

Cognition and Aggression: A Reply to Fowers and Richardson

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ABSTRACT. Fowers and Richardson (1993) charge that our theory of aggression is 'infused with unacknowledged liberal individualistic . . . assumptions which portray humans as . . . autonomous, strategic agents seeking to achieve pre-given ends' (Abstract), and that these 'unacknowledged sociocultural and moral values . . . distinctly limit its [our theory's] potential for either fully understanding unwanted forms of human aggression or orienting a practical response to them' (p. 354). In this reply we assert that, when stripped of their jargon, none of these criticisms is valid. The theoretical basis for our model is not disguised but has been specified quite openly and precisely. The theory has not been built on an ideological base of how humans *should* behave but on an empirical foundation of how humans *do* behave. Fowers and Richardson have invented an ideology for which they have coined the term liberal individualism. We suggest that, if they see some of its characteristics in our theory, it is because humans behave that way, not because the theory was derived from the ideology.

In their essay 'Individualism and aggression: A hermeneutic analysis of Huesmann and Eron's cognitive theory of aggression', Fowers and Richardson (1993) charge that our theory is 'infused with unacknowledged liberal individualistic . . . assumptions which portray humans as . . . autonomous, strategic agents seeking to achieve pre-given ends' (Abstract). More specifically they suggest that our theory is 'suffused with unacknowledged sociocultural and moral values in a way that distinctly limits its potential for either fully understanding unwanted forms of human aggression or orienting a practical response to them' (p. 354). They also argue that our 'approach to aggression may inadvertently reinforce aspects of modern culture that are themselves significant sources of unwanted aggression' (Abstract).

When stripped of the jargon in which they are couched, none of these arguments is valid. The authors have been misled by their very selective reading of the literature, including a misattribution of the origins of the theory to the wrong author and the wrong review article (Eron, 1987). Furthermore, the theoretical basis for the theory is not disguised but has been specified quite openly and precisely. The theory has been built not on an ideological base of how humans *should* behave but on an empirical foundation of how humans *do* behave. Fowers and Richardson have invented an ideology for which they have coined the term

liberal individualism. If they see some of its characteristics in our theory, it is because humans behave that way, not because the theory was derived from the ideology.

In the body of this note I elaborate on each of these points with regard to Fowers and Richardson's analysis of our theory. However, I must also contest their general attack on theorizing in psychology. While I have no quarrel with their well-written review of recent thinking on the philosophy of social science research, I have a substantial quarrel with their conclusion that 'attempts to develop *purely* explanatory theories of social reality *do indeed* seem to represent "disguised ideology" ' (pp. 356–367; emphasis added). First, I am puzzled by how a theory could be other than explanatory. Is not the purpose of a theory to explain and predict? Second, I am puzzled by the words 'do indeed'. Certainly ideology sometimes affects social science theorizing just as it has sometimes influenced natural science theorizing, consider Copernicus and Galileo for example. But that does not mean that all social science theories are infused with disguised ideology any more than it means that all natural science theories are infused with disguised ideologies. Human behavior is molded hierarchically by software programs which must fit into the hardware of the mind. The key point for the scientist working at either the hardware or software end of the continuum should be to formalize theories so assumptions are not hidden. Contrary to what Fowers and Richardson seem to suggest, information-processing theories of behavior, like our theory, in general have done the best job of revealing hidden assumptions.

Perhaps at the heart of our disagreement with Fowers and Richardson is the conflict between the moral value of a particular theory of human behavior and whether the theory does or does not predict behavior. Fowers and Richardson seem to adopt the perspective that everyone derives theories of human behavior from ideological beliefs about how people should behave. Thus, their major complaint about our theory seems to be that it is predicated on the assumption that humans *should* behave according to what they call 'liberal individualism', which, to them, is a morally questionable philosophy. But to the extent that our theory corresponds to the principles of what they call liberal individualism, it is because those principles predict behavior. As Fowers and Richardson have coined the term, 'liberal individualism involves the promotion of individual autonomy in the service of a relatively unimpeded pursuit of freely chosen ends' (p. 357). Because this is an objectionable ethical philosophy for human behavior, they seem to argue, it cannot be part of a *valid* theory. In fact they seem to argue against the validity of any instrumental learning theory explanation of behavior on the basis that such theories relegate cultural and moral values to a lesser state as learned constructs. Perhaps it would be nicer if the laws of learning were different than they are; however, a science of human behavior must develop theories of what *is* rather than of what *should be*.

