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Social Psychology of Violence

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1 Introduction

Most of the research in social psychology on harm doing behavior is conceived as aggression. There is no separate basic research area on violence, although sometimes high levels of aggression or inflicting physical harm are referred to as violence. The same causal factors that instigate aggressive behavior are assumed to also generate violent behavior. Examination of recent textbooks in social psychology indicate that they all have a chapter on aggression, but violence is only mentioned as a descriptive term referring to content of television programs or violent crimes. Applied researchers do of course study spouse and child abuse, sexual coercion, the effects of depictions of violence in the mass media, assaults and homicides, and (less often) terrorism but no cohesive scientific theory of violence has been offered.

Social psychologists tend to focus on individuals in face-to-face interactions, and to neglect larger scale conflicts between groups of people, such as riots and revolutions. Nevertheless, there are a few case studies of holliganism at soccer games and experiments examining intergroup conflicts. There is a body of research that focuses on factors that might be implicated in violence, such as stereotyping of outgroup members and the tendency to view the conduct of one's own group as legitimate and the same conduct when carried out by an outgroup as illegitimate. Stereotyping and prejudice, divergent perspectives, and ingroup and outgroup biases, are extensively studied in social psychology, but the role of these cognitive factors in bringing about violent behavior has not been subjected to systematic empirical evaluation.

2. History of Research on Aggression in Social Psychology

The laboratory study of human aggression was stimulated by frustration-aggression theory in the 1940s. Subsequent tests of the theory revealed shortcomings, which were addressed by the learning theories of Buss (1961) and Bandura (1973), and Berkowitz's (1989) reconceptualization of frustration-aggression theory as emotional aggression. Since much of the laboratory research on aggression has been theory relevant, it is appropriate to briefly describe the theories and some of the research each has generated.

2.1 Frustration-Aggression Theory

Laboratory research on aggression was limited primarily to examining biological factors until the 1940s. For example, Kuo (1930) found that cats do not have an instinct to kill mice or rats. The experience of kittens, particularly in observing the predatory behavior of their mothers, was the determining factor in whether the kittens would kill and eat rodents. The promulgation of frustration-aggression theory (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) stimulated psychologists to carry out experiments on aggression. The five authors specialized in different areas of psychology, including clinical, social, biological, learning, and developmental psychology. They applied Clark Hulls (1952) behavior theory to Freud's (1938) interpretation of aggressive behavior. According to frustration-aggression theory, frustration, defined as an interference in obtaining a goal when an organism is striving to obtain the goal, automatically because of biological prewriting creates aggressive energy or drive. Aggressive drive instigates aggressive behavior, which usually is directed at the frustrating agent. Aggressive behavior reduces aggressive drive, a process referred to as catharsis. Drive reduction is reinforcing, and therefore aggressive behavior is self-reinforcing. The organisms aggressive behavior,

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like any other behavior, is shaped by rewards and punishments. If aggressive behavior is punished or the organism learns to expect punishment for engaging in it, the organism will be inhibited. Whenever the organism does not perform an instigated aggressive behavior, the aggressive drive remains. This drive state may lead the organism to engage in displaced aggression which may take the form of some other noninhibited aggressive behavior against the frustrating agent (i.e., response generalization) or aggression against a substitute person who is in some way similar to the frustrating agent (i.e., stimulus generalization).

Direct effect of frustration on aggression. Laboratory research tested three major aspects of frustration aggression theory: (1) the direct effects of frustration on aggression, (2) whether performing aggressive behavior is cathartic, and (3) displacement of aggression toward substitute targets. The research on the direct effects of frustration produced mixed results. Frustration in the form of task failure (Buss, 1966) or time out from positive reinforcements (Jegard & Walters, 1960) did not cause human subjects to be more aggressive towards another person. On the other hand, when the individual is insulted, given high levels of shock by another person, or treated unjustly increased aggression does occur (Berkowitz, 1965; Buss, 1961, Geen 1968, Gentry, 1970). A distinction was made between arbitrary and justified frustration in an attempt to understand contradictory results (Pastore, 1952; Cohen, 1955). The idea was that a person would become angry only when experiencing arbitrary frustration, but not when the frustrating agent was justified in interfering with the person's attempt to achieve a goal. Thus, if task failure or time-outs from positive reinforcements did not cause aggression, it might be because the frustration was justified.

Overall the evidence does not support a direct relationship between frustration and aggression. Not only has research indicated a variety of frustrating conditions that are not associated with aggression, but related research indicates that frustration may cause other forms of behavior, such as depression or learned helplessness. It has also been said that frustration is the mother of all invention. Furthermore, some forms of frustration, such as playing golf or climbing cliffs, may be exciting and fun. In place of the term frustration more precise terms, such as attack, withdrawal of reinforcement, and delay of reinforcement, have become commonplace. Bandura (1973) has shown that these more precisely defined conditions lead to different behavioral outcomes.

