

## **Media Violence and Antisocial Behavior: An Overview**

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Do media portrayals of interpersonal violence engender aggression among the observers? This question has been the focus of social scientific inquiry for over a quarter of a century. The initial research efforts of numerous investigators led to the surgeon general's research program on television and social behavior in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The surgeon general's conclusion that "television violence, indeed, does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society" (Steinfeld, 1972) stimulated a torrent of research, congressional hearings, and expressions of public concern. The late 1970s and early 1980s also saw the emergence of cable television and the video cassette as major media forces. Accordingly, many teenagers and even preadolescents became frequent viewers of scenes that graphically couple sex and violence. Not surprisingly, a new research focus developed on the effects of such media stimuli.

In 1982 the National Institute of Mental Health commissioned a comprehensive review of the recent scientific literature on television and social behavior as a 10-year follow-up to the surgeon general's report. It indicated television violence in even stronger terms than did the earlier report. It seems fair to say that the majority of researchers in the area are now convinced that excessive violence in the media increases the likelihood that at least some viewers will behave more violently.

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The dissenters have remained, however. The major economic beneficiaries of media violence have always denied any adverse effects. In addition, a significant minority of dedicated researchers have remained unconvinced that media violence significantly influences real-life aggressive behavior. Although this minority viewpoint is not represented by a separate article in this present *JSI* number, many issues raised by the minority are addressed in the articles to follow.

We believe two factors may have been particularly important in perpetuating the minority view. One is the propensity of different reviewers to concentrate on different types of studies or even a single study to the exclusion of all others. For example, Freedman (1984), in his recent review of media effects, ignores laboratory research as being irrelevant. In fact, laboratory research is extremely relevant to demonstrating causality since there are ethical restrictions on the use of experimental methods in field research on aggression; causality cannot be proved or disproved from observational field studies alone. Those reviewers who have concentrated almost exclusively on showing how one or another field study is flawed have misfocused their energies to some extent. It is impossible to achieve the kind of control in the field that one can achieve in the laboratory. In fact, in field studies one knowingly trades control of confounding factors for greater external validity, i.e., greater generalizability. Therefore field studies of media violence should be viewed as supplements to the well-controlled laboratory studies. When examined in this light, the great majority of field and laboratory studies have yielded remarkably consistent results, which indict media violence as a factor in the development of aggressive behavior.

A second factor contributing to the divergence of views on media effects may be the researchers' differing theoretical orientations. In general, those researchers who have approached the topic from a developmental social-learning perspective have seemed more willing to conclude that media violence stimulates aggression. In our view, developmental social-learning theory provides a model that focuses one's attention toward the more relevant data and away from the less relevant. For example, it is critical to consider the age of the viewer in evaluating the expected outcome of exposure to media violence. At certain ages children are more likely to acquire from the media the habits and rules (which we call *scripts*) that will guide their behavior in later years. Thus it is not surprising to find that correlations between exposure to violence and aggressive behavior vary greatly, depending on a person's age. From a developmental perspective it is also reasonable to expect that the effects of exposure to violence will accumulate over time and reveal themselves in long-term effects, even when no short-term effects are detectable. Similarly, social-learning theory stresses the importance of dispositional, cognitive, cultural, and situational factors in mediating the learning of aggression from the observation of aggression. As a result, the social learning

theorist is not surprised to find that exposure to media violence results in increased aggression only for some people some of the time. The scripts for violent behavior that are acquired in childhood may have effects lasting into adulthood, but whether they do so for any given child will depend on these other characteristics of the child and of the child's environment.

### The Causes of Aggression

As we have stressed above, one cannot properly evaluate the available data on media effects without considering models of the psychological processes involved. Similarly, to understand the role that media violence plays in simulating antisocial behavior, a model of the psychological processes underlying antisocial behavior is needed. Theoreticians generally agree that serious antisocial aggression is determined by multiple factors. For example, Huesmann and Eron (1984) suggest that a number of interrelated constitutional and environmental factors must converge for aggression to emerge. However, they argue that habitual aggressive behavior is mostly learned, and learned early in life. During the first decade of life, they propose, a characteristic style of social behavior crystallizes in most children and becomes remarkably resistant to change. The mounting evidence suggests that these characteristic styles of social behavior persist into adolescence and young adulthood. Aggression is most likely to become the dominant style if the child's environment frustrates and victimizes the child, provides aggressive models, and reinforces aggression.

If aggression in humans is primarily the product of learned scripts, investigations of violence viewing and aggression should examine the possible roles of violence viewing in the learning process. The learning of an aggressive script can be divided into three distinct phases, as can most learning processes. One is the acquisition and encoding phase, in which the script or rule for guiding behavior is first acquired and represented internally. The second is the *maintenance phase*, in which the internal representation is strengthened and elaborated. The third is the *retrieval and emission phase*, in which the internal representation manifests itself in actual behavior.

This general model of the learning process is consistent with contemporary thinking about cognition and learning, and recent research on cognition provides additional insights into each phase of the process. For example, a scene will obviously not be encoded unless the viewer attends to the scene. Visual and auditory characteristics of a scene that capture a viewer's attention increase the likelihood that the scene will be encoded. Similarly, themes and plots that are more salient for the viewer promote encoding. But encodings may differ greatly in the extent to which the complexities of a scene are captured. Generally, older children produce richer, more elaborate encodings with more key features of the

scene stored in the memory. More elaborate encodings, in turn, provide more entries into the memory system and make retrieval of the memory representation easier.

