Aggression and Group Membership: A Social Representations Approach to the Study of Aggression

JOSEPH H. PUYAT
University of the Philippines, Diliman

Current social psychological theories of aggression emphasize the causal role of negative emotions and its interpretation in aggressive behavior (Geen and 1995). Study after study has shown that any unpleasant emotion will predispose a person to be aggressive (Anderson and Anderson, 1996, Berkowitz, 1993, Anderson and DeNeve, 1992, Griffitt and Veitch, 1971). Whether that person will act aggressively or violently will depend on his assessment of the social context, which includes among other things, the attribution that he/she makes, his/her assessment of the retaliatory capabilities of the other person and his/her beliefs about aggression (Geen, 1998 and Aronson, Wilson, and Akert, 1997).

The impact of people's beliefs about aggression on aggressive behavior has received attention only recently because many social scientists for a very long time focused on determining whether aggression is innate and on identifying the factors that trigger people's aggressive tendencies. It would appear from the existing literature that aggression indeed has strong biological origins (Renfrew, 1997). However, it is also very clear from the studies that have been made that aggression is either mitigated or amplified by cognitive factors (Geen, 1998). This means that it is not always the objective situations that make people violent or not, people's thoughts about their situation almost always determine whether they will become aggressive or not.

Needless to say, what people will think about their situation will be influenced by their past experiences, cultural background and strongly held beliefs. This is where membership to various social groups come into play. Different social groups develop considerably unique ways of thinking, feeling and interacting. These unique ways are embodied in the social norms that groups maintain. Hence, individuals that strongly identify with their social groups are expected to think, feel and interact in a manner that is characteristic of their social groups. An individual, for example, who prides himself in being a member of a group that has favorable attitudes toward violent behavior can be expected to have favorable attitudes toward such.

Aside from norms, groups also develop shared conceptualizations, ideas and thoughts about aggression. In extreme cases this could mean that acts which are clearly violent or aggressive for the out-groups might be perceived as ordinary or accepted by the in-

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groups. Such extreme examples would be very difficult to identify since most social groups today have easy access to public information about aggression which will definitely influence their shared ideas about aggression (Wagner, 1999). However, since different groups, particularly those which are cohesive, have experiences unique to them, it will still be possible to detect subtle differences in their shared ideas about aggression.

That cognitions can be elaborated and shared by a collectivity is best articulated by Moscovici's theory of social representation. Moscovici defined social representation as "a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication... by providing a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history" (Moscovici, 1973; cited in Wagner, 1999). Simply put, "social representations are cognitive packages containing attributions of cause, attitudes and images of a phenomenon that are transmitted socially within a culture and which are both generative and intepretative of behavior" (Moscovici, 1984; cited in Campbell, 1997).

Using social representations theory, Campbell and Muncer (1987; cited in Campbell, Muncer, Guy and Banim, 1996) was able to show that men and women differ in their beliefs about aggression. Results of their study suggest that males tend to have a more instrumental view of aggression than females. This means that males look at aggression more as a means of imposing social control while females see it as an issue of losing self-control. In everyday life, this would mean that males would be more likely to become violent to protect their self-esteem and honor or perhaps win in an argument, compared to females. Nevertheless, this does not mean that males and females are prisoners of their social representations. Social representations do not reside in people's heads; they are in the public domain and can be accessed by anybody. Males can consciously and with effort access females' social representations and vice versa (Campbell, Muncer, Guy and Banim, 1996). Because of socialization and the assumption of particular sex roles, males and females usually access their corresponding social representations (Lloyd and Duveen, 1993).

Cultural differences may also account for differences in the way people regard aggression. Studies conducted by Nisbett (1993) offer evidence that cultural beliefs about aggression influence aggressive behavior. In a carefully conceived experiment, Cohen, Browdle, Nisbett, Schwarz (1996) showed that people who grew up in the Southern part of America tend to react aggressively to insults compared to people who grew up in the Northern part. They explained that historically, people in the South are expected by their community to defend their properties, honor and dignity at all cost. For most Southerners, aggression is a necessary instrument for restoring perceived lost esteem or dignity. Part of the reasons why these people's peculiar beliefs about aggression remain is that existing laws and social policies in these regions are supportive of the idea that violence is a means for self-protection (Cohen, 1996).

STUDIES ON AGGRESSION IN THE PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, only a handful of studies have been done on aggression despite the obvious importance of the subject. While there are lots of things that can be learned from the voluminous foreign literature on aggression, it must be noted that the concept of aggression as it has been studied in the past is virtually a foreign social representation. It could be that the use and understanding of the word in our country is largely consistent with the available literature. This, however, should not stop anyone from studying aggression as conceptualized by different social groups in our country.