In their specific attack on our information-processing theory for the development of aggression, Fowers and Richardson have also clearly misunderstood the theoretical underpinnings of the theory and the implications to be drawn from it. Their critical analysis of the theory suffers from their unfamiliarity with both theory and empirical research concerning aggression and more specifically their unfamiliarity with the key original source articles in which the theory has been described in detail (Huesmann, 1982, 1986, 1988; Huesmann & Eron, 1984, 1990). They

focused on one article, Eron's (1987) MPA presidential lecture, in which the theory was summarized, but they did not attend to the original articles in which Huesmann developed the details of the theory.

In this note I can hardly recapitulate the entire theory. However, a reading of the original sources will show it is built on a firm foundation of existing theory in cognitive, developmental and social psychology. The theory is specified formally in terms of information-processing constructs such as scripts, but it by no means ignores the roles of emotions or values. In fact the role of arousal and hostile and angry emotions is specified in detail. Similarly, the role of self-regulating interval values is formalized as is the process through which such values may be acquired.

Fowers and Richardson complain that 'Human agents are . . . portrayed . . . as autonomous, strategic actors seeking to maximize outcomes that are merely preferential or individually defined' (p. 362). Well, we certainly do assert that humans seek to maximize outcomes that are individually defined. There is nothing disguised about that part of the theory. It is an explicit rule in the theory supported by a great amount of existing data on human behavior. We also point out that the value of an outcome may depend on what others beside the actor gain from it. As for actors being 'autonomous and strategic', our theory makes no such assertion as those words are usually understood. We also do not know what 'merely preferential' implies. In any case Fowers and Richardson's complaint about this part of our theory is that 'it powerfully restricts these theorists' discussion of any inherent rightness or wrongness of various forms of aggressive behavior' (p. 362). The theory does not restrict our discussion. Our discussion is restricted because we are in the business of describing and predicting behavior, not judging its rightness.

Fowers and Richardson complain (pp. 362-364) that in measuring aggression in children we do not measure intentionality, and they assert that this is a major deficit in our *theory*. This argument has no connection that I see with their overall themes. Furthermore, while it is true that we do not measure intentions directly in children, this is not part of our theory. Our definition of an aggressive behavior has always been a behavior that is *intended* to injure or irritate another person. Because young children are poor at judging intention in peers, we choose to measure aggression in young children by asking their peers about acts that injure or irritate another person without asking peers to judge intention. This is a measurement problem not a theory problem. Furthermore, we have made compelling arguments elsewhere (Eron, Walder, & Lefkowitz, 1971) that the measurement problem is not serious.

Fowers and Richardson also complain that our theory is essentially instrumental. If by that they mean that we emphasize the roles of goal-direct behavior and instrumental learning, we plead guilty. Certainly, these facts are not hidden; they are stated explicitly. But if they mean we ignore hostile emotions and the moderating role of values, they are completely wrong. As described above and in the original sources, these components play important roles in the theory in cueing what scripts will be retrieved and in moderating what scripts will be employed. Contrary to what the authors suggest, our theory does not undermine moral standards, it describes a specific psychological mechanism through which a culture's moral standards are acquired by children and utilized to modify behavior.

The remainder of Fowers and Richardson's complaints seem 'tacked on' and connected only tangentially to their central themes. They assert (pp. 364-365) that

our theory cannot explain why low identification with parents coupled with high punishment by the parents is predictive of aggressive behavior by the child. This is not true, as we have explained elsewhere. Punishment of the child by the parent can be viewed by the child either as an example of aggression or as an attempt to teach a self-regulating internal standard. If the child does not identify with the parent, the former is more likely and observational learning of an aggressive script occurs (Eron, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1991, p. 184). Finally, Fowers and Richardson dismiss the notion that within our theory prosocial scripts can act as a counterweight to aggressive scripts and mitigate aggressive behavior. Again their problem is that they cannot divorce what they believe should be from what is. They do not like the concept that prosocial behavior might be *just another behavior* for achieving individual goals; so they deny that teaching prosocial behavior as a problem-solving strategy might be valuable.

Fowers and Richardson conclude by arguing that there is 'a connection between the instrumental focus on individual achievement and the high level of aggression in American society' (p. 370). If they are talking about the instrumental nature of human behavior, of course, they are right. That is just what our theory says. If they are talking about the instrumental nature of our theory and suggesting that our theory by itself could make society more aggressive, we are flattered by the power with which they imbue us, but we do not believe it. To assert that our theoretical approach to understanding human behavior may actually exacerbate aggression if it accurately predicts behavior is an anti-scientific position.

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