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Amethyst Brell
University of Rhode Island, amethyst112@aol.com

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Beliefs of Violence-Sensitive and Violence-Tolerant People

Amethyst Brell

Faculty Sponsor: Charles Collyer

University of Rhode Island

Beliefs of Violence-Sensitive and Violence-Tolerant People

Psychologists have pondered the root of violence for years. Is violence part of the biology of human beings, or is it learned through social interaction? How can we reduce the amount of violence in the world? I believe we first need to examine the causes of violence, how people justify violent actions, and why some people are more sensitive to violence than others. Many studies have been conducted on the ways in which exposure to violence in the media desensitizes children to it (e.g., Molitor & Hirsch, 1994). Psychologists have found that higher exposure to media violence relates to poorer executive functioning in adolescents (Kronenberger, Mathews, Dunn, Yang ; Wood, Giauque, Larsen, Rembusch, Lowe, & Tie-Qiang, 2005). Studies on exposure to media violence often emphasize physical violence, but they do not examine the ways in which children and other populations define and conceptualize violence. Karen Morgaine points out that studies in the area of Violence Against Women have tended to focus on direct abuse, which, she says, "serves to obfuscate issues such as economic oppression which allow and perpetuate violence against women" (2006). In the field of educational psychology, Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt, & Lemme (2006) conducted a study comparing teacher versus student definitions of bullying. Naylor et al. found that students, when compared to teachers, are "more likely to restrict their definitions to direct bullying (verbal and/or physical abuse) and are less likely to refer to social exclusion, a power imbalance in the bully's favor and the bully's intention to cause the target hurt or harm and to feel threatened." Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & YLC-CURA (2006) conducted a study on adolescent bullying and found that those adolescents who are involved in direct

and particularly indirect bullying regard antisocial behavior as more legitimate than those who are uninvolved.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the different ways people define violence and to expand on previous research conducted by Collyer, Gallo, Corey, Waters, & Boney-McCoy (2006). Collyer et al. created a questionnaire which asked participants to rate various violent behaviors, ranging from killing to verbal insults, on a scale from 5 ("very violent") to 0 ("not violent"). Based on participant ratings, they found four clusters of violent behaviors: life threatening acts, low severity physical, high severity nonphysical, and low severity nonphysical. It might be expected that participants would fall into two groups according to what level of severity they rate physical versus nonphysical violence, since there is often emphasis on physical versus emotional abuse in domestic violence studies. Interestingly, the results of the study by Collyer et al. showed that all participants rated life threatening acts at the same level, and then split into two groups: one group consistently rating the three remaining categories of violent behaviors at a higher severity level than the other group. They termed these two groups of participants "violence-sensitive" (rating behaviors more severely) and "violence-tolerant" (rating violent behaviors more moderately).

The purpose of my current study is to expand on the research of Collyer et al. by using a similar severity rating section of my questionnaire and adding a second section of qualitative opinion questions. (See attached questionnaire.) I compare the violence-sensitive group with the violence-tolerant group in terms of their different answers to the qualitative section of my questionnaire. I expect that the violence-sensitive group will be more likely to label themselves as violence-sensitive and will be less likely to define

violence as purely physical abuse. I expect that the violence-tolerant group will be more likely to tolerate physical violence, less likely to have a broad definition of violence, and more likely to give answers which endorse the use of violence for punishment. I also expect that the violence-tolerant group will have a higher percentage of males because there's growing evidence that expressing "toughness" through acts or the threat of violence is part of the gender construction of maleness in our society (Gilligan, 1996; Pollack, 1998; Canada, 1995).

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 123 undergraduate students ranging from age 18-24 at the University of Rhode Island. Students were enrolled in a large introductory psychology course, and taking the survey was an option for either extra credit or to fulfill a course requirement of a Psychology in Action report. The participants were approximately 67% female and 33% male and had many different academic majors.

