

Honors Program at the University of Rhode Island

Senior Honors Project

University of Rhode Island

Year 2009-2010

Are Violence-Tolerant Individuals More Susceptible
To Involvement in Violent/Risky Behaviors?

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Abstract

In the present study, a sample of 348 college students (N = 112 male and 236 female) enrolled in a General Psychology course at the University of Rhode Island were inquired as to their perceptions on violent/risky behaviors as well as any involvement in violent/risky behaviors. This was in order to determine whether there was any correlation between opinions on violent/risky behaviors and actual engagement in such behaviors. Students were directed to an online survey which asked them to place several different violent/risky behaviors on an open-ended scale similarly utilized in Collyer and Melisi (2008) according to the item's severity. The study found that there was not a significant correlation between the sensitivity measure and engagement in violent/risky behaviors. Yet, there was also a high correlation between the sensitivity measure attitudes toward issues involving violence. The highest predictor of other violent/risky behaviors was binge drinking which may suggest that some college students are more likely to experiment than others. Future research should examine the violence sensitivity measure and whether or not differences exist within each group (violence-sensitive and violence-tolerant).

As a society surrounded by violence, many people believe that violence is a concrete concept with one definition. Yet, previous research has shown that individuals view violence differently. Some view it as a purely physical act while others view it as a psychological act. The final group of individuals views violence as a combination of the two, both physical and psychological violence. Also, how one perceives certain violent behaviors differs from individual to individual. Some perceive violence in a more tolerant manner while others have a more sensitive approach to violence.

Collyer et al. (2007) examined violence sensitivity on a close-ended scale. For instance, participants are asked to rate a series of behaviors on a scale of 1-100, 1 being low in violence and 100 being high. On an open-ended scale [used both in Collyer & Melisi (2008) and Egan (2010)], participants are provided with a reference point and asked to rate the other behaviors accordingly. For instance, in this study the behavior of grabbing was given the reference point of 75. According to Collyer et al. (2007), behaviors could be placed into four categories: V1 behaviors are categorized as “more severe physical violence”, V2 behaviors are categorized as “less severe physical violence”, V3 behaviors are categorized as “more severe non-physical violence”, and V4 behaviors are categorized as “less severe non-physical violence”. Collyer et al. (2007) also found that individuals could be separated into two different groups: violence-sensitive and violence-tolerant. Collyer and Melisi found that individuals differed on views of extremely violent behaviors (e.g. murder, rape, etc.) when an open-ended scale is utilized. This study will to replicate Collyer and Melisi’s (2008) original findings as well as expand upon them to examine how an individual’s sensitivity may correlate to their involvement in violent/risky behaviors. The hypotheses of this study are: (1) Collyer and Melisi’s (2008) study will be replicated with a much larger sample; (2) violence-tolerant individuals are more likely to be involved in more violent/risky behaviors; (3) violence-tolerant individuals are more likely to have more of an accepting attitude towards more violent issues.

Participants

Participants were students (112 males, 236 females; $N=348$) enrolled in a General Psychology course at the University of Rhode Island. Students from multiple disciplines are enrolled in this course, thereby providing quite a diverse sample of URI students. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 42 yet over half (58%) of the sample was 18 years of age ($SD = 1.61$). The racial composition of the sample was Caucasian (83%), African-American (4%), Hispanic (5%), and other (8%).

Procedure

The student investigator visited a University of Rhode Island General Psychology course and informed students about the study. It was mentioned that although students may not directly benefit from participation, they are helping a student complete her Senior Honors Research Project. Students were directed to an online survey which was accessed utilizing Sakai.

Part one of the survey provided participants with a consent form, providing appropriate contacts for any questions. Part two asked participants a series of demographic questions (e.g. age, sex, and race) for the purpose of further analysis at a later date. Part three required participants to rate sixteen different types of behaviors on an open-ended scale with a reference behavior of grabbing assigned a rating of 75¹. These sixteen behaviors were taken from the Collyer et al. (2007) study, four from each dimension of violence. V1 behaviors for the study included: murder, rape, execution, and stabbing. V2 behaviors for the study included: pushing, throwing things, fighting and grabbing. V3 behaviors for the study included: bullying, vandalism, exploitation, and robbery. V4 behaviors for the study included: cursing, gossip, road rage, and rudeness.