An interesting sex difference in the way Filipinos look at aggression was studied by Lopez in 1981. Using factor analysis she was able to note how words related to aggression are evaluated differently by men and women. *Paladabog*, for example, is evaluated in terms of attacking behavior by males while females look at it as an issue about moral uprightness and refinement. This suggest that to sulk in front of a male is ultimately an invitation for aggression while when done to a female will only be met with an admonition. *Palatsismis*, on the other hand, is evaluated by men in terms of deficiency in pride, intelligence and refinement while females look at it as an expression of hostility against one's nature. Finally, being *palaaway*, is viewed by men in terms of intelligence and physical sturdiness while for females it is an issue about moral uprightness and refinement.

An exploratory study on human rights by Conaco (1997) contains data supportive of the idea that men and women look at aggression differently. When asked about corporal punishment, fathers from a farming region talk about their right to use physical punishment while mothers talk about their feelings of remorse and distress when they find themselves or their husbands hitting their children. Similarly, a study conducted by Yacat and Mendoza (1996) revealed that women's aggression is perceived to be more intense but justified compared to aggression committed by men. This is because aggression is generally not associated with women in our society. When they do become aggressive, their acts become more salient, therefore amplified. People also tend to attribute unusually strong reasons for women's aggression, hence their acts are perceived to be more justified.

Pattugalan and Puyat (1998) found that attitude towards violence correlate negatively with attitude towards human rights of the Philippine National Police officers. The authors explained that police officers developed and maintained a more instrumental view of aggression. In the work that police officers do, aggression has a necessary value which unfortunately gets abused particularly when great emphasis is placed on the apprehension and conviction of suspects rather than on the upholding of the law. Religious backgrounds may also shape groups' attitudes and ideas about violence as shown by Puyat and Emboltura (1996).

An interesting group that probably has a distinct idea about aggression and violence is the university-based fraternity. For fraternity members, aggression is a powerful tool used to enhance and protect their social identities. It can be noticed that the kind of violence that fraternities are known to commit are those that are not intended to annihilate other groups, the violence in most cases are calculated; intended not to kill but to make a score. Sometimes they err, which results in casualties. But the deaths are probably

accidental and will definitely reflect on the group's incompetence. A descriptive study conducted by Shoemaker and Zarco (1995) bore out the fact that of the 972 students involved in rumbles only one was killed and that the weapons used are those not meant for killing their opponents.

Most people not familiar with fraternities attribute all sorts of psychological inadequacies to the members when they think about the violence committed by the members. Others offer the idea of the "culture of violence" as an explanation. Though it is difficult to dismiss any explanation without any evidence, the former explanation seems unlikely considering the number of students that must have psychological problems every year to be involved in rumbles and other violent incidents. The latter explanation, however attractive, has not been supported by any systematic study.

The aim of this paper then is to provide support to the idea that the violence committed by fraternity members is closely tied up with group membership. Social representations theory will be used as an approach both for collecting and analyzing the data. The statistical tools used are not of the inferential kind so the conclusions that will be made here should be interpreted as hypotheses generated by the data rather than evidence or empirical proof of the hypotheses. More than anything else, this paper is an attempt to demonstrate how social representations theory, method and analysis can be used to study aggression and other social objects for that matter.

METHOD

Participants

A total of two hundred and thirty students from the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City were asked to respond to the questionnaire. Forty-nine percent were males (n = 113) and fifty-one percent were females (n = 117). Of the total sample about twenty five percent (n = 58) were members of the different fraternity groups, while sorority members (n = 50) comprised twenty nine percent (29 percent). The rest of the sample consisted of males (n = 55) and females (n = 67) who were not members of any sororities or fraternities.

Convenience sampling was employed in getting the sample. Most of the nonmembers were given the questionnaires before or after their classes in introductory Psychology courses while almost all of the members were requested to complete the questionnaires in their respective *tambayans*.

Instrument

A one-page sheet containing the following direction was given to each respondents:

> Please write down everything that comes to your mind when you hear or see the word AGGRESSION. You may list down as many words or phrases (in English or Filipino) that you can think of. If you include words from your native languages please provide an equivalent translation in English or Filipino.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The word associations from all the respondents were content analyzed using words as the basic unit of analysis. Synonyms were coded as one word using the word, in English or Filipino, that appeared most frequently, e.g. conflict and dispute were coded as conflict and *agresibo* and aggressive were coded as *agresibo*. Some words that appeared to be synonyms were coded separately because of their connotations, i.e., fight, quarrel and *away* were given specific codes because of differences in degree and quality.

All in all, six hundred distinct words were used to code the 2,013 word associations of the entire sample. Initially, words mentioned by at least two respondents were included in the set of words to be analyzed, however this criteria yielded two hundred and fifty two words. This number not only exceeds the limitations of most statistical software available to the researcher, it also produces graphs that are difficult to read and interpret. To further trim down the set of words to be used, the criterion was made stricter: only words mentioned by at least six respondents were included. This yielded a set of eighty-two words. This set of words was utilized in the following correspondence analyses.

