

Interpersonal Aggression

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## ABSTRACT

Interpersonal aggression is a serious social problem that has been around for a very long time. It has received a great amount of attention from many different disciplines in the past century. Social psychology addresses this problem directly using research methods grounded in biopsychology and empirical research. Up to date models addressing interpersonal aggression adds to our knowledge base and points toward future research and positive social change.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Interpersonal Aggression is a Serious Problem

Baron, Byrne, and Branscombe (2006) stated, “Aggression is the intentional infliction of harm on others. Although most social psychologists reject the view that human aggression is strongly determined by genetic factors, many now accept an evolutionary perspective that recognizes the potential role of such factors” (424). The problem of aggression can be difficult to grasp because it is ubiquitous and seems natural in its expressions. However, daily news report incidents of people intentionally inflicting harm on self and others at an alarming rate. Waters et al. (2004) reports the economic cost of violence in the United States, England, and Wales to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars annually. In the U.S. alone the economic costs of interpersonal violence represents nearly 3.5% of the gross domestic product. Interpersonal violence around the globe is epidemic. Edens and Douglas (2006) stated, “In terms of some of the most extreme forms of aggression, WHO, estimates that more than 1.6 million people lose their lives each year as a result of interpersonal violence” (p. 221). In the United States, the picture painted by interpersonal aggression is grim. There are about 25,000 homicides reported each year and 5.4 million violent crimes against adolescents and adults. Reported crimes committed by juveniles are more than 1 million. The social, economic, and other costs attributed to interpersonal aggression is difficult to understand and grasp. Social psychologists have a difficult time studying interpersonal aggression because it is so widespread (Edens & Douglas, 2006). Researchers have concerns about operationalizations of interpersonal aggression because of the complexity of definitions, causes, and consequences. In some respects, interpersonal can become normalized in our

society because aggressive sports such as boxing, wrestling, and football are paired with financial benefits that make them quite lucrative and socially accepted.

This study seeks to examine interpersonal aggression in its milder forms. Aggression between individuals in the forms of fighting, road rage, verbal assaults, manipulative behaviors toward families and friends is the focus of this study. Intervention strategies are a concern too. Is there a way of teaching individuals aggression management skills in the form of anger management based upon models that teach skills in self-management and emotional intelligence? Before going forward, it is important to look at the research literature to gain a better understanding of interpersonal aggression through defined and theories that have advanced important knowledge of aggression in the human community.

#### *Interpersonal Aggression Defined*

This project defines interpersonal violence as acts aggression "...between family members and intimate partners and violence between acquaintances and strangers that is not intended to further the aims of any formally defined group or cause. Self-directed violence, war, state-sponsored violence and other collective violence are specifically excluded..." (Waters et al., 2004, p. #). The numbers comparing affected populations globally does not treat the problem with any certainty. One reason is that interpersonal violence affects people in poor countries in ways that are too complicated to measure. However, in the United States one murder costs more than two million dollars to the economy. Child abuse, partner violence, workplace violence, youth violence, and sexual violence are each serious problems in the U.S. and around the globe (Waters et al., 2004).

### *Biological Considerations*

Research indicates that interpersonal aggression is based in our neurological make-up and that we enter the social world with anger as one of seven primary emotions (Panksepp 1998). The expressions of genetically inherited emotions influenced by early childhood attachments determine how anger and aggression influence mental schemas, emotions, and social behavior. Bowlby (1973) identified secure and insecure attachment styles. He compared insecure attachment styles with socially deviant behavior and particular anger styles. Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008) provided evidence that maladaptive anger is based upon internal representations of revenge and venting were learned coping skills to manage emotions. Although interpersonal aggression in the form of anger has biological roots, its expressions are learned from social experiences. Maladaptive anger is one of many coping strategies learned from families during childhood. Evidence supports that interpersonal aggression was a common cause of death in our prehistoric ancestors (Jurmain, 2001).

## INTERPERSONAL AGGRESSION THEORIES

### Drives, Social Learning, and General Aggression Model

Baron, Byrne, and Branscombe (2006) note that older drive theories of aggression view the desire to inflict harm on others as basic to human nature and until recently psychologists held this view as the most persuasive. Later drive theories held that the drives instigating interpersonal aggression were situated in the environment and were stimulated by frustration. This theory is best known as the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Modern theories of aggression are the social learning theory and the general aggression model (GAM). Baron et al. stated, "Modern theories of aggression, such as the general aggression model, recognize the importance in aggression of learning, various eliciting input variables, individual differences, affective states, and, especially cognitive processes" (p. 424).

