Defining Aggression: An Exercise for Classroom Discussion

Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr.
Texas A&M University

This activity is designed to generate class discussion on the definition of aggression and related issues of causation and control. It exposes students to a large number of issues involved in defining aggression and helps them understand the complexity of such a construct and thus the reasons why their classmates and psychologists are in disagreement about its meaning.

Aggression is a topic included in virtually every textbook on introductory psychology. Some books place aggression in the section on motivation and emotion while others cover it as part of social psychology. Most include it in reference to research on humans but discussion of some animal studies of aggression is also common. Treatment of related concepts such as violence, anger, frustration, and assertiveness are also common topics.

Whereas textbook coverage of aggression is almost guaranteed, a definition of the term is not. In a nonrandom sample of 10 introductory psychology books (selected from the author's bookcase), 5 provided an explicit definition of aggression but the others left the meaning embedded in a series of paragraphs and so required the reader to serve as lexicographer. Considering the complexity of the term aggression, it is not surprising that these authors might choose to avoid espousing a particular definition.

The exercise described in this paper uses aggression as an example of a typical construct in psychology, permeated with a host of subtle meanings and not so subtle disagreements that make it difficult to reach a consensual definition. One could use other constructs such as intelligence or self-esteem, but aggression was chosen because it generates considerable discussion among students. Anecdotal evidence for the fascination with this topic can be drawn from the prevalence of aggression as a theme in movies and television, the popularity of sports, and the interest many people show in reports of violent crime.

The activity described here can be used in a number of classes, including the course in introductory psychology and, in fact, anywhere you treat the topic of aggression. It should be used prior to any lecture on aggression and before the students have read their textbook coverage of the subject. This exercise works best in a class of 50 students or less, but by altering the data reporting procedures it can be used in much larger classes, although discussion obviously will suffer in large classes. The activity requires about 50 minutes but could be made shorter or longer depending on the preferences of the instructor. The instructor's role in this exercise is to serve as a tabulator of the data and as moderator of the discussion.

PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the class, give each student a copy of a questionnaire containing the 25 numbered statements shown in Table 1. Instruct the students to "read each statement and decide whether or not you believe the situation described is one of aggression." Wording of this instruction is critical so as not to bias the responses. Avoid using phrases like "aggressive act" or "aggressive behavior" because one of the issues to be discussed is whether some overt behavior needs to occur in aggression. Ask the students to circle the number of each statement that describes aggression. Tell them they should respond according to their own beliefs and not how they think they should respond or how they think most people would respond. Compliance with this request can be enhanced by telling the students not to put their names on the questionnaires. Indeed, there is no reason in this exercise to know how a particular person responded. You may want to have the students indicate their sex on the questionnaire if you would be interested in looking at potential sex differences in the definition of aggression. Such differences, if obtained, would undoubtedly add to the interest in the discussion.

Allow the students about 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Most, if not all, of the students will finish before that time, so you should be ready to proceed when the last person has finished. Collect the questionnaires, shuffle, and redistribute them to the class so that each student gets a copy. Most students will be given a questionnaire other than their own, but it is unimportant if they get their own copy back. This procedure allows students to report on the responses that may or may not be their own, thus eliminating a potential source of embarrassment.

Record the data on the board by asking students for a show of hands on each numbered item, with hands being
Table 1. Aggression Questionnaire

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>A spider eats a fly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Two wolves fight for the leadership of the pack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>A soldier shoots an enemy at the front line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The warden of a prison executes a convicted criminal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>A juvenile gang attacks members of another gang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Two men fight for a piece of bread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>A man viciously kicks a cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>A man, while cleaning a window, knocks over a flowerpot, which, in falling, injures a pedestrian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>A girl kicks a wastebasket.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Mr. X, a notorious gossip, speaks disparagingly of many people of his acquaintance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>A man mentally rehearses a murder he is about to commit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>An angry son purposely fails to write to his mother, who is expecting a letter and will be hurt if none arrives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>An enraged boy tries with all his might to inflict injury on his antagonist, a bigger boy, but is not successful in doing so. His efforts simply amuse the bigger boy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>A man daydreams of harming his antagonist, but has no hope of doing so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>A senator does not protest the escalation of bombing to which he is morally opposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>A farmer beheads a chicken and prepares it for supper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>A hunter kills an animal and mounts it as a trophy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>A dog snarls at a mail carrier, but does not bite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>A physician gives a flu shot to a screaming child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>A boxer gives his opponent a bloody nose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>A Girl Scout tries to assist an elderly woman, but trips her by accident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>A bank robber is shot in the back while trying to escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>A tennis player smashes his racket after missing a volley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>A cat kills a mouse, parades around with it, and then discards it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Aggression Questionnaire

The warden of a prison executes a convicted criminal.

