

The Merits, Limitations, and Modifications of Applying Bandura's Social Learning Theory to Understanding African American Children's Exposure to Violence

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Abstract

The goal of this review of the empirical literature is to investigate the application of Social Learning Theory and make modifications in order to gain understanding African American Children's exposure to violence. African American children are exposed to violence more than any other race. Social Learning Theory holds that children learn through interactions with a variety of socializing agents. With increased violence on television, television has become a dangerous learning and socializing component that can enhance Social Learning Theory.

Keywords: Social Learning Theory, African American Children, Violence, Television

1. Introduction

According to Voisin (2007) more than any other population of children, African American children are exposed disproportionately to violence among their family members and within their community. This has been substantiated by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (USDOJ) National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) findings while more than 60% of children ages birth to 17 years of have been exposed to violence (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby & Kracke, 2009), Black youth ages 12 to 19 are exposed to crime at a significantly higher rate than their White counterparts (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012a). Previously Shakoor and Chalmers (1991) discovered of 1,035 Chicago African American youth, three of four had been witness to a stabbing, robbing or killing.

Children exposed to violence just once increase their risk for future victimization. Children exposed to violence suffer from increased levels of anxiety, aggression and conduct disorders (Finkelhor et al., 2009). They have increased sadness, troubles with teachers in school (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995), become aggressive, withdraw, appear depressed and/or have difficulty developing a sense of autonomy (Keane, 1996). These children are more likely to have increased risk of violent dating, delinquency and involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Those exposed under the age of eleven are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Davidson & Smith, 1990). Durant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens and Linder (1994) have linked exposure to community violence to an increased propensity to become involved in antisocial behavior, fighting, delinquency, use of weapons and involvement in gangs. In addition to the risk factors, exposure to violence can lead to the children learning, imitating and repeating the same behaviors they witness (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961). This imitation and repeating of behaviors can be explained through Social Learning Theory.

1.1. Social Learning Theory

According to the tenets of Social Learning Theory, behaviors are learned through interactions with the variety of socializing agents to which one is exposed. It is through these interactions where behaviors are either adapted or extinguished (Brown et al., 2005). Similarly McHale, Dotterer and Ji-Yeon (2009) find children learn from what they do in their everyday activities. It is the daily activities that influence their identity development, social relationships and abilities. It is during these activities where children begin to see and develop their own abilities and begin to identify with the leaders of the activities. According to Sellers, Cochran and Branch (2005) in order for social learning to occur there are four elements that must be present, imitation, definitions, differential associations and differential reinforcements.

The extent to which one emulates the behavior of a role model is imitation. In order for imitation to happen there must be a perceived personal relationship and a direct observation of the role model's behavior. Definitions refer to the attitude and values individuals have in regard to the morality of the law in general or an understanding of wrongfulness. This attitude may change depending on the situation or have different strengths at different points in time. Differential association refers to the influence the definitions have on another's conduct.

It is this exposure to others' definitions and behaviors that has an impact on one's own definitions and behaviors. The impact varies depending on frequency, duration and intensity of the relationship. Differential reinforcement refers to either the cost or the reward associated with a particular behavior (Sellers et al., 2005). Behaviors get adopted through reward; behaviors get maintained through reinforcement while behaviors get extinguished through punishment (Brown et al., 2005).

1.2. Violence of Children and Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Children learn social skills through their parents' child rearing practices. Children pick up on their parents' intended responses and behaviors as well as those not intended. These learning situations are often reinforced through the child's imitation of the parents' behaviors. The child rearing practices influence the child's behavior in future social situations as it what they have come to know as either the norm or acceptable behavior (Bandura & Huston, 1961). In addition, daily activities and interactions with the parents are just as important as child rearing practices as children learn through these activities and interactions. It is the activities and interactions that influence their future social relationships as again behavior is learned through the activities and interactions (McHale et al., 2009).

