Gender Distribution and Role Portrayal
on the Kids' WB Network:
Maintenance of the Status Quo?

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Abstract

This study analyzed the distribution of male and female characters in contemporary made-for-TV animation. The purpose of the study was to see whether today's cartoons are as stereotypical and male-dominated as they were 25 years ago when the first studies of children's cartoons were made.

To that end, shows from the relatively new Kids' WB network were recorded and analyzed according to the number of male and female characters present, and the behavior characteristics they exhibited. This study found that males still outnumber females by a large margin, but the females that were present acted in nontraditional roles.

Introduction

Characters such as Bart Simpson, Beavis, and Butt-Head have been the source of much concern and many animated debates about the television programs children watch. That children learn from and imitate what they see – to at least some extent -- is doubtless; anyone who doesn't believe so need only spend a few hours at a playground to observe the youth of America pretending to be Power Rangers or Ninja Turtles. This begs the question: "What kind of role models do children get from cartoons?"

One of the newest entrants into the realm of children's television is the Kids' WB network, a subsidiary of Warner Brothers' WB network. Kids' WB debuted in August 1995, and currently offers four hours of weekend programming and two hours of weekday programming to its affiliates. The relative popularity of the characters showcased by the network creates the potential for the content of their shows to influence many children in some way.

Statement Of The Problem

Most cartoon enthusiasts will tell you that animation entered into a Renaissance following the success of films like Who Framed Roger Rabbit? and The Little Mermaid, sparking new interest and a resurgence in popularity. With the explosion of cable and satellite channels such as the Cartoon Network and the creation of new broadcast networks like UPN and the WB, there are more outlets than ever for cartoons, and therefore, more opportunities to see more shows.

Conventional wisdom suggests that more time slots and more program sources will encourage more diverse programs to be developed and shown. The question at hand is whether the new programming shown by these outlets continues to reinforce the same old stereotypical

notions.

Theoretical Grounding

This study draws on two major theories, the first of these being social learning theory. According to Bandura, almost anything learned from self-experience can be learned vicariously by observing the experiences of others, and that television provides a source of symbolic modeling for its viewers (1978). This suggests that by watching television, we are learning patterns of behavior through the act of watching the way characters act in the constructed realities presented to us.

Also drawn upon for this study is cultivation theory. According to Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, television acts as the primary storyteller within the family unit, and that it is the common socializer of the latter half of our century.

As a result, television becomes the source of dominant views on issues within our culture (1980). Cultivation theory postulates that increased television viewing increases the likelihood that viewers will perceive reality as the way television portrays it.

Purpose of this Study

With previous studies in mind, this study seeks to determine whether the animated cartoons shown on the Kids' WB network contains similar tendencies of gender occurrences and representation as has been found in other outlets. This is of interest because most if not all research including animation produced by Warner Brothers has focused on what is generally referred to as "classic" short subjects from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s rather than the modern

output of the studio. Furthermore, Kids' WB is a new block of programming and has not yet been analyzed to see if the shows it carries carry the same tendencies as previous shows on other networks.

Review of Literature

As stated, no known studies have been done on the content of gender distribution and behavior characteristics of Kids' WB shows. However, prior research has been done on animated cartoons broadcast in the past on other networks and the way they affect the children who view them. Some of the studies have focused on the content of the shows, while others have focused on the way children react to them. Many of the latter studies have focused in particular on how sex role stereotyping affects girls.

Sex-Role Stereotyping and Character Tendencies

An overview analysis of animated cartoons was made by Streicher (1974), who found that many programs featured few or no female characters whatsoever, particularly "chase-and-pratfall" shows such as compilations of "classic" Warner Brothers shorts. Shows with "continuing adventure" or "teachy-preachy" themes were more likely to have female characters, but even then, women were grossly outnumbered by men. Males were found to play more lead roles, hold more titles, be more active, and more mature than their female counterparts, who were more likely to cause trouble inadvertently and more likely to swoon over a member of the opposite sex.

