



## PSYCHOTICISM IN THE EFFECT OF PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO GRATUITOUS MEDIA VIOLENCE ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENCE AS A PREFERRED MEANS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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**Summary**—Within a prolonged-exposure, delayed-measurement paradigm, respondents consumed films that featured no violence, old-style violence, gratuitous violence, or horror. Both male and female respondents had been classified as low vs high in psychoticism weeks prior to consumption. Delayed measures were: (1) the acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution; (2) crime apprehension; (3) evaluation of police brutality; and (4) the endorsement of the death penalty for perpetrators of violent crime. Female respondents, whether low or high in psychoticism, were not appreciably affected by the consumption of any of the violent genres. Similarly, male respondents in the lower half of psychoticism were not appreciably affected. In contrast, male respondents in the upper half of psychoticism, estimated to represent half the population, were significantly affected: Consumption of gratuitous violence consistently fostered greater acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Consumption of old-style violence and horror did not. Crime apprehension was not appreciably affected by genres differing in amount and type of violence featured. Neither were evaluations of police brutality. However, respondents, especially male respondents and respondents in the upper half of psychoticism, endorsed the death penalty more strongly after gratuitous violence than after consumption of alternative genres. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd.

### INTRODUCTION

In numerous reviews of the available research on the effects of media violence (e.g. Donnerstein, Slaby & Eron, 1994; Friedrich-Cofer & Huston, 1986; Geen, 1994; Heath, Bresolin & Rinaldi, 1989; Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, Feshbach, Katz, Murray, Rubinstein, Wilcox & Zuckerman, 1992; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985) it has been concluded that, on the whole, exposure to depictions of violence facilitates the formation of aggressive dispositions and the propensity for aggressive behaviors. Reviews by various national institutions of the United States (the 1972 report of the Surgeon General, the 1982 review by the National Institute of Mental Health, the 1991 report of the Center for Disease Control, and the 1993 reviews by the National Academy of Science and the American Psychological Association) also arrived at this verdict. Despite some dissension (e.g. Cumberbatch & Howitt, 1989; Freedman, 1984, 1988; Kaplan & Singer, 1976; Stipp & Milavsky, 1988), Kunkel, Wilson, Linz, Potter, Donnerstein, Smith, Blumenthal and Gray (1996), in a recent industry-supported assessment, saw fit to conclude that “there is clear evidence that exposure to media violence contributes in significant ways to violence in society” (p. 13).

Such generalizations, by projecting that media violence places the public at large at risk, lack specificity. Although children are usually singled out as particularly vulnerable and some allusion is made to gender differences, media-violence tends to be viewed as affecting an undifferentiated, unstratified audience: Everybody is deemed at risk and thought similarly open to influence. Meta-analyses (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood, Wong & Chachere, 1991) make it especially clear that individual-difference variables have been grossly neglected, and that statements about the potentially differential effect of exposure to media violence on persons of different personality are premature, if altogether feasible, at present.

Some research on the mediating influence of personality variables in the effects of media violence exists, however. Bushman (1995), for instance, explored the implications of trait aggressiveness as measured by the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). High trait aggressives, compared to low trait aggressives, were found to be more strongly drawn to depictions of violence, responded

with stronger assertiveness to such material, and when competing with other persons, exhibited greater aggressiveness in response to provocation. Check and Guloien (1989) similarly investigated the implications of an individual-difference variable for the effect of erotica on men's proclivity for sexual aggression. Specifically, these investigators assessed the respondents' psychoticism (Eysenck, 1978) and divided their sample into men low vs. high on this trait—a trait characterized by hostile dispositions, lack of empathy, and contempt for risks and danger. It was observed that men scoring low on psychoticism were not appreciably influenced by the consumption of different forms of pornography. Men scoring high on psychoticism, in contrast, showed greatly increased self-proclaimed rape proclivity (Malamuth, 1981) after repeated exposure to violent or nonviolent pornography. This demonstration of the potential dependence of media effects on the absence or presence of particular personality traits underscores the importance of their assessment and usage for stratification purposes. Had Check and Guloien not ascertained their respondents' psychoticism, they would have failed to observe an effect of erotica exposure or, at best, recorded a rather trivial one. In either case they would have reported uninformative, even misleading findings concerning the unstratified population at large.

Given the indicated trait specifications of psychoticism (i.e. hostile dispositions, lack of empathy, and contempt for risks and danger), there seems every reason to expect that exposure to depictions of violence per se will more strongly influence dispositions to perpetrate violence and to act them out, even under conditions of minimal or no provocation, in persons manifesting high degrees of psychoticism than in those showing little or no psychotic characteristics. Depictions of violent behavior exhibit, after all, a total lack of empathy for victims in the usually risk-defying, reckless behavior of the perpetrators. Psychotically inclined persons, as they are already callous and harbor social discontent and hostility, should be most receptive of the supportive information contained in violent displays. In contrast, persons without such inclinations should find it difficult to embrace the concept that hostile and violent actions are acceptable means of conflict resolution, if only because they respond with empathic distress to portrayals of coercion and victimization.

On the basis of findings showing that aggressive persons, in general (e.g. Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny & McDermott, 1979; Bushman, 1995; Huesmann & Eron, 1986), and psychotically inclined persons, in particular (e.g. Weaver, 1991b; Weaver, Brosius & Mundorf, 1993; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986), take a stronger interest in media violence than do nonaggressive and nonpsychotic persons, it may be expected that unempathic, callous persons are more strongly drawn to the callousness that is so obtrusive in the displays of violent action. As a result, the psychotics' more frequent activation of salient concepts should eventually produce *chronic accessibility* of callous, hostile concepts (Bargh, 1984; Bargh, Lombardi & Higgins, 1988; Higgins, 1996). In situations of conflict, this ready accessibility is bound to foster callous, hostile dispositions, making the psychotic person partial to aggressive, violent resolutions of the conflict. Whereas the not psychotically inclined person may search for nonaggressive solutions, exercising compassion and giving negotiation a chance, the psychotic person, because of the imposition of callous thoughts and possible courses of coercive action, seems prone to resort to hostile and violent action.

The present investigation has been designed to test these proposals. In order to rule out the possibility that any effect of media-violence exposure is of trivial duration (Zillmann & Weaver, 1996a), a research paradigm of repeated exposure and delayed effect assessment was employed. Specifically, respondents viewed feature films on several consecutive days, and effects were ascertained a full day after exposure to the last-viewed film.

Because contemporary violent films differ greatly in the depiction of violence, several violent film genres were examined, their potential effects on dispositions toward the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution being compared against the presumed nil effect of nonviolent drama. Specifically, the new genre of "superviolence" was compared with more traditional violent drama and horror. On the basis of cursory inspection, it was expected that superviolent films feature violence more graphically and more frequently than do traditional violent films. Thus, the superviolence genre is bound to activate concepts pertaining to the use of violence as a means of resolving social conflict more frequently and perhaps with greater emotional intensity (Bower & Cohen, 1982; Lang, 1979) than the genre featuring traditional violence, thereby creating stronger effects on disposition formation.

Predictions of the effect of horror are less clear. Although violence abounds in this genre, it tends

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