

The impact of media including video games on moral development in adolescence

[Media](#)



The impact of media including video games on moral development in adolescence. I wanted to focus this topic on a specific event that happened on the 20th April 1999. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, aged 18 and 17 respectively, carried out the fifth deadliest school massacre ever recorded in United States of America. The two senior boys, who had been planning it for over a year, killed 12 students, one teacher and seriously injured 24 others. They entered Columbine High School dressed in long trench coats, dark glasses, loaded with firearms and homemade bombs. After the initially placed bombs failed to detonate, the boys decided to open fire. The first gunshot was fired at 11. 19am and the last at 12. 08pm when Harris and Klebold turned their guns on themselves and simultaneously committed suicide. The boys' intentions to kill over hundreds of students and teachers and their means of doing so were recorded with great detail, first on internet web pages and then in handwritten journals and homemade video recordings.

This event could be explained using Bandura's Social Learning Theory. These two boys who became the infamous killers at Columbine High School were interested in and very much involved in playing violent video games. At school, both boys were bullied for being outcasts - perhaps the stem of their anger but in no way a justification for their deadly behaviour. Bandura's theory could explain how the boy's obsession with video games exposed them (observation) to violence, which they then transformed (imitation) into a remedy for their revengeful anger. Vicarious reinforcement was gained through game characters being rewarded for killing people, and intrinsic reinforcement was gained through the boys wanting to redeem themselves

from their lost power. 'Revenge' is key here. They felt that at school they had received less respect than they deserved, and had been patronized, intimidated and bullied, which culminated in feelings of insignificance and worthlessness.

How Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went from being angry and depressed teenagers to mass murderers could be better understood through Social Learning Theory. The fundamental concept underlying this perspective is that all human behaviour is learnt. Bandura theorised that people learn new information and behaviours within a social context through the means of observation, imitation and modelling. In regards to this, the actions performed (of extremely low morality) by Harris and Klebold on April 20th 1999 could be due to behaviour they had acquired via observation. The most direct source of learnt violent behaviour, in this case, is exposure to violent video games. I know this is an extreme example but it is at least worthy of seeing the potential connection here. Observational learning includes the symbolic model; where real or fictional characters' behaviour in different forms of media, influences that of observers. These two boys were infatuated by and habitually played various violent video games. In one game Harris even created a customized version that included extra weapons, unlimited ammunition, helpless victims and two main characters; an eerily similar set up to the actual shootings.

The unified aim of the violent video games they were playing is to maim, wound, injure and ultimately kill as many opponents as possible. In fact, players are rewarded by doing this with game points, ego, status and power.

Harris and Klebold could have been persuaded into thinking that imitating the observed behaviour in these violent video games they too could be reinforced with such rewards. Performing extreme violence against those who they perceived had wronged them, their opponents, could have been a way to reverse the effects of their lack of social inclusion, constant social ridiculing and consequently low of self-esteem. Bandura proposes that learning happens in four stages. Attention, retention, reproduction of observed behaviour and lastly motivation. Only when all stages are consecutively followed with success is a behaviour learnt. I believe that this could be an extreme case where in fact the behaviour was learnt by succeeding in these four proposed stages. As mentioned in the book by Busmann, Huesmann, & Whittkaer, 2009, three processes that may increase the level of aggression in children/ adolescents who watch media violence are; observing role models who engage in aggressive actions, viewing aggressive actions leads to heightened level of arousal and viewing aggression affects beliefs and values. I feel like these points can all be seen in the case I have outlined here.

Especially as the idealized ' heroes' or ' models' retaliate to conflict with violence and aggression, lending itself to the idea that this is an acceptable (arguably moral) way to deal with conflict. It's so sad for me to think that for such impressionable young minds this type of aggressive/ violent behaviour becomes cognitively ' normalised' or at least rationalised, even in such oppressed circumstances. Study after study shows that long-term and repeated exposure to media violence is significantly associated with heightened levels of aggression, lower empathy for others, negatively

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correlated with pro-social behaviour, desensitization to real-world violence; all having an effect on a person's morality. Video games are made essentially for entertainment. Violent behaviour displayed on these games is not designed to be replicated in the real world.

But when considering Bandura's Social Learning Theory, if all the stages are evident then it makes a kind of sense how these two boys came to imitate such observed behaviour given their situation. It's extremely noteworthy, that the game players' violent behaviour was not only not punishment but instead glamorized and rewarded. It could be seen that, consequently, this encouraged the willingness the two bullied and thus vengeful boys' to engage in and replicate such behaviour in hope for the same rewards to be gained by them in real life. There is no pardoning for what they did.

However, in seeing it in the light of the Social Learning Theory, you could get a deeper insight into how potentially dangerous and influential violent video games can be on an individual's moral development. I'm not saying in any way, shape or form that all people who play violent video games go on to commit mass murders but if all the other ingredients are there (anger, strong feelings of revenge, weapons, potential victims), repeated exposure to the violent video games could be the final straw.