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The role of perspective taking in anger arousal

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Abstract

Although there are strong grounds to expect that perspective taking deficits are associated with anger arousal following an interpersonal provocation, there has been little research directly testing this hypothesis. In this study, 636 volunteers were asked to rate their likely reactions to two brief video representations of potentially anger arousing social transgressions. Results confirm the relationship between dispositional perspective taking and the likelihood of anger arousal following an interpersonal provocation. Perspective taking was also predictive of trait anger (negatively) and of the means of control and expression of anger. Associations between personal distress and anger measures indicate the possible influence of the intensity, regulation, and direction of emotion on anger.

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1. Introduction

Although the emotion of anger has been the subject of increasing theoretical analysis and clinical application in the last 15 years, the empirical literature investigating the nature of anger

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remains relatively scant, particularly when compared with the published literature on other negative emotions such as anxiety and depression (Kassinove, 1995). At the same time, the clinical application of existing theoretical models of anger has burgeoned, arguably at a faster rate than the fundamental research required to support such an application. For example, anger is widely considered to be a potential contributing factor to aggression (e.g., Novaco, 1994; Novaco, 1997), and comparative studies suggest that prison inmates, violent offenders in particular, score higher on measures of anger experience and expression than other members of the community (Mills, Kroner, & Forth, 1998; Spielberger, 1991). One of the ways in which anger management programs aim to help offenders and other participants to act less aggressively is by changing the ways in which they perceive interpersonal provocation. Perceptions of another's provoking behaviour are reframed in treatment in ways that are thought to be less likely to lead to angry cognitions and arousal. What is less well understood is the way in which individual differences, such as perspective taking, influence those interpretations of behaviour that lead to anger arousal.

The term "perspective taking" is used here to denote the tendency or ability of an individual to consider a situation from another's point of view and has been distinguished both theoretically and empirically from affective or emotional empathy (Davis, 1980; Hogan, 1969). Davis (1983a) has provided the most widely accepted definition of perspective taking as "the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others" (pp. 113–114; see also Bernstein & Davis, 1982; Davis, 1980, 1983b; Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987; Davis & Oathout, 1992), implying that perspective taking is a skill that involves a number of cognitive processes. In his original validation work, Davis (1980, 1983a) differentiated perspective taking from other possible empathic responses that have been documented in the literature (e.g., Hoffman, 1978; Stotland, Mathews, Sherman, Hansson, & Richardson, 1978) including empathic concern (emotional empathy), personal distress (proneness to negative affect when exposed to arousal inducing situations such as emergency situations), and fantasy (the capacity for imaginative involvement in fictional situations).

Perspective taking skills might inhibit angry responses to provocation in at least two ways. First, they might inhibit anger arousal directly by decreasing the likelihood that provocations will be perceived in ways that lead to blame. A number of studies have investigated the importance of the types of attributions and appraisals made in potentially anger provoking situations. Ferguson and Rule (1983) suggested that the attributions an individual makes when involved in an interpersonal interaction can mediate his or her subsequent anger experience and anger related reactions. They argued that in interpersonal interactions in which an individual has in some way been harmed, he/she undertakes attributional work to understand whether what occurred was the result of behaviour from the other person that was accidental or deliberate, foreseeable or unforeseeable, and malevolently or non-malevolently intended, in creating a causal framework of events. McAuley and Shaffer (1993) reported the implication of external attributions of control in the generation of anger. Smith and colleagues have argued for the explanatory power of the appraisals individuals make of a situation and their central meaning (core relational theme) in emotional experience. According to this model, the appraisal of an event as important and interfering with personal goals and of the other individual in an interaction as accountable for the event underlies the core relational theme of other-blame that elicits the experience of anger (Smith & Lazarus,

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