



Aggressive personality traits in the effects of violent imagery on unprovoked impulsive aggression [☆]

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Abstract

In a three-factor design varying the aggressive-behavior subtraits of physical aggression (low, high) and hostility (low, high) with exposure to film content (innocuous, violent imagery), respondents were exposed to film segments and thereafter engaged in a teaching task that involved the administration of noxious feedback for unproductive efforts by the learner. A display informed respondents of the intensity of delivered feedback. Instructions were to provide feedback as often as required and of intensities deemed appropriate. However, respondents were also told to refrain from using extremely high intensities, as these intensities would be hurtful to the learner. None of the three independent variables exerted appreciable influence on the frequency of use of recommended feedback. In contrast, the frequency of the use of the disallowed, hurtful feedback was markedly affected. Independent of exposure to film content, men scoring high on hostility used impulsive aggressive responses more frequently than men scoring low on that subtrait. Within the subtrait of physical aggression, however, the degree of trait manifestation proved inconsequential for impulsive aggression, but exposure to the violent film segment resulted in more frequent use of impulsive aggressive responses than exposure to the innocuous film segment.

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1. Introduction

Reviews of research on the social consequences of exposure to violent imagery in the media of communication, whether solicited from agencies that serve the public interest (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1993; National Academy of Science, 1993) or deriving from personal initiatives (e.g., Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Heath, Bresolin, & Rinaldi, 1989), have invariably projected a rather undifferentiated facilitation of hostile and aggressive behavior in society. Meta-analyses (e.g., Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991) have similarly concentrated on showing that the research summarily gives evidence of aggression facilitation. Although gender differences in the impact of violent imagery were acknowledged in some of these reviews, the impression given is that essentially all individuals are at risk of being influenced, although probably to different degrees.

In recent years, however, much research on the influence of media violence has been conducted to overcome the indicated lack of effect specificity and to construct strata along which effects of distinct strength occur or do not at all materialize. Most of this work concerns the personality characteristics of respondents to media violence (cf. Zillmann & Weaver, 1997).

Bushman and Geen (1990) and Bushman (1996) focused on the moderating effect of the self-ascribed tendency to respond with physical aggression to provocation and established the usefulness of this personality characteristic for the investigation of media-violence effects. Employing the Buss and Perry (1992) procedure to ascertain individual differences in the subtrait of physical aggression (PA), Bushman (1995) showed that persons high in PA trait were more strongly drawn to violent media presentations than were persons low in PA trait. Bushman also showed, this time using the Buss and Durkee (1957) assault subscale, that exposure to media violence fostered aggressive dispositions in persons of high assault trait, but not in persons of low assault trait. Moreover, Bushman assessed aggressive reactions behaviorally within the reaction-time competition procedure (Bond & Lader, 1986; Taylor & Epstein, 1967) and demonstrated that the subtrait of physical aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992) moderates aggressive responding, as measured by the delivery of noise blasts to the opponent. Respondents high in PA trait, when provoked by intense blasts set by their opponent, delivered blasts of higher intensity after exposure to media violence than after exposure to innocuous material. In contrast, exposure of respondents low in PA trait to these presentations failed to show appreciable differences in blast intensities. Analysis of an unprovoked initial response (i.e. in a situation devoid of the threat of an intense blast from the opponent) largely replicated these findings.

To the extent that the sanction of the delivery of noxious noise blasts to another person, which is implicit in the indicated experimental procedure, can be accepted as a simulation of aggression, this latter part of Bushman's investigation suggests that exposure to media violence facilitates provoked aggressive behavior in persons scoring high, but not in persons scoring low, on the subtrait of physical aggression. It further suggests that unprovoked aggression is similarly facilitated by exposure to media violence.

Some inconsistencies in the trait-aggression mediation of asocial reactions to violent media presentations are apparent, however, Kiewitz and Weaver (2001) did not observe greater asocial callousness after respondents' exposure to violent than non-violent films, and Mathews et al. (2005) similarly failed to obtain differences in antisocial inclinations as a function of either trait aggressiveness or exposure to media violence.

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