Reviewer's report

Title: Aggression in Children with Behavioural/Emotional Difficulties: Seeing Aggression on Television and Video Games

Version: 1 Date: 15 March 2014

Reviewer: Christopher Ferguson

Reviewer's report:

Overall, this is a very interesting and informative look at the role of media violence exposure in the lives of young children. The sample is small, but a difficult to obtain sample of behavior disordered children so that makes this paper a valuable contribution. I have some suggestions for improvement:

Major Compulsory Revisions

The authors report on several meta-analyses of media violence effects, but they leave out several essential meta-analyses which conclude that the effects of media violence are quite minimal (Savage & Yancey, and Sherry, 2001 in particular). Further the $r = .31$ effect size from Paik and Comstrok is now known to have been an artifact of their failure to weight their analysis by study sample size, thus giving "publication bias" effects a bigger boost and spuriously inflating effect sizes. Ranges in meta-analyses across all media forms are, at this point, between $r = .04$ and .20, and that should be more accurately reflected. Also even these effect sizes are likely spurious due to the use of unstandardized aggression measures and publication bias effects, as the authors note a bit, but could probably highlight a bit more.

The authors note that participants distinguished between real and fictional violence and expressed different emotional reactions to the same. This is an essential finding that should be highlighted more in the paper and which could help us to resolve some of the debates in the field. The authors might want to refer to a recent study by Ramos et al (2013 in Psychology of Popular Media Culture) that supports this distinction. Further, the authors suggest later that young children don't distinguish reality from fiction but this contradicts a fair amount of research (see Woolley & van Rees, for instance).

Comments by parents should be put into context with research by Andrew Przybylski finding the expected generational differences in fears of media, particularly video games. A lot of fear of media appears to be driven by unfamiliarity with it, which I think is reflected in some of the parents' comments in this article. In that sense, I think the authors go a little too far in taking the parents' statements at face value rather than looking at them as part of a sociological process themselves.

Minor Essential Revisions
A lot of the discussion I think still relies to heavily on older, outdated theories related to social cognitive or social learning theories (which I suspect also influence some of the qualitative responses). The authors may wish to rethink this and look for alternate developmental models that explain how media violence may be a normal part of development. For instance Olson, 2010 in Review of General Psychology. The authors may also want to consider the Catalyst Model (Ferguson et al., 2008) which, similar to the author's point here, suggests that media is a minor contributor to aggression and real-life aggression is much more important.

There is another paper out there Ferguson & Olson, 2014 in Journal of Youth and Adolescence, that considers video game violence with a sample of kids with preexisting mental health problems. That might be worth mentioning.

I'd dial back the recommendations to policy makers and parents a bit...both the work here and elsewhere suggests that real-life violence, not virtual violence, is a key element to children's well-being. I think the authors need to be clearer about that and keep policy makers, practitioners and carers more clearly focused on this rather than worrying rather uselessly over virtual violence. My personal view is that a lot of harm has come out of overemphasizing virtual violence, making it more difficult for our societies to tackle real issues like poverty and domestic violence.

Discretionary Revision

Oswald & Murphy (2014) have a paper in Psychology of Popular Media Culture that is qualitative in nature. The authors may find some value in referring to this.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests