Impression Management and the Escalation of Aggression and Violence

Richard B. Felson

Impression Management and the Escalation of Aggression and Violence

RICHARD B. FELSON

State University of New York at Albany

Impression management theory is used to derive hypotheses about the escalation of incidents involving aggression and violence among samples of the general population, ex–mental patients, and ex–criminal offenders. Respondents were interviewed about incidents they had been involved in at four levels of severity: incidents in which they were angry but did nothing about it; verbal disputes; incidents involving physical violence but no weapon; and incidents in which a weapon was used. The findings generally support impression management theory: (1) respondents were more likely to express their anger when they had been insulted, particularly when they were males; (2) the probability of physical violence was lower when participants gave accounts for their actions; (3) conflicts involving same-sex participants were generally more severe when an audience was present; and (4) instigation from third parties resulted in more severe incidents while third party mediation resulted in less subsequent aggression.

There is a growing literature that examines aggression and violence and its escalation using an impression management approach (e.g., Athens, 1980; Luckenbill, 1977; Hepburn, 1973). Felson (1978), for example, suggests that escalation occurs when a person has been cast into a negative situational identity or self-image and retaliates in order to save face. Retaliation, it is suggested, is more likely when identity concerns are salient and when an audience is present, particularly if that audience is favorable toward an aggressive response. Felson presents some propositions suggested by this approach and reviews primarily experimental evidence relevant to these propositions. The present study goes outside the laboratory in an attempt to test some of these ideas using data from interviews about incidents of varying severity from three types of populations. In addition, an hypothesis derived from the related literature on accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968) is examined.

The basic determinant of aggression, according to an impression management approach, is perceived intentional attack. Insults and other such attacks are examples of altercasting, i.e., behavior by which an actor attempts to shape the situational identity that the other will hold in an interaction (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963). An insult altercasts or

places the target into an unfavorable situational identity. By counter-attack or retaliation an actor attempts to nullify that identity by altercasting the original aggressor into a negative identity.

The effect of attack on counter-attack is influenced by a number of conditions. First, persons vary in the degree to which particular identities are important to them; some may be more concerned with their identities in conflict situations than others, and as a result they may be more aggressive when they think they have been attacked. Second, the likelihood of retaliation depends on the presence and values of the audience. In general, retaliation is more likely when an audience is present since the identity costs are greater for backing down. Further, the perceived values of the audience are important: actors are more likely to retaliate when the audience is perceived as favorable to aggression, and they are least likely to retaliate when the audience is viewed as unfavorable.

Hypotheses

The first two hypotheses concern the effect of insults on verbal counter-attack during a conflict and whether targets of verbal attacks retaliate or suppress their anger. The remaining hypotheses focus more generally on the severity of the outcome, including the escalation from verbal to physical attack and the use of weapons.

> Hypothesis 1. Persons are more likely to verbally attack an antagonist during a conflict if they have been insulted.[1]

---

[1] Insults should make verbal retaliation more likely but they should not affect the severity of the

This hypothesis assumes that the insults given are perceived by the target as both intentional and illegitimate. Felson and Steadman (forthcoming) found supporting evidence for this hypothesis in their analysis of official data on homicides and assaults: identity attacks by the victim were associated with identity attacks by the offender.

Hypothesis 2. Males are more likely than females to attack an antagonist verbally when they have been insulted.

Males may be more concerned with their identities in aggressive situations than females because the traditional masculine identity stresses toughness and courage when one is attacked, and because retaliation is more normative or expected behavior for males (see Frodi et al., 1977, for a review). In other words, negative identities are more likely to be attributed to males who "back down" when they have been attacked than to females. This hypothesis posits an interaction between the original insult and the sex of the target: males and females differ in their propensity to retaliate rather than in the degree to which they engage in unprovoked attack, although the latter may occur as well.

Hypothesis 3. Conflicts are likely to be more severe when there are third parties present.

Since the presence of third parties in a conflict situation raises the identity costs of backing down to an antagonist, in general conflicts are likely to be more severe in front of an audience. However, this effect may not occur when the incident is such that the audience would disapprove (Borden, 1975; Baron, 1971; Taylor and Weinstein, 1974). For example, there is evidence that audiences are more likely to disapprove of physical violence against females (Farrell and Swigert, 1978; see Frodi et al., 1977, for a review). In such cases the audience could have a pacifying effect.

Hypothesis 4a. Conflicts are likely to be more serious if others present encourage the conflict to continue.
Hypothesis 4b. Conflicts are likely to be less serious if others present mediate the conflict.

