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## An Exploratory Study of the Effect of Aggressive Feelings and Their Relation to Humor Preference

J. Edward Chase  
*Western Michigan University*

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE  
EFFECT OF AGGRESSIVE FEELINGS AND  
THEIR RELATION TO HUMOR PREFERENCE

by

J. Edward Chase

A thesis presented to the  
Faculty of the School of Graduate  
Studies in partial fulfillment  
of the  
Degree of Master of Arts

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J. Edward Chase

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS . . . . .	iv
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
A Theory Explaining Cartoon Preferences . . .	3
Experimental Studies of Cartoon Preference . .	5
A Summary, Rationale, and Hypotheses for the Present Study . . . . .	9
METHOD . . . . .	12
RESULTS . . . . .	18
DISCUSSION . . . . .	23
SUMMARY . . . . .	27
APPENDIX . . . . .	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	32

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TABLE		PAGE
I	The total aggressive score on the twenty-four items of the P-F Study for sixty-five college males . . . . .	16
II	The total rating of college male subjects for twenty aggressive cartoons .	20
III	The total ratings given for twenty aggressive cartoons by college males scoring high on the extrapunitive scale of the Picture-Frustration Study compared with the total ratings of subjects scoring in the 'average range' on the Picture-Frustration Study . . . . .	21
IV	The total ratings given for twenty aggressive cartoons by college males scoring high on the intropunitive scale of the Picture-Frustration Study compared with the total ratings of subjects scoring in the 'average range' on the Picture-Frustration Study . . . . .	22

## INTRODUCTION

Humor, that disposition of feeling which produces or mediates the amusing, the incongruous, the ludicrous, has been of interest to philosophers and psychologists since Hobbes first theorized that laughter was a "kind of sudden glory". In the present century the experimental method has been used in the course of the endeavor to discern the cause of humor, its nature and its function. Yet while considerable light has been thrown on many aspects of humor, little has been done towards explaining the nature of this phenomenon. At first glance such lack of scientific explanation for the nature of humor might astonish the neophyte in the field of humor research. The confounded need only read the reviews of Piddington(1933), Flugel(1956), and Summs(1958) to understand that humor involves a vast complexity of thought processes and personality dynamics. It then becomes obvious that this complexity makes the study of humor, in total, prohibitive. The present investigation, therefore, made no attempt at encompassing the general nature of humor but was limited to the indagation of one small area of research, that of aggressive themes in cartoons. It was

wondered whether certain types of persons preferred aggressive themes over other nonaggressive themes. Even more of interest was the question whether there are many types of aggressive themes in cartoons. In order to find some answers for those issues the present study was designed with the intent to investigate the relationships between the way a person expressed his aggression due to frustration and the kind of aggressive behavior used in the cartoons he preferred. Before taking up the research pertaining to cartoon preference, it is important to define aggressive behavior as it applied to the present study.

The way a person expressed his aggression was labeled as to the direction of his punitive behavior. These labels were adapted from Rosenzweig's (1944) terms. They were used for the present investigation with the following definitions.

Extrapunitive aggression: a reaction to a frustrating situation in which the frustrated person clearly directs his aggressive action (be it physically mobile or verbal action) against objects in his environment would be termed extrapunitive aggression.

Intropunitive aggression: a reaction to a frustrating situation in which the frustrated person directs his aggressive action or feeling inward upon

himself would be termed intropunitive aggression.

### A Theory Explaining Cartoon Preferences

The reported research dealt with cartoon preferences and why one person would judge a cartoon to be amusing while another person would feel indifferent toward it and possibly a third observer would judge the same cartoon disgusting. Therefore, the first step was to formulate a theoretical explanation for the previously noted observations and then devise a method to test the theory as it pertained to aggressive persons. The theory will be considered here leaving the method to be presented in a separate section of the paper.

