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Aggressive fantasies, thought control strategies, and their connection to aggressive behaviour

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Abstract

The present study examined the relations between aggressive fantasies, thought control strategies and aggressive behaviour in a sample of non-clinical female participants ($N = 72$). First, the nature and prevalence of aggressive fantasies and thought control strategies were examined. Then, the relation between these constructs and aggressive behaviour was studied by means of correlations and regression analysis. Results indicated that aggressive fantasies were a common experience in these non-clinical participants, and that suppression, distraction and cognitive reappraisal were prevalent strategies to control aggressive intrusive thoughts. Most importantly, it was found that thought suppression and aggressive fantasies were positively correlated with aggressive behaviour. A regression analysis underlined the link between thought suppression and aggressive behaviour, but the relation between aggressive fantasies and aggressive behaviour was no longer significant. Further, some indications were found for distraction being an adaptive strategy for controlling aggressive intrusive thoughts.

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Keywords: Aggressive fantasies; Thought control strategies; Aggressive behaviour

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1. Introduction

While extensive research has been conducted on aggression, relatively few studies have focused on thought processes, or feelings and emotions of violent individuals (Doucette-Gates, Firestone, & Firestone, 1999). For example, whereas it is clear that dysfunctional thought processes lie at the core of cognitive therapy – which is one of the current treatment methods for aggression (Goldstein, Nensén, Daleflod, & Kalt, 2004) – instruments for assessing aggression-related cognition are sparse (Doucette-Gates et al., 1999). In a similar vein, many risk factors have been identified for aggressive behaviour, such as disruptive behaviour during childhood, substance use problems, and psychopathy (e.g., Webster, Douglas, Eaves, & Hart, 1997). However, surprisingly little attention has been directed at the construct of aggression itself, or more specifically, at the cognitive processes underlying aggressive behaviour.

Some studies have shown that aggressive thoughts, aggressive feelings or aggressive attitudes are related to aggressive behaviour. For instance, aggressive beliefs and hostile responses to hypothetical scenarios about being harassed by peers have been shown to be connected to aggressive behaviour in adolescents (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2005). In addition, research in non-clinical participants (Archer & Haigh, 1997) has demonstrated that instrumental beliefs about aggression (aggression as a way of controlling others) are positively associated with the use of physical and verbal aggression, and expressions of anger and hostility as measured by the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992). In contrast, expressive beliefs about aggression (aggression as a loss of control) were negatively correlated to physical aggression. Finally, it has been found that the frequency of four different types of negative thoughts was significantly higher for violent individuals as compared to non-violent individuals (Doucette-Gates et al., 1999).

Huesmann (1988, 1998) proposed an information-processing model to explain the development of aggressive behaviour in early childhood. In this model, cognitive processes play an important role. Huesmann assumes that in order to process information from the environment adequately and rapidly, a number of different programs or scripts are formed. Memories about experiences at an early age are clustered and stored in different scripts. Each time a person encounters a social problem, cues from the environment are evaluated and a search in memory is performed to find the appropriate script to guide behaviour. The scripts suggest what is likely to happen in the situation, what the person should do in response to these events, and what the likely outcome of this behaviour will be.

Huesmann's (1988, 1998) model predicts that aggressive behaviour will occur when aggressive scripts are retrieved and activated. The regular activation of aggressive scripts implies, above all, that a large number of aggressive scripts have become stored in memory. Therefore, it is important to look at the process by which scripts are constructed. First, the initial encoding of the observed behaviour takes place. This involves creating a representation of the experience in memory. Second, to maintain the initial encoding in memory, a script needs to be rehearsed regularly. Rehearsal involves mechanisms varying from simply recalling the original scene, to fantasizing, ruminating and play-acting. As a child fantasizes, elaborated connections to the script are generated, additional links to other concepts in memory are created, and the links within the scripts become strengthened. The scripts become more firmly represented and integrated in memory, thereby increasing the chance of reactivation in numerous situations. In this manner, aggressive scripts become the main template for response (Huesmann, 1988, 1998).

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