Differences in content

A correspondence analysis between words mentioned and student groups were performed. Correspondence analysis is a common procedure employed in word associations (Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993). Essentially, correspondence analysis is a factor analytic procedure (factor analysis for categorical data) that uses 2-way contingency tables as inputs. A chi-square statistic is computed before producing a two-dimensional plots of all the values to determine if the rows and columns of a contingency table are linked in some way.

For the present study, a 4 by 82 contingency table was constructed. The rows consisted of group membership while eighty-two words comprised the columns. Frequency counts or the number of times a particular word is mentioned by a specific group appear in the cells of this contingency table. The computed chi square statistics revealed that the hypothesis of independence should be rejected ($p = 0.0000$) suggesting that there is an association between the rows and columns. This supports the idea that different groups think differently, or at least associate ideas about aggression differently.

The resulting two-dimensional plot *(see Figure 1)* of the values accounted for 81% of the variation in the data for the entire sample. The variations explained by the plots for each group, on the other hand, ranged from 18 percent to 23 percent. These figures are not far from those obtained by other researchers who used correspondence analyses in word associations (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1994 in Wagner et al., 1999 and Wagner, 1999).

From the plot *(see Figure 1)* it could be observed that the responses of females and males who are not members of fraternities and sororities are spatially closer to each other than those of the members. Regardless of the dimensions *(axes 1 or 2)* used, the distance between these two groups is relatively small. Responses of the members, on the other hand, are nearer on one dimension *(axis 2)* but farther on another dimension *(axis 1)*.

These suggest that nonmembers' ideas about aggression are virtually the same and are distinct from those of the members while members' thoughts about aggression appear to be similar with respect to one dimension only. Interestingly, males, regardless their of group membership appear closer in terms of dimension or axis 1. The same is true for females, regardless of their membership. Again, these suggest a gender difference with respect to one dimension.

The first dimension, as portrayed by axis 1 or the horizontal axis, seems to describe aggression in individual vs group or intergroup contexts. On the left side are words such as clash, *bugbog*, *gulo*, *suntukan*, retaliate, *away*, conflict, weapons, *pananakop*, while on the right are words such as offense, attack, first move, unprovoked. The second dimension, depicted by axis 2 or the vertical axis, appear to group the ideas into two opposing continuum: on the upper portion are abstract ideas pertaining to traits, characteristics, and attitudes while on the lower portion are specific instances of aggression. Included in the upper end are words such as strong, selfishness, forward, motivated, temper, brave, impulsive, assertive, oppression, emotion, injustice, abuse, hate, negative, positive, bad and so on. On the lower portion of the continuum are words such as swearing, first move, unprovoked, assault, *bugbog*, clash, attack, *suntukan*, war, and offense.

Linking the words mentioned with group membership, the map could be interpreted to mean that members' ideas about aggression consist mainly of specific instances or images of aggressive behavior. Members differ only in one respect: males tend to see these acts in an intergroup context, while females do not. Stretching this interpretation further it can be said that male members tend to interpret actions in the context of their group membership or social identity while females do not. Members' long history of violence perhaps made salient to them specific acts that their groups have experienced in the past. These images form part of their social representation of aggression, which becomes a template for interpreting future behavior. Because male members' are the ones directly involved in violent encounters in the past to maintain and defend their social identity, it is not surprising that they would be the ones more likely to see aggression in the context of their group membership. Female members may have the tendency to interpret specific actions as aggressive but their group membership does not always crop up.

Nonmembers' ideas are generally abstract and viewed both in the individual and intergroup context. Lack of history as an identifiable group may be the reason for this. Their ideas generally came from dictionary or textbook definitions. Probably the images that they have are closer to the images that the general population would have.

The proximity of male members and nonmembers as well as female members and nonmembers with respect to dimension 1 seem to indicate gender difference in the individual vs intergroup dimension. However, since the male and female nonmembers appear very close to each other in the plot, this difference may be very small if not insignificant.

In summary, the entire sample's word associations can be described using two dimensions: abstract vs. specific and individual vs. group based. Nonmembers associations are mostly abstract, individual as well as group-based. Members' responses tend to be

specific, with males' being mostly group-based and females' being generally individual based.

An important implication that could be made from this kind of description is that the male members in the sample bring with them their social identity in the interpretation of aggressive acts. While as individuals they may not be that different from the opposite sex, within a group they can become relatively more aggressive. Their group membership makes them susceptible to see actions by other groups as hostile and may prime them to think and act more aggressively. The female members in the sample tend to be individualistic in their interpretation. They also tend to use more positive aggression-related words such as strong, assertive, motivated, self-confidence, brave etc. On these terms, they probably see or want others to see them as more aggressive.

Differences in organization

Originally, multidimensional scaling was performed to explore how different groups organize their thoughts about aggression. The results were difficult to interpret and were not congruent with those produced by correspondence analysis. This is most likely because similarity ratings are not directly derived in word association data. In most cases, multidimensional scaling produces outputs that are easy to interpret when strictly distance or similarity data are used.