Catharsis. Early tests of the catharsis hypothesis interpreted aggressive drive as autonomic nervous system activity, which was measured in the form of heart rate, respiration rate, and so on. In a series of experiments Hokanson (1970) found that frustration in the form of insults from another person caused increased ANS arousal, and delivering electric shocks to that person reduced ANS arousal. However, in this research subjects were allowed only to give more or less shocks to the other person, and did not have an option to behave in other ways. When subjects received shocks from another person who was said to have had the opportunity to choose to give a token reward or to pass on a given trial, males reciprocated by giving shocks back. However, female subjects tended to respond to shocks with conciliatory behavior. Both males and females showed the increased ANS arousal when receiving shocks, and reduction in ANS arousal after their aggressive or conciliatory behavior. Apparently, there is a reduction of arousal when any behavior sequence is completed, and it is not specific to catharsis produced by aggressive behavior.

An implication of the catharsis hypothesis is that when an aggressive behavior is performed, and drive reduction occurs, the organism would be less aggressive if given an immediate opportunity to again aggress against a frustrating agent. However, reviews of the literature (e.g., Geen & Quanty, 1977) indicate that performing an aggressive response increases aggressiveness.

Displacement of aggression. A displacement effect has been reliably demonstrated (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). For example, Doob and Wood (1972) had a confederate annoy subjects and then gave some of them an opportunity to shock him, while others were given an opportunity to shock a third party. The third party was shocked just as much as the annoying person. The interpretation by frustration-aggression theory is that subjects aggressed against the innocent third party because aggressive drive had built up and needed to be released or reduced by aggressive behavior. However, the evidence does not support a catharsis process. Thus, frustration aggression theory, which we know to be inadequate, has produced a reliable phenomenon (displacement), but the explanation for it cannot be correct.

2.2 Buss' Theory of Instrumental Aggression

Buss (1961) explained aggression in terms of instrumental conditioning. Research has shown that reinforcements do increase both the frequency and intensity of aggressive behavior (Geen & Pigg, 1970; Geen & Stonner, 1971). Frustration may lead to aggression, if that is the response that it associated with such an antecedent condition and subsequently reinforced. Buss also considered anger and personality as factors that need to be considered in explaining aggressive behavior. He indicated that anger increases the intensity but not the form of response performed by a person. Hostility is an attitude that develops out of negative experiences and persists over time, and may motivate aggressive acts of vengeance. Buss and Durkee (1957) developed a Hostility Inventory, which has been used in numerous research projects with varying success in predicting aggressive behavior. Buss believed that people had certain temperaments, perhaps determined largely by genetic endowment, that remained relatively unchanged throughout the lifespan. Impulsiveness, activity level, independence, and intensity of actions were temperament types that he associated with aggressive behavior. Thus, Buss brought emotions and personality into the empirical study of human aggression. A shortcoming of Buss's theory is that it views the individual as pushed by historical forces (i.e., past reinforcements). Habit patterns are simply tripped off by cues in the environment. Newer, cognitively oriented learning theories have since emerged in which individuals are viewed as examining choice alternatives and making decisions based on anticipated future outcomes.

2.3 Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1971) proposed a cognitively oriented social learning theory of aggressive behavior. According to this theory individuals learn aggressive behavior by observing models who act in aggressive ways. Imitation of the model's aggressive behavior is likely when the model's behavior is reinforced. Vicarious learning involves four interrelated processes (Bandura, 1977). First, the observer must pay attention to the cues, responses and outcomes associated with the modeled event. Second, an encoding of the observation must occur. Third, the encoded cognitive processes must be transformed into the imitative response. And, last, the learned response will be performed if the appropriate incentive conditions are present. It should be noted that an important distinction for Bandura is between learning a behavior pattern and performing it. The encoding process represents the learning of the behavior, while the incentive conditions elicit the performance of it.

Bandura developed a set of procedures to investigate modeling of aggression in which children observed an adult hit, kick, and yell at a large plastic clown (Bobo). Studies have shown that children more often imitate the model's behavior if the model was reinforced, and are inhibited from imitating when the model was condemned (e.g., Hicks, 1968a).

Furthermore, it has been found that children recall and repeat aggressive behavior several months after observing aggressive behavior by a model (Hicks, 1968b). Characteristics of the model are important in determining whether the individual will pay attention to the model's conduct and the influence that the model has on the subsequent imitative responses of the observer. For example, children more often imitated the aggressive behavior of a high status teacher than a low status teacher (Grusec & Mischel, 1966).

Bandura's theory stimulated research on the effects of corporal punishment by parents on their children. By using punishment parents serve as a model to the child, and if the punishment is effective in controlling the child, the parents' aggressive behavior is reinforced. While the child may be inhibited by fear of retaliation from acting aggressively toward the parents, they may use aggressive behavior to control others. This reasoning was supported by research showing that children who experience corporal punishment from parents engage in more fighting than control children (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Hoffman, 1970). To take this reasoning a step further it might be hypothesized that parents who abuse their children may have learned the behavior by observing their own parents. That is, abusive parents may have been abused when they were children. Examination of this intergenerational hypothesis has shown that a small percentage of abusive parents report that they were abused as

children (Gil, 1973). In addition to interview studies involving retrospective reports, prospective studies in which abused children are followed over time have found a relationship between child abuse and violent behavior later in life (McCord, 1983; Widorn, 1989). However, caution needs to be used in interpreting modeling as a cause of aggressive behavior from these correlational studies. A series of studies indicate that any form of parental maltreatment, whether it be neglect, sexual abuse, or physical abuse, is associated with likelihood of having a criminal record and other forms of misbehavior (McCord, 1983; Matt, 1992). A meta-analysis of the effects of family experiences on delinquency and conduct disorders found that harsh discipline was not an important predictor of misbehavior (Loeber & Schmalting, 1985).