Published on the heels of that study is a work by Sternglanz and Serbin (1974), who analyzed 10 of the more popular cartoons from the 1971-1972 season to compare the differences

in treatment of male and female characters. They coded 147 characters for 12 categories of behavior, and found that male characters outnumbered female characters by greater than a two-to one margin. Men were depicted as more active, more dominant, and more aggressive, while females were more nurturing, more likely to flee, and more likely to defer to others. It is significant to note that half of the initial sample had to be rejected due to a total lack of female characters within those shows, which correlates with Streicher's observations.

This study was updated and expanded upon by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995), who incorporated Streicher's broad categories into the instrument developed by Sternglanz and Serbin. They taped 175 cartoons from broadcast and cable channels during 1993 and analyzed them. The cartoons were coded by year, major characters, number of male and female minor characters, marital and parental status of lead characters, species, occupation, and appearance. The lead characters were also rated on a Likert scale measuring 25 traits. Then, the cartoons were coded again for the frequency of occurrence of 21 behaviors, and after that, the frequency of communication acts. Finally, the cartoons were coded a fourth time for the amount of dialog given to lead characters by gender.

The results were then divided into pre- and post-1980 based on their copyright dates, and evaluated. In the end, Thompson and Zerbinos found that both male and female characters were still portrayed stereotypically and that males still dominated screen time. However, they also found that characters were portrayed less stereotypically after 1980 than before – and that female characters had gained significant ground.

Sex-Role Stereotyping and Children's Perceptions

Mayes and Valentine (1979) state that sex-identified cartoon characters can be interpreted by children as role models. They showed episodes of four mid-70's cartoon shows to 30 children between the ages of eight and 13, and then asked them to evaluate 14 character behaviors on a Likert scale to determine the perceived masculinity or femininity of a given trait. The results showed that the children found the characters to be clearly stereotypical in their sex role behaviors.

This is strengthened by the work of Frueh and McGhee (1975), who surveyed 80 elementary school children from kindergarten and grades two, four, and six, half of them light TV viewers and half of them heavy TV viewers. They compared the types and frequencies of shows the children reportedly watched with the strength of traditional sex role development as depicted by the survey. They found a high correlation between heavy television viewing and traditional sex role beliefs across all age groups in both genders.

Also important is a study done by Davidson, et. al (1979), who examined the responses of 33 kindergarten girls to a showing of one of three animated cartoons, a stereotypical show, a neutral show, and a reverse-stereotype show. The girls were then asked to match a series of pictures with descriptions. They found that girls exposed to the reverse-stereotype show were less likely to match descriptions with stereotypical images.

Lastly, Forge and Phemister (1987) showed either a prosocial or a neutral program to 40 kindergartners and then allowed the children time to play. They observed that when subjects were shown prosocial fare, their play reflected more prosocial values.

As a whole, research indicates that on average and over time, animated cartoons have

depicted stereotypical portrayals of both male and female characters, and that boys are provided a larger and more diverse array of role models than girls. It has also been demonstrated that children detect and are likely to be influenced by the stereotypes portrayed in the television they watch. Given that, and the fact that cartoons make up the majority of what children watch, it becomes meaningful to examine the underlying messages and behavioral cues contained within these programs.

Research Question

Given that studies have demonstrated time and again that females are underrepresented in American animated cartoons and are normally presented in traditional roles, does the programming of Kids' WB reflect this norm?

In particular, what is the representation of male and female characters on Kids' WB, and what is the nature of the portrayals of those characters?

Methodology

In this study, I conducted a content analysis of the presence and characteristics of male and female characters in five animated cartoon shows broadcast on the Kids' WB television network.

Sample

This study uses a sample that is both convenient and purposive. The sample consists of one episode of five series aired as part of the Kids' WB weekend block. The episodes were

recorded on VHS tape in two sessions during late September and early October of 1997. This was done because some shows slated for the 1997-1998 season had not yet premiered when the first block was recorded.

The shows sampled include: <u>Men In Black</u>, <u>The New Batman/Superman Adventures</u>, <u>Animaniacs</u>, <u>Pinky and the Brain</u>, and <u>Sylvester & Tweety Mysteries</u>. All of the shows on Kids' WB are half an hour in length, except for <u>The New Batman/Superman Adventures</u>, which is an hour long on weekends and consists of a Superman cartoon and a Batman cartoon (a half-hour version of the show runs on weekdays, and features either Batman or Superman).

