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Social Psychology

A Unit Lesson Plan for High School Psychology Teachers

Activity 6.1

Defining Aggression

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The major point of this activity is to illustrate psychological constructs, and as such, it would be appropriate for you to use it in conjunction with discussions of operational definitions or tests and measurements. The only advance preparation is the reproduction of the Aggression Questionnaire. The activity is appropriate for classes of any size, although the data-reporting sections would need to be modified for classes of more than 50. No prior knowledge of psychology is necessary.

This activity addresses the standard in the Variations in Individual and Group Behavior Domain of the *National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula:* VC-3. Social influence and relationships.

Concept

This activity is designed to generate class discussion on the definition of aggression and related issues of causation and control. It exposes students to a large number of issues involved in defining aggression and helps them to understand the complexity of such a construct and, thus, the reasons why their classmates and psychologists disagree about its meaning.

Aggression is a topic included in virtually every textbook on introductory psychology. Some books discuss aggression in the section on motivation and emotion, whereas others cover it as part of social psychology. Most include it in reference to research on humans, but discussion of some animal studies of aggression is also common. Treatment of related concepts such as violence, anger, frustration, and assertiveness are also common topics.

Although textbook coverage of aggression is almost guaranteed, a definition of the term is not. In a nonrandom sample of 10 introductory psychology books (selected from my bookcase), 5 provided an explicit definition of aggression, but the others left the meaning embedded in a series of paragraphs and so required the reader to serve as lexicographer. Considering the complexity of the term *aggression*, it is not surprising that these authors might choose to avoid espousing a particular definition.

In this activity, aggression is used as an example of a typical construct in psychology, permeated with a host of subtle meanings and not-so-subtle disagreements that make it difficult to reach a consensual definition. You could use other constructs such as intelligence or self-esteem, but I chose aggression because it generates considerable discussion among students. Anecdotal evidence for the fascination with this topic can be drawn from the prevalence of aggression as a theme in movies and television, the popularity of sports, and the interest many people show in reports of violent crime.

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The exercise described here can be used in a number of classes, including introductory psychology or anywhere you treat the topic of aggression. It should be used prior to any lecture on aggression and before the students have read their textbook coverage of the subject. This activity works best in a class of 50 students or fewer, but by altering the data-reporting procedures, it can be used in much larger classes, although discussion obviously will suffer in large classes. The activity takes about 50 minutes but could be made shorter or longer. Your role in this exercise is to serve as a tabulator of the data and as a moderator of the discussion.

Materials

You will need to make enough copies of the Aggression Questionnaire shown at the end of this activity for each student in the class.

Instructions

At the beginning of the class, give each student a copy of the Aggression Questionnaire containing 25 numbered statements. Instruct the students as follows: "Read each statement and decide whether or not you believe the situation described is one of aggression." Wording of this instruction is critical so as not to bias the responses. Avoid using phrases like "aggressive act" or "aggressive behavior," because one of the issues to be discussed is whether some overt behavior needs to occur in aggression. Tell students to circle the number of each statement that describes aggression. They should respond according to their own beliefs and not how they think they should respond or how they think most people would respond. Compliance with this request can be enhanced by telling the students not to put their names on the questionnaires. Indeed, there is no reason in this exercise to know how a particular person responded. You may want to have the students indicate their gender on the questionnaire if you are interested in looking at potential gender differences in the definition of aggression. Such differences, if obtained, would undoubtedly add to the interest in the discussion.

Allow the students about 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Most, if not all, of the students will finish before that time, so you should be ready to proceed when the last person has finished. Collect the questionnaires, shuffle, and redistribute them to the class so that each student gets a copy. Most students will be given a questionnaire other than their own, but it is unimportant if they get their own copy back. This procedure allows students to report on the responses that may or may not be their own, thus eliminating a potential source of embarrassment.

Record the data on the board by reading each statement aloud and ask the students to raise their hands if the item is circled on the questionnaire they are holding. It is important to know the exact size of the class in this exercise to know the unanimity. For example, with a class size of 34, total agreement would get a score of 34, in which case every student agreed that the item described aggression; a score of zero would mean that no one thought the item described aggression. A unanimous score of zero is rare and typically occurs only on those items in which there seems to be no intent to harm. Tabulating the data on the chalkboard can be accomplished quickly, usually in less than 5 minutes, so that the bulk of the class time can be devoted to discussion.

