THE EFFECTS OF INTENT, REASON AND HARM ON ATTRIBUTION OF AGGRESSION

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ABSTRACT
A study of the ratings of aggressive behavior was based on a theoretical model of the attribution process. The ratings were based on four separate text versions. The subjects (the raters) were 28 Swedish adults studying Education at the University of Umeå. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Intent - No intent x Reason - No reason x Harm - No harm) analysis of variance was performed separately on each text version. The results which were discussed in terms of attribution theory showed among other things that intent and reason could be seen as attributes of aggression but that this hardly applies to harm. It was also shown that more than one text version could be useful for continued research within this field.
Some recent studies of aggression have been based on attribution theories, i.e. theories of how people interpret and explain other people's behavior (See e.g. Brown & Tedeschi, 1976 and Nickel, 1974). Attribution theories are based on the following assumption: In order to reduce the complexity of problems and situations that are facing the individual when he is observing an incident he tries to explain why the observed behavior occurred. He also - to some extent - predicts how others will behave in similar situations.

Essentially, the theoretical model of the attribution process may be described in three steps. An incident is initially observed for example in a classroom or out in the street. Secondly, a judgement of the person's intent with his action is made. If there is no inferred intent the action will be regarded as due to chance, for example an accident. Finally, an attempt will be made at explaining the reasons of the incident. This explanation can for example attribute a characteristic feature to a person (e.g. aggressiveness) or it can regard the incident as linked to the situation. It is generally assumed that a causal attribution is made to a person and/or a situation.
In an experiment made by Nesdale, Rule & Mc Ara (1976) Canadian college students were asked to read a text describing an aggressive incident between two persons. The researchers varied among other things socially acceptable intent and socially non-acceptable intent and found that an aggressive action was considered to be correct in the first case whereas the same action was considered to be wrong in the second case. Rule & Duker (1973) studied how variation in intent with and consequence of an action influenced eight- and twelve-year-old Dutch boys in their evaluation of aggressive behavior. The aggressive behavior was described in a text. Significant results were obtained both for variations in intent and consequence. Similar results for attribution of intent have also been obtained in American studies by Schwartz et al (1978) and Nickel (1974).

The intent per se is, however, hardly a sufficient explanation of aggressive behavior. The rater will probably also try to form an opinion about the reasons for the action, and he will also try to find out if these reasons agree with current social norms. Brown & Tedeschi (1976) showed that the same persons were considered to be aggressive and non-aggressive respectively depending on whether their actions were offensive or defensive. Different scenes were evaluated by American university students.
in their experiment. The person in the only scene where violence actually occurred, i.e. hitting and knocking down the aggressor in self-defence, was considered to be least aggressive. His behavior was thus regarded as a legitimate answer to the provocation he was target of.

It may thus be assumed that at least two attributes are required to characterize aggressiveness, namely intent and reason.

Jones & Davis (1965) have, however, more than many others pointed out the effects that may be the result of an incident or an action. It is reasonable to assume that aggressive behavior will cause either psychic or physical harm. Harm can therefore be expected to appear as an attribute of aggression. Psychic or physical harm is also, according to "traditional" definitions, the aim of the aggressive behavior, i.e. the effect that the aggressor wants to achieve (cf. e.g. Goldstein, 1975).

It has, however, proved to be difficult to confirm empirically that harm is an attribute of aggression. An exception to this is Dion (1972). In her experiment harm appeared as a four-way interaction, which of course made it more difficult to interpret as an attribute of aggression per se. Schwartz, Kane, Joseph & Tedeschi (1978) asked American female university students to evaluate a number of personality traits on the basis of various
situations in a text version. They found that harm influenced the ratings of how hostile and evaluative a person is, and also of how constrained he was, whereas the evaluations of aggressiveness were not affected. A number of personality traits (16 and 14 respectively) were evaluated in both these studies which may have resulted in a confusion of aggressiveness with other personality variables. It was therefore in the experiment reported here interesting to study harm as attribute only to aggression.

Variations in (a) intent, (b) reason and (c) harm can probably affect attribution of aggressiveness. There is however, no study on the simultaneous effect of these attributes. Other differences between this experiment and earlier studies are that the raters were older than the college students (middle-aged men and women working in various trades), the experiment was carried out in another culture (i.e. in Sweden) and that four different text versions were used in one and the same experiment.

To sum up, the aim of this experiment was to study how concomitant variations in intent, reason and harm influenced the attribution of aggression.
Subjects
The subjects, i.e. those who evaluated the occurrence of aggressive behavior in a number of texts, were 28 students of Education. Twenty-three of them were women and five were men. Their age varied from 30 to 45 years. Participation in the experiment formed part of their course requirement.

Material
Four different text versions were used. Each text version described an incident between two persons. The incident formed the basis for the evaluation of the "attackers" aggressiveness. The aggressor's intent with his action, his reasons for it and the harm he caused were varied in each text version, i.e. intent - no intent, reason - no reason and harm - no harm were all found in the text versions. Each separate text version was thus made up of eight text variants by combinations of the attributes intent, reason and harm (2 x 2 x 2). There were 32 text variants in all (4 x 2 x 2 x 2).
Every text was constructed according to the following: One person made something with or without intent and with or without reason for his action. This action either harmed or did not harm another person. The quotation
below is an example of a text (a task) with intent but without reason and harm.