The sample was made up of full programs of each cartoon, regardless of whether it contains a single coherent story or is a collection of shorts. Title sequences and credit rolls will be ignored, as will "We'll be right back!" and "We now return to..." tags, which will not be considered part of the full program for the purposes of this study. Interstitial material, such as characters interacting for a brief period of time before the start of a short outside of the context of the narrative (most often seen in <u>Animaniacs</u>) was also discounted in this study.

<u>Unit of Analysis</u>

There were two units of analysis for this study, one for each question. For the question of gender representation, the unit of analysis was "speaking" characters. To qualify as a character, a candidate (man, woman, ghost, animal, sentient machine (e.g., Rosie the Robot from <u>The Jetsons</u>), etc.) had to appear in more than one shot, and have two or more interactions with another qualified character that include some form of communication.

For this portion of the study, communication was defined as the transmission of an

understandable message, either verbally or non-verbally, between two entities. Therefore, a character that communicates via sign language or some other negotiated system (e.g., Lassie tugging at someone's pant leg when Timmy was in trouble) was considered a "speaking" character within the context of this study. Characters with indeterminate gender were not counted.

The portion of the study dealing with gender characteristics used behavior characteristics as the unit of analysis. A behavior characteristic was defined as physical action or communication that takes on a decipherable meaning, either alone or apart. This could be manifested as a line of dialog, a gesture given to another character, a change in expression or body posture suggesting emotional response, or some combination thereof which creates a meaningful message.

Categories of Content

A category system was developed, based on the instrument used by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995). Considering that it would be possible to generate a list of dozens of identifiable behavior characteristics, a decision was made to focus on 14 characteristics that had some tendency toward gender stereotyping (see Appendix A for category definitions). These were then grouped into three categories: positive characteristics, neutral characteristics, and negative characteristics.

Positive Characteristics:

1) Expresses Compliments or Gratitude

2) Shows Affection

3) Shows Joy

4) Leads/Gives Suggestions or Directions

Neutral Characteristics:

5) Apologizes/Shows Sorrow or Regret

6) Follows/Complies with Suggestions or Directions

7) Asks Questions

8) Answers Questions

Negative Characteristics

9) Expresses Criticism

10) Begs or Protests

11) Shows Fear

12) Does Not Follow/Comply with Suggestions of Directions

13) Needs Rescuing

14) Displays Aggression

Intercoder Reliability

A second researcher, a fellow COMS 491 student, was trained in the use of the instrument. Agreement was reached for 52 out of 57 instances coded. Using Holsti's formula, intercoder reliability was calculated at 93.6%.

Results

This study shows that men outnumber women on Kids' WB shows (see Table 1). However, behavior characteristics displayed are not significantly different between male and female characters (see Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4). Males and females were similar in behavior in all three major categories.

Statistical Analysis

The results were tabulated using a table of frequency and percentages for all coded behavior characteristics, grouped by category. A chi-square analysis was then performed on the data. In all three categories, the difference between the behavior characteristics exhibited by male and female characters was not statistically significant. Proportionally speaking, males and females behaved similarly.

Findings

This study found that the characters in Kids' WB shows are portrayed in similar ways regardless of gender. Males were as likely to be complimentary or need rescuing as females. Females were as likely to show aggression or to give directions as males. Also, shows of aggression accounted for over half of all instances of negative behavior characteristics.

Discussion

In many respects, this study presents an interesting picture of the shows aired on Kids' WB. Even though males outnumber females by a 3-to-1 margin, the females that did appear were

presented overall in nontraditional roles. Men In Black had only one minor female character appear during the entire episode coded, however, she was a highly skilled medical specialist. The Superman cartoon shown in The New Batman/Superman Adventures included a female as the lead villain. Pinky and the Brain sported a female character who initially pretended to play a traditional role; she turned out to be the villain in the end. In Sylvester & Tweety Mysteries, we are given a Jessica Fletcher like character who quickly gets on top of a given situation and remains calm during a stay at a vampire's castle, while the male characters are frightened out of their wits.

Of the shows analyzed, Sylvester & Tweety Mysteries was the most unusual. During the course of the show, Sylvester (a cat) tries repeatedly to eat Tweety (a canary). In most of these situations, Tweety is rescued when Hector (a dog) intervenes. This accounts for approximately 80% of the male entries in the "Needs Rescue" column. Similarly, the aforementioned run-in with a vampire accounts for the majority of male instances of "Shows Fear." The reverse-stereotyping at work in this cartoon is particularly stark.

