

Point/Counterpoint – A Forum for Discussion of Reviews and Books Reviewed

When Is a Book Review Really Something Else? A Response to the Review of *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: A Critical Analysis*

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Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: A Critical Analysis

by Christopher J. Ferguson

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Original review: [Subtracting From Scientific Knowledge About Media Effects](#)

Author response: When Is a Book Review Really Something Else? A Response to the Review of *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: A Critical Analysis*

Reviewer reply: [A Response to Ferguson: More Red Herring](#)

Anderson, DeLisi, and Groves clearly did not enjoy my new book *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: A Critical Analysis*. I appreciate that Anderson and colleagues were forthcoming in noting their conflict of interest in that their own work came under criticism within the book that they reviewed. I posit that their displeasure with my book in return is neither surprising nor particularly illuminating for the readers of *PsycCRITIQUES*. There are excellent reasons to argue for different sides of this contentious debate, and my book is certainly not beyond criticism. However, I suggest that readers of *PsycCRITIQUES* were done a disservice by this defensive and often self-congratulatory review. It is telling that Anderson et al. largely ignore half the book that does not pertain to their research.

Anderson et al. suggest that many of my concerns with their work have already been dealt with, mainly citing themselves and their close colleagues. However, they often neglect to inform the reader of new scholarship that would challenge their views. For instance, they suggest that aggression measures are valid and that the lack of standardization of aggression instruments is little to worry about, although they do not mention recent research that conflicts with those assurances (Elson, Mohseni, Breuer, Scharkow, & Quandt, 2014; Mitchell, 2012) or the larger context of researcher degrees of freedom (i.e., unstandardization) and how poor standardization spuriously influences conclusions in psychological science (e.g., Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). Anderson et al. assure readers that the inconsistent results of their own experiment (Anderson & Dill, 2000) were predicted by their a priori assumptions.

This would be more convincing if Anderson had been consistent in these assumptions across his work. However, instead of always breaking noise bursts into separate intensity and duration outcomes for both loss and win trials, in other studies (Anderson & Murphy, 2003) Anderson summed up all intensity measures, whether win or lose, and ignored the very noise duration that was the only successful outcome in Anderson and Dill (2000). In others, he separated the 25 trials into summed blocks of approximately equal thirds (Anderson et al., 2004), or took the square root of the duration score and multiplied this by the intensity score (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005), or summed the number of high-intensity trials (trials in which the participant selected an intensity between 8–10 on a 1–10 scale; Anderson & Carnagey, 2009). I have difficulty thinking of another science in which such lack of standardized measurement would even be up for debate.

As another example, Anderson and colleagues take issue with my noting the mismatch between claims of media effects on societal violence and societal violence data itself. Interestingly, I discuss ecological fallacies in my book. But here, Anderson misrepresents his own words or at least has been unclear. He quotes a sentence from his 2001 article (Bushman & Anderson, 2001), suggesting that he meant only to note that society's interest in the topic may have stemmed from increasing violence rates, yet he fails to mention his very next sentence (p. 478): "Indeed, studies of violent crime rates before and after the introduction of television have shown similar effects in several countries." This observation of violent crime and media consumption rates seems to suggest that it was worthwhile to consider data when it seemed to support Anderson's views. In testimony before the U.S. Senate in 2000, Anderson stated, "High exposure to media violence is a major contributing cause of the high rate of violence in modern U.S. society" (Anderson, 2000, Caveats section).

Within their review Anderson and colleagues make claims of definitive effects on violent behaviors such as, "Early studies in the media violence domain have linked media violence consumption to seriously violent behavior" (para. 14) and "Anderson and Dill's (2000) Study 1 research provides supportive evidence of a strong association between violent video game play and violent behavior" (para. 16). Note that the claim is for a *strong* association with violent behavior, from entertainment that almost everyone consumes. Mingling these types of statements along with disavowal of actual societal data on violence appears to be a classic case of wishing to have one's cake and eat it, too. Were scholars to take caution to make sure to state that effects were very small or limited only to minor aggressive acts, I might agree with Anderson et al. that societal data are not relevant. However, when scholars claim strong effects from pervasive media on societally relevant outcomes, they cannot and should not be allowed to then dismiss data on the very outcomes to which they seek to generalize their claims.

Many of Anderson et al.'s comments in their review are in this same vein: often acrimonious, self-referencing, and one-sided. Perhaps most disappointing, however, is their willingness to resort to provocative claims, such as that I am "among the most vocal critics of media effects research" (para. 1), and, later, "This book also can be seen as a primer on how the media industries and their supporters attack legitimate research and researchers, sowing the seeds of doubt about the truths that mainstream researchers around the world have discovered" (para. 20). As for the first comment, given that I conduct considerable media effects research myself, I would say that I am not remotely a critic of media effects research, only of *bad* media effects research. As for the latter, Anderson et al. appear quite inclined to smear me or, presumably, anyone who disagrees with them as an "industry

supporter,” despite the fact that the media industry had nothing to do with this book and I am not funded by them.

This is not Anderson’s first experience attacking those who disagree with him. In one recent essay he referred to people who disagree with him as industry “apologists” and “denialists” (Anderson, 2013, pp. 15, 18, respectively). In that same essay I assume it is I who appears as the role of *Harry Potter’s* Voldemort in the “he who must not be named” sense, with Anderson writing, “one very vocal critic of mainstream media violence research on the list, whom I shall not name” (Anderson, 2013, p. 16). Anderson also helped produce one report that might be best described as an academic “mine is bigger than yours” contest, comparing the résumés of scholars who did and did not agree with him (Pollard-Sacks, Bushman, & Anderson, 2011). Both the methodological and the theoretical grounds for that article were later questioned by several uninvested scholars (Hall, Day, & Hall, 2011).

I, in fact, am not critical of all media violence research; some of it on both sides of the debate is very good. However, I do detect that some facets of this field have taken on quasi-religious qualities. Thus Anderson et al. seem to present their views on this debate not as their opinion but rather as “the truth,” and their adherents are identified as “mainstream researchers,” whereas those who are skeptical are not reasoned scholars with differing views and seem to be considered heretics and immoral (“denialists” or “industry supporters,” in the parlance of Anderson and his colleagues). I would like to believe that these close-minded and bullying statements do not represent the majority of scholars on either side of this debate. Indeed, recently a group of over 230 scholars (Consortium of Scholars, 2013) with varying opinions on media violence wrote to the American Psychological Association asking it to retire its media violence policy statements as out of sorts with the available data.

Scholars on both sides of these debates undoubtedly have much to contribute, but I feel that this field truly risks a slide into self-caricature and the theater of the absurd so long as this sort of boorish behavior is permitted. Anderson et al.’s review is a defense of a rigid ideological belief system, not a book review. I encourage *PsycCRITIQUES* readers to read my book and contrast it with Anderson et al.’s review and decide for themselves.

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