

Albert Bandura Lecture—Bing Distinguished Lecture Series “The Power of Social Modeling: The Effects of Television Violence”

by Christine Van De Velde, writer and former Bing parent

Upon meeting Snow White at Disneyland, a preschooler said to her, “You’re not Snow White, you know.” “Why do you say that?” asked Snow White. “Well,” the child replied, “if you were real, you’d be a cartoon.” Such is the power of the media in shaping children’s images of reality.

That power and its effects were the subject of a presentation by Dr. Albert Bandura, David Starr Jordan Professor of Social Sciences in Psychology, at the annual Bing Nursery School Distinguished Lecture Series, held on May 27 in Jordan Hall. Almost forty years ago, Dr. Bandura became a regular commuter to Washington, D.C., testifying in Congress about the effects of televised violence on children.

In the famous “Bobo Doll” experiments, Bandura had shown that children, when exposed to televised violence, exhibited the aggressive behavior they had observed—hitting, kicking, and using hostile language. Believe it or not, this was considered heretical, particularly by the television industry. Prior to that time, the

prevailing theory was that televised violence drained aggressive impulses.

But Bandura demonstrated exposure to TV violence can produce at least four effects. First, it teaches aggressive styles of conduct. Second, it weakens restraints against aggression by glamorizing violence. When good triumphs over evil violently, viewers are even more strongly influenced. Third, it habituates and desensitizes reactions to cruelty. And finally, it shapes our images of reality; for example, only 10% of major crimes in society are violent, but on TV, 77% of major crimes are violent, which has the effect of making people more fearful of becoming crime victims. “Children and adults today have unlimited opportunities to learn the whole gamut of homicidal conduct from TV within the comfort of their homes,” notes Bandura.

So, once again, in the wake of the Littleton, Colorado, tragedy, Bandura is commuting to Washington, D.C. to talk about violent role models and their effect on children’s behavior. As he noted in his lecture, events

such as those that occurred in Littleton, have created a paradox. The fear of violence is rising while, for the last seven years, crime rates have been falling. This, however, is not as irrational as it appears. According to Bandura, there are three properties of violence that instill widespread fear and all three were present in the Colorado incident.

First, there is unpredictability, no forewarning when or where violence might occur. The second property is the gravity of the consequences; individuals are unwilling to risk being killed, raped or having their child abducted, even if the probability is extremely low. Finally, there is the property of uncontrollability, a perceived helplessness to exert control. When these properties are present, a single incident can mar the quality of life in communities.

Bandura explained that historically there have been three explanations for aggression. The “Instinct” theory asserts that people are by nature aggressive. There is no evidence of this, according to Bandura. In fact, there is further historical

evidence that societies change; for example, Sweden, which evolved from an aggressive, fighting society to a pacific one. This theory, however, has popular appeal, because it removes the onus of responsibility from people for their inhumanities to each other.

The "Drive" theory holds that frustration causes aggression. This theory is widely accepted even though research findings dispute it, says Bandura. Frustration produces all kinds of reactions.

Finally, "Social Cognitive" theory posits that aversive experiences produce distress, causing emotional arousal and resulting in aggression. Bandura notes, however, that people don't have to be distressed to aggress. Much human aggression is prompted by the material and social benefits anticipated for that type of behavior. Distress actually prompts all kinds of behavior, depending on how a person has learned to deal with stress, and most people marshal their resources to overcome the source of distress.

The fact is that there is no single cause of aggression. Violent acts are a product of a constellation of factors, such that a change in any one factor can result in the event not occurring. Therefore, if Eric Harris had been accepted into the Marines, the Columbine High School shooting would not have

occurred. To assign an average weight to one particular influence, such as violence on television or video games or current gun laws, reminds Bandura of the non-swimming statistician who drowned while crossing a river that averaged two feet in depth.

What one can be sure of, though, is that when a violent event occurs that stirs the public, the TV networks will run their "dog and pony show." Television industry spokespeople divert attention from the contributory influence of television and shift the blame to others "by invoking and flogging a single-cause theory of violence that no one really propounds," says Bandura. In what he terms their "self-exonerating sermonettes," it's not easy access to weapons, but lax enforcement of existing gun laws and it's not TV or interactive media, but detached and deficient parenting." As a result, since no one is at fault, they all get off scot-free. Sound familiar?

In addition, sensationalistic coverage of violent crimes tends to encourage imitative acts. In a television drama, titled "The Doomsday Flight," an extortionist threatened airline officials with an altitude-sensitive bomb that would explode if the airplane descended below 5,000 feet. Of course, the pilot outwitted the extortionists by landing at an airport above 5,000 feet. Following the broadcast, there was an eight-

fold increase in extortion attempts using threats of altitude-sensitive bombs. As the program was re-run in the United States and abroad, the same pattern occurred; as a result, Qantas Airlines paid \$560,000 to one extortionist and Western Airlines \$25,000 to another. Adults, obviously, are equally influenced by modeling. "These criminal acts would not have occurred if it were not for the televised influence," notes Bandura. Of course, in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings, we have experienced threats and actual bombings by students who felt they had been marginalized and disparaged, as a way of settling interpersonal grievances. Such copy cat incidences continue, according to Bandura, "until the modeled style of conduct fades from public consciousness." This, of course, cannot occur until the "dog and pony show" ends.

One of the questions frequently asked in the wake of the Littleton tragedy is how two seemingly "normal" boys could have committed such an act. As a result of his work on violent role models, Bandura began looking at that question. "Most violent acts and large-scale inhumanities are perpetrated by people who, in other areas of their life and in other circumstances, are quite considerate in their behavior," notes Bandura. "They inflict inhumanities on others by selec-

tively disengaging moral self-sanctions from their injurious conduct.” According to Bandura, a “mechanism of moral disengagement” occurs. He identified tactics such as euphemistic labeling (the TV industry calling violence “action and adventure,”) which lead to the minimizing of consequences (violence is a catharsis for kids), and result in a displacement of responsibility (we’re not personally responsible, society is sick.)

“Moral control,” notes Bandura, “functions most strongly when people acknowledge that they are contributors to harmful outcomes.” His interest in this idea caused him to re-direct his research to look at “efficacy beliefs.” As human beings we must believe that our actions can produce desired effects, or there is little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulties. This core belief that one has that power plays a pivotal role in many areas of life. For example, children’s beliefs in academic efficacy determine their interests, motivation and accomplishments, and efficacy beliefs have equally important roles in such areas as workplace productivity and individuals’ health habits.

Bandura is currently researching efficacy in tandem with “pro-social” modeling. “Pro-social” modeling, for example, tempers aggressiveness; restrained news

coverage of violent events does not result in copycat violence. Positive modeling can also foster cooperativeness, empathy, sharing, a panoply of positive behavior. In fact, in another study, Bandura demonstrated the therapeutic power of modeling in overcoming phobias. Working with young children at Bing who were phobic about dogs, he found that the combination of modeling coping strategies and carefully guided mastery experiences was an unusually powerful treatment. This therapy is now the treatment of choice for anxiety and phobic reactions.

Events such as those in Littleton cannot be prevented, says Bandura, but we can work toward reducing their likelihood. What he would like to see is each cultural subsystem take some responsibility for their part in violent events—TV, interactive media, the gun industry, parents. In the case of television, he believes strongly that the goal should be to create better programming, not to restrict material on television. But we need a much greater public commitment to this for it to happen. “Electronic media can be used to bring out the best in us or to bring out the worst in us,” says Bandura. “The tragedy is not only in violence, but in forfeiting the use of this powerful medium for human betterment and enlightenment.”