The individual and the group—social cognitive theory

Inquiry questions

- What determines your identity?
- Is violence a learned behaviour?
- How does culture influence health behaviour?

What you will learn in this section

- Socialization
  - Primary and secondary socialization: the process of becoming a member of a social group
- Social cognitive theory
  - Bandura's bobo doll experiments (1961, 1963, 1965) learning aggression through models
  - Social cognitive theory and prosocial behaviour

This section also links to:

- doctor–patient relations (health psychology)
- Bandura—origins of conflict (psychology of human relationships)
- developing identity (developmental psychology)
- the influence of globalization on individual behaviour
- cognitive processing in the digital world (cognitive approach to learning).

Socialization—how do we become who we are?

No child is born a nationalist, a racist, a sexist or a chauvinist—people must *become* these things. The process of becoming a member of a social group is called **socialization.** This begins at the most basic level in the family. This incredibly important stage in childhood development where a child learns the basic rules and norms of living in his or her group is called **primary socialization**. In short, primary socialization is the initial stage where **social norms** are passed between group members. There are many theories of socialization. Two examples are **gender socialization**, where children learn the attitudes and behaviours considered appropriate for their gender; and **cultural socialization**, where children are taught about their racial, cultural or ethnic heritage.

Primary socialization forces partially determine the prosocial or antisocial behaviours of a developing child. The most important primary socialization forces are the family, school peers and later peer groups. Families are the first point of social contact for babies. It is in these social relationships where babies first learn to bond, create and nurture relationships, mediate disputes and navigate the ethical conventions of a social group. The term "primary" refers to the distance from the target of the socialization forces, not the order in which they occur. Primary socialization forces bond directly with youths and transmit behavioural and attitudinal norms (Oetting, 1999). It is these forces that both monitor and correct behaviour to conform with norms. Some examples of this include parents coaxing a "please" or "thank you" from their children or encouraging children to share and treat other people with respect. Conversely, if a child witnesses a parent or role model expressing racist or derogatory opinions about a minority group, the child may think that behaviour is acceptable and continue to hold that derogatory opinion about the minority group.

Secondary socialization includes elements such as the larger community, extended family and (perhaps most notoriously) the media. Secondary socialization forces tend to influence adherence to or deviance from norms indirectly. That is, they influence behaviour and attitude by affecting the primary forces. They can influence the forces themselves or serve to reinforce or interfere with the transmissions of norms from primary forces. Children's television shows that model positive norms such as good manners and sharing are examples of "reinforcing secondary socialization", while media modelling antisocial violent behaviour or the mistreatment of others would be "detracting secondary socialization".

Secondary socialization forces are important because they play an important role in forming individual beliefs, behaviours, identities and attitudes beyond the family and close friends. Important questions arise, and beg study, when individuals do not receive input from their primary socialization forces. Youths subjected to racism, abuse (both physical and mental), poor or dangerous schools, or abandonment must seek alternative forms of socialization and can turn to secondary sources such as peer groups and the media (Garcia, 1999).

Group socialization is a form of secondary socialization where it is an individual's peer group, not the person's parental figures, that influences personality and behaviour.

Censorship

Governments often attempt to manage or manipulate cultural norms by controlling the sources and topics of information passed through the media (both social media and mass media). Some form of government censorship is practised in most countries around the world. Freedom House's 2017 report of press freedom claims that 45% of the world's population live in countries where the media (a key secondary socializing force) is not free. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that 2016 saw the lowest levels of media freedom in 13 years. The Freedom House report (2017) states that this is due mainly to "unprecedented threats to journalists and media outlets in major democracies".

ATL skills: Thinking

Media censorship is a hotly debated topic. The most common forms of media censorship are related to violence, hate speech and pornography but also often extend to political ideology and criticisms. Create a table of the pros and cons of media censorship, then answer the following questions.

- Who determines the norms of society?
- Who should be more responsible for the socialization of youths, parents and guardians or governments?
- Why do societies punish deviation from group norms?
- Do some societies punish deviance more severely? Which ones, and why?

Social cognitive theory

The fact that culture is learned from primary and secondary socialization is an important aspect of understanding how cultural norms are maintained or changed. The next step is to examine how these norms, behaviours, attitudes and identities are transmitted between group members. To this end, Albert Bandura developed his **social cognitive theory** (originally social learning theory).