Therefore in terms of violence, a child can learn aggression when their parent hits them in order to teach them to be nicer to their sibling. While the parent may be intending to send the message it is important to be nice to the sibling, their unintended message is that hitting or violence is a way to get a message across. When it comes to domestic violence, Davies and Cummings (1998) find children who are exposed to domestic violence by witnessing it from their parents, end up modeling their parents' aggressive behaviors. Intended violence has the same impact and these learned behaviors continue into adulthood (Bandura & Huston, 1961). This type of learned behavior can be seen in incarcerated adults.

Studies have shown high rates of exposure of abuse among incarcerated adults. Adams (2009) found out of 16 men, currently in prison for killing their spouses, half reported being abused as children. Fifty two percent reported their fathers were highly critical towards them while 29% stated their mothers' were highly critical of them. Thirty nine percent of the men reported their fathers had been convicted of criminal behavior at one point while they were growing up. Sixty eight percent of these men who had killed their spouses reported they had witnessed violence between their parents. Findings were similar with female inmates.

Roe-Sepowitz (2007) looked at the female inmate population in a Southern United States prison. Results from surveying 147 female inmates, who were not involved in self-mutilation, showed 53.7% witnessed parental domestic violence. Physical abuse was experienced by 42.9% of the population while 63.7 experienced sexual abuse. Both the Adams and Roe-Sepowitz studies show support for the findings Bandura and Huston (1961) found that children are influenced by the aggressive behaviors of their parents. Other studies have shown the impact on imitation.

Support for the imitation of the aggressive behaviors can be found in the Bandura et al. (1961) study with 72 nursery school children. The children were exposed to three different conditions, observation of an aggressive adult, observation of an inhibited nonaggressive adult and no exposure to either model. After exposure to the adult the children were given a variety of toys to play with. The authors found that those exposed to the aggressive adult responded with a great deal of aggressive play as compared to the children exposed to the nonaggressive and control groups. The authors also concluded, boys more than girls displayed more aggressive behaviors. While this study finds a difference in sex, there are also differences in race in terms of aggressive behavior, namely crime.

Per capita the African American population commits the largest number of crimes in the United States. According to the US Census Bureau (2012) while 7,309,208 Whites committed crimes in 2009, 3,027,159 Blacks committed crimes. With 223.6 million Whites in American and 38.9 million Blacks percentage wise this comes out to 3.26% and 7.78% respectively.

2. Merits to Applying Bandura's Social Learning Theory to African American Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence

Children exposed to domestic violence have an increased impairment in their own future parenting abilities later on in life, thus increasing the susceptibility for their children to be at risk for exposure to violence (Finkelhor et al., 2009). This therefore becomes a cycle of learned behaviors that continue from one generation to the next (Windom, 1989). The cycle increases the propensity for these children to become involved other acts of violence.

There is an increased propensity for children exposed to violence to become involved in antisocial behavior, fighting, delinquency, use of weapons and involvement in gangs (Durant et al., 1994). It would therefore stand to reason based on the tenets of Social Learning Theory the cycle of exposure to violence continues from one generation to the next with the number of African American children continuing the cycle at higher rates because the incidences of exposure of abuse among African American children is higher than White children as determined by The National Center for Victims of Crime (2012a) findings that Black youth are exposed to crime at a significantly rate than their White counterparts. A difference is also seen in the domestic violence in adults.

The difference between White adults' and African American adults' domestic abuse can be seen in intimate partner victimization records. According to The National Center for Victims of Crime (2012b) African American women are more likely to be victimized by their intimate partners at a rate of 35% higher than White females. In addition African American males are more likely to be victimized by their intimate partners at a rate of 62% higher than that of White males. Differences can also be seen in the maltreatment rates of children.

In a study using data from the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)

Seldak, McPherson and Das (2010) found Black children were exposed to maltreatment at higher rates than White children in many of the categories. The authors found socioeconomic status as being the strongest predictor of maltreatment with the income of Black families not rising as much as the income of White families since the inception of the last study, the NIS-3. In addition, Black children ages 1-9 had the highest rates of homicides and burn death. Black children ages 10-19 had higher injury related deaths and homicides as compared to their White counterparts (Bernard, Paulozzi & Wallace, 2007).

