

The Impact of External, Socially Synthetic Forces, such as Mass Media, Video Games, and the Internet on Human Behavior

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Abstract

This essay explores the controversial hypothesis of *reciprocal determinism*, a subset of the Social Cognitive Theory developed by Albert Bandura, Ph.D. The hypothesis suggests that external forces likely influence the behavior of an individual, and in turn, the individual reshapes (reciprocally) society in an escalating cycle of manipulation and modification. Diverse perspectives are gathered from seminal books and peer-reviewed journals in an attempt to substantiate or conceivably refute the notion that mass media, the Internet, video games, and other forms of one-way and interactive technology may be stirring aggressive behavior (by way of modeling), as well as desensitizing children and adolescents to real violence that occurs in everyday life.

While some developmental theorists claimed that measurable modifications in human behavior are brought about by internal (biological) *or* external (societal) forces that are equally perpetual and inescapable, others argued that recipes of *both* cognitive and innate factors comprise the essential ingredients that shape the ego, define the personality, or influence reflective choices individuals will make throughout their lifetime. Because theories are devised to seek explanations for the seemingly inexplicable, theorists continue to proffer formidable arguments in support of their unique research. While this essay threads together selected past and ongoing literature about a disquieting social phenomenon, the intent was not to produce new evidence on the matter, except that predicting outcomes of human behavior continues to evade scientific certainty.

Introduction

The use of a metaphorical scenario may best introduce the premise of behavior modification by way of *reciprocal determinism*. Consider an individual riding in his car, comfortably seated within the confines of the vehicle while propelling ahead toward his destination. The driver momentarily looks away, yet at that same moment another vehicle pulls in front, and the two collided. The driver who pulled in front is rammed into a tree and fatally injured. The driver who looked away is physically unharmed. A simple cause-effect anecdote may end here; however, in the context of reciprocal determinism and human behavior, the saga is destined to continue.

The physically unharmed driver sustains a significant emotional injury. The individual retreats inwardly and fails to function as before within society forever. Regrettably, this driver has a family who suffers as well. The family of the deceased driver is likewise devastated, and in time, grief morphs into anger. Hostile exchanges persist and the children of each *victim* retain their anger throughout their lives, even as they interact among those who had no direct involvement in the original incident. Thus, a paradigm of bitterness, anger, and dread becomes a way of life, and its residual effect is harbored by others, such as friends, extended family members, and the like who adopt feelings of hostility and rivalry as their own. One event initiated a chain reaction of behavioral transformation that affected both internal and external social units; moreover, a *new* aggressive attitude was born of the aftermath that would sustain itself independently for years to come.

The purpose of this essay is not to generate literary metaphors, but to conduct an investigation into Bandura's idea of reciprocal determinism, or the notion that environmental factors directly affect behavior; thus in turn, an altered behavior reciprocates back into the environment, thereby reshaping its capacity to spawn various forms of changed behaviors. Phillips and Orton (1983), both colleagues at Stanford University and professed skeptics of Bandura's theory claimed his notion to be nothing more than causal relationships building upon one another. However, this essay largely focused on the phenomenal effects various forms of *mass media* may hold as principal contributors to socio-environmental change; moreover, the immense influence it ostensibly wields on our younger, more impressionable populations.

According to Bushman and Anderson (2001), *one way* forms of communication, (such as newspapers, magazines, radio, *movies*, and *television*) became the basis of intense academic research studies around 1965. Ironically violent acts in the United States began to increase exponentially "exactly when the first generation raised on TV began to reach the prime ages for committing violent crimes" (p. 478). Meta-hypotheses of the time discovered a discernable connection between aggressive behavior and acts of social violence *with* the proliferation of violence on the silver screens. From these findings, a vigorous debate about the impact of cinema continues to rage inside and out many academic circles today.

Bandura (2001) attributed altered behaviors toward aggression as *social modeling*. Violent lyrics often masked within the beat or melody of a song is yet another *one way* form of artistic expression that may reveal disturbing social effects. Perhaps more troubling, yet less explored, are the possible adverse effects *interactive media* (such as the Internet and video games) may brandish on the attitudes and behaviors of children and adolescents, those ranked among the most vulnerable developmentally as identified by Erik Erikson (1998). Researchers/journalists Slater, Henry, Swaim, and Anderson (2003) argued "Internet sites that are violence oriented may be of particular concern because they can provide social support for aggressive tendencies and interests" (p. 715). Their study also revealed that a diminishing interest in one way media is trending; moreover, a preference (some allege an addiction) to the interactive forms is significantly on the rise.

