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Alexander Sovet
asovet@my.uri.edu

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Violence Sensitivity and Gender

Alexander Sovet

University of Rhode Island

Abstract

This study examines whether or not individuals' perceptions of violence are affected by the gender of either the aggressor or the victim. The secondary question of interest is whether or not using written scenarios in which the aggressor and victim are given defined characteristics is an effective method for measuring violence sensitivity. The study utilizes a factorial model with two independent variables, gender and category of violence, and is a within-group comparison. Findings indicate that gender does have an impact on the perceived severity of a violent act. Findings also suggest that written scenarios may be an effective method of measuring violence-sensitivity, although further statistical analysis is necessary.

Violence Sensitivity and Gender

While many believe that violence is both concrete and universal, research suggests that the definition of violence may be in the eye of the beholder. While some may define violence as physical aggression, others may define violence as both physical and psychological aggression. An individual's definition of violence may be an indicator of that person's tolerance towards violence. Someone who is violence-tolerant may believe that only physical aggression can be considered violence, while someone who is violence-sensitive may have a broader definition of violence that includes forms of non-physical violence. Non-physical violence may include theft, manipulation, verbal abuse, or even cursing.

Previous research by Collyer et al. (2007) utilized surveys in order to gauge participants' attitude towards various violent acts, which can reveal just how violence-sensitive or violence-tolerant that person is. Participants were asked to imagine a situation in which one person carries out a violent act against another. They were provided with a number of violent acts, both physical and non-physical. The current study replaces the list of acts with a series of short written scenarios. The reason for this is that it allows experimenters to define characteristics (in this case gender) of both aggressor and victim in the hypothetical situation. If this approach is found to be effective, it would allow future researchers to gain deeper insight into the nature of violence-sensitivity.

Psychologists have examined the connection between gender and violence for many years. Berke, Sloan, Parrot, and Zeichner (2011) identify research as far back as 1974 (Maccoby and Jacklin) suggesting that physical aggression is the only social behavior that reliably distinguishes men from women. Berke et al (2011) also noted that men make up the majority of both perpetrators and victims of violent crime according to national crime statistics (Federal

Bureau of Investigation, 2009; White & Kowalski, 1994). While much research has been done on violence and gender, the present body of literature in psychology tells us little about how gender may affect attitudes towards violence. Will the gender of the aggressor or victim have an impact on individuals' attitudes towards a violent act itself?

The current study uses a within-group comparison to examine how responses vary when the gender of the party portrayed in the scenario is manipulated. The first hypothesis is that a survey containing written scenarios will yield similar results to a survey containing a list of violent acts. For example, acts of physical aggression will be ranked higher than acts of non-physical aggression. The second hypothesis is that there is a gender effect, meaning that the gender of the aggressor or the victim in the written scenarios will have an effect on the perceived severity of violence in the hypothetical scenarios.

Methods

Participants

Participants (236 women, 100 men, Mage=19.51, age range: 17-51 years) were undergraduate students at the University of Rhode Island. They were recruited from the Personality Theory (PSY 235) and Intro to Experimental Psychology (PSY 301) courses held on the URI Providence CCE campus, as well as the Introduction to Psychology (PSY 110) course held on the Kingston campus. 313 students reported that they take the majority of their classes in Kingston, while 23 reported that they take their classes in Providence. 75.3% of the students identified themselves as White in combination with no other races or ethnicities. The sample also contained 9.8% Hispanic, 9.22% African-American, and 3% Asian participants. Other populations were represented in regrettably small numbers. Students were offered extra credit for their participation in the study.

Materials

This study used a survey containing 12 items using a seven-point Likert scale, carried out online via Survey Monkey.

Procedure

Participants were presented with 12 hypothetical scenarios in which an aggressor carries out a violent act on a victim. The scenarios were presented in random order. Participants were asked to indicate how violent they believe that the act was; 7: Highest level of violence; 6: High level; 5: Moderate-to-high level; 4: Low-to-moderate level; 3: Low level; 2: Lowest level of violence; 1: Borderline; 0: Not violent at all. The gender of both aggressor and victim was manipulated by using names commonly associated with a particular gender (based on a Google search of common boy names and common girl names). Scenarios for all levels of violence were tested, excluding V1 violence. It was decided that a written scenario containing V1 acts, such as murder and rape, may be unnecessarily disturbing to participants. Violence categories were borrowed from the V1-V4 levels from Collyer et al. (2007, p. 649).

