

# Indirect aggression on screen

## A hidden problem?

**T**HROUGHOUT history people have found violence and aggression entertaining. The Romans cheered in colossal arenas as gladiators were brutally murdered. In medieval England spectators applauded as knights fought each other in jousting tournaments. Shakespearean audiences were awed with bloody and violent conclusions of plays such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Violence in entertainment today exists in a more accessible form, with over 60 per cent of all television programmes containing some form (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Psychologists have studied the effects of viewing violence on television and in the movies for the last 50 years. Early studies were criticised for failing to establish that television has a direct effect on aggressive behaviour (e.g. Howitt & Dembo, 1974), but research within the past two decades has demonstrated such an effect (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood *et al.*, 1991). Most findings indicate that viewing violence influences children to become more aggressive, either in their attitudes or their actual behaviour.

However, violence is not the only form of aggression in the media. Attempts to harm and manipulate others via plotting and scheming behind their backs are also



**SARAH M. COYNE** on a new twist in the media violence debate.

major themes in entertainment throughout history. Psychologists call this covert form 'indirect aggression', and it can include gossiping, spreading rumours, and excluding others from the social group (Buss, 1961; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1988). For example, in the 1999 film *Cruel Intentions* the lead characters secretly manipulate their closest friends to cause pain to all those around them. They successfully spread rumours, damage relationships, distort reality, and destroy the reputations of those in their inner circle, while appearing the nicest, prettiest, and most popular people in school. (See the boxes below and on the following pages for further examples of indirect aggression in the media.)

Few people have been imprisoned for being indirectly aggressive. However, it is still a common form of bullying in schools, the workplace and at home, and it can leave lifelong emotional scars on victims, especially younger females (Crick *et al.*,

1999; Simmons, 2002). Victims of indirect aggression have been shown to experience increased levels of depression, peer rejection, anxiety and loneliness, and in extreme cases it has been implicated in suicide (Baumeister, 1990; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). In fact, a recent study found that children perceive some forms of indirect bullying to be just as harmful as physical or verbal forms of bullying (Eslea, 2004).

Unlike in research on physical aggression, the causes and consequences of indirect aggression have only recently been examined. If violence in the media has been shown to produce a small to moderate effect on a viewer's aggression, how is indirect aggression portrayed and does it have similar effects?

### How much indirect aggression is there on TV?

Today's television screens seem to be filled with violence, but how much indirect aggression is there on television and how does it tend to be depicted? A recent study (Coyne & Archer, 2004) involved a detailed content analysis of over 200 hours of television programmes popular among British adolescents (e.g. *EastEnders*, *Friends*, *Simpsons*, *Star Trek*). Each aggressive act (indirect, physical or verbal) identified was coded for reward/punishment, justification and realism of the aggression, character attractiveness, and the relationship between the aggressor and the victim.

Overall, indirect aggression was portrayed in 92 per cent of these programmes: more than physical aggression (55 per cent), and verbal aggression (86 per cent). Indirect aggressors were more likely to be female, attractive, rewarded, justified, and realistic. Importantly, the last four characteristics of aggressors have all been shown to increase

## MEAN GIRLS

Regina, Gretchen and Karen are known throughout their school as 'The Plastics': gorgeous, popular girls who know everything about everyone, and use this information to ruin the lives of their less popular classmates. They create a 'Burn Book', where most students and teachers in the school are given a page that mocks their looks, weight, sexuality, and so on. They spread rumours, destroy relationships and manipulate even each other to become 'Queen Bee' of the school.

They rule the school, until Cady comes to town. After Regina steals her crush, Cady becomes best friends with The Plastics, all as a guise to bring them down. Cady decides to use some bitchy tactics of her own, saying 'this is girl world...all the fighting has to be sneaky'. She tricks Regina into gaining weight right before the Spring Formal, turns her best friends against her and steals her boyfriend.

PARAMOUNT/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

subsequent physical forms of aggression (e.g. Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963). Indirect aggression was also more likely to be portrayed in soap operas than other genres. As soap operas such as *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Hollyoaks* set out to be reasonably realistic and are extremely popular among children and adults, it is especially important to examine these programmes in detail.

### Is there a relationship between fantasy and reality?

A recent study revealed that the amount of television violence girls viewed in childhood predicted their level of indirect aggression in adulthood (Huesmann *et al.*, 2003). However, what are the long-term effects of viewing indirect aggression? Before attempting time-consuming and expensive longitudinal studies into this question, it is important to establish that there is a relationship between indirect aggression viewed on television and in real life.