Instigating actions by third parties indicate to the participants that the audience is favorable toward aggression, while mediation conveys the opposite message. In addition, mediation may allow both sides to back down without losing face. There is experimental evidence

supporting both of these hypotheses. For example, Brown (1968) found that adolescent male subjects who received peer feedback informing them that they had looked foolish and weak were more likely to retaliate than subjects who did not receive such feedback (see also Borden and Taylor, 1973, and Richardson et al., 1979). Experimental studies showing the effect of mediation on conflict are reviewed by Rubin and Brown (1975) and Rubin (1980). Finally, in the only nonexperimental study in the area, Felson et al. (unpubl.) found that offenders delivered more blows during homicides and assaults if third parties were aggressive and fewer blows if third parties attempted to mediate. The degree of violence exhibited by the victim was similarly affected by third party behavior.

The hypotheses above focus on retaliatory aggression, i.e., aggression that occurs after people perceive they have been attacked. Felson (1981) suggests that *initial* attacks may involve punishment for perceived wrongdoing. When a person is thought to have violated a norm, then some form of punishment is legitimate as a means of social control. After the initial attack, retaliation may be morally justified because the target deserves punishment for that attack. One implication of this approach is that factors that affect sanctioning behavior have implications for aggression. For example, when persons engage in behavior that they think may result in disapproval from the audience, they are likely to give an account (Scott and Lyman, 1968). When they give accounts for untoward action, they align themselves with the normative order (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976) and, through this impression management device, avoid or at least reduce sanctions. Thus Dedrick (1978) found that sanctions were less severe for a boy who behaved in an arrogant, unfriendly manner if he offered an account afterward (see also Schwartz et al., 1978). If accounts reduce punishment, then conflicts should be less severe when an antagonist provides an account since the other antagonist is likely to withhold punishment (or reduce its severity), and this in turn results in a lower probability of a counter-attack from the initial party. The following hypothesis is implied:

Hypothesis 5. Conflicts are likely to be less severe if either participant gives an account for his or her actions.

METHOD

Samples

Prior experimental research on situational factors in aggression has usually studied col-

---

conflict beyond that; one would not predict that counter-attacks are more severe than initial attacks, but rather that a matching or reciprocating principle operates (see Kane et al., 1973).

lege students, while studies of situational factors in violence have relied upon police reports and focused on criminal offenders. The present study attempts to extend the generalizability of findings by relying on three samples: ex-mental patients, ex-criminal offenders, and a representative sample of the general population. We offer no hypotheses about the sample differences. However, one would expect that the differences between these populations are extreme in terms of a variety of individual characteristics. Therefore, findings of similar relationships between situational variables for all three populations would provide evidence for the utility of the situational approach and the generality of the processes involved.

The analyses are based on interviews of persons, aged 18–65, from a county in up-state New York that incorporates a middle-sized city. A representative sample from the general population (n=245) was obtained through a multistage process in which street names were randomly chosen from each of 35 census tracts based on the percentage of population in that tract. A sample of dwellings on each street was then randomly selected and it was determined whether a male or female was to be interviewed. Of those persons contacted, 76% were willing to participate.

The sample of ex–mental patients (n=148) included persons who had been hospitalized in a New York State mental hospital, but who had been living in the community for at least six months in the year preceding the interview. Respondents were contacted either through the mail or through visits to social clubs in the area for ex–mental patients.

The ex–criminal offenders (n=141) included parolees and local offenders who were contacted by mail. In addition, contact was made through a community day program for women who had been released from the state prison or from a local jail. All respondents had been living in the community for at least six months in the year preceding the interview.

Measurement

Respondents were asked to describe in detail four incidents of varying severity. First, they were asked to "recall the last dispute that you can remember clearly that you were involved, where a gun or knife was drawn or used." They were asked a similar question about a dispute where there was "slapping or hitting with a fist but no gun or other weapon was involved." The third incident involved a "bad argument with someone which involved screaming, shouting or name-calling, but not slapping or hitting. In other words, just a dispute where there was a bad argument, but nothing physi-

cal." Finally, they were asked to recall a dispute in which they were "really angry at another person but said nothing about it. In other words, we mean you kept your anger inside."

Many respondents were able to recall only certain types of incidents and not others; thus each respondent provided one to four incidents. The data were rearranged so that the incident was the unit of analysis, resulting in a total of 1,365 incidents from 534 respondents. The main dependent variable is the severity of the incident (four categories).

