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Interview With Dr. Craig Anderson: Video Game Violence

Distinguished Lectures/Special Topics

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Dr. Craig Anderson, a leader in the research on the effects of exposure to violent video games on aggressive behavior, was invited to speak at Nebraska Wesleyan University. A group of Nebraska Wesleyan University students interviewed Dr. Anderson. We explored his interest and experiences in this research area.

Since 1997, Nebraska Wesleyan University (NE) has held an endowed lecture to honor the 40-year career of Dr. Clifford Fawl. The FAWL Lecture Series brings distinguished psychologists to the Wesleyan campus to present their

research and interact with undergraduate psychology students. On March 22, 2007, we welcomed

Dr. Craig Anderson as the FAWL lecturer to speak on Violent Video Games: Theory, Research, and Public Policy. Dr. Craig Anderson received his bachelors degree at Butler University (IN) in 1976. He earned a masters degree (1978) and PhD (1980) in psychology at Stanford University (CA). He currently is a distinguished professor of psychology at Iowa State University and is widely regarded as the leader in research on the effects of violent video games and other forms of media violence. He has published widely on depression, loneliness, and shyness; attribution processes; social judgment; and human aggression. He has earned recognition as the second most highly cited scholar in social psychology textbooks. He has testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation's hearing on "The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children" and has served on the Media Violence Expert Panel for the Surgeon General. Dr. Anderson started his visit by discussing the importance of good methodology to a research methods class. He was then interviewed by a small group of Wesleyan students concerning his work on violence and video games.

STUDENT: What was your motivation for starting research on media violence and video games?

ANDERSON: It originally had to do with working on the General Aggression Model and learning about the media violence literature. There were literally hundreds of studies, but there were still gaps and unanswered questions. I had some students looking for research topics that were interesting and publishable, and then they identified gaps in the research. That was the initial reason. Later they basically extended the research using video games to test some aspects of the General Aggression Model. Next, my research team looked at priming issues, which prior to our work, had never been used in the context of media violence effects. After talking to some colleagues in cognitive psychology and debating about which method to use, we thought of using some cognitive measures such as a modified Stroop test but we chose a reading reaction time task.

STUDENT: Looking back on many of your articles, we noticed you first did a study on video games in 1987 and another in 1995, but the majority of your studies have been since 1999. Did this more recent increase in research on the effects of video games have anything to do with Columbine and other school shootings?

ANDERSON: No, it had to do with an internal grant I received about 1996. It funded three

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graduate students and enabled us to start doing research on the effects of violent video games. I had been writing grant proposals on the topic for some time, but this was the first time I had the opportunity to do some of those studies. Then, Columbine came along.

STUDENT: Were you asked to help with any of the Columbine research?

ANDERSON: No, although I was asked to testify in the U.S. Senate hearing about violent video games some time after the shooting.

STUDENT: What group of people do you think are the most susceptible to the effects of violent video games, and why?

ANDERSON: Many researchers in the field of media violence think that people who are high on what you would call trait aggression (especially children and adolescents) are going to be more influenced by exposure to media violence than people who are low on trait aggression. In other words, many scholars believe that highly aggressive people are more susceptible to the harmful effects of media violence than are nonaggressive people. However, I think that the research evidence over the years doesn't bear that out, yet. Some studies show this heightened susceptibility of highly aggressive people, but some studies show the opposite including one of my studies (Anderson, 1997). That study found that people who are lowest on trait aggression showed the biggest effect of a violent movie manipulation. Those data yielded a significant interaction between measures of trait aggression and measures of media violence exposure.

The nonaggressive people who watched a violent movie clip displayed more aggressive thoughts than nonaggressive people who saw the nonviolent clip, but highly aggressive people were relatively unaffected by the movie clip manipulation. Other researchers have found the opposite type of interaction. For example, in some studies those who score high on trait aggressiveness and have been exposed to a lot of violent media are the ones who are most likely to have, at some time in their lives, been arrested for assault. Well, is that because the media violence effect only operates on high trait-aggressive people? Perhaps low traitaggressive people are equally affected, but because their general level of aggression is low, media violence can't increase their willingness to aggress enough to rise to the level of assaulting someone.



