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Perspective-specific differences  
in the description, segmentation,  
and evaluation of aggressive  
interaction sequences

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Aggressive behaviour is a phenomenon that has stimulated a lot of everyday as well as scientific interest. As long as there are reports on violence in everyday's news, the relevance of this topic cannot be denied.

Especially during the last twenty years there was a widespread (social-)psychological research on aggression (for a survey see GEEN & DONNERSTEIN 1983a, b; MUMMENDEY 1983). In most of the studies aggression is dealt with from an individualistic viewpoint, namely asking for the conditions that cause individuals to engage in aggressive behaviour (MUMMENDEY 1982). More recently these conceptualizations of aggression were criticized (e.g. MUMMENDEY, BORNEWASSER, LÖSCHPER & LINNEWEBER 1982; TEDESCHI, BROWN & SMITH 1974; TEDESCHI 1984). It was stressed that it is not possible to agree on specific behaviours to be called "aggressive" - which is an implicit assumption in the research focussing on the individual - because the definition depends on the specific social context (an example is the changed evaluation of "killing" during wars). Therefore it is suggested to deal with "aggression" as an evaluative rather than a descriptive term (MUMMENDEY et al. 1982). BLUMENTHAL, KAHN, ANDREWS and HEAD (1975) stress the same point when discussing the definition of violence:

"The difference between groups in respect to whether or not particular acts are defined as violence cannot be explained by differences in their explanation of the semantic meaning of the word. Rather it appears that labeling an act 'violence' is a statement that the act in question is not legitimate, good or necessary." (p. 95)

In several studies it could be shown that important criteria for the definition of an act as "aggressive" are inappropriateness (does the behaviour contradict important norms in the given context?), intention of harming and factual amount of harm (DaGLORIA & DeRIDDER 1977; FERGUSON & RULE 1983; LÖSCHPER, MUMMENDEY, LINNEWEBER & BORNEWASSER 1984).

Another important criticism in many studies on aggression is that they don't pay regard to the fact that aggressive behaviour is a form of social interaction between at least two persons, that is actor and recipient (MUMMENDEY et al. 1982). Not only the specific social context but also the interaction-specific position of the judging person leads to variability in the evaluation and definition of aggressive behaviour. In most previous studies an observer, mostly the experimenter himself, defined which act should be called aggressive; the specific viewpoints of the actor and the recipient were disregarded.

Aggressive interactions can be characterized through a typical relation between the position-specific judgmental perspectives: the actor stresses that in the given situation he/she has "good reasons" for the behaviour, that from the behavioural alternatives the most suitable one was chosen and therefore the performed action was relatively appropriate; the recipient - and mostly the observer as well - evaluates the behavior in the given situation as inappropriate in relation to the valid norms and mentions possible alternative behavior (MUMMENDEY, LÖSCHPER & LINNEWEBER 1984).

In several experiments the position-specific divergence in the evaluation of aggressive interactions could be shown. In these experiments the subjects had to judge videotaped aggressive interactions out of the perspective of either the actor, the recipient or an observer. The results obtained showed

- that no matter whether the judged action was the first initiating or the second reactive act, it was evaluated more appropriate from the actor's than from the recipient's (and observer's) viewpoint.
- that in aggressive interactions consisting of an initiating action and a following reaction one's own behaviour, both initiating as well as reactive, is judged more favourably than other's behaviour (MUMMENDEY, LINNEWEBER & LÖSCHPER 1984a).

After the perspective-specific variability in the evaluation of aggressive interactions could be demonstrated in several studies

the main concern now is to ask for possible antecedent or parallel phenomena and for conditions that affect the amount of judgmental divergence between actor and recipient. The relevance of this question becomes obvious if one considers that the greater the differences in the evaluation, the less chances for a peaceful arrangement between the two opponents and the more probable an escalation of the given conflict (MUMMENDEY, LINNEWEBER & LÖSCHPER 1984b).

One interest of the study to be reported here is to look for the differences in the perception and/or verbal reproduction of aggressive interactions due to the interaction-specific position (i.e. actor, recipient, observer). This idea is related to the early work on memory processes by BARTLETT and the recent studies by STEPHENSON et al., who could show that the recall of given episodes depends on characteristics of the subjects (prior experience, cultural background; BARTLETT 1932) or on specific characteristics of the performance situation (individual vs. group recall; e.g. STEPHENSON, BRANDTSTÄTTER & WAGNER 1983; STEPHENSON, CLARK & WADE 1986). Depending on the given conditions, specific 'schematic' forms of recall were found. Further evidence is offered by the work of PICHERT & ANDERSON (1977), who could show that the reception of texts is influenced by the subjects' perspective.

In line with these results it is argued that in free descriptions and segmentations of aggressive interactions some position-specific 'schemes' may occur. Such possible differences could be motivated by functional aspects. A study by MEYBERG & OTTEN (1984) on norms of school-children showed that initiating an aggressive interaction was evaluated highly negative. One can argue that the norm of reciprocity (GOULDNER 1960) suggests a more favourable evaluation of reactions than of actions initiating a conflict. So actors probably will try to legitimize their behaviour by prior events or characteristics of the victim and thus re-define their action as reaction. In contrast to recipients (and observers) they may add certain elements to the given episode or stress specific information in order to justify their

behaviour.

In the segmentation of longer interaction sequences with each participant alternating between the position of actor and recipients several times, it would probably be functional for a positive self-description if the subjects began each segment with an action of the opponent to legitimize their own subsequent (re-) action (BLUMENTHAL et al. 1975).

In sum, the question of interest is whether there are perspective-specific differences in the description and segmentation of aggressive interactions which accompany or even cause - which would be the question of a further study - the typically differing evaluations. To deal adequately with this topic the videotapes used in this study don't show simple interactions consisting of a single action and following reaction but longer interaction sequences with several sub-actions.