For each incident respondents were asked to describe in sequence the actions of each participant. This list of actions was examined to determine whether either the respondent or antagonist had given an account (i.e., an excuse or justification for some prior action) or a denial of guilt during the incident. Then respondents were asked a series of questions about the incident. In order to determine whether the antagonist had insulted them, they were asked: "Did _____ say something bad about you?" To determine if others were present, respondents were asked, "Was there anybody else there at this time?" Finally, to determine if there was third party mediation and instigation, they were asked, "Did any of the other people who were there actually try to settle things down or make peace?" and "Did any of these people urge you to continue the dispute?" Each of these variables was coded as a dichotomy.

Given the nature of the design it is likely that the effects of sex of the respondent and type of sample on severity (but not interactions involving these variables) will be underestimated. Respondents were asked to recall an incident of each type and could describe an incident that occurred as far back as they could remember. Therefore, an incident description may be elicited even when incidents of that type are very rare for the respondent. For example, if males are more likely to participate in physical violence than females then incidents they describe are more likely to have occurred in the more recent past. Yet, our design would elicit a description of a physically violent incident from females as well, unless they had never participated in such an incident or at least were unable to recall one.[2]

A question naturally arises as to the accuracy of the self-reports on which these analyses are based. First, to some extent the question is irrelevant, since we take a phenomenological

---

[2] It is possible that mental patients are the least capable of the three groups of recalling incidents, but there is no reason to expect them to recall one type of incident better than another.

approach. That is, for example, it only matters whether respondents think they were insulted by the antagonist, not whether there was an actual insult by some objective standard, because, we assume, respondents act on the basis of their definitions of the situation. However, since we did not interview the antagonists we do not know whether antagonists think they received accounts (for example), and so we must rely on the respondents' reports. Given a phenomenological approach, we assume that there is a greater degree of error in these variables. For other variables, i.e., the sex of the participants and whether others were present, we expect that subjectivity does not play much of a role.

It still must be assumed that the respondents' reports reflect their perceptions at the time of the incident and are not simply reconstructions. For example, the descriptions of events provided by respondents could be reconstructions designed to allow respondents to see or present themselves favorably rather than accurate descriptions of what actually happened or even their perceptions during the incidents (see Greenwald, 1980). However, none of the reported actions (of either the respondent or the antagonist) correlated with the respondents' scores on the aggression subscale of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. If these reports are subject to a social desirability bias we would have expected respondents with strong concerns for social desirability to acknowledge fewer aggressive acts of their own and attribute more to their antagonists.

Another potential measurement problem involves memory. Some of these incidents occurred a long time ago and some of the details of the incidents have certainly been forgotten. To analyze the impact of ability to recall we examined the relationships between how long ago the incident occurred and each of our action variables, at all four levels of severity. Out of 28 relationships, only three were statistically significant at the .05-level, suggesting that memory processes did not affect these results.

Still, the shortcomings of a study based on self-reports must be acknowledged. If random measurement error is occurring then the relationships observed are likely to be weakened. More problematic is systematic measurement error that might produce spurious relationships in the data. However, it is difficult to imagine convincing artifactual explanations of the relationships we observe. Furthermore, this may be the best type (or at least one of the best types) of evidence available. Because violence is relatively infrequent, it would take a massive investment of time before we could observe first-hand a sufficient number of violent incidents involving adults. In the absence of perfect data, we must rely upon either self-reports, police data, or laboratory experiments, and the limitations of each of these are well known. If these methods yield corroborating evidence then confidence in the findings is increased. In general, our results are consistent with the results from experimental studies (e.g., Brown, 1968) and studies that rely on descriptions obtained from police reports (e.g., Felson and Steadman, forthcoming, and Felson et al., unpubl.).

The log-linear technique was used for most analyses (Bishop et al., 1975). This technique requires rather large samples when there are multiple variables with multiple categories. While this is the largest sample of incidents of its kind, it is still not large enough to examine all variables in a single model; as a result it is necessary to take a piecemeal approach and estimate six different models. All models include the following four variables: severity (A); sample (B); sex of the respondent (C); and sex of the antagonist (D). The fifth variable (which varies across models) is one of the following: antagonist's insult (E); third party presence (F); third party instigation (G); third party mediation (H); respondent's accounts (I); or antagonist's accounts (J).[3] Severity has four categories, sample has three, and the rest are dichotomies. The result in each case is a table with $4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 96$ cells. In a few instances a zero cell was observed, and a value of .5 was added to each cell in order to calculate logarithms and thus parameters (Goodman, 1970).

