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A THREE-COMPONENT MODEL OF CHILDREN'S TEASING: AGGRESSION, HUMOR, AND AMBIGUITY

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This exploratory investigation of children's teasing consists of a literature review, theory development, and the report of preliminary data. We propose that teasing consists of a communication, directed by an agent to a target, which synthesizes elements of aggression, humor, and ambiguity. Teasing messages are not meant literally, and often they exaggerate or overstate the intended derogation. For the target, making an attribution for the teaser's intention may be a complex task, and incorrect decoding may cause misunderstandings. Teasers see their motives as benign and friendly, whereas targets, especially young children, often experience teasing as hostile and painful. Social patterns suggest that teasing is an expression of status dominance and a mechanism for promoting conformity within groups. Much teasing occurs as a power-oriented interaction in which bullies dominate unassertive children, but there are also playful and beneficial aspects of teasing.

Teasing is an important feature of the social life of children. Nearly all children are teased, and for some the experience is quite painful. Indeed, when asked to list their principal fears, the most common response among high school students is the fear of being teased (Schaefer, 1978). Professionals who work with special populations will attest that being teased is a painful and even traumatic experience for some children. Thus, teasing holds interest for social psychologists, clinicians, and developmentalists.

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Despite the pervasiveness and importance of teasing, it has attracted little research. Teasing is not listed as a topic in *Psychological Abstracts*, and it is rarely included in indices of books on social, clinical or developmental psychology. Review of the literature located very few publications on this topic, and these were mostly impressionistic. Thus, although we can claim to summarize the current state of knowledge, there is in fact little knowledge to summarize. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate research on teasing by presenting a theoretical framework that has emerged from our literature review, exploratory studies, and conceptual work. We will present sections on the subtypes of behavior involved in teasing, the content or subject matter of teasing, causes of this behavior, responses by targets, the question of the desirability of teasing, and directions for future research.

BASIC CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES

Teasing should be approached as an interpersonal transaction involving a complex form of communication. As a working definition, we propose that teasing is a personal communication, directed by an agent toward a target, that includes three components: aggression, humor, and ambiguity. Neither unalloyed humor nor pure aggression would be indentified as teasing, but when these components are combined in a certain way, the result is teasing. The components must be synthesized in the teasing message itself; our definition is not met by instances in which insult and joking merely alternate, or by disputes in which arguments are stated humorously. In teasing, the aggression and humor both refer to the target. The ambiguous quality of teasing derives from the affective contrast between humor and aggression and also from the discrepancy that commonly exists between the literal meaning of the teaser's statement and his or her true evaluation of the target. Often the teasing behavior consists of some act which taken out of context would not be judged as aggressive

The aggressive and humorous components may be combined in different proportions. Teasing motivated primarily by a hostile intent would probably be painful to the target and would be judged as malicious. Teasing primarily meant as a form of humor could be enjoyed by all parties involved and would be considered benign

The following example illustrates the distinction between teasing and insulting. A fifth-grade teacher described an incident in which the verbalization "ting a ling a ling" functioned to draw attention to a child's bell-bottomed trousers, a style that was considered outmoded.

The point here is that the statement "Your clothes are unstylish" would simply be an insult; it would not be teasing because the humor and ambiguity are missing.

FIELD STUDIES

Our research included some exploratory empirical work. Forty-six third-grade and sixty fifth-grade pupils wrote classroom compositions in which they were asked to define teasing, give examples from their own experience, report how they felt when being teased, and state their value judgments of this behavior. Sixty-eight eighth-grade pupils completed questionnaires which included the above material and additional questions concerning their observations and opinions about teasing. The pupils completed these materials anonymously, during class time. Thirty-four teachers from these grades filled out a similar questionnaire adapted for them. The subjects came from the public school system of a middle-class, racially integrated, suburban community.

