Violent Video Games and Attitudes Towards Victims of Crime: An Empirical Study Among Youth

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that playing violent video games may be associated with an increase in acceptance of violence and positive attitudes towards perpetrators of crime. This study is the first to investigate the relationship between playing violent video games and attitudes towards victims of crime. A total of 206 young people (aged 12-24 years) completed measures of attitudes towards victims and violent video game exposure. The results suggest that exposure to violent video games is associated with less concern being reported for victims of crime. Young people who play more violent video games reported less concern for general victims and for culpable victims, and these effects cannot be explained by gender or age differences. The results are discussed in relation to relevant research in the area, along with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Attitudes, Exposure, Victims of Crime, Video Games, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Azjen (2005) argues that attitudes can be described as “dispositions to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution or event” (2005, p.3). Social psychologists are interested in the impact of attitudes on behaviour and in particular the impact of attitudes of different strengths on behaviour. The MODE model of attitudes (Fazio, 1986; 1990; Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999) argues that attitudes are learned associations in memory and that the strength of attitudes has a bearing on their influence on our perceptions and our judgments regarding the information we process. It can be argued that the impact of video games on a person’s attitudes according to this theory could increase the accessibility of attitudes, where a person’s attitude could be easier to access due to long-term exposure to similar attitudes in video game scenes.

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Attitudes Towards Victims

Attributions are made about people who are victims, and regarding the level of responsibility of the victim for the crime of which they have been a victim. Research on attitudes towards victims has explored the types of victims that appear to elicit higher levels of blame or a lack of empathy and understanding from others. Victim blaming can be described as a devaluing act that occurs when the victim of a crime or an accident is held responsible for the crimes that have been committed against them (Andrew, Brewin & Rose, 2003).

The research on attitudes towards victims of sexual violence has focused on two main explanations which have been proposed to explain this tendency to attribute higher levels of attribution of blame to victims. These explanations relate to the use of defensive processes people will use to protect themselves, while explaining the action that has occurred to victims of rape. The Just World Theory (Lerner & Matthews, 1967) and the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Shaver, 1970) explain how people can distance themselves from the plight of the victim, and through this process elicits higher levels of victim blame, than expected, while simultaneously comforting themselves that they are safe/exempt from this type of occurrence. The Just World Theory (Lerner, 1965, 1981), argues that people can find it difficult to understand a world that is chaotic and where people get hurt who do not deserve it. The theory states that to overcome this difficulty people can argue that victims may have somehow deserved the fate that occurred to them. The Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Muller, Caldwell & Hunter, 1994; Shaver, 1970; Thornton, Ryckman & Robbins, 1982) argues that individuals attribute positive attributions to people who are similar to us, which can have an additional benefit of protecting us from negative attributions if we were in a similar situation in the future (Anderson, 2004).

Research with children has focused on the perceptions that young people have on victims of bullying and explored positive or negative attitudes towards this form of peer aggressive behaviour. Rigby and Slee (1993) found that a positive attitude towards victims correlated negatively with bullying behaviour in an Australian sample of children aged 6- to 16-years of age, while Boulton and Hawker (2000) argue that attitudes towards bullying were found to significantly predict involvement in bullying with a group of 13- to 15-year olds. Similar research has found that one of the main predictors of readiness to support victims of bullying was having a positive attitude towards victims (Rigby & Johnson, 2006). In relation to gender differences primary school students have been found to be more accepting of girls use of violence and the boys were more accepting of violence overall than the girls in the study (Price et al., 1999).

Positive attitudes towards aggression and violence have been found among aggressive children and adolescents, as compared to their non-aggressive counterparts (e.g. Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). More recently, results of several studies have shown that children who bully others also express more positive attitudes regarding the use of violence and aggression in response to social difficulties (e.g., Bentley & Li, 1995; Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Olweus, 1997). Hymel, Rocke-Henderson and Bonanno (2005) set out to examine the processes by which student attitudes and beliefs contribute to their involvement in bullying behaviour within the framework of moral disengagement. The researchers argue that young people often justify their behaviour through social cognitive strategies that permit moral disengagement during the school years as a means of justifying and rationalising bullying behaviour. Researchers have argued that in order to explain and protect ourselves, people can attribute blame to victims and this can then leads to a less positive view of victims. In research with children, Fox, Elder, Gater and Johnson (2010) found that a strong belief in a just world in children was associated not only with high self-esteem but also with increased sympathy for victims of bullying.
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