Various researchers admonish that such trends may produce a succeeding generation of isolated, detached, desensitized, and socially inept individuals; however, Thomson and Holland (2002) attempted to allay this concern by countering “that young people have sophisticated value systems and are deeply engaged... in constructing their identities and lives” (p.104). Nonetheless, traditional institutions such as religious, academic, and political organizations are often deemed as havens of hypocrisy and unethical practices by members of Generations X, Y, and beyond, many of whom are seeking role models for authentic leadership, but finding little reassurance in those supported by their parents or guardians. The connective tissue affecting a diminution of respected role models Slater, Henry, Swaim, and Anderson (2003) called a “downward spiraling model” may be the *influence* of vicarious media and its reshaping of social attitudes and behaviors.

As this introductory section segues into an in-depth analysis of reciprocal determinism, a subset of Social Cognitive Theory, the reader is asked to consider the aforementioned variables as unmistakable components amidst a huge social web, and flickering at the center may boast the intrepid catalyst...*mass media*. Whether or not an individual believes media contributes adversely or positively to society is moot. The research concluded it does in some way *contribute*...and to date in unique and unparalleled ways. Through additional (and most likely perpetual) research, hosts of scholars, researchers, and journalists claim to be seeking a more highly developed understanding of this esoteric phenomenon; perhaps to affirm the role of mass media as a socially responsible source of influence. This notion is juxtaposed with concerns that mass media is adversely impacting how society views, tolerates, and even ignores its own humanity. The powerful, mesmerizing imagery built into today’s interactive technology fashions a surreal perception of reality, considered by some as indistinguishable from actual reality, and frighteningly more appealing.

Literature

A Review of Reciprocal Determinism

Contemporary behavioral theories were constructed with key elements from previously devised classical theories fundamentally in mind. Albert Bandura’s (1963) theory of *reciprocal determinism* appears to parallel B.F. Skinner’s (1987) non-stage theory of rewards and punishments as stimuli for behavioral modification. Because Skinner used caged rodents and pigeons to demonstrate the altering effects of behavioral responses when rewards were administered or denied, the famous term “Skinner’s box” was coined. (In the context of Bandura’s fascination with television as an instrument of behavioral dynamics, perhaps the TV may one day be referred to as “Bandura’s box”). Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) believed behavior to be goal directed; therefore, an individual will make *cognitive* choices when desired rewards or outcomes are promised.

At the heart of Bandura’s (2001) notion of reciprocal determinism lays his Social Cognitive Theory, a cerebral yet well researched analysis of humankind behavior; albeit

borrowed from classical scholarship and appropriately linked with modern day social phenomena. Because reciprocal determinism is a “spin off” of Social Cognitive Theory, it stands alone as a distinctive concept applicable to multiple scenarios, such as the hypothetical scenario spun in the *Introduction*. In this essay, Social Cognitive Theory is examined as Bandura proposed in a 1978 publication of *American Psychologist*, according to Phillips and Orton (1983). Bandura wrote “behavior, internal personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interlocking determinants of each other” (p. 158); therefore, Bandura advocated social learning as interactive, transactional, and reciprocally determined. In essence, Bandura argued that personal factors affect behavior, which alters the environment, that affects personal factors...and the cycle repeats itself. When media violence is placed in the equation, and escalated with each cycle, consider the possible adverse effects that ensue with time.

According to Bandura (2001), Social Cognitive Theory is centered on two basic concepts, social *modeling* and symbolic communication, or *imagery*. Both concepts may be easily obtained from most forms of mass media. According to Malone (2002), Bandura believed behavior to be modeled or imitated (not *mimicked* as various critics infer) from what is observed and synthesized through external venues. Various behaviors may become reinforced when rewards are attained or deterred in anticipation or fear of a consequence. Malone argued that Bandura’s theory advanced the notion of cognition, thereby asserting that individual actions are self-directed and inspired by external forces in a perpetual quest for social acceptance and personal success. Readers may note a correlation with Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory and earlier theories devised by Skinner (1987) and Kohlberg (1981).

Bandura (2003) claimed that humans progress *because* we cognitively model the behavior of others through imagery as opposed to simply learning from our own experiences, countering ideologies that advance the certainty of developmental stages as innate. Upon accepting Bandura’s (1963) notion of observational learning as an irrefutable model, an individual may assume that an impressionable student will likely benefit more from behavior *observed* by a positive and/or influential role model than by any form of verbal methodology. For example, in centuries past, craftsmen learned their skill as apprentices, or by observing and imitating the technique implemented by the master craftsman. This tradition was successfully passed down for many succeeding generations...reciprocally.

As a result of advancements in *communications*, effortless access to diverse ideas, life styles, and values are reshaping attitudes about society, family, and religion. For example, Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication highlighted finer points from the broader Social Cognitive Theory by focusing on research relevant to the effects symbolic communication (such as television and motion picture imagery) exact on an individual’s view of self and society (2001, 2003). Although Bandura acknowledged the unique characteristics, or “natural endowment” each human being innately possesses in making cognitive personal choices, he simultaneously emphasized the enormous influence external factors and social modeling wields on decisions, values, and judgments made resulting from frequent exposure to mass media *illusions* (2001).

Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Deborah, and Wright (2001) reported that Bandura believed children in particular are mostly swayed by television imagery “because young children have few preexisting scripts for many types of social conflict or problem situations...” (p.79). Most striking is Bandura’s conviction that humankind, unlike any other species, “has an evolved capacity for observational learning” (p.271), which is why media imagery is alleged to contribute towards altering behaviors. Nonetheless, such behaviors today will likely be modeled from a *superficial* reality as opposed to an actual one.

According to Decker and Nathan (1985), an individual “must *observe* what the model is doing, *remember* what the model did, *do* what the model has done, and later when the appropriate time comes, *want to use* what they have learned”(p. 4). When the modeled behavior is socially reinforced with either positive or negative feedback, its acceptance into the environment is validated. Bandura (1973) argued that “modeling influence play an especially important role in the rapid contagion of *aggression*. When behaving like others produces rewarding outcomes, modeling cues become powerful determinants of analogous behavior; conversely, when imitative actions are treated negatively, but dissimilar behavior proves rewarding, models’ responses prompt divergent performances in observers”(p. 46). In short, the symbolism observed and imitated is likely a product of the external environment.

An individual may cognitively choose to model depictions of social reality or the images replicating a type of surreal society as seen on our television sets, in the movies, or on music videos. However, such behaviors become reinforced once applied back into the environment evoking either positive or negative feedback responses. Newly modeled behaviors may be “tested” on family, peers, or groups that often share a similar social paradigm. Such accepting groups may be easily found within interactive chat rooms on the Internet.

Markward, Cline, and Markward (2001) recognized the Internet as a primary source of support for those in search of *social bonding*. In some cases, Internet behavior is positively modeled, depicting a realm where an individual may bond with others who reinforce all that is good. On the other hand, when modeled behavior is imaged as depressing or aggressive, social feedback (or reinforcement) can advance a darker worldview, resulting in a more hostile milieu. For example, a young person seeking to bond may encounter others in chat rooms who promote aggressive or rebellious agendas. As a result, the youngster might begin to reexamine former perceptions of self or family in exchange for what is believed to be peer recognition. When a behavioral change occurs within the individual, family dynamics and its social repute can be altered as well.

Consider the sequence of events when a stone is cast into a pond. The impact produces a ripple that grows from the center and expands outward sloshing against the shoreline tilting foliage rooted nowhere near the point of contact. Phillips and Orton (1983) might argue that this example describes a simple cause-effect scenario. Readers of similar mind may consequently fail to grasp the repercussions caused by one single

event. One occurrence affects not only its participants, but a plethora of non participants, both close and far away.

There may also be an indirect contribution, just as has been found in the TV literature. Specifically, short-term increases in aggression due to violent song lyrics affect the person's social environment as well as the person. Close friends (family, peers, teachers) are influenced by these initially temporary increases in aggression and naturally respond to them in a negatively way. Over time, these relationships deteriorate, and acquaintances begin to expect aggressive and conflictual interactions with the person and will therefore elicit further aggressive behaviors via well-established expectancy effects. In other words, repeated short-term media violence effects (lyrics, TV, movies, video games) can indirectly create a more hostile social environment, which further promotes the development of chronically hostile biases in the person's internal makeup—their perceptual and social scripts and schemata and related knowledge structures—in short, their personality. (Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2003, p. 976)

The authors of the aforementioned passage are claiming that reciprocally determined behaviors may be made manifest in several forms of one way media; moreover, violent song lyrics are being recognized as a primary contributor to the societal dilemma. While there is a paucity of research in this area, behaviorists are beginning to seriously study the causal elements perpetuated by this industry. According to Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003), recent studies have revealed that listening to violent lyrics may also provoke similar, if not more intense feelings of hostility and agitation. Although violent lyrics are often assuaged by the music or the “beat” of the song, a number of individuals who intensely pay attention and can decipher the violent anti-social verbiage will likely exercise their own imaginations to play out the lyricist's message, and apply it into their own environmental situations. In addition, correlation studies “suggested a connection between the kind of music youth listen to and various maladaptive behaviors and attitudes...” (p. 962). The premise behind this research suggests that listening to violent lyrics is more destructive than watching a violent TV show, primarily because the images on the screen are fictional, and the images in the mind are real.

According to Bandura (2001), individuals alter society whilst society alters the individual to whatever degree he or she may be predisposed to modify. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of change in degrees virtually undetectable; moreover, thresholds of toleration and desensitization are socially *reconstructed* subsequent to each event. Once the reader considers the logical construct of the aforesaid theory, the nature of reciprocal determinism is brought to the fore.

