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Reactive and proactive aggression: Similarities and differences

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to elaborate the nomological net surrounding the constructs of reactive (RA) and proactive aggression (PA). Typically examined in the context of children, the current study utilized a sample of 211 young adults to examine the relations between reactive and proactive aggression and measures of general personality and social information processing, as well as maladaptive behavioral correlates such as crime, substance use, and riskier sex. Both raw and residualized scores were examined. Using raw scores, the primary differences between RA and PA were related to Neuroticism (i.e., RA more strongly related) and externalizing behaviors (i.e., PA more strongly). The authors comment on the similarity of findings when using raw scores and the divergence of findings using residualized scores and argue for a cautious interpretation of differences based on residualized scores. The authors conclude that the role of Neuroticism warrants further exploration as a means for understanding the heterogeneity of aggressive behavior.

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1. Introduction

There is an ongoing debate regarding the validity and utility of the distinction between reactive and proactive aggression (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Reactive aggression (RA) refers to acts committed in negative affective states such as anger or frustration, or in response to provocation. Berkowitz (1988) has argued that this type of aggression is explained by the frustration-aggression model, which postulates that an obstacle to goal attainment leads to frustration which may lead to aggression. Alternatively, proactive aggression (PA), understood within a social learning model (Bandura, 1983), refers to acts which are motivated by the desire to reach a specific goal. It is thought that RA and PA are distinguished by the following variables (Bushman & Anderson, 2001): anger, motivation, and the roles of premeditation, planning, and impulsivity. Along with potentially different etiologies, RA and PA may have different consequences.

The reactive/proactive distinction has been examined in aggressive children, adolescents, and adults. Despite its frequent use, there remains debate regarding the validity of this distinction. Bushman and Anderson (2001) argued that the distinction has such limited validity that it is “time to pull the life-support plug” (Bushman & Anderson, 2001, p. 278). Alternatively, some argue that the constructs have different emotional, cognitive and behavioral antecedents and consequences (Merk, Orobio de Castro, Koops, & Matthys, 2005) and that the distinction has implications for diagnosis, prevention, and intervention (Kempes, Matthys, de Vries, & van Engeland, 2005).

1.1. Precursors of aggression—social information processing and personality

A variety of causes and consequences for these forms of aggression have been proposed – one of the most influential is Dodge’s model of social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1991), which posits that “a child’s behavior in a particular social situation will occur as a direct reflection of his or her mental processing of that situation” (Dodge & Schwartz, 1997, p. 171). Dodge and colleagues suggest that aggressive children tend to process information from their social environment differently than nonaggressive children, which leads them to engage in aggressive behavior. These researchers argue that aggressive children make mistakes at multiple steps of the social information processing model (SIP). First, they encode environmental cues in a selective and inaccurate manner, attending to fewer cues (Milich & Dodge, 1984) but attending selectively to hostile or threatening cues (Dodge & Frame, 1982). Second, they display a hostile attributional bias, misinterpreting others’ behavior, especially when cues are ambiguous (Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002). Aggressive children also generate fewer, less competent, responses, are more likely to choose aggressive behavioral responses for enactment, and hold positive beliefs regarding the outcomes of aggression (Dodge & Schwartz, 1997).

Dodge and colleagues have hypothesized that reactively and proactively aggressive children differ on various steps of this model with RA children showing a greater hostile attributional bias and PA children having more positive outcome expectancies. For example, Dodge and Coie (1987) and Schwartz et al. (1998) found that only RA children displayed hostile attribution biases. The relation between PA and positive outcome expectations for the use of aggression has been replicated in child and adolescent samples (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Schwartz et al., 1998).

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