

# Critical evaluation on two theories of aggression



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Aggression is a form of anti social behaviour, which shows a lack of emotion concern for the welfare of others (Baron and Richardson, 1994). There are two main social psychological theories, the Social Learning Theory and the Deindividuation Theory.

The social learning theory of Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. The theory suggests that for an individual to learn new behaviours this can only occur through direct experience. In the book, *Social Learning Theory*, Bandura (1977) states: “ Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.”

Bandura argued that individuals, most likely children, learn aggressive responses from observing others especially role models, either personally or through the media and the environment. He assured that most individuals believe aggression produces reinforcements. This is supported by Siegel (1992) who suggested that these reinforcements can be gaining financial rewards, a rise in self-esteem or receiving praise from other people. Skinner (1953) proposed that learning occurs through reinforcement. Vicarious reinforcement occurs when an individual observes the consequences of aggressive behaviour as being rewarding, for example a person achieving what they want through aggressive violent behaviour. If a child is to see this happening in a school playground, whereby a bully gets their way for

instance, the child may come to think of such anti-social behaviour as appropriate and therefore worth repeating.

Bandura (1986) went on to suggest that for social learning to take place, the child had to form mental representations of certain events in their own social environment to see possible rewards or punishments for the aggressive behaviour, alongside observational learning. In “ Deviant Behaviour: A Social Learning Approach,” Akers believed individuals learned aggressive acts through operant condition (Akers, 1977). In this process, the aggression was learnt after direct conditioning and modelling other people’s actions. He also believed that positive rewards and the avoidance of punishment encouraged aggression (Akers, 1977). The “ Bobo doll” studies by Bandura, demonstrated that children learn and imitate aggressive behaviours they have witnessed in other people. The children in Bandura’s studies observed an adult acting violently toward a Bobo doll. Afterwards, when the children received permission to play in a room with the Bobo doll, they began to imitate the aggressive actions they had previously observed. Bandura identified three basic models of observational learning. The first model involves an actual individual demonstrating a particular behaviour. The second model includes descriptions and explanations of any certain behaviour. The third model involves real or fake role models acting out behaviours in books, films, TV programs or web media.

Observational learning, also known as modelling consists of four major phases, which are influenced by the observer’s behaviour (Bandura, 1977). The first is whereby the individual pays attention and perceives the most important aspects of another’s behaviour by watching the role model with

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whom they identify. Therefore, a child would need to attend to what the model is doing and saying in order to reproduce a similar behaviour (Allen & Santrock, 1993). For example, children may be exposed to aggressive behaviour within the home and by watching the consequences; they slowly associate such behaviour as effective conduct. Hence, children learn aggressive responses largely through observation. This is followed by storing this behaviour into memory, also known as retention, for the information to be retrievable when an appropriate similar situation arises (Allen & Santrock, 1993). This is where mental representations are formed, including events from the individual's social environment. The child must be able to distinguish possible rewards or punishments expected in future outcomes, which is vital in observational learning. In the Bobo doll experiment, the children aggressively beat the doll because this information was stored in their memory. The third process is rehearsing this acquired modelled behaviour, in conjunction with possessing the physical capabilities of the behaviour observed. If a child is rewarded for their aggressive behaviour, they are more likely to repeat that same behaviour regularly. This is direct reinforcement and allows for the improvement of the behaviour. Again, in the same experiment, the children witnessed the adults being rewarded for their aggression and in turn, performed the same act to achieve the rewards. Moreover, individuals are more likely to repeat a modelled behaviour if the model is a role model or similar to them. Examples include parents or other people of the same age group or race. Albert Bandura believed aggression reinforced by family members was the most prominent source of behaviour modelling. He reports that children use the same aggressive tactics that their parents illustrate when dealing with others (Bandura, 1976). The final

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stage involves the individual being motivated to successfully repeat and reinforce this modelled behaviour with the expectation of being rewarded. Additionally, the individual will gradually gain confidence in their will to carry out aggressive behaviours, thus self-efficacy expectancies are developed.

The second theory of deindividuation originates from Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory (1895). In the book "The Crowd", he describes how an individual in the crowd is psychologically distorted. He suggests, "Within the crowd, the collective mind of the group takes possession of the individual". As a result, a member of the crowd then becomes irrational. "The individual submerged in the crowd loses self-control and becomes a mindless puppet, sometimes controlled by the crowd's leader". Hence, they are capable of performing any impulsive and emotionally charged act, however undesirable or regressive to society. Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb (1952) defined deindividuation as "...a state of affairs in a group where members do not pay attention to other individuals qua individuals and, correspondingly, the members do not feel they are being singled out by others". Festinger believed that when one becomes deindividuated, he or she merges their identity with that of the group and therefore becomes anonymous. As a result of being unidentifiable in a large group, this has the psychological outcome of reducing individuals' inner restraints, and increasing deviant behaviour that is usually inhibited. The causes of deindividuation were later extended from anonymity in groups to other factors, such as reduction in responsibility, arousal and altered consciousness influenced by drugs or alcohol (Zimbardo, 1969).

Later versions of the theory focus on the psychological process of reduced (private) self-awareness as the key element of deindividuation, such as the individual's attitudes and norms (Prentice-Dunn and Rogers, 1982). In their study, they induced a sense of reduced self-awareness by continuously instructing participants to focus their attention outwards. Conditions for external attention cues included sitting in a dimly lit room with loud music playing, verbal interaction and stimulating video games to play, to increase deindividuation amongst the participants. In the controlled condition, participants were required to focus on internal attention, by receiving the opposite i. e. no interaction and so forth. The findings showed that when required to administer electric shocks to confederates, participants who were focused on external attention cues and were more deindividuated, produced higher aggressive behaviour by delivering shocks that were more painful. The participants were made to ignore their own beliefs and self-identity, when their focus was placed on other aspects such as loud music and video games. In turn, this supports the idea that becoming less self aware, rather than just anonymity in a group, leads to deindividuation having the effect of producing aggression.

