Susceptibility to Filmed Models: A Study of Aggressive and Constructive Imitation

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This study supports the view that young boys are, to some degree, consistent in their tendency to be influenced by what they have seen on films. Seventy-two boys were assigned randomly to an 'aggressive' film, a 'constructive' film, or a 'mixed' condition, in which they saw two 'aggressive' films, two 'constructive' films or one 'aggressive' and one 'constructive' film. The number of acts a boy imitated after seeing one film was positively correlated with the number of acts imitated after viewing the second film in all three conditions. This tendency is shown to be independent of the initial tendency to act in the way portrayed in the film. Further research into the question of individual differences in the tendency to imitate filmed behaviour is encouraged.

It has been shown that viewers will imitate the behaviour of a model if they regard the model as highly competent (Rosenbaum, Chalmers & Horne, 1962) or as a status figure (Mischel & Grusec, 1966), or if the model is rewarded for its actions (Bandura et al., 1963). Obviously, from the perspective of the viewer these features are relative. For example, a child may find a young model more attractive in some situations than an adult model. He may see some behaviours as more appropriate in a child than in an adult. Similarly, a child might consider another who displays aggressive behaviour as being someone particularly worthy of copying, depending on his own evaluations of the attractiveness of aggressive behaviour.

The greater part of the research with human imitation, however, has emphasized the relative importance of different types of models, regardless of individual differences. Preoccupation with this approach leads film producers and educationalists who use audio-visual media to concentrate on presentation, often at the expense of content. Status figures and competent characters are used, and it is assumed that their impact is substantial. It could be, however, that some viewers are more vulnerable than others, and that those who respond to the example of models
would tend to respond no matter who the model was, and that those who do not react would fail to be influenced by any character, however presented.

There is every reason to believe that this is indeed the case, for studies have shown that, where subjects perform specific skills (Lanzetta & Kanareff, 1959), incompetents are more prone to imitate models, and Rosenbaum and de Charms (1960) showed that subjects with little self-esteem were more likely to imitate others' behaviour. Conformity research supports the idea of some individuals being especially vulnerable to the influence of others. Crutchfield's (1955) review highlights low intelligence and low self-esteem among many other characteristics typical of such individuals.

The implications of these findings for imitation research are important, for if some children are generally greatly influenced by any model, the research emphasis on the importance of those models is misleading. In a previous experiment (Kniveton & Stephenson, 1973) we showed that young boys are consistent in their tendency to imitate aggressive acts portrayed on film. In that experiment boys were shown, on separate occasions, two films which displayed aggressive child models. The children, situations and aggressive acts all differed from one film to the next. It was found that children who were aggressive after watching one film tended to be aggressive after watching the second film. The amount of aggression displayed was over and above that shown spontaneously in the experimental situation before the children saw any film. Initial aggressive behaviour, therefore, did not predict the degree to which a child was influenced by viewing an aggressive film.

That certain children are susceptible to aggressive films does not mean that they are more likely to imitate film models in general. In this experiment the extent of children's vulnerability to filmed models is examined systematically. In particular we examined whether or not the tendency to imitate aggressive models extends to the imitation of both adult and child models, and also to the imitation of non-aggressive models. To this end a sample of boys was exposed to film models on two occasions approximately one month apart. Each film had one model and in each case the experimental laboratory was furnished in a manner similar to the room shown in the particular film. In the present study a specialized skill is not investigated, nor are children shown, by comparison with their peers, to be incompetent or encouraged to have a low opinion of themselves. The activities chosen are well within the competence of each child so that his physical and intellectual abilities (Bandura, 1971) do not form any limit to the range of behaviours which are possible.

Boys were exposed to: (a) two aggressive-play films; or (b) two constructive-play films; or (c) one 'aggressive' and one 'constructive' film. It was predicted that there would be a high correlation between the amount and the range of imitative behaviour displayed by the children after observation of each of the two film models in each of the three experimental conditions. This hypothesis derives from our previous finding that consistent imitation of aggressive filmed models occurs independently of spontaneous aggressiveness. The consistency we have demonstrated, therefore, may relate to vulnerability to filmed models in general, rather than to the individual's propensity for aggression.