Theoretically, it was felt by this investigator that when a person preferred a certain cartoon, the preference was the result of the cartoon depicting a situation which was symbolic or reminiscent of a partially solved or unsolved conflict of the person observing the cartoon. Due to the momentary return to awareness of the conflict, anxiety would arise. However, whether a person would see the cartoon as amusing or dislike the cartoon would depend on the intensity of the aroused anxiety and/or the person's ability to release his anxious tension through laughter. A



cartoon theme relevant to the observing subject could at one time produce laughter and at another produce undisplaced anxiety. To feel neutral toward a cartoon theme, on the other hand, might indicate that it had little relevancy or meaning to the observing individual. Relating these ideas to aggressive persons and aggressive cartoons would result in the following formulations: extrapunitive persons will generally like or dislike extrapunitive cartoons but feel neutral toward intropunitive cartoons; intropunitive persons will generally like or dislike intropunitive cartoons but feel neutral toward extrapunitive cartoons.

This investigator's explanation of the mechanism involved in cartoon preference was a premise for the present study, but we must also consider the analyzing of the cartoon theme itself. Concerning such an analysis, it would seem that if the person observing an aggressive cartoon empathized or identified with a character therein depicted, then he would react to the cartoon on the basis of the role the character played in the theme of the cartoon. For example, if a person empathized with one cartoon character who was directing his aggression against other objects depicted in the cartoon, he would react to the cartoon on the basis of an aroused conflict relevant to that theme. The

cartoon would be relevant to the person only if this conflict was particularly significant for him. To determine, however, whether the subject was reacting on the basis of an extrapunitive theme or an intro-punitive theme, it would be essential that we know with which cartoon figure the person was identifying. (The technique used to determine this identification is discussed in detail in the Method section of this paper.)

### Experimental Studies of Cartoon Preference

Previous research pertaining to aggressive subject's preference for certain types of jokes or cartoons was limited. In those research papers found most investigators only concerned themselves with a general label of the cartoons and did not mention any measurement of aggressive trends in the subjects. One such paper has been presented by Abelson and Levine (1958). These researchers used 106 psychiatric patients, but they gave no indication of any specific diagnoses. Some of their findings, however, were of interest and suggested a further breakdown of aggressive humor. Abelson and Levine analysed the responses of the psychiatric patients to twenty popular cartoons and found three common themes which tended to make a

set of cartoons collectively liked and four themes which tended to make a set of cartoons collectively disliked. Two themes that were collectively liked by the patients contained implications of "interpersonal hostility" (one character provoking or in some way causing the aggression of another character), and "self-degradation". They disliked the cartoons that, among other things, depicted "unanalyzed or hostile behavior" (aggressive behavior against others for no apparent reason) and "victimization" or tricking of others. These results suggested that patients could tolerate and "enjoy" certain levels of extrapunitive or intropunitive aggression in the cartoons as long as they could see a reason for the aggression. But if the cartoons depicted hostile behavior which seemed unprovoked or, more generally, having no cause or excuse, then the patients rejected or disliked the cartoons. Seemingly, at least as far as psychiatric patients were concerned, other factors in addition to the direction of the aggression must be taken into account when analyzing cartoon preference. Whether or not the cause of the aggression was depicted could mean the difference between preferring or liking the cartoon and rejecting or disliking the cartoon. This idea of depicted cause was also taken into account in

the present study when the cartoons were analyzed.

Byrne(1956) did categorize the subjects as to diagnostic types. In addition, his study seemed to strengthen the proposition that there was a difference between cartoon preference of subjects based on whether or not the cause for the aggressive behavior was depicted as well as the direction of the aggression depicted. Using psychiatric patients, Byrne explored the relationships among the expression of hostility in behavior, the extent to which hostile cartoons were judged funny, and the patient's ability to recognize hostility in cartoons. The patients themselves were divided into three groups based on the degree to which they expressed hostility. These groups were (1) those expressing hostility overtly, (2) those expressing hostility covertly, (3) those not expressing hostility. The results of the study were positive. There was a direct relationship found between the expression of hostility and the tendency to judge hostile cartoons as funny, and there was a direct relationship found between the expression of hostility and the ability to differentiate hostile from non-hostile cartoons.

Finally, the following study (Vogel, 1959) was the only one found that utilized tests in its design to

differentiate types of subjects. In this case, however, written jokes were used in place of cartoons. As with Byrne's study, the following research would be classified as having been concerned with an explainable cause or excuse for aggressive behavior (though it must be admitted that the author was vague in describing his humor categories).

