ATTRIBUTION OF AGGRESSIVENESS AND JUDGMENT OF BEHAVIOR AS RIGHT OR WRONG

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Abstract

Thirty employees at a Swedish hospital rated a person's aggressiveness and his behavior as right or wrong. The ratings were based on a written story in which reasons for acting, intent and degree of harm was varied. A $3 \times 2 \times 2$ (Revenge - Selfdefence - No Reason $\times$ Intent - No Intent $\times$ Harm - No Harm) analysis of variance showed that the ratings were affected by both reason and intent. A socially acceptable reason (selfdefence) produced quite different ratings of aggressiveness than the two other levels of reason. The No Reason-condition was the most different level in ratings of right and wrong. This was interpreted as being in accordance with attribution theory. The absence of any effect of harm was also shortly discussed, as well as the usefulness of distinguishing between intent and causes/reasons.
When someone observes an interaction between two others, e.g. an aggressive event, according to attribution theories he interprets and explains what has happened (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973). The final result of this process is that a person and/or a situation is attributed certain characteristics, which are assumed to be the origin of or cause for the event in question.

The attribution process can be described in the following steps (Jones & Davis, 1965). First there is an observation of some action and the effects that this results in. Second, a judgment of whether the actor had an intention or not follows. If the person that is observed can be said to have acted intentionally the process ends with the third step, an attribution of some personal characteristic, e.g. aggressiveness. During the interpretation and judging of a behavior the observer also considers the possibility that the event is caused by circumstances (Heider, 1958) in which case the attribution becomes situational. Alternative ways of acting are also considered (Jones & Nisbett, 1971).

This means that attribution of aggressiveness is done from observation and inference/judgment of the
actor's intent, the causes or reasons for his acting, the effect that this acting produces and also to what degree his behavior is in accordance with social norms (which of the possible alternatives for action was right in the situation in question?).

Intent has in many studies been shown to be an attribute to aggressiveness. The investigations do however differ regarding how intent as a variable has been described in the material that subsequent ratings have been based on. Holm (1980) used two levels of intent by either stating an intent explicitly in texts or leaving it unstated. Ratings of aggression were significantly affected by this manipulation. Nickel (1974) found in an experiment that if the subjects were informed that received electric shocks were intended to be of another strength than the ones that were actually given, this produced significant different ratings of the shock-giver. Nesdale, Rule & McAra (1976) varied intent as socially acceptable versus socially non-acceptable, and found that the same action was judged as right in the first case but as wrong in the second. Variations of intent as stated versus not stated, as actually experienced versus described as differently intended and as socially acceptable versus non-acceptable have, thus, significantly affected ratings of aggressiveness.

Many studies of aggression have built upon Feshbach's (1971) classification of aggression as
hostile, personal-instrumental and social-instrumental (see e.g. Rule, Dyck, McAra and Nesdale, 1975 and Edmunds, 1978). In judging an action and the intent behind it as social-instrumental or socially acceptable the reason for acting and a comparison with relevant social norms is inherent. Although it is difficult to separate intent and reason from each other in real-life situations, there are at least two reasons to do so experimentally. First, observers can be expected to react differently in situations where they have to infer an intent themselves than in situations where an intent is given. To find this out intent must be studied as separated from reasons as possible. Second, such experimental separation gives at least to some degree possibilities to distinguish between cause (that which brings about a change) and reason (that for which a change is brought about). According to Buss (1978) observers are assumed to explain nonintentional occurrences by referring to causes, whereas intentional behavior also could be explained by reference to reasons.

When raters of aggressive behaviors have been given different explanations to someone's acting, this has strongly affected their judgments of the behavior in question. Brown & Tedeschi (1976) found that a person's acting was rated significantly different depending upon its description as offensive (attack) or defensive (selfdefence). Coercion in
selfdefence seems to be accepted ( according to some cultural norm ) and is considered to be legitimate. Such a behavior is not rated as aggressive. Aggression with a socially acceptable or good intent was also labeled as right in the earlier mentioned study of Nesdale et al, while the opposite - wrong - was labeled to the socially non-acceptable or bad intent. Holm ( 1980 ) also found differences in attribution of aggressiveness depending on whether a reason for acting was given or not.

The influence of social norms on ratings of aggressiveness was further demonstrated by Stapleton, Joseph & Tedeschi ( 1978 ). In their experiment a person was considered to be non-aggressive and good respective aggressive and bad depending on whether he gave back a less intense or a more intense electric shock than the one he had received himself. Experienced constraint also affects ratings. When the freedom of action was described as reduced in an investigation by Kane, Joseph & Tedeschi ( 1977 ) the shown aggressiveness was also rated as lower.