Another topic of this study is concerned with the analysis of different kinds of segments. It is distinguished between aggressive acts in terms of their position in the course of the interaction (initiating vs. later actions) and/or their seriousness. The classification is obtained by the subjects themselves: they subjectively define the segment the aggressive interaction started with and where the aggressive interaction became serious. This way four subgroups of segments were constructed:

- a) beginning segments,
- b) beginning and serious segments,
- c) serious segments,
- d) other segments.

Using this classification it will be examined in which way the perspective-specific divergences in the evaluation of aggressive interactions are affected by the kind of segments to be judged. A possible expectation is that the more relevant or serious the aggressive action (is) the more accentuated the difference in the evaluation: the recipient will perhaps increase his negative judgment for more serious events, the actor on the other hand may even feel a higher need for legitimization and positive self-description if his action was very severe.

Finally, it should be stated that the main concern of this study is not to test clear-cut hypotheses but to explore conditions that could contribute to the perspective-specific divergence in the evaluation of aggressive interactions.

Before proceeding in the description of the study a summary of the research-questions is given:

1. Are there perspective-specific differences in the way the aggressive interactions are reproduced by the subjects
  - concerning the segmentation of the interaction?
  - concerning the description of the beginning?
  - concerning the definition of serious events?
  - concerning the completeness of the report?
  - concerning the connections between the single events?
2. Can the results of previous studies (e.g. MUMMENDEY, LINNEWEBER & LÖSCHPER 1984a, 1984b) be confirmed, which show for simple aggressive interactions (action/re-action) that own behaviour is judged more favourably than comparable actions by the opponent?
3. Are the differences in the evaluation of aggressive interactions influenced by the kind of segments (i.e. their relevance/seriousness) to be judged?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Independent variables

#### Perspective:

The subjects watched a videotape depicting an aggressive interaction between two boys in school. Some participants watched the film out of the perspective of an outside observer (69 subjects). The others were instructed to take over the perspective of one of

the two main characters. One group of the subjects (N=99) was asked to watch and judge the interaction out of the initiator's perspective - the "initiator" being the person performing the very first critical action in the film - the other group (85 subjects) took over the reactor's perspective - the "reactor" being the recipient of the first and the actor of the second action.

The positions of initiator and recipient are fixed for the whole interaction sequence. This is not the case for the positions of actor and recipient which are defined only for the single sub-actions. In the course of the interaction the two main characters take over both positions several times, changing from the actor's to the recipient's position and vice versa. So the distinction between actor and recipient is not person-specific but segment-specific. Mostly the single segments of the interaction sequence aren't analysed separately; therefore it is differentiated between the evaluation of own behaviour (including all segments in which the subject is in the actor's position) and the evaluation of the other's (opponent's) behaviour (including all segments in which the subject is in the recipient's position).

**Segment:**

It is distinguished between (a) beginning segments, (b) beginning and serious segments, (c) serious segments and (d) other segments. The classification of segments was obtained by the subjects themselves, who answered the questions:

- With which action did the conflict start?
- Where did the conflict become serious?

If a subject mentioned the same segment for both questions, this segment was assigned to category (b) (beginning and serious segments); segments that weren't defined as either beginning or serious were assigned to category (d).



## 2.2. Dependent variables

### Evaluation of behavioural segments:

The subjects subjectively divided the film into distinguishable sub-actions. For each of these subjective segments, own as well as other's behaviour, they judged whether the behaviour was inappropriate, bad, intentional, harmful and sanctionable. The evaluations were obtained on seven-point bipolar rating scales. The five variables are closely related to the factors norm deviation, intention, harm, which are supposed to be decisive criteria for the definition of aggressive behaviour (LÖSCHPER et al. 1984).

The hypothesized perspective-specific divergences especially refer to the judgments on norm deviation, being measured by the ratings as "inappropriate" and "bad" (the judgments as "sanctionable" are related to this topic as well). The evaluation as "intentional" and "harmful" offers important additional information (e.g. an actor may admit he behaved inappropriately, but stresses that his action was not intentional or didn't cause any factual harm).

### Reproduction of the interaction sequence:

Subjects were asked to write summaries of the interaction sequence. The summaries can be analysed

- concerning their completeness,
- concerning interpretative elements (i.e. the way single behavioral segments are linked),
- concerning the free description of the beginning of the interaction.

Based on their summaries the subjects produced a subjective segmentation of the interaction sequence. It is examined

- how many segments are formed by the subjects and
- at which points of the interaction new segments begin.

Additionally, the subjective definition of the beginning of the conflict is obtained by two open-ended questions ("With which action did the conflict start?", "Who was the initiator of the conflict?").

Finally, the subjects gave a subjective definition of the first serious segment (they are asked: "Where did the conflict become serious"?).

There are two reasons to ask for "beginning" and "serious" segments: (1) to allow a classification of segments (see above) and (2) to look for perspective-specific divergences (e.g.: Do the subjects try to avoid responsibility for the beginning of the conflict? Do the subjects tend to define other's behaviour as more "serious" than their own behaviour?).

### 2.3. Material

Two different videotapes were used in this study, both depicting a longer interaction sequence between two boys at school. The episodes were filmed in a real school setting with male pupils (15 to 17 years old) engaged as actors.

Each interaction sequence consists of several sub-actions, the two main characters repeatedly changing from the recipient's to the actor's position and vice versa. The single sub-actions are of comparable low to medium severity.

The used films differ in two respects: (1) film I is ambiguous in its beginning, it is difficult to decide, whether the initiator behaved intentionally or not; (2) film I consists of more and shorter sub-actions than film II.

Three raters (coworkers in the social psychology department) first individually and then consensually decided on a so-called objective segmentation. In this segmentation all sub-actions are distinguished, in which an actor and a recipient can be defined. The objective segmentation is necessary to get a reference system for the analysis and comparison of the subjects' segmentation of the interaction sequence by the subjects.