Our study of 347 British adolescents reveals that indirectly aggressive girls viewed more indirect aggression on television than non-aggressive girls did (Coyne & Archer, in press). This finding was based on the children's individual level of aggression as nominated by their peers, and self-reports of their favourite television programmes. It may be that after viewing rewarded gossiping, backbiting and rumour spreading, these girls are particularly likely to use this form of aggression in their own lives. An alternative explanation is that aggressive individuals are drawn to programmes portraying indirect aggression, as they are similar to the situations they encounter in real life.

The possibility nevertheless remains that the cumulative result of viewing programmes containing indirect aggression may be to increase that individual's use of indirect aggression in real life. Our study therefore provides a useful starting point for future studies examining the long-term effects of viewing indirect aggression in the media.

### Is there a short-term effect of viewing indirect aggression?

Although the causal connection cannot be ascertained from a correlational design, a further study (Coyne *et al.*, 2004) did examine the influence of viewing this form of aggression using an experimental procedure. In this study 199 adolescents

were shown one of three videos: one portraying indirect aggression, one portraying physical aggression, and one portraying no aggression (non-violent sports clips).

Before viewing the videos the adolescents were made angry by an arrogant male confederate. The confederate gave them a standard test, told them they had all done miserably, and then stormed out of the room. After viewing one of the three videos, participants were given an opportunity to evaluate the confederate. They were told that this evaluation would have a direct bearing on his chances of being re-hired at the university and given a raise. By evaluating the confederate as overly negative, participants could be indirectly aggressive against him, as their actions were covert and could harm his future career. This experimental paradigm has been stated to be the laboratory equivalent of spreading rumours (Buss, 1961). After evaluating the confederate, participants were given a series of ambiguous vignettes dealing with potential aggression, and were asked to write down what they would do if they were personally in each situation.

Participants who viewed any form of aggression (indirect or physical) rated the confederate more negatively than participants viewing no aggression. This appears to be a general effect of viewing aggression on television, and shows that viewing one form of aggression (physical) can affect a different form of aggressive behaviour (indirect). However, this study also demonstrated specific effects of viewing one type of aggression. The participants who viewed indirect aggression also listed more indirect ways of harming others when responding to the vignettes, while participants who viewed the physical aggression listed more physically aggressive ways. Participants who viewed no aggression listed responses as expected by chance.

### What can we learn?

Media violence has been studied for many years, with a large number of studies examining the effect of viewing violence and how this violence is portrayed on television. These findings extend the research by showing that indirect aggression is also shown frequently on television and influences aggressive behaviour in some individuals.

The findings from these studies have

CASTLE ROCK/DAGOTA FILMS/THE KOBAL COLLECTION/KOZLOV, ROUF

## OTHELLO

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the manipulative Iago spreads rumours, destroys relationships, and ruins lives to exact his revenge and to gain power amongst those in high positions in society. In a soliloquy, Iago spells out his bitter hatred for Othello and schemes to make Othello jealous by making it appear as if his wife, Desdemona, is having an affair. Iago appears as Othello's most trusted and loyal adviser; yet he uses this trust to completely manipulate Othello to the degree that he evolves into a jealous madman and eventually strangles Desdemona.

implications for parents, children, media producers and researchers alike. Parents may wish to regulate the amount of indirect aggression their children are viewing, especially at very young ages. Parents may also wish to watch the soap operas that contain extremely high levels of indirect aggression with their children, so they can discuss the themes present.

This research also has a number of implications for media producers, particularly for soap opera producers where much of the conflict involves indirect ways of aggressing. One potential reason why these soap operas are so popular could be because of their focus on exciting and devious ways of aggressing. The way indirect aggression is being portrayed should also be examined. By showing young, attractive females who are often justified and rewarded for their indirectly aggressive actions, the media may be providing inappropriate role models, especially for younger girls. It may be teaching young children that it is acceptable to behave aggressively when the cause permits, and when they think they can get away without anyone discovering their actions. This may be one of the reasons for the high level of indirect bullying that becomes evident during adolescence. Television producers should

## EASTENDERS

Nathan and Barry are brothers who work together at the used car lot and love the same woman. Barry got the girl in the end, and Nathan is incredibly bitter; he wants to get back at Barry, while still appearing considerate and pleasant to everyone else.

First, Nathan tries to sabotage Barry at work. He calls potential clients and then tells them about deals elsewhere, so it will appear that Barry is a bad salesman. Nathan also gets one of his friends to pose as a customer, become upset and storm out without buying anything, again to make Barry appear incompetent. Nathan then tells Barry's wife of Barry's failures at work, and convinces her to get a job of her own, leaving Barry with their young child. Nathan carefully orchestrates the situation, so he winds up spending a great deal of time with the wife, leaving Barry to change the dirty nappies.