Learning can be done both directly and indirectly. In other words, we can learn by performing an action or behaviour and experiencing the consequences ourselves (**direct**) or by observing the consequences of another person's actions or behaviour (**indirect**). Social cognitive theory is an attempt to explain how we learn from others.

Social cognitive theory began in the 1960s as social learning theory. **Social learning theory** is based upon a behaviourist approach to learning which uses **classical** and **operant conditioning** to describe how social learning occurs. The behaviourists believed that learning was simply a matter of conditioning a response from a stimulus.

Classical conditioning was famously studied by Ivan Pavlov and his dogs. In classical conditioning, an **unconditioned stimulus** (food) is paired with a **neutral stimulus** (a bell ringing). Over time, the neutral stimulus will become the **conditioned stimulus** which brings about the **conditioned response** (salivating dogs). In Pavlov's case, consistently pairing a ringing bell with food resulted in his dogs salivating at the sound of the bell. Pavlov received a Nobel Prize for his work in this area in 1904.

Operant conditioning is another form of learning studied by BF Skinner, considered one of the most important behavioural psychologists of the 20th century. In operant conditioning, a desired behaviour is followed by either punishment or reward to either strengthen the behaviour or weaken it. Learners or observers are more likely to engage in the behaviour for which they are rewarded.

The **behaviourist approach** to learning places an emphasis on observable behaviour (as opposed to cognition) and assumes that most behaviour is learned from the environment. In this approach, a stimulus is given from the environment and a response is measured in terms of a given behaviour, everything in between those two observable events is not considered. See Unit 3 for more on the behaviourist approach.

The behaviourist approach to learning seems to suggest that in order to learn something, individuals must observe it then try it. **Bandura (2005)** felt this trial-and-error type of learning could not explain how people learned language, customs or educational, religious and political practices. In short, Bandura felt that the complex process of socialization did not occur through trial and error.

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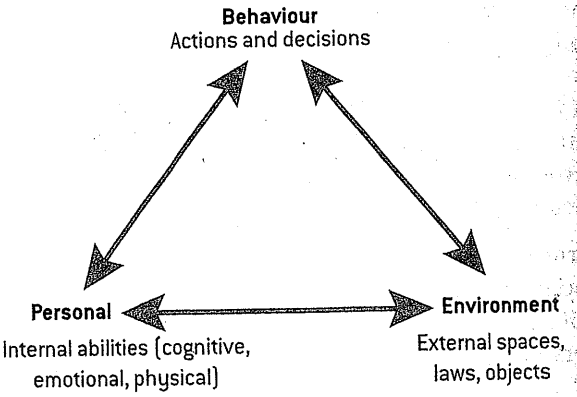
Aristotle argued that people are born as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) and begin to fill their mind as they grow older and acquire their behaviours and attitudes from their life experiences. Modern psychology has used adoption studies and twin studies to explore this claim. Steven Pinker in *The Blank Slate* makes the claim that humans are pre-programmed to develop certain traits (IQ, gender identity and alcoholism). Pinker is specifically interested in language and argues that people are born with innate dispositions toward spoken language (2016). Pinker is not referring to any specific language but simply language as the more general ability to understand and apply grammar and vocabulary to explain our world. This characterizes the classic debate between innatism (or nativism) and the concept of *tabula rasa*.

Where does language come from? Is it innate or learned?

Bandura understood behaviour, society and cognition as all mutually interrelated. He believed the behaviourists were too simplistic in explaining human behaviour as being a one-way relationship between the environment and behaviour. Bandura proposed a model of behaviour based upon **reciprocal determinism** (or **triadic reciprocal determinism**). This is a model of the mutual influence of three sets of factors; personal (cognition, biology and mood), behavioural and environmental (see Figure 4.8). It works on the assumption that all three of these things are responsible for the way we behave.

For example, if you are in a bad mood and unhappy then you may affect the mood of those around you and the way they treat you. Others may choose to avoid contact with you or adopt your bad mood and unhappiness while interacting with you. This may, in turn, reinforce your bad mood and influence your behaviour in unhelpful ways when dealing with people around you. Conversely, imagine you are in a great mood and you are able to change your environment by improving the moods of the people around. In this way you can create a friendly, stimulating and supportive environment that will then influence how you interact with or behave with people in that environment.