Empirical support for deindividuation theory is minimal. Zimbardo (1969) conducted a study to demonstrate the effects of deindividuation on aggression. Some of the female participants used wore oversized lab coats and hoods, and set in a dimly lit room; increasing anonymity. In contrast, those in the control group wore normal clothes, nametags and were set in a bright room, making them easily identifiable. The participants' task was to shock a confederate and findings suggested that anonymous participants

shocked longer and therefore more painfully than identifiable participants did. This gives support to the theory, as the study suggests that deindividuation or anonymity played a huge role, because when one is appearing as anonymous, they are likely to act in an aggressive approach than they would if their identity was easily available. Other research to support the deindividuation theory (Deiner et al., 1976) showed that American children who wore halloween costumes that hid their identities stole more sweets and money than those who wore costumes where they remained identifiable.

The Stanford Prison Experiment by Haney et al. (1973) illustrated how college students assigned to act out the role of guards in a mock prison, behaved very aggressively in the cruelty they showed towards those students assigned to the role of prisoners. This is largely due to the guards wearing mirrored glasses, thus rendering them anonymous, as their eyes were not visible to the prisoners. In addition, just a simple prison number identified the prisoners. The brutality posed by the guards can be explained in terms of social norms. The guards only did what they thought was expected of them, although the state of deindividuation did cause them to ignore personal beliefs and perform the expected aggressive behaviour. This is one criticism of the study, as it did not show how real guards actually behave. Hence, the findings may have no real-life validity as the study was highly controlled and the possibility of demand characteristics coming into play.

In contrast, Bandura et al. (1961) were successful in showing that children learn aggressive behaviour through observation, which is reinforced by

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rewards and discouraged by punishment (1962). Strengths of the Bobo doll studies are that they were well controlled and produced sufficient results. However, a problem with this is that the studies hold no ecological validity because of where and the manner in which they were carried out. In addition, it is possible to argue that the children also reacted aggressively to the Bobo doll as they were responding demand characteristics. The children may have known what they had to do for the experiment. Another limitation is that the Bobo doll is fictional as was unable to fight back, which could also have influenced the children's behaviour. Although the Bobo doll experiment shows that for an individual to express aggressive behaviours, observational learning has to take place, individuals may not display such behaviour due to social constraints, or fear of being punished. This means that even if an individual has learnt of an aggressive behaviour through watching someone else, he or she will not necessarily act it out, especially if it is perceived to be socially undesirable. Nonetheless, if the opportunity arises where they can demonstrate the behaviour without being punished for it, such as when they are deindividuated, then it is possible that they will behave aggressively.

The social learning theory places great emphasis on individuals, especially children, imitating observed behaviour from watching others individually, the environment, and the mass media. However, biological theorists argue that the social learning theory does not take into consideration the individual's biological state. They also state that the theory ignores individual differences in relation to genetic, brain, and learning differences (Jeffery, 1985). For example, if an individual were to observe a brutal killing, they will respond differently when compared to someone else. Biological theorists would



suggest that, heart rate and blood pressure would possibly rise, as a response made by the autonomic nervous system when in this particular circumstance. Hence, the response or behaviour acquired is also genetically inherited.

There have been many questions over whether or not violence on television causes aggressive behaviour in children. Many studies have indicated that television does not always lead to aggressive behaviour. For instance, Feshbach and R. D. Singer believed that television actually decreases the amount of aggression in children (Feshbach, 1971). They conducted a study on juvenile boys who regularly watched aggressive behaviour on TV compared to juvenile boys who were exposed to non-violent shows. Findings showed that the juvenile boys that viewed the non-violent shows were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour than those that witnessed the violent shows. This is because watching violent shows allowed the viewers to relate with the characters (Feshbach & Singer, 1971). As a result, the viewer is able to let go all aggressive thoughts and feelings through relation, causing them to be less aggressive than they would have been had they not watched a violent act. There is a theory that suggests viewing violence on television leads to a decrease in aggression, known as the Catharsis effect (Gerbner. G, Gross. L, and Melody. W. H). As television is highly influential, then positive and non-aggressive programs can aid in reducing aggression among viewers. Cooke believed “ If violence in television causes people to be more aggressive, then shouldn't the good-hearted qualities in television cause its audience to be kinder to others (Cooke, 1993.) Therefore, television can

serve as prevention if individuals focus on the positive aspects, or use violent media to channel their own personal aggressive thoughts and feelings.

In comparison, one likely reason for the minimal support for the deindividuation concept is that the theory, which is based on Le Bon's analysis of the crowd, is too simplified. According to Le Bon, collective behaviour is always irrational; the individual in the crowd loses cognitive control. Researchers argue that deindividuation settings do not account for a loss of self-identity. Instead, they alter a person from an individual identity to a collective identity as a member of the group. On the other hand, deindividuation does not always lead to aggression, for example, a person attending a peace gathering. Therefore, deindividuation leads to individuals conforming to the group norms. A meta-analysis of sixty studies on deindividuation conducted gave no results suggesting that deindividuation is the cause for increased anti-normative and disinhibited behaviour. Instead, individuals under anonymity complied more rather than less strongly with situational norms (Postmes and Spears, 1998).