As one might expect, the majority of the instances of "Shows Aggression" can be attributed to Men In Black and The New Batman/Superman Adventures. If not for the female villain in the Superman cartoon, instances of female aggression would have been far lower.

Perhaps the most surprising find, however, is the lack of instances of "Does Not Follow Directions" in the female column. The situation where a (stereotypically male) hero tells a (stereotypically female) tag-along to stay back, only to have the tag-along quickly disobey is a traditional inclusion in cartoons of the past. That it was not found in this sample is a positive sign.

<u>Implications</u>

The results of this study present many implications. Since male characters still outnumber female characters by a large margin, female viewers are left with fewer choices upon which to gather expectations and fewer role models to choose from. However, Kids' WB shows do present female viewers with characters in nontraditional roles. This suggests that further ground has been gained since the Thompson and Zerbinos study, indicating a sea change from the 1970s when nontraditional female characters were highly rare.

However, none of the cartoons analyzed contained scenes that depicted representations of domestic life. <u>Pinky and the Brain</u> depicted the main characters spending time in their home (a cage in a laboratory), but no domestic tasks were performed. All of the other shows occurred entirely away from home, either in a professional setting of some sort, or in a limbo environment (such as in <u>Animaniacs</u> when the characters interacted in a cartoon within the context of the cartoon being shown). As a result, these shows say nothing about how male and female characters divide chores within the household, and no opportunity is presented to depict female characters in roles within the household, traditional or not.

Social learning theory tells us that the characters presented in these cartoons provide behavioral cues for children to absorb and mimic. Given this, boys watching Kids' WB are given a wealth of characters to choose from, while girls are left with a scant few characters to look to for these behavioral cues from within their gender. Therefore, girls are also given less opportunity to live vicariously through another female.

How cultivation theory applies to the cartoons in question is an interesting issue to ponder. Taken at face value, a child who watched only <u>Pinky and the Brain</u> might come to think

of their relationship to the world as like a mouse in a cage. Therefore, the impact of cultivation

upon a viewer by a show is more likely for a show like <u>Sylvester and Tweety Mysteries</u> which

presents a more realistic environment than a show like <u>Animaniacs</u> which makes extensive use of

limbo environments that is highly detached from what could be seen as familiar surroundings by a

viewer.

On the other hand, certainly a child learns that contrary to what some cartoons depict, the

moon is not made of cheese and people cannot fly unaided, but it seems entirely possible that

children may extrapolate some element of such fantasy situations to their real surroundings. As

such, it appears that cultivation theory applies more directly to some cartoons than others.

Regardless of setting, however, these cartoons do not represent a true representation of

the number of females in the population in general and the workplace in particular. Cultivation

theory indirectly tells the viewer that these women absent from the screen must be somewhere

else – implying that they may be occupying traditional roles unseen at home.

<u>Limitations</u>

This study was constrained by several limitations. The small sample size may have

contributed to a Type II error in final calculations. This study says nothing about the portrayal

and distribution of characters on other popular networks, such as ABC and Fox Kids Network.

Considering that four of the five programs analyzed were produced by Warner Brothers

Animation for Kids' WB, this study measures a somewhat closed system and cannot be used to

generalize about all contemporary sources of animated programming.

As suggested earlier, it would be possible to generate a list with many more characteristics

that could be measured with respect to gender which could find differences in areas not measured here. Furthermore, this study does not account for differences between major and minor characters for the purposes of distribution, which may underexaggerate the presence of females in lead roles. The study may also have been affected by unusual circumstances within the programs. The reverse-stereotyping present in the episode of <u>Sylvester & Tweety Mysteries</u> is an example of this.

Finally, this study samples only one episode from five of the nine shows in the overall Kids' WB lineup. The network removed a tenth show, <u>Calamity Jane</u>, which starred a whip-toting female in an old-west setting after airing just three episodes, causing the schedule to change, which may have had an effect on the sample. A listing error also prevented one other show, <u>Channel Umptee-Three</u>, from being recorded and analyzed with the others.