Results

The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Participants were given the option of skipping any questions they were not comfortable answering, which explains the variation in N. The two-factor analysis of variance showed a significant main effect for the gender factor, $F(3,3959) = 96.07, p < .05$; significant main effect for the category factor, $F(2,3959) = 1203.45, p < .05$; and the interaction between gender and category was significant, $F(6,3959) = 95.44, p < .05$. V2 (less severe physical acts) were scored highest, regardless of

gender. V3 (more severe acts were scored highest in the Male-to-Female scenario, and lowest in the Male-to-Male scenario. V4 (less severe nonphysical acts) were scored highest in the Female-to-Male scenario and lowest in the Male-to-Female scenario. Male-to-Female acts were scored lowest for the V3 category. Male-to-Male acts were scored lowest for the V4 category. Female-to-Male acts were scored lowest at the V3 level, with a slim margin of error. Female-to-Female acts were scored lowest at the V4 level, with a slim margin of error. There was a positive correlation between gender and category of violence, $r = 0.672$, $n = 3971$, $p = < 0.0001$.

Discussion

The hypothesis that gender of aggressor and victim would have an effect on perceived severity of violence was confirmed by these results. There is evidence that the hypothesis that written scenarios would yield similar results to previous work by Collyer et al. (2007) in regards to the categories of violence was confirmed, although further statistical analysis will be needed before anything can be said for certain.

One result of note was that male-on-male physical aggression was scored significantly lower than the three other possible conditions. One possible explanation for these results may be that people are generally conditioned to expect physical violence between men, which may result in lower scores. There are some important real-world implications to this finding. If men are expected to resolve conflicts among one another using violence, it seems only natural that young boys adopt this standard as they grow into adulthood. This could be a small part of what pulls so many young men into a life of violence and self-destruction.

Also of note is that when scenarios with a female aggressor were generally (with some exception) rated more severely than scenarios with a male aggressor, as shown in Figure 1. One

explanation is that people may be conditioned to expect women to be passive, which may explain why acts with a female aggressor were generally rated higher. This may be evidence of a larger social dynamic that may leave young women feeling powerless and disenfranchised.

One limitation to this study was that other factors that may influence perception of severity (such as relationship of the aggressor and victim, whether or not the victim was aware of the violent act, etc.) were not held constant. This may be the reason for the large gap between male-to-female V3 scores and the rest of the conditions, although more testing may be needed. These factors may influence participant's responses, thus confounding the results. Another limitation was that the names were selected casually from an internet search, and may have been subject to experimenter bias. Another limitation was that the sample was made of nearly 70% women. Given that this is a study on violence sensitivity and gender, the disparity between male and female participants is less than ideal. The fact that the sample was made up of a large majority of White participants is also not ideal. Finally, this study was based on a gender binary (male/female). Future research will hopefully find ways to study and include the Trans* community as well.

An important point is that the violence-sensitivity scale can be used to study violence between different groups of people. Future research may be able to study violence sensitivity and race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other factors. It may be interesting to see if a violent act is considered more or less violent if it seems to be racially motivated. Researchers could see if an insult is considered more or less violent if it is a homophobic slur. The possibilities are endless, and this has implications for both psychology and for those interested in social justice.

References

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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*(2), 637-653.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations

Category of Act	Gender	Results		
		N	Mean	Std Dev
V2	Male-Female	330	5.761	1.233
V2	Male-Male	334	4.886	1.407
V2	Female-Male	331	6.169	0.899

V2	Female-Female	329	5.875	1.142
V3	Male-Female	330	4.839	1.638
V3	Male-Male	330	1.836	1.843
V3	Female-Male	330	3.303	2.268
V3	Female-Female	330	2.718	1.901
V4	Male-Female	332	1.889	1.881
V4	Male-Male	331	2.897	1.90
V4	Female-Male	332	3.620	1.673
V4	Female-Female	332	2.174	2.027