The Effects of Violent Media on Society, Children, and Adolescents

Disturbing research by Bushman and Anderson (2001) revealed “by the time the average American child graduates from elementary school, he or she will have seen more than 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other acts of violence (e.g., assaults, rapes) on network television” (p. 478). Studio executives argue that on-screen violence is simply a form of art imitating life. However, readers may ask if violence in the *real world* is as dramatic or appealing as imagery depicted by Hollywood. On the other hand, what is the fascination of seeing the aftermath of a traffic accident, often *rubbernecking* at the risk of being in one of our own?

The likelihood that more socially responsible attitudes inside the entertainment industry will occur is remote, particularly because of the lucrative profits gained by *giving society what it seems to want*. The Freudian notion (referenced by Bushman and Anderson 2001) of the *catharsis hypothesis* is an attempt to rationalize media violence as a deterrent to aggressive behavior in the real world. The basis of the hypothesis, now debunked within most scholarly circles, claims that by viewing a socially undesirable act quells the urge for an individual to perform it. Various behavioral modification techniques have been applied in an attempt to treat sex offenders and violent criminals while incarcerated.

Felson (1996) argued that violence in Western civilization has been, and continues to be a prominent element of its subculture. A fascination with violent behavior, as well as the need to perform acts of aggression, may be considered primal and instinctual; therefore, unalterable. If Felson’s notion is accurate, each individual may possess intrinsic tendencies toward aggressive behavior, though in varying degrees. Consistent exposure to vicarious media violence might be the nudge that awakens such predispositions, and propels the observer to alter preceding behaviors in exchange for new ones. While Felson viewed the slaughtering of Christians in the Roman Coliseum as a relevant paradigm, more contemporary illustrations might be increases in gang violence, riots, school shootings, and police brutality as innate, *contagious* behavior.

Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Deborah, and Wright (2001) purported that watching television at an early age affects behavior or attitudes later in life. Their research suggested that inherent *conditions* can predispose an individual to respond adversely to television violence, resulting in the tendency to model aggressive behavior. Assuming that humans possess predisposed tendencies towards violence, Bandura (2001) asserted that such decisions are made *cognitively* with determinants of a reward, or a consequence, as the initiative. Nonetheless, not all scholars agree contemporary media to be the single catalyst for aggressive actions, particularly when considering Felson’s (1996) illustration of bloody “sporting” events as a means of entertainment centuries before electronic mass media were invented.

According to Bushman and Anderson (2001), young children become *desensitized* to authentic events after being repeatedly exposed to fictional violence on television, in

the movies, in music videos, and on the Internet. Felson (1996) noted *two* disturbing byproducts from the research that corroborates with these findings. *One*, overactive viewing of television contributes to antisocial behavior (non-compliance, disregard for rules/laws, etc.), and *two*, the desensitization of an individual toward actual violence. According to Felson's report, "subjects may assume a more permissive atmosphere when they are shown a violent film, and their inhibitions about misbehavior generally are reduced" (p.116). In an ironic twist, the study concurrently revealed a reduction in domestic violence during prime time hours, (allegedly *because* individuals are so engaged with television viewing); idle time when a violent act might ensue is diminished.

In a phenomenological study conducted by Thomson and Holland (2002), a diverse mix of adolescents was interviewed regarding their perspectives on media violence. Most subjects believed they were not influenced by vicarious media violence, yet, expressed concern that "younger children" may be. The most profound affirmation of this phenomenon became evident when one youth espoused that he felt "less conscious of violence, so when you see it on the news and it's really happening, you don't care much, you put a blind eye to it" (p. 112).

Bandura (1973) conducted empirical and observational research that conclusively revealed an increased sense of agitation in an individual after observing violence on a monitor in a controlled environment. The quagmire to his experiment was inconclusive in determining whether the arousal recorded created exhilaration for the individual or disgust. The heart rate and brain waves were not distinguishable between the two opposing emotional responses.

Various types of *one way* forms of communication such as television, the movies, and songs on the radio have become entrenched into the social norm as sources of entertainment, news, and education; modern day *necessities* designed to expand our minds and ameliorate our lives. However, recent studies have begun to center on the *interactive* forms of electronic media as disturbing advocates of aggression and social isolation. Enter the new age of video games and the Internet.

Although the Internet or "the information highway" was conceived as a network for gathering and sharing data in the spirit of global cohesiveness and unity, it has ostensibly mutated into an instrument that fosters isolation and antisocial behaviors (Felson, 1996). Due to its interactive capacity, various sorts of ideas can be exchanged and plans contrived. Particularly enticing, the Internet is cloaked in anonymity. As a result, special interest groups may assemble and boast claims far beyond the truth to allure supporters and feed the *ego* (Loevinger, 1987). It's attraction to the general population is widespread; however, children, and especially adolescents gravitate to its' snare as a social refuge or support system to link with others of similar mind. The lure of the Internet to the younger population may have socio-biological underpinnings. According to Sylwester (1999), divergent ideas for this phenomena stem from innate brain functions that often remain dormant in most people. These functions awaken as a result of social influences, to changes in biological or physiological stresses (such as the onset of puberty and a surge of testosterone in males). Ultimately, the controversial

notion that synthetic factors such as media violence (possibly experienced while engaged on the Internet) arouse aggressive “memes” that perniciously alters the behavior of an impressionable individual.

