Using self-esteem instability to disentangle the connection between self-esteem level and perceived aggression

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ABSTRACT

Recent debate has considered the connection between self-esteem and aggression. The present study attempted to clarify this association by examining the possibility that self-esteem instability moderates the association that self-esteem level has with aggression. Perceived aggression was measured in 234 (34 men and 200 women) undergraduate participants. These participants were then evaluated by 1078 friends and family members. Self-esteem instability was found to moderate the association between self-esteem level and aggression such that individuals with stable high self-esteem were viewed as being less aggressive than those with unstable high self-esteem or low self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable). These findings are discussed in the context of understanding the connection between self-esteem and aggression.

1. Introduction

Recent debate has focused on the connection that self-esteem has with aggression. A popular view is that low self-esteem may sometimes cause aggression (e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Although low self-esteem has been shown to be associated with a variety of externalizing behaviors and delinquency (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Trzesniewski et al., 2006), there are actually very few studies that provide direct support for the idea that low self-esteem contributes to aggression per se (see Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000 for an extended discussion of this issue). Among the studies that are consistent with the idea that low self-esteem is linked with aggression are a longitudinal field study showing that children with low levels of self-esteem reported getting into a relatively large number of fights and a study showing that college students with low levels of self-esteem reported relatively high levels of trait aggression (Donnellan et al., 2005). Although these studies found support for the connection between low self-esteem and aggression, similar results have failed to emerge from other studies (e.g., Bushman et al., 2009). Taken together, these studies suggest that even though low self-esteem is clearly associated with a range of negative behaviors including various externalizing behaviors and delinquency, the connection between low self-esteem and aggression is, at best, weak and inconsistent.

A rival hypothesis to the idea that low self-esteem causes aggression is that high levels of self-esteem lead to aggressive behavior (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Baumeister et al., 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2009). It is important to note that this competing view does not suggest that the possession of high self-esteem is a simple and direct cause of aggression. Rather, the contention is that individuals with high levels of self-esteem are at greater risk for behaving in an aggressive manner if they believe that their feelings of self-worth have been threatened in some way. According to this view, aggressive behavior is considered to be a means by which individuals holding highly favorable – but easily threatened – views of themselves may protect their feelings of self-worth from potential threats. Support for this argument has been found in a number of laboratory studies in which individuals with high levels of self-esteem and/or narcissistic personality features were exposed to various self-esteem threats (e.g., receiving negative feedback on an essay) and responded aggressively to these threats (e.g., blasting a fellow participant with an aversive noise; see Bushman et al., 2009 for a review).

We believe that much of the confusion concerning the link between self-esteem and aggression may be due, at least in part, to researchers focusing on self-esteem level (i.e., whether self-esteem is low or high) without giving adequate attention to other aspects of self-esteem such as its temporal stability (i.e., fluctuations in moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth over time; see Kernis, 2005 for a review). Self-esteem instability is typically operationalized as the magnitude of change in state self-esteem across repeated measurements. The inclusion of self-esteem instability is

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important because high self-esteem has been shown to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a stable and unstable form (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013 for a review). Stable high self-esteem reflects positive attitudes toward the self that are realistic, well-anchored, and resistant to threat. Individuals with stable high self-esteem are believed to have a solid foundation for their feelings of self-worth that does not require constant validation from others. In contrast, unstable high self-esteem refers to feelings of self-worth that are vulnerable to challenge, require constant validation, and rely upon some degree of self-deception. Individuals with unstable high self-esteem are believed to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth. Much of the previous research concerning self-esteem instability has shown that it – in conjunction with self-esteem level – predicts a variety of important outcomes including defensiveness (Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008), psychological adjustment (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012), and interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Beckman, 2011). These studies suggest that the self-regard of those with unstable high self-esteem is constantly at risk which leads to heightened reactivity and defensiveness among these individuals.