The written material obtained from the pupils provided descriptive information about teasing from the child's perspective. These responses generally exhibited recurrent themes that allowed us to categorize them and develop simple coding schemes. The examples of teasing described by the children provided narrative accounts of teasing incidents, including verbalizations and actions, that were coded on two dimensions: (1) Behavioral form, that is, the type of statement or overt behavior produced by the teaser, and (2) The content or subject matter of the teasing, in other words, the attribute or behavior the target was teased about. The individual incidents described by the respondents sometimes included more that one form or content, so that more than one coding on each dimension was possible for a single incident. As a result, we calculated proportions by tabulating instances of a particular coding and then dividing by the total number of codings (rather than number of incidents or subjects). Responses to the question about the respondent's typical emotional reaction to being teased were coded as negative, neutral, or positive. The respondents' value judgments of teasing were coded as negative, mixed, or positive.

Our theory is elaborated from the constructs suggested in the literature and our exploratory studies, but the conceptual analysis proposed goes beyond the empirical data. These several years of work have brought us to the beginning rather than the conclusion of the study of teasing, and our hypotheses are intended to stimulate others

to pursue the topic systematically so that it will not remain in its present position of near total neglect.

BEHAVIORAL FORMS OF TEASING

The first question is, just what do children do when they tease, that is, how do children tease? As described by our sample, there are many different specific behaviors that are included under the rubric of teasing. Most teasing seems to be verbal. The most common forms were making humorous reference to some behavior or attribute of the target (i.e., "making fun;" 28%), calling the target humorous names (25%), and simply laughing at the target (11%). Important but less common verbal forms were sarcastic statements, facetious questions, tricking the target into believing something untrue, exaggerated imitation, and engaging in word play with the target's name (e.g., "Tony Baloney") Nonverbal forms of teasing (9%) included pointing, making faces, pestering the target physically, taking some possession from the target (e.g., a hat) and refusing to give it back, and attaching a "Kick Me" sign to the target's back. In general, these behaviors seem characterized by an aggressive yet humorous impinging on the target's dignity.

Escalation Principle. The humor and ambiguity of teasing are often created by exaggeration or *escalation*. Escalation is change in meaning toward the identification of stable, central, intentional, and yet undesirable attributes. Teasing may refer to an unintended act as if it were intended (e.g., "You seem to like getting yourself soaked") or may invent illogical intentions (e.g., suggesting that a child wore pants too short in order to avoid getting them wet in case of a flood). Also, isolated acts are escalated into stable attributes ("Do you *always* wear socks that don't match?"), the extremity or size of an attribute or act is exaggerated ("How's the air up there?" to a tall person), and peripheral characteristics are escalated into central attributes of the individual. Escalation can create humor by imputing absurdity to the target's intentions, behavior, or attributes.

CONTENT OF TEASING

The next question is, what do children tease about? In our sample, the most common content of teasing was reference to poor physical appearance (39%), especially being fat (13%). Other types of subject matter reported by the children, in decreasing order of frequency, were

as follows: intellectual performance (especially stupidity, but also being too smart in school), physical performance (largely clumsiness), family, interest in the opposite sex, hygiene (mainly smelling), race, being afraid, promiscuity, effeminate behavior in males, psychological problems, and being a "goody-goody." One intriguing type of teasing seems to have no content at all. Such contentless teasing (e.g., "Nya, nya, nyah") appears to express only the intention to tease the particular target.

There were no sex differences except that girls (at all ages) were more likely than boys to report teasing about some aspect of physical appearance (48% vs. 29% of incidents described). The content of teasing was mostly the same in the different age groups with the exception that teasing about sexual issues (homosexuality, physical development, and promiscuity) appeared only in the older (eighth-grade) pupils' responses, although such content was not common here (7%).

Deviation from Norms. The best single generalization about the content of teasing is that it typically refers to deviations from group norms. Norms can be understood in two senses, prescriptive and statistical. Deviations from prescriptive norms are failures to measure up to standards, whereas deviations from statistical norms entail being unusual in either good or bad ways. Both types of norms are relevant to teasing. Most teasing concerns negative deviations (as in the prescriptive model) and refers to various failures, blunders, or undesirable personal characteristics. There were, however, a few instances of teasing about positive deviations (as in the statistical sense), such as calling an intelligent child an "egghead."

