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ABSTRACT

A previous study (EM 009 547) found that the most favorable attitudes of boys toward aggression existed when there was high exposure to television (TV) violence, ambiguous family attitudes toward aggression, or low socio-economic status. This study sought to examine the same three variables with respect to girls. Subjects, who were 404 fourth through sixth grade girls, completed questionnaires on TV exposure, family attitudes toward violence, and social class. The questionnaire also included four paper-and-pencil indexes of aggression: willingness to use violence, use of violence in conflict situations, perceived effectiveness of violence, and approval of aggression. The results for all four measures indicate that family attitudes toward aggression showed the most persistent relationship to the child's aggressive attitudes. However, exposure to television violence also made a consistent, independent contribution to the child's notions about violence--the greater the level of exposure, the more the child was willing to use violence, to suggest it as a solution to conflict, and to perceive it as effective. There were no social class differences. Among the limitations of the study were that the data allow only associative, not causative, statements, and that much of the variance in attitudes is not explained by the three variables. (SH)

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Project VIM

Violence in the Media

GIRLS' ATTITUDES TOWARD VIOLENCE AS RELATED TO TV EXPOSURE, FAMILY ATTITUDES, AND SOCIAL CLASS

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Many variables influence the development of aggressive attitudes in children. In this project, the role of exposure to televised violence was examined, together with two other variables which prior research suggested were of prime importance--family attitudes toward aggression and social class. An earlier report analyzed the interplay of these three variables among nine and ten year-old boys (Dominick and Greenberg, 1970). This report presents parallel data from girls of those ages.

The child's sex is an important factor in the way a child expresses hostile and aggressive behaviors. Not surprisingly, boys have been found to be more overtly aggressive in many studies (e.g., Walters, Pearce and Dahms, 1957). Boys were significantly more aggressive in play (Levin and Sears, 1956) and their play was more violent and physically damaging than that of girls (Sears, 1951). Attitudes toward the use of aggression show similar differences. Sears (1961) found that girls displayed higher levels of anxiety about aggression than boys and were significantly less tolerant of what Sears termed "antisocial" aggression.

In an experiment on the effects of mediated violence, girls exhibited less imitative behavior than boys after watching adults perform violent acts. When offered an incentive, however, girls remembered as many aggressive acts as did the boys (Bandura, 1965).

Our conceptual framework in the boys' study proposed that exposure to televised portrayals of violence socializes children into the norms, attitudes,

and values for violence as given in the TV depictions. The probability or amount of socialization increases as--

...the duration of exposure increases;

...the degree of stereotyping in televised violence increases; and,

...the influence of other socialization sources decreases.

In other words, television should have its maximum impact when a child is heavily exposed to content which portrays a consistent set of ideas and when he does not have personal sources whose values offset the views of that content. The same paradigm exists for this study.

A test of this requires us to identify what television presents to the child about violence. It also leads us to examine the roles of the family and the environment in socializing youngsters about aggressive behavior.

Several analyses of television content (Larsen, Gray and Fortis, 1968; Stempel, 1969; Gerbner, 1968) led to these generalizations:

...children who watch an average amount of TV are likely to see a substantial amount of violence;

...violence is presented as a highly successful means of goal-achievement;

...as of the 1969 season, violence was the predominant means of conflict resolution in TV drama.

Child development research has spelled out the importance of the family in shaping a child's attitudes toward aggression (e.g., Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957; Sewell, Mussen and Harris, 1955). To summarize:

...the family is the first agency which deals with a child's aggressive behavior;

...families provide positive or negative feedback when the child is aggressing;

...families can influence attitudes toward violence by commenting positively or negatively about TV scenes of violence.

Related studies also document the probable influence of social class on

attitudes toward aggression (Allinsmith, 1960; Minuchin, et. al., 1967; U.S. Government, 1969). Some generalizations from this research are:

> ...low-income youngsters are more likely to watch more violent TV content;
>
> ...low-income youngsters are more likely to be exposed to real-life aggression;
>
> ...low-income families are less likely to provide alternatives to physically aggressive behavior.

From these various theoretical linkages, we posited that the most favorable attitudes toward aggression should exist when there was high exposure to TV violence, ambiguous family attitudes toward aggression, or low socio-economic status. All three interacting should be even more facilitative of positive feelings about aggression.