#### *Frustration-Aggression Theory*

Modern research continues to be influenced by frustration-aggression theories (Gustafson, 1989). These theories propose that people aggress toward others when their goals are interfered with, especially when the anticipated goals included anticipated pleasure (Berkowitz, 1988). The problem with this theory is that there are other causes of aggression other than frustration of goals. However, this theory continues to be applicable to modern research and clinical application. Testing anger reactions in research methodologies frequently use frustration by various means.

#### *The Need to Vent and Get Even*

The hydraulic theory of aggression postulated that pent up frustration and hostility needed an outlet. This theory has a long history in psychology and psychiatry. It can be

placed within the frustration-aggression and drive theories. This theory purported that people needed to let their frustrations out on some object or the frustration would build up and cause damage to their nervous system. Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008) stated, “There is a widespread acceptance of the notion that aggression, either directed against the target of one’s ire or displaced to some other object, relieves the tension, and thus the anger, that had been pent-up inside” (p. 1316). Coupled with this theory is the belief that getting revenge on an offender serves a utilitarian purpose too (Carlsmith et al., 2008). Through a series of experiments these authors provided evidence that venting and getting even for offences do not serve the goal of mood repair. Venting prolongs frustration and anger. Getting revenge does not provide the hedonic qualities forecasted by offended persons. The studies provide evidence that persons seeking revenge feel worse than persons who learn other coping strategies.

### *Aggression As Learned*

Social learning perspective regarding aggression advance earlier ideas and were more inclusive of multi-factors influencing aggressive behavior. It recognizes that humans are born with aggressive instincts and that these instincts are ripened through experience. Experiences of interpersonal aggression, like many other forms of human behavior, are shaped through family interactions, school peers, television and movie personalities, and video games with aggressive content. Baron et al. (2006) asserted, “...the social learning perspective suggests that whether a specific person will aggress in a give situation depends on many factors...” (p. 422). Factors include past experience, rewards, attitudes, values, and thoughts. Social learning theory supports that people learn ways of harming others, targets of aggression, what actions cause retaliation and

vengeance, and situations that permit aggression (Baron et al.). Social learning theory is important in understanding causes and interventions for interpersonal aggression.

### *Intrapersonal Aggression Complexity*

Interpersonal aggression is a complex social phenomenon that requires a more complete formulation of aggression than previous theories. Psychologists developed the general aggression model (GAM) to account for previous perspectives in a more integrated way. The GAM attributes two main factors, the current situation and person factors, influencing human aggression (Baron et al., 2006). Situational and individual differences can cause interpersonal aggression. Situational influences include frustrations, insults from environment and other people, discomfort, and other environmental problems. Personal factors include irritability traits, physical arousal, affective states, cognitive appraisals, beliefs about other's intentions, and developmental skills related to aggression.

The GAM recognizes that people exposed to high levels of aggression through direct experience or other sources develop tendencies toward aggressive behavior more readily than individuals without as much exposure do to violence. Interpersonal aggressive behavior stem from social, cultural, personal and situational variables.

### Methods of Studying Interpersonal Aggression

#### *Empathy and Attitude Measurement*

Edens and Douglas (2006) stated, "Violence and aggression are considered major public health hazards throughout the world. Yet there is considerable variability in how these terms are operationalized, measured, and studied in the social sciences, which can lead to ambiguity and confusion" (p.221). Interpersonal aggression is a complex human

problem reinforced through social norms and attitudes. Evidence suggests that our attitude about the usefulness of anger as a form of interpersonal aggression is undergoing a revision. Venting anger does not help us feel better and causes our anger to intensify. Revenge caused by anger does not serve the hedonic effect as is reinforced through social norms and reward systems. However, these attitudes about the use of interpersonal aggression for managing angry emotions are deeply embedded social constructs. Are our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors changing? Is there a way to measure attitudinal changes regarding the utilitarian use of anger?

Interpersonal aggression is not an effective means of coping with stress and unpleasant emotions, but it is a reality. Reid (2006) stated, “Likert used questions requiring responses ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ (on a five-point scale) or from ‘very strongly agree’ to ‘very strongly disagree’ (on a seven-point scale)” (p. 4). This strategy could help measure social attitudes regarding the use of anger to resolve interpersonal problems. This would be a positive use of social psychology research knowledge about human behavior tendencies toward social concerns.