The expansion and elaboration of a memory representation may continue long after the scene has ended. Any time the child recalls the scene, thinks about it, has fantasies based on it, or acts it out in play, the child is "rehearsing" the scene. Rehearsal, particularly elaborate rehearsal that provides a richer organizational framework for the scene, is central to maintenance of the representation in memory. In addition, elaborate rehearsal may lead to the construction of a new, more general or abstract memory representation of the scene. For example, a scene showing a lawman shooting a criminal who threatened him with a gun may be transformed into a representation of "good guys" shooting "bad guys."

As mentioned above, the likelihood that a child will recall a previously viewed scene and use it as a script for his or her own behavior depends on more than the strength and complexity of the encoded memory trace. Various cues in the child's environment may elicit the recall of a script for behavior. Generally, the more the child's current situation matches the characteristics of the encoded situation, the more likely it is that the encoded script will be retrieved and employed as a guide for behavior. At this point it no longer matters how a particular script was acquired or maintained. Thus, an aggressive cue encountered in one venue may trigger aggressive scripts acquired in other venues.

### **The Potential Roles of Media Violence**

Given the above model, one can identify several ways that media violence could affect aggressive behavior. Media violence could provide the original aggressive scripts that children store in memory. Repeated exposures to the same media scripts could increase their retention and lead to changes in children's attitudes. Exposure to violent displays of any type could provide cues leading to the retrieval of these and other aggressive scripts, and to the emission of aggressive behaviors. Note again that the script retrieved in this latter process need not have been learned through exposure to media violence.

In addition to playing a role in the learning and retrieval of specific aggressive habits, media violence may affect behavior by changing a person's attitudes, by changing a person's emotional responses to violence (desensitization), or by arousing a person. Each of these processes are examined by one or more writers in this issue. Within our overall model, attitudes and emotional responsivity can perhaps best be considered potential inhibitors of aggressive responding. The realization that a behavior may produce unpleasant emotional responses, or may violate important attitudes or norms for behavior, may prevent the behavior. Arousal, on the other hand, seems to play a more complex role; it is known to affect both encoding and retrieval, and to serve as a motivating factor.

It should be clear that, under the model we have outlined, the relation between exposure to media violence and aggression need not be unidirectional or due to a single process. A person's media-viewing behaviors are undoubtedly learned, and their acquisition, maintenance, or emission might well be influenced by the person's aggressive behavior and the environment's responses to the person's aggression. For example, a person who behaves aggressively in social interactions and is punished might acquire television viewing as a competing response to the punishing social interactions. Media violence may cause aggression, and aggression may cause the viewing of media violence. These are not mutually exclusive paths, as some researchers appear to assume; rather, they are likely to be complementary dynamic processes underlying the frequently observed correlation between viewing media violence and aggressive behavior.

Although aggression in humans may be primarily a learned behavior, no single environmental factor can be expected to account for more than a small portion of the individual differences in aggression. Even the scientist most convinced of the detrimental effects of media violence would not argue that exposure to such depictions alone would be sufficient to make a person behave aggressively. For aggression to occur, a number of the factors mentioned above must converge. These factors may predispose an individual to learn aggressive scripts or may simply predispose an individual to respond aggressively to certain stimuli.

### **In This Issue**

In this issue we encouraged the contributors to organize their writings within the just-described theoretical framework, which includes the processes of acquisition, maintenance, and emission of aggression. Within this framework, research on media violence can be divided into that focusing on the relatively immediate effects and that focusing on the cumulative long-term effects of exposure. The immediate effects of exposure to an aggressive scene could include the emission of an aggressive behavior cued by some elements of the scene, the acquisition of a new aggressive behavior represented in the scene, or the acquisition and/or strengthening of attitudes or emotions about aggression. Most studies of immediate effects have used traditional experimental designs either in the laboratory or the field. A general overview of the research on behavior is given by Geen and Thomas in the first article. Research on the immediate effects of violence viewing on attitudes, emotions, and cognitions is summarized by Rule and Ferguson in the following article.

For media violence to have a long-term effect on behavior, it must stimulate the acquisition of aggressive habits that persist over time. Repeated exposures may, in fact, accumulate to produce greater individual differences than are apparent in the short run. In investigating such long-term effects, however, one

is generally restricted to longitudinal observational designs in which variables cannot be manipulated or controlled. Nevertheless, such data often are the most compelling because they are collected in real-world settings. Turner, Hesse, and Peterson-Lewis review the more prominent of these studies in the third article.

Next, Malamuth and Briere review the recent studies on the effects of media displays that couple violence with sex. They present a model to explain how sexually violent media may contribute both to immediate and to future aggression against women. Sexual violence in the media has recently been cast in the limelight by the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986). Malamuth and Briere's article, and the later one by Linz, Penrod, and Donnerstein, address some of the difficult issues debated by this commission.

The next section contains three theoretical papers that attempt to elaborate on the psychological processes through which media violence affects aggressive behavior. First, Berkowitz discusses the role of situational variables in mediating the effects of media violence on aggression. Then Jerome and Dorothy Singer present a model and data concerning how family variables mitigate or exacerbate the effects of media violence on children. Finally, Huesmann outlines a process model for explaining the long-term cumulative effects of media violence. His reciprocal-effects model explains how a child's early viewing habits may be reflected in his or her behavior years later.

The last section contains three articles concerning the implications of the research findings for society. Rosenthal demonstrates that even the seemingly small correlations obtained between violence viewing and aggression have real social significance. Eron outlines some possibilities for intervening with children to prevent adverse effects of media violence. Finally, Linz, Penrod, and Donnerstein investigate some possible legal responses to the published research findings, particularly those pertaining to sexually violent depictions.

The authors in this issue represent a broad range of specialties in psychology and communication. Each brings his or her own unique perspective to a complex issue. We make no pretense of presenting every point of view. Rather, we have attempted to collect a coherent set of scholarly articles that deal with an important and disturbing problem.

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