Materials

I designed a questionnaire containing both a quantitative and a qualitative section. The quantitative section was based on the questionnaire designed by Collyer et al., and asked participants to rate various violent behaviors on a scale from 5 (very violent) to 0 (not violent). The qualitative section contained questions such as “What is your own definition of violence?” and “Do you believe verbal abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse?” (See attached questionnaire)

Procedure

Participants were given the opportunity to fill out the questionnaire online anonymously as an option for a course requirement or extra credit assignment. On the website there was an informed consent form, and a statement that there are no right or wrong answers to the questionnaire. I visited the students twice at the start of class, where I announced my study as an optional way to fulfill their course requirement. I explained that I was a student who was conducting a research project on different people's opinions of violence and crime and that I would appreciate their voluntary participation.

Results

Part one of the questionnaire was based on the rating system designed by Collyer et al. (2006). In order to compare groups, I split the participants into an above-median group (the violence-sensitive group) and a below-median group (the violence-tolerant group.) As expected, 81% of participants in the violence-sensitive group labeled themselves as violence-sensitive. Not as expected was that 57% of the participants in the violence-tolerant group labeled themselves as violence-sensitive. However, as expected, participants in the violence-tolerant group were 24% less likely to label themselves as violence-sensitive. (See Figure 1) As might be expected, and is supported by Gilligan (1996), the violence-sensitive group was 23% male, whereas the violence-tolerant group was 44% male. In other words, the violence-tolerant group was 21% more likely to include males. (See Figure 2)

When asked, "Do you believe verbal abuse can be as harmful as physical abuse?" 78% of participants overall answered yes to the question. The violence-sensitive group was 9% more likely to answer yes than the violence-tolerant group, which is not a significant difference. (See Figure 3) The violence-tolerant group was 14% more likely

to answer “No,” to the question, “Can inaction be a form of violence?” Forty-one percent of the violence-tolerant group answered ‘No’ to this question, whereas only 27% of the violence-sensitive group answered ‘No.’ (See Figure 4) When participants were asked, “Do you see physical violence as acceptable under certain circumstances?” 74% of the violence-tolerant group said, “Yes,” and 55% of the violence-sensitive group said “Yes.” In other words, the violence-tolerant group was 19% more likely to say that physical violence was acceptable. (See Figure 5) The violence-sensitive group was also more likely to use phrases such as “under certain circumstances, rather than a straight out “yes.”

In answer to the question, “In your opinion, how should bullies be held accountable for their actions?” an example of a response from a violence-tolerant participant was, “Bullies should be held accountable for their actions by getting done to them what they have done to others. Otherwise, they will never learn how abuse can hurt others.” An example of a response from a violence-sensitive participant was, “Bullies should be punished; however, it is more important to show them how their actions impact others. To just punish without teaching them why being a bully is wrong won't change their behavioral mindset.” The responses to this question were all different, so it was hard to analyze whether there was a significant difference between the two groups.

As expected, when asked to define violence, participants in the violence-sensitive group gave more broad definitions of violence, while participants in the violence-tolerant group were more likely to use phrases such as, “physical abuse or physical harm.” There were participants in both groups who gave definitions containing “physical or mental abuse,” but it was more likely for the violence-tolerant group to only state physical harm.

Discussion

My expectation that the violence-sensitive group would be more likely to label themselves as violence-sensitive was confirmed, despite the fact that the 57% of the violence-tolerant group also labeled themselves violence-sensitive. I believe the violence-tolerant group did not like to label themselves as "tolerant," because of the negative connotation. However, there still was a significantly higher amount of participants in the violence-sensitive group who labeled themselves as violence-sensitive. The violence-sensitive group of participants were less likely to define violence as purely physical abuse.

