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Bandura

Claire Pollard discusses the legacy of the infamous Bobo doll experiment and considers its limitations for analysing media effects.

It began with novels, then television, and after that video games; for more than a century psychologists, academics and policy makers have sought to make a connection between popular art and culture and violent or immoral behaviours. Whenever a new form of entertainment grips society, the initial excitement ('social media is responsible for dismantling corrupt regimes') is often followed by concern ('social media gathers and sells our personal data and damages our mental health').

Albert Bandura had already been studying teen violence and aggression when he devised the Bobo doll experiment in 1961 to explore the connection between observing violence and committing acts of violence. If you watch that experiment now (and you can, on YouTube) you may well have a giggle as a smartly dressed woman kicks, hurls hammers, cusses and punches the inflatable clown-doll called Bobo. In the study she did this for about 10 minutes while nursery age children watched her. When they then put the children in the same room with the doll, of course, they did the same as the woman they had just observed.
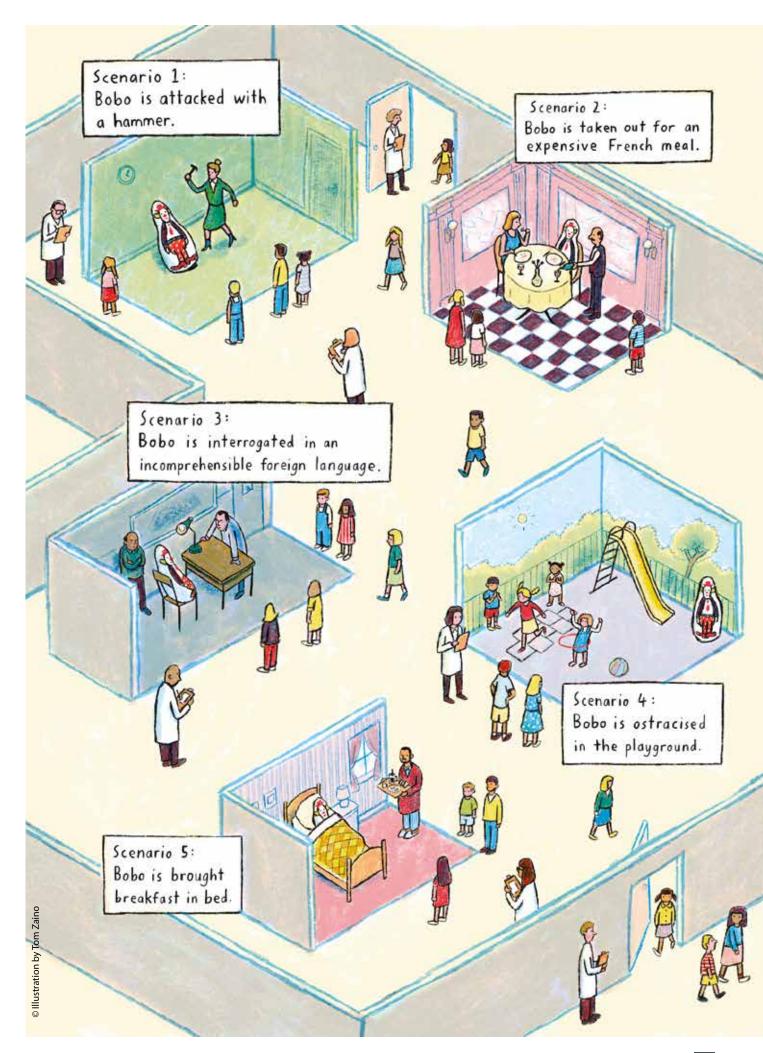
I say 'of course' because to the modern viewer, it seems entirely predictable that they would copy the 'aggressive' actions modelled to them. We all know that kids copy other people: when my friend's four-year-old son blurted out 'What the fuck!' on a pony ride, his mum shot a look at his dad and we all had a chuckle because we knew instantly where he'd heard this before. This is what Bandura called 'modelled learning'.

However, contemporaries of Bandura would argue that the reason why this seems obvious, almost laughable to us in the 21st century, is because of the influence of this study: it was the first time that anyone had proven a link between the behaviour of influential people (parents, teachers, role models celebrities) and the children who observe it. This is an idea that has been largely assimilated in Western culture and attitudes. British parents nowadays – maybe your own, for example – are way more concerned about how their actions and behaviours might cause damage to their children's personalities and emotional resilience. But for your grandparents' generation, who might have had a more 'children should be seen but not heard' approach to parenting, this was less of a worry. It's representative of an increased awareness in the modern age of the psychological impacts of various factors on people's behaviour that was made possible as a result of Bandura's seemingly silly experiment.