This rationale was generally supported in the boys' study. Among the middle-class ones, ill-defined family attitudes and above-average viewing of TV violence interacted to yield the highest level of approval of aggression, willingness to use violence and suggested use of violence to resolve problems. For the lower-class boys, the interaction was not evident; perceived family attitudes were the key predictor. For the less advantaged, only perceived effectiveness of violence was directly related to television exposure.

Parallel analyses of data obtained from teen-age girls were made within the same conceptual framework. Without again delineating each hypothesis tested among the boys, the general expectation was that the same three antecedent variables would be related to the shaping of aggression attitudes among the young ladies. If anything, TV exposure was expected to be even more important a factor for them, given fewer direct experiences with physical violence and aggression in their daily lives.

Methods[1]

Questionnaires were completed by 404 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade girls in six central Michigan schools during May, 1970. The schools were selected on the basis of economic variation.

Antecedent variables

We examined three antecedent variables--the girls' exposure to TV violence, their perceptions of their family's attitudes toward violence, and the family's socio-economic status.

Exposure to TV violence. Each youngster received a list of 28 locally-available television shows. Twenty had been judged by a sample of newspaper and magazine critics to contain more than average violent content (Greenberg and Gordon, 1970). The number of shows watched regularly by the girls from this subset of 20 was summed. Obtained scores ranged from 0 to 19 with a mean of 7.8 and a standard deviation of 4.4.

Family attitudes toward violence. The children answered seven questions dealing with how they thought their parents felt about violence. Two examples are:

> "Suppose you and your parents were watching a TV show together and one of the people on TV shot another person. What do you think your parents would say?"
>
> "Suppose one of your friends hit you. What do you think your parents would want you to do?"

Each item had 2-4 response categories. The scores from the seven items were summed into an index ranging from 7 (low approval of violence) to 17 (high approval). The mean was 10.6.

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[1]A more detailed description of methods and procedures are in VIM Report #2 (see inside front cover for complete citation).

Social class. Each child wrote down the job(s) of his parents. The principal job was then coded on a 13-position scale of occupational prestige (Troldahl, 1967).

The intercorrelations among these three variables ranged from .12 to -.17. They are treated as mutually independent throughout the analyses.

Dependent variables

Willingness to use violence. This index measured the child's willingness to use violence in real life. Five scale items were adapted from the Buss-Durkee inventory (Buss, 1957) with "agree" or "disagree" as the possible responses. The five sentences dealt with whether or not the respondent would use some sort of physical violence in certain situations. Item scores were summed into an index with a score of 5 indicating low willingness to use violence and 10 indicating high willingness.

Perceived effectiveness of violence. Five items measured how effective violence was as a means of problem-solving. Item scores from the three response options (agree...not sure...disagree) were summed with 5 indicating low perceived effectiveness and 15 high perceived effectiveness.

Suggested solutions to conflict situations. In four open-ended questions, the child wrote down the thing she would most likely do in a problem situation. For example, "Pretend somebody you know takes something from you and breaks it on purpose. What would you do?" Responses judged to be non-violent were scored 1 and those judged as violent were scored 2. Violence was defined as behavior which would produce physical pain to another. An index score of 4 indicated all non-violent responses and 8 represented all violent responses.

Approval of violence. Eight modified items from the Sears (1961) anti-social aggression scale were used. These were declarative sentences, e.g., "I see nothing wrong in a fight between two teen-age boys," with three response

categories (agree...not sure...disagree). Scores were summed across the eight items to form an index ranging from 8 (low approval) through 24 (high approval).

All items for each dependent variable were summed into the constructed indices. Inter-item correlations for the modified Sears anti-social aggression items were low and inconsistent. Interpretation of results for this index should be restrained. Although some items in other indices had low inter-item correlations, they were retained for these analyses because of the overall inter-item reliability for those indices.

The four dependent variables intercorrelated from .13 (Solutions to conflict by Approval of violence) to .37 (Effectiveness of violence by Approval of violence). Therefore, they are not to be interpreted as completely independent attitudinal assessments, but as partial replicates of general attitudes toward the use of aggression. Each was analyzed as a dependent variable.

Analytic procedures

Respondents were divided into eight groups. The first division was on the occupational prestige of the child's family. Those in the three lowest scale categories were grouped as low-income (N=153); the remainder were classed as middle-income (N=251).

For each sub-group, a median split was made for the number of violent shows the girls reported watching each week. The median was seven shows a week.

Finally, each sub-group was divided on the index of the family's attitudes toward violence. This distribution was skewed toward the low end of the scale. Scores of 7-10 (N=210) were placed in the "low approval" group. Scores of 11 or higher (N=194) were categorized as "undefined." The scores in the latter group indicated that the girls were unsure or didn't know how their parents felt about violence, that the family norms were ambiguous.