The emphasis of learning theories, such as those of Buss and Bandura, is on the acquisition and performance of responses, sometimes referred to as skills by Bandura. In Bobo experiments children learn to punch, kick, and yell, responses that when aimed at another child can do harm. Aside from Buss's acknowledgement of the presence of social norms, there is very little in these theories about the social context of behavior. Other people are simply stimuli, serving as cues to elicit or perhaps to inhibit aggressive behavior, depending on the reinforcement history of the individual or the encodings of cue-response-outcome contingencies learned from observing models. The developments in aggression research in the 1980s and 1990s were in the direction of examining cognitive, emotional, and social factors that might be involved in aggressive behavior.

2.4 Berkowitz's Theory of Emotional Aggression

Berkowitz (1993) has developed a theory of emotional aggression that has dominated social psychological research on aggression for several decades (see Geen, 1992). According to Berkowitz (1993), there are two systems of aggression - emotional and instrumental. Emotional aggression is based on innate tendencies of organisms to respond aggressively (or by flight) to aversive stimulation. Aversive stimuli produce negative affect in individuals, and the negative affect creates a desire to hurt, which, in turn, instigates aggressive behavior. This innate system is modifiable by experience and may be indirectly affected by emotions and cognitions. Aversive stimuli may prime negative thoughts and feelings, adding to the intensity of negative affect experienced by the individual, and the intensity of aggressive behavior. Anger does not instigate aggression, but may be a parallel process. Anger does not cause aggression, but it does induce negative thoughts and feelings that adds to negative affect. Thus, anger may facilitate aggression, but it is not an instigator.

While emotional aggression is aimed at hurting the target, instrumental aggression is simply a means of achieving other goals that might require hurting a target. For example, a robber's goal is to get the loot and not to harm the victim. However, harming the victim may be a necessary aspect of getting the loot. As the organism gains experience, its behavior is increasingly guided by environmental cues. Instrumental aggression is grafted onto the more primitive or basic system of emotional aggression. As a consequence, emotional aggression becomes less likely to be automatic, but instead is given expression only to appropriate cues.

Over the past four decades there has been a vigorous investigation of Berkowitz's theory of emotional aggression. It has been found that exposure to noise, air pollution, high population density, and personal space invasions may increase aggressive behavior (Mueller, 1983). However, these conditions facilitate or intensify aggression only when some other factor instigates it (Zillmann, 1982). Thus, exposure to noise or air pollution do not cause people to become aggressive, but when a person is instigated to be aggressive, its intensity will be greater if aversive physical stimuli are present.

Cue-elicited Aggression. A series of studies examined the role of cues in aggressive behavior. In one study a person identified as a boxer or a speech major insulted subjects (Berkowitz, 1965), who then were exposed to either a film depicting a violent boxing scene or a film about canal boats. In the guise of evaluating a work product of the other person, subjects were most aggressive when they had been insulted, the other person was a boxer, and they had viewed a violent boxing scene. Witnessing the fight scene had no impact on the aggressiveness of participants if they had not been first insulted by the other person. It is not clear whether this kind of result supports Berkowitz's theory. If viewing the fight film created more negative affect in the participants than watching boats float down a canal, then there

should have been some impact of the fight film on aggressive behavior whether or not the confederate had insulted them. On the other hand, it might be argued that viewing the film after one has been angered might lead to different associated thoughts than watching it without being angered first. Thus, associated cognitions primed by the fight film might have created more negative affect in the insult condition. Another possibility is that the responses of participants merely reflect what they believe the experimenter wants them to do. A person who has just been insulted by a boxer, then is given a fight film to view, and then is given an opportunity to deliver electric shocks to the boxer may believe that the experimenter expects them to use more rather than less shocks - which is the only choice participants have in the Situation.

Weapons are cues that prime negative thoughts in most people. According to Berkowitz's theory, the mere presence of weapons may make people more aggressive. Not only do people pull the triggers of guns, but the trigger can pull the finger (Berkowitz, 1981, p. 12). A number of experiments have been carried out in which guns, knives and other weapons are placed directly on an apparatus which is used by participants to deliver electric shocks to another person. The results of some of these studies appear to support the hypothesis that the presence of weapons increases aggression. However, there are a significant number of weapons related studies that have produced null or even reverse effects (See Tedeschi & Felson, 1994, 60-65).

2.5 Social Interactionist Theory

In a radical departure from more traditional approaches the social interactionist theory proposes that the concept of aggression should be abandoned as a scientific concept (Tedeschi, Smith & Brown, 1974). An alternative language of coercive actions is preferred and is used to integrate aggression research into a more general theory of power and influence. The types of coercive actions include threats, punishments and bodily force. The theoretical question to be answered is why people choose to use threats, punishments, and/or bodily force against one another. The social interactionist theory (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) proposes that there are three basic motives for the use of coercive actions: social control, justice, and identity. One of the implications of this viewpoint is that the typical methods of studying aggression in the laboratory may under represent the construct of aggression, or possibly may not even be interpretable as aggression (Tedeschi & Quigley, 1996, 2000).