Instead of multidimensional scaling, correspondence analysis was performed for each group. This time a contingency table with 82 rows and 82 columns was constructed for each group. The rows and columns represent the 82 words. The frequency with which a word is mentioned together with another word is recorded in the cells of these matrices. The co-occurrences of the words associated with the stimulus word—aggression is of particular interest in these analyses. The higher the co-occurrences the closer these words will be represented in the plot. All in all, four matrices, one for each group, were analyzed for correspondence.

For members of fraternities, responses appear to cluster in the center. The horizontal and vertical dimensions can not be easily interpreted *(see Figure 2).* A number of words related to instances of fraternity and group violence, in general, appear on the center of the plot (i.e., rumble, attack, *suntukan*, hazing, fight, war, *pananakop*, invasion, away, *gulo* and punch). On the extreme right portion of the plot, however, were a few "abstract" words such as assertive, bad, positive, and will. What all these suggest is that for this group, aggression consists mainly of specific images of violence probably committed in an intergroup context.

The plot for the sorority members suggests a two dimensional organization when viewed horizontally *(see Figure 3).* That the responses appear to cluster in the middle probably indicates that the vertical dimension is not as meaningful as the horizontal dimension. The horizontal scattering of responses can be described in terms of the abstract-concrete continuum. On the right side are words referring to traits or characteristics (such as assertive, *bilib sa sarili*, impulsive) and descriptions of emotional states (i.e. rage, fear, and anger) while on the left side are words depicting concrete acts of aggression such as invasion, assault, attack, provocation and first move. There were more words on the

Figure 1. Correspondence Analysis: Group Membership and Associations to Aggression

