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Victims and aggression

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Two experiments were conducted to investigate the role of the victim in the initiation of aggression. The three major factors of the semantic differential were used to construct scripts portraying eight different target types. Scripts validated in Experiment 1 were reenacted live by targets in Experiment 2, in which subjects who overheard the scripts subsequently had the opportunity to aggress against the target in a competitive game. Male subjects shocked both the bad, strong, active and the bad, strong, passive targets much more than the good, strong, active targets. Females shocked all three targets at a low rate. Late in the game, all subjects shocked the bad, strong, passive target more often than the other targets. Sex differences in shocking were attributed to a sex difference in the disposition to behave aggressively.

Current knowledge of target influences comes largely from laboratory studies manipulating only one aspect of a victim, and these studies have generally produced inconsistent outcomes. One example of these discrepancies is research on sex of the victim. The modal outcome has been that males have been attacked more than females (Taylor & Epstein, 1967; Taylor & Smith, 1974). However, Levitt and Viney (1973) and Silverman (1971) found that males and females were attacked equivalently. In addition, targets of the opposite sex received more aggression in studies by Jaffe, Malamuth, Feingold, and Feshback (1974) and Titley and Viney (1969). Similar inconsistencies have been found with other target variables: physical handicap (Farina, Sherman, & Allen, 1968; Titley & Viney, 1969), level of the victim's psychological adjustment (Farina, Holland, & Ring, 1966; Ring & Farina, 1969), and the similarity of the target's attitudes to the aggressor's (Baron, 1971; Farina, Chapnick, Chapnick, & Misiti, 1972).

These discrepancies may have been due to the isolated nature of the independent variables manipulated. Most investigators of target variables have structured their manipulations across a single dimension. However, aggression in these studies may have also been influenced by a variety of other target characteristics that were unspecified and uncontrolled. Recently, Hynan (1980) proposed a theory of hostile human aggression that addressed the issue of target influences by specifying certain target characteristics and their relationships to the occurrence of aggression. This theory utilized the three major factors of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) as mediators of aggression. The factors also provide a taxonomy for the classification of all possible targets. Specifically, Hynan has proposed that judgments made by potential aggressors concerning the evaluation (good vs. bad), potency (strong vs. weak), and activity (active vs. passive) characteristics of targets are determinants of both the probability of aggression and the choice of victim. Theoretically, instigations such as frustration (Berkowitz, 1962) and pain (Ulrich, 1967) must be judged as bad on the evaluative dimension before aggression will occur. The probability of aggression is a linear function of judgments of increasing badness. Evaluative judgments of available targets also determine the choice of victim. The worst available target (usually the person responsible for the frustration or pain) is most likely to be attacked. Judgments of targets on the potency and activity dimensions are theoretically related to the anticipated severity and probability of retaliation, respectively. Theoretically, judgments of potency and activity function to inhibit aggression. Targets judged as being likely to retaliate or being capable of retaliating strongly will be aggressed against less frequently. The theory makes specific predictions about the probability of aggression directed against different target types. Bad targets are expected to be attacked more frequently than good targets. Also (given equivalent levels of evaluative judgments), weak passive targets are expected to be attacked most often, weak active targets and strong passive targets will be attacked at an intermediate frequency, and strong active targets will be attacked least frequently.

EXPERIMENT 1

The first experiment was a study designed to validate the portrayals of eight different target types. The target types corresponded to the eight possible combinations of the bipolar categories of the semantic differential

Requests for reprints and the scripts used in Experiments 1 and 2 should be sent to Michael T. Hynan, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201. The authors would like to acknowledge the help of those who served as research assistants and confederates: Chris Greiten, Michael Kohl, Karen Kubic, and Barbara Sanicki. This research was funded, in part, by a grant from the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, awarded to the first author.

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(e.g., good, strong, active targets; bad, weak, passive targets; etc.). Eight scripts, each portraying a dialogue between two advanced undergraduates, were composed. These scripts were rehearsed, videotaped, and subsequently viewed by subjects who rated both actors. Scenes successfully validated were reenacted (live) by targets in Experiment 2 to assess the influence of the target variables upon aggression.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 48 female and 46 male undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

Apparatus and Materials. In each script, one actor was designated the target (T) and the other was the confederate (C). The same male T and female C acted in each script. Both actors were portrayed as teaching assistants for the same psychology course.