Conceptual Issues. The concept of aggression is an observational term which purportedly identifies a common attribute that all such responses have. The most accepted definition of aggression is that it refers to any behavior that the actor performs with an intent to do harm. In an analysis of this definition Tedeschi, Melburg, and Rosenfeld (1982) argued that no aggression theorist has defined intent and seldom are the intentions of participants in aggression experiments assessed. Furthermore, there is an implicit value judgment made when identifying aggressive behaviors. It is usual to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of aggression. For example, it is legitimate for a judge to impose a fine on a traffic violator or for a parent to punish disobedience by a child, but it is illegitimate for a person to rob a victim of money or for a motorist to punish another motorist for violation of traffic laws. Since what is considered legitimate or illegitimate varies across people within a society and between cultures, the distinction is a subjective one. This is important because aggression theorists are clearly concerned with explaining illegitimate forms of aggression, and therefore must use their subjective values to identify the appropriate responses. It is typically assumed that the causes of legitimate and illegitimate forms of aggression are different. According to social interactionist theory, there is no necessity for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate threats, punishments, or bodily force because the essential motives that explain their use are the same. A judge who punishes a traffic violator and a motorist who punishes another motorist both have the motive to punish someone who violated a rule - that is, a justice motive.

Motives for Coercive Actions. Social control motivation is one of the three basic motives for engaging in coercive actions. It is assumed by social interactionist theory that people are reward seeking and punishment avoiding organisms, and that most reinforcements are mediated by other people. For example, if we want money, we must somehow convince someone to give it to us, and if we want love, we must make ourselves lovable to someone. In other words, if we are going to achieve our

goals, we must influence others to do what we need them to do so that we can have what we want. The primary concern of a person motivated by social control is to gain compliance from target persons. Of course there are many ways to influence others, including persuasion, offers of exchange, promises, forming of alliances, and modeling. Stronger techniques include the use of threats, punishments, and bodily force. It is proposed that coercive actions are used when the actor believes that other forms of influence will not work and the actor is not willing to forgo the interpersonal goal. Among the conditions that undermine confidence in positive forms of influence, and hence increase the likelihood of coercion, are the lack of social skills, intelligence, education, or possession of resources that would allow a person to effectively use them. A person with low intelligence or who is inarticulate cannot form effective persuasive messages, and a person without resources cannot offer exchanges or make believable promises. Consistent with this explanation is the fact that violent criminals have lower intelligence than nonviolent criminals (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985) and that inarticulateness is related to spouse abuse (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). Conflict also undermines the confidence that positive forms of influence will work since the parties know that each is motivated to obtain a resource that both desire. The lack of trust that is inspired by knowledge that each is acting out of self interest may place the individual into a situation of letting the other person have the desired resource or of using coercive means to attain it (Deutsch, 1969). The scarcity and value of resources in conflicts are related to their intensity, and the likelihood that coercion will be used.

When a perceived injustice occurs to a victim or to others who are socially identified with the victim, the emotion of anger is experienced and the motive for restoring or imposing justice on the perpetrator is aroused. The injustice may represent what is perceived as an unfair distribution of positive or negative resources, privileges, or responsibilities, or some set of procedures for making decisions that are perceived as unfair, or violation of norms of how people ought to treat one another. A person who is motivated to restore justice may do nothing, may reconsider the event and decide that the purported perpetrator is not responsible for an injustice (remove blame), may forgive the perpetrator, may make a demand that the perpetrator make restitution or offer an apology, or may punish the perpetrator.

The grievant may do nothing when the costs of acting are perceived as high, as for example might be the case when an employee believes her supervisor treated her unfairly. Expressing anger and demanding some change in the supervisors behavior could be costly in terms of job security and advancement. If the perpetrator provides explanations that excuse or justify his conduct, the grievant may remove blame, and the injustice no longer exists. Research has shown that accounts of what has been perceived as misconduct can be effective in revising judgments by others (cf. McLaughlin, Cody, & Read, 1992). The use of apologies and remorse by a perpetrator may induce a grievant to forgive previous unjust actions, and reduce the likelihood that punitive actions will be taken (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). If the perpetrator agrees to demands for restitution or an apology, the grievant may feel that the episode has been satisfactorily closed, but if the perpetrator resists such demands, there is the possibility that the conflict between the two parties will escalate. The grievant may follow the biblical law of *lex talionis* and impose a harm on the perpetrator which is modulated to be about equivalent to the degree of harm done by the prior unjust action. The tit for tat behavior of participants in laboratory experiments, which as been interpreted as retaliatory behavior, has been interpreted as a desire to restore justice (Donnerstein & Hatfield, 1982).

