

Winning makes people more aggressive toward the defeated

February 29 2012, by Jeff Grabmeier

In this world, there are winners and losers – and, for your own safety, it is best to fear the winners.

A new study found that winners – those who outperformed others on a competitive task – acted more aggressively against the people they beat than the losers did against the victors.

"It seems that people have a tendency to stomp down on those they have defeated, to really rub it in," said Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University.

"Losers, on the other hand, don't really act any more aggressively than normal against those who defeated them."

Bushman said this is the first study to examine whether winners or losers were more likely to act aggressively.

There were reasons to believe either side could have been more in a fighting mood, Bushman said. Losers might be the bigger aggressors, because they would be angry against those who prevented them from feeling competent. However, other research suggests that people are more aggressive when they feel powerful, as they may when they win a competition.

These results, though, suggest "losers are the ones who get the brunt of

the aggression," he said.

Bushman conducted the study with three French scholars: Dominique Muller and Emmanuelle Ceaux of Pierre Mendès-France University in Grenoble and Baptise Subra of University Paris Descartes. Their results appear online in the journal [Social Psychological and Personality Science](#) and will appear in a future print edition.

They conducted three related studies.

The first study involved 103 American college students who were told they would be paired with a partner who they would be competing against on two tasks. (In actuality, there was no partner).

In the first task, participants were shown patterns of simple shapes on a computer screen for just a fraction of a second (70 milliseconds) and they had to decide whether a dollar sign was present or absent.

After 80 trials, all students were told their scores. Half of them were told they did better than their supposed partner, and half were told they did worse. In other words, half were winners and half were losers.

The second task was a competitive reaction time task which is used to measure aggression. Participants were told that they and their partner (supposedly the same person they competed against in the first task) would have to press a button as fast as possible on each of the 25 trials and that whoever was slower would receive a blast of noise through headphones.

The winner of the task would decide how loud the blast would be and how long it would last.

Results showed that participants who won in the first competition blasted

their partners longer and louder than did those who lost the competition.

"People were more aggressive when they were better off than when they were worse off than others," Bushman said.

One possible limitation of this study, Bushman said, was that participants might have thought that someone who was good at the first task would also be good at the second task. If that was true, the losers in the first task may have been afraid to act aggressively because they were afraid their partner would again win a lot of trials and punish them with loud blasts.

So in a second study, conducted with 34 French college students, the researchers repeated the same experiment, except that the researchers told participants that the two tasks tested different capacities, and that those who did well on the first task do not necessarily perform well on the second.

The results were the same as those in the first experiment, providing further evidence that winners are more aggressive than losers, Bushman said.

Another question, though, is whether winners really were more aggressive against losers, or whether losers were actually just less aggressive than normal against winners.

A third study, involving 72 French college students, answered that question by adding a control group to the study. As in the previous experiments, one group was told their partner did better than they did on the first competitive task, and one group was told their partner did worse. However, there was also a third group that told there was a computer error during the first task and they couldn't tell who was the winner.

This study also used a different measure of aggression. In an earlier part of the study, the participants filled out a "Food Preference Form" which was shared with their supposed partner, reportedly as part of a study on how people form impressions of others.

Participants were then told they were randomly assigned to drink a sweet beverage and their partner was assigned to drink a tomato juice beverage. Participants were told they could add Tabasco sauce and salt to their partner's beverage -- which they knew their partner strongly disliked from the food preference form.

Results showed that participants who were winners in the first task added more Tabasco sauce and salt to their partner's drink than losers did.

In addition, the losers acted about as aggressively as did those in the control group, who didn't know if they were winners or losers. That suggests winners do indeed act particularly aggressively, while losers aren't particularly nonaggressive.

Bushman said the fact that the findings were repeated in three different studies, in two different countries, suggest that there really is something about winning that makes people more aggressive.

"Losers need to watch out," he said.

The next step, he said, is to find out if winners act more aggressively toward everyone, or just toward people they defeat. That's the subject of an upcoming study.

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Winning makes people more aggressive toward the defeated (2012, February 29)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-people-aggressive-defeated.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.