Within the first two decades of life, brain development experiences two poles of cognition, *reflective* and *reflexive* thoughts. Whilst archaic in the latter decade, often referred to as the default phase, adolescents and young adults, (particularly males), tend to seek solidification of tenuous racist, sexist, and stereotypical attitudes that when *reinforced* become branded as part of the individual’s personality, presumably for life. Sylwester (1999) claimed that babies up to the age of ten years receive unconditional nurturing from parents or role models with whom they identify and depend upon. As a result, children discover and often reflect the traditions apparent in their environment and *model* the same social behavior observed from family. In the second decade, however, indulgent unconditional nurturing by adults is often replaced with criticism for making poor decisions and expressing individualism in appearance, garnished with perhaps unorthodox behaviors. Sylwester admonished frustrated parents to be aware that biological forces are at work chemically breeding chaos and uncertainty for many pubescent youth who need guidance and support more than ever during this phase.

Perhaps in an attempt to gain attention, most adolescents demonstrate assorted degrees of rebellion and gravitate towards peer groups where commonalities among them can be found. These groups can become systems for reinforcing positive or negative behaviors in the individual, depending upon the aspirations of the particular group where acceptance is recognized. Often those who form negative alliances, or are unable to gel within any faction, isolate themselves in virtual worlds enabled by electronic media in chat rooms via the Internet. Sylwester claimed that the socially unaccepted are more likely to find an unconditional connection from among a plethora of choices. Fraternal alliances are forged and *reflexive* aggressive behavior becomes an acceptable recourse to perceptions of social injustice (1999).

According to Markward, Cline, and Markward (2001), it is within these virtual realms where reciprocal sanctions of plans to perform violent acts of retaliation, and notions to “right” superfluous social injustices are exacerbated. Individuals who may bond within these dominions are among those who have often felt victimized by family and peers most of their lives. The high school students responsible for the shootings in Columbine, Colorado matched the aforementioned profile. The two adolescent culprits devised their disturbing plan by using the Internet as an instrument of socialization, communication, and even more reprehensible, absolutism. Reports indicated the youth were frivolously engaged in playing video games just hours before entering the school and carrying out their murderous mission. The Columbine killers may have believed their actions to be completely justified, all the while considering themselves victims of an unjust society (Sylwester 1999). Such retaliatory behavior against representative members of the socially functioning sect completes a cause, conceivably in the same manner as those who view jihad and suicide bombings as a morally acceptable cause.

In the case of the Columbine shooters, a paradigm of aggression instigated by feelings of isolation and despair was apparent. Moreover, the youth were considered social outcasts in their school, and ultimately resorted to Internet chat rooms as a source of social bonding and support (Markward, Cline, and Markward 2001). Researchers argued the youth were attracted to the vicarious imagery of the video games they played, as are most children and adolescents; however, these young men were allegedly unable to distinguish themselves from the virtual characters that battled for points in each round.

Through the eyes of Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, and Baumgardner (2004), the issue of *desensitization* is of most concern. As technology advances, images on the screen are becoming increasingly life-like, complete with blood and gore (unlike the original “Pac-Man” fantasy characters). In addition, their research revealed that some children demonstrated an obsession with the games. One subject professed “you get into it and don’t want to stop” (p. 34). Markward, Cline, and Markward (2001) expressed apprehension that video games are marketed to children, uncensored by most stores, and often unchecked for content by parents or guardians.

Reciprocal determinism, according to Decker and Nathan (1985) is validated by the fact the boys involved in Columbine *observed* a behavior, *remembered* it, *practiced* it, (as the home videos illustrated), and *used* or applied the behavior within an actual (not virtual) environment. The repercussions of this horrific event has heightened the awareness of the magnanimous influence the Internet and video game imagery wields upon young people, in particular individuals who may be predisposed to aggressive or violent behavior. Whether or not the shooters believed their mission was just, scars left behind in Columbine will never fade.

A Theoretical Peek into the Future

As ascending members of the new generation takes a step up to the plate and assumes their legacy as leaders and figures of authority in our constantly changing social order, a guarded tentativeness is often sensed among alumni who ask themselves if generation-elect is up to the task. No generation is precisely like the former brood, and would *we* really want them to be? Can better leadership be gleaned from each new generation, and will rookies hold skills necessary to ameliorate the diverse global challenges our parents and grandparents may have never imagined?