CAUSES OF TEASING

Why does teasing occur? Two levels of analysis seem useful: reasons stated by participants or casual observers, and inferences regarding underlying psychological purposes or functions. At the first level, one may simply ask people when they tease, and the eighth-grade questionnaire included such a question.

Motives Stated by Subjects. The most commonly cited causes of one's own teasing were quite benign; these included reciprocation (i.e., teasing when someone teases you first; 35%), and teasing as a way of playing or joking around (16%). Four other motives for teasing were occasionally mentioned. Twelve percent of the respondents said they tease when they dislike the target, and 8% said they tease when in a bad mood; these responses suggest some awareness of aggressive motives

in one's own teasing. Ten percent of the respondents said they tease when in a group that is teasing, which suggests that individuals may "join in" to tease a target. Finally, 4% of the eighth graders said they tease members of the opposite sex whom they like. Altogether, then, both playful (including flirtatious) and hostile motives for teasing seem to exist. Our suggestion that teasing may be classified along a continuum of malicious versus benign thus corresponds to the subjective experiences of the actors.

Social Dominance. To begin a conceptual analysis, one can explore the social identities and characteristics of teasers and targets. In other words, who teases whom? Responses to these questions in the eighth-grade questionnaire tend to portray teasing as an expression (and possibly mode) of dominance within a group. By far the most common response to "What kind of kid teases a lot?" portrayed frequent teasers as aggressive bullies (51%). However, the next most common category of frequent teasers was popular, funny, lively children (23%). What popular children and bullies have in common is dominant status within a peer group.

The theme of dominance is also suggested by eighth graders' responses to the question "What kind of kid gets teased a lot?" Seventy-one percent of the responses fell among four categories (often described in combination), all of which suggest children of low status within peer groups: timid, physically small losers; unpopular children; fat children; and stupid children. Thus, to generalize from the modal responses, frequent teasing is a matter of bullies teasing wimps, which portrays teasing as one way of expressing social dominance and supports the hypothesis of an aggressive component in teasing.

It is important to note, however, that 12% of the respondents described frequent targets as having desirable attributes. These respondents answered that it is very smart, good-looking, or popular children who are teased often. These responses support our suggestion that teasing is sometimes aimed at people who deviate from norms in a positive direction. Such teasing may be motivated by jealousy, or by the desire to engage in a playful interaction with an attractive target.

If social dominance is indeed a major cause of teasing, then teasing may be either an expression or a mode of dominance. As an expression, teasing simply reveals the pecking order. Part of having high status is the privilege of teasing children of lower status. As a mode of dominance, teasing may be a competitive medium by which status is negotiated. Thus, two children may tease each other until one of them prevails. This process has been documented among American Blacks in

the practice called "the Dozens" (Abrahams, 1962; Smitherman, 1977). The winner of this overtly competitive exchange is celebrated by the audience as a kind of champion.

Conformity with Norms. In view of the central concern of teasing with norm deviation, we suggest that this behavior functions as a social control mechanism by which groups promote conformity (cf. Groos, 1901). Teasing often promotes mediocrity by bringing pressures to bear on individuals with attributes that are unusual in either bad or good ways.

Teasers may be motivated to perform this social function by the opportunity teasing affords to demonstrate one's knowledge and affirmation of group norms. Our reasoning is as follows. In negotiating one's status in the peer group, it is helpful to make an obvious display of one's knowledge of norms and conformity to them. But because conformity is so common, by itself it brings no distinction. One *can* distinguish oneself, however, by being the first to recognize and repudiate deviations by others. The teaser demonstrates his or her own superior knowledge and affirmation of group norms by calling attention to the target's nonconformity. In "join-in" teasing, the audience may feel a need to follow the teaser's lead in repudiating norm deviations, perhaps as a way to help establish their membership in the in-group (cf. McGhee, 1979). This explanation is consistent with the focus on norm deviation in teasing, and it integrates a wide range of teasing behaviors, from teasing about clothes to simply pointing at the target.

