Perceptions of Appropriateness of Violent Acts by French and American Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated French and American perceptions of violence. The participants were 100 undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA, and 190 undergraduates from the University of Caen, France. Participants completed a survey which assessed appropriateness and intensity of response to a scenario describing an assault situation. The nationality of the perpetrator was manipulated (American – French) as well as the precipitation (provoked – unprovoked). Results were analyzed with MANOVA and post-hoc ANOVAs, and reveal no significant main effects for gender and nationality of perpetrator, with regard to perception of normalcy of response and degree of response. Results suggest that all participants, regardless of nationality, viewed the perpetrator response as more inappropriate and unnecessary when there was no clear provocation. A significant interaction was found whereby the French participants rated perpetrator response as overly intense regardless of provocation; Americans held a similar view only for the unprovoked scenario.

Keywords: Appropriateness, Violence Perceptions, Provocation

INTRODUCTION

Violence and aggression appear to be nearly universal human attributes seen across centuries and across cultures (Hicks, 2004). Aggression may be expressed directly (committed in the presence of the targeted person) or indirectly (committed outside the presence of the targeted person) (Hogg, et al., 2003), and is defined as any behavior that is intended to hurt another living being (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Violence is defined as extreme acts of physical aggression (Schultz & Oskamp, 2000). The prevalence of human aggression and violence has garnered psychologists' attention and been the target of much research throughout the history of the discipline. Some research has suggested that the tendency to be aggressive is biologically and perhaps even genetically based. Argyle (1992) stated that "twin studies in humans show that individual differences in aggressiveness have a strong genetic component, about 50 per cent." However, most psychologists would agree that there is a large learning and environmental component to aggression. That is, the tendency to be aggressive appears to be learned as one is socialized and enculturated into society and culture. Current research on aggression focuses on variables that increase or decrease the likelihood of aggression. For instance, some factors associated with higher aggression are heat (Robbins, et al., 1972), war history (Archer & Gartner, 1984), alcohol and drug use (Argyle, 1992) and social stress (Landau, 1984). Research also emphasizes the importance of provocation in eliciting aggression (Berkowitz, 1989). If an interpersonal provocation elicits feelings of anger, the desire to retaliate through aggression is strong. Topalli and Neal (2003) described this desire to retaliate to provocation as "retaliatory motivation". This motivation is hypothesized to have significant impact on the way in which people process social information, especially through interpersonal contact. In other words, provocation focuses the attention of the perceiver on aggression and hostility from another person, and therefore justifies a response of aggression. The most prevalent models of aggression suggest that aggression occurs when provocation of some sort leads to some kind of negative emotions, which prime a person to either fight or flee. Which response the individual chooses depends on genetics and biological predispositions, previously learned response patterns due to socialization, and the specific characteristics of the context and situation (Myers, 2002).

Although the factors that influence aggression appear consistent cross-culturally, rates of violence and aggression vary widely within social context (Smith & Bond, 1999) and by culture (Kurian, 2001). Cross-cultural research has shown that aggressive tendencies, attitudes, and norms differ and that these differences are firmly established at a relatively early age (Matsumoto, 2000). Despite research that supports the existence of variation in violence rates across many cultures, the large gap between the U.S. and other industrialized nations yields a

particular research challenge in trying to explain violence rates in the U.S.   Among industrialized nations, there are 1.2 murders per million people each year; whereas, the U.S. averages 50 times that number with 65 murders per million people each year (Potter, 2003).