Generations X and Y were raised in the midst of a constant influx of electronic media invading their homes, schools, and spiritual domains. In a study conducted by Calavita (2003), one subject responded “Dad came home at 5:30 or so, dinner was on the table at 6, the TV was there where he could see it from the table, and we’d watch the news...it was always on in the background”(p.32). Have such changes in nuclear family dynamics brought about by the “information age” inexplicably altered this rising generation unlike any of those before? On the surface, it may appear Generations X (and Y) is an eclectic mix of selfish individualists pulling away from “traditionalism” and forging new spheres representative of a more secularist social order. Sociologist and scientist George Simmel (1910) concluded advancement in sciences and technologies

were *among* the contributors which shape how an individual perceives the world and their place of value within it, (or a desire to retreat from it). Hinds (2001) admonished that “Gen-X is completely self absorbed with little or no concern for others. They reside in private realms; replete with personal CD players, headphones, and personal computers” (¶ 6). Zygmunt Bauman (2002) recapped a belief by renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim (from his 1915 book *The elementary forms of religious life*) that prophetically suggested movements towards individualism was generational. Mass media was not a factor in Durkheim’s time, yet the perception of individualistic behavior in young adults was as much of a concern then as researchers allege exists today.

In the 1960s after experiencing “The Beatles” perform before millions of impressionable adolescents on national television, the moral establishment was appalled by and concerned about the untamed, non-conformal attitudes widened by the mesmerized youth of the era. Once again, messages culled from today’s musical culture and media arts encourage acts of violence, rebellion, disrespect for females, and disdain for the moral, ethical, and spiritual traditions valued by the prevailing establishment (Reader 2003). Suggestions of social reform or bigotry in music continue to evoke controversy, even amid today’s more secular moral establishment.

An institution seemingly most affected by fast paced, disengaged lifestyles in contemporary society is *organized religion*. Bandura (2003) argued the capacity to experience spirituality (not necessarily an inference to organized religion) by way of self-reflection, forethought, and self-regulation through symbolism is unique to humankind. In the absence of exemplary spiritual modeling, exacerbated by convoluted and often comedic images portrayed in media of religious leaders, conventional extrinsic spirituality is emerging in many forms. Some people opt to embrace a more native, holistic, or naturalist approach to spirituality. While some forms of spirituality include symbolic and theistic fundamentals, it differentiates itself from conventional Judeo-Christian themes. Such a shift from conventionality does not diminish the intensity of spirituality a young person might experience. Bandura continued “The power of symbolization, in which social modeling is rooted, supplies the basis for other distinctly human capacities” (p.168). As a cognitive species, among these capacities is our ability to set long term goals, to be aware of our own mortality, and attempt to grasp the meaning of life. In essence, humankind may possess the unique capacity to put into perspective the vicarious images of that we are repeatedly exposed, and in turn, select our own paths that lead us towards a self-actualized and spiritual state of being (Maslow, 1987).

Decker and Nathan (1985) purported that we are constantly attaining new knowledge and experiences from those who’ve preceded us; nonetheless Bandura (2003) affirmed that once principle *foundations* are set, each individual “can use them to generate new instances of the behavior that go beyond what they have seen, read, or heard” (p. 169). A strong foundation and communal support may be essential elements to effectively thwart temptations of adopting maladaptive behavior when exposed. However, according to Bandura, “There is a wide variation of lifestyles being modeled and discrepancies between what is practiced and what is preached” (p.170); as such, an

unending host of contradictions re-emerge whilst Generations X and Y seek venues of idealistic consistency. Our children are watching and learning; therefore, future attitudes and values will be built upon such observed foundations. Within certain establishments, (such as the political and judicial arenas), individuals observe, by way of media, behaviors that appear to conflict with what they were taught during their “reflective” years (Sylwester, 1999).

Subsequently an inception of confusion and distrust will likely ensue. Regrettably, “bad” news or violent programming found in brutal sporting events, reality shows, and violently enacted talk shows such as *Jerry Springer* seem to attract the favor of the masses. Thomson and Holland (2002) alleged a significant cultural revolution within Western society may be fashioning a new generation who claim disregard for and a *suspicion* of traditional and social institutions as models of moral values. Such movements away from the establishment are simultaneously placing greater emphasis on the individual as center, particularly from within today’s adolescent population or members of Generations X and Y. Studies indicate that a byproduct of individualism is isolation or anxiety.

Researchers argue that youth “predisposed to aggression” (Bandura, 2001) and (Slater, Henry, Swaim, and Anderson 2003) from dysfunctional family situations, alienated by peers, or self perceived as socially maladaptive resort to interactive chat rooms enabled by the Internet to make connections with others who share common issues. These “retreats” into cyber space do not always develop into breeding grounds for murderous plots and violent exchanges as described earlier regarding the Columbine case (Markward, Cline, and Markward 2001). In fact, some research showed the Internet to be a positive technological achievement that provides a social and academic venue where affiliation among individuals with common interests can be produced in order to exchange ideas and gain knowledge. The practical application of the Internet may be undisputed, and certainly revered by many users; however, the influence of its darker side warrants additional studies as time unveils new occurrences of misuse that lead to violent acts.