(For each film a list of the objective segments and their content can be found in the appendix.)

The subjects had to watch and evaluate only one of the two films. To achieve perspective-taking by the subjects the presentation of the interaction sequence was preceded by a visual presentation of the target person. The subjects saw the target sitting in a library and working with some books; this scene was accompanied by a verbal instruction to take over the perspective of the boy on the screen and to imagine vividly his feelings and emotions during the following interaction.

#### 2.4. Subjects

253 school children (203 male, 50 female) participated in the study. Female subjects were equally distributed over the experimental conditions (i.e. the three judgmental perspectives). The subjects' age varied from 14 to 22 years. The average age was about 16 years.

The subjects were recruited on a voluntary basis in their school. A small amount of money was paid to them for participating in the experiment.

#### 2.5. Procedure

In each experimental session small groups of three to five subjects took part. They were told they would be presented a videotaped episode out of everyday life at school. They would see an interaction between two boys who were the same grade, but weren't very close friends. It was announced that at the very beginning of the film one of these two boys would be introduced to the subjects and that they should try to look at the following events with the eyes of this boy.

The experimenter showed the film twice. After the first presentation he made sure that the subjects recognized the target person in the film.

Then a sheet of paper was given to the subjects and they wrote down a summary of the interaction. The experimenter stressed that they should do this task - as well as the following ones - still out of the perspective of the boy introduced to them. The instructions in the questionnaire additionally emphasized perspective-taking, e.g. "Write down what happened to Thomas (the other boy) and you during the conflict" or "The way Thomas treated you was bad ... not bad".

After that the subjects segmented their summaries. They were instructed to form segments in such a way that for each segment it would be possible to define an actor and a recipient. Then the subjects evaluated each subjective segment on a questionnaire sheet either dealing with own or with the other boy's behaviour, depending on who was the actor in the specific subjective segment.<sup>1</sup>

After judging all subjective segments the last task was to define the beginning and the first serious segment (see above: 2.2, Dependent variables). Each experimental session lasted about 90 minutes.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. Content and structure of the subjective descriptions**

##### **3.1.1. Segmentation**

The average number of segments formed by the subjects is less than the number of objectively defined segments: the average number of segments formed by the pupils is 6 segments for film I (13

objective segments) and 5 segments for film II (7 objective segments). The discrepancy between the number of objective and subjective segments is due to the fact that the subjects didn't mention every sub-action and/or that they formed segments that included more than only one objective segment.

A striking finding is that although film I has nearly twice as much defined segments than film II, the average number of segments formed by the pupils is only slightly different. The rougher segmentation of film I is probably due to its specific characteristics: In this film, in contrast to film II, there are very quick changes from action to re-action or from the actor's to the recipient's position; some of the single actions are only lasting only short time; changes of sub-actions are not always accompanied by changes in the positions (actor/ recipient). Additionally, the subject's memory capacity may be relevant: the fewer the number of presented events, the smaller the probability of incomplete recall.

There are no systematic differences in the segmentations formed out of three perspectives (initiator, reactor and observer). The beginning of new segments mostly coincides with changes in the setting of the interaction (e.g. from schoolyard to classroom). Besides there are hints that the length of presentation, and the severity of the single segments are decisive for the subjective structuring of the interaction sequences.

### 3.1.2. Definition of the beginning

Concerning the subjective definitions of the beginning of the aggressive interaction, different sorts of data could be analyzed:

- a) the way the subjects began their summaries
- b) the answers to the question: "Who was the initiator of the aggressive interaction?"

c) the answers to the question: "With which action the aggressive interaction started?"

ad a)

It was distinguished between three possibilities to present the beginning of the episode:

- correspondence of first objective and first subjective segment
- leaving out the first subjective segment(s)
- construction of a segment preceding the first objective segment.

The frequencies of these possibilities did not considerably differ for subjects in the position of the objectively defined initiator and those in the position of the reactor (see Tab. 1).

Irrespective of the judgmental perspective, in the majority of cases a correspondence of first objective and subjective segment is found. For film I there is a slight tendency that initiators more often tend to re-define the beginning by adding a segment preceding the first objective one (so they can offer a plausible explanation for their behaviour).

The frequency-distribution was tested by Chi-Square-tests. For both films the results were nonsignificant (film I: Chi-Square = 6.68; df = 4, n.s.; film II: Chi-Square = 2.92, n.s.).

ad b)

The subjects were asked, who of the two main characters in the film was the initiator of the aggressive interaction. The answers to this question are clearly affected by the judgmental perspective of the subjects (see tab. 2). The result is highly significant for film I and only slightly fails significance for film II (film I: Chi-Square = 21.47, df = 2,  $p < .001$ ; film II: Chi-Square = 5.71, df = 2,  $p = .057$ )

Tab. 1: Free descriptions of the beginning of the aggressive interaction out of the three different perspectives

PERSPECTIVE						
Frequency of	Film I			Film II		
	Initiator	Reactor	Observer	Initiator	Reactor	Observer
Omission of 1st obj. segment	8	3	1	0	1	0
Construction of a preceding segment	4	2	4	9	8	5
Corresponding of 1st obj. and subj. segment	46	51	39	32	20	20

Tab. 2: Frequencies of subjective identification of the initiator in the interaction sequence

PERSPECTIVE						
Subj. definition of initiator of interaction	Film I			Film II		
	Initiator	Reactor	Observer	Initiator	Reactor	Observer
objective initiator	30	51	30	33	26	23
objective reactor	24	3	14	8	1	1

In all judgmental perspectives there is most often a correspondence of the objective and subjective definition of the initiator. Nevertheless, if the objective reactor is made responsible for the beginning of the interaction, this is mostly done by subjects in the initiator's and nearly never by those in the reactor's position. This position-specific divergence is especially obvious in film I, where it is difficult to decide whether the first action was performed intentionally.