¹ Grabbing was ranked a 20 out of 38 in the Collyer et al. (2007) study.

Part four of the survey asked participants about their involvement in a series of behaviors such as binge drinking, illegal drug use, and use of a firearm. Part five of the survey asked participants several true and false questions to measure violent attitudes on specific topics (see Appendix A for questionnaire).

Results

Collyer and Melisi's (2008) study was replicated with a much larger sample. The graph (refer to Appendix B) displays the significant difference between sensitive and tolerant people on extremely violent behaviors when an open-ended scale is utilized. The difference between an open-ended scale and close-ended scale in measuring extremely violent behaviors is further explained in the discussion.

There was no significant correlation found between the measure of violence sensitivity and involvement in violent/risky behaviors. However, significant correlations were found between the measure of violence sensitivity and attitudes towards specific violent topics. The sensitivity measure and attitudes toward corporal punishment (refer to Appendix A; Section 6; Question 1) were moderately correlated; $r(346) = -.167, p < .01$. This suggests the more violence-tolerant an individual is, the higher level of acceptability he/she will have towards corporal punishment. The sensitivity measure and attitudes toward cheating (refer to Appendix A; Section 6; Question 3) were moderately correlated; $r(346) = -.155, p < .01$. This suggests the more violence-tolerant individual is, the higher level of acceptability he/she will have towards cheating. The sensitivity measure and attitudes toward the death penalty (refer to Appendix A; Section 6; Question 5) were somewhat correlated; $r(346) = -.107, p < .05$. This suggests that the more violence-tolerant an individual is, the higher level of acceptability he/she will have towards the death penalty. This relationship may be weaker due to the fact that the death penalty is a complex issue which cannot be addressed in one question.

Although there were no significant relationships found between the sensitivity measure and engagement in violent/risky behaviors, there were highly significant relationships found between the

behaviors themselves. The strongest relationship between binge drinking and illegal drug use (refer to Appendix A; Section 5; Questions 7 & 12) were strongly correlated; $r(346) = .537, p < .01$. This suggests that the more engagement in binge drinking results in a greater likelihood of an individual to participate in illegal drug use. Due to the population from which the sample was drawn, focus will be placed on the behavior of binge drinking as a predictor to other behaviors.

Engagement in binge drinking was correlated with several other behaviors. Binge drinking and injury with intentional harm (refer to Appendix A; Section 5; Questions 2 & 12) were moderately correlated; $r(346) = .239, p < .01$. This suggests that more engagement in binge drinking increases the likelihood that an individual will intentionally harm another. Binge drinking and hurting someone's feelings with words (refer to Appendix A; Section 5; Questions 8 & 12) were strongly correlated; $r(346) = .273, p < .01$. This suggests that increased engagement in binge drinking results in a greater likelihood of an individual hurting someone's feelings verbally. Binge drinking and cheating (refer to Appendix A; Section 5; Questions 12 & 13) were strongly correlated, $r(346) = .283, p < .01$. This suggests that more engagement in binge drinking increases the likelihood of an individual to cheat on a test. Binge drinking and theft (refer to Appendix A; Section 5; Questions 5, 6, & 12) were moderately correlated, $r(346) = .188, p < .01$ (under \$10) and $r(346) = .224, p < .01$ (over \$25). This suggests that more engagement in binge drinking increases the likelihood of an individual to steal.

Discussion

Two of the three hypotheses were found to be correct in this study. The sensitivity measure from Collyer and Melisi (2008) was able to be replicated by Egan (2010) with a greater sample. Also, violence-tolerant individuals were found to have a more accepting attitude towards violent topics in comparison to violence-sensitive individuals.