Throughout this essay, much of the research was focused on the potentially adverse effects violence vicariously portrayed in media may have on children, adolescents, and young adults, in particular those individuals who make up the Generation X and Y populations. Developmental stage theorists differ as to whether reflex-response, physiological, or emotional factors must occur before an individual is propelled into the next level of maturation; however, Erikson (1998), Kohlberg (1981) and Maslow (1987) seemed to agree that every human will advance along the stage continuum, digress, or remain static depending upon his or her distinctive genetic makeup. In contrast, Bandura (2001) and Loevinger (1987) argued that individuals develop due to the ever changing environmental and *social influencers*, each according to their individual cognitive capacities and personality maturity. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory stressed how choices made by an individual not only shape the life of that person, but the lives of many others as well, hypothetically in a perpetual cycle of

cause and effect scenarios that with each behavior modification, a new social dynamic is reborn.

Although an untested hypothesis, a curious reader may speculate if people actually take time to *think* anymore. Because ideas (by others) are fed to us at staggering rates of speed, and through many different modalities, is it likely that “we” have become merely medians for the exchange of facts, not ideas, between one another? Many of us may not possess the inclination or the opportunity to reflect as did Henry David Thoreau (1854/1999) who pondered and later wrote about many aspects of the human condition as he perceived them while in modified seclusion on Walden Pond.

In a case study conducted by Calavita (2003) young adults were asked to recall memories from their *childhood* and experiences of how media affected their family relationships. Several young people believed because of the time allocated to television viewing, even when sitting together, family conversational exchanges were quelled. This dynamic suggests that watching the news and engaging in discussions that followed were *not*, in a sense, a bonding mechanism. On the other hand, one young man fondly remembered engaging in discussions with his father in reference to remarks made by Rush Limbaugh; whereas, a young woman recalled crying alongside her mother while watching Richard Nixon resign as President.

There may be insufficient research to conclusively discern the extent media’s influence has had, and will have on the lives of aspiring adults. Assorted studies, some perhaps biased, might have us believe that its force is immense and detrimental to building a cohesive society, beginning with the decline or decentralization of the family unit. The crystal ball remains cloudy, yet optimists purport that each new generation brings fresh hope and advanced achievements into the cultural mix to better insure our humanity will collectively prevail. Pessimists contend that movements towards secularism or individual spirituality are destroying the fundamental elements essential to keeping the human lifeboat afloat. The next generations of savvy *movers and shakers* may have been taunted by media’s alluring imagery of impossible perfection and success; however, with these enticements may also spawn a new wave of rationality as well as *possibilities*. Bandura (2003) argued that many people are watching and learning; therefore, future attitudes and values will be built upon such observed foundations. Whether reciprocally determined or generated by one behavior impacting another, the preservation of values where morality, spirituality, and fundamental principles are both socially and cognitively forged may be consumed by isolation and individualism.

Conclusion and Reflections

Most readers may find it difficult to imagine contemporary life without electronic multi-media. It’s in our homes, offices, schools, restaurants, gas stations, cars, soup kitchens, courtrooms, restrooms...everywhere! We can be connected in seconds with each other all over the world as a result of the pervasive technological advancements made within recent years. It’s not an unusual site for an individual to be talking on their cell phone, working on their laptop while watching television, listening to the radio, or

playing a CD. Baby Boomers have embraced the advantages made possible through media, and subsequent generations seem to expect exponential advances to be in store for them.

As a youth, I remember similar images Calavita (2003) conveyed of the family sitting together on the plastic covered sofa in a dimly lit room staring forward intently at the television for a few hours each evening. Dad would always get to watch the programs he wanted to see; however, changing the channel required more effort because there were no remotes...not to mention fewer channels. If I made a noise, or asked a question during the show, a resounding Shhhhhh! would have likely ensued. When the children's bedtime arrived, off we'd go while the adults remained glued to the set, and without looking away placidly dismissing us (in unison) with a simple acknowledgment of "good night" as we reluctantly retreated into our TV-less rooms until morning. Of course homework completion was a requirement before we'd be allowed to watch television, which was often overseen by my *domestic engineer* mom immediately upon arriving home from school (while she prepared dinner to be presented promptly at 6:00pm). If homework was unfinished, the opportunity to spend *family time* in front of the set would be denied...and if our report card was poor, or we had been reprimanded by our teacher, the privilege of watching television could be deprived as punishment for a to-be-determined period of time by dad; clearly a consequence for an act of disobedience or disrespect.