The ambiguity of the beginning of film I is also perceived by the observers, who much less clearly than in film II agree with the objective definition of the initiator.

ad c)

The answers to the question "With which event the aggressive interaction started?" show similarities to the results just described under b) (see tab. 3).

Concerning film I the distribution of answers differs highly significantly for the three perspectives ( $\text{Chi-Square} = 17.74$ ,  $\text{df} = 4$ ,  $p = .001$ ), whereas for film II there is no significant result ( $\text{Chi-Square} = .22$ ,  $\text{df} = 8$ , n.s.).

In film I, which is ambiguous with respect to the intentionality of the first action, 23% of the initiators (11 out of 47 subjects) use the chance to postpone the 'real' beginning to the second objective segment, in which they are in the position of the recipient. Besides, 19% of the observers (8 out of 42) define the second or third objective segment as the beginning of the aggressive interaction. The reactors on the other hand nearly un-animously (only one exception) call the first objective segment the starting point of the conflict.

In film II the definition of the beginning seemingly is not af-



Tab. 3: Frequency of single objective segments subjectively defined as the beginning of the aggressive interaction by subjects in the three different perspectives

Film I:

Perspective	Objective segment		
	1	2	3
Initiator	36	11	0
Reactor	50	1	0
Observer	34	5	3
Total	120	17	3

Film II:

Perspective	Objective segment	
	1	2nd or later
Initiator	38	3
Reactor	25	2
Observer	22	2
Total	85	7

ected by the judgmental perspectives. The majority of subjects, whether in the position of initiator, reactor or observer, say that the aggressive interaction started with the objective segment 1. The action in the first segment of this film obviously is performed intentionally (the initiator is continuously making fun of the reactor, whose hair was just cut very short). Additionally, this event is lasting a long time so that it cannot be overlooked. Because of these specificities it is not surprising that only two or three subjects in each experimental condition postpone the subjectively defined beginning to a later segment.

### 3.1.3. Definition of serious events

Table 4 shows the distribution of answers to the question "With which action the conflict became serious?". The answers aren't clearly affected by the judgmental perspectives. The Chi-Square-tests indicate no significant result (film I: Chi-Square = 18.15, df = 14, n.s.; film II: Chi-Square = 11.38, df = 10, n.s.).

Probably the specific content of the segments is important: The most often mentioned segments are segment 4 in film I (A pushes B to the ground) and segment 5 in film II (A screws off the valve of B's bicycle-tyre), which both can easily be characterized as intentional and which are more obviously causing harm than other segments.

Moreover, events from the beginning of the interaction are mentioned frequently (segments 1, 2 and 3 in film I; segments 1 and 2 in film II). This corresponds to the idea that the beginning of the aggressive interaction is of special importance.

Tab. 4: Frequency of single objective segments subjectively defined as "serious" by subjects in the three perspectives

Film I:

Perspective	Objective segment							
	1	2	3	4	... 6	... 8	9	... 11*
Initiator	7	8	8	16	0	1	0	6
Reactor	6	5	13	21	4	0	2	1
Observer	2	10	7	14	2	0	2	3
Total	15	23	28	51	6	1	4	10

Film II:

Perspective	Objective segment					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Initiator	14	7	0	1	17	0
Reactor	5	3	0	0	15	2
Observer	6	6	0	0	9	4
Total	25	16	0	1	41	6

\* Objective segments that aren't included in the tables were mentioned by none of the subjects.

#### 3.1.4. Content

The analysis of the free descriptions of the interaction sequences was concerned with the three aspects:

- Which are the most relevant segments, that is those segments, that are nearly never missing in the subjects' summaries?
- Which are the most irrelevant segments, that is those segments, that are often missing in the reports?
- Which way are the single segments connected by the subjects? How do they refer to preceding segments?

Segments that are mentioned by all or nearly all subjects are especially the first segments (importance of the beginning!) and segments that coincide with changes in the setting (so these results confirm those reported above under 4.1.1 and 4.1.2).

Not surprisingly, from the much longer film I (13 objective segments) there are more segments left out than from film II (7 objective segments). Probably 13 single events are too many to be remembered exactly; additionally, in film I there are several sub-actions that last only a very short time.

Concerning the question, which segments are most often missing in the summaries, there are no differences due to the subjects' position: there are no hints for functional aspects influencing the recall, causing subjects to give a complete list of the opponent's behaviours, but to omit some of their own actions. What seems to be characteristic for segments often missing is their triviality (low seriousness, few harmful consequences) and/or short duration of the action.

The analysis of the written summaries of the aggressive interactions clearly indicates that the judgmental perspective is relevant for the way subjects refer to the preceding segments. Subjects in the position of an actor often refer to preceding segments to legitimize their behaviour by prior events, especially by prior actions of the opponent. Recipients as well as observers either don't see any connection between the single segments or

they just mention the temporal sequence (action B followed action A).

The differences in the connections between the segments are quite obvious: whereas out of the actor's position in 191 cases the given is legitimized by prior events, the comparable numbers for recipients and observers are only 17 and 35.

### 3.1.5. Discussion

Looking at the results concerning the content and structure of the subjective descriptions of the aggressive interactions it can be stated that there are only few divergences due to the subjects' judgmental perspective. Initiators, reactors and observers nearly unanimously structure the given material and don't systematically differ in the (in-)completeness of their recall.