<u>Suggestions For Future Research</u>

Although there have been several studies done in the past that have dealt with the topics I have, there is much that could still be done. For starters, there has been no comprehensive research of all made-for-TV cartoons, organized by year produced. Many of the previous studies have included shows comprised of theatrical shorts (e.g., "classic" Warner Brothers shorts starring characters like Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, "classic" MGM shorts featuring Tom & Jerry) which were not originally directed toward young audiences, which may have influenced their results.

Another suggestion is to code episodes of all 16 series that Kids' WB has aired (12 if you ignore shows made from "classic" shorts, and re-runs of shows not specifically produced for the

network). This could give a more comprehensive view of the programming offered by Kids' WB since its debut. This could be broken down still further by grouping the cartoons into "chase-and-pratfall," "continuing adventure," and "teachy-preachy" varieties for still further insight.

Conclusion

This study provided an extension to previous research into the representation of gender and the behavior characteristics portrayed by characters of both sexes in children's cartoons by examining the Kids' WB network. Results showed that male characters outnumbered female characters 3-to-1, reinforcing all previous studies of gender distribution of American cartoons. However, male and female characters on Kids' WB shows did not behave in significantly different ways, which does not correlate with previous studies. This suggests that the programs produced by Kids' WB are less gender stereotyped than programs produced by other studios in the past.

When considering these results in light of cultivation theory and social learning theory, there is cause for concern. Even though children watching these cartoons are presented with female role models that are just as active and intelligent as their male counterparts, they are still given very few female role models. Further, they are presented with a picture suggesting that men outnumber women in society.

The ramifications of such a distorted picture is unclear and subject to debate. However, what is clear is that cartoons remain the favorite entertainment of America's youth, and the picture presented to them is certain to have at least some impact upon their perception and expectations for the world they will inherit.

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Table 1

Character Distribution by Gender

Male		Female	
#	%	#	%
38	76%	12	24%

Table 2

Positive Behavior Characteristics

Trait	Male Characters					Female Characters					Total
	Observed		Expected		χ^2	Observed		Expected		χ^2	
	ν	%	ν	%		ν	%	ν	%		
Compliments/ Shows Gratitude	6	19%	5.25	17%	.11	4	14%	4.75	17%	.12	10
Shows Affection	6	19%	7.36	24%	.25	8	29%	6.64	24%	.22	14
Shows Joy	9	29%	9.46	31%	.02	9	32%	8.54	31%	.02	18
Leads/Gives Directions	10	32%	8.93	29%	.13	7	25%	8.07	29%	.36	17
Total	31	99%*	31	101%*	.51	28	100%	28	101%*	.72	**59**

χ^2 (3, N = 59) = 1.23, NS   * Does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 3

Neutral Behavior Characteristics

Trait	Male Characters					Female Characters					Total
	Observed		Expected		χ^2	Observed		Expected		χ^2	
	v	%	v	%		v	%	v	%		
Shows Sorrow	3	6%	2.41	5%	.14	0	0%	.59	5%	.59	3
Obeys/ Follows Directions	13	25%	11.24	21%	.28	1	8%	2.76	21%	1.12	14
Asks Questions	20	38%	20.88	39%	.04	6	46%	5.12	39%	.15	26
Answers Questions	17	32%	18.47	35%	.12	6	46%	4.53	35%	.48	23
Total	53	101%*	53	100%	.58	13	100%	13	100%	2.34	66

χ^2 (3, N = 66) = 2.92, NS   * Does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 4

Negative Behavior Characteristics

Trait	Male Characters					Female Characters					Total
	Observed		Expected		χ^2	Observed		Expected		χ^2	
	ν	%	ν	%		ν	%	ν	%		
Criticizes	10	8%	11.09	9%	.11	4	13%	2.91	9%	.41	14
Protests/Begs	10	8%	11.09	9%	.11	4	13%	2.91	9%	.41	14
Shows Fear	19	16%	17.42	15%	.14	3	10%	4.58	15%	.55	22
Does Not Follow Directions	7	6%	5.54	5%	.38	0	0%	1.46	5%	1.46	7
Needs Rescue	10	8%	9.50	8%	.03	2	6%	2.50	8%	.10	12
Shows Aggression	62	53%	63.36	54%	.03	18	58%	16.64	54%	.11	80
Total	118	99%*	118	100%	.80	31	100%	31	100%	3.04	**66**

χ^2 (5, N = 149) = 3.04, NS   * Does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Appendix A
Categories of Content

<u>Positive Characteristics</u>

1) Expresses Compliments or Gratitude: A communication conveying a positive evaluation, either personal or professional. Statements such as "Well done!" or "You look good today!" are both applicable. Also, a communication that expresses gratitude, e.g. "Thank you, Superman!" after being rescued.