Vogel(1959) studied similar relationships that concerned Byrne. He used thirty written humorous items with one hundred undergraduate male and female subjects. His thirty items were divided into three categories: non-aggressive, slightly aggressive, and highly aggressive. The subjects were asked to circle the ten most "amusing" items on the list of thirty. A "humor aggression score (HAS)" was obtained by assigning two points to the highly aggressive items, one point to slightly aggressive items and zero to non-aggressive items. The total score was correlated with all the scales on the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS). The HAS of the female subjects and the total of male and female subjects had the highest correlation (significant at the .01 level) with the "aggressive" scale on the EPPS. Though males alone did not rank highest with the "aggressive scale (two other scales ranked higher with the HAS), the corre-

lation between the HAS and the "aggressive" scale was still significant to the .01 level.

#### A Summary, Rationale, and Hypotheses for the Present Study

The present study was designed to investigate the relationships between the way a person usually expressed his aggression and the type of aggressive cartoons he prefers and dislikes. In addition, the labeling of the punitive cartoons was more specific than in previous cartoon research. Further, this study was devised to include persons who turned their aggression against-the-self, a personality dynamic not included in preceeding investigations. Therefore, keeping in mind the theoretical formulations, it was suggested that intropunitive persons might prefer or dislike intropunitive cartoons while feeling neutral toward extrapunitive cartoons. Furthermore, it was suggested that extrapunitive persons might prefer or dislike extrapunitive cartoons while feeling neutral toward intropunitive cartoons. One stipulation was added which stated that the labeling of the direction of punitiveness in a cartoon depended on the behavior of the cartoon character with which the subject observing the cartoon empathizes. However, Abelson

and Levine's (1958) study suggested a further breakdown of punitive cartoons, i.e. aggressive behavior was easier to accept and 'enjoy' if the cause for the aggression was depicted. Byrne(1956) showed that overtly hostile psychiatric patients prefer hostile cartoons. Vogel(1959) measured normal college males for aggressiveness and found that aggressive subjects were most 'amused' by highly aggressive jokes.

With these inferences from the studies as a guide, the formal hypotheses for the present investigation were developed as follows:

(1) College male subjects will (a) prefer more aggressive cartoons that depict the cause of the character's aggressive behavior (to be referred to as 'cause') than cartoons depicting no obvious cause for the aggressive behavior (to be referred to as 'no cause') and (b) dislike more 'no cause' cartoons than 'cause' cartoons.

(2a) College male subjects who score high on measures of extrapunitive aggression will prefer and dislike more extrapunitive cartoons than subjects who score in the average range on measures of extrapunitive aggression. (b) College male subjects who score high on measures of extrapunitive aggression will rate more intropunitive cartoons neutral than subjects who score

in the average range on measures of extrapunitive aggression.

(3a) College male subjects who score high on measures of intropunitive aggression will prefer and dislike more intropunitive cartoons than subjects who score in the average range on measures of intropunitive aggression. (b) College male subjects who score high on measures of intropunitive aggression will rate more extrapunitive cartoons neutral than subjects who score in the average range on measures of intropunitive aggression.



## METHOD

Three judges (clinical psychologists) and the principal investigator rated ninety (90) cartoons in order (1) to determine whether the cartoon depicted aggression being displayed by one single character and (2) to label the behavior of the main character (which was always an adult male) as he interacted with his environment, e.g. if the character was directing his aggression against objects in his environment the cartoon theme was labeled extrapunitive; if the character was depicted as passively receiving aggression from his environment the cartoon theme was labeled intro-punitive. Thirty cartoons were finally agreed upon, fifteen being intro-punitive and fifteen being extra-punitive. These thirty were then further divided by the principal investigator as to the cause of the depicted aggression. This division produced the following four categories: (1) seven cartoons depicting the main character behaving extrapunitively due to an observable frustrating situation (Ec), (2) eight cartoons depicting the main character behaving extrapunitively for no apparent cause (En), (3) seven cartoons depicting the main character behaving intro-punitive due to an

observable frustrating situation (Ic), (4) eight cartoons depicting the main character behaving intro-punitively for no apparent cause (In).