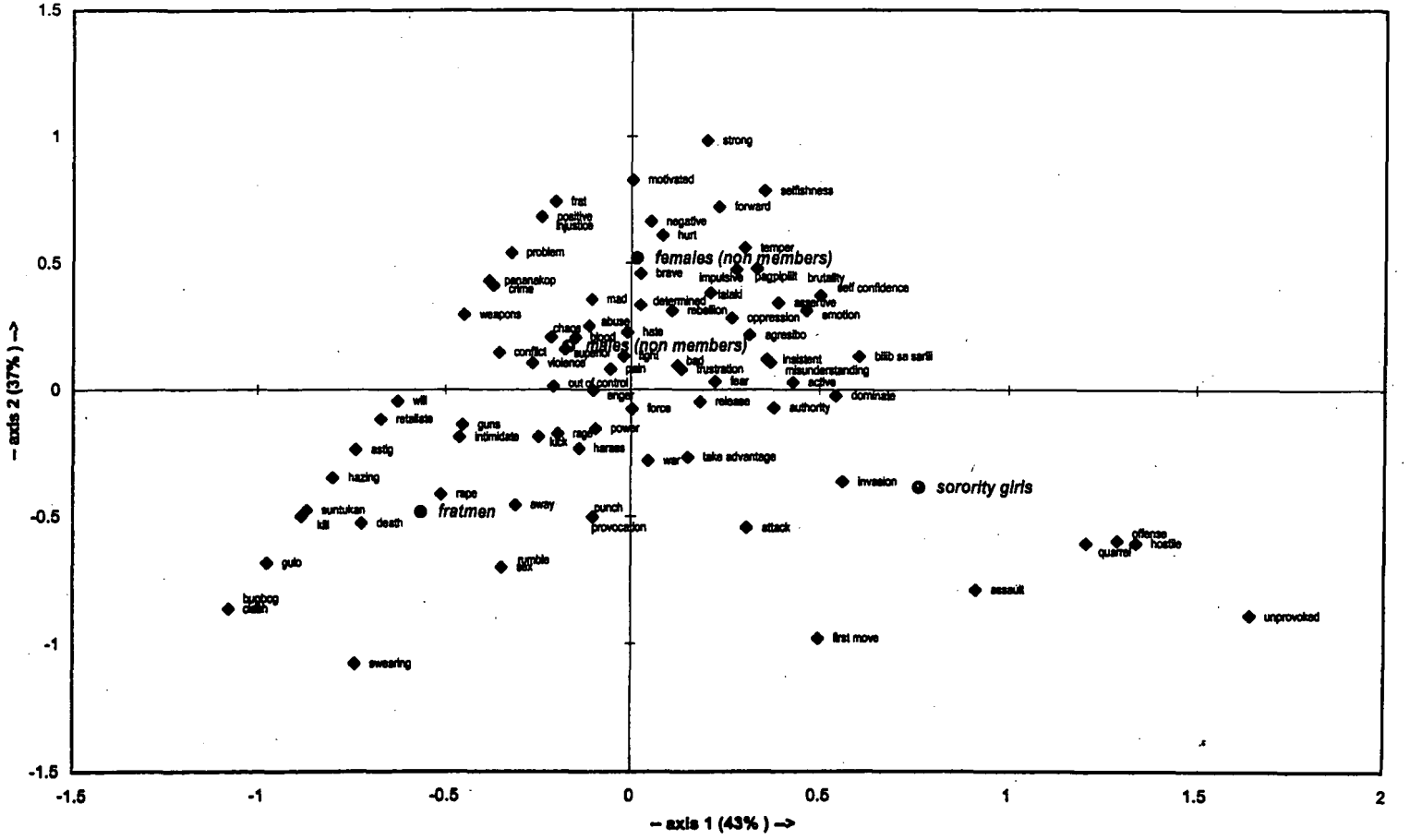


Figure 2. Correspondence Analysis of Fraternity Members' Responses

