

Perception of violence as a function of observer's ideology and actor's group membership

Jorge Vala and Maria Monteiro

Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

Jacques-Philippe Leyens

*Faculté de Psychologie, Université de Louvain, 20, Voie du Roman Pays,
1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium*

This article examines how conservative and radical subjects explain and judge aggression perpetrated by institutional (i.e. policemen) or anomic (i.e. delinquents) agents. One hundred and twenty-nine university students in Lisbon, either very conservative or very radical, selected five causes out of a total of 30 to explain an aggressive act committed by a given actor toward an unknown victim in unspecified circumstances. Half of the causes were internal and half were external. Subjects also had to rate the amount of violence, the responsibility of the agent, and the potential punishment. In accordance with the hypotheses, conservative and radical subjects used different types of causes to explain the aggression of different actors and they judged the act differently according to the perpetrator. Moreover, for all subjects there was a significant correlation between perceived violence, responsibility and punishment. These judgements, however, correlated significantly with the type of attribution only in the case of conservative subjects: the more tolerant conservatives were, the more external causes they selected. These results are discussed in the light of the social dimensions most valued by observers of aggressive episodes.

Increasingly, aggression is considered as a special kind of interaction whose features are *socially* defined; it is the meaning of the act, rather than its physical characteristics, which is important. Authors also recognize that this meaning may vary according to the different protagonists—actor, observer or victim (e.g. Leyens & Fraczek, 1984; Mummendey, 1984; Tedeschi, 1983)—and also according to the causes attributed to the act (Da Gloria & De Ridder, 1977). While acknowledging the social specificity of aggression, only a few studies have examined the role of the observers' and agents' social position within a society in the labelling of an act as aggressive or violent. In a remarkable survey conducted in 1969 on 1374 American men aged 16–64, Blumental, Kahn, Andrews & Head (1972) were able to show that the definition of and justification for different kinds of violence depended on various background variables of the subjects as well as on their values and also on the sort of aggressor. Similar findings were obtained by Vala (1981) and Camino & Troccoli (cited in Leyens & Fraczek, 1984).

Although not controlled directly in those studies, the subjects' ideologies could explain the observed differences. Vala (1984), for instance, used conservatism and radicalism as measured by a modified version of Adorno's F scale (Eysenck & Wilson, 1978) to distinguish the ideology of his subjects. The subjects had to associate freely to the term 'violence' and their responses were subsequently classified by independent judges. The main finding was that radical subjects used more words referring to social reality, social institutions, and phenomena external to the individuals than did conservative subjects. The latter, by contrast, made more reference to personal attributes, psychic states and individual moral values than did radical subjects. On the whole, however, both groups produced more social (external) than individual (internal) associations.

Also using Adorno's F scale, other researchers have tried to find a relationship between ideology and severity in the judgement of presumably aggressive acts and their perpetrators. The results are not that simple. Anisfield, Munoz & Lambert (1963) and Ray (1980), for instance, succeeded in showing a general positive relationship between conservatism and severity, but other authors failed. According to the latter authors, one should take into account the type of act and/or the type of victim. Garcia & Griffitt (1978), for example, found that conservative persons are more severe than radical ones for some acts only, such as incest. De Grada & Ercolani (1978), on the other hand, showed that conservative individuals are more punitive than radical ones only toward low-status, powerless, persons.

These studies do not tell us, however, whether conservative and radical subjects arrive at different decisions simply because they differ in terms of severity in given circumstances, or because they use different criteria to explain the acts they have to judge. This is precisely the question addressed in the present experiment. Our primary goal was to investigate whether conservative and radical subjects use the same types of causes, external or internal, when they explain and judge an aggressive episode. We postulated that they would not, and that more severe judgement would be related mainly to explanations in terms of internal dispositions.

Indirect support for this general hypothesis is provided by the study of Blumenthal *et al.* (1972, p. 58): they found that American men who favoured violence for social control were less likely to believe in social (i.e. external) causes to explain violent acts than were individuals less favourable to the use of violence for social control.