The third motive for engaging in coercive actions, according to social interactionist theory, is the desire to assert or to protect identities. A person may try to establish a reputation as being tough by provoking others into fights (Toch, 1993) or by acting as a bully against whipping boys (Olweus, 1978). These proactive actions are typically staged in front of audiences to build the desired reputation. The individual desires an identity as tough, courageous, or bad because it serves his social control interests by gaining compliance from those who are afraid of him. A person may also act to defend his identities when it is perceived that another person has threatened or attacked them. When an affront is perceived, a character contest may ensue (Goffman, 1955). Actions that are perceived as showing disrespect or attacking valued identities will motivate the target to save face. If the target does nothing, she will look weak, ineffective, and perhaps as assenting to the affronts that have occurred, and it may encourage subsequent disrespect from the offender and by third parties. Thus, the target is highly

motivated to turn the tables by putting the offender down by the use of insults. While this may put the person one up in the relationship, the other party is now motivated to counter-attack, and an escalation process occurs which may lead to violence (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977).

Social interactionist theory examines the cognitive processes of attributions of intentions and the establishment of blame, the emotions of anger and humiliation, the social context, and the social motives associated with coercive actions. It attempts to establish associations with other literatures - social conflict, criminology, attribution theory, justice research, social influence theory, and the role of emotions. While situational factors are given prominence in explaining coercive actions, individual difference factors are also explored as moderators.

The course of a coercive episode may involve all three motives proposed by social interactionist theory (Ohbuchi, et al., 1999), although they may occur at different points in the episode or be present in different degrees at any particular time. For example, an episode may begin with an attempt at social control through persuasion, which the target person resists. Perhaps it is important for the source to obtain compliance from the target and so a stronger demand is made. The target person may interpret such a demand as a form of disrespect, and respond by insulting the source. Each person may interpret the other's behavior as unfair or unjust. Thus, a failed attempt at social control may lead to a character contest and perceptions of injustice, and the processes that are associated with justice and identity motivations.

The dynamic character of most coercive episodes are not captured by experiments that basically maintain a stimulus-response character. Most research has a confederate insult or deliver noxious stimuli to a participant, who is then given an opportunity to deliver noxious stimuli to the confederate. The participant is under strong constraints imposed by the instructions of the experimenter. In most cases the instruction is that they must administer noxious stimuli to another person, and the measure of aggression is how much is administered. Viewed in this way it may be said that the main instigation to aggression found in social psychological research is obedience to authority (cf. Milgram, 1974). It may be questioned whether this obedient behavior is aggression (Gottriedson & Hirshi, 1991).

Research on aggression is conducted by giving participants cover stories that they are to act as teachers and use the noxious stimuli to punish the other persons errors (and presumably help them learn), or that they are to evaluate the work product of another person by giving one to ten shocks, which represents a rating scale from excellent to poor. Still another set of procedures sets up the exchange of shocks as a competitive game. These cover stories act as frames within which the meaning of actions are modified. While in the teacher/learner frame, giving shocks to a learner who makes errors may do harm, the participant's motive may be to help the other person to team. But a critical component of the definition of aggression is that the actor has the intent to do harm. Similarly, if the participant believes that giving shocks is necessary for giving a rating, then the goal of giving a shock is not to harm the other person. although of course that may happen, but rather it is to obey the experimenter and do the best job of evaluation one can do.

Tedeschi and Quigley (1996; 2000) strongly recommend that researchers should investigate the construct validity of the major empirical paradigms for studying aggression, and that modifications be made to give participants more freedom in deciding whether to harm others. They note that aggression researchers seldom study threats or the recursive nature of coercive episodes. Evaluation of the processes proposed by social interactionist theory will require the invention of new procedures for studying coercive behavior.

3. Results and Controversies in the Discipline

Eddies of research on aggression have emerged in developmental, cognitive, and personality psychology. No general theory has emerged from these sometimes isolated studies, but they have identified components to an overall process that leads to aggressive conduct. It will be useful, then, to examine an hostility attribution bias, divergent perspectives, and excitation transfer as processes that contribute to an understanding of human aggression. In response to salient and important social problems social psychologists have also examined the impact of pornography on aggression toward women, the effect of violent programs on the mass media on viewers' aggression, and the effects of

alcohol consumption on aggressive behavior. The research on these applied areas have generated controversies within the discipline.

3.1 Hostility Attribution Bias and Divergent Perspectives

Toch (1969) studied violent men who were in prison and observed that they often engaged in what they believed were preemptive attacks. These men had a paranoid style of attributions with a tendency to infer hostile intentions by others. Parents who attribute their children's misbehaviors or failures to willful disobedience are more likely to be abusive (Frodi & Lamb, 1980). Institutionalized, aggressive boys display a tendency to attribute hostility to other boys (Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1979).

In their study of elementary school children Dodge and Newman (1981) found that aggressive children made more hostile attributions about fictitious others and remembered hostile information better than did non-aggressive children. In a subsequent study, Dodge and Somberg (1987) found that attributions of hostility toward another led to direct aggressive actions toward him. If the target strikes back, the retaliation can be interpreted as verifying the original hostility attribution, and the circle is closed. While some people may have a more paranoid attributive style than others, most observers tend to weigh negative information about an actor more heavily than positive information, and this tendency may contribute to attributions of blame under ambiguous circumstances (Kanouse & Hanson, 1971).