"'A' caught sight of a rake against the wall. He pushed it so that it would fall against 'B'. The rake fell in the direction of 'B' but missed him with a few centimetres".

The persons were designated with letters instead of names in order to avoid biassed evaluations. The letters were also systematically varied between the aggressor and the "victim" in order to eliminate associations to a certain letter. Every text variant also had its own letter in the beginning of the text which meant that a special numbering of the text could be avoided.

**Design**

The design was a within-group, three factorial design with two levels on each factor. A 2 x 2 x 2 (Intent - No intent x Reason - No reason x Harm - No harm) analysis of variance with repeated measurements on the same subjects was performed (Winer, 1971, p. 539 ff.). The subjects were randomized to one of the two levels of intent and they were given all combinations regarding the levels for reason and harm. Fourteen subjects were thus randomized to each level of intent.
Procedure

The raters were told that the aim of the experiment was to study the ratings of given persons. They were instructed to indicate how aggressive they thought a person was in each text. Seven-point rating scales were used. End-points were "not at all" and "very much" respectively. The subjects were given an envelope containing two booklets (booklet 1 and booklet 2) with 16 text versions in each. There was a text and a rating scale on every page in the booklets (three rating scales in booklet 2).

When the subjects had filled up booklet one they were instructed to pass on to booklet two. This booklet contained the same texts as booklet one and in the same order but with questions about the actor's intent, his reasons for acting so and the amount of inflicted harm. (These questions were also answered along a scale with seven degrees). The aim of this latter procedure was to find out if the subjects really observed the levels (intent - no intent, reason - no reason and harm - no harm). All text versions were randomized.

Results

Data from booklet two were analyzed with mean value tests, i.e. t-test for intent and t-test for correlated means for reason and harm. All differences in means between the levels of each factor were significant (p<.01).
The raters thus kept all levels separate in the four text versions.

Data from booklet one were analyzed by a 2 x 2 x 2 (Intent - No intent x Reason - No reason x Harm - No harm) analysis of variance on each separate text version regarding the ratings of aggressiveness.

The main effects of intent, reason and harm were significant in the first version, $F(1,26) = 5.90, p < .05$; $F(1,26) = 96.34, p < .01$ and $F(1,26) = 18.76, p < .01$ respectively. The main effects intent and reason were significant in the second version, $F(1,26) = 21.66, p < .01$; $F(1,26) = 23.00, p < .01$ respectively. The interaction Intent x Reason was also significant, $F(1,26) = 4.67, p < .05$. The third version yielded the "same" results as the second, i.e. the main effects for intent and reason were significant, $F(1,26) = 11.22, p < .01$; $F(1,26) = 63.47, p < .01$ respectively. The interaction Intent x Reason resulted in $F(1,26) = 6.87, p < .05$. The main effects intent and reason were significant in version number four, $F(1,26) = 52.09, p < .01$; $F(1,26) = 37.31, p < .01$.

Comparisons between the four separate text versions show that all main effects were significant for intent and reason. The interaction Intent x Reason was significant in two of the separate text versions ($p < .05$). The main effect harm was significant in only one of the text versions ($p < .01$).
Discussion

The results can to a large extent be explained in terms of attribution theory, i.e. intent and particularly reason seem to be causal attributes of aggression. Or in other words, if a person does something intentionally or does not have a reason for his action this can be interpreted as aggressive behavior. This, in its turn, can often lead us not to evaluate aggression *per se* but rather - and perhaps solely - the attributes of aggression. It should also be observed that these two attributes of aggression (intent and reason) reappear in various cultures and in samples drawn from various populations differing in age.

It was earlier assumed that an action depending only on chance does not result in its being regarded as aggressive, i.e. you can suppose that a person is "directed" by an intent of some kind. This also means that intent is an important concept in this context. It is however reasonable to assume, that in such complex processes as the one of attribution, one attribute could interact with others, for example some of the attributes used in this experiment. This argument can thus be an explanation of the interaction Intent x Reason (see also Rivera, Joseph & Tedeschi, 1977). The interaction was, on the other hand, not always significant which of course means that you can question the validity of the above argument. It is, how-
ever, somewhat unexpected that harm - generally speaking - does not appear as an attribute of aggression since harm is significant in one of the texts. Or, in other words: Harm is not "invariant" throughout when the other attributes are varied. One explanation of this result may be that this particular text (text version number 1) deals with a special type of harm or that the harm - in terms of attribute - is felt to be definitely different from the harm in the other versions. Harm has on the other hand, as we have already pointed out, seldom appeared as a causal attribute of aggression (cf. also Rule & Nesdale, 1976).

The results of the interaction Intent x Reason and the main effect of harm also stress the importance of using more than one text version which so far has been done relatively seldom in the way this study has used them.

An educational implication of these results is that we should primarily be aware of the attributes of aggression if we want to consider an aggressive incident with as many nuances as possible. Being aware of possible attributes of aggressive behavior - and possible interactions between these attributes - also provides possibilities for explaining and understanding aggressive behavior.
References


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