewing.*" There is the additional problem of explaining why anti-social behaviours that are depicted in the news and other documentaries are not imitated. Indeed, in news depictions of anti-social behaviour there are few apparent consequences for the perpetrator, whilst in fictional drama the

perpetrator is usually punished. Therefore they should be more, rather than less, likely to be imitated according to SLT.

Cognitive Priming as an explanation of anti-social behaviour

Some psychologists believe that cognitive priming is a better explanation of TV's effects on antisocial behaviour. This explanation proposes that aggressive ideas in violent films and programmes can activate other aggressive thoughts in viewers through their associations in memory pathways. According to **Berkowitz (1984)**, unconscious memories of violent scenes from films are stored in memory. Immediately after seeing a violent film, the viewer is primed to respond aggressively because a network of memories involving similar (but not necessarily the same) aggression has been retrieved.

Huesmann (1982) argues that children learn 'scripts' about how to behave from observing others. 'Aggressive scripts' can be learnt from watching aggressive behaviour in the media. If children find themselves in a similar situation in real-life, they may recall aspects of the aggressive script as an appropriate way to behave. Note that priming has also been claimed to occur in media sources such as song lyrics. There is, for example, a lot of interest in the possible effects of rap lyrics on cognitive priming.

The importance of cognitive priming was demonstrated in a study by **Josephson (1987)**. Boy ice hockey players were deliberately frustrated and then shown a violent or non-violent film where an actor held a walkie-talkie. After this, the boys then played a game of ice hockey. Josephson found that the boys behaved most aggressively if they had seen the violent film and the referee in their game was holding a walkie-talkie. According to Josephson, since there were 'cues' in the violent film that mirrored aspects of their own game, these results support the idea of cognitive priming.



However, other research does not support cognitive priming theory. For example, **Goldstein (1976)** found that immediately after seeing a violent

film, men were more concerned about murder, and more punitive to those who commit murder. Although this finding is usually used as evidence against desensitisation theory (see below), it also seems to contradict cognitive priming theory.

Desensitisation Theory as an explanation of anti-social behaviour

Smith & Donnerstein's (1998) content analytic study showed that adolescents in the US view TV that is overwhelmingly anti-social in content. Indeed, it has been estimated that the average American child sees 32,000 murders, 40,000 attempted murders, and 250,000 acts of violence on television before the age of 18.



According to the 'desensitisation' explanation, under normal conditions anxiety about violence inhibits its use. However, frequent viewing of television violence causes such events to appear more commonplace, and they have less impact on us. Violence may be seen as 'normal', and we become 'desensitised' to it. Desensitised individuals may be less likely to intervene when they witness violence and be more likely to engage in violence themselves.

In one study investigating desensitisation, **Drabman & Thomas (1974)** showed eight-year-olds a violent or non-violent programme. The children then witnessed what they *thought* was a real fight between two other children (in fact it was staged). Those who saw the violent programme were much less likely than those who saw the non-violent programme to tell an adult that a fight was occurring.

There is also some physiological evidence that can be taken as support for desensitisation theory. For example, boys who are 'heavy' television watchers show lower than average physiological arousal in response to new scenes of violence. According to **Giles (2003)**, although the arousal stimulated by viewing violence is unpleasant at first, children who constantly watch violent television become used to it, and their emotional and physiological responses decline. As a result, they do not react in the same way to violent behaviour, and so are less inhibited in using it.

Interestingly, this research also indicates that desensitisation effects are stronger for males than for females.

However, in general research has failed to support the claim that the media desensitises people to violence. For example, **Belson (1978)** studied over 1,500 teenage boys and found no evidence that high exposure to television violence would desensitise them into becoming more violent. Additionally, Belson found no evidence that watching violence on television even reduced boys' *consideration* for other people or their *respect for authority*. Similarly, **Schramm et al (1961)** compared towns that did not have TV with those that did, and found that those *with* television scored higher than those *without* television in terms of their anxiety about aggression.

In fact, some research shows the exact opposite to what desensitisation theory claims. For example, and as noted previously, **Goldstein (1976)** found that immediately after seeing a violent film, men were more concerned about murder, and more punitive to those who commit murder. The fact that this finding has been replicated in four different countries indicates that it has some validity. **Cumberbatch (1997)** argues that people might get used to screen violence, but this does not mean a person will get used to violence in the real world. According to Cumberbatch, screen violence is more likely to make children 'frightened' than 'frightening'.



More frightened
than frightening?

General issues relating to all explanations

One major problem in this area is that most studies are **correlational**, and therefore can do no more than show a relationship between TV and anti-social behaviour, rather than a cause, and this therefore weakens any explanation.

It is also the case that a lot of research into anti-social behaviour in the media demonstrates a pronounced **gender bias**. Research has often focused on acts of male on male physical violence within the artificial setting of the laboratory. Moreover, most of the research has been conducted on men. This means that researchers are ignoring female viewers' responses to the characters and the situations depicted. Also, the gender bias of the sample is rarely referred to, and samples are often simply called 'college students' or 'viewers.'

Finally, much of the research into anti-social behaviour in the media is **reductionist**. Often the researchers are merely counting the number of violent acts that occur during the experimental set-up. This means that researchers are ignoring all of the other factors (cognitive and so on) that may be driving behaviour.