A spider eats a fly.

A tiger fights for the leadership of the pack.

A soldier shoots an enemy at the front line.

The warden of a prison executes a convicted criminal.

A juvenile gang attacks members of another gang.

Two men fight for a piece of bread.

A man viciously kicks a cat.

A man, while cleaning a window, knocks over a flowerpot, which, in falling, injures a pedestrian.

A girl kicks a wastebasket.

Mr. X, a notorious gossip, speaks disparagingly of many people of his acquaintance.

A man mentally rehearses a murder he is about to commit.

An angry son purposely fails to write to his mother, who is expecting a letter and will be hurt if none arrives.

An enraged boy tries with all his might to inflict injury on his antagonist, a bigger boy, but is not successful in doing so. His efforts simply amuse the bigger boy.

A man daydreams of harming his antagonist, but has no hope of doing so.

A senator does not protest the escalation of bombing to which he is morally opposed.

A farmer beheads a chicken and prepares it for supper.

A hunter kills an animal and mounts it as a trophy.

A dog snarls at a mail carrier, but does not bite.

A physician gives a flu shot to a screaming child.

A boxer gives his opponent a bloody nose.

A Girl Scout tries to assist an elderly woman, but trips her by accident.

A bank robber is shot in the back while trying to escape.

A tennis player smashes his racket after missing a volley.

A person commits suicide.

A cat kills a mouse, parades around with it, and then discards it.

RAISED IF THE ITEM IS CIRCLED ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE THEY ARE HOLDING. IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE EXACT SIZE OF THE CLASS IN THIS EXERCISE TO KNOW WHEN YOU HAVE UNANIMITY. FOR EXAMPLE, WITH A CLASS SIZE OF 34, TOTAL AGREEMENT WOULD COME FROM A SCORE OF 34, IN WHICH CASE EVERY STUDENT AGREED THAT THE ITEM DESCRIBED AGGRESSION. A SCORE OF ZERO WOULD MEAN THAT NO ONE THOUGHT THE ITEM DESCRIBED AGGRESSION. SUCH UNANIMITY IS RARE AND TYPICALLY OCCURS ONLY ON THOSE ITEMS IN WHICH THERE SEEMS TO BE NO INTENT TO HARM. TABULATING THE DATA ON THE BLACKBOARD CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED QUICKLY, USUALLY IN LESS THAN 5 MINUTES, SO THAT THE BULK OF THE CLASS TIME CAN BE DEVOTED TO DISCUSSION.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Use the questionnaire results to get the students talking about how aggression is defined. You might begin with those items for which there is greatest agreement and proceed to those on which the class is evenly divided. Note that the 25 statements are quite diverse and are intended to span the gamut of issues relevant to consideration of aggression: harm to living versus nonliving things (9 and 23), accident versus intention (8 and 21), actual damage versus no physical damage (10, 13, and 18), self-defense (3, 13, and 14), duty or job responsibility (3, 4, 19, 20, and 22), predation and instinctual behavior (1, 2, and 25), survival (1, 6, and 16), acts involving animals other than humans (7, 16, 17, and 18), covert acts (11 and 14), inaction (12 and 15), self-injury (24), and killing for sport (17 and 25).

ATTENTION data can be devoted to discussion. It is important to know the exact size of the class in holding. If there is time, or in a separate lecture in the next class period, you can present some of the definitions of aggression proposed by psychologists. Consider the following examples:

1. "Behavior intended to hurt another person" (Freedman, 1982, p. 259).
2. "Any behavior whose intent is to inflict harm or injury on another living being" (McGee & Wilson, 1984, p. 503).
3. "Hostile or forceful action intended to dominate or violate" (Lefrancois, 1982, p. 596).
4. "Behavior that is intended to injure another person (physically or verbally) or to destroy property" (Atkinson, Atkinson, & Hilgard, 1983, p. 321).
5. "A response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism" (Buss, 1961, p. 3).