In our study, extremely conservative or radical (i.e. radical leftist) subjects had to attribute internal and/or external causes to explain a violent act committed in unspecified circumstances by either institutional actors (i.e. policemen) or anomic ones (i.e. delinquents). It was hypothesized that the attribution of (internal and external) causes would be a function of the subjects' ideology and of the actors' group membership (hypothesis 1). In particular, if it is assumed that radical subjects are more prone than conservative ones to excuse the delinquents' behaviours and that conservative subjects are more in favour of the policemen than are radicals, it is anticipated that radical subjects will explain the delinquents' behaviour more in terms of external than internal causes, and the policemen's behaviour more in terms of internal than external causes. The opposite should be true for conservative subjects (hypothesis 2).

If the preceding hypothesis was confirmed, and for the reasons outlined above, we expected conservative subjects to be more tolerant (in terms of perceived violence and responsibility as well as in terms of proposed sanctions) towards policemen than towards delinquents. The reverse should be true among radical subjects (hypothesis 3).

Method

Subjects

Two hundred and fifty-eight students from several universities and departments (economics, letters, sociology, engineering and management) in Lisbon took part in this study. They participated in small groups (15 to 30 subjects) during lecture hours.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to answer a questionnaire concerned with social problems. Two versions of an aggressive episode were randomly distributed. They were identical except for the actor who committed the violent act. In the case of the institutional actor, subjects read the following vignette: 'policemen had misreated and severely injured a person in, as yet, unknown circumstances'. In the case of the anomic actor, delinquents were substituted for policemen. The victim and the circumstances were deliberately not specified or manipulated to keep the design as straightforward as possible. Subjects had to explain and judge the act as well as the actor. They also had to complete a questionnaire on social and political attitudes under the pretext of validating this questionnaire for the Portuguese population. Finally, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and their questions were answered.

Attribution of causality

Out of 30 potential causes, subjects had to rank in order the five which, according to them, best explained the violent act. The criterion for the ranking was the importance of the causes as explanations for the violent act. To obtain these 30 potential causes, a pilot study had been conducted with 60 university students. After having read a violent episode (the same vignettes as in the main study) perpetrated either by an institutional actor (policemen) or by an anomic actor (delinquents), they had to give five causes which might best explain the actor's behaviour. One hundred and sixty-three and one hundred and forty-two causes were produced for the anomic and institutional versions respectively. All these causes were then independently classified by three judges as internal or external.

Fifteen causes, which, according to the authors, best represented each category were selected to make the final list. The agreement for the classification of those 30 causes as internal (e.g. because he lost control; because he is violent) or external (e.g. because he was paid; because the other attacked first) was total (100 per cent) among the three judges.

After having selected the five most appropriate causes, subjects had to rate: (a) the perceived violence of the act on a scale ranging from 1 (not very violent) to 10 (the most violent act I can imagine); (b) the responsibility attributed to the actor on a scale ranging from 1 (no responsibility) to 9 (very high responsibility); (c) the punishment for the act ranging from 0 to 30 months of imprisonment.

Ideological orientations of the subjects

The subjects' ideological orientation was determined by the SOPOL questionnaire which has proved to have good psychometric qualities (Sozicka, 1986). Only the items pertaining to the conservatism-radicalism dimension were considered and only the data for the 25 per cent most conservative ($n = 64$) or radical ($n = 65$) subjects were retained. Radicals were those individuals who scored high on the economic socialism factor and low on the religion and traditional moral factors.

Results

Manipulation check

To check whether we had effectively selected conservative and radical subjects, we asked them to state the political party for which they had last voted or would vote. Fifty radicals and 46 conservatives agreed to answer the question. It appears that the selection was correct: 47 radicals said they voted or would vote for left-wing parties while 39

conservatives stated they voted or would vote for right-wing parties ($\chi^2 = 41.98$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$). All subjects ($n = 129$) were retained for further data analysis (Table 1).

Attribution of causality

Given the nature of the task and the hypotheses we entertained, we selected as the main dependent variable the first and most important cause—internal or external—that the participants gave. * The overall χ^2 analysis showed a strong association between the kind of causes, the subject's ideology and the type of actor ($\chi^2 = 28.29$, d.f. = 4, $P < 0.001$).

The computation of a log-linear model showed that main effects and first-order interactions were unable to account for the results of the complete table ($L^2 = 22.41$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$). We therefore calculated the data separately for the radical and the conservative subjects. For radical subjects, the relation between actors and attributions was highly significant ($L^2 = 28.48$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$): more internal causes were attributed to the institutional agent and more external causes to the anomic agent ($\phi = 0.64$). The L^2 for conservative subjects on the other hand failed to reach significance ($L^2 = 1.50$, d.f. = 1, $P = 0.22$).