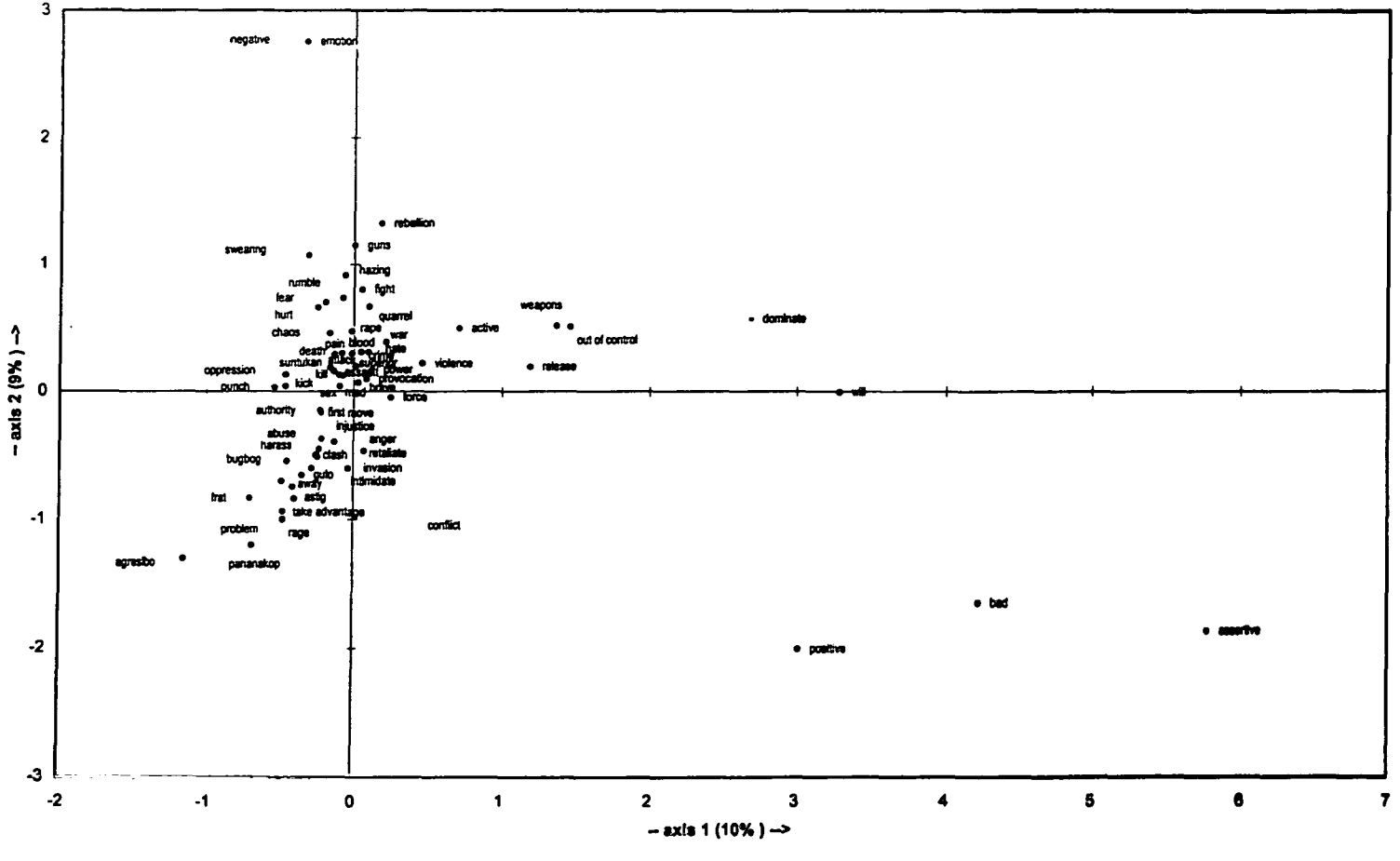
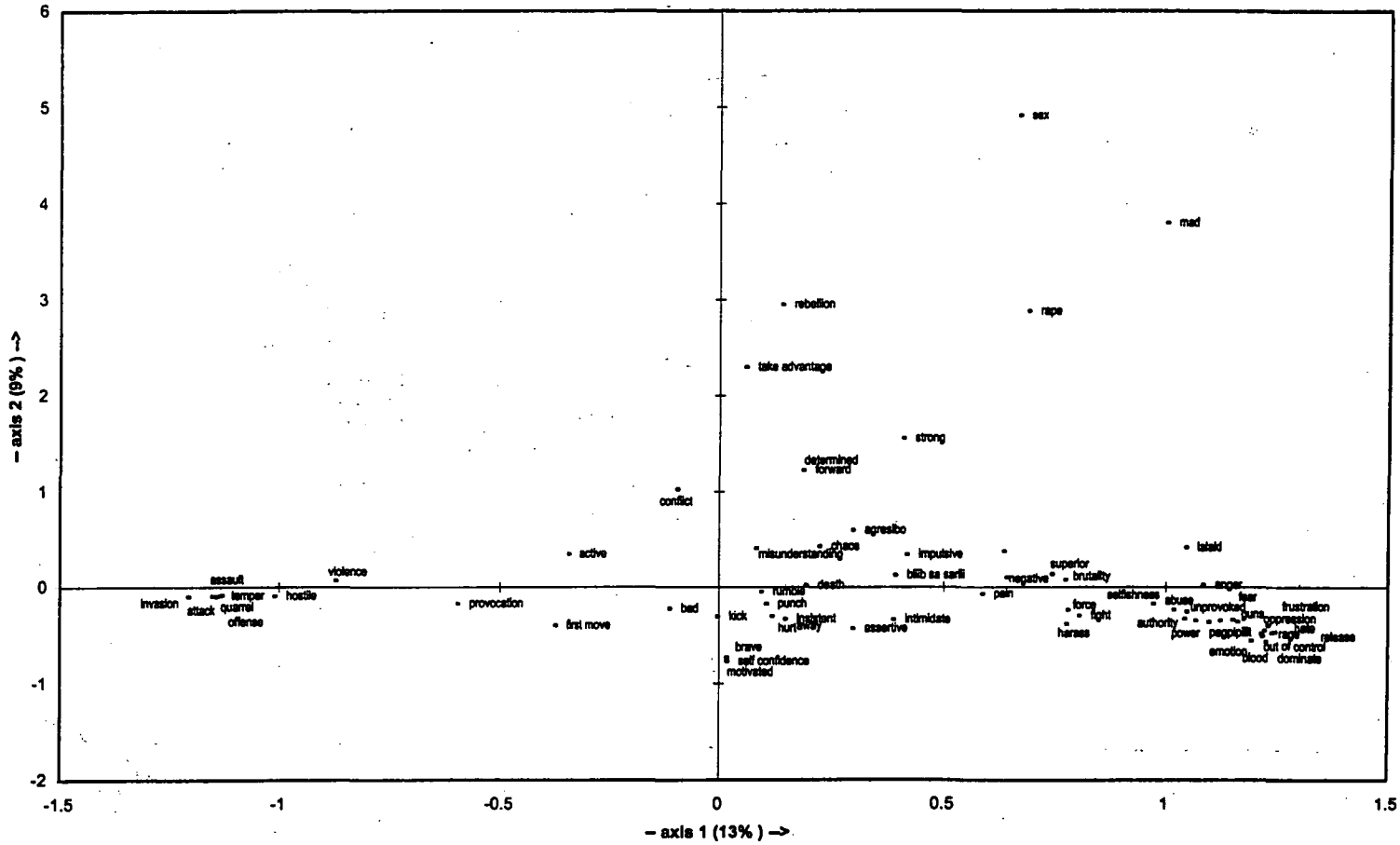