In those good ol' days, the *news* came on at designated periods of time... and it was just that, the news. One could almost bet that all three networks pretty much reported the same events of the day, so there was very little competition except by the commercial sponsors. Commercials then were another entity in themselves. They sold useful products, (with the exception of tobacco), engaging us with catchy musical jingles and imagery promoting the sheer satisfaction one could possess if their product was purchased. The actors in commercials were often stereotypical and sexist, depending on the product...not to mention perfectly attired, clean, and set in a superficial environment that we could only imagine existed. Our home certainly did not look like theirs, but we wanted it to, so their products were purchased.

With the exception of raucous cartoons and westerns that only came on Saturday mornings until noon, the *violent* television shows were presented after 9:00pm, assuming most respectable conformist kids would already be in bed and dreaming of becoming President. The *action* shows were saved for adult viewers; albeit looking back at reruns, the situational violent imagery appeared glamorous, yet clearly phony, and atypical of life in the real world. Finally, the shows we all watched together were surreal. The *episodes* (an enigmatic word) involved perfect families with perfect teeth, skin, hair, clothes, body weight, living rooms, lots of time, plenty of food, and friends working together to solve the most severe crises. For example, what will the Beaver do? He lost the sweater his aunt crocheted for him and she's on her way for a visit? This was clearly a matter for Ward (the dad) to resolve.

Things have certainly changed. Our lives have become more complicated, stressful, and families no longer seem to gather in front of the tube and *share* moments of unity or bonding. Everyone is scurrying about doing their own thing. Each member is on a different schedule, and greeting each other at the doorway coming or going may be the only social time spent together. I am fortunate to at least have memories of simpler, more serene times with the family; whereas, the next generation only knows of today's fast paced, media-enhanced lifestyle where reruns of the shows we enjoyed together are mocked by the youth today on *Nickelodeon* as shallow and superficial. Reality seems to be what they want...not some representation of what things could be like if families who resembled the *Cleavers* truly existed...if they ever did.

Has media become the *interpreter* between human interactions? Have we allowed television, the music industry, the Internet, and video games to become substitutes for effective human *communications*, a skill defined by Wilkins and Christians (2001) as "the creative process of building and reaffirming through symbols...to express levels of reality that otherwise remain hidden" (p. 104)? I once observed an adolescent become obsessed to the point of destroying a bed room in search of a misplaced "memory card" essential to play a particular video game. Could this form of aggression be attributed to the individuals' interest in the game itself, or the possibility of being denied the opportunity to play it? I've likewise noticed how simple it is to lose all track of time while engaged on the Internet either "chatting" with a virtual friend or researching a topic for an essay. The esoteric power of interactive media is unlike any *addictive* force yet experienced. It does not alter the body but the *mind*...and the impact of this dynamic may not be realized for decades ahead.

Perhaps we will never know if the Internet was the catalyst that somehow sanctioned the act carried out by the young Columbine shooters. I recall reading transcripts by a serial killer of the 1960s who claimed instructions to perform violent acts were administered by rotating a particular record album counter clockwise on the player. The culprit alleged demonic messages of encouragement and absolution could be heard, and thereby not be ignored. Because we are a unique species in both our physical and emotional design, clearly distinguishing how certain external forces will affect our behavior may be equally unique to discern.

One method for scientifically testing contextual claims in a local environment would be to read conclusions from this essay to a *mix* of parents alongside their children in a common and comfortable setting. In this environment, each generation would be encouraged to openly discuss how they believe mass media, the Internet, and video games influence (or not) their behavior. Afterwards, separate each generation into two rooms (so that each group feels less intimidated), and re-ask the question, assuming more candid remarks about the impact of media in their lives will emerge. With assistance from an unbiased facilitator, all relevant comments would be scribed. Later, after the two generations reassembled, the key researcher would openly share comments attained from each group in a free forum and encourage discussion. Reactions to each others' comments would likewise be recorded (in writing), and the pertinent excerpts later statistically analyzed and contrasted by group.

A more compelling exercise would be to show the same violent movie or television show to a group of parents and to a group of young people (their children) in separate rooms. After the viewing, each individual would be asked to respond in writing to a set of questions regarding the plot, which they consider the victim, the hero, and asked to describe the most fascinating and disturbing part(s) of the film. Once again, the findings would be compared and analyzed statistically according to group.

In closing, I leave the reader with a quote by Albert Bandura that may summarize the essence of this essay; moreover, present a challenge to those who wish to ameliorate society...a noble and formidable charge.

Like so many other problems confronting man, there is no single grand design for lowering the level of destructiveness within a society. It requires both individual corrective effort and group action aimed at changing the practices of social systems. Since aggression is not an inevitable or unchangeable aspect of man but a product of aggression promoting conditions operating within a society, man has the power to reduce his level of aggressiveness. Whether this capacity is used wisely or destructively is another matter. (Bandura, 1973, p.323)

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