

How cruel is a cat playing with a mouse? A study of people's assessment of cruelty

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Samples of American and New Zealand university students rated 18 brief scenarios for their cruelty, the amount of suffering inflicted, the suffering meant to be inflicted, and the pleasure felt by the actor. Both samples rated the two cruelest scenarios to be a sexual assault and a guard herding terrified prisoners to execution. Overall, scenarios which were rated as relatively cruel were those in which the victim suffered more and in which the suffering was inflicted intentionally. The pleasure derived by the actor in inflicting the punishment was less clearly related to the rated cruelty of the act.

While the concept of cruelty may initially appear to be unproblematic, in fact a number of different strands of meaning can be discerned in its use. In their recent review, Brodsky, Caputo and Kemp (1996) drew attention to the number of different dictionary definitions of "cruelty" and to the variety of their historical antecedents. For example, the Roman philosopher, Seneca (1928), defined cruelty as a disposition to inflict pain rather than to show mercy, from savagery, in which people take pleasure from inflicting the pain.

Not everyone would agree with Seneca's distinction. Freud, for example, considered the relationship between cruelty and sex, and the way in which sadism could arise from "an aggressive component of the sexual instinct ... [becoming] ... independent and exaggerated" (Freud, 1953, p. 153). Again, the first definition of the adjective "cruel" given in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "disposed to inflict suffering, indifferent to or taking pleasure in another's pain and distress".

The medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, stressed that reasoning ability was required in order to be cruel, and hence that it was essentially a possible characteristic of humans rather than of animals or of nature generally. (Aquinas, 1964). Modern usage clearly does not always follow Aquinas's precept: Consider, for example, the title of Nicholas Monsarrat's novel "The Cruel Sea". But do people consider, for example, that the cat which plays with a mouse is being cruel?

Cruelty has been identified as a dimension of disturbed behavior in children and adolescents. Achenbach and Edelbrock (1970) identified a factor of cruelty in the behavior of disturbed girls. The factor emerged from factor analysis of parent ratings of a checklist of behaviors, and comprised such items as "cruel to animals", "cruel to others" and "destroys things belonging to others", and has been used by later researchers (e.g. Feshbach and Price, 1984). Interestingly, none of the items involved ratings of either the intentionality or the possible pleasure to the children.

Clearly, then, somewhat different concepts of cruelty have been used by eminent writers and identified by researchers. But is there any consensus among more ordinary folk? Brodsky et al. (1996) found that a sample of students produced variable responses when asked to describe cruel acts they had experienced or perpetrated themselves and to identify the cruelest acts they had read in a book or seen depicted on television. Among the cruelest actions they had read about or seen in a movie, murder, torture and sexual assaults were commonly mentioned. Frequently given reasons for identifying these particular acts included the purpose or intentionality of the perpetrator, the pleasure experienced by the cruel individual, and the

extent of the injury.

The present research sought to extend this previous work by presenting to respondents scenarios featuring possibly cruel behaviour and then asking them to rate how cruel each was, how much suffering was inflicted, how much intended, and what pleasure they thought the actor felt when inflicting the pain.

Method

Respondents

Two separate samples from different English-speaking countries completed the questionnaire. The first sample consisted of one hundred and thirty students in an introductory psychology course at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Sixty-three of the respondents were male, 63 female, and 4 did not give gender information. Although the oldest respondent was aged between 61 and 70 years, the sample was predominantly younger: 109 were under 20 years old. The sample completed the questionnaire in class hours.

The second sample contained 103 undergraduate students at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, who elected to take part in this and other research studies rather than to complete brief written reports for their introductory psychology courses. Twenty-one of these students were male, 81 female and one

did not give gender information. Their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years, with a median of 18.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires were identical for the two samples. It began by informing subjects that the researchers were interested in what people thought about cruelty, and then presented 18 scenarios, listed in Table 1. The scenarios were chosen so as to cover a range of suffering endured by the victim, suffering intended by the actor, and pleasure received by the actor. We did not attempt to manipulate these variables parametrically, firstly because of the difficulty of finding plausible scenarios for some combinations, and secondly because we felt it important to establish empirically how subjects rated the scenarios on these dimensions. Thus, for each scenario, respondents were asked to estimate, on a scale from 0 to 10, the degree of cruelty displayed, the amount of suffering endured by the victim, the amount of suffering intended by the actor, and the pleasure the actor received.