In the four scripts portraying a good target, C engaged T in a conversation thanking T for lecturing to C's discussion section while C was at the doctor. In the good, strong, active (GSA) condition, T carried on the conversation in a loud, rapid manner and was physically demonstrative in confidently showing C some of his well-received lecture on body language. In the good, strong, passive (GSP) condition, T in a slow, distinctive manner expressed a conviction that he gave a terrible lecture. C attempted to dissuade him with some positive student feedback, but T was stubborn in his self-opinion. The good, weak, passive (GWP) condition was similar to the GSP condition, except T appeared indecisive and vacillated in his self-appraisal of the lecture. The good, weak, active (GWA) condition was similar to GSA, in that T displayed various body language movements in a rapid fashion, but GWA differed by GSA in that the T in GWA vacillated in his self-appraisal of the lecture.

In the four scenes portraying bad targets, one of the actors had failed to perform an assigned teaching assistant duty. In the bad, strong, active (BSA) condition, C forgot to proctor an exam for T. When T discovered this, he engaged in a derogatory tirade against C. C sincerely apologized, but T then took an unwarranted extra pound of flesh and forced C to apologize to the professor. In the three remaining bad conditions, T was the one who had not proctored the exam. As a result, students had difficulty finishing the exam and complained to the professor. The professor then became very angry with C, who was not the source of the problem. In the scene, C asked T to rectify the situation and talk to the professor. In the bad, strong, passive condition (BSP), T absolutely refused to do so, in a slow, distinctive manner. In the bad, weak, active (BWA) condition, T vacillated about talking to the professor and communicated this in a rapid, indecisive manner. In the bad, weak, passive (BWP) condition, T was again indecisive about taking the blame, but he acted in a slow, distinctive manner.

Each scene lasted for approximately 2 min and was videotaped with a Sony 13-mm recorder. Subjects viewed the scenes on a 58-cm diagonal black- and-white monitor.

An 18-item semantic differential was used to rate the actors. These bipolar items were rated on a 7-point scale. Items on the evaluative dimension were: good-bad, kind-cruel, fair-unfair, tactful-tactless, polite-hostile, and pleasant-unpleasant. The potency items were: strong-weak, confident-doubtful, stubborn-yielding, decisive-indecisive, assertive-nonassertive, and dominant-submissive. The activity items were: active-passive, fast-slow, tense-relaxed, sharp-dull, excitable-calm, and rash-cautious.

Procedure. Subjects were told that the experiment investigated first impressions. After entering a 5.5 x 7.6 m room and facing the video monitor, subjects were told to pay close attention to the short scene and form impressions of the two actors. After viewing the scene, subjects were given two semantic differential forms and then told to rate the male actor first and then the female. Each group of subjects viewed only one scene.

Results

The results of the study were analyzed using a 2 (evaluation, good vs. bad) by 2 (potency, strong vs. weak) by 2 (activity, active vs. passive) multivariate analysis of variance. The dependent measures were the mean target ratings on the three dimensions of the semantic differential.

On the evaluation dimension, all good Ts were rated as good and all bad Ts were judged as bad [$F(1,86) = 105.2$, $p < .01$]. However, ratings on the potency and activity dimensions were not always consistent with target portrayal. There were many higher order interactions associated with a significant correlation between ratings of potency and activity [$r(93) = .44$, $p < .01$] (based on the pooled within-cell correlation matrix). Among the good Ts, both GSA and GWP were rated in a manner consistent with portrayal, whereas the GSP and GWA Ts were judged to be weak and passive [$Fs(1,43) = 68.2$ and 34.0, $ps < .01$, for comparisons of GSA with the other three good Ts combined on the potency and activity dimensions, respectively].

Among the bad Ts, BSA and BSP were rated in a manner consistent with portrayal. However, the BWA T was judged as weak and passive, and the BWP T was rated as slightly strong and passive. On the potency dimension, the BWA T was the only bad T judged to be weak, and the remaining bad Ts were rated as strong [$F(1,47) = 48.6$, $p < .01$]. On the activity dimension, only the BSA T was rated as active, and the other bad Ts were rated as passive [$F(1,47) = 115.9$, $p < .01$].

The GSA T differed from the BSA T only on ratings of evaluation [$F(1,20) = 92.4$, $p < .01$]. The BSA and the BSP Ts differed only on ratings of activity, [$F(1,21) = 75.0$, $p < .01$].

Post hoc analyses revealed that males and females did not differ in their ratings on the three dimensions.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 1 met with mixed success. Ratings consistently validated the scripts on the evaluative dimension. However, due to the positive correlation between potency and activity ratings, only the GSA, GWP, BSA, and BSP scripts were validated on all three dimensions. The GSA, BSA, and BSP scripts were chosen for future study so that the roles of target evaluation and target activity could be investigated. In Experiment 2, subjects viewed one of three scripts enacted live by the T and C prior to the opportunity to aggress against the T. A competition paradigm (Hynan, Harper, Wood, & Kallas, 1980) was used to give subjects the opportunity to agress against the Ts. This paradigm was designed to investigate target influences in a face-to-face interaction. In the procedure, the subject engages in a manual game with the T. In addition to scoring points, each competitor can temporarily block the point accumulation of the opponent, and the subject can also shock the assistant (the aggressive response).

