



Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Youths' displaced aggression against in- and out-group peers: An experimental examination



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 June 2012

Revised 15 September 2012

Available online 29 January 2013

Keywords:

Displaced aggression

Ethnicity

Youth

Out-group

In-group

Prejudice

ABSTRACT

People often displace their anger and aggression against innocent targets, sometimes called scapegoats. Tragic historic events suggest that members of ethnic minority out-groups may be especially likely to be innocent targets. The current experiment examined displaced aggression of Dutch youths against Dutch in-group peers versus Moroccan out-group peers. Participants ($N = 137$, $M_{\text{age}} = 11.6$ years) completed a personal profile that was allegedly evaluated by Dutch peer judges. After randomly receiving negative or neutral feedback from these peers, participants were given the opportunity to aggress against other innocent Dutch and Moroccan peers by taking money earned away from them. Results showed that in response to negative feedback, participants displaced aggression disproportionately against innocent Moroccan out-group targets. This effect was not driven by ethnic prejudice; in both conditions, participants holding more negative attitudes of Moroccans engaged in higher levels of aggression regardless of the ethnicity of the target.

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Introduction

In today's society, human aggressive behavior is omnipresent and ranks among the most serious problems facing our species. Aggression is any behavior that is intended to harm another person (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). Aggression is *direct* when the target is the provocateur. Aggression is *displaced* when the target is innocent of any wrongdoing but is simply in the "wrong place at the wrong time." Prototypically, displaced aggression occurs when a person cannot aggress or is constrained from aggressing against the source of provocation. Direct retaliatory aggression might not be possible because the source of the initial provocation is unavailable (e.g., the provocateur has left the situation). Fear of retaliation or punishment from the provocateur may also constrain direct aggression (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). For example, if the provocateur is strong or powerful, people may be reluctant to aggress directly against the provocateur and may instead displace their aggression toward innocent targets, sometimes called scapegoats.

Meta-analytic findings have shown that displaced aggression among adults is a robust phenomenon (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000). Surprisingly, only one experimental study has investigated displaced aggression in youths (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Thomaes, Bushman, & Telch, *in press*). This is unfortunate because displaced aggression is clearly not confined to adults. School shootings may be extreme examples of displaced aggression among youths. More common examples include youths verbally or physically aggressing against innocent siblings or peers.

A recent study among young adolescents examined how situational factors (e.g., provocateur availability, provocation intensity) and dispositional factors (e.g., callousness, trait aggressiveness) interact to influence displaced aggression (Reijntjes et al., *in press*). Results revealed that displaced aggression was more likely to occur when the level of provocation was high and when provocateurs were unavailable for direct retaliation. Trait aggressiveness was positively associated with both types of aggression. In contrast, dispositional callousness (i.e., proneness to make use of others coldheartedly and the relative absence of guilt and empathy) predicted displaced but not direct aggression, suggesting that different factors may contribute to the propensity to harm innocent others versus provocateurs.

Targets of displaced aggression

Although previous research has increased our understanding of factors that incite displaced aggression, it is unclear which individuals are most likely to become the targets of displaced aggression. Are some people at increased risk to be chosen as the targets of displaced aggression? One possibility is that those who engage in displaced aggression want someone to "pay" for their maltreatment regardless of the attributes of the target. Consistent with this view, it appears that most school shooters targeted innocent bystanders "at random" regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. However, there are also good reasons to believe that displaced aggression may be disproportionately directed against individuals who the aggressor perceives as dissimilar (i.e., out-group members). Impression formation studies have shown that targets that differ in important ways from the self are typically liked less (Smeaton, Byrne, & Murnen, 1989). Because out-group status is associated with negativity, out-group members are more likely to prime a network of aggression-related thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in semantic memory (Miller, Pedersen, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003). Consequently, the stronger the dissimilarity between the aggressor and the potential targets of displaced aggression (particularly on salient attributes), the higher the level of displaced aggression may be.

Although dissimilarity between the aggressor and victim can exist along numerous attributes (e.g., age, gender, profession), events throughout human history have shown that under certain conditions people tend to behave more aggressively in particular toward others who are of a different race or ethnicity from their own. Race/ethnicity ranks among the most accessible criteria for constructing in-group versus out-group distinctions (Messick & Mackie, 1989), and although many societies have developed strong egalitarian traditions and norms that emphasize the importance of racial/ethnic equality, the categorization of people from different ethnicities into in-groups and out-groups is a pervasive automatic human tendency that is present from preschool age onward (Aboud, 1988; Hodson,

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