The perspective of the person involved in an aggressive episode affects the attributions that are made about the other actor. For example, Mummendey, Linneweber, and Löscher (1984) assigned participants roles as actors or recipients of actions. Actors viewed their actions as provoked, while recipients perceived attacks as unprovoked. Interviews of married couples indicated that husbands and wives have very different memories of what the other person experienced as a serious transgression (Mikula & Heimgartner, 1992). Blaming others may be a form of self-justification, but divergences may be a product of a fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). In general actors tend to view their own behavior as constrained by environmental forces, while observers tend to perceive actors as first causes of their actions.

Hostility attribution bias, divergent perspectives, attributions of blame, and a negativity bias probably contribute to negative reactions towards another person. This reaction may produce a further reaction from the other person and a conflict spiral and aggressive behavior may be the outcome. Combined with scripts about how to react to negative actions of others or habitual responses to conflict, cognitive processes contribute to the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

3.2 Emotions and Aggression

Psychologists have strong differences about what emotions are, what arouses them, and what effects they have. One view is that there is some primitive level of emotional reaction, such as flight or fight dispositions, which is enriched, interpreted, and guided by cognitive mechanisms (Berkowitz & Heimer, 1989). Another view is that emotions are constructed and can be understood only by consideration of language, attributions, and appraisals (Averill, 1983). Still another approach considers social norms as providing the basis for interpreting and expressing emotions. Eclectic approaches combine each of these levels of analysis, giving more or less weight to one or another of the processes. These wide differences in describing what an emotion is may have stunted the development of research on emotions and aggression, which has been limited primarily to the study of anger and aggression.

Zillmann (1982) has proposed that the intensity of anger is associated with the degree of autonomic arousal that the individual experiences. He proposed a process of excitation arousal to explain why people sometimes seem to overreact to provocations or frustrations that they experience. A person might be aroused in numerous ways - by watching an exciting film or by riding a bicycle, for example. The arousal dissipates over time but a residual amount may be still present when the individual is no longer aware of its presence. If at such a time the individual is angered, there will be a greater intensity of anger than would have been experienced if the residual arousal had not been present. Because for Zillmann aggression is often learned as a response in anger producing situations, heightened anger leads to more intense aggression. Thus, excitation transfer is a process by which physiological arousal may

summate across situations to produce enhanced aggressive behavior. It would be fair to say that the majority of aggression researchers have been convinced by Zillmann's research. However, Tedeschi and Felson (1994, pp. 75-83) examined his evidence and raised questions about Zillmann's procedures, specific patterns of results in experiments, and about the problems associated with experimental manipulations of conditions to produce different levels of arousal. For example, the basic idea of excitation transfer is that there is residual arousal available when a person is angered. However, most of the research has first angered the participants and then had them watch pornographic films or ride bicycles. Also, whenever a manipulation creates different levels of arousal, it presumably also induces different cognitions. Thus, all of the studies done to investigate excitation transfer might also be interpreted as due to ideas, expectations, or other interpretations of conditions made by participants.

Berkowitz and Heimer (1989) proposed that anger and aggression are parallel processes. Negative affect, negative ideas or cognitions, and aggressive response tendencies may be associated as nodes in a network so that when one is activated, they tend to reverberate and activate associated nodes. Aversive stimuli may bring about negative ideas and anger, and also instigate aggressive responses. These nodes are elements of the same syndrome, and produced by the same antecedent condition - aversive stimuli. Thus, anger does not cause aggression, although sometimes they occur together.

Averill (1983) and Tavris (1982) have proposed that expressions of anger only sometimes lead to aggressive behavior, but usually have constructive outcomes. Presumably, the constructive or destructive outcomes that anger may have depend upon how it is expressed. And, how anger is expressed is probably a learned behavior. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) have proposed that anger produces justice motivation. When a negative event is blamed on another actor, the victim is angered, and anger produces a desire to remedy the injustice. In their social interactionist theory Tedeschi and Felson (1994) attempted to state some of the conditions in which an angered person is likely to engage in aggressive behavior.

There is evidence to support all of the above theories, but many anomalous findings have also been obtained. It will be some time before the relationship between anger and aggression is clarified. Even less is known about the impact of other social emotions, such as jealousy, humiliation, envy, and fear, on aggressive behavior.

4. Policy Related Research

Research on aggression by social psychologists and other social scientists has often been directly addressed to social problems, such as family abuse, sexual coercion, and juvenile delinquency. The focus here will be on the effects of viewing television violence and pornography on the aggressive behavior of viewer, and the effects of alcohol consumption on aggressive behavior. These are areas in which experiments have been carried out and where there is controversy over the interpretation of the available research.

4.1 Television Violence and Aggression

The Bobo studies carried out to examine Bandura's social learning theory indicated that a model's aggressive behavior could induce imitative responses by the observer. Because many of the characters in movies and television programs are rewarded for aggressive behavior, it could be asked whether viewers are likely to become more aggressive themselves. Three approaches have been used to study the effects of viewing mass media violence on aggressive behavior: laboratory studies, longitudinal studies, and field studies. Meta-analyses have found that effects in laboratory studies have been reliable and substantial (Anderson, 1977; Hearold, 1986). The National Institute of Health (1982) and the American Psychological Association (1993) have publically concluded that there is a significant relationship between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior. Yet, a few psychologists remain unconvinced.