<center>RESULTS</center>

Insults

The first model includes antagonist's insult as the fifth variable and was designed to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. These hypotheses concern the relationships between insult, sex, and severity of outcome. The final model, which has a very good fit, includes a saturated term for the independent variables (BCDE), and

_____

[3] Bivariate cross-tabulations were run between each of these variables in order to determine if it was appropriate to analyze them independently. Bishop et al. (1975) show that one can collapse over a variable if that variable is independent of either of the two variables whose relationship is being examined. Most relationships were either statistically insignificant or of borderline significance but extremely small. There were only two notable relationships: the presence of others was significantly related to the respondent's accounts and to the antagonist's accounts. However, the relationships between these variables were statistically insignificant in a log-linear analysis that controlled for the other variables.

three significant three-term interactions (see Table 1). The omission of any of these terms significantly decreases the adequacy of the fit [ACD:LR (likelihood ratio) $\chi^2(3)$=22.6, $p <$ .0000; ABE:LR χ^2 (6) = 18.4, $p <$ .005; ACE: LR χ^2 (3) = 10.91, $p <$ .01].

In support of the hypotheses, respondents are more likely to engage in verbal dispute (as opposed to being angry but doing nothing) when they have been insulted, particularly if they are males (the ACE term). Thus, an insult increases the odds of a verbal dispute 3.2 times when the respondent is a male and 2.2 times when the respondent is a female.[4]

The highly significant three-term interaction involving severity of the outcome, sex of respondent, and sex of antagonist (ACD) was not predicted. This interaction occurs because conflicts are more likely to involve physical violence (particularly hitting/slapping) when males fight with other males. Thus, the odds of a hitting/slapping dispute vs. a verbal dispute increase 2.1 times when both participants are males compared to female-female conflicts and 4.3 times compared to cross-sex conflicts.

Finally, the three-term interaction (ABE) involving antagonist's insult, severity, and sample reflects the fact that the relationship between insult and severity is weaker for exmental patients. It appears that they are more likely to suppress their anger when insulted than the other groups.

Third Party Presence

Three hypotheses were offered in regard to the effect of third parties on the severity of the incident: that the presence of third parties is likely to result in more severe incidents; that incidents are likely to be more severe when someone instigates or encourages the conflict to continue; and that mediating actions are likely to discourage conflict. The model used to test the first of these hypotheses (Hypothesis 3) substitutes third party presence (F) as the fifth variable. The fit of the final model (see Table 1) is quite good. The model includes a saturated term for the independent variables (BCDF); a term reflecting the sample differences in severity of incidents [(AB) LRχ^2 (6) = 47.7, $p <$ .0000] and an unanticipated four-term interaction [(ACDF) LR χ^2 (3) = 13.4, $p =$ .004] to be explained below. The sample $\times$ severity interaction is due to the fact that the general population tends to describe incidents that are less severe than the other two groups.

---

[4] Data are presented in terms of odds ratios and percentages rather than effect coefficients because of the greater intuitive meaning of the former (Page, 1977).

There is partial support for the hypothesis that incidents are more severe when others are present. The four-term interaction and the percentages presented in Table 2 indicate that the effect of third parties on severity depends on the sex of the respondent and antagonist. The table suggests that the presence of third parties generally enhances the severity of the outcome for conflicts in which both participants are of the same sex. For example, when both participants are male the presence of others increases the odds of physical violence (hitting/slapping) vs. verbal disputes 2.0 times. In conflicts across sex the presence of others is unrelated to the severity of the outcome, nor does the presence of others appear to make a difference in conflicts involving weapons. One expects that for these serious incidents, members of the audience are more likely to disapprove of violence and may even be viewed as potential witnesses in legal proceedings, and that these conditions offset the generally aggravating effect of the audience.

Third Party Instigation

In order to examine the effect of instigation on the severity of the conflict (Hypothesis 4a), a model was estimated that substituted third party instigation (G) for third party presence as the fifth variable. Only incidents where third parties were present were included in the analysis (n = 607). The final model, presented in Table 1, has an excellent fit. It includes the saturated terms for the independent variables, and the (ACD) and (AB) effects observed in earlier models. It also includes the hypothesized (AG) term, thus suggesting support for the hypothesis. The omission of this term significantly decreases the adequacy of the fit of the model (LR χ^2 (3) = 13.38 $p =$ .004). Instigation increases the odds of a verbal dispute (vs. unexpressed anger) 1.5 times and it increases the odds of hitting/slapping (vs. verbal disputes) 2.0 times. However, the results also show that there is less instigation in weapon disputes than hitting/slapping disputes, suggesting a reciprocal effect: if weapons are already present, third parties are less likely to either feel the need to encourage or want to encourage the conflict to escalate.

