



# On thwarted goals and displaced aggression: A compensatory competence model



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## ABSTRACT

Thwarted goals and motivational obstacles are antecedents of aggression, but it is not entirely clear what motivates the aggressive response or why it is often displaced onto unrelated targets. The present work applies Goal Systems Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002) to consider how displaced aggression can sometimes operate like any other means to an end. Specifically, in five studies, we find that thwarted goals motivate displaced aggression to compensate for a threatened sense of competence. First, when an achievement goal is experimentally thwarted, it both threatens self-efficacy beliefs and increases displaced aggression (Studies 1–2). Second, when goal-thwarted individuals have the means to engage in displaced aggression, it reestablishes self-efficacy in the thwarted goal domain (Study 3). However, we find that the superordinate goal being served is competence and not to be aggressive per se: In Study 4, goal thwarted individuals choose to help someone rather than remain idle, even if idleness is the more aggressive alternative. In Study 5, displaced aggression is attenuated among individuals who expect a second performance opportunity in the thwarted goal domain. Together, the results suggest goal-thwarted individuals mainly resort to displaced aggression when they lack other means to interact effectively with the environment.

## 1. Introduction

Novelist Isaac Asimov once described aggression and violence as “... the last refuge of the incompetent” (Asimov, 1951, p. 58). The sentiment conveys a lay belief that bullies are just compensating for their own inadequacies—in school, in their jobs, or at home. The present work considers whether everyday acts of aggression can indeed be compensatory and serve a person's psychological need for competence.

Thwarted goals and motivational obstacles are antecedents of aggression and hostility (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). However, it is not yet clear what specifically motivates the aggressive response or why it is often displaced onto unrelated targets. In this research, we consider whether displaced aggression can sometimes be a means to compensate for a threatened sense of competence. *Competence* refers to a belief that one can interact effectively with the environment, and it has been argued to be a fundamental psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). In a pivotal paper, White (1959) described the need for competence in terms of *effectance*—a driving force in human behavior that motivates people to experience efficacy in their actions and to pursue achievement goals. Bandura (1997) described it in terms

of self-efficacy and wanting to exercise agency upon the world. What binds these concepts is the idea that people want to establish and maintain beliefs in their capability to produce clear effects in the environment.

In the present work, we aim to demonstrate that thwarted goals may often motivate displaced aggression because inflicting harm is a compensatory way to interact with the environment and experience efficacy. A compensatory competence model could help to explain why thwarted goals trigger aggression-related responses by articulating what aggression shares in common with all motivated behaviors: it is a means to an end, where the “end” is not necessarily consciously known to the aggressor or to outside observers. From this perspective, causing harm helps to reestablish a sense of efficacy. This could potentially explain the psychological function of displaced aggression in response to thwarted goals; it also suggests that aggression can sometimes be attenuated if one has alternative means to experience efficacy.

### 1.1. Displaced aggression as a product of self-regulation

A clear act of *aggression* is any behavior motivated by a (proximal)

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goal to cause harm, wherein one believes the behavior would harm the target and the target is motivated to avoid it (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Baron & Richardson, 1994). Acts of aggression are often retaliatory and evolutionary psychologists suggest that such behavior can be instrumental if it prevents victimization or deters future would-be harm doers (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). However, many aggressive behaviors otherwise do not seem to have any clear function or purpose: *Displaced aggression* is thought to occur when a motivation to retaliate gets redirected because, for instance, the harm-doer is unreachable or intangible (e.g., foul odors or bad weather, Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000, for a review). The person pivots to more accessible means and targets: bullying or sabotaging bystanders, disproportionately retaliating against an unrelated provocateur, or engaging in imagined or fantasized aggression (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Dollard et al., 1939). Prevailing ideas about a proximal psychological function of displaced aggression, such as catharsis or venting, have historically received little empirical support (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999; Geen & Quanty, 1977). Given its seeming disconnection from the original harm-doer, displaced aggression instead often appears purely hostile or senseless.

Yet a functional explanation emerges if one considers displaced aggression to be motivated by a need to have an effective interaction with the environment. From a compensatory competence perspective, some perpetrators of displaced aggression might be trying to address a psychological need. This approach – construing previously unexplainable behaviors as special cases of motivation and self-regulation – has already been used to explain the extreme behaviors involved in the maintenance of addictions (e.g., crack cocaine use, Kopetz, Lejuez, Wiers, & Kruglanski, 2013). However, thwarted goals are more commonplace than addictions, suggesting that anyone could experience the resulting aggressive motivations and intentions.