While promoting group homogeneity, on the individual level teasing can act either to include or to exclude the target. Aggressive, cruel teasing seems to repudiate the target as a group member. Benign forms of teasing represent a gentle rebuke, with a message to "get with it," correct deviations, and realign oneself with group standards.

Camouflage of Intentions. Although the ambiguity of teasing presents a certain problem to the target, it holds distinctive opportunities for the teaser. The elements of humor and ambiguity may allow the teaser to express aggression without facing the negative repercussions associated with undisguised disrespect. One can get away with some statements said jokingly that would elicit anger if stated seriously. Thus, teasing may provide a means of expressing sentiments that could not otherwise be expressed.

Anthropologists have described customs in a number of societies which permit and even encourage teasing (Farb, 1974; Smitherman, 1977). These customs involve structuring insult and verbal dueling by

adhering to rules and by expressing derogation in imaginative, obviously exaggerated statements. These farfetched insults cannot be taken literally, and the verbal dueling is viewed as a type of game. The above authors both suggest that one social function of these customs is to permit discharge of aggressive tension in a safe manner (i.e., one not disruptive to group relations).

The element of play is not necessarily only a veil for hostility; indeed, the aggressive component of teasing can be used to disguise affection or attraction. Sluckin (1981), in an observational study conducted on playgrounds, noted that when early adolescent children tease members of the opposite sex, they often do so because a more direct expression of interest would be embarrassing. He suggests that this behavior allows the teaser to approach and interact with an attractive target while simultaneously seeming to deny that any affectionate interest exists.

A catalogue of likely causes of teasing would not be complete without mention of intrinsic motivation. Teasing apparently affords direct pleasure to the teaser, the audience, and perhaps even the target at times. The pleasure of teasing probably derives from the element of humor and play in this behavior.

RESPONSES TO TEASING

A target's response to being teased can be examined on three levels: Cognitive appraisal, emotional reaction, and behavioral response. The cognitive response probably occurs first and influences outcomes on the emotional and behavioral levels (cf. Lazarus, 1970).

Ambiguity, Decoding, and Attribution. Because of the roles of ambiguity and escalation in teasing, the spoken message generally does not literally express the teaser's actual evaluation of the target. As a result, the target must decode an ambiguous message in order to arrive at an attribution of the teaser's true intention. Being teased can be confusing, and it may be unclear to the target whether he or she is being insulted or is being engaged in play.

A target can use several forms of contextual information to decode the underlying meaning of a tease. Decoding means (in part) correcting for escalation, that is, appreciating that the teaser's evaluation may not be as seriously derogating as it seems. The teaser's tone of voice and facial expression may provide clues to the spirit in which the message was sent. The pre-existing relationship between the members of the dyad would be particularly important. The same statement could be

attributed to playfulness if it comes from a friend and hostility if it comes from an enemy.

Misunderstandings seem possible. If the target attributes malice to a communication the teaser meant as playful, offense would be taken where none was intended. To avoid giving offense, the teaser can explicitly supply an attribution to a humorous intention (e.g., "just kidding").

Emotional Reactions. Pupils at all grade levels were asked how they felt when they were teased. Ninety-seven percent of the elementary school children reported negative responses, including anger, embarrassment, hurt, and sadness. Among the eighth-graders, 22% denied any negative feelings, but even they did not report enjoyment or pleasure. Rather, these early adolescents said they felt OK when teased or said they had no particular reaction

This predominance of painful responses contrasts markedly with the primarily playful self-reported motives for teasing described earlier. Whether teasing is described as painful or benign seems to depend largely on the perspective of the respondent, perhaps because the aggressive component is more conspicuous to targets while the humor is more apparent to teasers (and audiences). The painful effects of teasing may often be unintended However, this discrepancy can also be explained by a self-serving bias on the part of teasers reporting their own motives.