In order to determine whether any of the thirty cartoons would be preferred significantly over the other cartoons by a large majority of college men, the sample cartoons were initially presented to twenty college males. They were asked to indicate which cartoons they thought to be humorous, which they thought to be distasteful, and which they thought to be neither humorous or distasteful but neutral, i.e. somewhere in between. The results of this pilot test showed seven of the thirty cartoons to have been preferred by nineteen of the twenty subjects while three cartoons were disliked by eighteen or more of the twenty subjects. These results were not readily explained, but in order to remove them as biasing factors they were deleted from the list of thirty leaving six Extrapunitive-observable cause (Ec), five Extrapunitive-no cause (En), five Intropunitive-observable cause (Ic), and four Intro-punitive-no cause (In).

In order to measure the direction of aggression normally expressed by the subjects, the Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration Study (P-F Study) was used. The test, a combination of pictorial and verbal material,

was comprised of a series of cartoon like drawings, each depicting two principal characters. In every drawing (there were twenty-four in all) the two characters were shown talking to each other. The situation depicted was always mildly frustrating to one character while the other character said something which either occasioned the frustration or called attention to the frustrating circumstances. The caption for the frustrated character was missing and the subject taking the test was instructed to write in the blank caption box what the frustrated person would answer. It was assumed that the subject identified with the frustrated character in each picture and projected his own reaction tendencies in the reply given. However, it was not known whether this test actually measured what a subject would do in frustrating situations or what he would like to do under such conditions. Therefore, for the purpose of the present study the P-F Study was interpreted as measuring what the subject would presently feel like doing if he were free to behave at the moment of testing. Finally, the norms presented in the manual (1947) were disregarded in preference for the norms obtained from the present study. Therefore, the mean of 11.15 for extrapunitive answers was used instead of the manual's mean of 9.50; the mean

of 5.03 for intropunitive versus the published 7.75.  
(see Table I)

### Procedure

Sixty-five (65) college males ages eighteen to twenty-eight (mean age - 20.44) were administered the Picture Frustration Study and the twenty aggressive cartoons. The subjects were randomly divided into small groups (containing from three to seven subjects per group with a median of four). The subjects were first presented with the P-F Study with the additional instruction: "Please, do not give humorous responses". After completing the P-F Study the subjects received a sheet of paper with two columns (one column labeled preferred, the other column labeled disliked) each numbered from one through twenty after which they were given the following instructions:

You will be shown twenty cartoons, one at a time, which you are to rate. The ratings you are to use will be, (1) prefer, (2) neutral, (3) dislike. The rating 'prefer' should be used if you feel the cartoon is humorous. The rating 'neutral' should be used if you understand the joke being depicted but do not consider it as being amusing or humorous. The rating 'dislike' should be used if you feel the cartoon is, for some reason, disgusting, vile, 'sick', or unbearably stupid. If you do not understand one of the cartoons please place a question mark before the corresponding number on your answer sheet. If you prefer the cartoon place an 'X' in the 'prefer' column with the number corresponding to the number

TABLE I

The Total Aggressive Score on the Twenty-four  
Items of the P-F Study for Sixty-five College  
Males

	<u>Extrapunitive</u>	<u>Intropunitive</u>	<u>Impunitive*</u>
Total	724.7	307.0	390.3
Mean	11.15	5.03	6.00
Standard Deviation	3.09	3.32	2.13
'Average' or Normal Range	14.0 to 8.0	8.50 to 1.50	8.00 to 4.00

\*Not used in the study

of the cartoon. If you feel neutral about the particular cartoon do not mark anything on your answer sheet. If you dislike the cartoon, place an 'X' in the 'dislike' column with the number corresponding to the number on the cartoon. Are there any questions?

After the above instructions were given, the twenty cartoons, one at a time, were projected upon a movie screen with the aid of an opaque projector. The cartoons themselves (taken from the "New Yorker" magazine of the years 1952, 1953, and 1954) were single frame, black and white reprints mounted on eight by six cards with the caption type one half inch from the bottom and identifying numbers one inch in height in the upper right hand corner. (see Appendix for examples)

## RESULTS

Our initial concern in examining the results of this investigation involved the preferences for cause-depicted (C) cartoons and no-cause-depicted (N) cartoons (see Table II). It was predicted that college male subjects would like more C-cartoons than N-cartoons and dislike more N-cartoons than C-cartoons; since the subjects were free to prefer or dislike as many C-cartoons or N-cartoons as they wished, the number of C-cartoons rated was independent of the number of N-cartoons rated. Not only was the first prediction unconfirmed, but the results were in the opposite direction, i.e. the subjects showed more preference for N-cartoons over C-cartoons to a statistically significant degree ("Student-t" = -4.15). Since this prediction was not made, we are unable to interpret this result. Concerning the second prediction, the differences between the disliked C-cartoons and disliked N-cartoons were statistically insignificant. Therefore, the first hypothesis received no support in this study.