The giving of different reasons has thus empirically been shown to affect ratings of aggressiveness as well as ratings of some behavior's accordance with social norms ( good/bad ). Consequently, there are reasons to expect that to the extent that a behavior is perceived as deviating from accepted social norms, the more aggressive it appears to an observer. In other
words, there should be a positive correlation between perceived wrongness and perceived aggressiveness. It was therefore in the experiment reported here interesting to use a socially accepted reason (selfdefense), a socially non-acceptable reason (revenge) as well as a level where no reason for action was given, and to study their respective influence on attribution of aggressiveness and on judgments of right or wrong.

The effect of an aggressive behavior is in general some kind of harm, physical and/or psychological. This is also the goal of the aggression, according to "traditional" definitions (see e.g. Goldstein, 1975). Harm has, however, seldom appeared to be an attribute of aggressiveness. Dion (1972) and Holm (1980) have shown results where harm has affected ratings. In the Dion study harm appeared as a four-way interaction in ratings of aggression, while Holm found a main effect of harm on attribution of aggressiveness in one of the four texts that was used in his experiment. In the earlier mentioned Stapleton et al study the ratings of aggression were affected by the intensity of electric shock an actor was described to use or attempt to use. Whether the subjects rated some intent, the level of harm or the justness of chosen shock intensity according to some norm of reciprocity can be discussed. The last explanation is perhaps the most probable.

Rule & Nesdale (1976) have discussed the relative absence of effects of harm and pointed to the
fact that the degrees of harm used in different experiments may not have been severe enough to be considered by the raters. Another possibility might be the differing weights that the raters can give to descriptions of harm compared with statements of intent and/or reason. If the latter are present or can be inferred, harm might be treated as some surplus information, i.e. the raters does not need it in their attribution. Eventually harm could be something that is used only in cases where norms of reciprocity are in function, that is, when there is a need for comparing what the actor has suffered and what he is giving back. The study reported here used two degrees of harm, one that is very low - someone gets wet - and another more severe - the breaking of an arm.

The aim of this experiment was to study how concomitant variations regarding intent as given versus not stated, reasons as socially acceptable versus socially non-acceptable versus not given and harm as relatively serious versus virtually none affected attribution of aggression and judgments of right or wrong regarding the behavior of an actor.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were thirty employees at a Swedish hospital. They were participating in a one-week course in personal cooperation. Twentyeight were women and two were men. Their age varied between 25 - 45 years.
The ratings were done as a part of the course-work regarding judgment of persons.

Material

The ratings were based on written descriptions of an incident between two persons. One of the persons was to be rated concerning shown aggressiveness and how right or wrong his behavior was experienced. The same theme was found in every text, but the descriptions of reason, intent and harm varied. Reason for acting was varied over three levels: The first was described as selfdefence (socially acceptable), the second as revenge (socially non-acceptable) and the third was no given reason at all. Intent on the part of the actor was either clearly stated or not given at all. Two levels of harm were used. In one the target-person of the action got wet when he stumbled into a puddle, in the second his arm was broken and both cases were consequences of the other person's acting.

The text-material thus consisted of twelve stories on the same theme, but with varying reason, intent and harm ($3 \times 2 \times 2$). The persons appearing in the texts were designated with letters instead of names. This was done to avoid associations to some real-life persons, which could have biased the ratings. The letters were systematically varied between attacker and victim in order to avoid bias on part of the letters. Every text had its own letters, and a special numbering of them was thus not necessary.
Design

A three-factorial design with three levels on one factor and two levels on each of the others was used. A $3 \times 2 \times 2$ (Selfdefence - Revenge - No Reason x Intent - No Intent x Harm - No Harm) analysis of variance with repeated measurements on each subject was planned (Winer, 1971, p. 539 ff.). Type of reason was a between-groups factor while intent and harm were within-groups factors. The subjects were randomized to one of the three levels of reason and there given all combinations of intent and harm. Ten subjects were distributed to each level.

Procedure

The subjects were told that the aim with the experiment was to study ratings of a given person. They were instructed to indicate how aggressive they thought that a person was in each text, and to rate his behavior in terms of right and wrong. Seven-degree rating-scales were used. The aggressiveness-scale had "not at all" respective "very much" as endpoints, on the other scale they were "right" and "wrong". The subjects were given an envelope containing two booklets, each containing four texts. The distribution of envelopes also meant randomizing subjects to one of the levels of reason. In the booklets every text was written on a separate page, and the subjects were not allowed to look back on earlier ratings while working through the material.
In booklet one the texts on each side was followed by the rating-scales for aggressiveness and right-wrong. In booklet two they were followed by questions about the actors intent, reason and amount of harm done. These scales were also with seven degrees. The order of texts was random for each subject, and orders in booklet one and two were the same.

Results

The data from booklet two were analyzed with mean value tests ( t-test for reason, t-test for correlated means for intent and harm ). Between the three levels of reason the ratings were significantly different ( p<.01 ) for selfdefence - no reason and for self-defence - revenge, while the difference revenge - no reason was not significant. The differences between levels of intent and levels of harm were also significant ( p<.01 ). This means that selfdefence was felt to be definitely different from the other reasons, and that the subjects on each level of reason kept the levels of intent and harm separate or apart.

