

Defense Mechanisms and Self-Reported Violence Toward Partners and Strangers

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We examined the relationship between defense mechanisms and self-reported violence toward partners and toward strangers in a sample of college student men. Fifty men completed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943) and the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), a self-report measure of strategies (including violence) for resolving conflicts with partners and strangers. The TAT responses were coded for defense mechanisms with the Defense Mechanisms Manual (Cramer, 1991b). The relative use of identification was negatively correlated ($r = -.49, p < .001$), and the relative use of projection was positively correlated ($r = .49, p < .001$) with the most extreme CTS report of violence toward partners. The relative use of identification was negatively correlated with the most extreme CTS report of violence toward strangers ($r = -.34, p < .05$). The relative use of denial was positively correlated with the most extreme CTS report of violence toward strangers ($r = .32, p < .05$).

Violence is an important public health problem related to both physical and psychiatric symptoms (Campbell, 2002; Coker et al., 2000; Kessler, Molnar, Fuer, & Applebaum, 2001; Porcerelli et al., 2003) and cuts across all socioeconomic strata (Forjuoh, Kinnane, Coben, Dearwater, & Songer, 1997). The personality characteristics of men who are violent toward their partners have been studied, and the evidence suggests that more severe violence toward partners is associated with general violence and antisocial characteristics (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Magdol et al., 1998; Simon, 1997; Tolman & Bennett, 1991). Very little empirical research has considered the psychodynamics of violence. Cogan, Porcerelli, and Dromgoole (2000) found that anxiety about masculinity is related to partner violence, whereas antisocial characteristics are related to violence to-

ward strangers. Cogan, Porcerelli, Sharp, and Ballinger (2001) reported that the core conflictual relationship themes (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998) of men who are violent toward their partners involve wishes for control. People who have not reached mature levels of personality development are more vulnerable to acting on angry or violent feelings toward others (e.g., Apter et al., 1989; Feldman & Gowen, 1994; Pfeffer, Plutchik, Mizurichi, & Lipkins, 1987), and Cramer (1999) found a relationship between personality disorders and immature defense use.

Violence is most common in late adolescence (Pastore & Maguire, 2000) and is quite common among college students (Cogan & Porcerelli, 2003). Late adolescence is an important time in intrapsychic development characterized by a significant shift to the use of more mature defense mechanisms (Cramer, 1991b; Porcerelli, Thomas, Hibbard, & Cogan,

1998). Immature defense mechanisms may not be sufficient to control aggression. For example, the denial of aggressive urges and the projection of them onto another may increase the likelihood that a person will be aggressive toward another.

The most often used measure of violence is the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) on which people report their behaviors in situations involving conflicts or disagreements with others, increasing from Item 1 ("discussed the issue calmly") to Item 18 ("used a knife or gun"). In a recent study of college student men using the CTS, 14% reported committing physical violence toward partners, and 35% reported committing physical violence toward strangers (Cogan & Porcerelli, 2003). No satisfactory alternative to the self-report of violence has been developed (Straus, 1990). Most violence is not reported to authorities and arrest statistics are not free from bias. Although the National Crime Survey carries out household surveys of crimes, most violence is not experienced as a crime (Straus, 1990). In contrast, the CTS asks about the occurrence of specific behaviors. Although several self-report measures are available, the CTS remains the most often used measure of violence (Schafer, 1996), and a considerable amount of research has found the CTS to be acceptable in terms of reliability and validity (e.g., Straus, 1990).

We undertook the assessment of defense mechanisms using Cramer's (1991a) Defense Mechanisms Manual (DMM) for the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943). The DMM provides an overall level of defensive functioning ranging from immature to mature. Immature defenses are related to more psychopathology (Cramer, 1999; Hibbard et al., 1994) and poorer interpersonal functioning (Cramer, Blatt, & Ford, 1988). We hypothesized that men with more mature defense mechanisms would report less violent means of conflict resolution with both partners and strangers.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty undergraduate student men who were enrolled in beginning psychology classes participated in the research. The average age of the students was 19.62 years ($SD = 1.50$, range = 18 to 25 years). The participants were White (70%), Hispanic (14%), Black (4%), and other (12%). The participants were freshmen (58%), sophomores (30%), juniors (4%) and seniors (8%).

