

Media Violence and Violent Behavior

We will use Brad Bushman's (see Bushman & Huesmann, 2012, for review) experiments on media violence and aggression to illustrate the five criteria for establishing causal relationships. Bushman's study focused in part on this specific research question: Do individuals who view a violent videotape act more aggressively than individuals who view a nonviolent videotape?

Undergraduate psychology students were recruited to watch a 15-minute videotape in a screening room, one student at a time. Half of the students watched a movie excerpt that was violent, and half watched a nonviolent movie excerpt. After viewing the videotape, the students were told that they were to compete with another student, in a different room, on a reaction-time task. When the students saw a light cue, they were to react by trying to click a computer mouse faster than their opponent. On a computer screen, the students set a level of radio static that their opponents would hear when the opponents reacted more slowly. The students themselves heard this same type of noise when they reacted more slowly than their opponents at the intensity level supposedly set by their opponents.

Each student in the study participated in 25 trials, or competitions, with the unseen opponent. Their aggressiveness was operationalized as the intensity of noise that they set for their opponents over the course of the 25 trials. The louder the noise level they set, the more aggressively they were considered to be behaving toward their opponents. The question that we will focus on first is whether students who watched the violent video behaved more aggressively than those who watched the nonviolent video.