Characteristics of the two films and their sub-actions seem to be crucial for the segmentation as well as the content of the subjective descriptions. Relevant aspects are changes in the setting of the conflict, the duration of a single event and the severity (harm caused by a given behaviour). Especially the last two of these three factors are probably also important for the definition of serious events. Surprisingly here the position of the judging subject is more or less irrelevant, as well. Considering the typical position-specific differences in the evaluation of aggressive interactions, it seemed to be a plausible expectation that subjects would prefer to define some of those actions as serious in which they are in the recipient's and not in the actor's position. The data don't confirm this idea. Instead this study suggests for another interpretation: out of the actor's position the performed behaviour is not generally evaluated positive (i.e. less negative than from the recipient's point of view), but actors differentiate between their own behaviours in term of seriousness. Since there is no situationally independent bias in the perception of own behaviour, there is evidence for

the argument that very serious events will be perceived and evaluated irrespective of the judgmental perspective.<sup>2</sup>

The prevailing importance of structural characteristics of the given interactions is equally true for both films, which heightens the relevance and generalizability of this finding.

Nevertheless, there are some differences due to the judgmental perspective in the subjective descriptions and definitions of the beginning of the conflict:

A look at the subjects' summaries of film I shows a tendency of the initiators to change the 'objective' beginning by adding a preceding segment, which might help to justify their behaviour, e.g. in terms of the norm of reciprocity (GOULDNER 1960) or the concept of retributive justice (BLUMENTHAL et al. 1975). The position-specific differences are more obvious in the subjects' answers to the questions, how the interaction started and who was the initiator of the conflict: Subjects in the position of the objective initiator try to get rid of this role - whether consciously or not - by calling the (objective) reactor the "real" initiator and/or by postponing the beginning of the interaction.

A comparison between the two films shows, that the occurrence of perspective-specific divergences in the definitions of the beginning of the conflict depends on the characteristics of the given episode. Only in film I, where there is ambiguity concerning the intentionality of the first action, there is a significant difference in the way initiators and reactors define the beginning. The reactors seemingly don't realize the ambiguity and usually define the first objective segment as the starting point of the aggressive interaction (in film I as well as in film II). A good deal of observers in film I agrees with the initiators' preferred point of view, i.e. postponing the beginning. So it can be argued, that initiators don't re-define the beginning in every case, but only if their arguments are strong enough, that is, if the 'objective' reality does not obviously contradict their interpretation (a condition that is clearly fulfilled in film I).

Perspective-specific divergences in the descriptions of the be-

ginning of complex social interaction sequences, as are found in this study, have already been theoretically conceptualized and described by BLUMENTHAL et al. (1975<sup>3</sup>):

"Life is not so neatly episodic, and in an endless sequence of events starting points become arbitrary. Which blow was unprovoked and which retributive becomes correspondingly confused, ... The objective observer sees only a series of violent acts by A and B, a process without an identifiable beginning or imminent end. But A insists that the initial act of violence was done by B, and that the episodes of violent provocation and justifiable retaliation form a sequence properly described as B-A, A-B; B-A, A-B; etc. His antagonist agrees to the description of the process but not to its origin; that he assigns to a violent act by A, which initiated a sequence A-B, B-A; A-B, B-A; etc. The differences in their perceptions can be illustrated as follows:

AS PERCEIVED BY PERSON A

... B A A B B A A B B A A B B A A B B A A B ...

AS PERCEIVED BY PERSON B

The perception of a precipitating event is required only to launch such a sequence; once begun, it is fueled by the value of retributive justice." (p. 99/100)

The way subjects combine the single events of the interaction sequence indicates perspective-specific divergences, too. Whereas actors tend to refer to preceding segments in a way legitimizing their own behaviour, e.g. "Michael provoked me, therefore I stroke him", recipients and observers either don't connect the single segments or do so in a neutral way, expressing simply the temporal order of events: "After I pushed Michael, he threw my bag to the ground".

In sum it can be said, that the 'pure' content and the structure of the interaction sequences are not perceived clearly different by initiators/actors, reactors/recipients and observers. Perspective-specific divergences occur as soon as some subjective interpretation is required (as in film I with its ambiguous beginning). These differences correspond to the typical divergence

in the evaluation of the appropriateness of a given behaviour: the actors legitimize their actions by prior events, which offer good reasons for their behaviour, whereas the recipients don't produce a causal link between their preceding own and the following opponent's action and insist in the viewpoint that the actor behaved inappropriately.

### 3.2. Evaluation of the aggressive interaction

The subjects' ratings of the single segments on the five dependent variables (judgment as inappropriate, bad, intentional, harmful, sanctionable<sup>3</sup>) were analysed in a 3x4-MANOVA with the factors PERSPECTIVE (own, other's, observed behaviour) and SEGMENT (beginning, beginning and serious, serious, others).

In this analysis it was not differentiated between the two films. A MANOVA with the additional factor SCENE (film I, film II) was conducted as well. It showed a main effect of this factor, film I being evaluated more negatively than film II on most dependent variables. The factors this study is mainly focussing on, SEGMENT and PERSPECTIVE, have similar effects in both films. So in this article it seems not necessary to discuss the factor SCENE any further.

#### 3.2.1. General effects of the judgmental perspective

It was tested whether own aggressive behaviour (that is all segments in which the subjects are in the position of an actor) is evaluated more positively than others' behaviour (that is all segments in which the subjects are in the recipient's position). The "own-other-divergence" was a stable result in previous studies (e.g. MUMMDENDEY, LINNEWEBER & LÖSCHPER 1984a,b); the question now is, whether the data of this study support those find-



ings.

The results obtained are shown in table 5a and 5b:

The results clearly support the notion of a perspective-specific divergence in the evaluation of aggressive behaviour.

On all variables there is a significant difference between the evaluation of own and other's behaviour, that is, own behaviour is judged as less inappropriate, bad, intentional, harmful and sanctionable than the opponent's behaviour.

The observers' judgments of the given segments as inappropriate, bad and intentional are closer to those of the recipients (other behaviour) than those of the actors (own behaviour). In the descriptions of the actions as harmful and sanctionable actors' and observers' evaluations clearly resemble each other.