The violence in America is a world-famous phenomenon, and Americans are stereotypically viewed as "aggressive" (Matsumoto, 2000). In the past several years, international discontent with the United States has grown –especially in light of the U.S.'s response to the events of September 11th, 2001 (Press Releases, 2002). The relationship between France and the U.S. is a prime example of the growing anti-Americanism in Europe and worldwide. Historically, this anti-Americanism has been ingrained in France's culture. In past centuries, Europe was the master of the planet, leading each industry and innovating the arts and sciences through time. Today, however, they often follow in America's footsteps and lend support to the U.S. as American scientists and businesses reinvent the planet. France holds an extreme bitterness against America for this perceived loss of world power and our imperialism in reversing these roles, and has viewed the United States as an unique threat to their existence (Miller, 2005). This view as America as a "hyperpower" has influenced the French anti-American response to the Korean War, World War II, and American intervention in the Middle East (Revel, 2003). The Francophobia in the U.S. and the anti-American sentiment in France are proliferated by a bashing in both country's prime sources of media. For example, in the U.S., the History Channel's 2005 series about the French Revolution advertised the series with the statement: "For Two Hours, It Won't Kill You To Love the French" (Audouard, 2005)[9]. For years in France, hateful caricatures of Uncle Sam as the "master" of the world have been found in many sources of French media (Revel, 2003).

Nevertheless, these feelings were briefly set aside in the event of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington D.C. On September 12, 2001, the daily French newspaper *Le Monde* printed the pro-American headline 'We are all Americans.' Jacques Chirac, the French president, promised to lend support to the United States and on September 18, 2001, became the first head of state to visit George W. Bush after the attacks (Colombani & Wells, 2004). The international press covered the visit extensively. At the dawn of this new period in their common history, French-American relations hit their peak (Colombani & Wells, 2004).

However, in February of 2002 waves of Anti-Americanism and Francophobia overcame France and the United States again as a reaction to differing perspectives on America's stance toward Iraq. The citizens of these countries reverted to hurling standard, worn-out prejudices and clichés that are the bases of anti-Americanism and Francophobia. Some Americans took toward calling French fries "freedom fries"; in retaliation, American WWII graves were vandalized, and some French proclaimed hateful slogans such as "Death to the Yankees" (Armstrong, n.d.). The proposed study draws on these current events and explores a comparison of French and American perceptions of violence.

The understanding and knowledge of violence and aggression is a key component to this study. However, two other inter-group relation factors are important to this project as well. First, there is a tendency to exaggerate the homogeneity of the out-group, and its differences from the in-group (Argyle, 1992). Therefore, in-group members tend to favor their own group members and shun other groups. Triandis (1994) observed that humans believe it is natural to help and assist members of our in-group and to be suspicious of and even hostile toward out-groups. This may be explained by the social identity theory, which states that because our self-image relies partly on our group membership, we tend to view those groups as more superior in comparison to their counterparts (Argyle, 1992). Secondly, the stereotypes held about an out-group can predict the perceptions of that group (Smith & Bond, 1999). Consequently, as Americans are stereotypically viewed as aggressive, Americans are also more likely to be judged as aggressive.

It was hypothesized that French students would rate a violent act as more appropriate when a French character commits the act as compared to an American character due to in-group preferences. The inverse was expected for American students. In addition, it was hypothesized that French students would rate a violent act as less appropriate when committed by an American male, regardless of provocation. However, the Americans were expected to rate the act as less appropriate without provocation, and more appropriate with provocation.

METHOD

190 French psychology students at l'Université de Caen, France, and 100 American psychology students at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, were asked to complete a short survey. For the French, the survey was translated into French, and then "back-translated" into English. This procedure is commonly used in social science in order to catch translation oddities (Sinaiko & Brislin, 1973). The survey consisted of a scenario describing an assault situation in a bar where two young men are involved in a heated conversation which results in violence. The situation was piloted to be culturally appropriate to both Americans and French. Several variables were manipulated: the male character was either American or French, and the physical violence was provoked (by