The violence-tolerant group was more likely to tolerate physical violence, less likely to have a broad definition of violence, and more likely to give answers which endorsed the use of violence for punishment. The question about bullying was particularly interesting because the violence-tolerant group was more likely to endorse the use of "bullying the bully" or punishing the bully with detention or boot camp. The violence-sensitive group was more likely to endorse educating or counseling the bully in order to help them change their mindset. I had expected that the violence-tolerant group would have a higher percentage of males, because as Gilligan (1996) says, men feel the need to defend their honor, respect, status, and identities as strong and invulnerable. Gilligan points out that, "Often violent men will hide…behind a defensive mask of bravado, arrogance, 'machismo,' self-satisfaction, insouciance, or studied indifference" (111). Although the male students at URI may not be violent, they still feel the pressure from American society to fit into a certain role and definition of manhood which includes fearlessness.

While this study was exploratory, further comparisons between violence-sensitive and violence-tolerant people could be made using a similar questionnaire format. My study only included students from an introductory psychology course at URI, which was representative of the larger student body because of the variety in student age and academic majors. It would be interesting to see how other populations, such as urban high school students, would rate the severity of violent behaviors, and if the same patterns would emerge. In my opinion, the best way to grow on this study would be to see whether a course or series of workshops in nonviolence would affect answers of participants using a pre and post test.

An important conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that people have different understandings of what constitutes violence. The violence-tolerant group was more likely to endorse punishment as response to violent behavior, but punishment has been shown repeatedly to continue the cycle of violence (e.g. Gilligan, 1996; Canada, 1995). It is clear from the results of this study that students are generally not being educated about nonviolent alternatives to punishment. If people are to agree on ways to decrease violence, they need to first have a thorough understanding and agreement about how to define violence. How can the education system hope to decrease bullying and violence in schools when nonviolence alternatives are not a required part of the curriculum? Along the same lines, as Morgaine (2006) has studied, how can the Violence Against Women Movement hope to decrease violence when they do not have a clear and universal definition of violence which includes more than direct physical violence? My study has helped to raise some awareness of the need for nonviolence training in our education system, and will lead to further study into the effectiveness of such programs.

