Social Learning Theory:
A Look at Violence and Cartoons

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For a substantial amount of time, theorists have looked at the Social Learning Theory with many different perspectives. It is not exactly clear when it became a theory, but it began with the publication of Miller and Dollard’s *Social Learning and Imitation* (1941) (Baldwin, 1973, p. 35). Since then, a lot of work has been done to help prove this theory’s parts. Much of that work has focused on the continuous debate about whether or not violence, in television specifically, promotes violence in children. Many theorists say that seeing violence on television may have a short-term effect, but most of the time does not convert a person to being permanently violent. There is good evidence for this belief.

First, it is important to know some basic facts about the Social Learning Theory (SLT). There are three paradigms (some say four) in mass communication theory. A paradigm is a way of thinking about something. The SLT falls under the third paradigm. This is called the “return to powerful” stage of media effect, which lasted approximately from the 1970’s to the 1980’s (Diels, 2008). It is placed in this category because as media keeps growing, the effect it makes on society becomes stronger.

Another significant aspect to realize is that the SLT takes the positivist perspective. This means that the concepts are based on logic and that natural regularities can be observed. It uses assumption of causality, it can explain and predict relationships, and it generalizes (Diels, 2008). The main strength of this perspective is that you can predict certain outcomes. However, the weakness of this perspective is very problematic. The SLT uses generalization; therefore it does not predict individual behavior. If a study is completed, and the results show what they were supposed to show, it is assumed that every person with a similar status will have the same end
result without being tested. Now that these details about the Social Learning Theory are known, we can take a look at the concepts behind it.

What is the Social Learning Theory?

“The Social Learning Theory focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling. Among others, Albert Bandura is considered to be the leading proponent of this theory” (Social learning theory, 1999). This theory is laid out, in many different places, as four main principles. They are important to keep in mind because they are the framework behind it. The principles are:

1) Learning may or may not result in behavior change.

2) People learn by observing other’s behavior and the outcome of that behavior.

3) Cognition plays a role in learning. Being aware and expectant of rewards and punishments can have a major effect on a person’s behavior.

4) The SLT is a bridge between the behaviorist perspective and the cognitive perspective.

The first and most significant principle states that learning may or may not result in behavior change. In other words, according to social learning theorists, a person can learn through observing someone else, but that does not mean that the behavior will be performed or imitated (Social learning theory, 1999). The example of violence in television can be used here. When a child observes a violent television program, this may not necessarily convince the child to act in a violent way.

Bandura mentions four conditions that are necessary before an individual can successfully model the behavior of someone else. The first is attention; the person must pay
attention to the model. Secondly, a person needs retention; he or she must be able to remember the behavior that has been observed. One way of increasing retention is using the technique of rehearsal. The third is motor reproduction; this is the ability to replicate the behavior that the model just demonstrated. This means that the observer has to be able to replicate the action, which can be an issue with a small child that is not adequately developed to perform certain complex physical actions. Lastly, a person needs motivation. The learner must want to demonstrate what they have learned. This can sometimes be encouraged with rewards (Social learning theory, 1999). Albert Bandura’s famous and well known Bobo doll experiment is a great example of these conditions being put to use.

Around 1962, Bandura and some of his colleagues joined together and performed an experiment with nursery school children. They divided the children according to their natural aggressive tendencies. One group observed adults behaving aggressively toward a plastic doll (the Bobo doll) with sand in its base. Another set watched a movie showing the same adults performing comparable aggressive behavior toward the doll. A third group observed a model dressed up as a cartoon cat, also behaving in the same aggressive manner toward the doll. As should always be included, there were also two control groups to be used for comparison later (Bandura, 1973, p. 74).

The results of the study showed two basic effects of modeling. First, it taught the nursery children new ways of aggressing that they had never seen before. The results also showed that this experiment reduced the inhibitions that children usually have against performing aggressive acts. The children simply believed that copying the behavior was what they were supposed to do. As they found with further analysis, the children that watched the film were just as aggressive as those who observed it in real life (Bandura, 1973, p. 75). The obvious problem
with these results is that it only used a group of children from a small area. This refers back to the issue of the positivist perspective and the fact that this type of theory tends to generalize. As soon as Bandura discovered that the children reacted violently after observing an adult model that behavior, he assumed that all or most children would react this way. Another key outcome of this study, though, is that “the children were less likely to imitate the cartoon character than the real life model (Bandura, 1973, p. 75).

Are Children More Likely To Become

Violent After Watching Violent Cartoons?

According to Bandura, “televised violence will grab a child’s attention because it is simple, distinctive, prevalent, useful, and depicted positively.” Violence is simple because almost any person can understand what a punch or a slap means. It is also very distinctive because the television characters are taking risks that would probably never be taken in the child’s world. In society today, video games are sweeping the nation. Many of the games that are produced contain some type of violence, and these games are very readily available, or prevalent. Aggression is also presented as being a way of life, and that is why it is useful. Violence is positive because of the appearance of the cast in the programs. Rarely are overweight bodies or unattractive faces put on television, therefore violence is presented in a positive way (Griffin, 1994, p. 369). Because violence is so attention-grabbing, many people have uncertainties about its effect.

Bandura warned that “children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling.” He also cautioned that television might create a violent reality that was worth fearing (Griffin, 1994, p. 368). The key word here is might. Many parents and educators fear that watching violent television will transform
children into intimidating people. However, this is not necessarily the case; they are simply jumping to conclusions.

Taking a look at the short episodes which came from a series of *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* cartoons can help with understanding the media effect of violence on children. Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner was a very popular show in its time. The episodes were very simplistic, lasting from about six to nine minutes each. The Coyote’s goal was to catch the Road Runner, and he did everything in his power to make it happen. This included using dynamite, dropping heavy objects, and many other dangerous activities. Wile E. received all of his contraptions and devices that he used from the ACME company. The funny part is, somehow the coyote cannot ever manage to actually catch the Road Runner. A scene from one of the short episodes is shown to the right.

Fig. 1. Chuck Jones, cartoon, Alexander Ross Animation & Fine Art Gallery 2006.

http://www.alexross.com/opticular.jpg

Cartoons characters, especially ones like Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner, are usually not similar at all to humans. Their actions are, most of the time, different than the actions of normal people. Therefore, children seem to be less motivated to re-create their aggressive behavior. If the child is watching a cartoon similar to the one in Figure 1, these characters are
nothing like them. This refers back to the first principle of the Social Learning Theory; that learning may or may not result in behavior change. Even though the child is seeing violence on a program, that does not necessarily mean they will attempt to act in that same aggressive manner.

The Social Learning Theory can be used to explain other media effects as well. Nonetheless, violence in television seems to be the issue that most social learning theorists like to focus on. This is a very large concern that we are dealing with in society today. Though people have their own opinions, the explanation seems to be clear. Violence on television may have a short-term effect, but most of the time does not convert a person to being permanently violent.
References


