

20.9: Weapons and Aggression

Learning Objectives

- Study of the "Weapons" effect

Research conducted by

Anderson, Benjamin, and Bartholow

Case study prepared by

David Lane

Overview

The "weapons effect" is the finding that the presence of a weapon or even a picture of a weapon can cause people to behave more aggressively. Although once a controversial finding, the weapons effect is now a well-established phenomenon. Based on this, Anderson, Benjamin, and Bartholow (1998) hypothesize that the presence of a weapon-word prime (such as "dagger" or "bullet") should increase the accessibility of an aggressive word (such as "destroy" or "wound"). The accessibility of a word can be measured by the time it takes to name a word presented on computer screen.

The subjects were undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 24 years. They were told that the purpose of this study was to test reading ability of various words. On each of the 192 trials, a computer presented a priming stimulus word (either a weapon or non-weapon word) for 1.25 seconds, a blank screen for 0.5 seconds, and then a target word (aggressive or non-aggressive word). Each subject named both aggressive and non-aggressive words following both weapon and non-weapon "primes." The experimenter instructed the subjects to read the first word to themselves and then to read the second word out loud as quickly as they could. The computer recorded response times and computed mean response times for each participant for each of the four conditions.

Examples of the four types of words

- Weapon word primes: shotgun, grenade
- Non-weapon word primes: rabbit, fish
- Aggressive word: injure, shatter
- Non-aggressive word: consider, relocate

Questions to Answer

Does the mere presence of a weapon increase the accessibility of aggressive thoughts? More specifically, can a person name an aggressive word more quickly if it is preceded by a weapon word prime than if it is preceded by a neutral (non-aggressive) word prime?

Design Issues

This is a within-subjects design, and each participant provided four scores to the analysis.

Descriptions of Variables

Table 20.9.1: Description of Variables

Variable	Description
gender	1 = female, 2 = male
aw	The time in milliseconds (msec) to name aggressive word following a weapon word prime.

an	The time in milliseconds (msec) to name aggressive word following a non-weapon word prime.
cw	The time in milliseconds (msec) to name a control word following a weapon word prime.
cn	The time in milliseconds (msec) to name a control word following a non-weapon word prime.

Data Files

Guns.xls

References

- Anderson, C.A., Benjamin, A.J., & Bartholow, B.D. (1998). Does the gun pull the trigger? Automatic priming effects of weapon pictures and weapon names. *Psychological Science*, 9, 308-314.

This page titled [20.9: Weapons and Aggression](#) is shared under a [Public Domain](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [David Lane](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.