Third Party Mediation

To test Hypothesis 4b, third party mediation (H) was substituted as the fifth variable. Again, only incidents in which third parties were present were included. The final model, presented in Table 1, has an excellent fit. It includes the saturated terms for the independent variables, the (ACD) and (AB) effects observed in earlier

Table 1. The Final Models

Model	Fitted Marginals*	d.f.	Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	p-value
1. Insults	(BCDE) (ACD) (ABE) (ACE)	42	41.64	.49
2. Third Parties Present	(BCDF) (ACDF) (AB)	42	36.53	.71
3. Instigation	(BCDG) (ACD) (AB) (AG)	51	31.66	.98
4. Mediation	(BCDH) (ACD) (AB) (AH)	51	28.01	.99
5. Respondent's Accounts	(BCDI) (ACD) (AB) (AI)	51	39.89	.87
6. Antagonist's Accounts	(BCDJ) (ACD) (AB) (AJ)	51	40.00	.87

* Where A = severity of incident; B = sample; C = sex of respondent; D = sex of antagonist; E = insult by antagonist; F = third party presence; G = instigation; H = mediation; I = account by respondent; J = account by antagonist.

models, and the hypothesized (AH) term. The omission of this term significantly decreases the adequacy of the fit of the model (LR χ^2 (3) = 49.8, $p < .00001$). However, the results in general indicate a positive rather than a negative relationship between mediation and severity, suggesting that mediating behavior is affected by the severity of the incident rather than the reverse. That is, the more severe the incident the more likely that third parties will attempt to mediate.[5] Data on the sequence of events, then, is necessary to test this hypothesis.

In order to determine the effect of mediation we compared the frequency of aggressive actions immediately following mediation with the overall frequency of aggressive actions during the whole incident. Specifically, we compared the percentage of actions following mediation that were verbally or physically aggressive (e.g., insults, threats, and physical attacks) with the percentage of total actions that were aggressive, for each incident. The hypothesis that the observed aggression following mediation would be less than the expected aggression according to a random model was strongly supported (see Table 3). For all four types of incidents, the actions following mediation were less likely to be aggressive than would be expected by chance. For incidents involving unexpressed anger, however, the relationship does not quite reach statistical significance.

Accounts

According to Hypothesis 5, incidents should be less severe when either the respondent or

---

[5] Third parties are much less likely to mediate in conflicts involving unexpressed anger, which is not surprising given that there may not be a conflict to mediate. Third parties are more likely to mediate physical conflicts than verbal conflicts. There was slightly less mediation in physical conflicts involving weapons, however.

the antagonist gives an account. The final model involving the respondent's account (I) includes saturated terms for the independent variables (BCDI), the hypothesized effect of accounts on severity [(AI) χ^2 (3) = 57.2, $p < .0000$], and terms suggested by the previous models (ACD) and (AB). As can be seen in Table 1, the fit of the model is excellent.

The results suggest that when a respondent gives an account during a verbal dispute, the incident is less likely to involve physical violence. An account by the respondent decreases the odds of hitting/slapping vs. verbal dispute 2.9 times. However, accounts are more likely in verbal disputes than incidents in which no anger was expressed. Data not presented suggest that the infrequency of accounts here is the result of the infrequency of reproaches (e.g., criticisms, protests, demands for accounts) that call for such behavior in these least severe incidents.

Sample was also related to the respondent's tendency to give accounts (LR χ^2 (2) = 10.3, $p = .006$). The general population was more likely than the other samples to give accounts (general population, 32.6%; ex-offenders, 27.4%; ex–mental patients, 21.3%). There were no sex differences in the propensity to give or receive accounts, however.

In the final model, accounts by the antagonist was substituted for accounts by the respondent. The results were similar to those from the previous model and again the fit was excellent (see Table 1). As predicted by Hypothesis 5, accounts were more likely to be given in verbal disputes than hitting/slapping disputes. An account from the antagonist decreases the odds of a physically violent dispute vs. verbal attack 3.0 times. Again, accounts were more likely to occur in verbal disputes than incidents in which no anger was expressed. The samples did not differ in their tendency to receive accounts nor were sex differences observed.