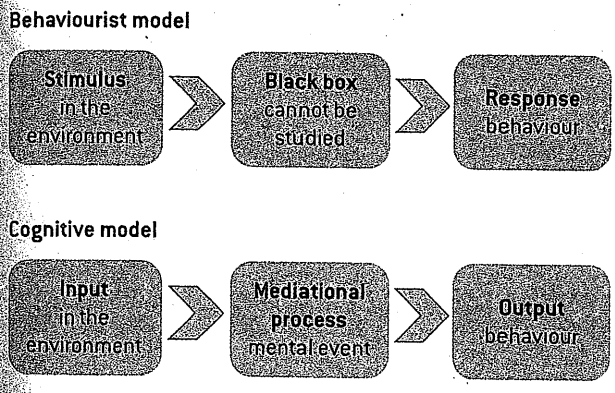
▲ Figure 4.8 Triadic reciprocal determinism

In relation to the topics discussed in this section, you may also wish to look at health belief models (see Unit 6 on health psychology) and thinking and decision-making (see Unit 3 on the cognitive approach to behaviour).

Exercise

Create your own example of a situation showing reciprocal determinism in the form of a cartoon strip. Make each image part of a timeline of an event where behaviour, personal characteristics and environment are interacting with, and influencing, each other. Try to be original but realistic.

In response to a perceived shortcoming of the behaviourists' explanation, Bandura adopted a cognitive approach to studying learning. In his book *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, published in 1986, he refers to his theory of learning as social cognitive theory as opposed to social learning theory. **Bandura (1986)** adopted the assumption that the mind could be studied scientifically and therefore attempted to shed light into the "black box" of the mind. Although on the surface this may seem like a simple change, when he focused his theory of learning on human cognition, the theory became far more complex and better able to explain learning processes.



⚠ Figure 4.9 Bandura's social cognitive theory

Source: https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html

Instead of simply stimulus–behaviour, Bandura's theory encourages researchers to examine the complex thought processes that occur between observation and behaviour: stimulus–*cognition*–behaviour. Bandura calls this an **agentic approach** to studying learning. To be an agent means to:

- have control over behaviour
- develop intentions and forethought—be able to visualize future behaviours
- regulate behaviour—do things that give satisfaction and reward while avoiding things that result in negative outcomes
- reflect on capabilities and goals—be self-aware and think about self-efficacy and the soundness of behaviour (Bandura, 2001).

Together, these factors describe the cognitive part of Bandura's cognitive theory of learning. In other words, human beings are agents in their own lives; we do not simply react to the world around us (behaviourist model). We pay attention to the people and events around us, interpret their behaviour (including rewards and punishments), design a plan considering our abilities and goals, and behave in a way that will bring about a desired outcome. It is in this way that we can learn from the mistakes and success of others (**vicarious learning**) as well as the reinforcements experienced by others (**vicarious reinforcement**). In evaluating the actions and consequences of behaviour performed by other people, individuals are able to learn without the need to perform an observed behaviour themselves.

Bandura broke down his social cognitive theory into four components; attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Each one of these can be seen as a cognitive process.

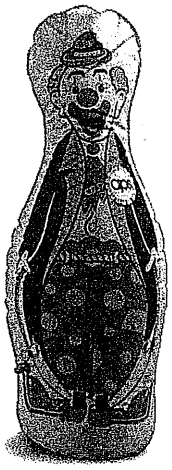
Attention (observation)