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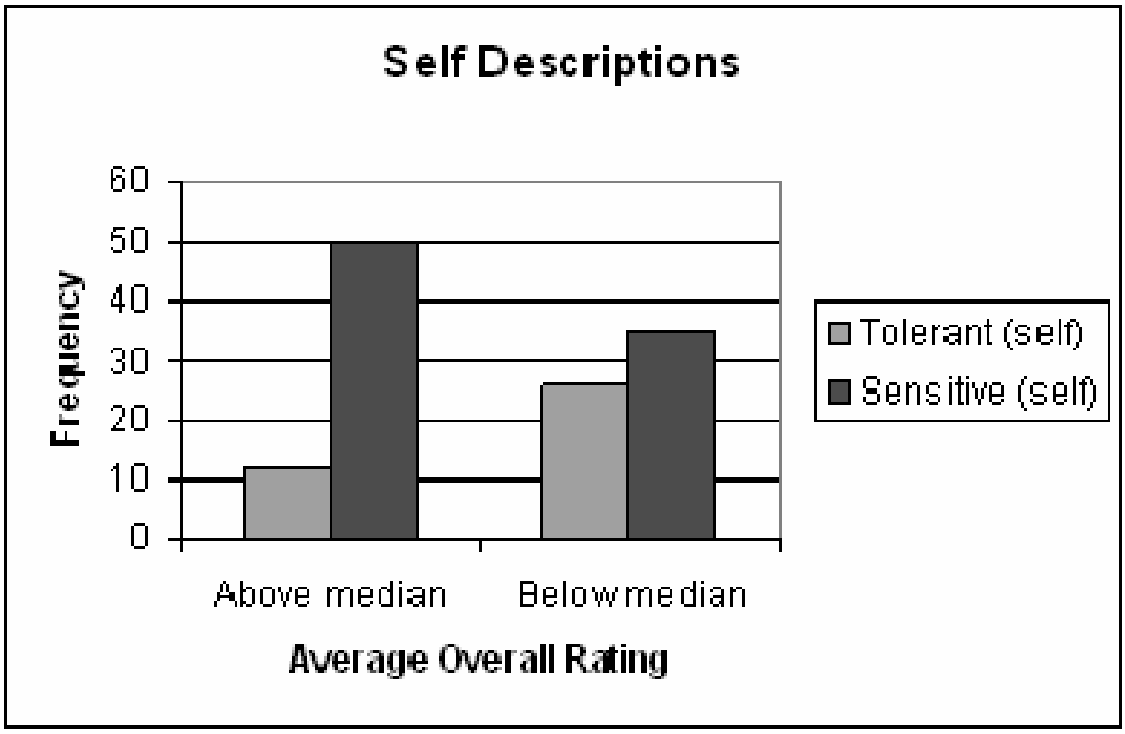