Collyer and Melisi (2008) and Egan (2010) demonstrate that there are significant differences between violence-tolerant and violence-sensitive individuals on extremely violent behaviors when an open-ended scale is used. This differs from a close-ended scale which displays views on violence as similar due to what is known as a ceiling effect. The open-ended scale used by Collyer & Melisi (2008) and Egan (2010) allow for subjects to express their opinions without the restriction posed by the ceiling effect. The ceiling effect occurs on a close-ended scale when views on extremely violent behaviors meet at one point, suggesting agreement between violence-tolerant and violence-sensitive individuals. Yet, the open-ended scale displays that there is a significant difference between the two groups. Egan's (2010) sample consisted of 348 participants. This is much larger than the sample in Collyer & Melisi (2008) which further proves that individuals differ in views of extremely violent behaviors. The replication of the Collyer and Melisi (2008) study demonstrates the reliability of this specific measure of violence sensitivity. This has important implications for future measurements of violence sensitivity.

The sensitivity measure was not correlated with any of the violent/risky behaviors which suggests that this specific measure of violence sensitivity is not an adequate predictor of involvement in violent/risky behaviors. Yet, the sensitivity measure was correlated with some attitudes on violent behaviors. This suggests that violence-tolerant individuals possess a more accepting attitude towards more violent behaviors. Finally, binge drinking was strongly correlated with several different violent/risky behaviors. This may be because alcohol lowers inhibitions, allowing for an increased likelihood of engagement in other violent/risky behaviors. Due to the population from which the sample was taken, this suggests that some college students are more willing to experiment in several violent/risky behaviors.

Limitations

There are a couple of limitations to the study as a whole which must be addressed. The sample was a convenience sample taken from a URI General Psychology course. The ability to generalize to all college

students is not really reasonable. Further research should look at a much broader sample, individuals of all ages or at least students from multiple colleges would enhance generalizability. Also, survey questions may have not asked about enough different violent behaviors to encompass the full set of violent behaviors that a violence-tolerant individual may engage in. Therefore, there may have not been significant relationships between the violence sensitivity measure and involvement in violent/risky behaviors due to the limited number of questions in the survey. Finally, additional research should look further into the sensitivity measure of violence to determine whether there are differences within the two groups: violence-sensitive and violence tolerant. For instance, an individual may be extremely sensitive to violence due to knowledge of non-violence or may be suffering from some sort of anxiety disorder which results in such high ratings. On the contrary, violence-tolerant individuals may differ within the group due to various external factors which are not measured such as: exposure to violence as a child or violent television and/or video game exposure. Only with further investigation, can we determine whether violence sensitivity predicts behavior in individuals.

Appendix A

Survey

Violence Perspectives and Personal Experiences

1. Introduction

The following pages will contain the consent form and the survey. Thank you for your participation in this study.

2. Purpose and Consent

The University of Rhode Island
Research Office
Address: 51 Lower College Road
Title of Project: Violence Sensitivity and Personal Experience

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

Dear Participant:

You have been asked to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have more questions later, Justine Egan, who is the person mainly responsible for this study, will discuss them with you. Her e-mail is (e-mail provided).

YOU MUST BE AT LEAST 18 YEARS OLD TO
PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT.

Description of the project:

You have been asked to take part in the study that measures your viewpoint on violent/risky behaviors and how often you may be involved in violent/risky acts.

What will be done:

If you are participating in this study, then you already have received a visit from a student investigator in your Psychology 113 class and have accessed this survey from Sakai. The link on Sakai is to a survey which should take approximately 20 minutes. You will read a consent form and continue on with a survey asking about your views on certain behaviors and questions about your own activities.

Risks or discomfort:

There will be questions that ask about your involvement in certain illegal activities. If you feel uncomfortable answering such questions you may skip these questions yet still complete the rest of the survey if you wish. If you feel as though you do not wish to finish the survey then you may exit the survey at any time and your answers will not be recorded.

Benefits of this study:

Although there will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about violent/risky behaviors in the context of one's view on violence as a whole.

Confidentiality:

Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. All records will be anonymous and will only be viewed by the Project Investigator and Student Investigator. The survey web (surveymonkey.com) uses multiple layers of security to make sure that the account and data remains private and secure. The only people who will have access to such data will be the Project Investigator (Student Sponsor) and the Student Investigator.

Decision to quit at any time:

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. There are no right or wrong answers to questions. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at anytime or skip any question as you so wish. Whatever you decide will in no way affect your grade or status as a student in this class. If you wish to quit, simply exit out of the survey.