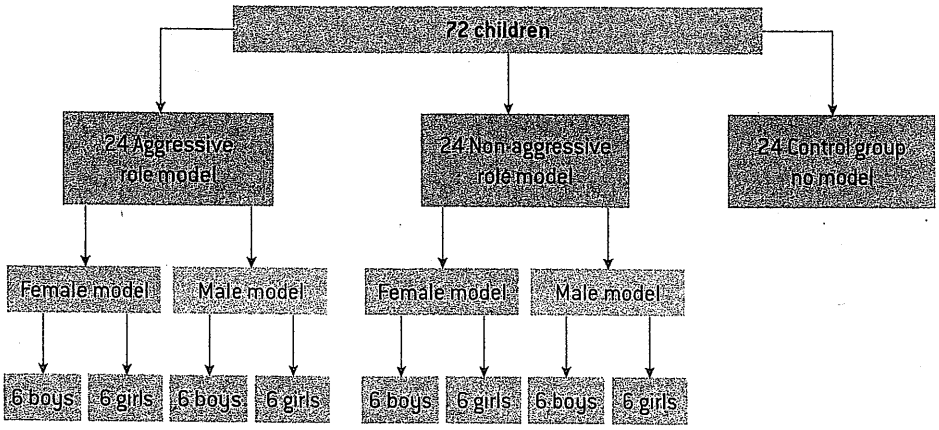
In *Social Learning Theory* (1977), Bandura argues that instead of learning by trial and error, people learn their ways of thinking and behaving by paying attention to how others think and behave. He called this **observational learning**: learning that takes place by observing others. The stimuli that serve to expose learners (or observers) to particular behaviours are the models in the social environment. The people with whom an individual normally associates will determine, to a large extent, the types of modelling the individual is exposed to. A child born into an abusive family in a dangerous neighbourhood is more likely to be exposed to aggressive and violent models and so to aggressive and violent behaviours. Conversely, a child who is exposed only to pacifist and non-violent models will likely engage in pacifist and non-violent behaviour.

Bandura is most well known for a series of experiments carried out in the 1960s, starting with the key study **Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961)**. These experiments used a large inflatable doll as the object of aggression for a model while children observed model acting aggressively towards the doll. Collectively, these are known as the **bobo doll experiments.**

Aggression has long been the focus of social cognitive theory. In 1961, Bandura and colleagues

tested his social cognitive theory on 72 children (36 girls and 36 boys) between the ages of 3 and 6 enrolled at Stanford University's Nursery School (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961). The children were first split up into three groups (see Figure 4.10). One group was exposed to an adult aggressively playing with a bobo doll, a second group was exposed to an adult engaged in non-aggressive play and a third group was not given a model to observe. The children were rated on their aggressiveness by their nursery school teachers prior to the experiment to control for equal amounts of pre-exposure aggressiveness in each group.





▲ Figure 4.10 Method for Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) bobo doll experiment

Source: https://www.simplypsychology.org/bobo-doll.html

In both the aggressive and the non-aggressive conditions, a child was seated in one corner of a room while a model was escorted by the experimenter to another corner. The child was given prints and stickers to play with. The model's corner contained a Tinkertoy set, a mallet and a 1.5-metre tall bobo doll. (A bobo doll is an inflatable doll with a weight in the bottom so that the doll will right itself after being hit.) Once the model and the child were seated and playing, the experimenter left the room.

In the non-aggressive condition, the model ignored the doll and played quietly with the toys. In the aggressive condition, the model played briefly with the toys before turning to the bobo doll and "aggressing toward it" both verbally and physically for the rest of the time. The model hit the bobo doll in unique and novel ways so that "imitation" could be identified as opposed to unrelated but also aggressive play. After 10 minutes, the child was taken by the experimenter to another room.

At this point each of the children underwent an "instigation to aggression" stage where the child was given time to engage with attractive toys but separated from these toys once he or she became interested and began playing with them. At this point the child was told that he or she could play with toys in the adjoining room. This was the experimental room containing several toys similar to the first room, including a 1-metre tall bobo doll. The experimenter at this point remained in the room but worked quietly at a desk in the corner for the 20-minute session.

Response category	Experimental groups				Control groups
	Aggressive		Non-aggressive		
	F Model	M Model	F Model	M Model	
Imitative physical aggression					
Female subjects	5.5	7.2	2.5	0.0	1.2
Male subjects	12.4	25.8	0.2	1.5	2.0
Imitative verbal aggression					
Female subjects	13.7	2.0	0.3	0.0	0.7
Male subjects	4.3	12.7	1.1	0.0	1.7
Mallet aggression					
Female subjects	17.2	18.7	0.5	0.5	13.1
Male subjects	15.5	28.8	18.7	6.7	13.5
Punches bobo doll					
Female subjects	6.3	16.5	5.8	4.3	11.7
Male subjects	18.9	11.9	15.6	14.8	15.7
Non-imitative aggression					
Female subjects	21.3	8.4	7.2	1.4	6.1
Male subjects	16.2	36.7	26.1	22.3	24.6
Aggressive gun play					
Female subjects	1.8	4.5	2.6	2.5	3.7
Male subjects	7.3	15.9	8.9	16.7	14.3

▲ Table 4.6 Mean aggression scores for experimental and control subjects

Source: Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961)

Results for this experiment supported the hypothesis that exposure of children to aggressive models would increase aggressiveness among the children (see Table 4.6). According to the researchers, this was clear confirmation of observational learning.

