

Does media violence cause aggression in children? assignment



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Does Media Violence Cause Aggression in Children? Amber Holmberg Psych 204-01 March 23, 2011 The debate whether violence in the media increases aggression in children has been going on for decades. There have been hundreds of studies, experiments and articles supporting and opposing both sides of the argument. This essay is going to examine an article supporting and an article opposing the debate.

The articles include “ The Influence of Media Violence in Youth” which supports media violence causing aggression through the use of evidence that includes short and long term effects of media violence, theories as to why media violence causes aggression, factors that influence aggression and ways to counteract the negative effects (Anderson et al. 2003.) The second article “ Effect of Television Violence on Aggressiveness” opposes that media violence causes aggression and uses evidence that laboratory settings are not consistent with real life settings, studies come to inconsistent results and there could be third and confounding variables (Freedman, 1984. “ The Influence of Media Violence in Youth” examines the long and short term effects violence in the media has on children, how media violence can produce aggression in children, how media is most influential and who is the most susceptible to aggression, how accessible and widespread media violence is and lastly ways to counteract the negative effects media violence has on people (Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Edward, Huesmann, Johnson, James, Linz, Daniel, Malamuth & Wartella, 2003. There are four general observations made in the article based on all the research done (Anderson et al. , 2003.) Firstly there is a positive correlation on the moderate direct effect of media violence on aggressive behaviour. Secondly

following more extensive research and taking into account larger samples derived from a greater diversity of methods, samples and media genres the results become more consistent that media violence causes aggression.

Thirdly the majority of children who display aggressive behaviour caused by the portrayal of violence in the media show aggressive behaviours in adulthood even without media violence being consumed. Lastly children of non typical high aggressive behaviours show more aggressive behaviours in the long and short term after watching violence in the media (Anderson et al. , 2003.) The short term effects include an increase of violence in children, adolescents and adults in both physical and verbal aggression as well as in aggressive thoughts and emotions.

The long term effects are derived from very few longitudinal studies, but all have consistent findings. These include repeated exposure to violence in the media in childhood continue throughout adulthood, in adulthood there is an increased probability of physical aggression including physical assaults, spousal abuse and other crimes. Unfortunately in order to discover if there is an increase of aggression such as homicide, aggravated assault and forced rape, which are rare offences, due to violence in the media more longitudinal studies with larger samples are needed (Anderson et al. 2003.) There are many theories as to why media in the violence causes aggression including physiologically explanations, observation learning and desensitization. In the short term media violence causes an increase in aggression by stimulating aggressive thoughts, increasing physiological arousal and initiating the tendency to imitate others behaviours especially in children. In the long term

media violence causes an increase in aggression through the ability to access scripts and schemas portrayed in the media.

These scripts and schemas provide encouragement and support towards the beliefs and attitudes that violence portrayed in the media is approved (Anderson et al. , 2003.) Lastly the normal reaction to violence in humans is to have a negative emotional response. Desensitization is when one is unresponsive to these negative emotional responses and repeated violence in the media causes desensitization. Implications of desensitization include a decrease of sympathy to the victims of violence and an increase in thoughts about engaging in violence or aggression (Anderson et al. , 2003.)

There are many other factors taken into account on how media violence has an effect on aggression called moderators (Anderson et al. , 2003.) These include characteristic of viewers; age, aggressive personality, perception of realism portrayed and the ability to identify with the aggressor portrayed. Social environment (influences from parents, family, and friends etcetera) and the content in the media (the characteristics of the perpetrators, the realism of the violence portrayed, justification of the violence and whether there were consequences) are also factors (Anderson et al. 2003.) At the present time it is known there is an importance to all these factors, but the importance and relative influence is largely unknown and more research is needed. What is known is the gender, personality, upbringing, social class and intelligence is irrelevant to how media violence increases aggression, and everyone is susceptible to aggression caused by media violence. The only factor that is relevant and can prevent an increase in aggression is for the parents to educate their children on violence (Anderson et al. , 2003.)
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Over the past couple decades there has been an increase and expansion of new media including more news channels, television programs, movies, video games, music videos and internet that portray an increase in violence (Anderson et al. , 2003.) All around the world access to media is easy to obtain and is widespread. With the increase of media and media violence new research is needed to determine if an increase in violence in media causes an increase in aggression. Lastly it is known that reducing exposure to media violence leads to a decrease in aggression both in the short and long term (Anderson et al. , 2003.)

“Effect of Television Violence on Aggressiveness” by Freedman (1984) discusses whether “ the hypothesis that viewing television violence increases subsequent aggressive behaviour” and defines this as the causal hypothesis (Freedman, 1984.) In this article Freedman is trying to determine the real effects that television violence has on people in real life situations Therefore he focuses on using research on natural experiments and correlation studies as evidence. Freedman suggests that the research done in a laboratory setting does not account for the effects of television in real world situations due to limitations.