The first four definitions require intent, but the last one does not. The first one limits aggression to humans, while the second and fifth broaden it to include all living organisms. But what about kicking wastebaskets and smashing tennis rackets? That could be considered aggressive under the fourth definition. All definitions talk about behaviors, actions, or responses but leave one unclear as to whether inaction can be aggressive or not. Providing these definitions to students helps them to understand that, like them, psychologists also have some difficulty in agreeing on what does or does not constitute aggression.

Students in my class consistently have rated this activity high in terms of satisfaction and as an exercise in learning. Written comments indicate that a number of them believe that it serves to sharpen their critical thinking skills. A few miss the point and want to be told the "real" definition of aggression after the exercise is over, but that kind of reaction is quite rare.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

You can use this exercise as a basis for discussion or as a lecture on the causes of aggression: Is aggression instinctual? Is aggression a natural reaction to conditions such as frustration, conflict, and pain? Is aggression learned, and if so, how and from what sources? This last question presents a good opportunity to discuss aggression in the media, particularly television, and what effect it may have on the behavior of viewers (see Liebert, Sprafkin, & Davidson, 1982).

Other topics of interest include: aggression in athletics, competitiveness versus aggressiveness, assertiveness versus
aggressiveness, the positive role of aggression, violet crime, the relation of prejudice to aggression, and methods for the control of aggression.

REFERENCES

NOTES
1. The items in Table 1 were taken from Johnson (1972), Kaufmann (1970), and Krech, Crutchfield, Livson, Wilson, & Parducci (1982). Some of their items were modified for use in this questionnaire.
2. Address requests for reprints to Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843.

Identifying Major Techniques of Persuasion

Vivian Parker Makosky
St. Lawrence University

The purpose of this class exercise is to teach students how to identify the major persuasion techniques employed in advertisements such as: appeal to or creation of needs, use of loaded words or images, prestige or social suggestion.

Exposure to advertisements is a fact of everyday life. Vast amounts of money are spent on these attempts to control behavior, and there is at least some evidence that the persuasion techniques employed are successful. Surveys conducted by a market research firm indicate that we not only remember what advertisers tell us, we also believe it a lot of the time. In one survey, 82% could correctly name the product for "Please don't squeeze the ..." (Charmin); 79% knew that "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is" means Alka-Seltzer; 59% identified Coke for "It's the real thing"; 57% knew that Morton Salt goes with "When it rains, it pours"; and 55% knew that you should "Give your cold to ..." Contac (Feinsilber & Mead, 1980). These same authors report that in a second survey, the percentage of people who consider advertising claims to be "completely true" is surprisingly high.

Most discussions of persuasion in social and introductory psychology textbooks (e.g., Crider, Goethals, Kavanaugh, & Solomon, 1983) focus on such issues as: how credible, attractive, and similar to the target the communicator is; whether or not the communication is one-sided or two-sided; whether or not the target person is paying attention to the message, or has agreed to a similar request in the past. Advertising uses additional techniques of persuasion, which are seldom presented, providing an opportunity for the instructor to present useful and interesting information without duplicating the text.

The purpose of this class exercise is to increase student awareness of common persuasion techniques used in advertising such as: (a) the appeal to or creation of needs, (b) social and prestige suggestion, (c) the use of emotionally loaded words and images. The instructor's presentation of these techniques draws on television commercials for illustrations, but the assignments to students use magazine advertisements because they can be brought to class more easily or attached to written reports.

THE APPEAL TO OR CREATION OF NEEDS

In this technique, the advertiser evokes a need and then represents the product (or recommends action) as a means of satisfying that need. The discussion of needs is structured with a modified version of the Maslow (1954) hierarchy of needs, including the following levels: physiological needs, safety and security needs, needs for belonging and love, self-esteem and status needs, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization needs. It is easy to find TV commercials to illustrate appeals to physiological needs ("Aren't you hungry for Burger King now?"), safety and security ("Get a piece of the rock"), belongingness and love ("Brush your breath with Dentyne"), and self-esteem and status ("When E. F. Hutton speaks..."). Appeals to cognitive, aesthetic, and self-actualization needs are much less common. It would seem that those with advertising dollars to spend believe that some needs really