derogatory language) or not-provoked (character commits the first violent act). The primary dependent variable was the participants' ratings of the appropriateness of the behavior. Consequently, the design is a 2 X 2 X 2 – nationality of participant (French or American), nationality of character in the scenario (French or American), and type of violence (provoked or not). Results were analyzed with MANOVA and post-hoc ANOVAs.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses via MANOVA reveal no significant main effects for gender and nationality of perpetrator, with regard to perception of normalcy of response and degree of response. A post-hoc analysis 2 x 2 ANOVA was performed with participant nationality and provoked – unprovoked scenarios. Results suggest that all participants, regardless of nationality, viewed the perpetrator response as more inappropriate and unnecessary when there was no clear provocation ($\underline{M}_{Provoked}$ = 11.59, $\underline{SD}$ = 3.18; $\underline{M}_{Unprovoked}$ = 13.56, $\underline{SD}$ = 2.85; $F_{(1, 291)}$ = 31.31, p < .001). Compared to their American counterparts, the French participants rated the response of the perpetrator as overly intense regardless of provocation ($\underline{M}_{French}$ = 7.77, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.97; $\underline{M}_{American}$ = 6.03, $\underline{SD}$ = 2.11; $F_{(1, 291)}$ = 49.08, p < .001).

A sub-scale of degree of intensity was measured, totaling the ratings of appropriateness, normalcy, and necessity of response for each participant (cronbach alpha = 0.68). The minimum possible score was 3, being more necessary, more appropriate, and more normal; the maximum possible score was 18, being more unnecessary, more inappropriate, and more abnormal. A significant interaction was found whereby the French participants rated perpetrator response as overly intense regardless of provocation; Americans held a similar view only for the unprovoked scenario (Figure 1). In preliminary analyses and in secondary analyses, subjects did not rate characters differently based on their nationalities.

	Provoked	Unprovoked
American	11.06	13.71
French	11.87	13.49
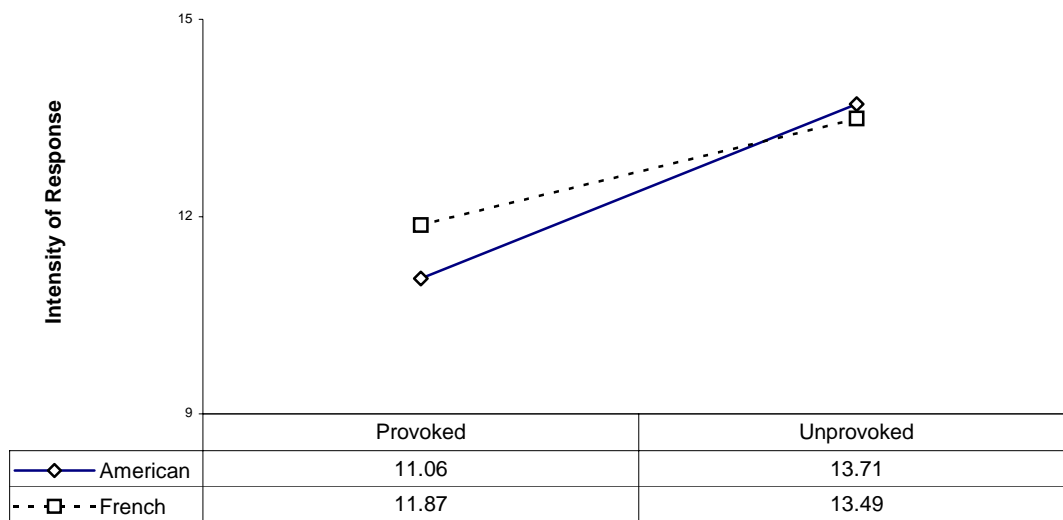
$F_{(1, 291)}$ = 49.08, p < .001

Figure 1. Intensity of Response Rating (Subject Nationality by Level of Provocation).

DISCUSSION

Results suggest that the subjects did not discriminate against a character based on their nationality. The French subjects felt more uncomfortable with any aggressive response, while the Americans were less concerned with such responses, especially for the provoked scenario. This may go towards the (real or perceived) perception of the collective American "psyche", in which an aggressive response is deemed appropriate after being threatened. This coincides with current events concerning America's reaction to the Middle East after the events of September 11th, 2001. Americans felt strongly that retaliation towards the Middle East was necessary, appropriate, and normal considering the provocation received through the instrumental terrorist attacks of September 11th. However, other countries around the world, including France, did not agree with the desired response of the United States. France

supported the United States and felt sympathetic towards their situation (Colombani & Wells, 2004). Even so, that sentiment changed when the United States expressed desires of retaliation towards the Middle East. France had the general opinion that retaliation, even when provoked, was still unnecessary, inappropriate, and abnormal, even considering the dire circumstances, and the United States lost their support.