Figure 1
Male Aggressor vs. Female Aggressor

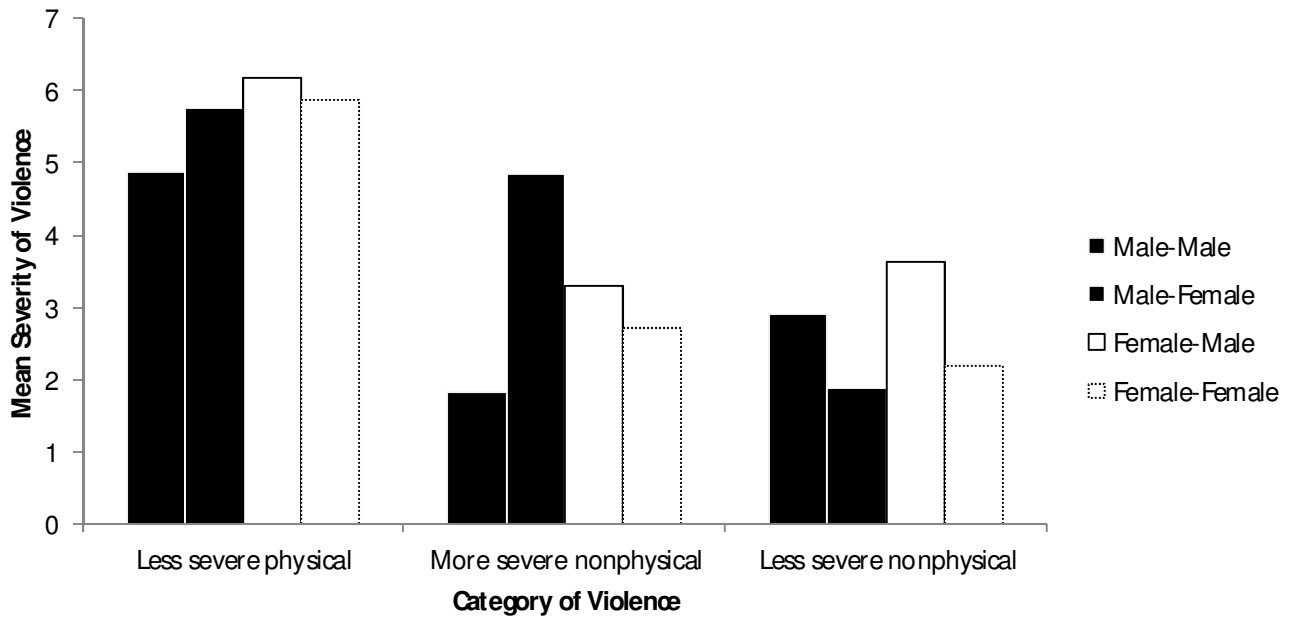
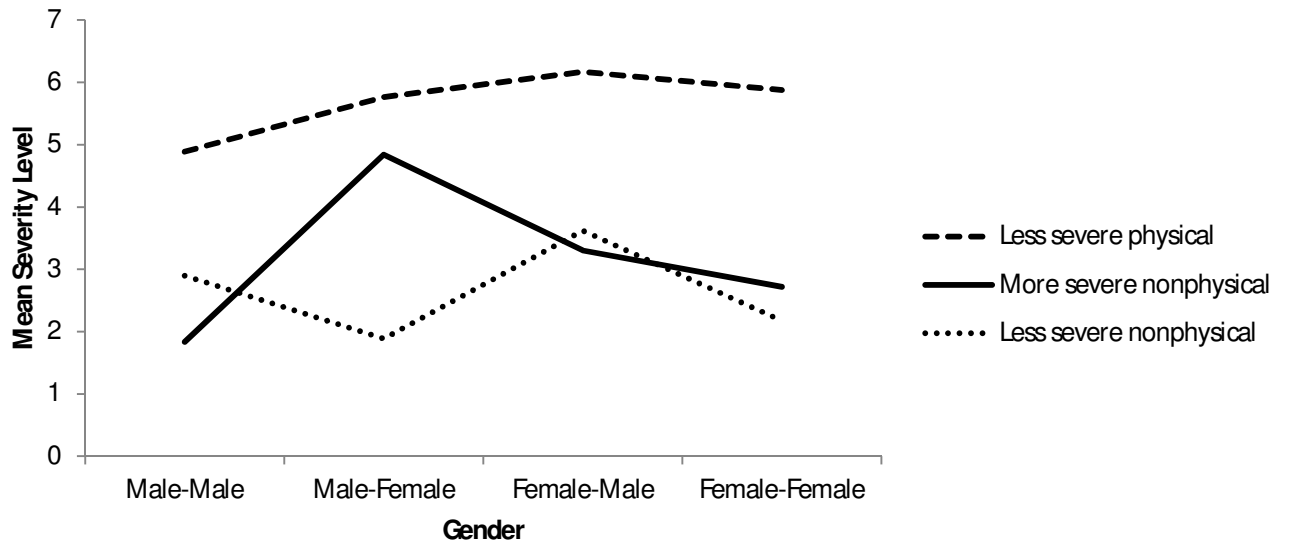