Consequently because there are higher numbers of African American children exposed to violence and domestic violence in the form of maltreatment, the potential of African American children to imitate violent and domestic violent behaviors increases. This claim can be substantiated via Bandura and Huston (1961) social leaning theory as children learn by imitating their parents' behaviors. In addition children who witness aggressive behaviors, and these behaviors do not need be from the parent, learn to imitate said aggressive behaviors themselves (Bandura et al., 1961).

This claim of learning maladaptive behaviors from the parents or from the family can also be substantiated by findings from Patterson, Dishion and Bank (1984). The authors used a variety of assessments including interviews, questionnaires and laboratory and home observations to look at relations among 91 preadolescent and adolescent boys and their families. The authors found it was the family interactions that served as a basis for the training of fighting. In other words, the maladaptive and aggressive behaviors exhibited by children originated within the family because of interactions and behaviors learned from family members themselves.

Low and Espelage (2012) support this idea of and find the home is where the training of problem behaviors outside the family occurs and that African American Children are more likely to be exposed to violence in their study on bullying.

Looking at 1023 student Low and Espelage (2012) looked at bullying and its association with family violence and parental supervision. They found African American children were not only exposed to more family violence and alcohol and drug use, but they received less parental monitoring and empathy from their parents than the White students. The author's concluded their finding were consistent with Social Learning Theory and it was the African American students' high risk of exposure to violence and learning how to behave from this exposure to violence and due to low levels of protective factors in the home that increased their propensity to bully.

3. Limitations to Applying Bandura's Social Learning Theory to African American Children's Exposure to Violence

While Bandura's Social Learning theory holds it is the imitation of behaviors that trains youth (Bandura & Huston, 1961) there are also genetic conditions, more specifically psychiatric disorders, that could play a role in antisocial, maladaptive or aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (DiLalla & Gottesman, 1991) rather than social learning. Beardslee et al. (1996) conducted a study on family history of depression and found it was a significant predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in children. Burt et al. (2005) suggests mothers who suffer from depression are more inconsistent, insensitive and inattentive towards their children. These behaviors in turn suggest it is the impairment of parenting that predisposes depression and mental illness to their children. Thompson (2006) also finds depression runs in families and the outcomes relate to negative or maladaptive outcomes. Mothers who are depressed are more likely to use harsh words and have lower sensitivity towards their infant. The potential then for intergenerational linkages in said depressive behavior is relevant as a genetic factor. Other studies have shown a link between psychiatric disorders and involvement in domestic violence.

Danielson, Moffit, Caspi and Silva (1998) have found adults who met the criteria for diagnosis for certain psychiatric disorders including antisocial personality disorder, depression and substance use have increased risk of getting involved in domestic violence with their intimate partner. Turner, Lloyd and Taylor (2006) in their study with 1,968 individuals classified as being disabled for reasons of emotional or psychiatric difficulties, found the African American population had the highest number of individuals living with antisocial personality disorder.

In their study with abuse and mental disorders, Danielson et al. (1998) measured domestic violence and compared it with mental disorders. The authors found over 50% of the women victims had elevated rates of mood and eating disorders. Almost two thirds met the criteria for one or more disorders including mood, eating and substance use disorders as well as antisocial personality disorder and symptoms of schizophrenia. Over 50% of the male perpetrators also met criteria for some type of disorder and had elevated rates of anxiety, substance use and antisocial personality disorder. Poverty may also be an indicator of genetic disorders and domestic abuse.

Seldak et al. (2010) using the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) found that socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of maltreatment. Simning, van Wijngaarden and Conwell (2010) found African American individuals living in public housing were 1.8 times more likely to have an anxiety disorders, 1.4 times more likely to have a mood disorder and 2.2 times more likely to have substance use disorders than those in non-public housing. These numbers are significant as of the 2.4 million people living in public housing, 69% are racial and ethnic minorities of which 46% are African Americans. The significance to the African American population lies in Seldak et al. (2010) finding that the income of Black families is not rising as much as the income of White families. This is significant in regard to children as according to the National Poverty Center (2012) 38.2% of Black children lived in poverty in 2010 while 22% of White children lived in poverty.