Results

Mean ratings given to each scenario for each of the four dependent measures by the two samples are shown in Table 2. The sexual assault scenario and the behavior of the guard scenario were rated as the cruelest acts, and those giving rise to most suffering. The sexual assault scenario was also thought to be that from which

Table 1. Scenarios.

1. A cat plays with a mouse.
2. A guard in a World War II German concentration camp forces a number of terrified people into a room where they are executed.
3. An Alien (as in the film ALIEN) attacks a human being.
4. A schoolchild who has been tormented by a bully strikes back and succeeds in breaking the bully's arm.
5. A boxing fan who has bet a large sum of money yells for his fighter to kill the opponent.
6. A football player disables the opposing team's best player with a punch during a tackle.
7. Someone sexually assaults a stranger.
8. A child sets the family cat on fire.
9. Someone plays a video game in which enemies disappear in fountains of blood.
10. Someone is discovered in a compromising sexual situation by their partner.
11. Someone ridicules a stranger in a wheelchair by saying "stay out of my way, you @#& cripple".
12. A psychotic throwing large stones hits passersby.
13. A battlefield surgeon is forced to perform an operation without anaesthetic.
14. A ruler orders someone be executed in front of the throne.
15. A schoolmaster canes someone on the buttocks for misbehaving in class.
16. A professor embarrasses a student in front of classmates by repeatedly asking questions the student cannot answer.
17. Someone in a conversation makes a witty remark at the direct expense of someone else in the group.
18. Someone doubleparks for thirty minutes, blocking another car whose driver wishes to leave.

Table 2. Average ratings (on a scale from 0 to 10) of cruelty, suffering actually inflicted, suffering intended, and pleasure felt by the actor in 18 scenarios. Separate averages are shown for Alabama (Ala) and Canterbury (Can) samples.

Scenario	Cruelty		Suffering inflicted		Suffering intended		Pleasure felt	
	Ala	Can	Ala	Can	Ala	Can	Ala	Can
Camp guard herds prisoners	9.9	9.2	9.9	9.4	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.4
Sexual assault	9.8	9.2	9.8	9.4	9.3	7.8	9.3	8.5
Setting fire to cat	9.3	8.8	9.7	9.2	7.1	5.6	6.7	6.3
Abuse of cripple	9.3	8.2	8.0	8.0	7.8	6.9	7.2	5.6
Ruler executes prisoner	9.1	8.1	9.6	9.0	9.5	9.0	8.4	7.7
Psychotic stones passersby	8.4	6.1	8.5	6.7	7.2	5.5	7.6	6.3
Prof. ridicules student	7.8	7.1	8.0	7.3	7.5	7.0	7.4	6.9
Partner's infidelity	7.5	6.2	7.6	7.6	4.2	3.0	3.9	2.1
Alien attacks human	7.3	5.7	8.4	8.3	7.6	7.3	7.7	6.3
Wit at another's expense	7.0	6.0	7.0	6.4	6.3	5.2	7.3	6.2
Football	7.0	5.9	8.1	6.6	7.1	6.5	6.7	6.0
Teacher canes boy	6.6	5.5	7.6	6.4	7.0	6.6	4.2	4.5
Double parking	5.9	4.0	5.6	4.8	3.2	2.5	3.0	2.4
Boxing fan urges fighter	5.4	5.2	4.7	4.5	5.8	6.2	7.7	7.5
Surgery without anaesthetic	4.4	3.3	8.7	8.1	1.6	1.8	0.6	1.0
Video	4.2	2.6	2.7	2.0	4.0	4.1	7.4	7.1
Cat plays with mouse	4.1	5.0	6.1	7.7	4.4	4.3	5.8	7.5
Boy breaks bully's arm	4.1	3.5	7.8	6.9	7.6	6.3	7.7	6.6
Average	7.0	6.1	7.7	7.1	6.5	5.8	6.5	5.8

the actor received most pleasure. The ruler's order to execute a prisoner was rated that in which most suffering was intended.

It could be that the concept of cruelty covers a number of different types or dimensions of cruelty. To address this issue we performed two principal components factor analyses – one for each sample – on the cruelty ratings given to the 18 different scenarios. For the Canterbury sample, a scree test clearly indicated a single dimension which accounted for 28 percent of the variance in the cruelty ratings. Cruelty ratings on all 18 of the scenarios correlated positively with this single dimension, with correlations ranging from .12 (Cat plays with mouse) to .74 (Prof. ridicules student). For the Alabama sample, the scree test also indicated a single dimension accounting for 26 percent of the cruelty variance ratings, and again the cruelty ratings for all 18 scenarios correlated positively with this dimension, ranging from .20 (Abuse of cripple) to .65 (Wit at another's expense).

