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research.5. Influence of Novelty (Familiarity with the Bobo Doll)Cumberbatch (1990) found that the novelty of the Bobo doll influenced childrens likelihood of imitating aggressive behavior, indicating a weakness in Banduras experiment.Specifically, he observed that children who had never played with a Bobo doll before were five times more likely to imitate aggression than those who were familiar with it.According to Cumberbatch, the dolls novelty increased the childrens curiosity, prompting them to mimic the adults aggressive actions simply because the situation and the object were new and intriguing. This suggests Banduras findings might be partly due to the novelty of the toy rather than true learned aggression, questioning the validity of his conclusions about observational learning.As a result, the practical relevance of the findings could be limited, as children might not react the same way to aggression in more familiar, everyday contexts.Ethical IssuesConducted in 1961, the study predates modern ethics codes and thus raises several ethical concerns by todays standards.Protection from harm is a major issue:Children in the aggressive-model condition were exposed to quite violent behavior by an adult.Some children were reportedly distressed or confused by witnessing the adults aggression.There is the risk that learning aggression could have had a lasting negative effect on the children participants are supposed to leave an experiment in the same state they entered it, which may not have been the case here.Encouraging children to act aggressively (even toward a doll) could be seen as normalizing unhelpful behaviors that might persist beyond the study.Informed consent and assent:The preschool children could not give informed consent themselves.Bandura did obtain informed consent from the nursery school and presumably from parents (known as presumptive consent), but the children themselves had no say in participation.They were not fully informed about the purpose of the study (which might have been beyond their capacity to understand at that age).Also, the children were not explicitly debriefed afterward in a way that they could understand e.g. theres no indication that an experimenter explained to them that the aggressive behavior they saw was pretend or discouraged them from imitating it outside the study.Without debriefing, children might have left with the impression that such aggression is acceptable, which is ethically concerning.Right to withdraw:Its not clear that the young children knew they could withdraw from the study.Reports suggest that at least one child wanted to stop upon being upset by the aggressive model (remarking that the behavior was wrong),but generally the experiment was structured such that the child was led from one stage to the next without a clear option to leave.This raises concerns about whether participants could quit if they felt uncomfortable an aspect of ethical treatment.Bandura argued that the benefits to society outweighed the risks to the children.The study did yield important insights about learning and has been influential in understanding and reducing real-world aggression.Nonetheless, by modern ethical standards, exposing children to aggression deliberately and possibly inducing aggressive behavior in them is problematic.Researchers today would likely mitigate these issues for example, by thorough debriefing (explaining to children with parents that the violence was pretend and not desirable behavior) and ensuring any distressed child could be comforted or removed.Vicarious Reinforcement Bobo Doll StudyAn observers behavior can also be affected by the positive or negative consequences of a models behavior.So we not only watch what people do, but we watch what happens when they do things.This is known as vicarious reinforcement. We are more likely to imitate behavior that is rewarded and refrain from behavior that is punished. Bandura (1965) used a similar experimental set up to the one outlined above to test vicarious reinforcement.The experiment had different consequences for the models aggression to the three groups of children.One group saw the models aggression being rewarded (being given sweets and a drink for a championship performance, another group saw the model being punished for the aggression (scolded), and the third group saw no specific consequences (control condition).When allowed to enter the playroom, children in the reward and control conditions imitated more aggressive actions of the model than did the children in the punishment condition.The children in the model punished group had learned the aggression by observational learning, but did not imitate it because they expected negative consequences.Reinforcement gained by watching another person is known as vicarious reinforcement. Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1959). Adolescent aggression: A study of the influence of child-training practices and family interrelationships.Bandura, A. (1965). Influence of models reinforcement contingencies on the acquisition of imitative responses. Journal of personality and social psychology, 1(6), 589.Bandura, A., Ross, D. & Ross, S.A. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 63, 575-82.Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. A. (1963). Imitation of film-mediated aggressive models. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 66(1), 3.Bandura, A. (1977). Social Learning Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Olivia Guy-Evans, MSc BSc (Hons) Psychology, MSc Psychology of Education Associate Editor for Simply Psychology Olivia Guy-Evans is a writer and associate editor for Simply Psychology. She has previously worked in healthcare and educational sectors. Saul McLeod, PhD Editor-in-Chief for Simply Psychology BSc (Hons) Psychology, MRes, PhD, University of Manchester Saul McLeod, PhD., is a qualified psychology teacher with over 18 years of experience in further and higher education. He has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including the Journal of Clinical Psychology.

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