2) Shows Affection: A statement or action made to convey affection. This includes hugging, kissing, and cuddling, and statements such as "I love you, Superman!" It can also include friendly touching between non-intimate people, such as a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Multiple shows of affection, such as a hug and a kiss given in the same brief period of time (i.e., one shot) should be counted as one continuous expression rather than separately.

3) Shows Joy: Any expression or verbal cue suggesting joy or happiness. Smiles, fist-pumping, hi-fives, shouts of "We did it!" or "Yay!" qualify for this.

4) Leads/Gives Suggestions or Directions: A behavior where a character takes charge of a situation by using leadership qualities. This includes communication which suggests a procedure or course of action, such as explaining how to use a piece of equipment, detailing a rescue plan, directing someone to call the police, etc. This does not include statements such as "Get lost!"
Also, it must include an exchange between characters. For example, just because Superman shows up and fights a villain who is terrorizing others does not mean he is automatically leading a situation. A statement like "It's time we did battle, Batman!" does not qualify, while a statement like "Put down that gun, Lex Luthor!" does.

Neutral Characteristics

5) Apologizes/Shows Sorrow or Regret: A statement or display suggesting sorrow or regret for

an action or occurrence. Statements such as "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you, Pinky..." or

"I never should have done that..." are examples of this. Also includes apologies.

6) Follows/Complies with Suggestions or Directions: This is the compliment to the previous

category. If Batman says, "Follow me, Robin!" and Robin follows, it counts.

However, if Superman tells Lex Luthor to put the gun down, and Lex says he will but

does not, it does not count.

7) Asks Questions: A question posed from one character to another. Questions asked of an

inanimate object for the benefit of the audience, such as Batman looking at a piece of

evidence and asking, "Who could it be this time?" are not included. Questions on the

order of "Are you all right?" posed when a character finds another character in an injured

state are also ignored, as are rhetorical questions.

8) Answers Questions: A reply made to a question asked by another character, given the

parameters above.

Negative Characteristics

9) Expresses Criticism: A communication conveying a negative evaluation, either personal or

professional. Statements such as "Now look what you've done!" or "That was a bad

move!" are applicable. This includes remarks made in a sarcastic manner.

10) Begs or Protests: A plea made from one character to another. Statements such as "You

can't kill him, Clayface, please don't!" or "Have mercy on me, Superman!" are examples of

this.

11) Shows Fear: An expression or verbal cue suggesting fear. Recoiling, particularly with mouth open, is a good physical cue. Lines like "What are you going to do to me?" -- particularly with a quivering voice -- when a villain looms is an example of a verbal cue.

12) Does Not Follow/Comply with Suggestions or Directions: This is the opposite of the previous category. If Superman says, "Stay here, Jimmy!" and Jimmy follows Superman anyway, it counts.

13) Needs Rescuing: This occurs when a character is put in a position where they must be saved. This can include Batman saving a kidnap victim, or Superman pulling someone from a burning building. A character must be in some threat of danger to need rescuing. Also, this applies only to discrete characters. If Twoface tries to destroy Gotham City, that does not equate to 100,000 people who need rescuing. However, if the Joker has both Commissioner Gordon and Batgirl captive, there are two people in need of rescue.

14) Displays Aggression: This is just about any direct and intentional move to do harm to another character. This includes physical aggression such as hitting, kicking, punching, use of super-powers, using a weapon or other device, etc., as well as verbal threats and attacks. This does not include indirect or consequential events, such as a rockfall caused during the fight. But if a villain tries to intentionally start a rockslide to trap a hero (or vice-versa) it will count. In the case of aggression with multiple persons, such as a policeman versus a group of thugs, one instance will be counted for the group per attack.