In addition, the researchers discovered that boys were more likely to imitate physical aggression while girls were more likely to imitate verbal aggression. Boys were also more aggressive than girls in all groups.

See video

Watch this video on social cognitive learning: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=128Ts5r9NRE

Simply exposing someone to a model is not enough for learning to take place. The observer has to **pay attention** to the model and recognize a specific behaviour upon which to focus attention. Without due attention, observers will not learn behaviour. Related to this is the idea that some models command more attention than others and therefore interpersonal attraction is a component of modelling. For example, a child is more likely to model the behaviour of a close family member or of a particularly close peer over more distant relatives or an unfriendly peer. One exception noted by Bandura is televised models, who seem to hold attention despite the lack of social cohesion between model and observer (Bandura, 2005).

In 1963, Bandura partially replicated the 1961 bobo doll experiment. He used mediated violence (in the form of aggressive adult models on film, rather than live) and found that observing children exhibited the same learned aggression toward the doll. This has important ramifications for the effect of mediated violence on children.

For more on this see Unit 3 on the cognitive approach to behaviour, HL extension "Cognitive processing in the digital world".

Retention, reproduction, motivation (cognitions)

Related to the concept of attention is **retention**—Bandura stated, perhaps obviously, that observers have to remember what behaviour was observed in order to repeat it. This is important in instances when imitation of the learned behaviour is delayed.

Reproduction of a task is affected by self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you are able to accomplish a task. High self-efficacy means you are optimistic and confident that you will be able to accomplish a task successfully; low self-efficacy or low confidence is the opposite (see Unit 6 on health psychology for more on this). People tend not to try something if they expect failure, so a belief that you are capable of successfully reproducing an observed behaviour is an important component of social cognitive/learning theory.

Bandura (2012) identified four sources of self-efficacy.

- **Mastery experiences**—past success reinforces the belief that further success is possible but failure (especially if it occurs before efficacy is achieved) reduces belief in a successful outcome.
- **Vicarious experiences**—this is where models are so important because seeing others, similar to themselves, succeed by sustained effort will raise observers' beliefs in their ability to carry out an action or behaviour successfully.
- **Social persuasion**—people who are convinced by others that they possess the ability to succeed at a given action or behaviour are likely to make a greater effort and to sustain it longer than those who receive either negative social reinforcement or none at all.
- **Emotional and physical states**—positive mood improves perceived self-efficacy and hopeless or sad moods can diminish it (Bandura, 1994).

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Research on the impact of visualization and imagery training (using your imagination to picture yourself performing a task) has shown that imagination can be as effective as practising a skill physically (Jones *et al*, 2002). Researchers examined the effect of imagery script on a group of novice rock climbers.

Novice climbers were randomly assigned to either a control group who took part in a light exercise programme, or an experimental group who were exposed to a scripted imagery training programme. After the participants went through their respective training, they climbed a 5.1-metre high wall following a designated route. Levels of self-efficacy and stress were measured before and during the climb. There was no significant difference in climbing performance, but the experimental group reported lower levels of perceived stress and higher levels of self-efficacy as compared to the control group.

This study shows that imagining practising a task can reduce stress and improve self-efficacy, adding another source of self-efficacy to the list generated by Bandura in 1994. Do you think this research supports the concept of imagination as a way of knowing? What makes you say that?

Motivation to perform an action or demonstrate behaviour has a lot to do with **reinforcement**. If people perform an action and are rewarded for it, they are likely to be motivated to repeat the action. Similarly, if they are punished, they are not likely to repeat the action. So reinforcement (through **rewards or punishments**) can influence a person's motivation to act.

Similar to learning, reinforcement can be effective both directly and indirectly. We can learn through reinforcement of our own actions or through observing the reinforcement of others.

In a 1965 partial replication of Bandura and his colleagues' 1961 and 1963 studies, researchers sought to examine the role of reinforcement in the social learning of aggression. In this version, children watched a film where an adult model was acting aggressively toward a bobo doll. The children were separated into three conditions.

1. **Control:** the children witnessed the aggression without reward or punishment.