### 3.2.2. Different kinds of segments

Four kinds of segments are differentiated in this analysis:

- beginning segments
- beginning and serious segments
- serious segments
- other segments.

The classification of segments was obtained by the subjects themselves, who answered the questions "With which action started the aggressive interaction?" and "With which action the conflict became serious?".

A 3x4 MANOVA with the factors PERSPECTIVE (own, other's, observed behaviour) and SEGMENT was conducted to analyse whether the typical perspective-specific divergence is affected by the kind of segment to be evaluated.

Tab 5: Results from the Oneway MANOVA, factor PERSPECTIVE

a) Means and Standard Deviations

Perspective		Judgement as ...				
		inapprpr.	bad	intentional	harmful	sanctionable
Own Behaviour (Actor)	mean	4.18 <sup>a</sup>	4.66 <sup>a</sup>	6.16 <sup>a</sup>	3.74 <sup>a</sup>	2.76 <sup>a</sup>
	sd	2.21	1.81	1.36	2.06	1.75
	n	395				
Other's Behaviour (Recipient)	mean	5.51 <sup>b</sup>	5.91 <sup>b</sup>	6.51 <sup>b</sup>	4.26 <sup>b</sup>	3.83 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	1.87	1.30	.87	2.07	2.05
	n	411				
Observed Behaviour (Observer)	mean	5.04 <sup>c</sup>	5.30 <sup>c</sup>	6.51 <sup>b</sup>	3.95 <sup>a</sup>	2.76 <sup>a</sup>
	sd	2.13	1.70	1.06	2.21	1.95
	n	323				

(Means with different superscripts differ at least at the 0.05 level of significance according to the Duncan test)

b) Effects of factor PERSPECTIVE

	F	df	p
Multivariate	10,12	2,1117	***
Judgement as...			
inappropriate	13,30		***
bad	23,53		***
intentional	16,64		***
harmful	2,01		n.s.
sanctionable	20,24		***

(\*\*\*: p < .001)

Table 6a and 6b show the means, standard deviations and main effects of the factor SEGMENT.

The MANOVA results show on all dependent variables a significant main effect ( $p < .001$ ); the judgment of aggressive interactions probably is influenced by the characteristics of the single actions.

"Other" segments are judged less inappropriate, bad and harmful than the three other kinds of segments. Both, "beginning" and "other" segments are evaluated as especially low sanctionable.

Segments that are at the same time classified as initiating the critical interaction and as first serious event are described as most inappropriate and harmful.

"Beginning" and "beginning and serious" segments are evaluated less intentional than the two other kinds of segments (but in all conditions the means are very high - > 6.0 - and the obtained differences are - although significant - only small).

Concerning the interaction of the factors PERSPECTIVE and SEGMENT Table 7a and 7b give an overview of the MANOVA results.

The interaction is significant for the judgments as intentional. It can be seen that in the conditions "beginning" segments and "beginning and serious" segments own behaviour is evaluated less intentional than in the other cells.

For other's and observed behaviour no differences due to the different kinds of segments are found.

A striking finding in the conditions "serious" segments and "other" segments is the lack of divergence between judgments of own and other's behaviour.

Although there are no more significant results it is worthwhile to have a look at the other variables as well. The results are

Tab. 6: Results for the MANOVA: PERSPECTIVE x SEGMENT; factor SEGMENT

a) Means and Standard Deviations

Kind of Segment		Judgement as ...				
		inapprpr.	bad	intentional	harmful	sanctionable
Beginning Segments	mean	5.48 <sup>ab</sup>	5.59 <sup>b</sup>	6.12 <sup>a</sup>	4.39 <sup>a</sup>	2.92 <sup>a</sup>
	sd	1.84	1.41	1.51	1.99	1.98
	n	155				
Beginning & Serious Segments	mean	5.98 <sup>a</sup>	5.98 <sup>b</sup>	6.09 <sup>a</sup>	5.16 <sup>b</sup>	3.87 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	1.48	1.78	1.43	1.82	1.94
	n	45				
Serious Segments	mean	5.24 <sup>b</sup>	5.57 <sup>b</sup>	6.61 <sup>b</sup>	4.38 <sup>a</sup>	3.67 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	2.12	1.59	0.89	2.13	1.97
	n	135				
Other Segments	mean	4.68 <sup>c</sup>	5.15 <sup>a</sup>	6.42 <sup>b</sup>	3.78 <sup>c</sup>	3.07 <sup>a</sup>
	sd	2.19	1.76	1.04	2.12	1.97
	n	794				

(Means with different superscripts differ at least at the 0.05 level of significance according to the Duncan test)

b) Effects of factor SEGMENT

	F	df	p
Multivariate	5.85	3,1117	***
Judgement as...			
inappropriate	9.71		***
bad	6.45		***
intentional	7.47		***
harmful	10.57		***
sanctionable	7.12		***

(\*\*\*: p < .001)

Tab. 7: Results for the MANOVA: PERSPECTIVE x SEGMENT; interaction of the two factors

a) Means and Standard Deviations

Kind of Segment	Per- spec- tive	Judgement as ...								
		inappropriate			bad			intentional		
		A	B	C <sup>1)</sup>	A	B	C	A	B	C
Beginning Segments	mean	4.22	6.19	5.72	4.60	6.13	5.83	5.09 <sup>a</sup>	6.51 <sup>b</sup>	6.55 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	1.83	1.40	1.79	1.56	1.02	1.22	2.09	0.90	0.97
	n	45	63	47						
Beginning & Serious Segments	mean	5.95	6.47	5.30	5.60	6.67	5.70	5.60 <sup>a</sup>	6.53 <sup>b</sup>	6.40 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	1.47	0.74	2.11	1.27	0.49	1.34	1.79	0.92	0.97
	n	20	15	10						
Serious Segments	mean	4.63	5.62	5.37	4.90	6.04	5.63	6.58 <sup>b</sup>	6.63 <sup>b</sup>	6.60 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	2.40	1.69	2.24	1.79	1.10	1.69	0.81	0.79	1.07
	n	40	52	43						
Other Segments	mean	3.99	5.29	4.82	4.57	5.80	5.11	6.31 <sup>b</sup>	6.49 <sup>b</sup>	6.48 <sup>b</sup>
	sd	2.22	1.99	2.15	1.86	1.40	1.77	1.14	0.88	1.09
	n	290	281	223						