It was predicted that both the BSA and BSP Ts would be shocked more than the GSA T, because bad Ts are expected to be aggressed against more often than good Ts. It was also predicted that the BSP T would be attacked more than the BSA T, because passive Ts are expected to be judged as less likely to retaliate than active Ts. Although Ts were not able to shock subjects in the competition paradigm, the possibility that a T might respond to receiving shock by yelling at or insulting the subject was always present.

Method

Subjects. Seventy-nine college students were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Four subjects were excluded from data analysis because of information obtained during debriefing. The data analysis was based on the performance of 45 males and 30 females.

Apparatus and Materials. The male T and female C who were videotaped in Experiment 1 enacted their roles again in Experiment 2. An additional male T and female C were also used.

The competition game consisted of a 60 x 31 x 30 cm box located on the top of a large table in a soundproofed room. The subject and T sat at opposite sides of the table and faced similar equipment panels. The subject's panel contained a block lever on the right, a telegraph key at the lower center, and a shock button on the left. Two counters (the scoreboard) with adjacent lights were positioned above the telegraph key. The research assistant's panel was almost identical; it lacked only the shock button. A start button and green lamp were on top of the box. A Lafayette ac shock source with current meter was on the right of the game box, facing the subject. Shock was delivered through finger electrodes attached to the assistant's left hand.

Procedure. Subjects were informed that the experiment studied the emotional effects of competition. The experimenter met subjects in a waiting room and brought them to the room containing the competition apparatus. The experimenter introduced the subject to the T (identified as a research assistant) and announced that the experiment would begin in a few minutes. The experimenter left the room with the door open, and 30-60 sec later, the C entered, engaged the T in one of the three rehearsed conversations (GSA, BSA, or BSP), and left. The experimenter returned 60-90 sec later and played the taped instructions.

Subjects were told that each game was a race to score 900 points. Competitors scored points by repeatedly pressing their respective telegraph keys. Both competitors could block, a response that prevented the accumulation of points by the opponent for 5 sec. During a block, the light next to the blocked competitor's counter was lit. Only subjects could shock, and subjects were told that shocking might compensate for the assistant's experience. Shocks delivered during the game were received by the Ts. The experimenter self-administered a .5-sec .4-mA shock (this duration and intensity were constant throughout) and invited subjects to do so. The instructions stressed that while blocking and shocking were optional, subjects should engage in these responses if they felt like it.

The lamp was on while taped instructions were played and was extinguished at the start of the game. Then the assistant placed his left hand on the start button and said, "One, two, three." At "three," the assistant pressed the button, and both competitors began to respond. There were two rest periods during the game, so the competition was divided into three periods.

When the assistant pressed the start button, electromechanical equipment pulsed the assistant's counter on a variable-time 8.8-point/sec schedule with a range of 6.1-11.5 points/sec. During this time, the assistant rapidly pressed the telegraph key. Just before a block was to be delivered to a subject, the light next to the upper counter on the assistant's panel was illuminated for .35 sec. In response, the assistant stopped tapping on the telegraph key and made a block response. Thus the assistant was only mimicking what was electronically programmed. Both subject and assistant were limited to the use of their right hands.

Results

None of the subjects won the competitive game. Statistical analyses of the nominal criterion of shocking showed that, overall, more males (62%) than females (27%) shocked during the game [$\chi^2(1) = 4.0$, $p < .05$]. In addition, males and females showed different patterns of shocking the three Ts. The three Ts were attacked by similar proportions of females (BSA, 40%; BSP, 20%; and GSA, 20%). The males, however, showed differential attack against the target types. For the males, 87% shocked BSP Ts, 67% shocked BSA Ts, and 33% shocked GSA Ts [$\chi^2(2) = 8.7$, $p < .025$]. There were no significant differences between the percentages of males and females shocking the GSA Ts. However, there were differences between the percentages of males (79%) and females (30%) shocking the two bad Ts [$\chi^2(1) = 9.5$, $p < .01$].

Shock frequency scores were analyzed with a 3 (target condition) by 2 (sex of subject) by 3 (game periods) analysis of variance. There was a significant Target Condition by Game Period interaction for the curvilinear function (i.e., Game Period 2 vs. Periods 1 and 3) of shock-frequency scores [$F(2,69) = 3.49$, $p < .05$]. An inspection of Figure 1 reveals that BSP Ts were shocked more frequently in Period 3 than were the other two Ts [$F(1,73) = 4.5$, $p < .05$]. Shocking by subjects was not related to individual differences in the Ts or Cs.