In the second hypothesis it was predicted that the subjects scoring high on the extrapunitive scale of the P-F Study would prefer and dislike more Extra-

punitive (E) cartoons than subjects scoring in the average range on the P-F Study (see Table I). The resulting "Student-t" score ( $t = -2.23$ ) was insignificant. The section (b) of the second hypothesis predicted that extrapunitive subjects would rate more Intropunitive (I) cartoons neutral than subjects within the average range on the P-F Study. In this case the mean ratings of the two subject groups were identical (thus giving a " $t$ " = 0.0). Hence the entire second hypothesis was not confirmed.

Finally, both sections of the third hypothesis dealing with Intropunitive subjects as the second hypothesis dealt with Extrapunitive subjects were not confirmed by the resulting "t-test". For section (3a) " $t$ " equalled -0.30; for section (3b) " $t$ " equalled -0.90.



TABLE II

The Total Rating of College Male Subjects for  
Twenty Aggressive Cartoons

	Preferred		Disliked	
	'Cause'	'No-cause'	'Cause'	'No-cause'
Raw Total	346	332	122	94
Raw Mean	5.34	5.26	1.88	1.45
Weighted Total*	346	417	122	115
Weighted Mean*	5.34	6.42	1.88	1.77
"Student-t"	-4.15**		0.52	

\*The total 'No-cause' cartoons were weighted for comparison with the 'Cause' cartoons because there were only nine 'No-cause' to eleven 'Cause' cartoons in the twenty aggressive cartoons used.

\*\*Significant at the .001 level of probability for sixty-five subjects.

TABLE III

The Total Ratings Given for Twenty Aggressive Cartoons by College Males Scoring High on the Extrapunitive Scale of the Picture-Frustration Study Compared with the Total Ratings of Subjects Scoring in the 'Average Range' on the Picture-Frustration Study

	High Extrapunitive P-F Study Score	'Average Range' on P-F Study
	Number of Extrapunitive Cartoons	Number of Extrapunitive Cartoons
Total 'Prefer' and 'Dislike' Ratings	71	136
Mean 'Prefer' and 'Dislike' Ratings	3.55	4.00
"Student-t" of 'Prefer' and 'Dislike'	-2.23	
	Number of Intropunitive Cartoons	Number of Intropunitive Cartoons
Total 'Neutral' Ratings	53	91
Mean 'Neutral' Ratings	2.65	2.68
"Student-t" of 'Neutral'	0.00	

TABLE IV

The Total Ratings Given for Twenty Aggressive Cartoons by College Males Scoring High on the Intropunitive Scale of the Picture-Frustration Study Compared with the Total Ratings of Subjects Scoring in the 'Average Range' on the Picture-Frustration Study

	High Intropunitive P-F Study Score	'Average Range' on P-F Study
	Number of Intropunitive Cartoons	Number of Intropunitive Cartoons
Total 'Prefer' and 'Dislike' Ratings	32	97
Mean 'Prefer' and 'Dislike' Ratings	2.91	3.16
"Student-t" of 'Prefer' and 'Dislike	-0.30	
	Number of Extrapunitive Cartoons	Number of Extrapunitive Cartoons
Total 'Neutral' Ratings	31	93
Mean 'Neutral' Ratings	2.82	3.00
"Student-t" of 'Neutral'	0.90	

