



## More than Bandura: Contemporary Research into Learnt Violent Behaviour

This Factsheet examines social influences on violent behaviour from a **sociocultural** perspective. The Factsheet includes examiner comments and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam style questions. Words in bold are explained in the glossary.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

- Explain violent behaviour using the sociocultural level of analysis,
- Draw on social learning theory to explain violent behaviour,
- Provide relevant examples from psychological research,
- Critically analyse psychological research,
- Link theory and research with examples from everyday life.

**Exam Hint:** Make sure you are familiar with different levels of analysis and how to apply them to topics.

### A. Introduction



Psychologists have long been interested in the role of sociocultural factors on violent behaviour. This includes influences from social and cultural norms, including gender roles, and how they are portrayed in society and in the media. Children in particular are exposed to cues from influential **models** such as peers, parents, television, and film characters. These models provide examples of behaviour that are observed and then imitated. Psychologists call this **social learning theory** and use it to explain a range of behaviours, including violent behaviour. One of the most well-known studies in this field of psychology is Albert Bandura's (1961) Bobo doll experiment. This study concluded that children learn violent behaviour through the process of observational learning, which has important implications for the effects of media violence on children. You are probably familiar with Bandura's study, but there is a wealth of more recent psychological research that applies the sociocultural level of analysis to the study of violent behaviour.

**Examiner Comment:** Candidates, on the whole, are familiar with Bandura's famous study but fail to demonstrate a wider knowledge of psychological research to support it

### B. Family Influence



Early childhood experiences provide models of behaviour that are observed, learned and imitated. Totten (2003) was interested in the influence of experiences within the family for young men who went on to behave violently towards their girlfriends. This behaviour is often referred to as domestic violence, domestic abuse, or intimate partner violence. The Canadian study examined a sample of 30 adolescent males with an average age of 15½ years. Twenty-four of the males were white and six were ethnic minority. Many identified as members of gangs. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants about their current beliefs and behaviours as well as their family histories. Researchers discovered similarities in the boy's family experiences. They described their fathers as rigid authoritarians who used violence to control their wives and children. All the boys had been exposed to violent behavior in the family and believed this was justified. In their current relationships, the boys admitted to violent beliefs and to using violent behaviour towards their girlfriends. It was also found that participants had strong masculine identities. Twenty-one of the boys admitted using physical and sexual violence against their girlfriends in order to control them. The researcher concluded that the boys interviewed identified with violent behavioural 'norms' as part of their masculine gender identity, and that they had learnt to do so from their experiences in the family.

The qualitative data gained from an interview technique provides rich insight into self-perception of violent behaviour in adolescents. However, the sample size was small and findings cannot be generalized. This study does, however, have implications for applications to strategies to reduce violence in domestic relationships and demonstrates the importance of positive male role models for young boys.

**Examiner Comment:** There is no need for candidates to provide lengthy descriptions of research methods in questions about violent behaviour. It is more important to demonstrate an understanding of the implications of the findings.

### C. Peer Influence

Early experiences provide models of behaviour that are observed, learned and imitated. If children experience violent behaviour in the family, research has shown that they are more likely to demonstrate violent behaviour as adolescents (e.g. Totten, 2003). But family members are not the only people who influence behaviour. Once children start school, they become influenced by their peer group and imitate the behaviour they observe in other children. Young children prefer to play with children whom they perceive as similar to themselves and therefore they tend to choose friends of the same gender. Research

suggests that this influences behaviour as well as **gender identity**. It has been noted, that when children begin school in the autumn term there are few differences between girls' and boys' behaviour. However, by the spring term, there are marked differences between boys and girls, and researchers have suggested that this is a result of peer influence and developing gender identity. Research suggests that girls who spend more time playing with other girls are likely to demonstrate gentle, nurturing behavior, and be more cooperative, whereas boys who spend more time playing with other boys are likely to be more active, dominant, and aggressive (Martin and Fabes, 2001). As gender differences increase, so too does a child's preference to play with same-sex peers who are perceived to be more like themselves. This further enhances gender stereotypical behaviour and beliefs, both about one's own gender and about difference between self and other.

**Exam Hint:** Assumptions about gender identity and gender specific behaviour is based on observational studies. The examiner will expect you to criticize this type of methodology in terms of its strengths and limitations.

#### D. Television



As well as influences from people in the home, school, and wider social networks, children are also influenced by the media. Researchers are interested in the effects of television viewing on children's behaviour, both short and long term. Eron and Huesmann (1986) conducted a **longitudinal** study of 800 eight-year-old children. They recorded the number of hours of television the children watched and gathered information from teachers about their behaviour at school. Participants were re-visited at the ages of nineteen and thirty. Researchers found that those children who watched the most television as eight-year-olds were more likely to demonstrate violent or antisocial behaviour aged nineteen. At the age of thirty, those who watched the most television as children were more likely to have been arrested for criminal behaviour. Later research suggests that being an aggressive child does not predict more violent television viewing as an adolescent. This supports the causal relationship between viewing television violence and later acts of aggression, rather than the other way around.

number of hours reviewing television as a child	+	type of television viewed as a child	=	tendency towards antisocial and or violent behaviour during adolescence and adulthood
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While the research conducted by Eron and Huesmann (1986) does appear to demonstrate a link between television viewing and later acts of violent behaviour, it does not take into consideration **extraneous variables** such as environmental and genetic factors. Nor does it consider the type of television viewed, merely the amount. However, this and similar studies initiated a report by the National Institute of Mental Health which highlighted the effects on children of viewing violence on television, including:

- Increased likelihood to behave in an aggressive or harmful way,
- Reduced sensitivity to suffering caused by violence in the real world,
- Increased anxiety and fear.