Two years after Bobo, Bandura carried out similar research into the effects

The algorithms used by social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok mean that when we show an interest in certain types of images or information, we are served up more and more of it in a bid to keep us on the platform.

Scenario 1:
Bobo is attacked with a hammer.

Scenario 2:
Bobo is taken out for an expensive French meal.

Scenario 3:
Bobo is interrogated in an incomprehensible foreign language.

Scenario 4:
Bobo is ostracised in the playground.

Scenario 5:
Bobo is brought breakfast in bed.

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of screen violence on the behaviour of children. These were termed 'representational effects' and, as before, the children involved in the research were later seen to be re-enacting the violence they'd witnessed on screen. Despite the fact that what they were observing was not real-world aggression, but rather representations of aggression, the outcome, in terms of their learned behaviour, was the same. This caused even more alarm among adults for the exact reason that children were seen to be transporting violent actions from an imaginary world, which they understood wasn't real, into the real world. Cue massive moral panic about the impact of screen violence on children that pretty much lasted for the next half-century.

Now I do have a couple of issues with the response to these findings. I don't deny that aggression in children is worrying: seeing a sweet girl with curly pigtails and a sailor dress go ape with a hammer on a clown IS alarming to watch. When we hear a tiny kid say something like 'I'm going to shoot you in the face' it's horrifying. But that's because as adults we understand the gravity of those threats. A 3-year-old doesn't understand what 'to kill' even means or what the consequences are of a shooting. These actions say very little about the moral character of those children. Of course, it's not out of the question that they may grow up to commit acts of violence but equally they may grow up to be carers or accountants or firefighters. We understand now that human behaviour is influenced by multiple people and factors and that one act of mimicry in a child means very little.

So why are 'effects theories' like these still so frequently quoted? Often, it's to distract from deeper societal problems. Donald Trump famously blamed violent video games for a spate of school shootings during his presidency, not the gun laws that mean disaffected and morally detached young people can access violent weapons. But also, it's because when bad things happen, people want to know why. In a 2019 study carried out by psychology professor Patrick Markey and colleagues at Villanova

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University in the US, it was discovered that in 200,000 articles about mass shootings, video games were 8 times more likely to be blamed for a school shooting when the perpetrator was white than when they were Black.

This raises several issues – not least the racism of a society that leads to such assumptions about race and violence – but also suggests that when some kind of intrinsic motivation can't be blamed, external factors are sought out. And the media is the easiest target. Of course, looking at the role of the media in shaping racist discourses about crime might be another theory drop for another time…

The whole media effects debate has also taken on a new lease of life in the age of social media. Some high profile – and deeply upsetting – cases of young people taking their own lives, or being radicalised by Islamist, incel or far-right communities and taking other people's lives have led to moral panics about the effects of social media. The algorithms used by social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok mean that when we show an interest in certain types of images or information, we are served up more and more of it in a bid to keep us on the platform: in some cases, more and more extreme content. For teenagers with body image

issues, or for those who already feel depressed or isolated from their friends, families and communities, perhaps social media can exacerbate and magnify these feelings, with terrible consequences. There's definitely an argument about media effects here, but it's a lot more complex than a simplistic interpretation of Bandura might offer.

So how do you apply Bandura in your Media Studies lessons? It is a great theory to use when practising exam questions that begin 'How far does…' or 'To what extent does…', because although most people (of all ages) would insist that they don't copy the actions and behaviours depicted in the media, the messages communicated through the media (as well as the messages communicated to us through schools, families, social groups) are bound to leave some sort of impression. You might find Gerbner's Cultivation Theory more useful: the idea that over time, through repeated exposure to ideas and messages in the media, the way we view the world becomes skewed.

And of course, it's crucial not to ignore the positive messages conveyed in the media we consume. Surely Bandura's children, had they been witnessing kindness and care towards the Bobo doll – giving him a cuddle, serving him tea and a biscuit – may well have copied that behaviour too. Bandura was concerned about the power that role models had over our behaviour but for every naked Miley Cyrus swinging on her wrecking ball, there's a Greta Thunberg berating world leaders, or a Marcus Rashford campaigning for free school meals. As long as media responsibly and accurately depict the full spectrum of human behaviours and experiences we needn't be worried about society being poisoned by its messages.

Claire Pollard is the editor of *MediaMagazine.*

Further reading

Watch the Bobo doll experiment on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmBqwWlJg8U