Rights and Complaints:

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Dr. Charles Collyer or with Justine Egan. You may also contact the office of the Vice President for Research, anonymously if you so choose, at (address and telephone number provided). You have read the Consent Form. If you have any further questions about the study before participating, you may contact Justine Egan at (e-mail provided). Completing this survey means that you understand the information provided and you agree to participate in this study.

1. I fully understand the consent form and agree to the conditions of this study.

Yes_____ No (If you do not feel comfortable participating in this study, please go to the "Exit this survey" link in the upper right hand corner to exit the survey.)_____

3. Basic Information

We would just like to know some basic non-identifying information about you.

1. Are you a male or female?

Male_____ Female_____

2. How old are you?

3. What ethnicity are you (please pick one answer)?

Caucasian _____

African-American _____

Hispanic _____

Native American _____

Other _____

4. Violence Rating

We would like to know your opinions on various behaviors. Please rate each act as to its extent of violence. You are provided with a starting point (i.e. grabbing = 75) and you should rate each act in reference to this

point with no numerical limit. For example, if grabbing is 75 you could rate bullying as higher or lower to that number (i.e. 80). Please enter ratings into the text boxes below.

<----->

(Grabbing = 75)

- Bullying _____
- Cursing _____
- Execution _____
- Exploitation _____
- Fighting _____
- Gossip _____
- Grabbing 75
- Murder _____
- Pushing _____
- Rape _____
- Road Rage _____
- Robbery _____
- Rudeness _____
- Stabbing _____
- Throwing Things _____
- Vandalism _____

5. Personal Experience

We would like to get an understanding of how often you engage in certain activities.

1. How many times do you swear in a day?

- None _____
- 1-5 Times _____
- 5-10 Times _____
- 10+ Times _____

2. How many times have you injured someone with the intention of harming them physically?

- None _____
- 1-5 Times _____
- 5-10 Times _____
- 10+ Times _____

3. How many times have you been involved in a conflict with a weapon?

- None _____
- Once _____
- Twice _____
- Three times or more _____

4. How many times have you shot a firearm?

- None _____

1-2 Times____
2-4 Times____
4+Times_____

5. How many times have you stolen something under \$10?

None____
Once____
Twice____
Three times or more_____

6. How many times have you stolen something above \$25?

None____
Once____
Twice____
Three times or more_____

7. How many times have you participated in illegal drug use (e.g. marijuana, heroin, cocaine, etc.)?

None____
Once____
Twice____
Three times or more_____

8. How many times have you said something that has deliberately hurt someone's feelings?

None____
1-5 Times____
5-10 Times____
10+ Times_____

9. How often do you engage in gossip?

Never____
Once a day____
Twice a day____
Three times or more a day_____

10. How many times have you witnessed someone else physically harming someone else intentionally?

Never____
1-5 Times____
5-10 Times____
10+ Times_____

11. How many times have you taken advantage of another person for your own gain?

Never____
Once____
2-3 Times____
3+ Times_____

12. How often do you engage in binge drinking? (Generally, binge drinking by definition is 5 or more drinks for a man and 4 or more drinks for a woman).

- Never_____
- Once a week_____
- Twice a week_____
- Three times a week_____

13. How many times have you cheated on a test?

- Never_____
- 1-3 Times_____
- 3-5 Times_____
- 5+Times_____

6. Personal Opinion

We would like to get your opinion on certain topics.