In sum, both models suggest that verbal disputes are less likely to become physical when

Table 2. Severity of Incident by Sex of Participants and Presence of Others

| | Sex of Participants | | | | | |
| | Males Others Present | | Females Others Present | | Mixed Others Present | |
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Unexpressed Anger	32.6	17.8	46.9	25.0	26.4	26.3
Verbal Disputes	23.0	19.3	35.0	32.6	42.0	42.5
Hitting/Slapping	24.7	41.1	15.3	39.1	21.3	25.1
Weapons	19.7	21.8	2.8	3.3	10.2	6.0
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	239	348	143	92	333	167

either participant gives an account of his or her actions. This relationship is unaffected by the sex of the participants or whether respondents are ex-offenders, ex–mental patients, or from the general population. Accounts do not appear to affect whether a weapon is used (as opposed to hitting) and accounts are more likely in verbal disputes than disputes involving unexpressed anger.[6]

DISCUSSION

These results generally support an impression management approach to aggression and violence. Respondents were more likely to express their anger in a verbal attack when they had been insulted, particularly if they were males. Thus the evidence suggests that persons retaliate when cast into negative identities, particularly when these identities are important to them. Of course, this assumes that males are more concerned with their identities in aggressive conflicts than females.

While the relationship between insult and the

expression of anger in a verbal attack was far from perfect, it is important to note that there are many other ways of eliciting aggression besides insult. Furthermore, it may be strategically unwise to retaliate at times, if one fears further retaliation from the opponent. Finally, as suggested earlier, we expect a fair amount of measurement error in these variables.

Accounts

Additional support for the impression management approach comes from the findings on accounts. Incidents were much less likely to be physically violent when either the respondent or the antagonist gave an excuse or justification for their actions. These impression management devices occurred quite frequently during these disputes and apparently enabled participants to align themselves with the normative order and thus avoid more severe punishment in the form of physical violence.[7] The findings indirectly suggest the utility of looking at some aggressive actions as legitimate punishment (from the actor's point of view) for wrongdoing. The definition of punishment, i.e., unpleasant consequences applied to a person for some offense against a rule, could easily be applied to many acts of aggression. It appears that when the punishment is viewed as illegitimate it is called aggression (see Tedeschi et al., 1974). With the exception of aggression for material gain (e.g., the use of force in robbery), and self-defense, most interpersonal aggression can be seen as responses to perceived rule-breaking by the target. In the case of retaliation for an attack, the aggression maintains the identity of the attacker and can be justified because the target deserves punishment for breaking a rule. Both may play a causal role in retaliation. In other

[6] These analyses do not take into account the fact that these episodes are not independent. Since respondents provided multiple incidents, the observations are likely to be correlated. There is no easy way to handle this problem given the limitations of sample size. As a partial solution, we reanalyzed the data using only one incident (randomly selected) from each respondent. This results in a severely attenuated sample (n ≤ 500) and some zero-cells; however, we can see if the results are generally consistent with those obtained from the full sample. The main findings are, for the most part, the same with this subsample. There are two instances where the effects do not quite reach statistical significance (using the LR χ^2 statistic) in the smaller sample: the sex of respondent × sex of antagonist × presence of other × severity term ($p = .09$) and the instigation × severity term ($p = .17$). In the latter case, the sample size is even smaller (n = 316) since analyses were restricted to when others were present, and the instigation variable is highly skewed as well; thus it would be difficult to obtain significant effects. In both cases the patterns are the same as in the larger sample.

[7] Saving face (with accounts) may be an end in itself or a means to an end. In the latter case, a more favorable identity can serve the strategic purpose of avoiding punishment.

Table 3. Frequency of Aggression Following Mediation

Type of Incident	Percent of Actions That Were Aggressive			Significance of Z
	Overall	Following Mediation	Difference	
Weapons	40.2	20.8	19.4	.001
Physical Violence (No Weapon)	41.5	25.1	16.4	.001
Verbal Dispute	15.0	3.8	11.2	.028
Unexpressed Anger	8.7	0.0	8.7	.084

words, the norm of justice can serve the motive for revenge.

As suggested earlier, if it can be established that the same variables that affect aggression affect the use of punishment, then the treatment of aggression as punishment is reasonable. Thus, our finding that accounts inhibit aggression is parallel to studies that show the effect of accounts on punishment (Dedrick, 1978; Schwartz et al., 1978), and suggests that similar processes may be involved. In addition, the key legal notion that the "punishment should fit the crime" is directly comparable to the notion that retaliation should be proportionate to the original attack. Thus, experimental studies suggest that persons who match an antagonist's aggression are judged more favorably (Kane et al., 1976). The goal of deterrence is also important for both aggression and acts of punishment: both are designed to deter the target from repeating the offense. For example, children may be advised to retaliate against bullies to deter them from future aggression.

Third Parties

Further support for impression management theory comes from the evidence on the effect of third parties. When third parties instigated the conflict, incidents were likely to be more severe. When they mediated the conflict, on the other hand, subsequent actions tended to be less aggressive. This evidence is consistent with experimental results (e.g., Brown, 1968) and research based on police reports (Felson et al., unpubl.). The presence alone of third parties affected the severity of the incident. When participants were of the same sex, the presence of third parties increased the probability that the conflict would be more severe. This was not the case for conflicts across sex, where presumably the audience was more likely to disapprove of more severe aggression.