**Exam Hint:** If you are asked to discuss the sociocultural explanation of violent behaviour with reference to relevant research, the examiner will be looking for links between theory, behavior, and research. If any one of those three areas is missing, you will only gain basic marks.

#### E. Computer Games



Following a spate of highly publicized school killings by young men in the American states of Kentucky, Arkansas, and Colorado, researchers suggested that there might be a link between the habitual use of violent computer games and increased acts of violent behaviour. In each of these incidents, the perpetrators were found to be habitual players of violent computer games. Anderson and Bushman (2002), two psychologists at Iowa State University, conducted a **meta-analysis** of existing research literature on computer game violence. They reviewed both experimental and non-experimental data of male and female users of violent computer games. The research found that exposure to violent games increased physiological arousal and violent behaviour. It is suggested that violent media provides a model of behaviour that is observed and imitated. In effect, players learn to be violent through increased arousal and an aggressive mental **affect**. In turn, their behaviour becomes increasingly aggressive and their **prosocial** behaviour is decreased.

Long-term effects of habitual violent game playing also involves social learning. It is suggested that day-to-day observations of and interactions with other people in reality, such as peers and family members, as well as fantasy figures, such as media and game characters, influence learnt behaviour. As such, each violent media episode is essentially one more learning experience. As these experiences are repeated they become rehearsed, internalised, and difficult to change.



The American Psychological Association (APA) task force conducted a review of more than 300 studies into the effects of violent computer games that had been published between 2005 and 2013. They highlighted that much of the research failed to identify gender differences in behaviour and also ignored the impact on children under the age of ten years. In part, this could be because the games under scrutiny are classified as 18+ and there has been a reluctance to acknowledge habitual use in children under 10. Of note, most games are exempt from classification by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) unless they depict human sexual activity, human genital organs, or gross acts of violence. The APA review does, however, support the conclusion that violent computer are linked with antisocial behaviours including:

- Increased aggressive cognitions and emotional affect,
- Increased violent behaviour,
- Decreased prosocial behaviour,
- Decreased sensitivity to real world violence,
- Decreased empathy.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to infer cause and effect from studies such as those described. The findings might appear compelling; that there is a link between computer game violence and violent behaviour. However, not all children who habitually play violent games are violent, and not all violent people play violent games. The best we can say is that there is a correlation between the two but that other variables, such as real world experiences with family and peers, are also risk factors in the development of violent behaviour.

**Examiner Comment:** While candidates are encouraged to apply their knowledge to everyday life, care should be taken not to rely too heavily on **anecdotal** evidence at the expense of **empirical** evidence.

## F. Conclusion

Findings from empirical studies, as well as anecdotal observations, support the role of sociocultural factors in violent behaviour. This includes influences from family experiences, peer relationships, and gender roles. Research also supports media influences and suggests that habitual television viewing and computer games are risk factors for violent behaviour. Organizations that support perpetrators and victims of violence, as well as those with an interest in mental health, have suggested a list of risk factors that increase the tendency towards violent behaviour. Programmes set up to reduce violent behaviour and improve mental health aim to reduce these risk factors. These are:



- Male gender identity,
- Exposure to violence in the family home,
- Unstable family relationships,
- Previous experiences of violence,
- Habitual use of violent computer games and/or violent film or television.

## Glossary

**Affect:** Emotional feelings/expressions observable by psychologists.

**Anecdotal:** Evidence based on subjective opinion, experience, and/or hearsay.

**Empirical:** Evidence based on research findings.

**Extraneous variables:** Factors not controlled for that can influence the findings.

**Gender identity:** Sense of being male or female.

**Longitudinal:** Study that takes place over a period of time, often many years.

**Meta-analysis:** Method that involves the examination of existing data from previous research studies.

**Model:** Person who provides an example of behaviour that is observed and then imitated.

**Prosocial:** Behaviour that promotes social relationships, opposite of antisocial.

**Social learning theory:** Behaviourist explanation of behaviour.

**Sociocultural:** Level of psychological analysis that considers the role of social and cultural norms.

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### Worksheet: More than Bandura: Contemporary Research into Learnt Violent Behaviour

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Outline social learning theory with reference to one relevant study.

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2. Explain the link between gender identity and violent behaviour in adolescent boys, with reference to relevant research.

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3. With reference to research, explain the effects of children’s television viewing on adolescent behaviour.

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4. Outline the behaviours that have been associated with the habitual use of violent computer games.

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5. Research suggests that violent behaviour can be learned from family and peer interactions and from the media. How can these findings be used to inform strategies to decrease violent behaviour?

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