1. Corporal punishment (i.e. spanking) should be used to discipline children in most situations.

- True_____
- False_____

2. Revenge is a better alternative than forgiving and forgetting.

- True_____
- False_____

3. Cheating is acceptable as long as I do not get caught.

- True_____
- False_____

4. Telling someone a white lie is reasonable in most situations.

- True_____
- False_____

5. The death penalty is an effective form of crime prevention.

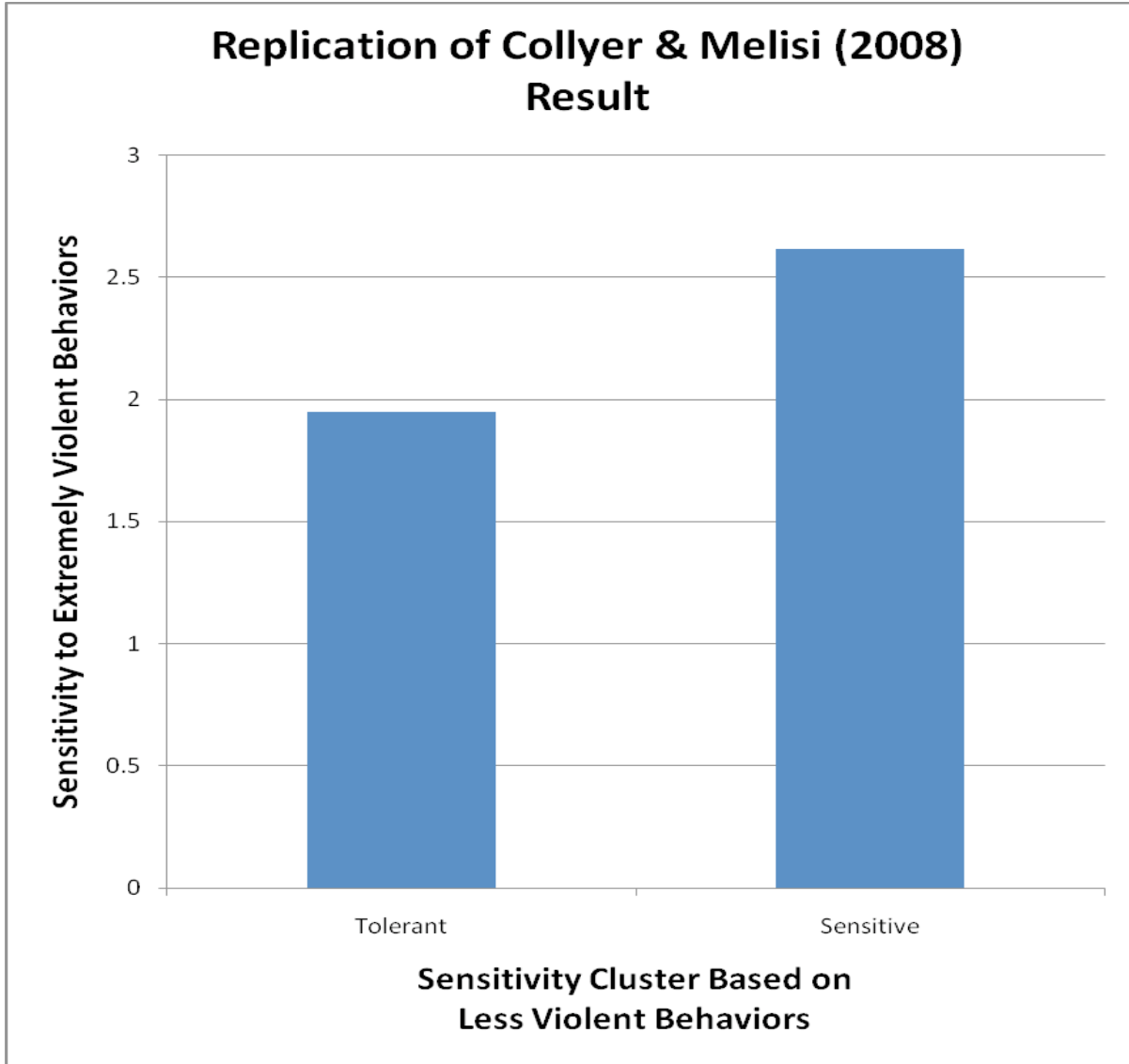
- True_____
- False_____

7. Thank you

Thank you again for your participation in this study. If you are completing this study for extra credit, please print off this page, sign it, and give it to your T.A. or professor.

Student Signature _____

Appendix B Replication Graph



References

Collyer, C.E., Gallo, F.J., Corey, J., Waters, D., Boney-McCoy, S. (2007). Typology of violence derived from ratings of severity and provocation. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 104*, 637-653.

Collyer, C.E. and Melisi, J. (2008). Sensitive and tolerant individuals differ in their magnitude estimates of extremely violent behaviors. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 106*, 759-762.