The generalizability of laboratory findings has been questioned. One argument is that the use of noxious stimuli in laboratory experiments is rationalized to participants as ratings or teaching procedures, or as a competitive game that is being played with another person. Experimenters

legitimate, encourage, and even demand that participants administer electric shocks or noxious noise to another person. It is not clear that without the legitimations of a high status person or the permissive social climate that presenting such programs creates that viewing violent programs would have the same effects (Cook, Kendzinski, & Thomas, 1983; Freedman, 1984). A second argument is that violent programs are shown to research participants apart from the context of other programs that are available outside the laboratory. This selectivity itself may enhance the effects on viewer aggression that are found. A third argument is that demand cues are strong in these studies. As was mentioned when we examined Berkowitz's cue-arousal experiments, the sequencing of events that include insult, an aggressive cue (such as guns or another person identified as a boxer), watching a violent film, and finally directions to give shocks to another person may indicate to participants that they should deliver more shock rather than less shock. The film is an added component that may serve to communicate what the experiment would like participants to do. It is noteworthy that watching violent films in laboratory studies typically has no effect on aggressive behavior unless the participants have first been insulted or otherwise attacked.

The most important problem associated with the research on television violence is that it has not shown which processes or mechanisms are activated by viewing violence and how such viewing gets converted into aggressive behavior. While most studies show a small but significant relationship, they do not establish a causal one. A number of processes have been suggested, including modeling, cultural spillover, priming, desensitization, and unrealistic fear. Modeling can explain the fact that airline hijackings, civil disorders, and suicides tend to increase after a highly publicized instance takes place. However, these contagion effects reflect news events and not fictional ones, and it needs to be established that viewing fictional forms of violence induces imitative behavior. Straus (1991) proposed that viewing fictional programs may create legitimation for violence that spill over into everyday life. Very little research has been carried out to examine this process.

We have seen that Berkowitz's neoassociationist model incorporates the idea that aggressive stimuli prime hostile thoughts and contribute to negative affect, thereby increasing aggressive behavior. Huesmann (1982) proposed that viewers of television programs learn scripts about how to behave in various situations. Later when placed in similar circumstances, or perhaps in seeking out such circumstances, the scripts are activated in the form of aggressive or violent conduct. There is scattered evidence that can be interpreted as priming of aggressive or scripted forms of violence, but it is inadequate to draw any firm conclusions about these processes.

Still another process that has been proposed is that observing so many thousands of murders over the years, viewers become desensitized to the plight of victims. A desensitized person no longer is aroused by viewing a murder, and has little or no sympathy for the victim. This indifference to suffering may make it easier for a desensitized person to hurt others. There is some evidence that desensitization results from frequent viewing of television violence (cf., Rule & Ferguson, 1986), but no evidence that desensitization makes people more aggressive. Insofar as television distorts the real world and makes it appear more dangerous than it is, people may develop unrealistic fear of others. This distrust may lead them to make hostile attribution biases and engage in preemptive actions. While there is some evidence that people who watch a lot of television do have unrealistic fears, there is little or no evidence that unrealistic fear resulting from viewing television leads to aggressive behavior.

Until social psychologists pin down the causal processes that allegedly mediate the impact of viewing violence on television on aggressive behavior, it would be premature to conclude that there is a causal relationship. On the other hand, given the grave import of such a relationship, if it exists, policy makers appear willing to err in the direction of assuming that it does.

4.2 Pornography and Aggression

Sigmund Freud (1933) speculated that sadistic and masochistic behaviors frequently occur in normal sexual relations. Research done with male animals has demonstrated that concentrations of testosterone are associated with both sexual and aggressive behaviors (Berstein, Gordon, & Rose, 1983)². One

² Although testosterone apparently affects the sexual motivation of men, there is no convincing evidence that testosterone causes humans to be more aggressive (cf. Svare & Kinsley, 1987).

possible implication of a connection between sex and aggression is that viewing pornography may increase the amount of aggression by men against women.

Several early studies indicated that subjects who are provoked and then shown an erotic film are more aggressive than provoked subjects who have seen a neutral film or no film (e.g., Zillmann, 1971; Meyer, 1972). On the other hand, it has also been found that exposure to pictures of nude women lowered the aggressiveness of provoked subjects (e.g., Baron, 1974). These inconsistent early studies did not focus on male aggressiveness toward women, however. More systematic studies were undertaken to determine whether observing pornographic films can make male subjects more aggressive against female than against male victims. The usual finding in laboratory studies of aggression is that both men and women are more aggressive toward men than women (e.g., Taylor & Epstein, 1967).