Kind of Segment	Per- spec- tive	Judgement as ...					
		harmful			sanctionable		
		A	B	C	A	B	C
Beginning Segments	mean	3.82	4.71	4.51	1.82	3.75	2.85
	sd	2.05	1.99	1.85	1.23	2.08	1.94
	n	45	63	47			
Beginning & Serious Segments	mean	5.00	5.07	5.60	3.40	4.87	3.30
	sd	1.89	2.05	1.35	1.93	1.81	1.70
	n	20	15	10			
Serious Segments	mean	4.20	4.52	4.37	3.30	4.17	3.42
	sd	2.16	2.11	2.15	1.88	1.81	2.13
	n	40	52	43			
Other Segments	mean	3.58	4.07	3.67	2.78	3.74	2.60
	sd	2.02	2.06	2.27	1.74	2.08	1.91
	n	290	281	223			

- 1) A = Evaluation of Own Behaviour  
 B = Evaluation of Other's (Opponent's) Behaviour  
 C = Evaluation of Observed Behaviour

(Means with different superscripts differ at least at the 0.05 level of significance according to Duncan test).

Tab. 7 (contin.)

b) Effects of the interaction PERSPECTIVE x SEGMENT

	F	df	p
Multivariate	2.06	6,1117	***
Judgement as... inappropriate	1.28		n.s.
bad	.80		n.s.
intentional	6.93		***
harmful	.50		n.s.
sanctionable	1.72		n.s.

(\*\*\*:  $p < .001$ )

similar to those just mentioned for the judgments as intentional. On all variables the greatest discrepancy in the evaluation of own and other's behaviour is found for the "beginning" segments. Concerning the judgments as inappropriate, bad and harmful especially low perspective-specific divergences are found for "beginning and serious" segments and/or "serious" segments.

It should be mentioned that the low perspective-specific judgmental differences for some variables and kinds of segments are mainly caused by the variability of the actors' judgments (judgments of own behaviour); recipients and observers are less affected by the kind of segment to be evaluated.

### 3.2.3. Discussion

**Main effects of factor PERSPECTIVE:** The results obtained confirm the findings of prior studies (e.g. MUMMENDEY, LINNEWEBER & LÖSCHPER 1984; MUMMENDEY, LÖSCHPER & LINNEWEBER 1984). The judgments about the behavioural segments are clearly influenced by the subjects' perspective. While dealing with own behaviour (actor's perspective) the evaluation on all dependent variables is less negative than the evaluation of the opponent's behaviour (recipient's perspective). Thus, the typical perspective-specific divergences not only occur in the evaluation of simple aggressive interactions (consisting of a single action and re-action), but also in judgments on more complex, longer interaction sequences.

The observers' ratings are not clearly similar to those out of one of the two other perspectives. On one variable (intention) observers' and recipients' evaluations resemble each other, whereas on two other variables (harmful, sanctionable) the observers agree with the actors. The observers' average judgment of the actions as inappropriate and bad is in between those of actors and recipients. This result confirms what has already been mentioned in the introduction: dealing with aggressive behaviour simply out of the observer's perspective is an inadequate reduc-

tion of the phenomenon, leaving out the specific characteristics of the actor's and the recipient's viewpoint.

**Main effects of factor SEGMENT:** The results clearly indicate that the position and function of a behavioural segment (i.e. beginning of the aggressive interaction) and its seriousness are relevant to the evaluation. "Beginning" and/or "serious" segments are judged more inappropriate, bad and harmful than "other", not specified segments. The correspondence between the subjective classification of an action as "serious" and a clear negative evaluation is not very surprising. Nevertheless this result shows that the subjects, who first rated the single segments and then classified "serious" segments, already differentiated in terms of seriousness while judging the actions and not only when they were asked to define serious segments. The negative judgment of "beginning" segments offers more evidence for the idea, that beginning an aggressive interaction is an especially disapproved behaviour.

**Interaction of the factors PERSPECTIVE and SEGMENT:** Although there is a significant interaction only on the variable "intention", similar tendencies are found on other variables as well. The data obtained offer a mostly structured picture about how the evaluation of specific kinds of segments differs in the three judgmental perspectives.

The results indicate that actors are much more affected by the kind of segment to be judged than observers and (especially) recipients are.

On most variables actors' and recipients' judgments differ less concerning ("beginning and") "serious" segments than for "beginning" and "other" segments.

Actors seem to differentiate between their actions in terms of situational aspects (i.e.: Did the action initiate the aggressive conflict?) and severity. It is noteworthy that own behaviour is about as often classified as "serious" as is other's and the definition for both, own and other's behaviour, coincides with a



negative judgment.

The relatively positive evaluation of own beginning behaviour could be caused by functional motives. By admitting that he initiated the aggressive interaction and that this initiating action was inappropriate, the actor would legitimize the reaction of the opponent and would weaken his argument that his further behaviour was simply provoked by this re-action.

The recipients' judgments show only low variability. Being in the position of a victim seems to lead to a rigid and clearly negative evaluation of the actor's behaviour.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The study shows only few perspective-specific differences in the content of the subjective descriptions and in the segmentations of the aggressive interaction sequences. Divergences occur as soon as the subjects interpret or evaluate the segments. So, while using a similar set of informations, the opponents form different judgments of the interaction.