Discussion

Use the questionnaire results to get the students talking about how aggression is defined. You might begin with those items for which there is greater agreement and proceed to those on which the class is evenly divided. Note that the 25 statements are quite diverse and are intended to span the gamut of issues related to aggression: harm to living versus nonliving things (statements 9 and 23), accident versus intention (8 and 21), actual damage versus no physical damage (10, 13, and 18), self-defense (3, 13, and 14), duty or job responsibility (3, 4, 19, 20, and 22), predation and instinctual behavior

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(1, 2, and 25), survival (1, 6, and 16), acts involving animals other than humans (7, 16, 17, and 18), covert acts (11 and 14), inaction (12 and 15), self-injury (24), and killing for sport (17 and 25).

Help students grasp these issues by grouping the related items in the discussion. For example, statements 16 and 17 make an interesting comparison. The latter is more often viewed as aggressive, and a similar pattern emerges in statements 1 and 25. In both pairs, students distinguish between killing for food and killing for sport. Many will argue that food seeking justifies the act and would not label it aggression. Debate on these items and many others is typically lively, and opposing viewpoints are common. If alternative views are not forthcoming on some issues, you may wish to play the role of devil's advocate.

If there is time, or in a separate lecture in the next class period, you can present some of the definitions of aggression proposed by psychologists.

Consider the following examples:

1. "Behavior intended to hurt another person" (Freedman, 1982, p. 259).
2. "Any behavior whose intent is to inflict harm or injury on another living being" (McGee & Wilson, 1984, p. 503).
3. "Hostile or forceful action intended to dominate or violate" (Lefrançois, 1982, p. 596).
4. "Behavior that is intended to injure another person (physically or verbally) or to destroy property" (Atkinson, Atkinson, & Hilgard, 1983, p. 321).
5. "A response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism" (Buss, 1961, p. 3).

The first four definitions require intent, but the last one does not. The first one limits aggression to humans, whereas the second and fifth broaden it to include all living organisms. But what about kicking wastebaskets and smashing tennis rackets? That could be considered aggressive under the fourth definition. All definitions talk about behaviors, actions, or responses but are unclear as to whether inaction can be aggressive or not. Providing these definitions to students helps them to understand that, like themselves, psychologists also have some difficulty in agreeing on what does or does not constitute aggression.

Students in my class consistently have rated this activity high in terms of satisfaction and as an exercise in learning. Written comments indicate that a number of them believe that it serves to sharpen their critical thinking skills. A few miss the point and want to be told the "real" definition of aggression after the exercise is over, but that kind of reaction is quite rare.

You can use this exercise as a basis for discussion or as a lecture on the causes of aggression. Questions for discussion include the following: Is aggression instinctual? Is aggression a natural reaction to conditions such as frustration, conflict, and pain? Is aggression learned, and if so, how and from what sources? This last question presents a good opportunity to discuss aggression in the media, particularly television, and what effect it may have on the behavior of viewers (see Liebert, Sprafkin, & Davidson, 1982). Other topics of interest include aggression in athletics, competitiveness versus aggressiveness, assertiveness versus aggressiveness, the positive role of aggression, violent crime, the relation of prejudice to aggression, and methods for the control of aggression.

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From

Benjamin, L. T., Jr. (1987). Defining aggression. In *Activities handbook for the teaching of psychology* (Vol. 2). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Aggression Questionnaire

1. A spider eats a fly.
2. Two wolves fight for the leadership of the pack.
3. A soldier shoots an enemy at the front line.
4. The warden of a prison executes a convicted criminal.
5. The juvenile gang attacks members of another gang.

6 Two men fight for a piece of bread.

7. A man viciously kicks a cat.
8. A man, while cleaning a window, knocks over a flowerpot, which, in falling, injures a pedestrian.
9. A girl kicks a wastebasket.
10. Mr. X, a notorious gossip, speaks disparagingly of many people of his acquaintance.
11. A man mentally rehearses a murder he is about to commit.
12. An angry son purposely fails to write to his mother, who is expecting a letter and will be hurt if none arrives.
13. An enraged boy tries with all his might to inflict injury on his antagonist, a bigger boy, but is not successful in doing so. His efforts simply amuse the bigger boy.
14. A man daydreams of harming his antagonist, but has no hope of doing so.
15. A senator does not protest the escalation of bombing to which he is morally opposed.
16. A farmer beheads a chicken and prepares it for supper.
17. A hunter kills an animal and mounts it as a trophy.
18. A dog snarls at a mail carrier, but does not bite.
19. A physician gives a flu shot to a screaming child.
20. A boxer gives his opponent a bloody nose.
21. A Girl Scout tries to assist an elderly woman but trips her by accident.
22. A bank robber is shot in the back while trying to escape.
23. A tennis player smashes his racket after missing a volley.
24. A person commits suicide.
25. A cat kills a mouse, parades around with it, and then discards it.

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Johnson (1972), Kaufmann (1970), and Krech, Crutchfield, Livson, Wilson, and Parducci (1982); full citations are listed under Activity 6.1 References.

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