STUDENT: From where do you recruit your participants?

ANDERSON: Well, very often, it's a convenience sample. However, the present grant research that my colleagues/students and I have been doing allows us to pay participants. So we are able to pay kids to play video games, which they think is great (laughter). Some try to come in two or three times, and we have to tell them they cannot. In these situations, we have to select samples to fit the particular research question or issue.

STUDENT: In your experimental research, how do you account for the participants who regularly play video games from those who have little to no experience?

ANDERSON: We usually give the participants questionnaires that tell us how much the individuals have played and what kinds of games they play. Prior experience with video games can then figure into the data analysis. We seldom find any kind of difference in our experimental studies between those participants with a lot of experience and those without. The one difference we do find is that participants with a lot of gaming experience really like being in the violent video game condition. Typically, we do not find much of a statistically reliable effect of gaming experience on aggressive thought processes and behavior.

STUDENT: Do you feel that your research has or will have an impact on the video game industry? If so, what impact do you think it will have?

ANDERSON: Our research has probably had a bigger impact in countries other than in the United States. Almost every other modern country has legal restrictions on violent media including video games. Many of them ban some of the games outright and most have age-based restrictions. Certainly the research that my students and I have done over the years has been used by child advocacy groups and others in these countries to make sure that these ratings are enforced. The research certainly has increased the awareness of the issue in the United States. However, there are no U.S. laws regarding violent video games. I

have never said publicly whether I support a legislative solution, because my political opinion is not relevant to what I regard as my scientific expertise. Even in the court cases with which I have been involved, I say upfront that I will not comment on what I think about the law under judicial review. I will talk about what the science says or what it cannot say. The work and interviews that we've done concerning violence in video games is used to get the word out to parents about the effect of violent video games. Our research has had a big impact on parents, but not as big as it needs to be. There are still people teaching their 2- or 3-year-olds how to shoot a gun in these video games.

STUDENT: What are some of the stronger arguments against your research? How do you counter those arguments?

ANDERSON: One of the best arguments, until recently, is that there are no longitudinal studies, but we have now published one (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Previously in my various talks, I had described the lack of longitudinal data on the effects of video games. The paucity of these studies was due to the lack of government support for longitudinal research. The support for the longitudinal study I just mentioned came from non-governmental sources. More recently, we finally got the funding needed to perform a larger, longerterm longitudinal study after being turned down six or seven times. There really aren't any long-term longitudinal studies, such as when you follow the group of individuals and see where these participants end up after several years. Some participants may end up in jail, juvenile detention facilities, or kicked out of school, which makes this an important field of interest. A response to this criticism about the lack of longitudinal studies on violent video games is that such studies have already been done pertaining to television violence, which is the same phenomenon, but some individuals fail to see the similarities between violence on television and violence in video games. People used this lack of a longitudinal study, focusing on violent video games, as a criticism for the evidence found between increased aggression and exposure to violent video games. Of course, they can no longer do this.

STUDENT: Do you have any plans for the future implementation of your research? How should your research be applied to schools, home, everyday life, etc.?

ANDERSON: We haven't been thinking much about intervention studies, mainly because I don't do intervention studies. There is a group at Iowa State University that does intervention studies, but most of their work focuses on drug use and intervention to reduce kids' use of alcohol, tobacco, and various illegal substances. There have been some TV/video game interventions done in school systems, but intervention as a whole is done by another group of researchers.

STUDENT: Where do you think video game research will go from here?

ANDERSON: There are two related issues that are going to be big soon. One is the identification of video game addiction or Internet addiction, including text messaging, as a true addiction in need of clinical intervention for some individuals. The other has to do with attention deficit disorders, executive control, and impulse control. There is potential longterm damage in those brain systems due to extensive viewing of media that flash across the screen and demand constantly shifting attention. Some evidence indicates that extensive use of screening media, whether it is violent or not, leads to attention deficit disorder, especially in very young children who see a lot of TV.

References

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