

Critically consider research into media influences on antisocial behaviour

Perhaps the best-known explanation and research suggesting people are adversely affected by the media was put forward by Bandura (1965). According to social learning theory (SLT), aggressive behaviours are learned through vicarious reinforcement and imitation of aggressive models. It's suggested that television can shape behaviour through imitative learning. Watching models perform aggressively may increase aggressive behaviour in those viewers already motivated to aggress. Television may also teach viewers the consequences (negative or positive) of their aggression.

There's a great deal of experimental evidence to support the social learning theory explanation. Bandura *et al.*'s (1963) study into the imitation of film-mediated aggressive models showed that children who observe a model behaving aggressively towards a 'Bobo' doll subsequently behave more aggressively than those who don't see the aggressive model. Their study involved exposing three-, four- and five-year-old children to an adult model behaving aggressively towards an inflated plastic Bobo doll. Later the children were allowed to play with the doll themselves. The number of acts of imitative aggression were recorded. Bandura made the distinction between learning and performance: learning of aggressive responses (acquisition) doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be displayed in the child's behaviour (performance). Indeed, Bandura (1965) showed that when children who'd seen the model being punished for his behaviour were themselves offered rewards for behaving aggressively, they showed they'd learned the model's behaviours just as well as those who saw the behaviours being reinforced. This well-controlled experiment and the identification of specific learned responses provides good evidence for imitative learning. However, the sample characteristics were unrepresentative (only children from a university nursery) and the study has been criticised for lacking ecological validity. In addition, the study did not measure real aggression (a Bobo doll is designed to be hit) and only the short-term effects of the filmed aggression were assessed. However, it was later found that 40 per cent of a model's acts were reproduced up to eight months after one showing of a 10-minute film. The Bobo doll study has also been questioned for its ethical status, since children were encouraged to be aggressive.

Research into media influences on antisocial behaviour has mainly involved laboratory, field and natural experiments. These are designed to try to establish a causal link between watching violent TV and behaving aggressively (if indeed such a link exists). Liebert & Baron (1972) randomly assigned two groups of children to either a violent condition (where they watched a violent episode of the detective show *The Untouchables*), or a non-violent condition (where they watched an equally arousing sports event). Afterwards, during periods of play, the violent group were assessed as behaving more aggressively than the non-violent group. However, not all the violent condition children acted aggressively and aggression levels were measured quantitatively (amount), not qualitatively (type). The problem with such laboratory studies is they mostly use small and unrepresentative samples who are exposed to the type of TV programme (the independent variable) under highly contrived and unnatural viewing conditions. The measures of TV viewing and aggression tend to be so far removed from normal everyday behaviour, that it's doubtful whether such studies have any relevance to the real world (Gunter & McAleer, 1997). Such studies are therefore said to be low in ecological validity.

Field experiments tend to be more ecologically valid and involve children or teenagers being assigned to view violent or non-violent programmes for a certain period of time (days or weeks). Measures related to violence and aggression are taken during this time. To ensure that no further viewing beyond that in the experiment occurs most of these

studies have taken place in institutional settings such as schools or foster homes. In general, results tend to support the claim that children who watch violent TV are more aggressive than those who don't. Parke *et al.* (1977) tested this with Belgian and American juvenile delinquents living in low security institutions. After noting the boys' base levels of aggression, some were exposed to five commercial films involving violence over a one-week period. A control group watched five non-violent films over the same period. The former group showed significantly higher measures of aggression in certain specific categories, but other measures of aggression were restricted to those boys who were naturally more aggressive in the first place. Problems with field experiments include the fact that the setting cannot be controlled as well as laboratory experiments. One cannot be certain that the only difference between the two groups was the viewing of the violent or non-violent programmes, especially when the participants are not randomly allocated to each of the conditions. In addition, participants in such studies (juvenile delinquent males) may not be very representative of other children or adolescents in general.

In a natural experiment, the independent variable is not manipulated but naturally occurs due to fortuitous circumstances. One such study examined the effects of the introduction of television to the island of St Helena in the Atlantic (Cooper, 1994). 859 children were examined and behavioural measures recorded. There was no increase in anti-social behaviour five years after the introduction of television, but instead pro-social behaviour had actually increased. One benefit of natural experiments is that they take advantage of a naturally occurring event and as such involve no manipulation of the independent variable. However, there are many uncontrolled (confounding) variables in these natural experiments and it's therefore difficult to draw any firm conclusions about media influence on violent behaviour. Indeed, any relationship found between the introduction of television and increased levels of violence may not be causal.

Given the evidence, it would be surprising if media effects had no influence on anti-social behaviour. The effect is likely to be small, weak and affect only a small number of pre-disposed individuals. The exact explanation for this effect remain inconclusive.