Third parties were present in 46% of the incidents. When they were present, they were much more likely to mediate the conflict than to instigate it (39% vs. 9%). This provides an interesting contrast to data on homicide and

serious assault, where police reports indicate that third party instigation and aggression are more likely than mediation (Felson and Steadman, forthcoming). The evidence suggests that one reason those incidents became so serious is that they had much more third party support.

There is an alternative interpretation of the effect of third party mediation and instigation, however. It was assumed that participants alter their behavior in front of third parties in order to manage a favorable impression for this audience. It is possible, however, that third parties, through mediating and instigating actions, influence the definitions of the situation for the major participants. Participants may "conform" because of the information others provide on how to behave rather than because they desire approval from the audience. The key to knowing which of these processes is operating would be to determine if the behavior continued once the audience was gone. Because we did not obtain this information, the best we can say is that on grounds of parsimony, impression management theory is supported since it accounts for all of the other results as well (including the effect of audience presence). Further, experimental evidence supports this explanation of third party effects (see Rubin, 1980, for a review, and the work of Borden and also Taylor on audience effects, cited earlier).

Sample Differences

In general the relationships among variables were similar for all three samples. There was only one three-term interaction observed that involved sample: the relationship between an antagonist's insult and severity was not as strong for mental patients. The fact that these extremely different samples respond similarly to antagonists' behavior suggests the generality of the situational processes described and the utility of a situational approach. In other words, it appears that once persons become involved in a dispute their behavior follows certain patterns regardless of whether they have been institutionalized for emotional problems or incarcerated for committing

crimes. Of course, there may be other individual characteristics that affect the relationship between these situational variables. In fact we found that the sex of respondents affected how they responded to insults.

There were, however, differences between the samples in a number of behaviors during the incident. Ex-offenders and ex-patients tended to be involved in more severe incidents than the general population. Moreover, these differences may be underestimated for reasons suggested earlier. In addition, both ex-offenders and ex–mental patients gave fewer accounts during these incidents, suggesting that one reason why ex-offenders and ex-patients are more likely to be involved in more severe incidents is that they give fewer accounts.

In sum, this research generally supports an impression management approach to aggression and violence.[8] The results suggest that aggressive behavior in these disputes was a function of the behavior of both the antagonist and third parties who were present. Insults resulted in retaliation and escalation of the conflict, particularly when the target of the attack was male, while accounts tended to result in less severe conflicts. When third parties were present and identities were presumably more salient, conflicts involving members of the same sex tended to be more severe. Mediating actions by these third parties had a pacifying effect, while instigating actions appeared to produce escalation. These relationships were similar for three very different samples, suggesting the generalizability of the findings and the utility of a situational approach.

REFERENCES

Athens, L. H.
1980 Violent Criminal Acts and Actors: A Symbolic Interactionist Study. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Baron, R. A.
1971 "Aggression as a function of audience presence and prior anger arousal." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 7:515–523.

---

[8] As suggested earlier, the pattern of findings cannot be easily explained in terms of a biased reconstruction. While it is possible that respondents claim to have been insulted to justify verbal arguments, it is unclear why males should be more likely to do this than females. Further, while it is possible that respondents attempt to justify their involvement in physical violence by failing to mention the antagonist's accounts, this does not explain why they are less likely to mention their own accounts during physically violent incidents. In fact one might expect the opposite pattern: i.e., that they would be more likely to mention their own accounts in a violent incident since these more serious incidents require more justification than verbal incidents.