A compensatory competence model could inform theories of aggression in at least two ways. First, it could advance Dollard et al.'s (1939) original Frustration-Aggression hypothesis because it suggests displaced aggression can be psychologically functional even if it appears purely hostile in its manifestation. Second, this model connects socio-cognitive models of goal pursuit to prevailing associative network models of aggression—namely, Berkowitz's Cognitive-Neassociation model (Berkowitz, 1989, 2012) and Anderson and Bushman's (2002) General Aggression Model. These models suggest aggression-related constructs (e.g., aggressive intentions and behavioral scripts) are cognitively associated and that bad experiences (such as pain), or mere exposure to weapons or violence, can trigger them by association. As a result, displaced aggression could often be a byproduct of spreading activation in memory. Yet the General Aggression Model also provides a framework for connecting superordinate goals to subordinate aggressive scripts and behaviors. Our model posits that a threatened sense of competence could sometimes motivate aggression from the top-down. Superordinate goals can govern construct activation in a top-down manner (Kruglanski et al., 2002), which suggests that aggression-related constructs become activated to serve as subordinate means. Thus, our model advances the idea that displaced aggression can be predicted by both top-down processes (goals) as well as bottom-up processes (spreading activation).

### 1.2. Model overview and assumptions

In developing our model, we integrate the literatures on aggression and compensatory control with social-cognitive theories of goal pursuit. Bushman and Anderson (2001) theorized that aggression could be part of a broader network of goals and that the proximal goal to cause harm could be motivated by some other, superordinate goal. If aggression fits into a goal network, it may operate in some empirically predictable ways. According to Goal Systems Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), goals and means are organized hierarchically in memory, such that abstract

superordinate goals are served by more proximal means and subgoals. If competence is indeed a superordinate goal, then achievement goals and other ways to experience efficacy could all represent substitutable means to the same end (Shah, Kruglanski, & Friedman, 2003). This implies that if any single means or subgoal is thwarted (e.g., failure at school), one could compensate by switching to another means (e.g., achievement in sports, video games). People may also turn to aggression to compensate.

We regard such aggression as *compensatory* because we think people turn to it as a substitute means to experience efficacy. The logic for our model is derived from research on compensatory control, which suggests people are motivated to perceive they have control over their lives and will compensate for threats to efficacy and control in one domain by asserting control in other, often disconnected domains (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). This potentially includes aggression-related responses. McGregor (2006), for instance, proposed that thwarted goals and other losses of control can invoke a compensatory, defensive zeal that manifests in angry jingoism or extremism. In one demonstration supporting this, a manipulation of academic uncertainty increased support for religious warfare (McGregor, Haji, Nash, & Teper, 2008). Note that we believe *competence* is analogous to a person's sense of personal control (Bandura, 1977; Kay, Sullivan, & Landau, 2015); that is, we assume competence and control both refer to the same underlying idea that people are motivated to effectively interact with the environment. We use the specific term *competence* because it is narrower in scope – it implies a direct personal interaction with the environment wherein the self is the active agent. The term *control* is more expansive in that it can be established either directly from personal interaction or indirectly from endorsing external agents and systems (e.g., God and government, Kay et al., 2009). Furthermore, past work suggests that threats to competence, in particular, underpin many acts of aggression: The link between power and aggression, for instance, is moderated by the extent to which a boss is made to feel incompetent (Fast & Chen, 2009), and a recent study suggests that video games increase aggression when they thwart the need for competence (Przybylski, Deci, Rigby, & Ryan, 2014). These studies suggest a competence-aggression link.

We assume goal-thwarted individuals resort to aggression because it is a primitive and rudimentary means to interact with the environment. Aggression is rooted in (possibly ancient) neurobiology (Siever, 2008), can emerge in infancy (Alink et al., 2006), and is often impulsive and automatic (Anderson, Arlin, & Bartholow, 1998; Todorov & Bargh, 2002). Young children use aggression to manipulate their environment in the pursuit of goals (Hartup, 1974), and they may come to rely on it as an early means to experience efficacy (Andreou, 2004). From this perspective, aggression becomes associated with competence. Yet aggression in young children also tends to decline as they learn to use alternatives (Tremblay et al., 2004). Thus, our model assumes that aggression is a rudimentary means to pursue competence that is eventually replaced with more normative means and goals. However, these replacements are only substitutes—they do not necessarily break the association between aggression and competence. As a consequence, people can always turn to aggression if their goal pursuits do not work out: schoolchildren might turn to bullying when they are unsuccessful at school (Andreou, 2004; Kaukiainen et al., 2002), abusive men turn to aggression when they deem other means of influence inadequate (Prince & Arias, 1994), and extremists turn to terrorism when political activism fails (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009). Aggression might linger as a means of last resort.

### 1.3. Research objectives

In five studies, we test whether goal-thwarted individuals turn to aggression as means to compensate for a threatened sense of competence. We operationalize competence by measuring beliefs about *outcome efficacy*, which refers to one's effectiveness at influencing or

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