While genetic conditions such as psychiatric disorders play a role in the antisocial, maladaptive or aggressive behavior of children and adolescents (DiLalla & Gottesman, 1991), there are also other venues, such as the media that have been found to be a medium of learning which influences the behavior of children (Rudy, Popova & Linz, 2010) and a modification to Bandura's Social Learning Theory adding the element of media as a socializing agent may make the theory more relevant to African American children due to a higher amount of television watched by African American children as compared to White children as found by the CDC (2012).

4. Modifications Necessary to Make Bandura's Social Learning Theory More Culturally Relevant to African American Children

Bandura's Social Learning Theory holds children learn through imitation of their adult role model with aggression learned from aggressive role models and the way in which a parent rewards or punishes the behavior leads to reinforcement or extinguishment of the behavior (Bandura & Huston, 1961). The theory also holds parents reinforce or extinguish behaviors based on perceived sex appropriate behaviors (Bandura et al., 1961). What this theory does not take into consideration is the influence the media, more specifically the watching of television, has on children and their behaviors in terms of social learning.

According to McHale et al. (2009) it is during every day activities where children begin to see their own abilities and will often identify with the leaders of the activities.

The watching of television is one of these activities or participation venues. Rudy et al. (2010) found according to Social Cognitive theory children learn through media in the same manner in which they learn in real life, through repetition, messaging and role modeling. The watching of television therefore has become context which influences learning and adapting behaviors.

According to Wilson (2008) it is not how much television is watched, but the type of programming. Children, she finds can learn about emotions from watching emotional experiences of television characters. Repetitive watching can lead empathy with those characters. Repetitive watching of violent television can also lead to violent behaviors in children. Television watching has therefore become the place where children learn to appreciate the norms and standards as depicted by the fictional characters and shows. This has led to children learning emotional and social behaviors not through life situations but vicariously through media and how media portrays people. As found by Stroman (1986) television has become the new socializing agent.

These findings are important to African American children as the CDC (2012) found in 1997 40% of Black children reported watching six or more hours of television on a day while only 14% of White children watched six or more hours of television a day. The most recent study from the CDC using data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2001-2009 showed 63.3% of Black high school students watched three or more hour of television a day whereas only 28.3% of White high school students watched three or more hours of television a day (Jones, Anderson, Lowry & Conner, 2011). With this in mind certain modifications are necessary in order to make Bandura's Social Learning Theory more culturally relevant to African American Children as behaviors learned may not be from the parents, but from television. How families are portrayed and how much violence is on television may also be contributing to Social Learning Theory.

Berry (1998) finds African American families are portrayed in a comically ghetto manner. But it is not just the portrayal of African American families children are watching, it is the violence on television that is important. According research from Kaiser Foundation (2012) The National Television Violence Study shows two out of three programs on television contain some type of violence with an average of six violent acts per hour. Violence was found to be more prevalent in children's programming at a rate of 69% than in regular programming at 57%. With Black children watching three or more hours a day of television on a school day (Jones, 2011) there are more than just parents and family members that have an influence on their socialization. This statement can be supported by Miller, Grabell, Thomas, Bermann and Grahm-Bermann (2012) study on violence. In their study with 213 mothers and their children it was found higher levels of maternal depression and increased exposure to violent television led to the child's more aggressive behaviors towards their sibling. In addition community violence was linked to sibling aggression with children who had aggressive fathers. What surprised the authors was that after accounting for family and community violence, violent television was significantly associated with aggression towards a sibling.