Materials

Each man completed a brief demographic measure with questions about sex, age, race/ethnicity, and academic classification and responded to the TAT, the CTS-Partners, and the CTS-Strangers, described below.

TAT. Each man told stories in response to six TAT cards (1, 2, 4, 6BM, 7BM, and 13MF; Murray, 1943), describing what was going on in the picture, what led up to what was going on, what the outcome might be, and the thoughts and feelings of each character.

CTS. The CTS (Straus, 1979) is an 18-item self-report measure on which respondents indicate the frequency of occurrence of 18 behaviors used in conflicts with partners and with strangers in the past year. The items increase in aggressiveness and range from Item 1 ("discussed the issue calmly") to Item 18 ("used a knife or gun"). The most extreme item the respondent reported was identified as the "high point" for partners and for strangers. Internal consistency reliability of the CTS Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Violence subscales of the CTS is adequate (Straus, 1990). Reports of husbands and wives agree with respect to the most extreme item reported (Szinovacz, 1983). Both concurrent (Boone & Flint, 1988) and predictive validity (Gully & Dengerink, 1983) have been demonstrated.

DMM. The TAT responses were coded using the DMM (Cramer, 1991b). The DMM assesses three defense mechanisms: denial, the least mature; projection, intermediate; and identification, the most mature. Each defense is scored according to seven categories that represent different aspects of the defense. For example, denial is scored when there is

1. An omission of a salient aspect of the TAT card.
2. A misperception of some aspect of a card.
3. A reversal of either a usual perception or the story itself.
4. A statement of negation (e.g., "He does not feel angry").
5. A statement of denial of an aspect of a story or situation (e.g., "It did not really happen").
6. Overly maximizing positive aspects of a story or minimizing negative aspects of a story
7. Unexpected goodness or optimism within a story.

A defense can be scored more than once within a story, and more than one defense can be scored for a story.

Defenses were summed across all stories yielding a total score for denial, projection, and identification. To control for the number of defenses for each respondent, relative scores were also used in which the total raw score for each defense (denial, projection, and identification) is divided by the total number of all three defenses. The reliability and validity of the DMM is well established (Cramer, 1991b; Porcerelli & Hibbard, 2003). Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies with the DMM have demonstrated developmental changes in the use of defenses (e.g., Cramer, 1997; Cramer & Brilliant, 2001; Porcerelli et al., 1998). Experimental studies have shown changes in DMM defenses in response to experimental manipulations (e.g., Cramer, 1991a; Cramer & Gaul, 1988).

Procedures

The study procedures were explained to and a written consent was obtained from each man. Each man was tested individually by the same experienced clinician. The TAT stories were audio tape recorded and transcribed. After the TAT interviews were completed, each man completed the demographic and CTS measures. Participants were treated according to the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

The TAT responses of the men were scored by doctoral-level psychologists experienced in scoring the DMM. Coders worked with the DMM scoring manual by scoring TAT protocols provided by Cramer (YEAR), reconciling their scores with those provided by the manual before coding study data. The coders were blind to all demographics and CTS responses of the participants. Thirty-eight of the protocols were double coded, and differences were resolved by discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interrater Reliabilities and Descriptive Statistics

Intraclass correlations (ICC) were calculated using Model 1 (one-way random effects): identification (ICC = .82), projection (ICC = .80), and denial (ICC = .69).

Because the sample size was small, one might be concerned about the distribution of the study variables. As can be seen in Table 1, neither skewness nor kurtosis are problematic (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996) for the DMM or CTS scores.