Examination of the table suggests both similarities and differences between the ratings of the two samples. Averaged over all the scenarios, the Alabama sample

gave significantly (two-tailed t-test, $p < .01$) higher ratings on all four measures. This result, however, is not easier to interpret, since it might simply reflect a tendency for that sample to give higher ratings overall.

Of greater importance, perhaps, is whether the rankings of the different scenarios differed between the samples. Spearman rank correlation coefficients were computed over the 18 scenarios between the two samples. The correlations between the rank orders were high for the measures of cruelty ($r = .95$) and suffering intended ($r = .92$), moderately high for the estimates of average suffering inflicted ($r = .84$) and moderate for the estimates of the actor's pleasure ($r = .66$). Overall, then, the two samples were in reasonably good agreement, particularly with respect to the judgments they made about the cruelty displayed in the scenarios.

It is possible that differences between the two samples can be traced back to differences between the two cultures, but the results shown in Table 2 do not strongly support this idea. The scenario showing the biggest difference between the Alabama and the Canterbury samples (Psychotic stones passersby) and

the only scenario on which the Canterbury sample gave a higher average cruelty rating than the Alabama sample (Cat plays with mouse) are not obviously related to cultural differences.

Probably the most important results of the study are the relationships between the cruelty estimates and those obtained with the three component measures. Intercorrelations between the average results obtained from the Canterbury sample produced Pearson correlation coefficients of .74, .68 and .34 between estimated cruelty and estimated suffering inflicted, suffering intended and pleasure felt by the doer respectively. Suffering inflicted correlated .44 with suffering intended and .05 with pleasure felt by the doer; suffering intended correlated .69 with pleasure felt by the doer.

For the Alabama sample, estimated cruelty correlated .71, .73 and .46 with suffering inflicted, suffering intended and pleasure received by the doer respectively. Suffering inflicted and intended correlated .59, suffering inflicted and pleasure felt correlated .14, while suffering intended correlated .80 with pleasure felt.

Multiple regression on the average results from the Canterbury sample found that 70 percent of the variance in average estimated cruelty could be explained by the other three variables. For the Alabama sample, 66 percent of the variance in average estimated cruelty was explained by the other three ratings. The standardized regression coefficients shown in Table 3 show that, for both samples, the important variables predicting rated cruelty were the suffering actually inflicted and the suffering intended to be inflicted. The pleasure believed to be felt by the actor had negligible predictive value.

Thus for both samples the average cruelty estimates were dependent on the estimates of suffering and suffering intended, rather than those of the pleasure received by the actor. The meaning implicit in these multiple regression results is made clearer when some of the individual scenario results are considered. The importance of the intention is reflected in the

perception that cruelty is predominantly a human act: neither the cat playing with the mouse nor the alien are perceived as very cruel. On the other hand, the intention is not enough by itself. The doctor who must operate without an anaesthetic is not perceived as cruel. Note also that the cruelty of the video game player and the boxing fan were rated low or moderate.

A final analysis investigated gender effects. Table 4 shows the differences between male and female ratings for both the single scenario "Someone sexually assaults a stranger" and for the mean ratings taken over all 18 scenarios. The women in the samples tended to rate (often significantly) the sexual assault as crueler, with more suffering inflicted and intended, and with more pleasure received by the assaulter. However, women tended to rate *all* the scenarios as crueler and with more suffering inflicted and intended, suggesting that the gender effect found with respect to sexual assault might arise because women rated our scenarios as crueler in general rather than because they were particularly inclined to think of sexual assaults as cruel.

Discussion

The results suggest a concept of cruelty that was common to the samples from both countries. Cruelty is the intentional infliction of suffering. For an act to be cruel two elements should be present: There must be actual suffering inflicted and the actor must intend the suffering. This result emerges most clearly from the multiple regression analyses, but it is also exemplified by many of the scenarios. For example, discovering a partner's infidelity is painful but clearly suffering was not intended and the act was not rated as particularly cruel.

A more subtle point to emerge from the study is that, as suggested by Seneca, cruelty appears to be differentiated from sadism. For both samples ratings of suffering intended and pleasure felt by the actor were moderately highly correlated, thus generally it was thought that when the actor intended to be cruel he or she also derived pleasure from the act. However, the results from the multiple regression indicate that where

Table 3. Standardised regression coefficients (β) from multiply regressing average rated cruelty on average suffering inflicted, average suffering intended, and pleasure felt by the actor in the 18 scenarios.