Data from booklet one were analyzed with a 3 x 2 x 2 ( Selfdefence - Revenge - No Reason x Intent - No Intent x Harm - No Harm ) analysis of variance both for aggressiveness and right - wrong ratings. Regarding aggressiveness there were main effects for Reason, F (2,27) = 7.65, p<.01 and Intent, F (1,27) = 38.20, p<.01 as well as an interaction Reason X Intent, F (2,27) = 11.37, p<.01. Harm did not affect the
ratings of aggressiveness. For the right-wrong ratings there were main effects for Reason, $F(2,27) = 4.79$, $p < .05$ and for Intent, $F(1,27) = 33.47$, $p < .01$ and an interaction Reason x Intent, $F(2,27) = 8.68$, $p < .01$. Harm did not affect these ratings either, and data were collapsed over harm for the purpose of easier treatment and interpretation. The results of the ratings are shown in figure 1.

(Figure 1 in about here)

Further analyses of the data (Duncan range statistics) showed significant differences ($p < .05$) between selfdefence - revenge and selfdefence - no reason in the ratings of aggressiveness. For the right-wrong ratings there was a significant difference between selfdefence - no reason ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The results from the analysis of variance showed that the raters were affected by both reason for and intent with an action when they attributed aggressiveness to a person. When a socially acceptable reason (self-defence) was given the ratings remained on the same level, no matter if intent was given or not. When no reason was given or when it was described as revenge, the ratings were heavily affected under the condition of an explicitly stated intent. The differences between selfdefence and the other reasons were significant when an intent was given. This was also an expected result and in accordance with earlier research (see...
e.g. Brown & Tedeschi, 1976 and Nesdale, Rule & McAra, 1976). In terms of attribution theory this may mean that the selfdefence condition produces an attribution mainly to the situation and not so much to the person. His behavior is however not rated as completely free from aggressiveness even in the case of selfdefence. This is also in accordance with attribution theories (see e.g. Jones & Nisbett, 1971), and what is said about the raters consideration of the possible alternatives of action that a person had. (See also Kane, Joseph & Tedeschi, 1977). When socially non-acceptable reasons are stated or inferred the attribution becomes personal, in particular when an intent is given. Only the combination no reason - no intent produced ratings of the person as virtually not aggressive.

The ratings of the actors behavior as right or wrong were also influenced by the variations in reason and intent. With selfdefence as the reason, the ratings were on the "right" side of the midpoint of the scale, while revenge held them on the "wrong" side. The difference was significant (Duncan range statistics). The behavior was judged as most right when no reason and no intent were given, but as most wrong when an intent but no reason was stated. This could be interpreted so that any given reason for an intended action makes it less blameworthy than no reason at all when the issue is rating behavior as right or wrong.
Buss' (1978) distinction between causes and reasons could partly explain the differences between separate levels of intent for acting without a given reason. If both intent and reason are missing, what has happened probably becomes perceived as an occurrence. The actor can thus not be held responsible and could in that respect be said to have done right. When intent is given the incident is regarded as an action of will, and if there is no reason at all for it, the raters will see it as very unjustified and wrong.

Harm did not in any respect affect the ratings either of aggressiveness or of right or wrong (sum of squares were less than or equal to 1), despite the very clear difference in degree of harm between the two levels. The subjects also noted these differences. This makes one of the possible explanations that were discussed earlier - that harm may affect ratings only when there are difficulties to form impressions of intent and reason otherwise - seem less probable. There were four conditions ranging from no intent - no reason till intent - reason but harm had no effect whatsoever on any of them. The possibility that there is some kind and/or degree of harm that affects ratings of aggressiveness should however not be ruled out without further investigation.

Reason for and intent with an action seems to be attributes to both aggressiveness and ratings of right or wrong. Even if the separation intent -
reason is hard to maintain in the sense that an observer often infers an intent of some degree even when none is given and vice versa, the procedure of separation gives valuable information about the reactions and ratings that observers make in cases where somebody states an intent with someone else's acting. This means that we should be very aware of the impact that such a giving of intentions and/or reasons has on other people, as well as the operation of social norms in judging reasons for an action.
References


Holm, D. The Effects of Intent, Reason and Harm on Attribution of Aggression. Unpublished manuscript, University of Umeå, 1980.


Figure 1a: Ratings of aggression with three different reasons and two levels of intent.

Figure 1b: Ratings of behavior as right or wrong with three different reasons and two levels of intent.
Figure 1a: Ratings of aggression with three different reasons and two levels of intent.

Figure 1b: Ratings of behavior as right or wrong with three different reasons and two levels of intent.
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