The average number of words for the TAT protocols was 1,177 words ($SD = 995$ words). The average number of DMM defense scores was 13.9 per protocol ($SD = 4.55$). The number of words for the TAT was related to DMM identification raw scores ($r = .48, p < .001$, large effect size), but not to DMM projection or denial raw scores ($r = -.04, p = .79$, and $r = .23, p = .10$, small and medium effect sizes, respectively). When DMM raw scores were converted to relative scores, the correlation between relative identification and the number of words was no longer significant ($r = .12, p = .41$, small effect size).

Defenses and Violence

The DMM raw score for identification was significantly negatively correlated with the level of the CTS reports of violence to partners ($r = -.52, p < .001$, large effect size), and the DMM raw score for denial was significantly positively correlated with the level of the CTS reports of violence to strangers ($r = .36, p = .01$, medium effect size) as can be seen in Table 2. With respect to DMM relative scores, relative identification was significantly negatively correlated with the level of CTS reports of violence to both partners ($r = -.49, p < .001$, large effect size) and strangers ($r = -.34, p = .02$, medium effect size). Relative projection was significantly positively correlated

TABLE 1
Characteristics of DMM Defense Scores,
Level of CTS Reports to Partners
and to Strangers, and Number of TAT Words

	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
DMM raw scores						
Identification	10.70	9.50	4.22	3 to 21	0.45	-0.40
Projection	2.46	2.00	1.75	0 to 8	1.24	2.42
Denial	0.70	0.50	0.86	0 to 3	1.23	1.03
Level of CTS reports						
To partners	8.09	8.00	3.46	0 to 16	-0.21	0.43
To strangers	9.38	10.00	5.30	0 to 16	-0.25	-1.21
No. of TAT words	1,177	995	685.55	385 to 3,151	1.29	1.29

Note. DMM = Defense Mechanism Manual; CTS = Conflict Tactics Scale; TAT = Thematic Apperception Test.

TABLE 2
Correlations Between the Level of CTS
Reports of Partner and Stranger Violence,
Defense Mechanisms, and the Number
of TAT Words

	<i>Level of CTS Reports</i>		<i>No. of TAT Words</i>
	<i>Partners</i>	<i>Strangers</i>	
Defense Mechanisms Manual			
Identification (raw score)	-.52***	-.06	.48***
Projection (raw score)	.19	.12	-.04
Denial (raw score)	-.08	.36**	.23
Identification (relative score)	-.49***	-.34*	.12
Projection (relative score)	.49***	.16	-.19
Denial (relative score)	.02	.32*	.12

Note. CTS = Conflict Tactics Scale; TAT = Thematic Apperception Test. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

with the level of the CTS reports of violence to partners ($r = .49, p < .001$, large effect size). Relative denial was significantly positively correlated with CTS reports of violence to strangers ($r = .32, p = .02$, medium effect size).

The significant negative correlation of the DMM relative identification score with CTS reports of violence to partners and strangers suggests that student men whose conflicts escalate to more violent behaviors have not attained the age-appropriate shift to a greater relative use of identification, suggesting a developmental lag in ego maturity. Likewise, the significant positive correlation between DMM projection and CTS reports of violence to partners and between DMM denial and CTS reports of violence to strangers suggests that a higher relative use of less mature defenses by student men is related to more violent means of conflict resolution. The findings related to the defense of denial are consistent with the findings of Apter et al. (1989) who concluded that denial as a defense is related to outward directed aggression. Longitudinal studies are necessary to determine whether violence as a means of conflict resolution decreases when more mature levels of defenses are obtained by young adults.

Limitations

Although violence is common among college students (Cogan & Porcerelli, 2003), the college population is relatively healthy and mature, which may have restricted the range of defenses and the range of violent acts. A greater range, frequency, and intensity of violence could be observed, for instance, in a forensic population. What is noteworthy is that the TAT-based assessment of defense mechanisms may relate to a significant public health problem—partner and stranger violence.

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