Table 1. Attribution of causality as a function of type of actor and subjects' ideology

Ideology:	Institutional agent		Anomic agent	
	Radical	Conservative	Radical	Conservative
Attributions				
Internal	21	9	3	19
External	9	17	32	19

Subsidiary variables

Three 2 (observer's ideology) \times 2 (agents) ANOVAs were performed for the perceived violence of the act, the responsibility of the actor and the severity of punishment. No main effects were detected for these three variables but the interaction was significant in each case (respectively: $F = 8.96$, d.f. = 1, 125, $P < 0.01$; $F = 6.54$, d.f. = 1, 125, $P < 0.05$; $F = 12.49$, d.f. = 1, 125, $P < 0.001$).

As can be seen in Table 2, radical subjects are more tolerant for the delinquents than for the policemen while the reverse is true for the conservative subjects. It should be noted also that the differences between the two ideologies are especially marked for the delinquents.

* If one had been interested only in seeing that people were more or less internal (or external) in one condition than in another one, another treatment of the data would have been to calculate a raw or weighted score of internality or externality for the five causes chosen by each subject. Because we were interested in the differences between internal and external causes *within* conditions, we chose not to present the parametric solution. However, we calculated it for the weighted scores of internality. As expected and in agreement with the data we present, radicals were significantly less internal than conservatives and they discriminated more between the actors than did the conservatives.

Table 2. Mean scores of perceived violence, agent's responsibility and severity of sanction as a function of subjects' ideology, conservative vs. radical, and type of agent, institutional (inst.) or anomic. The higher the score, the higher is perceived violence, responsibility or punishment. Means that do not share a common subscript differ at $P < 0.05$ using the Newman-Keuls procedure

Dependent variables	Perceived violence		Agent's responsibility		Severity of punishment	
	Inst.	Anomic	Inst.	Anomic	Inst.	Anomic
Ideology						
Conservative	6.92 _{ab}	7.34 _{ab}	5.58 _{ab}	6.50 _b	8.15 _a	15.30 _b
Radical	7.87 _b	6.37 _a	6.33 _{ab}	5.37 _a	12.30 _{ab}	7.20 _a

Relationships between attributions, perceived violence, responsibility and punishment

Finally, we computed correlations between the four dependent variables across all cells: type of attribution*, perceived violence of the act, responsibility of the actor and severity of the punishment. From Table 3, it can be seen that all correlations are highly significant (all P s < 0.01). This was to be expected from the results presented above. Nevertheless, the correlations are not especially high, ranging from 0.26 to 0.48. Type of attribution is the variable which correlates least strongly with the other variables.

This latter result becomes much more clear-cut if one looks at the within-cell correlations rather than the overall ones. In all four cells, perceived violence, responsibility and sanction interrelate strongly. For conservative individuals these three variables correlated significantly ($P < 0.05$) with type of attribution, independently of agent of aggression: more internal attributions are associated with more violence ($r = 0.31$), more responsibility ($r = 0.48$), and more severe punishment ($r = 0.39$). This was not the case for radical subjects; here the correlations are very low and negative: $r = -0.03$, -0.11 and -0.13 for perceived violence, responsibility and punishment, respectively.

Table 3. Matrix of intercorrelations between the four dependent variables ($n = 129$ per cell). All correlations are significant at $P < 0.01$

	Attributions	Violence	Responsibility
Violence	0.26		
Responsibility	0.31	0.36	
Punishment	0.30	0.40	0.48

* In the results presented in the paper, we took into account only the first choice which was treated as dummy variable with value = 1 for external cause and value = 2 for internal cause. The correlations calculated for the five weighted causes are almost identical.

Discussion

Several interesting results emerged from our study. First, more external (77) than internal (52) causes were provided as the most important explanation of the violent act. This is in agreement with Vala's (1984) and Blumenthal *et al.*'s (1972) findings and raises questions about the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). Maybe the fundamental error is not that fundamental?

Second, the results of the present experiment support our first and third hypotheses. When judging aggressive persons belonging to different social groups, conservative and radical subjects not only differed in their judgements of severity of punishment; they perceived the violence of the act differently, they varied in the degree of perceived responsibility of the actor, and they also used different types of explanation. The second hypothesis is supported only for the radical subjects; among conservatives, there is almost no relationship between type of causes and type of actors.