Independent Variable	Canterbury sample	Alabama sample
	β	β
Average suffering inflicted	.55	.44
Average suffering intended	.42	.44
Pleasure felt by the actor	.03	.04

Table 4. Average ratings by males and females on the four dependent variables for "Someone sexually assaults a stranger" and averaged over all 18 scenarios.

Variable	Sexual Assault		All scenarios	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
<u>Canterbury Sample:</u>				
Cruelty	9.0	9.4	5.6	6.6**
Suffering inflicted	9.1	9.7*	6.8	7.5**
Suffering intended	7.0	8.6**	5.4	6.1**
Pleasure felt	8.0	9.0**	5.6	5.9
<u>Alabama Sample:</u>				
Cruelty	9.5	9.8	6.3	7.2**
Suffering inflicted	9.6	9.9	7.2	7.8**
Suffering intended	8.7	9.5*	6.0	6.6**
Pleasure felt	9.0	9.4	6.2	6.6

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$. Two-tailed t-test.

these two variables can be disentangled, it is the infliction of suffering rather than receiving pleasure while doing it which is the hallmark of cruelty. The conclusion is exemplified by the results from at least one of the scenarios: The Canterbury sample rated the concentration camp guard as very cruel even though he was not perceived to find his work particularly pleasurable.

Although the study was focussed on people's concept of cruelty, the method used asked subjects to make judgements about the states of mind of people featured in the scenarios. In particular they were asked to make judgements about the intentionality and pleasure felt by the actors and the suffering experienced by the victims. The judgments of intentionality and pleasure seem to be in line with common sense expectations. The partner is not pleased to be discovered in infidelity; the surgeon on the battlefield does not intend the pain; the sexual assaulter feels pleasure; the ruler intends the condemned to suffer. However, some of the ratings of suffering are more difficult to understand. It seems strange, for example, that the suffering of one sexual assault victim is the same or greater than that of several prisoners herded to their deaths or than that of someone suffering the alien attack. One possibility here is that the subjects may have found certain types of suffering more or less easy to empathise with than other types, and that these difference in empathetic ability are reflected in the suffering ratings.

In general the results obtained from the two samples are in good agreement with each other and, unsurprisingly, appear to conform to cultural norms. So, for example, the cruelly rated behaviour of the camp guard and the sexual assault are crimes carrying severe penalties in both New Zealand and the USA, the lightly rated cruelty resulting from someone double-parking inconveniently is not. In this context, it is noteworthy that some of the crueler actions (e.g. sexual assault) in the present study are also serious crimes as identified by a number of previous researchers (e.g. Davis and Kemp, 1994; Fox and Freiberg, 1990; Gebotys, Roberts and DasGupta, 1988; Sellin and Wolfgang, 1964). On the other hand, many of the moderately or less cruel actions in the present study are crimes in neither New Zealand nor the USA, while many crimes (e.g. defacing currency, use of illegal drugs) are not directed against other people at all.

It is noteworthy that at least some of the discrepancies between the average ratings of the two samples arose where inferences had to be made about the states of mind of animals or unfamiliar people. How much suffering does the cat inflict on the mouse? How much pleasure would an alien receive from attacking a human being? One reason why these questions are difficult may be that there are no appropriate cultural norms for answering them. In this context, it is noteworthy that there is also no apparent consensus on the degree of awareness possessed by animals (Kemp & Strongman, 1994).

Another culturally related issue is whether people believe the infliction of suffering may on occasion be deserved. Some of the scenarios used here – the schoolmaster caning someone or, more debatably, the ruler executing the prisoner – contain an element of retribution. We have not examined the issue here of whether cruel acts might in some circumstances be regarded as "just desserts", but the frequently televised interviews with relatives of murder victims, for example, suggest that at least some people believe in retributive cruelty at least some of the time.

Finally, it should be remarked that there were differences between the male and female ratings. Why these arise is uncertain, but their existence points up the possible inferential errors that could be made from overinterpreting differences in individual scenario ratings. At first sight the finding that women rated sexual assault as crueler, with more suffering inflicted and intended, and giving more pleasure to the perpetrator than the men suggests a greater female

sensitivity to this behaviour in particular. This would not be surprising. But, since the women generally rated the 18 scenarios as crueler than the men did, it is more probable that the particular result for sexual assault is simply a reflection of this overall tendency.

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