Bandura et al. (1961): Aggression

Lesson 1.3.1 | Concepts and methods

1. Psychology and aims

The learning approach emphasises environmental experience and observable behavioural change through classical conditioning, operant conditioning and social learning. Its blank-slate assumption is an approach position, not proof that biology is irrelevant.

Social learning: learning by observing others. A **model** demonstrates behaviour; **imitation** reproduces it. This experiment tested whether aggressive behaviour was copied later in a different setting when the adult model was absent, and examined child/model sex and nonaggressive modelling.

2. Sample and allocation

Seventy-two Stanford nursery children: 36 boys and 36 girls, aged 37-69 months (mean 52 months). Prior aggression and inhibition informed matched triplets; children were then randomly allocated within triplets.

Condition	Children
Aggressive model	24: male/female models; boys/girls
Nonaggressive model	24: same subdivisions
No-model control	24

Laboratory experiment using matched groups. Factors: model behaviour, model sex and child sex (a natural characteristic). Outcomes: frequencies of specified aggressive and nonaggressive responses.

3. Three stages

Exposure, 10 minutes: the child did a separate activity. Aggressive adults sat on, punched, mallet-hit, tossed and kicked Bobo, with aggressive phrases; nonaggressive adults quietly used construction toys.
Frustration: attractive toys were removed after about two minutes, providing common instigation to aggression.
Test, 20 minutes: a fixed array of toys in another room; model absent; behaviour observed through a one-way mirror.

> Novel actions closely matching the model provide stronger evidence of imitation than general rough play with an inflatable doll alone.

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Lesson 1.3.1 | Evidence and interpretation

1. What was measured?

Observers used five-second intervals: 240 units per child. Categories included physical imitation, verbal imitation, partial imitation, nonimitative aggression and nonaggressive behaviour. A second observer scored half the children; agreement coefficients were in the .90s.

2. Mean physical imitation

Children	Aggressive female model	Aggressive male model	No model
Girls	5.5	7.2	1.2
Boys	12.4	25.8	2.0

Nonaggressive-model scores were much lower (0.0-2.5). These are mean scores, not percentages. Boys generally showed greater physical imitation, especially after the male aggressive model.

3. Mean verbal imitation

Children	Aggressive female model	Aggressive male model	No model
Girls	13.7	2.0	0.7
Boys	4.3	12.7	1.7

There was no overall boy/girl difference in verbal imitation. Model-sex patterns depended on the response: same-sex imitation was not a universal rule.

4. Main conclusions

Aggressive-model children reproduced more physical and verbal aggression than nonaggressive and control groups. Conditions did not significantly affect every aggressive response, including gun play or general Bobo punching. Quiet-male-model inhibition was clearer than quiet-female-model inhibition.

> Conclusion: children can learn novel aggressive responses observationally and express them with the model absent. The study tested immediate imitation, not lifelong violence or every form of media influence.

Hint: Specify physical imitation, verbal imitation or another category. Do not treat "aggression" as a single undifferentiated score.

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Lesson 1.3.1 | Evaluation and connections

1. Strengths

Matching and allocation: baseline aggression was considered before assignment, improving group comparison.
Standardisation: exposure time, test-room toy layout and observation intervals supported control and replication.
Defined coding: specific actions and high observer agreement improved measurement consistency.

2. Limitations

Observer awareness: the male model scored all children, knowing the condition when he had been their model; copied actions could also reveal condition.
Artificiality: attacking a doll after an adult demonstration may reflect invited play rather than ordinary interpersonal harm.
Generalisation: one university nursery, short testing and only one model of each sex limit broader conclusions. Model sex was confounded with the two adults' personal features.

3. Child ethics

Children saw aggressive actions/phrases and were deliberately frustrated by toy removal. Immediate imitation shows why exposure and possible later learning require careful welfare evaluation. Young children may find it difficult to resist adult expectations.

Consent, assent, easy withdrawal, distress monitoring and suitable debriefing/remedial care matter. The original paper does not fully describe modern safeguards or establish the absence of lasting effects. Missing detail does not prove that every safeguard was absent.

4. Applications and debates

Application: adults can consider the examples children observe. The study did not directly test long-term violence prevention.
Nature/nurture: behavioural change after exposure supports a learning influence; sex differences do not identify genetic causes.
Individual/situational: prior aggression and child sex were considered alongside modelling conditions.
Children: direct evidence about childhood learning must be weighed against exposure to harm.

> Avoid: "All boys copied men and all girls copied women." The reported patterns were qualified and differed between physical and verbal outcomes.

Hint: Link an ethical criticism to a specific procedure and explain the possible consequence, rather than writing only "the study was unethical".