Bishop, Y.M.M., S. E. Fienberg, and P. W. Holland
1975 Discrete Multivariate Analysis: Theory and Practice. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Borden, R. J.
1975 "Witnessed aggression: Influence of an observer's sex and values on aggressive responding." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 31:567–573.
Borden, R. J., and S. P. Taylor
1973 "The social instigation and control of physical aggression." Journal of Applied Social Psychology 3:354–361.
Brown, B. R.
1968 "The effects of need to maintain face in interpersonal bargaining." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 4:107–122.
Dedrick, D. K.
1978 "Deviance and sanctioning within small groups." Social Psychology 41:94–105.
Farrell, R. A., and V. L. Swigert
1978 "Legal disposition of inter-group and intra-group homicides." Sociological Quarterly 19:565–576.
Felson, R. B.
1978 "Aggression as impression management." Social Psychology 41:205–213.
1981 "An interactionist approach to aggression." Pp. 181–199 in J. Tedeschi (ed.), Impression Management Theory and Social Psychological Research. New York: Academic Press.
Felson, R. B., and H. S. Steadman
forth- "Situations and processes leading to criminal
coming violence." Criminology.
Felson, R. B., S. Ribner, and M. Siegel
un- "Youth, third parties and criminal violence.
publ. Manuscript, State University of New York at Albany, 1981.
Frodi, A., J. Macaulay, and P. R. Thome
1977 "Are women always less aggressive than men? A review of the experimental literature." Psychological Bulletin 84:634–660.
Goodman, L.
1970 "The multivariate analysis of qualitative data." Journal of the American Statistical Association 65:226–256.
Greenwald, A. J.
1980 "The totalitarian ego: Fabrication and revision of personal history." American Psychologist 35:603–618.
Hepburn, J. R.
1973 "Violent behavior in interpersonal relationships." Sociological Quarterly 14:419–429.
Kane, T. R., J. M. Joseph, and J. T. Tedeschi
1976 "Person perception and the Berkowitz paradigm for the study of aggression." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 33:663–673.
Luckenbill, D. F.
1977 "Criminal homicide as a situated transaction." Social Problems 25:176–186.
Page, W. F.
1977 "Interpretation of Goodman's log-linear model effects: An odds ratio approach." Sociological Methods and Research 5:419–435.

Richardson, D. C., S. Bernstein, and S. P. Taylor
  1979 "The effect of situational contingencies on
         female retaliative behavior." Journal of
         Personality and Social Psychology
         37:2044–2048.
Rubin, J. Z.
  1980 "Experimental research on third-party in-
         tervention in conflict: Toward some gener-
         alizations." Psychological Bulletin
         87:379–391.
Rubin, J., and B. Brown
  1975 The Social Psychology of Bargaining and
         Negotiation. New York: Academic Press.
Schwartz, G. S., T. R. Kane, J. M. Joseph, and J. T.
  Tedeschi
  1978 "The effects of post-transgression remorse
         on perceived aggression, attributions of in-
         tent and level of punishment." British Jour-

nal of Social and Clinical Psychology
         17:293–297.
Scott, M., and S. Lyman
  1968 "Accounts." American Sociological Re-
         view 33:46–62.
Stokes, R., and J. P. Hewitt
  1976 "Aligning actions." American Sociological
         Review 41:838–849.
Taylor, M., and E. A. Weinstein
  1974 "Criticism, witnesses and the maintenance
         of interaction." Social Forces 52:473–480.
Tedeschi, J. T., R. B. Smith, and R. G. Brown
  1974 "A reinterpretation of research on aggres-
         sion." Psychological Bulletin 81:540–563.
Weinstein, E., and P. Deutschberger
  1963 "Some dimensions of altercasting."
         Sociometry 26:454–466.

The Impact of Task Inputs, Situational Context, and Sex on Evaluations of Reward Allocators

BARBARA L. WATTS

LAWRENCE A. MESSÉ

Michigan State University

This study examines the proposition that observers take into account a multitude of information—e.g., situational contexts and personal attributes such as sex and task inputs—when evaluating a reward allocator. Specifically, 453 subjects evaluated via semantic differential scales a stimulus person who performed a task with another person and then divided a monetary reward between the two of them. The effects of reward distribution, work inputs, sex of allocator, situational context, and sex of observer on these evaluations are explored. Results indicate that all five factors influence impressions, but their impact differs depending on the specific attribute dimension assessed.

Research on person perception has identified an extensive list of variables in the observer, in the stimulus target (i.e., the person being evaluated), and in the environment that can affect impressions (Schneider et al., 1979). Within this tradition, investigations have explored how people use the overt behavior of others as a basis for evaluating them, and how other variables can moderate the link between actions and impressions (Darley and Goethals, 1980; Jones et al., 1961; Kahn et al., 1977; Livesley and Bromley, 1973). The present

study extends this work by examining the possibility that people's evaluations of a reward allocator can be moderated by a broad range of factors—e.g., the actions of the allocator, the context in which these actions take place, and personal attributes of both the allocator and the observers.

Of most relevance to the present research is a study by Kahn, Lamm, and Nelson (1977), which examined differences in observers' evaluations of a stimulus target as a function of how he or she distributed a monetary reward, and the way these differences were related to the observers' sex and the target's level of achievement on a task. The stimulus target was portrayed as being the most, median, or least productive member of a three-person work group. Based on numerous previous studies demonstrating that the norm of equity mediates reward allocation behavior, Kahn et al. (1977)