2. **Reward:** the children witnessed the aggression followed by the model being rewarded for the aggressive acts with candies and a soft drink.
3. **Punishment:** the children witnessed the aggression followed by the model being punished for the aggressive acts with a scolding and spanking.

After viewing the film, the children were observed in a playroom with toys similar to the ones used by the adult model in the film. It was found that the children in condition 3 performed significantly fewer aggressive acts than children in conditions 1 and 2 (Bandura, 1965).

Further support for Bandura's theory

Bandura's theory has been tested beyond the strict conditions of experimentation: it has been used to explain behaviour in the real world. Social cognitive theory has been effective in explaining marital violence. Violence is a learned behaviour and it has been accepted for many years that there is an intergenerational transmission of violence. **Mihalic and Elliott (1997)**. found that males and females who endured more physical violence as children had higher rates of marital violence as adults. Social cognitive theory is able to explain why this is. During childhood, observing how parents and other models behave in relationships provides an initial learning of behaviours that are "appropriate" for these relationships. Implicit in the act of violence is an understanding of that behaviour as socially acceptable, especially when the behaviour is rewarded with the achievement of a goal.

Other research, examining the cognitive determinants of aggressive behaviour in school children, found that perceived self-efficacy and reinforcement (punishment or reward) were both key in determining behaviour. In one study by **Perry, Perry and Rasmussen (1986)**, 160 children were sampled and categorized as either aggressive or not aggressive. Children were given two questionnaires, one measuring perceptions of self-efficacy in avoiding aggressive actions and the other measuring **outcome expectations** (that is, whether the children expected reward or punishment following the action). It was found that "aggressive children" found it easier to engage in aggressive behaviour and more difficult to inhibit aggressive impulses. "Aggressive children" were also more confident that aggressive behaviour would produce rewards rather than punishments.

Interestingly, the researchers found that there were very few differences between the sexes on the perceived self-efficacy questionnaire but large differences on the outcome expectations questionnaire. Girls were more likely to expect that aggression would cause suffering in the victim and that the aggression would be punished more severely by peers. Conclusions from this study point toward the importance of self-efficacy and perceived reinforcement (rewards or punishments) as cognitive determinants of social learning in relation to the antisocial behaviour of aggression.

Social cognitive theory can also be used to explain the learning of prosocial behaviours. Using a sample of 647 kindergarteners (325 boys, 322 girls), **Sheridan *et al* (2011)** examined the perceived effectiveness of social cognitive theory in teaching children four skills: listening, following directions, problem-solving and knowing when to tell. A widely recognized programme called "Skillstream", developed by McGinnis and Goldstein, was used. This programme uses modelling, role-playing, performance feedback and generalization to encourage prosocial behaviour. In Sheridan *et al* (2011) results showed significant improvements in all skills. Additionally, classroom teachers as well as mental health staff reported overall improved sociability among the students. Conclusions from this study suggest that learning prosocial skills can be explained through social cognitive theory.

ATL skills: Thinking

Bandura's bobo doll studies were experiments undertaken in a laboratory with strictly controlled variables—arguably a very unnatural environment.

Can a social phenomenon that normally takes place within a complex set of social relationships ever be studied in such a contrived and controlled situation? In other words, do experiments on social learning lack ecological validity?

Digital technology and social learning

McLuhan believed that electronic media serve to extend humanities senses; for example, radio extended our ears and television our eyes. He also argued that it is not the content of a medium that affects human behaviour but the form of the medium itself. This, now famous, idea is summed up perfectly in McLuhan's quip that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964). In other words, it is not what is on the radio, television or the internet that is of interest, but the form and function of the medium that will change individuals and societies. The content of a medium is just "the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan, 1964, cited in Carr, 2011).

If we examine this effect through the lens of international cultural products, we see that from a receiver's perspective this could be seen as an insidious threat to national culture. Not only is the content of most western television culturally skewed toward western values, but the actual delivery system of the values also represents those foreign cultural components of consumerism, mass communications and all of the myriad gatekeepers who go along with it.

More recently, Carr (2011) wrote about this idea. Using some of the greatest minds in history, starting with Plato, Carr argues that the internet encourages scanning and skimming at the cost of concentration, contemplation and reflection. Essentially, he argues that the combination of neuroplasticity and repetitive interactions online are reshaping our brains.

For more on this see Unit 3 on the cognitive approach to behaviour, HL extension "Cognitive processing in the digital world".