LIMITATIONS

As perhaps one of the most well-known days in history, "D-Day" (or "Jour-J" in France) creates a strong link between Americans and the Normandy peoples of France. After much oppression and destruction by the Germans during World War II, the French were liberated in 1944 after efforts on the Normandy beaches by Ally soldiers, including Americans, Canadians, and British citizens. Slowly, the soldiers moved inland, and on July 9th, 1944, after several devastating attempts where each side lost thousands of men, soldiers obtained the city of Caen and the peoples were liberated. The city of Caen was, without a doubt, the greatest obstacle stopping the advance inland for the allies who were landing in Normandy (Ambrose, 1995). In that first month of the campaign to liberate Normandy, 10,000 Americans died (Colombani & Wells, 2004). And to honor these efforts, the Normandy people have created a living history tour of all the Battlefields of Normandy where a person can stand on the battlefields, walk inside the concrete forts, and touch the cannons used. Caen is also home to one of the most impressive WWII museums in France, *Le Mémorial de Caen, un musée pour la paix* (The Caen Memorial, a Museum for Peace), which includes an American garden, live footage of the war, and remnants of the 9/11 attacks. Normandy is also home of the American Cemetery and Memorial, which brings in visitors from around the world, including thousands of Americans each year (Fischer, 2005). And today, the Normandy people are still very thankful for those sacrifices of the Allied Forces, and have not forgotten them. When the month of June comes each year, Normandy people fly American, Canadian, and British flags outside their homes, hold parades celebrating Ally troops, and hold gatherings and get-togethers at homes and pubs throughout their cities.

This regional history has shaped the culture of French people in the Normandy area and has also been a part of each citizens' enculturation in society (Fischer, 2005). The effects of this pro-American sentiment may have confounded the results in this research, and if so, do not accurately represent the opinions of the French people in general. To collect a more generalized opinion of French people, this research could be carried out again in another area of France, particularly the south of France, where Americans did not directly take part in the liberation of the French people. For example, Marseille is a city in the south of France and has an interesting history of liberation during World War II. Under the direction of General Monsabert, Marseille was liberated by French soldiers on the 28th of August after 5 days of combat. They lost 1,800 French soldiers in the battle, but captured approximately 11,000 Germans (U.S. Army Center of Military History, n.d.). In Marseille, Americans did not receive the sentiments and credit for liberation; French soldiers did instead. Without regional history of pro-Americanism in the south of France, there may be a much more representative opinion of Americans, and possibly significantly different results in relation to in-group tendencies and anti-American sentiment as expressed in this hypothesis.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As well as future research on the regional differences in both France and the United States, future research is also needed on this American "psyche of violence" that was explored in this research. This "psyche" appears to be prevalent in our society, as Americans focus on the *context* of violent acts instead of the acts themselves when passing judgment. For example, in a courtroom setting, juries tend to focus on what provoked the violent act and what the consequence of the act were rather than the viciousness of the act itself when determining guilt and sentencing. A jury is much more likely to give a wife a lighter sentencing for the murder of her husband after they learn that her husband abused her for years. When talking to delinquent youth, I have seen these themes repeated. Teens determine anything after provocation as "just", regardless of the act, and then regard the initiator as "getting what they deserved". Even further down the line, young children make "he/she started it!" one of their most popular remarks. Even though I feel this phenomenon can be generalized to most of our society, there is little statistical evidence of it in psychological research. Today, critics focus on blaming the violence in our society on video games, television and media violence, or family dysfunction. However, I think delving in to the psyche of the American may prove as more beneficial than the cultural blame on the externals in our society and may, one day, serve as the foundation of reinventing the culture of this country.

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