Behavioral Responses. The eighth-grade questionnaire asked respondents what they do when they are teased. To judge by their responses, the target of teasing has a wide range of options At the aggressive end of the spectrum, some subjects said they respond by fighting (10%) or by reporting the teasing to an authority figure (4%). At the other extreme, 12% of the subjects said they typically laugh along with the teaser. There were two commonly reported responses in the middle of this spectrum: 39% of the respondents said they reciprocate teasing with a verbal comeback or tease of their own, and 24% said they ignore being teased. These diverse responses indicate the ambiguity of the teasing stimulus as well as the dual salience of aggression and humor in these transactions.

Given the range of possible responses to teasing, what is the best option? Ninety-one percent of our teachers recommended that targets ignore being teased, and this seems to be the conventional adult wisdom. However, the target's response may often structure the teasing interaction by resolving its inherent ambiguity If so, the optimal response would be one that defines the teasing as pleasant, innocuous, or playful.

DESIRABILITY OF TEASING

Is teasing good, bad, or variable? The few previous articles dealing with teasing have differed on this question. There appears to be a pattern to the controversy: Clinical psychologists have treated teasing as a harmful behavior associated with psychopathology (Brenman, 1952; Galdston, 1983; Patterson, 1976), while sociologists and anthropologists have described both desirable and undesirable aspects of teasing (Abrahams, 1962; Farb, 1974; Groos, 1901; Miller, 1982a; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Sluckin, 1981; Smitherman, 1977).

Why would teasing be bad? Galdston (1983) described teasing as a sadistic, pathogenic abuse of power that causes violence; however, his conclusions were based on observations of families in therapy for violent behavior, so their teasing patterns may not be typical. Teasing has also been considered in the contexts of masochism (Brenman, 1952) and child aggression (Patterson, 1976).

How can teasing be "good"? Miller (1982a; 1982b) presented a case study in which a mother teased her child for the purpose of stimulating development of assertiveness. As discussed earlier, investigators of group processes have suggested that teasing can provide socially useful outlets for aggression and also convenient means of expressing affection. Several positive aspects of teasing were proposed by our eighth-grade respondents who were asked whether teasing could be good and, if so, why. Seventeen percent said that teasing can be funny and intrinsically enjoyable. Thirty-one percent of the eighth graders said that teasing can inform the target of something inappropriate or undesirable about him or her, thereby helping the target to change. In this light, teasing appears to be a gentle, inclusionary form of social control which benefits targets by helping them correct their deviations from norms. One of our teachers wrote

> A girl in my class was looking so glum. When the period ended, I caught her eye and said "Don't smile so much." I held her gaze until she smiled.

There are several factors which may influence the desirability of a given tease. Value judgements of an incident probably depend on how aggressive versus playful it appears to be. The hurtfulness of teasing would be partly a function of the target's sensitivity about the subject matter of the communication. The teaser may or may not make the playful component obvious as a way to palliate the aggressive impact. Finally, the target's pre-existing relationship with the teaser may affect whether a given statement is interpreted as benign or malicious.

Developmental Changes in Evaluation of Teasing. Children in all three grades were asked whether they thought teasing was good, bad, or both. Only 1% of the subjects stated that teasing is simply good. The answer that teasing can be either good or bad was chosen by 18% of our third graders, 31% of our fifth graders, 82% of our eighth graders, and 94% of our teachers, with a parallel decrease in the proportion who said teasing is simply bad. In a study reported earlier (Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1987), we examined relations between three variables: age, whether the respondent was the teaser or the target in the incident he or she described (the directions did not specify this), and value judgments of teasing. We found that subjects who portrayed themselves as teasers were more likely to give mixed rather than purely negative value judgments of this behavior. This finding is consistent with the contrast between the mostly benign self-reported motives of teasers and the mostly painful reactions of targets described earlier in this paper. It seems plausible that an awareness of oneself as a teaser, with largely benign motives, would moderate value judgments of this behavior. While this association could be attributed to a self-serving bias, Shapiro et al. also found that older subjects were both more likely to portray themselves as teasers and more likely to give relatively positive value judgments. The overall pattern of results suggests that, with cognitive development, children become more aware of themselves as teasers and more able to connect their own mostly benign motives as teasers with their experiences as targets. The ability to take different perspectives may result in attribution to more benign intentions, less painful emotional reactions, and more balanced value judgments of this behavior.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Most teasing seems to occur among peers when left free of adult supervision, and this presents methodological difficulties for investigators. There are two general approaches that seem promising. For naturalistic observational studies, the playground, school bus, and summer camp seem to be situations in which children's behavior would be relatively unconstrained by adult direction and supervision. For experimental studies, cartoon-type sequences, similar to those used in studies of humor, could be used to portray teasing incidents with manipulation of their content and form, character descriptions, relationships, and settings. Subjects could be asked to state their predictions of the targets' reactions, inferences of the teaser's inten-

