
Leonard D. Eron (1920–2007)

Leonard D. Eron, one of the world's preeminent aggression researchers, died May 3, 2007, at the age of 87. Eron's contributions to understanding the causes of aggressive behavior and how to treat it helped revolutionize psychology's perspective on aggression during the past 60 years, and his efforts to apply this knowledge to public policy have left a lasting impact on society. During his years as a professor at Yale University, the University of Iowa, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Michigan, he also left his mark on countless students who carry on his tradition of merging research with public policy applications of psychology.

Len was born on April 22, 1920, in Newark, New Jersey, and grew up in Passaic, New Jersey, the son of Lithuanian immigrants. After graduating from Passaic High School, where he indulged his talents for the theater, he began to study on a scholarship at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. But when his father died, he turned to earning a bachelor's degree at City College of New York, which he received in 1941. To support himself, he worked as an usher in Manhattan movie houses. During this time he not only developed his interest in psychology but he also acquired an enormous repertoire of 1930s and 1940s songs, which he sang at parties for the rest of his life. After one semester of graduate work at Columbia University, during which he met the love of his life, Madeline Marcus, the bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred, and Eron was drafted into the army. He chose the "ordnance" corps, he always claimed, under the misperception that it would prepare him for a career in law. He served in the campaigns of North Africa, Sicily, and Italy and attained the rank of 1st lieutenant. He never forgot the horrors he experienced on the beach at Anzio and in other battles, and this undoubtedly contributed to his later interests in studying aggressive behavior.

In 1946, Eron completed his master's degree in psychology at Columbia University, and in 1949, he received his doctorate from the University of Wisconsin under the mentorship of Ann Magaret. On the lookout for a job, he attended the 1948 meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) in Philadelphia, where his future wife Madeline introduced him to her friend Seymour Sarason from the faculty at Yale. Sarason offered Eron a position as an assistant professor of psychology. At Yale, Eron continued the research he had started in graduate school on the reliability and validity of projective techniques. In his 1950 publication in *Psychological Monographs*, "A Normative Study of the TAT," he demonstrated that the content of fantasy was not very different between individuals with and without schizophrenia. Later, in 1965, along with colleagues Joseph Zubin and Florence Schumer, Eron published the seminal book on projective testing, *An Experimental Approach to Projective Techniques*. However,

perhaps influenced by his war experiences and the mood in the 1950s, Eron was becoming increasingly concerned about the development of aggressive behavior in American youths.

Eron's mentor and role model, Seymour Sarason, argued that to really contribute to child psychology, researchers needed to get out of the laboratory and into the community. Following Sarason's advice, in 1955 Eron reduced his time at Yale and accepted a position as director of research and chief psychologist at the Rip Van Winkle Clinic in Columbia County, New York, a precursor of community mental health centers. Eron was allowed to hire a research staff and conduct his own research with little interference. He chose to conduct a community epidemiological study on aggression in children. Thus began one of the longest running (spanning over 40 years) longitudinal studies to date: the Columbia County Longitudinal Study.

In the first phase of the study, along with colleagues Monroe Lefkowitz and Leopold Walder, Eron and his staff interviewed 856 children, the entire third-grade population of Columbia County, and 80% of their mothers and fathers. The study's initial purpose was to relate the aggressive behavior of children in school to the child rearing practices of the parents. Eron pioneered a peer-nomination assessment of children's social behavior that gained widespread popularity in several countries as a better alternative to self-reports, and he published widely cited results suggesting that punishment at home could increase the child's aggression at school, particularly if the child did not identify with the parent doing the punishing (Eron, Walder, Toigo, & Lefkowitz, 1963, *Child Development*).

However, because there was widespread suspicion in the community about mental health research at that time (Eron & Walder, 1961, *American Psychologist*), Eron and his colleagues also included a number of filler questions such as "What are your child's three favorite TV programs?" Much to their surprise, when they analyzed the data, they found that there was a significant correlation between the aggressiveness of the boys they studied and the violence of the boys' favorite TV shows. This was the start of a lifelong concern Eron displayed about the effects that media violence was having on children.

The original participants were again interviewed at age 19 in 1970, when Rowell Huesmann joined the project; at age 30 in 1980, when Eric Dubow joined the project; and most recently at age 48 in 2000, when more than 500 of the original participants' children also were interviewed. The 1970 follow-up was part of the U.S. Surgeon General's initiative on the effects of television, and Eron's conclusion from that follow-up, that media violence causes aggression, was published in the *American Psychologist* (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972). It led to a storm of controversy. Critiques and counter critiques were written.