## DISCUSSION

The relationships predicted by the three hypotheses were absent in the results. The way in which this affects the theoretical implications for explaining the dynamics involved in aggressive humor is not clear to this researcher. The most difficult result to explain was the lack of verification for the second and third hypotheses. It might be that there is no consistent relationship between the way aggression is handled and preferences for hostile cartoons or the relationship might depend on the amount or quantities of intro-punitiveness or extra-punitiveness. Moderately punitive subjects might not react to the anxiety aroused by relevant aggressive cartoons by rating them 'prefer' or 'dislike' but defensively react by 'not feeling the cartoon was amusing'. This response would call for a 'neutral' rating, but the emotional reaction may be more like vindictively rejecting the cartoon because it failed to amuse the subject. On the other hand, severely punitive subjects might be unable to defend themselves as well as the moderates, and therefore would release their anxiety more directly by rejecting the cartoon. In this case, the subject would

behave as predicted in the third hypothesis.

A third situation might involve a punitive subject who would empathize with any character to fit his need and still try to keep his anxiety at the lowest possible level. This might be thought of as a strong need-aggression which would tend to overcome a normal drive in the subject to empathize with the male, adult cartoon character. If the subject made his judgement under an influence of such a need, it would be expected that he would be apt to prefer most cartoons. If a large number of the subjects in our sample rated cartoons on the basis of need and keeping anxiety to a minimum (sort of taking the path of least resistance), it would bias the results by producing a high mean preference for all subjects. In fact, the mean preference per subject was 10.60 while the neutral rating mean was 5.87 and the dislike mean was only 3.30. Finally, when looking at degrees of punitiveness in terms of defensiveness or need-aggression it would seem that amounts of insight possessed by the subject would influence cartoon preference.

Another possible explanation for the results on hypothesis (2) and (3) which would arise from the previous discussions might involve the labels of cartoons (i.e. extrapunitive and intropunitive). These labels

may still be too general. The cartoon may only be relevant to a subject when it depicts an interpersonal situation similar to previously experienced life situations of the subject.

It might have been that the measures used in the study were not valid. For example, to ask a person to rate his feelings might have been an inaccurate technique for categorizing personal emotions, especially when a person was within a group situation. The projective test used was just as likely to have been an invalid measurement. Previously it was assumed that the P-F Study measured the direction in which the subject would likely aim his aggression. This assumption is at the best questionable. The assumption was that the subject would answer each item as if he were in the frustrating situation. Yet it seems to this investigator that the subjects tended to give responses on the P-F Study that reflected what they would have liked to do at the moment they answered the item. This is not to say that the subject would act out this aggressive response but only that he might like to behave in this manner.

Finally, in light of the negative findings for the first hypothesis and in order to produce some positive statements about the humor preference of college males,

it might be helpful to compare these findings with those of Abelson and Levine(1958). Their results suggested, in short, that neuropsychiatric patients could not tolerate cartoons which depicted unprovoked hostility and fear. The patients might have felt incapable of handling such hostility. The college subjects, on the other hand, because of their more flexible personalities were able to cope with the more hostile or 'no-cause-depicted' cartoons and therefore, they enjoyed the humor for what it was. They kept an appropriate psychological distance between themselves and the cartoon situation. It would seem to this investigator that what was seen in the differences of preferences between normal subjects and psychiatric subjects was due to a fundamental difference in the strength of the personality structure, which Federn (1952) called "ego-boundries".