Previous research has begun to examine the possibility that individuals with unstable high self-esteem will be particularly aggressive. The earliest of these studies found that individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of anger and hostility (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). Although these results did not directly address aggression, the finding that individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of anger and hostility are certainly consistent with the idea that these individuals may also be highly aggressive. More recent studies have directly examined the connection between unstable high self-esteem and self-reported aggression (Webster, Kirkpatrick, Nezlek, Smith, & Paddock, 2007; Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012). The results of these studies showed that individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported being more aggressive than those with stable high self-esteem. It is important to note that sex sometimes further moderated these results such that women with unstable high self-esteem were found to possess relatively low levels of aggression in two of the three studies reported by Webster et al. (2007) and men with unstable low self-esteem possessed the highest levels of physical aggression in one study reported by Zeigler-Hill and Wallace (2012). These results may shed important light on the connection between self-esteem and aggression because they show that individuals with unstable high self-esteem often report higher levels of aggression than those with stable high self-esteem. However, it is important to note that individuals with low levels of self-esteem often reported levels of aggression that were similar to those reported by individuals with unstable high self-esteem. Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that individuals with stable high self-esteem tend to report being less aggressive than those with either unstable high self-esteem or low levels of self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem is stable or unstable). This is important because it suggests that the continuing debate concerning whether low self-esteem or high self-esteem is associated with aggression may be persisting because both sides are partially correct. It may be necessary to account for self-esteem instability in order to gain a clearer understanding of the true connection between self-esteem level and aggression.

1.1. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connection between self-esteem and aggression by using self-esteem instability to distinguish between individuals with stable high self-esteem and those with unstable high self-esteem. This was accomplished by asking participants to complete a measure of self-esteem level as well as repeated measures of state self-esteem each day for up to seven consecutive days which were used to generate an index of self-esteem instability. Then, participants were asked to recruit up to five friends or family members who were asked to rate the participants in terms of their aggression. Thus, the present study was an attempt to improve our understanding of the connection between self-esteem and aggression by examining whether self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and perceived aggression. Utilizing perceiver reports of aggression is an important extension of previous studies that relied on self-reported aggression because it is possible that the low levels of aggression reported by those with secure high self-esteem may have been due, at least in part, to socially desirable response tendencies. At the most basic level, we expected our results to replicate those of previous studies showing that self-esteem level had either no relationship or a relatively weak negative relationship with aggression. More importantly, we expected that any main effect of self-esteem level would be qualified by its interaction with self-esteem instability. Consistent with previous results concerning self-reported aggression (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012), we expected that individuals with stable high self-esteem would be perceived by others as being less aggressive than those with unstable high self-esteem or low levels of self-esteem (regardless of whether their low self-esteem was stable or unstable).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 357 undergraduates at a university in the southern region of the United States enrolled in psychology courses who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Participants completed measures of self-esteem level – along with other measures that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., Big Five personality dimensions) – via a secure website. Following the completion of those questionnaires, participants were offered additional research credit for completing a measure of state self-esteem via the internet at approximately 10 pm for up to seven consecutive days. Of the 357 participants who completed the initial measures, 280 participants completed the daily measures for three or more days. The decision to only include participants in the final analyses who contributed data for 3 or more days was due to the fact that three data points are necessary to estimate self-esteem instability using the variability of these daily measures of state self-esteem (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007). These 280 participants were offered additional research credit for recruiting up to five friends or family members (i.e., perceivers) to complete questionnaires concerning the perceived aggression of the participant (i.e., the target) – along with other evaluations of the target that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., personality features) – via the internet. In order to assess how targets with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem were viewed by others, it was necessary to establish some minimum number of perceivers for each target to be included in the final analyses. As a result, the final analyses only included targets who recruited three or more perceivers (see Malkin, Zeigler-Hill, Barry, & Southard, 2013 for a similar strategy). Of these 280 participants, 234 participants (34 men and 200 women) recruited three or more perceivers to participate in the study. Our final sample included 1078 perceivers (an average of 4.61 perceivers for each participant). The mean age of the targets was 20.88 years (SD = 4.99) and their racial/ethnic composition was 62% White, 33% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 3% Other. The final participants contributed 1280 daily reports of state self-esteem (i.e., an average of 5.47 reports for each participant).