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Brief Report

Televised relational and physical aggression and children's hostile intent attributions



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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted with 150 children (mean age = 10.1 years) in third to fifth grades to test whether exposure to different forms of aggression in the media affected hostile attributional biases in response to different forms of provocation scenarios. Children were randomly assigned to watch a clip containing physical aggression, relational aggression, or no aggression. After exposure, children were asked to respond to a series of written provocation scenarios where a character caused some form of harm (instrumental or relational) to a target person, but the intent of the provocateur was ambiguous. Results revealed that exposure to relationally aggressive portrayals resulted in a hostile attributional bias in response to relational scenarios, whereas exposure to portrayals of physical aggression was associated with a hostile attributional bias in response to instrumental scenarios. Moreover, these biases were shown to be specific to the exposure condition (physical or relational) and not simply associated with exposure to aggression in general. The findings are discussed in terms of the general aggression model and children's social information processing.

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Introduction

In the media violence arena, much of the research has focused on physical aggression as a possible outcome of exposure to media violence (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Yet during recent years, developmental psychologists have identified other less overt ways to engage in aggression. Relational aggression is a subtype of aggression that harms a target through purposeful manipulation or damage to his or her peer relationships (Crick, 1996). Research indicates that children perceive relational

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aggression as a commonly occurring behavior within their peer groups (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996) that is perpetrated by both boys and girls (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008).

Recent evidence suggests that the media may be a contributing factor to relational aggression. A casual examination of the television landscape suggests that there are plenty of examples of relational aggression on television. For example, the popular children's program *iCarly* routinely depicts one of the show's main characters, Sam, ignoring or refusing to talk to her friends when she is mad at them. Content analytic work supports the idea that portrayals like these are commonplace, particularly in the shows that children watch. One content analysis found that 92% of programs popular with children contained at least one act of relational aggression. Such behavior was perpetrated by an attractive person, featured in a humorous context, and was neither rewarded nor punished (Martins & Wilson, 2012a).

Evidence also indicates that exposure to relationally aggressive portrayals is linked to subsequent relational aggression. Coyne and Archer (2005) found that adolescents (sixth to eighth grades) who frequently watched programs containing relational aggression were significantly more likely to be peer nominated as relationally aggressive. Martins and Wilson (2012b) found a significant relationship between exposure to televised relational aggression and girls' self-reported use of relational aggression in their study of 500 U.S. children in Grades K–5 (kindergarten to Grade 5).

One theoretical explanation for the relationship between exposure to relationally aggressive portrayals and children's relational aggression is the general aggression model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). According to the GAM, individuals have cognitive scripts in memory that help to guide and interpret behavior. After exposure to media violence, aggressive scripts are activated, thereby increasing the likelihood of subsequent aggression. Whether an individual acts on these scripts, however, is dependent on personal variables (e.g., traits, sex) and situational variables (e.g., frustrating social stimulus).

Particularly important to this study is the body of research demonstrating that aggressive individuals tend to interpret ambiguous social situations in a relatively hostile way. The most widely researched version of this phenomenon is the hostile attribution bias (HAB) frequently observed in aggressive children (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). A HAB is the tendency to infer hostile intent to the actions of another individual even though the intent of that individual is unclear. For example, when exposed to a frustrating social stimulus (e.g., being hit with a ball), a HAB may result in cue distortion, whereby hostile intent is attributed to the provocateur's ambiguous action, thereby leading aggressive individuals to respond aggressively. The GAM predicts that exposure to media violence may activate cognitive scripts that make it more likely that an ambiguous situation will be interpreted within an aggressive context.

Crick (1995) theorized that the HAB may serve as a risk factor for children's perpetration of relational aggression. Her studies suggest that aggressive children may have HABs that are specific to the type of provocation. For example, Crick, Grotpeter and Bigbee (2002) examined the relationship between hostile intent attributions and relational aggression in two studies of elementary school-aged children. The results revealed that relationally aggressive children were significantly more likely to exhibit HABs in response to written relational provocation situations, whereas physically aggressive children were significantly more likely to exhibit HABs in response to written instrumental provocation scenarios. Thus, such research supports the need to look at differences between physical and relational aggression in the media and how they relate to children's intent attributions.

Indeed, there is some evidence to indicate that the media are a powerful socialization force in the formation of HABs. Kirsh (1998) assigned children in third and fourth grades to play a violent video game or a nonviolent video game. Children assigned to the violent video game condition gave more hostile interpretations for a subsequent ambiguous provocation story than did children who played the nonviolent video game. Similarly, Krahe and Moller (2004) found an indirect relationship between children's exposure to violent games and the HAB such that the relationship was observed only among children who thought that physical aggression was acceptable. Although these two studies suggest that short-term exposure to violent media can temporarily produce HABs, it should be noted that both of these studies examined the effects of violent video games on hostile attributions in response to instrumental or physically violent provocation stories.

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