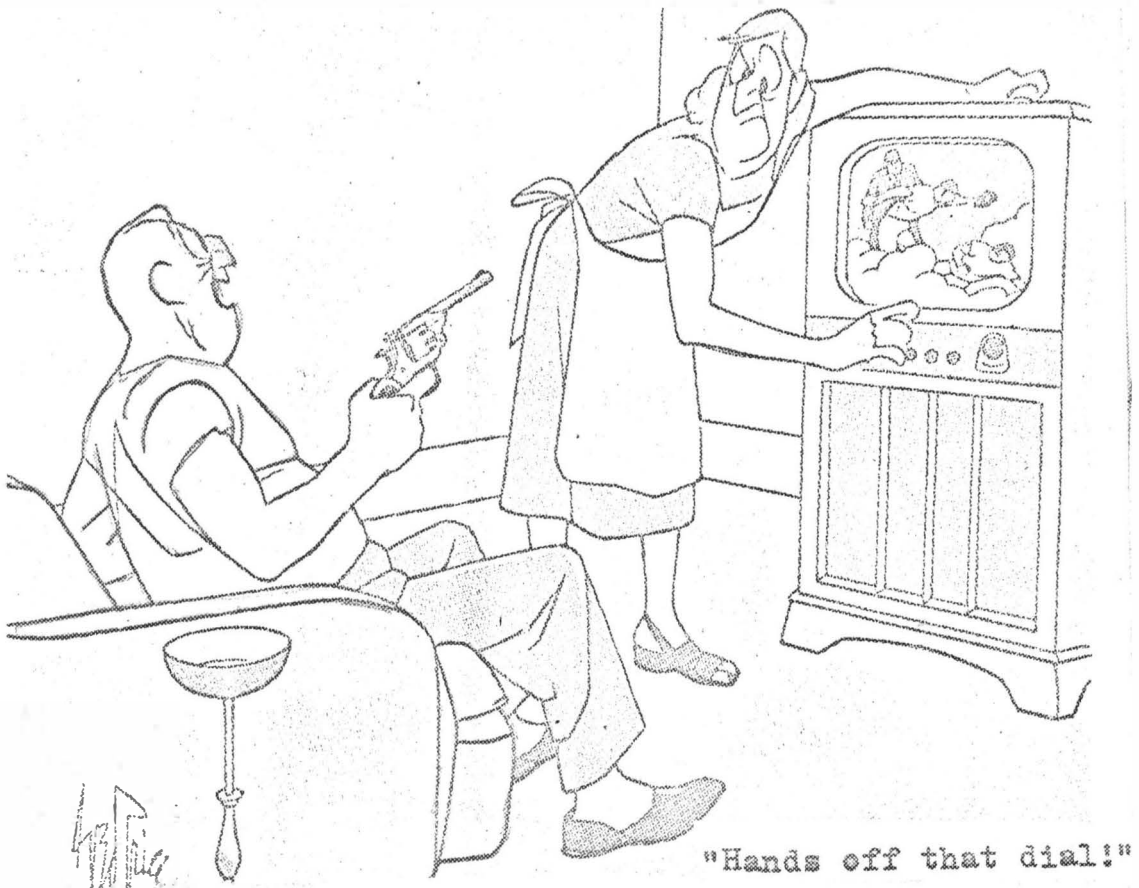
## SUMMARY

The intent of the study was to investigate the relationships between the way a person expressed his aggression and the kind of hostile cartoons he preferred. Three general hypotheses predicted that (1) college males, in general, prefer provoked aggression in cartoons, (2) outwardly aggressive college males would prefer and dislike extrapunitive cartoons and feel neutral toward intropunitive cartoons, (3) college males tending to turn their aggression inward would prefer and dislike intropunitive cartoons and feel neutral toward extrapunitive cartoons. Twenty cartoons labeled: Extrapunitive-cause, Extrapunitive-no cause, Intropunitive-cause, and Intropunitive-no cause were given to sixty-five college males along with the P-F Study. The "Student-t" tests that were run on the results did not verify the hypotheses. These results were then discussed with respect to the degrees of punitiveness and need-aggression in the subjects, the labeling of the cartoons, the psychometric instrument used, and the difference between the preferences of college males and the psychiatric patients used in previous studies.



