Aggression

Psy 240; Spring 2006
Purdue University
Dr. Kipling Williams
Layperson Definitions of Aggression

- We commonly use the word aggression to mean:
  - assertive
  - competitive
  - Forward/“fresh”
  - risk-taking
  - dominant, powerful
  - angry

- Factors that predict aggression are different from factors that predict these behaviors
Working Definition

• Social psychologists define *aggression* as: *intent to harm another*

• Problems with this:
  – hard to measure intention, so why don’t we just say “Doing harm to others?”
    • Harming without intent *shouldn’t* be called aggression
    • Not harming, but intending to do so, *should* be called aggression
Three Theoretical Perspectives on Aggression

• Psychodynamic (Freud)
• Sociobiological (Lorenz)
• Learning
  – I. Two-factor theory (Berkowitz)
  – II. Social learning (Rotter, Bandura)
  – III. GAM: General Aggression Model; (Anderson)
Freud’s Psychodynamic Perspective

• We all possess an *innate* drive for sex and aggression. They are *inescapable*.

• Society functions to inhibit direct expression of these urges, so we seek socially acceptable means to express them
  – sex: creativity, the arts
  – aggression: sports, competition

• *Hydraulic Model*: aggressive tendencies build up over time and must be released (catharsis)

• Can achieve catharsis vicariously: *watching violence can release pent-up aggressive tendencies*
Sociobiological Perspective: Lorenz

• Aggression is innate, necessary and adaptive
  – Genes for aggression are passed along, whereas genes for passivity are not.

• Situational or environmental cues interact with genetic predispositions:
  – *Arousal* caused by hormones, etc.
  – A situational cue or trigger: *hard wired, not learned*

• The case of the “stickleback fish”
Stickleback Fish
Learning I: Two factor theory of aggression (Berkowitz)

• We are *not* born with innate tendencies to be aggressive

• Two factors must co-occur in order to produce aggression:
  – Arousal (could be hormonal, could be externally induced)
  – External cue (learned to be associated with aggression)
Origins of 2-factor theory

• Originally stems from the “frustration-aggression hypothesis”

“Frustration, and only frustration, causes aggression, and only aggression”

Research Example:

• Children building blocks with desk-shaking button
Problems with the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

• But, hypothesis overly strong and generally not supported, because:
  – Many things can instigate aggression
    • heat, insult, modeling or conformity
  – Frustration causes other feelings and behaviours
    • helplessness, perseverance, reactance
Two-factor Theory

• Internal arousal +
• External cue, which is learned (via classical conditioning)

Both must be present

• Examples
  – Rifle study (lab)
  – Dunking booth study (field)
  – Horn-honking studies (field)
The Presence of a Gun

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Amount of Aggression as defined by intensity of shocks
# The Presence of a Gun

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*Amount of Aggression as defined by intensity of shocks*
The Dunking Booth

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*Amount of Aggression as defined by number of bean bags thrown*
The Dunking Booth

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Amount of Aggression as defined by number of bean bags thrown
Learning II: Social learning

• Aggression is learned, not innate
• We learn
  – either directly through reinforcement of aggressive behaviors; OR
  – by modeling others who are behaving aggressively
    • aggressive behavior must be rewarded
    • aggressive behavior must be seen as real
Bandura’s Bobo Doll Studies

- Participants were normal children
- Watched violent TV episode or various “control” episodes that were not violent
- Manipulated whether aggressor in video was rewarded or not
- Observed children in play area after they watched video
- Aggression defined as number of times the children hit the bobo doll
Results indicate that...

- Viewing *rewarded* violence increases violent behaviors in children.
- Viewing *unrewarded* violence does not necessarily increase violence.
- Choice of control groups are very important when conducting this research.
- So, what are the effects of watching violence? Catharsis or modeling?
Media Effects on Suicide


• U.S. suicides increase after publicized suicide stories
• the more publicity given to the suicide story, the higher the suicide rate thereafter; and
• the rise occurs mainly in the geographic area where the suicide story is publicized
Media Effects on Suicide

• Additionally, automobile fatalities also increase just after publicized suicide stories;
• the more publicity given to the stories, the greater the increase in automobile fatalities, and
• the increase occurs mainly in the area where the story is publicized.
Media Effects on Suicide

• Also, single-car crash fatalities increase more than other types, and
• the driver in these crashes is significantly similar to the person described in the suicide story, while the passengers are not.

• THEREFORE:
  – suicide stories appear to elicit additional suicides, some of which are disguised as auto accidents
Media Effects on Homicide
Phillips

• What sort of media-depicted homicide would be modeled?
  – Rewarded
  – Made exciting
  – Perceived as real
  – Culturally Justified

• What is shown on TV that fits these criteria?
  Heavyweight Prizefighting
Media Effects on Homicide
Phillips

• Across U.S., homicide rates increased by 12.5% following highly publicized prize fights.
• The more publicized the fight, the greater the increase in the rate.
• The relationship between prize-fight and homicide rate persisted after statistically controlling for day of week, seasons, and other extraneous variables.
Media Effects on Homicide
Phillips

- **Hypothesis 1:**
  - Prize fighting triggers an increase in gambling, which in turn provokes anger, fighting, and murder.
  - However, increased homicide rate *did not* occur following the Super Bowl. Therefore, not supported.

- **Hypothesis 2:**
  - Prize fight merely precipitated a murder that would have occurred anyway, even in the absence of the prize fight.
  - Found no evidence of any *dip* in homicides soon after the peak. Therefore, not supported.

- **Hypothesis 3:**
  - Social learning / modeling hypothesis. Was there victim modeling? -- is a person more likely to aggress against a target victim if his target is similar to the victim? This hypothesis *was supported:*
Media Effects on Homicide
Phillips

• White-loser prize fights are followed by significant increases in young, white male homicides; in contrast, Black-loser prize fights do not seem to trigger young, white male homicides.

• Black-loser prize fights are followed by significant increases in young, Black male homicides. White-loser prize fights do not trigger significant increases in Black male homicides.
Violence in Japanese TV: Personal Observations

• Japan has (or had) extraordinarily low violent crime rate

• Japan has explicit violence/nudity on TV, even on Sunday mornings

• How can this be?
  • Offenders NOT rewarded
  • The consequences of the violence are shown, not ignored. Grieving widows, children, etc.