tions, and value judgements of the depicted behavior. The social psychologist, the clinician and the developmentalist would undoubtedly choose different areas for investigation.

Questions for the Social Psychologist. The role of dominance in teasing needs verification. If dominance and also conformity are important, then teasing may be especially common among children with authoritarian personalities. Patterns of teasing within groups may covary with changes in the status hierarchy and with other features of group evolution.

Early evidence suggests that norm deviations elicit teasing, but further evidence is needed, particularly in regard to teasing about positive deviations. If teasing is a way for the teaser to demonstrate knowledge of norms, then artificially or experimentally created group norms should lead to teasing. The relation of group homogeneity to quantity of teasing also deserves investigation. Perhaps homogeneous groups, which should have the most consensual norms, would therefore have the most teasing. Or, it may be that teasing is most strongly stimulated when people with discrepant norms come into contact with each other, because this would likely produce many perceptions of norm deviation. Comparison of ethnically diverse summer camps with homogeneous ones would be a useful way to explore this issue.

Questions for the Developmentalist Longitudinal study or cohort comparison of groups undergoing change would be a fertile area in which to study teasing. The subject matter of teasing may reveal the norms that are of concern to children at different ages. We suggest that as children approach puberty, there may be a change from teasing about the presence of heterosexual interest to teasing about the absence of such interest. Teasing among adults, between children and adults, and between children of different ages would also be important areas to investigate.

The content of teasing may change with developmental shifts in the organization of self, roles, and social interaction patterns (cf. Baumeister & Senders, 1989). The pronounced age-related changes we observed in value judgments of teasing suggest that cognitive maturation may influence the experience of the participants. The development of attribution, social judgment, and perspective-taking would be useful processes to investigate.

Clinical Questions. Responses to teasing are of both theoretical and practical interest. One might compare different therapeutic approaches to teasing: one that focuses on benign decodings ("Remember that they don't really mean it"), one that follows the traditional prescription for

non-responding ("Just ignore it"), and one that involves actively imposing a positive interpretation ("Laugh and say something funny yourself"). Interventions which focus on attribution could borrow from previous work in cognitive therapy. If hurtful teasing is elicited by the timid, anxiously vulnerable personal quality that elicits victimization by peers (Olweus, 1978; Perry, Kussel, & Perry, 1988), then such clients might benefit from assertiveness training.

It would be useful to examine teasing interactions in special populations. Handicapped children may have particularly difficult experiences with teasing, either because of the teasing they elicit or because of greater sensitivity. Finally, it would be useful to study the correlates and effects on children's development of being either a frequent teaser or a frequent target of teasing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The class of behavior called "teasing" appears to include a diverse array of verbal and non-verbal actions that share in common a combining of the elements of aggression, humor, and ambiguity. This behavior reveals social structures of dominance and popularity, and it promotes conformity within peer cultures. Teasing presents an interesting instance of the uses and dangers of ambiguity in interpersonal communication. It is capable of eliciting a range of affective reactions from laughter to tears and behavioral responses from joking to physical assault. The diverse effects of this social stimulus, as well as the widely varying value judgments of teasing, attest to the complexity of this common social behavior.

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