## APPENDIX

Two examples of extrapunitive-cause-depicted cartoons used in the present study

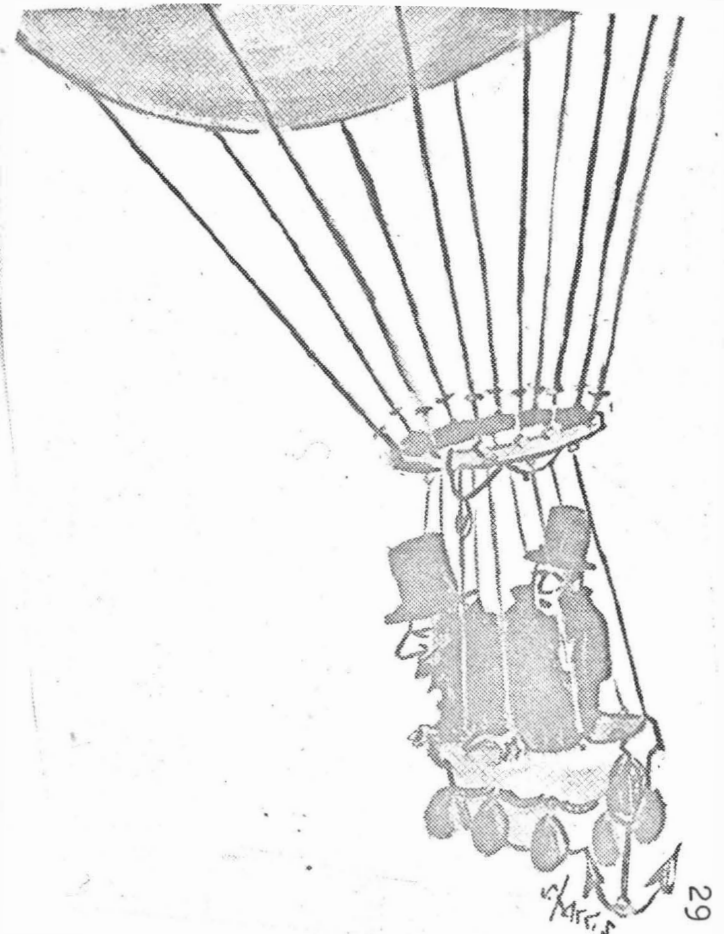


# APPENDIX B

Two examples of extrapunitive-no-cause-depicted cartoons used in the present study

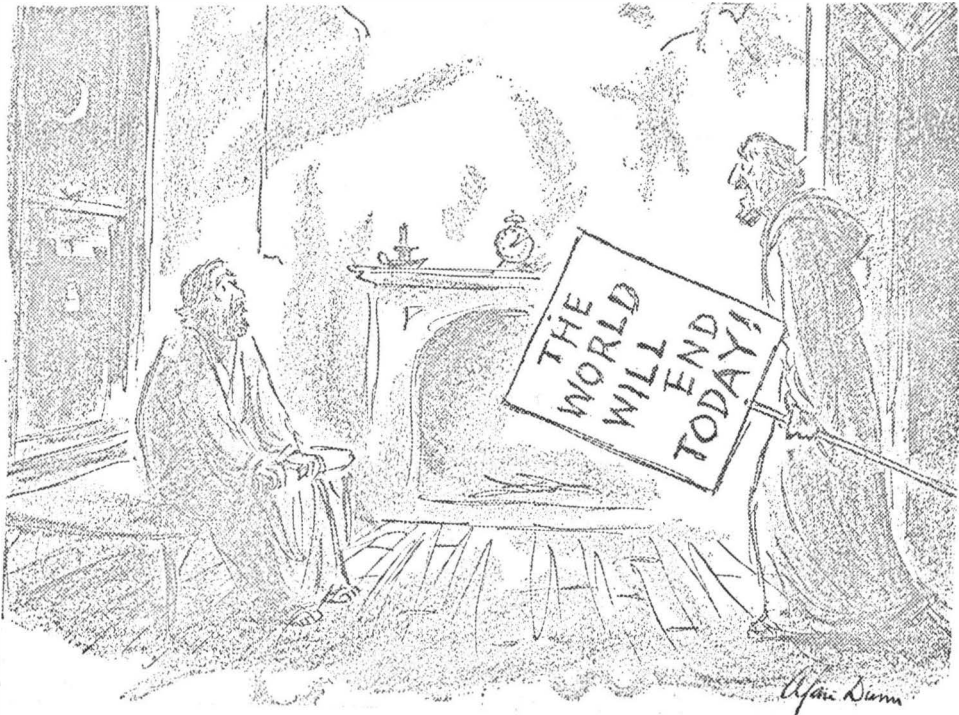


"Death ray, fiddlesticks! Why it doesn't even slow them up."



"Is that why you built this, Professor Grinbaum—so you could spit on them?"

Two examples of intro-punitive-no-cause-depicted cartoons used in the present study



"Well, live and learn!"



"I suppose you think my tipping after every course is a sign of insecurity."

APPENDIX D

Two examples of intropunitive-cause-depicted  
cartoons used in the present study



" How come you didn't have a tough day today ?"

" Well, if you're so damn fed up, why don't you abdicate?"

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