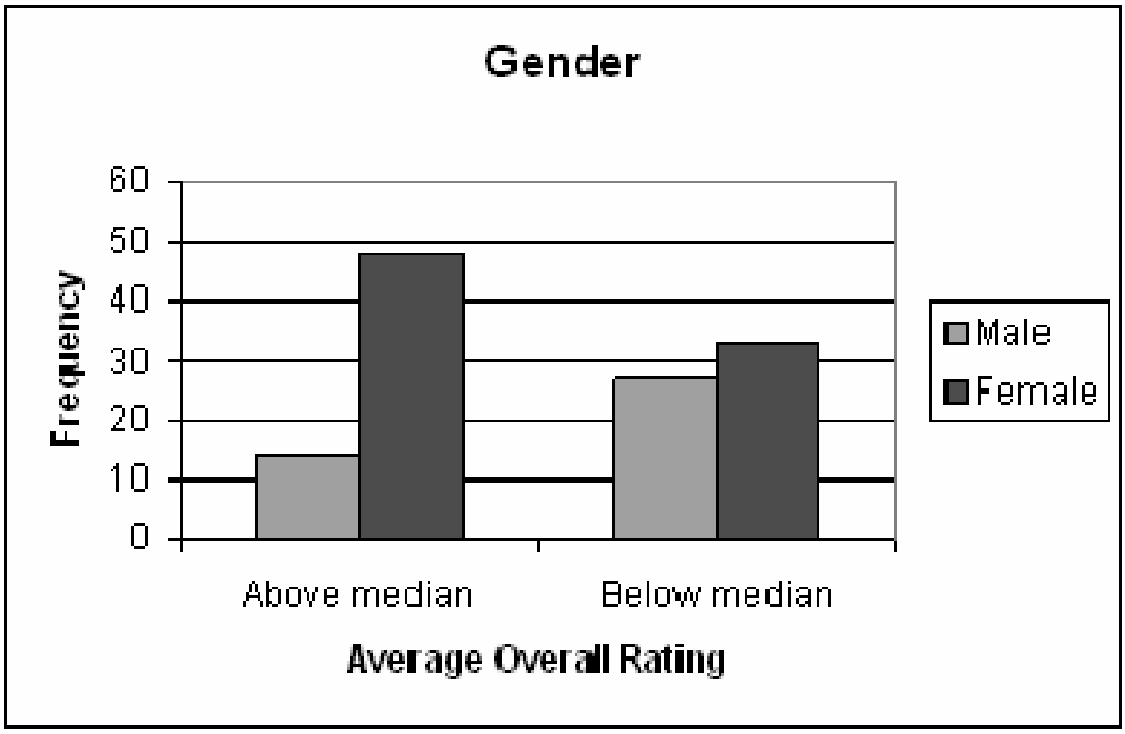
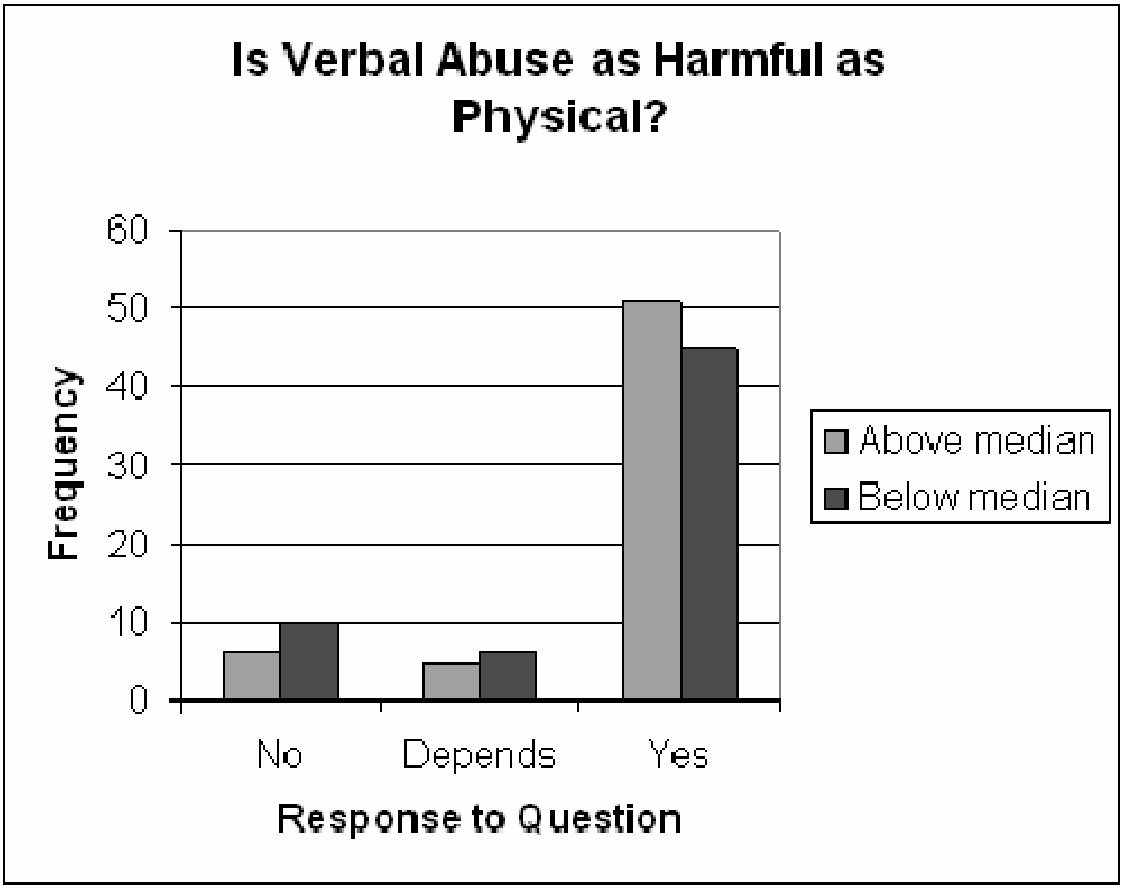