No clear pattern of results has been obtained across studies of pornography and aggression. A greater amount of aggressiveness by men toward women as compared to other men has been shown only under two specific conditions: when the male participants are angered and either the pornographic film contains violence, or a depicted victim of rape confirms a rape myth by showing a pleasurable response to the violence (cf. Donnerstein & Linz, 1986). Since it had already been established that viewing violent films can increase the intensity of aggressive behavior by already angered subjects, it may be the violence and not the sexual content of the film that facilitates aggression. The victim's response to the violence might also serve as a demand cue to subjects about the responsiveness of women to being hurt. If so, a positive response to violence in the film might have served as a cue that they are expected to give more shocks, and a negative response to violence in the film might serve as an inhibitory cue to give fewer shocks to a female target.

It has been argued that the effects of viewing pornography on aggression may be indirect. Negative attitudes toward women may be fostered by depictions of women as sexual playthings, and sexist attitudes may increase the likelihood of sexual coercion (MacKinnon, 1984). A few studies have shown that viewing pornography may be associated with less favorable attitudes toward women (e.g., Malamuth, 1986), but the link from attitudes to aggressive behavior has not been established. Furthermore, Reiss (1986) reported that men who were interested in pornography had more liberal attitudes toward women.

4.3 Alcohol and Aggression

Alcohol is associated with criminal assaults (Martin & Bachman, 1997) and homicides (Shupe, 1954; Virkunen, 1974). Reviews of research also indicate a reliable impact of alcohol on aggressive behavior in laboratory experiments (Bushman & Cooper, 1990; Ito, Miller, & Pollock, 1996). Despite intense investigation of the alcohol-aggression relationship, it is not known at this time what specific mechanism mediates it. A physiological perspective suggests that psycho-pharmacological effects on cognitive functioning may be responsible for the relationship, while a cultural perspective suggests that the symbolic meaning of drinking may create self-fulfilling behavior.

Psychopharmacological Effects. Imbibing a small amount of alcohol may produce physiological arousal, but larger doses produce sedative effects and reduced responsiveness to stressful stimuli (Wallgreen & Barry, 1970; Levenson, Sher, Grossman, Newman, & Newlin, 1980). Since it has been well established that arousal may intensify aggressive behavior, it could be suggested that low doses of alcohol would lead to more aggression than imbibing larger amounts. However, Taylor and Gammon (1975) found that subjects who ingested larger doses of bourbon or vodka were more aggressive than subjects who drank a lesser amount. In general no clear relationship has been found between the arousal effects of alcohol and aggression.

One proposed pharmacological effect on cognition is that inebriated persons may be less sensitive to the contingencies involved in interpersonal behavior. For example, Zeichner and Pihl (1979) showed sober persons reduce their use of aversive stimuli against another person when the other person used a tit-for-tat strategy of responsiveness as compared to a condition where there was no such contingency. However, inebriated persons aggressively administered aversive stimuli in both conditions, despite the fact that doing so led to receiving more aversive stimuli from the other person. This effect may be associated with a failure to perceive inhibitory cues. Steele and Southwick (1985) proposed that when

there is strong instigation to aggression and salient inhibitory cues (a condition they refer to as inhibitory conflict), drinking may have a disinhibitory effect. In a meta-analysis of relevant studies, they found support for their hypothesis. However, a direct experimental test of the inhibitory conflict hypothesis would be desirable.

Ingestion of alcohol may make it more difficult for a person to interpret social situations, a condition of ambiguity that may trigger the negative inferences of persons with a hostile attribution bias. Support for this hypothesis was found by Schmutte, Leonard, and Taylor (1979). Subjects faced variable levels of shock from another player in a competitive game. Those who had been drinking estimated that the level of shock they would receive as greater than did control subjects. Despite attributing a higher intent to do harm to the other person, subjects who had been drinking did not act more aggressively than did control subjects.

Cultural Effects. There are cultural differences in the effects of alcohol consumption on social behavior (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969). In Japan, for example, alcohol is associated with congenial social relations rather than aggressiveness. Such cultural differences throw doubt on any psychopharmacological explanation for the effects of alcohol consumption. In the United States drinking evokes stereotypes and expectancies related to aggressive conduct. In a survey of 400 respondents, it was found that moderate drinkers report that drinking gives them a feeling of power and makes them more assertive, and reduces tension and anxiety (Brown, Goldman, Inn, & Anderson, 1980). If these beliefs get converted into self-fulfilling behaviors, the result could be greater aggressiveness.

In support of an expectancy hypothesis subjects in placebo conditions have been shown to be more aggressive than control subjects (Lang, Goeckner, Adesso, & Marlatt, 1975; Zeichner & Pihl, 1979). However, a meta-analysis of experiments comparing placebo and alcohol conditions found no overall difference between placebo and control groups (Bushman & Cooper, 1990). Placebo conditions may not be the best way to examine alcohol expectancy effects. There may be strong individual differences in alcohol-related expectancies, and self-fulfilling prophecies leading to aggressive behavior may occur only when a particular set of schemata exist. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) suggested that expectancies may be channeled through aspects of identity. For example, males who desire a macho identity and who believe that drinking transforms them into more dynamic, courageous, and assertive persons, may be less polite to others, and their offensive conduct may precipitate conflicts. Given expectations of how they should act (i.e., how men should act), especially in honor based cultures (cf. Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) they may also be more confrontive and less likely to be conciliatory in conflict situations.

5. References

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