

# The ignorant and the furious: video and catharsis

April 22, 2010

The Greek philosopher Aristotle had many original and enduring ideas, but he didn't get everything right. One idea that's been pretty much debunked by modern psychology is *catharsis*. Catharsis is the notion that we can purge our negative emotions by acting them out or witnessing them in our arts and entertainment—and that such purging is a healthy thing to do. Not true. Indeed there is evidence that indulging our anger and aggression can increase—not decrease—those destructive emotions.

Even so, a lot of people still believe in catharsis. They believe that pummeling punching bags and watching *Fight Club* and cursing at the universe is cleansing. Scientists wonder if this unshakeable belief—even if it's misguided—might be shaping behavior in important ways. A team of psychological scientists at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research decided recently to explore this idea in a very modern domain: the world of video games.

Brad Bushman and Jodi Whitaker wondered if distorted beliefs about catharsis might be playing a role in the popularity of violent video games. Specifically, they wanted to see if believing in catharsis might influence angry people to vent their anger by playing these unsavory games. To test this, they recruited a large group of college students and instructed them to read two different newspaper articles on the science behind catharsis. Both articles were bogus, but some volunteers read an article extolling the value of catharsis, while others read an article refuting the concept. The purpose was to spark either belief or disbelief about the idea of catharsis.

Then the scientists used a well-known lab technique to anger only some of the volunteers. After writing an essay about an incident in their lives that had made them angry, these students received a cruel and insulting handwritten comment from another student: "This is one of the worst essays I've read!" The other students received lavish praise for their essays.

So at this point, half the volunteers believed in catharsis and the other half did not. And half of each group—believers and nonbelievers—was steaming with resentment. The next step was to give all the volunteers a choice of fictional video games, some violent and some not. The students rated how much they wanted to play each game, and they also named the actual commercial video games they preferred to play at home.

The results were unambiguous. As [reported on-line this week in the journal \*Psychological Science\*](#), the fuming volunteers were much more likely to opt for the violent video games—but only if they believed in catharsis as a valid tool for channeling rage. Interestingly, the angry volunteers who did not believe in catharsis were the least likely to pick the violent games—even less likely, that is, than the upbeat volunteers.

The psychologists reran this experiment, but instead of using the fake science articles to prime beliefs,

they measure the volunteers' natural tendencies to vent their angry feelings. They got identical results. It appears that belief in catharsis increased the appeal of violent games in angry people.

Do these findings help explain why people are attracted to violent entertainment in general—and violent video games in particular? It's not entirely clear, but it's at least possible that the interplay of anger and belief plays a part. A worthwhile public health strategy might disabuse people of the belief that these games are a healthy outlet for life's inevitable frustrations. One volunteer's statement, which the scientists include in their report, captures this dynamic in a telling and disturbing way: "How could I squelch the urge to set my manager on fire," the student asked, "if I couldn't set people on fire in video games?"