Self Descriptions
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Frequency
Above median
Below median
Average Overall Rating
Tolerant (self)
Sensitive (self)

(Figure 1)


Gender
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Frequency
Male
Female
Above median
Below median
Average Overall Rating

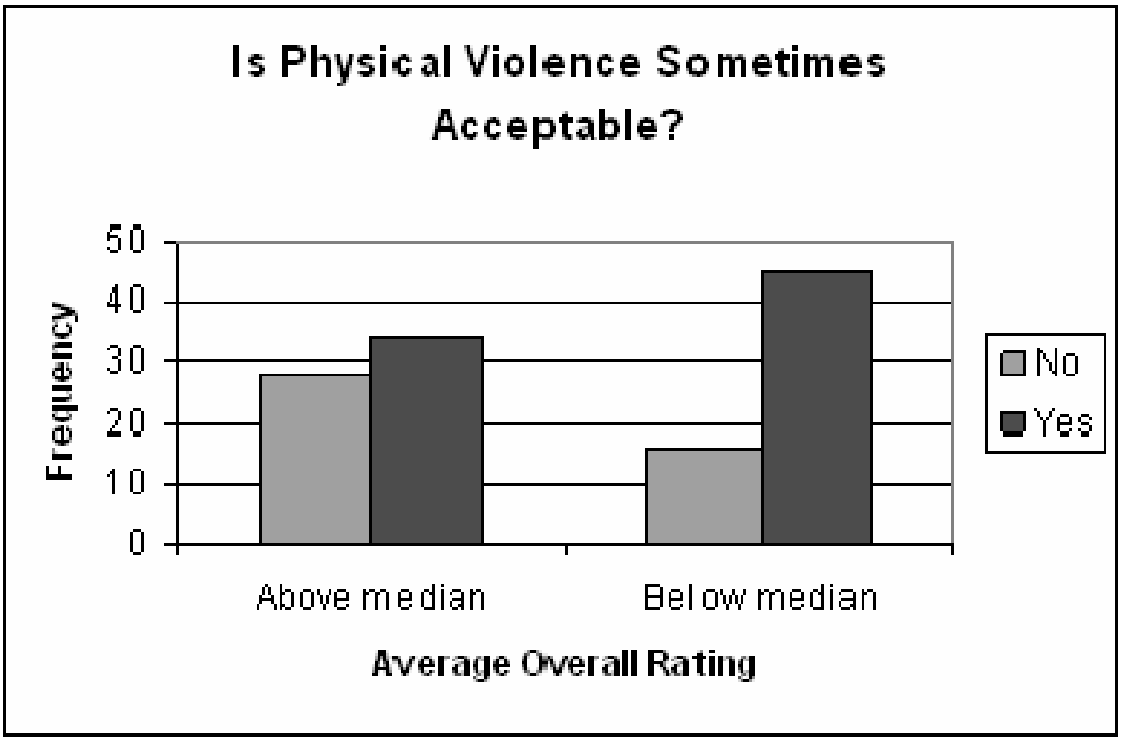
(Figure 2)


Is Verbal Abuse as Harmful as Physical?
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Frequency
No
Depends
Yes
Response to Question
Above median
Below median

(Figure 3)

Is Inaction a form of Violence?
Frequency
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
No
Unsure
Yes
Response to Question
Above median
Below median

(Figure 4)


Is Physical Violence Sometimes Acceptable?
Frequency
50
40
30
20
10
0
Above median
Below median
Average Overall Rating
No
Yes

(Figure 5)

Your Age: **Gender:** **Major:**

Part I
Ratings of Violence Severity

Instructions:
Please rate each behavior listed from 0 to 5 on how violent you think it is:

Not Violent					**Very Violent**
0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

slapping _____

screaming _____

hitting _____

robbery _____

fighting _____

gossip _____

pushing _____

stealing _____

vandalism _____

verbal abuse _____

home robbery _____

cursing _____

stalking _____

competition _____

staring _____

shoving _____

Part II
Opinions and Beliefs about Violence

Instructions:
Please answer these questions to the best of your ability. There is no right or wrong answer.

1. What is your own definition of violence?

_____

_____

2. Do you believe verbal abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse? Y/N

Please explain briefly.

_____

_____

3. Can inaction by a form of violence? Y/N

Please explain briefly.

_____

_____

4. In your opinion, how should bullies be held accountable for their actions?

_____

_____

5. Do you see physical violence as acceptable under certain circumstances? Y/N

Please explain briefly.

_____

_____

6. Is hunting animals acceptable to you? Y/N

Please explain briefly.

_____

_____

7. What is the most severe act of violence you would be willing to commit, and under what conditions?

_____

_____

8. Do you see yourself as someone sensitive to violence (violence-sensitive) or as someone who sees violence as somewhat acceptable (violence-tolerant)?

violence-sensitive _____ violence-tolerant _____