With this additional information on the impact of television on children modifications to Bandura's Social Learning Theory can be made in order to make social learning more relevant to African American children and the impact of the watching of television. These modifications can be made in form of adding the watching of television as one of the socializing agents to which one is exposed in the four elements that need to be present in order for social learning to occur and by adding television watching to how children learn social skills as it is not just through parent child rearing practices as found by Bandura and Huston (1961). The first element that must be present is imitation. In order for imitation to happen there must be a perceived relationship and a direct observation of the role models behavior (Sellers, 2005). Television watching offers this element. Applying Social Cognitive theory Rudy et al. (2010) discovered children have found role models on television and through watching of television they learn and adapt to the behaviors they see.

The second element, Definitions, refer to the attitudes and values individuals have in regard to the morality of the law in general or an understanding of wrongfulness. With Black children watching television at high rates (Jones, 2011) the potential to identify with the attitudes and values in regard to morality of the law based on the characters they see increases. In addition, Wilson (2008) finds the children learn about emotions from watching the emotions displayed by characters on television with repetitive watching leading to empathy towards these characters. She finds children are not learning emotional and social behaviors through life situations, but rather through television characters.

The third element, Differential Association, refers to the influence the definitions have on another's conduct (Sellers, 2005). According to McHale et al. (2009) the daily activities in which children are involved influences their social relationships. What Black children see in terms of Black families on television are characters that are typically comical or ghetto in nature (Berry, 1998). In addition, with two out of three programs containing some type of violence with an average of 6 violent acts per hour (Kaiser Foundation, 2012) violence is what children learn to associate with.

Finally there is the fourth element, Differential Reinforcement. This refers to the rewards or costs associates with a particular behavior (Sellers et al., 2005). Miller et al. (2012) found exposure to violence on television led to a child's aggressive behavior towards their sibling. Therefore there is the potential that differential reinforcement is occurring due to the prevalence of the outcome of watching violent television which would be the violence directed at the sibling.

5. Conclusion

According to the tenets of Social Learning theory, behaviors are learned through interactions with the variety of socializing agents to which one is exposed (Brown et al., 2005). According to Bandura and Huston (1961) children learn social skills through their parent's child rearing practices. Bandura et al. (1961) postulate children who witness aggressive behaviors in others imitate the same aggressive behavior. Imitation, learned morality or an understanding of wrongfulness, frequency, duration and intensity of a relationship as well as cost or reward of the learned behavior all add up to reinforce social learning (Sellers et al., 2005).

One such interaction in which children are exposed is violence, with African American children getting exposed disproportionately to both family and community violence (Voslin, 2007). This exposure has a negative impact on their future psychological and behavioral functioning as the exposure to violence has led to increased risk of future victimization, anxiety, aggression and conduct disorders (Finkelhor et al., 2009) as well as developing depression, failure in developing a sense of autonomy (Keene, 1996), impairment in their own parenting capabilities and an increased involvement in the juvenile justice system (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

While Social Learning Theory holds it is the imitation of behavior that trains youth (Bandura & Huston, 1961) genetic factors also need to be considered. DiLalla and Gottesman (1991) find psychiatric disorders could play a role in the antisocial and maladaptive or aggressive behaviors found in children and adolescents. This is significant as Danielson et al. (1998) discovered adults who met the criteria for certain psychiatric disorders including antisocial personality disorder had an increased risk of getting involved in domestic violence. This is important to the African American population as Turner et al. (2006) found the African American population had the highest number of individuals with antisocial personality disorder. This large number of individuals with antisocial personality disorder would potentially mean there is an increase in the number of children learning from said individuals. Yet there are other factors to consider such as media.

Television itself holds all the components Sellers et al. (2005) has found to be present in order for social learning to occur. The elements include imitation, definitions, differential associations and differential reinforcement. Using the tenets of Social Learning Theory, Rudy et al. (2010) has found children can learn through media in the same manner in which they learn in real life, through repetition, messaging and role modeling. McHale et al. (2009) finds children learn from what they do in their everyday activities, one such activity is television with African American children watching more television per day than white children (CDC, 2012). With an increased prevalence of violence in television (Kaiser Foundation, 2012), this makes television a dangerous learning and socializing component that can be used to enhance Bandura's Social Learning Theory in order to help explain behaviors associated with violence and domestic violence and the African American Children.

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