Figure 3. Correspondence Analysis of Sorority Members' Responses



right side which probably suggest that this sample tend to think of aggression in abstract terms.

The plot for the female nonmembers seems to resemble that of the sorority members except for a more clustered representation on the center *(see figure 4)*. As with the plot for the sorority members, the plot for the nonmembers suggests the opposition in the horizontal dimension of abstract ideas (self-confidence, *bilib sa sarili*, active, determined, strong, temper, assertive) with concrete images of aggression (assault, take advantage, hurt and harass).

The male nonmembers' plot *(see figure 5)* reveals no apparent organization since most of the responses are virtually clustered in the center.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, correspondence analyses of the word associations suggest two probable organizing principles that the respondents from the different groups used when thinking about aggression: 1) individual vs intergroup aggression; and 2) abstract vs. concrete aggression. It is worth noting here that these dimensions have some similarity with the organizing principles derived by Spini and Doise (1998) in their work on human rights. They suggested that people's thoughts about involvement in human rights can be described using two dimensions: 1) personal vs governmental, and 2) abstract vs applied. One can only wonder whether in general these dimensions describe groups' way of thinking about social objects.

All people probably have ideas about aggression that can be placed under any of the categories of the two dimensions. The interesting point here is that group membership influences the salience of a particular category in the minds of the respondents. Fraternity members appear to have concrete images of aggression in intergroup situation while sorority members think about aggression in abstract and individual terms. Nonmembers, be they females or males, seem to think about aggression in terms of abstract ideas or definitions that may fall under individual or intergroup categories.

How these collective ways of understanding aggression came about is another area worth paying attention to. Aggression is a foreign word with no exact translation in Filipino or any other local languages. Most North American social psychologists would define aggression as intention to cause harm in whatever form. That is their social representation of aggression. With Filipinos and lay people in general, the everyday use of the term is commonly understood in terms of traits, characteristics and concrete actions. Which of these will be used predominantly as a framework for understanding aggression by a certain group will depend on its unique experiences and interactions. Groups constantly exposed to specific instances of violence, for example, will have concrete images of aggression as their social representation. Consequently, the shared ways of cognizing becomes integral to the maintenance of a social identity since access and acquisition of this collective understanding becomes a prerequisite for participating meaningfully as a member in a social group (Lloyd and Duveen, 1993).

