**Mass Media Leads to Mass Murder: A Social Learning Theory Analysis**

Over the past few years, it has become obvious that there is an increased dialogue in the news about mass shootings within our communities. Sadly, this increased dialogue is a result of an increase in actual mass shootings – the most recent one being the Navy Yard shooting in Washington D.C. Whenever another mass shooting occurs, I question whether the person who committed such a horrific crime was simply modeling the behavior of a previous “inspirational” shooter exceedingly discussed in the media. In this paper, I will identify recent mass shootings and explain how such a terrible act may be grounded in Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory.

**The Theory**

Social Learning Theory was created by Albert Bandura in 1965. The Theory posits that learning takes place as a result of modeling other people’s behaviors. Bandura conducted a study and found that when children witnessed an adult model aggressively beat a Bobo doll in a controlled experimental setting, they imitated the adult model and played aggressively when left alone with the doll; however, when children did not play aggressively after seeing the adult model, they were able to imitate the aggressive behavior if asked to do so (Sullivan, 2013).

Social learning theory emerged as more and more homes in the United States started to own television sets. By the mid 1960s, when most homes in the United States had a television set, families were constantly exposed to various types of programming, rendering many quite concerned about the effects of programming on children, particularly if the programming included any level of violence (as cited in Sullivan, 2013).

After Congress agreed to look into whether television was truly prompting aggressive behavior in children, studies were commissioned and professionals were asked to explore and understand whether television did affect children the way people thought it did. The result was the “Surgeon General’s Report” which included Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory of 1965 (as cited in Sullivan, 2013, p.45).

John Sullivan, author of *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power* wrote, “Bandura’s research was the first to provide empirical evidence that children imitate adult models, which suggested that children were internalizing behaviors they witnessed on television” (Sullivan, 2013, p.45).

**The Situation**

The most recent mass murder that occurred in the United States was the Washington Navy Yard shooting, which involved a gunman getting into the Navy Yard, shooting and killing 12 people in September 2013 (Pearson, Botelho & Brown, 2013). This shooting prompts one to question why mass shootings have been occurring a lot more often than they used to.

In 2012, twenty school children were shot along with six school employees in Connecticut while in Colorado another mass shooting killed many while watching a movie at the theater. Similar incidents like the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007 and the Columbine 1999 are other examples of a much too often witnessed crime in the United States (Mesoudi, 2013).

According to Washington Post author Brad Plumer in his article titled, “Why are Mass Shootings Becoming More Common,” mass shootings have been on the increase. He says, “Of the 12 deadliest shootings in U.S. history, six have taken place since 2007” (Plumer, 2012).

Plumer considers mental illness to be a likely cause as well as the increased availability of guns; however, he does mention that “overall gun violence has been declining in recent years while mass shootings appear to have become more commonplace.” Additional Plumer believes that research is still weak and the true factors behind such horrific crimes are still not clear (Plumer, 2012).

While research still has not been able to identify exact reasons for the majority of mass shooting, some believe that one cause is the media itself. In fact, Professor Alex Masoudi at Durham University in the United Kingdom says, “One potential cause of mass shootings that receives little attention in the mass media, however, is the mass media themselves. It may be that, simply by devoting continual, non-stop coverage to these events, the media may be encouraging 'copycat' mass shootings” (Mesoudi, 2013).

Mesoudi also says that while there may be many reasons for such a crime including “the availability of guns, mental illnesses, and movie, television and video game violence,” the media should not simplify the reasons for mass shootings but should describe them holistically not linking the crime to only one or two causes. He believes reasons may be more complex than we think (Mesoudi, 2013).

**The Relevance of Social Learning Theory**

The use of Social Learning Theory is relevant to mass murder situations because of the theory’s modeling attribute, whereby one person witnesses some sort of aggressive behavior and is later able to imitate it. Therefore, when someone with a potential to kill – due to numerous personal or social reasons – keeps seeing mass murder cases discussed in mass media or constant analyses of the mass shooting predecessor, he or she is constantly reminded of the aggressive behavior allowing for the modeling of that behavior.

**The Appropriateness of Social Learning Theory**

Although not incorporated for mass murders or shootings, Social Learning Theory has served as a basis for research in the areas of suicide, terrorism, and multiple murders (Brosius & Weimann, 1991; ­­­­­­­­­­Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003; Singer & Hensley, 2004).

In a study conducted by Brosius and Weimann (1991), the researchers tried to find out the effects of mass media on the emergence and increase of terrorism. Their findings revealed that there is a “contagious effect” in terms of the “contribution of the media, especially US TV networks, to the reoccurrence of terrorism” internationally (Brosius & Weimann, 1991).

Additionally, another study investigated suicidal modeling behavior in youth after having viewed suicide or heard reports about suicide in the media. The researchers of the study found that “The evidence is stronger for the influence of reports in the news media than in fictional formats. However, several studies have found dramatic effects of televised portrayals that have led to increased rates of suicide and suicide attempts using the same methods displayed in the shows” (Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003).

In an analysis by Atchison and Heidi in 2010, the researchers looked into the reasons behind Charles Manson and his followers’ multiple murders, also using multiple social theories including Social Learning Theory (Atchison & Heidi, 2010).

If Social Learning Theory has been used as significant grounds on which to base these types of murders, then one may also consider Social Learning Theory appropriate for grounding mass murders and mass shootings.

**Conclusion**

After shedding light on the most recent and deadliest mass shootings in the history of the United States, it has become clear that along with an increase in shootings is an increase in media coverage about mass shootings. In this paper, I found numerous articles that demonstrated how Bandura’s Social Learning Theory has been a thorough lens in which to ground tragic events where murder is a result of imitative behavior. Similarly, since mass shootings are in fact mass murders, social learning theory may be considered an appropriate theory for grounding this situation. Whether mass shootings have been a result of mental illness, increased gun availability, media imitation or a combination of everything, future research is undoubtedly required to fully understand the complex reasons as to why people may commit such cruel acts.

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