Mass media interests promoted opposition to the conclusion. Believing strongly in the importance of the public policy role for psychologists, Eron spoke about his work repeatedly in public forums, on radio and TV shows, and in testimony before Congress. His firm but polite demeanor under fire convinced many skeptics of the truth of his conclusions. After hearing Eron's testimony, U.S. Surgeon General Jesse L. Steinfeld testified in March 1972 before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee that "it is clear to me that the causal relationship between [exposure to] televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action. There comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come."

The results from subsequent waves of the Columbia County Longitudinal Study established both the continued influence that exposure to media violence in childhood has even into adulthood and the strong continuity of aggressive behavior from childhood to adulthood in both males and females (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984, *Developmental Psychology*). Eron's conclusions were also supported by a second longitudinal study he and Rowell Huesmann conducted between 1977 and 1995, the Cross-National Television Study. For this study, the researchers organized an international collaborative of researchers who investigated in a more systematic manner the long-term effects of media violence in five countries. In each country, substantial samples of children were studied as they progressed from the first to the third grade, from the third to the sixth grade, and then again in their mid-twenties. This study again demonstrated that exposure to violent media in childhood led to immediate increases in childhood aggression and to long-term increases in serious physical violence in young adulthood (Huesmann & Eron, 1986, *Television and the Aggressive Child*; Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 1963, *Developmental Psychology*).

Eron was also interested in applying the knowledge he gained from those studies to preventing the development of aggression. In the 1980s and 1990s, collaborating with Huesmann and other colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Eron showed that classroom interventions designed to change second-grade children's beliefs about media violence and aggression could reduce the effects of exposure to such violence in the short run.

Overall, the results of all these empirical studies strongly reinforced Eron's conception that aggression was primarily a learned behavior in humans. What is learned by observation and reinforcement are not only the actual behaviors that are copied but also the attitudes about the appropriateness of such behavior, its efficacy, and its normativeness. In 1972 with his colleagues Leopold Walder and Monroe Lefkowitz, Eron published *The Learning of Aggression*, which outlined his initial learning theory. However, over the next 25 years, he continued to modify and elaborate his views to reflect the more important role that he thought cognitions played.

In 1962, Len moved to the University of Iowa as professor of psychology, and then in 1969 he moved on to the University of Illinois at Chicago as professor, director

of clinical services, and chair for several years. He retired from Illinois in 1990 but then spent the next 15 years at the University of Michigan, splitting his time between the Department of Psychology and the Institute for Social Research.

During all this time, Eron's scholarly output was prodigious. He was the author of nine books and approximately 150 articles, most of which appeared in the highest quality edited journals. He served as editor of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (1973–1980), as associate editor of the *American Psychologist* (1986–1990), and as president of the Midwestern Psychological Association (1985–1986) and of the International Society for Research on Aggression (1988–1990).

His public policy advocacy kept pace with this scholarly output. He testified numerous times before the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, as well as before various state legislatures, on the effects of violence in the media, about V-chips and ratings systems to curb violence on TV, and on the implementation and evaluation of violence prevention programs. He met with President Clinton to discuss the topic and appeared on innumerable national TV shows to talk about the issue. He served willingly on many professional and governmental panels, including the National Research Council Panel on Understanding and Control of Violence and the APA's Commission on Violence and Youth, which he chaired.

Eron's accomplishments were widely recognized by his peers. He was a Fulbright scholar twice. He was a diplomate of the American Board of Professional Psychology and a fellow of the Academy of Clinical Psychology, the APA, the American Psychological Foundation (APF), and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. However, Eron was proudest of the three recognitions he received from the APA. In 1980, he was given the APA Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Knowledge; in 1995, he received the APF's Gold Medal Award for Life Contribution by a Psychologist in the Public Interest; and in 2003, he received APA's Award for Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to Media Psychology.

On a personal level, Eron was the kind of individual who made everyone around him smile. He was proud of his hard-nosed approach to empirical research and scholarship, and woe to the student or author who asked him to read a methodologically sloppy piece of work or an ungrammatical sentence. However, his criticisms were always blunted by his wit and warmth. He cared about everyone and acted on those cares. And he enjoyed making fun of himself. He was that rare outstanding scholar who also possessed wit, self-deprecating humor, warmth, and great humanity. His scholarly accomplishments will live on for a long time, but we will all terribly miss the man we have lost.

Len is survived by his wife Madeline of Lindenhurst, Illinois, his daughter Barbara and two grandchildren, and his son Don. His daughter Joan died in 1990.

Rowell Huesmann and Eric Dubow
Ann Arbor, Michigan