A three-way analysis of variance with unequal cells was performed on each of the dependent measures (Snedecor, 1956).

Results

Results are presented for the four dependent variables.

Willingness to use violence

Table 1 presents the three-way analysis of variance for this attitudinal variable. Two of the main effects were significant. The strongest predictor of willingness to use violence was the perceived attitude of the family. The main effect for exposure to TV violence was also significant. Pre-teen girls who were more regularly exposed to television violence expressed more willingness to use violence than those less exposed. Neither the main effect for social class nor any of the interactions were significant.

Use of violence in conflict situations.

The principal difference between this measure and the respondent's expressed willingness to use violence was that here a free response was given and coded. Results are in Table 2.

Again, main effects were found for the family attitude variable and for exposure to TV violence. Social class did not further differentiate. Girls from families where the attitudes toward violence were ambiguous offered more violent solutions. Similarly, more violent suggestions were made by those youngsters who were heavier viewers of televised violence. No interactions existed.

Perceived effectiveness of violence.

As evident in Table 3, family attitudes showed a strong relationship with this attitudinal measure. An equally strong relationship was found on the basis of exposure to TV violence. In general, those girls who watched a great deal of TV violence were more likely to perceive violence as effective. Social class differences did not emerge.

One interaction was significant. Maximum perceived effectiveness of violence existed among lower-class families where attitudes toward violence were ambiguous; violence was minimally effective for the middle-class youngsters with clear, anti-violence norms.

TABLE 1

Willingness to Use Violence

Cell means

(The higher the score, the more willingness to use violence.)

Exposure to TV violence:	Middle Class Family attitudes toward aggression		Lower Class Family attitudes toward aggression	
	Low approval	Undefined	Low approval	Undefined
Low	6.60 (n=73)	7.42 (n=64)	6.71 (n=38)	7.28 (n=29)
High	7.02 (n=59)	7.67 (n=55)	6.90 (n=40)	7.76 (n=46)

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLE

Source of variation	MS	df	F	p
Exposure to TV violence	11.94	1	5.76	.025
Family attitudes	57.16	1	27.49	.0005
Social class	0.01	1	*	n.s.
TV violence X Social class	0.12	1	0.06	n.s.
TV violence X Family attitudes	0.72	1	0.34	n.s.
Family X Class	0.12	1	0.06	n.s.
Violence X Family X Class	0.01	1	*	
Error	822.00	396		

*less than 0.01.

TABLE 2

Suggested Use of Violence in Conflict Situations

Cell means

(The higher the score, the more frequently the child suggests violence to solve conflict.)

Exposure to TV violence:	Middle Class Family attitudes toward aggression		Lower Class Family attitudes toward aggression	
	Low approval	Undefined	Low approval	Undefined
Low	4.30 (n=73)	4.72 (n=64)	4.32 (n=38)	4.41 (n=29)
High	4.37 (n=59)	4.89 (n=55)	4.48 (n=40)	4.93 (n=46)

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLE

Source of variation	MS	df	F	p
Exposure to TV violence	4.00	1	5.88	.025
Family attitudes	15.84	1	23.30	.0005
Social class	0.01	1	0.02	n.s.
TV violence X Social class	1.28	1	1.88	n.s.
TV violence X Family attitudes	0.57	1	0.84	n.s.
Family X Class	1.16	1	1.78	n.s.
Violence X Family X Class	1.14	1	1.77	n.s.
Error	0.68	396		

TABLE 3

Perceived Effectiveness of Violence

Cell means

(The higher the score, the more violence is seen as being effective.)

Exposure to TV violence:	Middle Class Family attitudes toward aggression		Lower Class Family attitudes toward aggression	
	Low approval	Undefined	Low approval	Undefined
Low	7.12 (n=73)	8.80 (n=64)	8.24 (n=38)	9.03 (n=29)
High	8.73 (n=59)	9.91 (n=55)	8.22 (n=40)	10.77 (n=46)

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLE

Source of variation	MS	df	F	p
Exposure to TV violence	173.71	1	24.39	.0005
Family attitudes	200.43	1	28.15	.0005
Social class	15.16	1	2.13	n.s.
TV violence X Social class	0.01	1	*	n.s.
TV violence X Family attitudes	9.09	1	1.27	n.s.
Family X Class	65.61	1	9.21	.025
Violence X Family X Class	11.99	1	1.68	n.s.
Error	2818.00	396		

Approval of aggression

Only the main effect of the family attitudes variable was significant for this scale, the least reliable of the measures used. In Table 4, girls from families negatively inclined toward violence had lower scores than girls from families where the attitudes were more undefined. No other main effect nor any interaction was significant.