One of the limitations is that the measures of aggression used in laboratory settings are not typical definitions of aggression the real world. For example shocking a person with a shock button and punching a Bobo doll are not typically defined as aggressive behaviours. In addition the experimenter in these situations encourages the act of aggression even allows it and offers the sense that there will be no repercussions or retaliations after the aggressive act (Freedman, 1984. This shows that given the opportunity, given encouragement and given the idea that there will be no repercussions

one will behave in an aggressive manor and is not a fair example of a real life situation. Secondly in laboratory settings the experimenter chooses the content that is shown leaving the subjects to assume that the experimenter approves and permits the violence being portrayed. The results are that the subject is more likely to behave aggressively due to the approval put forth by the experimenter (Freedman, 1984. Therefore laboratory studies demonstrate the potential effects of media violence, but do not conclusively account for real life situations. Lastly there has been very little research done, less than one hundred independent studies, the majority of them being laboratory studies (Freedman, 1984.) Freedman then discusses the merit of field experiments where the subjects are tested in relatively natural environments and can determine the real effect of television violence on aggression (Freedman, 1984. These studies observe measures of aggression that are more typical and defined as aggressive behaviour in the real world versus the aggressive behaviour in laboratory studies (Freedman, 1984.) The main studies examined and critiqued are by Feshbach and Singer (1971), a Belgian study by Leyens et al. (1975), an American study only stated in this article as the Parke studies and a study by Friedrich and Stein (1973.) All of the experiments were done in a natural setting, three of them in school settings and one in a nursery school setting and all included random assignment (Freedman, 1984. The studies have flaws and come to inconsistent results. In the study done by Feshback and Singer the results, in general, were the boys who had watched non violent programs were more aggressive than the boys who watched violent programs. Of the seven schools only three were of significant effect (Freedman, 1984.) A critical look at this study shows there was inconsistency in the programs that were

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allowed. Some of the schools, not all, allowed the boys in the non violent program group to watch “ Batman. Allowing the boys to watch “ Batman” could present the idea that the aggressive behaviour in the program is approved by the experimenters. In addition the three significant schools were all schools for delinquent boys. Lastly violent programs are more popular than the non violent programs shown in the experiment causing the non violent group of boys to become unhappy or frustrated and could be a third variable to their aggressive behaviour (Freedman, 1984.) Secondly the results from the Belgium study by Leyens at al. s well as the American study by Parke were flawed. In both these studies the researchers observed aggression in boys in secondary schools who shared the same cottages. The flaw was the aggressive behaviours were not measured by the change in aggressive behaviour or by “ initial scores as covariates” (Freedman, 1984.) Instead a procedure was used that divided the boys into high and low aggressive groups and used an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to account for the boys being dependent of each other.

The results for both non violent and violent films were the boys classified as low-aggressive increased in aggression and high-aggressive boys did not change in aggression very much (Freedman, 1984.) There is weak evidence showing that violent films cause an increase in aggressive behaviour. The study by Friedrich and Stein (1973) was done in a nursery school and divided the children into groups that watched either prosocial films, aggressive films or neutral films. During free play aggressive behaviour was measured and observed. The results concluded that there was no increased aggression on males or females (Freedman, 1984. Lastly Freedman examined an article by

Hennigan et al. (1982) that examined the crime rates of American cities that were first introduced to television between 1949 and 1952 and cities that were not yet introduced to television (Freedman, 1984.) The results found no increase in violent crimes which include assault and homicide. This suggests that violence in the media does not increase aggression (Freedman, 1984.) Both articles have inconsistencies, faults, thought provoking and valid ideas that add to the life long debate of whether media violence causes aggression in children.

Although “ The Influence of Media Violence in Youth” by Andersen et al. (2003) has an abundance of evidence supporting this statement there are some questions left unanswered for example although a positive correlation has been found the studies presented do not account for a third or other confounding variables as Freedman (1984) argues. Other critiques include how are aggressive thoughts measured and is it known that a person with aggressive thoughts will behave more aggressively due to these thoughts?

Taking into the account that there are very few longitudinal studies on aggression caused by media violence, whether the findings are consistent or not, is this due to small sampling or coincidence? Lastly there is not enough evidence on moderator factors to conclusively state what causes aggression and to what extent. Critiques on “ Effect of Television Violence on Aggressiveness” by Freedman (1984) include the idea that laboratory settings are not equivalent to real life situations.

Freedman suggests that in real life one is not encouraged to act aggressively which does not take into account the act of peer pressure. In regards to both

articles and the evidence discussed and taking into account the inconsistent findings and faults media violence can not be named the sole cause for aggression. Further research is needed to examine third and confounding variables. Further research is also needed to determine to what extent factors including the characteristics of the viewer, social environment and media content have an effect on aggression caused by media violence.

Lastly media violence can be a cause for aggression supported by the evidence of physiological responses, observational learning and desensitization, but as discussed earlier is not the sole cause. References Anderson, C. A. , Berkowitz, L. , Donnerstein, E. , Huesmann, L. R. , Johnson, J. D. , Linz, D. , Malamuth, N. M. , & Wartella, E. (2003). The influence of media violence on youth. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(3), 81-110. Doi: 10. 1111/j. 1529-1006. 2003. pspi_1433. x Freedman, J. L. (1984). Effect of television violence on aggressiveness. *Psychological Bulletin*, 96(2), 227-246. Doi: 10. 1037/0033-2909. 96. 2. 227