The science of predicting and controlling outcomes of social behavior is a tricky endeavor because attitudes change for different situations and over time. Scientists cannot predict attitudes with absolute certainty using point scale analyses (Reid, 2006). However, point scale analyses for attitude tendencies can help provide useful evidence of potential angry reactions about social concern and attitudes can be changed to reduce interpersonal aggression. Evidence strongly suggests empathy development inhibits interpersonal aggression. Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, and Signo (1994) stated, “An investigator who is interested in the control of aggressive behavior must

determine how to improve cognitive functioning in order to enhance the probability of aggression inhibition” (p. 276). Two aspects of empathy that have received attention are the affective components and the cognitive components. The affective components include sympathy and concern for others in need. The cognitive aspect of empathy is the ability to understand the psychological perspective of others (Richardson et al., 1994). If one can take the perspective of others and feel concern then aggressive behavior can be inhibited. This mitigating information would reduce interpersonal aggression.

### *Participants*

This study seeks to recruit 60 adult males between the ages of 25 years to 50 years from the Los Angeles County Probation Department with a history of interpersonal aggression and court ordered to attend Anger Management Education classes for 12 weeks.

### *Materials*

This project proposes measuring one independent variable empathy as measured by Interpersonal Empathy (E) of the Personal Skills Map (Leaseburg, Bull, & Salyer, 1990). The independent variable will be the Personal Skills Map (Leaseburg et al., 1990). This scale measures individual’s ability to sense the affective state of others and to understand other’s perspective. Skills in empathy can be measured as low, normal, or high. People scoring low on empathy have difficulty with interpersonal aggression. It is predicted that participants referred to anger management education classes will score low on empathy skill development.

### *Procedures*

Each participant will be administered the Interpersonal Empathy (E) of the Personal Skills Map (Leaseburg et al., 1990). Half, 30, of the participants will be randomly selected to attend a Los Angeles Probation Department certified anger management program for 12 weeks. Certified anger management programs in Los Angeles County teach emotional intelligence skills self-management and empathy. The 30 other participants will be placed on a waiting list and receive no anger management education classes for 12 weeks. The hypothesis proposes that the participants enrolled and attending anger management classes for 12 weeks will score higher on empathy rating scales at the end of the 12-week classes. The participants on the waiting list, non-intervention group, will show little or no improvement on interpersonal empathy rating scale. At the end of the 12-week period each participant will be administered the Interpersonal Empathy (E) of the Personal Skills Map and the results will be correlated comparing the scores between the participants from the anger management education class with the participants on the waiting list.

### *Results*

Interpersonal empathy was increased with the participants attending the anger management classes. In addition, the individuals attending the anger management classes had fewer violations of their probation as reported by the probation department. The participants in the study on the waiting list showed lower scale scores for empathy than originally recorded and lower compliance with probation conditions. As predicted, empathy would be associated with prosocial behavior. Empathy as a higher cognitive

emotion is a skill that can be learned in an anger management program using cognitive-behavioral strategies.

## CONCLUSION

### Discussion

#### *Implications for Understanding Interpersonal Aggression.*

Previous research indicated that interpersonal aggression is a serious problem with a long history among humans that traced to prehistoric times. Research indicated that humans have developed aggressive instincts that are important to survival individually and for groups. The world that we live in now is such that interpersonal aggression violates many norms in civilized societies. As such, interpersonal aggression has become a subject of social concern that is widespread and multivariate. Social psychologists have designed theories to help gain greater understanding and control of interpersonal aggression. Methodologies that study interpersonal aggression can be confusing because the ubiquitous nature of the problem and confusing socially accepted norms. In the United States, interpersonal aggression is at epidemic proportions and researchers have discovered ways of measuring interpersonal aggression with attitude assessment scales. Empathy is an important skill that helps individuals understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Interventions aimed at strengthening the cognitive factors of empathy can be learned in an anger management education setting that teaches emotional intelligence skills of self-management and empathy.

#### *Applications*

The findings of this study can be applied to settings where interpersonal aggression is a problem. In school settings, hospitals, mental health clinics, and social institutions concerned with developing prosocial behavior. Anger management classes

that teach empathy can be an alternative sanctioning for persons violating social norms using interpersonal aggression. Other researchers have found empathy to be an important skill to deter interpersonal aggression (LeSure-Lester, 2000; Richardson et al., 1994).

*Directions for Future Research*

This study focused on interpersonal aggression, methodological issues related to research of this social problem, and empathy development as a skill development area that helps modify aggression tendencies within individuals. Many other skill development deficits contribute to interpersonal aggression. For example, lack of stress management skills, learned helplessness, and the lack of assertiveness skills contribute to interpersonal aggression. Future research with different populations and multivariable analysis using other skill sets as independent variables would add to our knowledge and help gain better control of interpersonal aggression. Perhaps, an interesting study would include measuring collective empathy and intervention strategies as agents of social change on a larger scale.

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