Third, for all subjects, there were significant correlations between perceived violence, responsibility of the actor and punishment. In their survey, Blumenthal *et al.* (1972) came to the conclusion that violence is defined in terms of legitimacy. For example, students' protests may be seen as legitimate by students but not by other people and therefore these protests will be labelled as non-violent or as violent by the different groups. It may well be that perceived violence, responsibility and punishment in our study reflect the legitimacy side of the act: as people are considered less responsible, their act is seen as less violent and the punishment should be less severe.

Fourth, the legitimacy of the act is significantly correlated with the type of attribution for conservative subjects but not for radical ones. However, radicals discriminate more than conservatives between causes when they have to explain an aggressive act committed either by delinquents or by policemen (see hypothesis 2). We can only speculate about these two findings.

Given the political situation in Portugal, our preferred explanation is as follows. In the ideology of our extremely radical subjects, it is not surprising that they used the internal-external dimension as a discriminating device. For them, social contingencies are most important. This does not mean, however, that they cannot distinguish between a legal or illegal act. They may find many external—or internal—explanations for an aggressive act and still find it illegitimate. For conservatives, the internal-external dimension is not so important. According to their ideology people are considered as free and autonomous on the one hand, but also as good and reasonable on the other. Deviations from the norm are thus considered as internal in the first case and external in the second one. One way to resolve the dilemma for them is therefore to keep their perceptions of the legitimacy of aggressive acts and their explanations for such acts in alignment.

This is simply a plausible explanation that needs to be supported by further research. In any case, and this was the point we wanted to make in this study, our results show that it is futile to look for a consensual meaning of aggression in a social vacuum. Once categorical memberships of the observers and of the actors are taken into account, as in the present study, differences occur not only in the outcomes of judgement but apparently also in the process leading to it (Hewstone & Jaspars, 1984). Our findings also indicate that attributions should not be considered separately from other judgements, such as punishment. Each definition of aggression comprises a constellation of factors whose understanding seems to require some knowledge of the dimensions most valued by the observers.

References

- Anisfield, M., Munoz, S. R. & Lambett, W. E. (1963). The structure and dynamics of ethnic attitudes of Jewish adolescents. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 66, 31-36.
- Blumenthal, M. D., Kahn, R., Andrews, F. & Head, K. (1972). *Justifying Violence: Attitudes of American Men*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Da Gloria, J. & De Ridder, R. (1977). Aggression in dyadic interaction. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 7, 189-219.
- De Grada, E. & Ercolani, A. (1978). *Il Comportamento Deviante di Tipo Criminale*. Roma: Bulzoni Editore.
- Eysenck, H. J. & Wilson, G. D. (1978) (Eds). *The Psychological Basis of Ideology: Selected Readings and Comments*. Lancaster: MTP Press.
- Garcia, L. T. & Griffitt, W. (1978). Authoritarianism—Situation interactions in the determination of punitiveness: Engaging authoritarian ideology. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 12, 469-479.
- Hewstone, M. & Jaspars, J. M. F. (1984). Social dimensions of attribution. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *The Social Dimension. European Developments in Social Psychology*, vol. 2, pp. 380-404. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leyens, J.-P. & Fraczek, A. (1984). Aggression as an interpersonal phenomenon. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *The Social Dimension. European Developments in Social Psychology*, vol. 1, pp. 184-203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mumendey, A. (1984). *Social Psychology of Aggression: From Individual Behaviour to Social Interaction*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Ray, J. (1980). Authoritarianism and hostility. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 12, 307-308.
- Ross, L. B. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 10, pp. 173-220. New York: Academic Press.
- Soczka, L. (1986). *Sopol. Estudo Factorial de um Questionario de Atitudes Sociais Validado Para a População Portuguesa*. Lisbon: Laboratorio Nacional de Engenharia Civil.
- Tedeschi, J. T. (1983). Social influence theory and aggression. In R. G. Geen & E. I. Donnerstein (Eds), *Aggression: Theoretical and Empirical Reviews*, vol. 1, pp. 135-162. New York: Academic Press.
- Vala, J. (1981). Grupos sociais e representação social de violência. *Psicologia*, 2, 329-342.
- Vala, J. (1984). La production sociale de la violence. Représentations et comportements. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve.

Received 22 May 1987; revised version received 22 September 1987