Summary

The results show strong consistency for the four dependent measures. Recall that the measures themselves were moderately inter-correlated (.13 to .37). For all four measures, family attitudes toward aggression, as reported by the child, showed the most persistent relationship to the child's aggressive attitudes.

Exposure to TV violence also made a consistent, independent contribution to the child's notions about violence. The greater the level of exposure to TV violence, the more the child was willing to use violence, to suggest it as a solution to conflict, and to perceive it as effective.

Contrary to expectations, there were no social class differences in attitudes toward aggression. Perhaps both lower and middle-class girls receive similar instructions as to its undesirability, although the literature suggested otherwise.

Discussion

This study has limitations similar to those in the boys' study:

1) The data allow only associative statements, not causative ones.

2) Much variance in attitudes towards violence remains unexplained. These three antecedent variables explain 8-15 percent.

3) The extent to which favorable attitudes toward violence show themselves in more violent behavior is undetermined.

4) The method of determining exposure to TV violence is gross. What elements in violent shows are related to pro-aggression attitudes is also undetermined.

TABLE 4

Approval of Aggression

Cell means

(The higher the score, the more expressed approval of aggression.)

Exposure to TV violence:	Middle Class Family attitudes toward aggression		Lower Class Family attitudes toward aggression	
	Low approval	Undefined	Low approval	Undefined
Low	13.63 (n=73)	15.09 (n=64)	13.61 (n=38)	14.34 (n=29)
High	14.44 (n=59)	14.93 (n=55)	13.50 (n=40)	15.61 (n=46)

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLE

Source of variation	MS	df	F	p
Exposure to TV violence	16.00	1	2.89	n.s.
Family attitudes	164.77	1	29.66	.0005
Social class	3.84	1	0.69	n.s.
TV violence X Social class	2.56	1	0.48	n.s.
TV violence X Family attitudes	0.08	1	0.01	n.s.
Family X Class	10.94	1	1.98	n.s.
Violence X Family X Class	13.82	1	2.49	n.s.
Error	2196.00	396		

A more sensitive measure of program content exposure, coupled with indices of overt aggressive behavior might begin to explain more variation in young people's attitudes toward aggression.

For both teen-age boys and girls, their perception of their parents' attitudes toward aggression was the predominant correlate of their own beliefs. The gap that remains here is that the data on parents' attitudes originated with the youngsters. More direct data from parents should be obtained. Does the youngster know, reflect, or guess at the parent's attitude? Is the youngster rationalizing his own beliefs, by making those of key reference groups consistent with his own? What of other viable reference groups, e.g., peers? And what of possible contradictory information from parents and peers about responding to frustrating or mutually aggressive situations? Current research by Chaffee and McLeod at the University of Wisconsin has obtained data from both parents and their children; a research project in the present program does so with a younger set of respondents. Both bear on the unanswered questions.

Also, for both the boys and girls, but more consistently so for the girls, direct exposure to TV violence was significantly linked to positive attitudes toward aggressive behavior. For the middle-class boys, exposure interacted with family attitudes; for all the girls, TV exposure had its own independent impact on their attitudes.

Social class, a discriminant among the boys, did not differentiate among the girls. In this study, the girls' socialization experiences in both low- and middle-income families had similar influences on their personal beliefs. The girls from different environments reported learning equally well the lack of desirability of being physically aggressive.

This social class anomoly has another implication. Among the most disadvantaged boys, perhaps the pressures of their experiences with real violence coupled with equivocal family attitudes had effectively eliminated an added impact from television. Such information must come before adolescence, for them. Thus, it is among the more advantaged boys, and any of the young ladies, that programming might serve to modify attitudes about aggression. If made available, alternatives to violence as problem resolvers could alter acceptance of aggression as a mode of conduct among teen-agers.

Females in this culture get strong family training to inhibit display of physical aggression (Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957; Sears, 1961). There is much variance in that training. Nevertheless, one might suggest that the concern for females not focus on whether television violence stimulates them to imitative acts of violence. Rather, it seems sufficiently important to continue to focus concern on whether the content of television violence induces more pro-aggression attitudes -- more tolerance of violence and more reliance on its effectiveness. This in turn is what could be passed to their own children.

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