Figure 2
Interaction Plot for Gender



Please read the following scenario, and imagine that both people described know one another.

How violent do you believe the act was? Choose one of the following options:

7: Highest level of violence; 6: High level; 5: Moderate-to-high level; 4: Low-to-moderate level; 3: Low level; 2: Lowest level of violence; 1: Borderline; 0: Not violent at all.

1) Steven and Jennifer are two college students who are roughly the same age. They are in the middle of an argument, although neither of two have raised their voices. Suddenly, Steven slaps Jennifer across the face with the back of his hand. Jennifer is speechless, and she stares back in disbelief.

2) Bob and Jacob are both walking in a crowded shopping mall, when Bob accidentally bumps into Jacob. Bob turns around to apologize, but before he has the chance to do so, Jacob shoves him into the nearby wall. Mall security intervenes before things have a chance to escalate further.

3) Barry is at a crowded night club, waiting in line to place a drink order. Suddenly, and without provocation, Stacy approaches Barry and punches him square in the nose, sending him hurling to the floor. Stacy flees the scene before anyone has time to react.

4) Kathy and Tracie are in their shared apartment, and are in the middle of an argument about money. Kathy grabs a nearby bottle and throws it across the room at Tracie's head. Tracie ducks out of the way just in time, and the bottle shatters as it hits the wall.

5) Michael is in a coffee shop and needs to use the restroom. He asks Rebecca, whom he has never met to watch his laptop for a few minutes. As soon as Michael is out of sight, Rebecca grabs Michael's laptop, puts it in her bag, and leaves.

6) Lisa parks her brand new car in the supermarket parking lot and hurries into the store. She is in such a hurry that she doesn't notice Tim. Tim takes a set of keys and scratches the driver side door of Lisa's car repeatedly.

7) Eric and Andrew are both sales employees at a local insurance company. One day, Eric's boss pulls him aside and says that Andrew is likely to be promoted to manager. Eric replies "I almost don't want to say anything, but I question Andrew's commitment to this company. I really feel like I would be a better fit for the position."

8) Amy is a temp worker at a local insurance firm, and Sarah is her direct supervisor. One night, Sarah does not feel like filing paperwork, and she orders Amy to stay late and do it for her. Sarah knows that the Amy will be afraid to say no, as Amy is in a severely bad financial position and will do anything to get hired full-time.

9) William and Henry have not seen each other in years, and they run into one another at a dinner party. After greeting one another, William says that "I wasn't going to say anything, but it looks like you've really let yourself go! When is the last time you went to the gym?" Henry is clearly hurt and embarrassed.

10) Julia is at a McDonald's with her two younger children. Ben is on his cell phone in the booth next to them, and is using a lot of profanity. Julia is clearly uncomfortable, but Ben gets up and leaves before Julia has the chance to say anything.

11) John and Linda are both attempting to park in a crowded garage, and John accidentally backs into Linda's car. John rolls down his window and apologizes. Linda screams "where did you

learn how to drive?" John attempts to apologize again, but Linda continues to scream at him, saying that he should have his license revoked.

12) Kara is at a house party, when she notices Alexis is across the room. She says to the person standing next to her, "did you see Alexis over there? Her husband has been having an affair with his boss for the last year. Poor girl doesn't even know." Kara makes eye contact with Alexis, and then feigns a smile at her.