There are some hints to a specific importance of the beginning of the aggressive interaction sequence. First of all "beginning" segments are evaluated more negatively than "other" segments.

Besides, there are some perspective-specific divergences in the subjective definitions of the beginning. Subjects in the role of the initiator (the person who performs the very first action shown in the film,) tend to deny this role, if possible. Therefore, in film I, where it is difficult to decide whether the first action was planned or just an accident, several subjects in the initiator's position postpone the "true" beginning of the aggressive interaction, this way attributing the responsibility for the conflict to the opponent. In the non-ambiguous film II initiators and reactors don't differ in their descriptions of the be-

ginning. This probably means that only if there is some room for subjective interpretation, the beginning of an aggressive interaction is perspective-specifically defined in a way that is suitable for a positive self-description of the subjects.

In the introduction it has been already mentioned that divergences in the evaluation of aggressive actions may be decisive for the further development of the conflict. The same is probably true for perspective-specific differences in the subjective definitions of the beginning: if the two opponents agree on which event was the initiative one, an escalation of the aggressive interaction may be inhibited. As BLUMENTHAL et al. (1975<sup>3</sup>) put it:

"If violence occurred only as retribution for violence, of course, there would be no violence at all; it would never be provoked. But if violence always brought retribution, what then? Two dramatically different possibilities present themselves, depending on where one locates the starting point in a violent sequence and how one appraises the relative force of the initial and retaliative acts. If the protagonists agree on this matters, the violent episodes may be brief and self limiting. A strikes B; B returns the blow. Hands are shaken and all is well." (p.99)

The data obtained in this study indicate that the evaluation of aggressive actions is influenced by their position in the course of interaction (i.e. "beginning" vs. "other" segments) and their severity (i.e. "serious" vs. "other" segments). "Beginning" and/or "other" segments are mostly evaluated more negatively than "other" segments. This variability is mainly due to the actors' judgments; observers and especially recipients only slightly differentiate between the kinds of segments distinguished in this study.

At the beginning of this article it has already been mentioned that the further course of a given aggressive interaction, that is its escalation or settlement (e.g. by excuses or compensation), is influenced by the amount of divergence in the interpretations of the situation by the two opponents. The findings just reported show that actors do not generally insist in the relative

appropriateness of their behaviour, but are able to define own behaviour as the beginning of the aggressive conflict and/or as "serious" and do (therefore) admit, they behaved inappropriately. Probably in these cases they will be willing to consider a peaceful agreement with the opponent.

On the other hand it is obvious that recipients are rather rigid in their negative judgments of the actor's behaviour. An interesting concern of further experimental work could be to look for conditions that heighten the variability to the recipients' evaluations and especially to investigate possibilities to reduce the perspective-specific judgmental divergences by leading recipients to a better understanding for the actor's viewpoint.

Footnotes:

1. For subjects in the observer perspective sheets with the names of the two characters in the film, "Michael" and "Thomas" were used. So they filled in some sheets on Michael's and Thomas' behaviour.
2. It should be stressed that this interpretation refers to judgments out of the retrospective. It does not contradict the idea that in the moment, the actor behaves "aggressive", he is sure to behave in the situationally most appropriate way (perhaps he chooses the least bad behavioral alternative).
3. The ratings were given on seven-point bipolar scales. "7" always means the most negative evaluation on the given variable (i.e. most inappropriate, bad, intentional, harmful and clearly sanctionable).

## 5. SUMMARY

The present study is based on a social psychological concept of aggression, focussing on typicalities in the subjective definitions and interpretations of aggressive interactions.

The study was conducted to explore whether perspective-specific divergences in the evaluation of longer aggressive interaction sequences are accompanied by different descriptions of the content and different segmentation of the interaction from the actor's versus the recipient's viewpoint.

253 pupils participated in the study. The data obtained indicate that - while only slightly differing in the free descriptions and segmentations of the interaction - subjects evaluate the single behavioural segments more positively if they are in the position of an actor than of a recipient.

Presenting the subjects an ambiguous situation leads to perspective-specific differences in the subjective definitions of the beginning of the aggressive interaction, showing that there is a tendency to reject the initiator's role.

Four kinds of segments were distinguished; the MANOVA results show that actions initiating the conflict and actions defined as "serious" are evaluated significantly more negative than other, not specified segments. Actors' judgments are much more affected by the distinction between segments than are those of recipients.

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## APPENDIX

### Objective segments of film I

- 1) The school-children arrive at school with their bikes. After having parked his bike the boy A (the initiator) walks along B's bike whereby B's school bag falls from the carrier to the ground.
- 2) B reacts angry and blames A.
- 3) B pushes A.
- 4) A throws B to the ground.
- 5) B bumps against A.
- 6) A throws B's school bag to the ground.
- 7) B bumps against A.
- 8) A pushes B from the school entrance stairs.
- 9) A keeps the school entrance door shut so that B cannot enter.
- 10) A keeps the entrance door of the classroom shut so that B cannot enter.
- 11) B bumps against and pushes A.
- 12) B pulls at A's pullover.
- 13) B makes a gesture towards A, indicating that A has a bee in his bonnet.

### Objective segments of film II

- 1) B has a new haircut. His hair is extremely short now. As soon as he steps into the classroom his classmates, especially A (initiator), start to make fun of him.
- 2) At the end of the lesson B leaves the class first and makes a knot into the sleeve of A's jacket.
- 3) A recognizes the knot and has some difficulties to loosen it. Meanwhile B is watching him and seems to enjoy his revenge.
- 4) When A sees that B is laughing at him he becomes angry, and insults B.

- 5) A leaves the school building before B and opens the valve of B's bicycle tyres.
- 6) B sees what has happened, runs after A and tries to start a brawl.
- 7) A shakes B off like a fly. He is not willing to engage in a fight.



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