DISCUSSION

Sex Differences

There were striking sex differences in aggressiveness when subjects competed against bad Ts. Males were much more aggressive. In contrast, good Ts were attacked by low proportions of both sexes, a finding that parallels previous research with the competition paradigm using neutral targets (Hynan et al., 1980). It is difficult to account for this pattern of sex differences in terms of differential sensitivity to instigation, because males and females showed no differences in their ratings of Ts on the evaluative dimension in Experiment 1. In other words, bad Ts were equivalently aversive

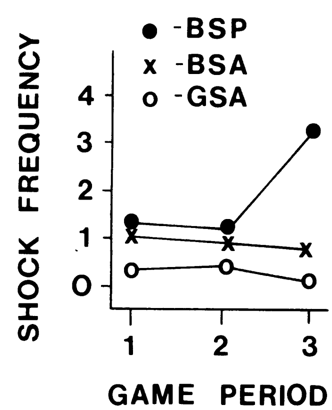

Figure 1. Mean shock-frequency scores in the three target conditions across the three game periods (BSP = bad, strong, passive; BSA = bad, strong, active; GSA = good, strong, active).

to both sexes. Instead, the pattern of sex differences in this study can be understood in terms of a sex difference in a disposition to behave aggressively. This implies that women require relatively more intense instigation to aggress at the same level as men.

One correlate of this hypothesis is that the magnitude of sex differences observed in aggression research is dependent upon the level of instigation. Specifically, when instigation is low (e.g., competing against the good T in Experiment 2), there will be weak or nonexistent sex differences. As instigation increases (e.g., competing against the bad targets in Experiment 2), males will aggress more than females. Under high levels of instigation (such as being directly angered or attacked), sex differences would be expected to disappear, because the thresholds for both sexes would be exceeded. In addition to accounting for the data in this paper, this hypothesized sex difference provides predictions that are consistent with the pattern of sex differences reported by Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome (1977) in their review of research on direct physical aggression. Frodi et al. reported that sex differences were found in only a small minority of studies when subjects were directly angered. In contrast, there were clear-cut sex differences in most studies when subjects were not directly provoked. This hypothesized sex difference in a disposition to behave aggressively has been supported by many studies (also reviewed by Frodi et al., 1977) that have found that males score higher than females on instruments designed to measure aggressiveness as a personality trait.

Target Variables

Males were more likely to aggress against bad Ts than against good ones. This result confirms the prediction of Hynan's (1980) theory concerning the effects of the evaluation dimension upon aggression. However, similar results were not obtained for females. One possible reason for this lack of differential aggression against the Ts by the females is an insufficient level of instigation by the bad Ts. The instigation manipulated in Experiment 2 was indirect to the extent that the Ts did not directly interact with subjects while acting out the scripts. The indirect instigation by bad Ts may have been insufficient for bringing aggression above threshold in most women. A manipulation of instigation such as direct provocation would be expected to exceed threshold and should theoretically lead to more aggression by women against bad Ts than good Ts.

During the third period of the competitive game, BSP Ts were attacked more frequently than were BSA Ts. This effect can be attributed to differences between the two Ts on the activity dimension, and it suggests that the BSP Ts were attacked more because the BSP Ts were judged to be less likely to retaliate. However, the support for this conclusion is limited. The effect of target activity upon aggression was observed only with the shock-frequency data and not with the nominal criterion of shocking. Thus the increase in attack frequency against BSP Ts was not due to an increase in the proportion of shockers. It was an increase in the rate of shocking by subjects who had shocked previously. Since the competition paradigm was validated on the basis of the nominal criterion of shocking, findings restricted to frequency data are of less import than might be expected. It is interesting to note, however, that the increased attack occurred only during Game Period 3, a time that minimized the opportunities that BSP Ts may have had to retaliate. In retrospect, more aggression may have been directed toward BSP Ts throughout the whole game if the BSP T had been portrayed as someone other than a teaching assistant. Subjects may have inhibited shocking because of the chance that they might be taught by the T as a teaching assistant in the future.

Experiment 2 needs to be replicated with different scripts and validated for all target types to provide a better theoretical understanding of the role played by victims in initiating aggression. The results of Experiment 2 indicate that the probability of an aggressive act can depend upon the characteristics of available Ts. It is the authors' belief that when target characteristics are better specified and controlled, the discrepancies observed across studies of human aggression will be reduced.

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