Barry, however, is not beaten. He convinces himself to try once more, and ends up with a dead cert of a customer at the dealership. He makes a fantastic deal, puts the money in the safe, and closes up the shop for the night. Nathan is frantic that Barry is actually going to look good, and sneaks into the dealership after hours. He wrecks the place and steals all the money in the safe. The next morning, Barry is blamed for not taking the money to the bank and is ruined.

take a hard look at how they are portraying indirect aggression in their programmes: if future research finds further effects, it may even be necessary for programmes with very high levels of indirect aggression to warn viewers of the content. Why not, if viewers are warned of violent content and indirect aggression can have a similar effect on the victim?

Obviously, I am not advocating that we remove all forms of aggression from television. This would not be realistic, as these forms of aggression do occur in real

life and should be represented in our media. In fact, they clearly make for good TV, as their portrayal in soaps helps to draw a wide audience of all ages that are often religiously devoted to these programmes for decades. However, what I am suggesting is that the sheer frequency and portrayal of indirect aggression may be giving individuals an unrealistic and counterproductive view of what forms of behaviour are acceptable to use in their own lives.

Throughout researching this topic

I have witnessed a great deal of indirect aggression on television and have heard several stories of the harmful effects of real-life aggression. This research has helped me to recognise how common and how hurtful indirect aggression can be among adolescents. The way that television portrays this form of aggression may be influencing some individuals to act in similar ways. Being a victim of indirect aggression can leave scars that may not fade as easily as those received during a physical fight. It is important that we discover all the potential reasons why a person uses this behaviour against others and try to curtail it as much as possible. It is important to educate teachers, parents and media producers about the harmful effects of indirect aggression and to teach them how to recognise and prevent the spread of this behaviour. By doing so, we can hopefully discover the effects of viewing indirect aggression on television and more importantly, how to prevent these cruel intentions from becoming a reality.

■ Sarah M. Coyne is a psychology lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston. E-mail: [smcoyne@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:smcoyne@uclan.ac.uk).

## WEBLINKS

Sarah Coyne's homepage: [www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psychol/staff/sarah.htm](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psychol/staff/sarah.htm)  
International Society for Research on Aggression: [www.israsociety.com](http://www.israsociety.com)  
Mean Girls webpage: [www.meangirlsmovie.com](http://www.meangirlsmovie.com)

## References

- Baumeister, R.F. (1990). Suicide as escape from self. *Psychological Review*, 97, 90–113.
- Berkowitz, L. & Rawlings, E. (1963). Effects of film violence on inhibitions against subsequent aggression. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 66, 405–412.
- Bushman, B. & Anderson, C.A. (2001). Media violence and the American public. *American Psychologist*, 56, 477–489.
- Buss, A. (1961). *The psychology of aggression*. New York: Wiley.
- Coyne, S.M. & Archer, J. (2004). Indirect aggression in the media: A content analysis of British television programs. *Aggressive Behavior*, 30, 254–271.
- Coyne, S.M. & Archer, J. (in press). The relationship between indirect and physical aggression on television and in real life. *Social Development*.
- Coyne, S.M., Archer, J. & Eslea, M. (2004). Cruel intentions on television and in real life: Can viewing indirect aggression increase viewers' subsequent indirect aggression? *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 88, 234–253.
- Crick, N.R. & Grotpeter, J. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66, 710–722.
- Crick, N.R., Werner, N., Casas, J., O'Brien, K., Nelson, D., Grotpeter, J. et al. (1999). Childhood aggression and gender: A new look at an old problem. In D. Bernstein (Ed.) *Gender and motivation*. Nebraska Symposium on Motivation (Vol 45, pp.75–141). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Eslea, M. (2004). *School bullying: Severity, distress and coping*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Central Lancashire, Preston.
- Howitt, D. & Dembo, R. (1974). A subcultural account of media effects. *Human Relations*, 27, 25–41.
- Huesmann, R., Moise, J., Podolski, C. & Eron, L. (2003). Longitudinal relations between children's exposure to television violence and their later aggressive and violent behavior in young adulthood: 1977–1992. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 201–221.
- Lagerspetz, K., Björkqvist, K. & Peltonen, T. (1988). Is indirect aggression typical of females? Gender differences in aggressiveness in 11- to 12-year-old children. *Aggressive Behavior*, 14, 403–414.
- Paik, H. & Comstock, G. (1994). The effects of television violence on antisocial behaviour: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research*, 21, 516–546.
- Paquette, J.A. & Underwood, M.K. (1999). Gender differences in young adolescents' experiences of peer victimization: Social and physical aggression. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 45, 242–266.
- Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Harcourt.
- Wood, W., Wong, F. & Chachere, G. (1991). Effects of media violence on viewers' aggression in unconstrained social interaction. *Psychological Bulletin*, 109, 371–303.

