Social Cognitive Processes in the Contagion of Violence

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Contagion of Violence

• Violent Victimization → Violent Retaliation
  – Within groups and between groups
    • Families, Peers, Schools, Communities, Cultures and ethnic groups, Nations
  – In the short run and in the long run

• Observing Violence → Behaving Violently
  – Within groups and between groups
    • Families, Peers, Schools, Communities, Cultures and ethnic groups, Nations
  – In the short run and in the long run
  – Proximal or distal exposure
The Psychological Processes Promoting the Contagion of Violence: Immediate Effects

- Exposure to Violence
- Violent Victimization
- Observational Learning Of Social Cognitions Supporting Violence
- Emotional Dysregulation and Emotional Desensitization
- Violent Behavior
- PTS Symptoms

The Psychological Processes Promoting the Contagion of Violence: One’s Own Behavior is An Exposure

- Exposure to Violence
- Violent Victimization
- Observational Learning Of Social Cognitions Supporting Violence
- Violent Behavior
- Emotional Dysregulation and Emotional Desensitization
- PTS Symptoms

The Psychological Processes Promoting the Contagion of Violence: Effects on Cognitions & Emotions

- Exposure to Violence
- Violent Victimization
- Observational Learning Of Social Cognitions Supporting Violence
- Emotional Dysregulation and Emotional Desensitization
- Violent Behavior
- PTS Symptoms

The Psychological Processes Promoting the Contagion of Violence: Long Term Effects

Exposure to Violence

Observational Learning Of Social Cognitions Supporting Violence

Violent Victimization

Emotional Dysregulation and Emotional Desensitization

Violent Behavior

PTS Symptoms

Long Term Contagious Effects of Exposure to Violence Cross Ecological Boundaries
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2010)
Observed Violence Effects Model  
(Huesmann, 1988; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007)

Through what psychological processes does observing violence increase the likelihood of the observer behaving violently?

• **Situational Stimulating Processes (short term)**
  - 1) Observed violence “**primes**” **social cognitions** (e.g., schemas, scripts, and beliefs) associated with violent behaviors in the brain.
  - 2) **Excitation Transfer** -- Observed violence “**primes**” **related emotions** (e.g., anger) which may be misattributed to something else or affect “impulsivity.”
  - 3) Humans have “wired in” tendencies to **“mimic”** violent behaviors they see

• **Observational Learning Processes (long term)**
  - 1) Repeated observations of violence lead to the encoding ("**imitation**") of schemas, scripts, and beliefs promoting violent behaviors.
  - 2) Repeated observations of violence **dysregulate emotional processing** and “**desensitize**” viewers to the negative emotions related to violence making their violent behavior more likely.
Automatic Cognitive Processes in Social Decisions
(Huesmann, 1988; 1998; Dodge et al., 1980; Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

1. Situational Cues
2. Make Attributions
3. Retrieve a Script
4. Evaluate Script & Likely Outcomes

- Emotional State
- Revised Emotional State
- Scripts
- Schemas about the World
- Normative Beliefs

BEHAVE

Bad Script

Good Script

Emotional State

Situational Cues

Make Attributions

Retrieve a Script

Evaluate Script & Likely Outcomes

BEHAVE
Effect of Exposure to Violence in Middle Childhood (Age 8) and Adolescence (Age 18-19) on Aggression in Middle Adulthood (Age 48-49) Mediated Through “Aggressive Fantasy at Age 30” and “Normative Beliefs Approving of Aggression at Age 48”

Ind Eff = .08, z = 2.06
Ind Eff = .044, z = 2.53

Rehearse Agg Scripts Age 30

Severe Agg
Mild Agg

Exposure to Peer, Family & Media Violence at Age 8 and Age 18-19

Aggression at Age 48-49

Norm Beliefs Approve Agg at Age 48-49

Chi-sq = 10.0, df = 6, p = .13, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .028
*p < .10  **p < .05  ***p < .01  ****p < .001

R² = .35
The Mediating Role of Normative Beliefs in Linking 4th-grd Exposure to Neighborhood Violence to 6th-grd Aggression

(Guerra, Huesmann & Spindler, *Child Development*, 2003)

(N = 1,318)

![Diagram showing the relationship between exposure to neighborhood violence, rehearsal of aggression scripts, normative beliefs, and aggression.

- Expos Viol 4-5
- Rehearse Agg Scripts 5
- Agg 6
- Norm Beliefs 5

Summary:
- GFI = 0.966
- Total effect of Expos on Agg = 0.234
- Mediated effect through Agg Fant = 0.013* = 6%
- Mediated effect through Norm Bel = 0.037 **= 16%
Figure 4a

Skin Conductance Level During *Casino* (Violent Film) for a Subject with High “Anxious Arousal”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Subj. Score</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trait Aggression</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>2.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approval of violence</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>3.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>NB – Ret. Aggression</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child TV Violence</td>
<td>8.90</td>
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<td>18.33</td>
<td>5.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current TV Violence</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>31.70</td>
<td>8.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agg. Beh. – No Prov.</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>4.23</td>
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<td>Agg. Beh. – Mod. Prov</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>4.80</td>
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Figure 4b

Skin Conductance Level During *Casino* (Violent Film) for a Subject with Low “Anxious Arousal” *

<table>
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<td>5.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current TV Violence</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>31.70</td>
<td>8.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg. Beh. – No Prov.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>4.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agg. Beh. – Mod. Prov</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
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Summary

- Violence is contagious – all that is required is viewing it
  - It is contagious in multiple contexts
  - It is contagious in the short run & the long run
- The contagion is mediated by both emotional reactions and cognitive processes
- The consequences of exposure are both an increased risk of behaving violently and an increased risk of internalizing problems and PTS symptoms