Figure 4. Correspondence Analysis of Female Non-Sorority Members' Responses

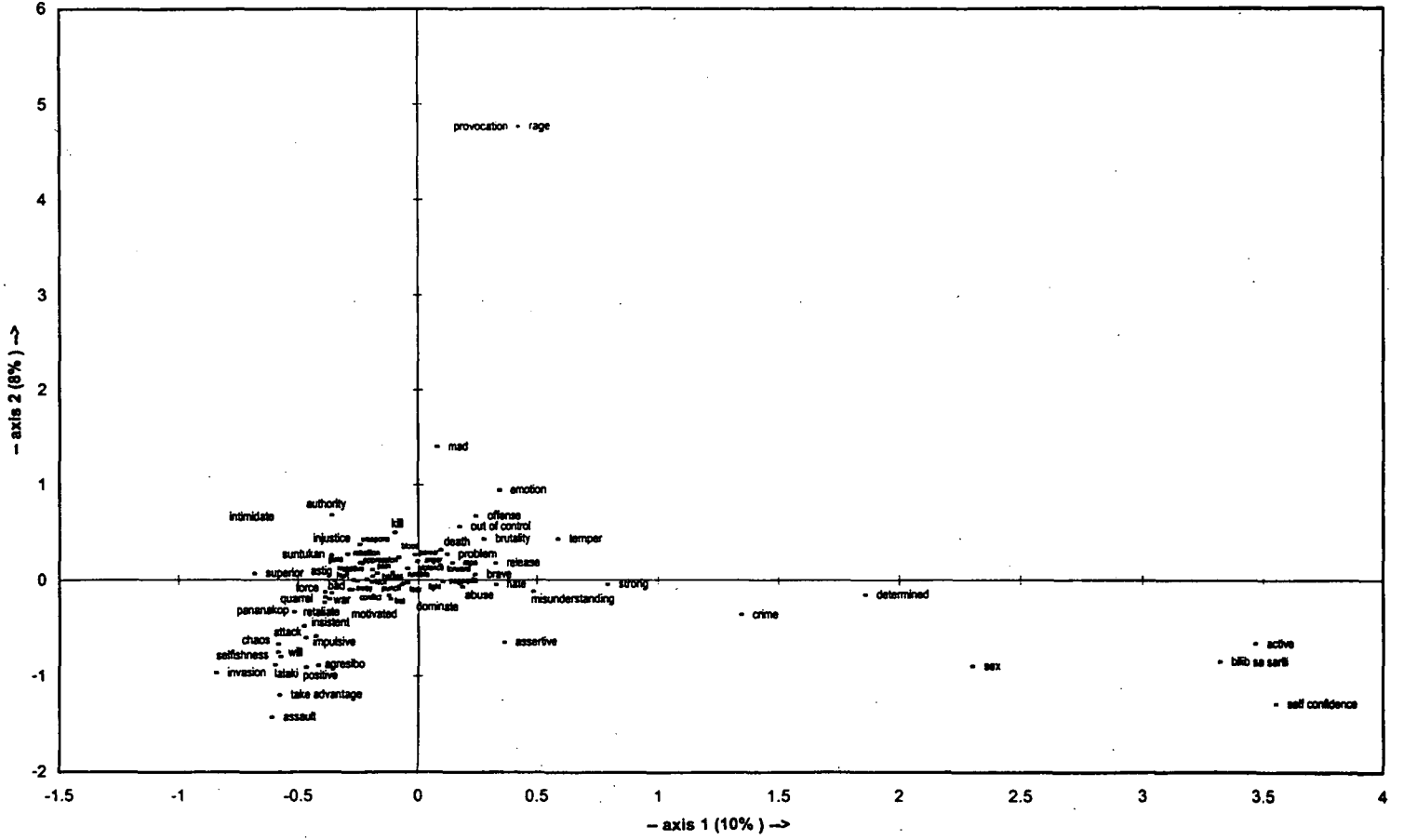
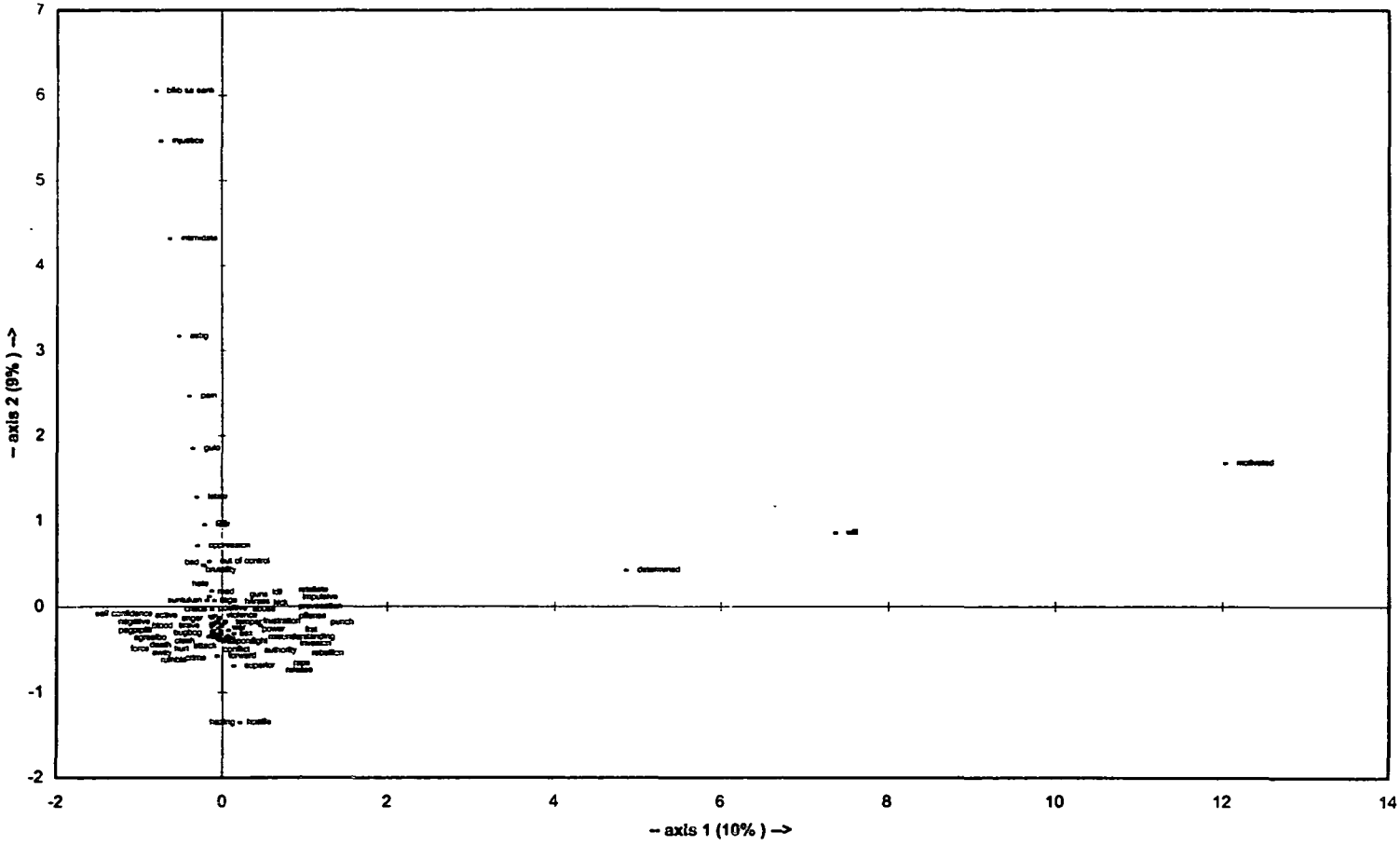


Figure 5. Correspondence Analysis of Male Non-Fraternity Members' Responses



For fraternities, their social representation of aggression is likely shaped by their experiences with aggression which they employ as a means for resolving conflicts probably brought about by competition over valued but limited material resources or psychological goods such as esteem. Prospective members of this group acquire and access this social representation in order to be accepted as a member. Ultimately, their understanding is guided by this social representation. Because how we think largely influences our behavior, it is probably reasonable to hypothesize that for fraternity members, being confronted with concrete instances of aggression may lead to retaliatory acts of similar nature. But people are not prisoners of their social representations (Campbell, 1996). Through conscious effort, people can be made aware of their tendencies and the consequences that their actions bring.

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