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Youths' displaced aggression against in- and out-group peers: An experimental examination

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ABSTRACT

People often displace their anger and aggression against innocent targets, sometimes called scapegoats. Tragic historic events suggest that members of ethnic minority out-groups may be especially likely to be innocent targets. The current experiment examined displaced aggression of Dutch youths against Dutch in-group peers versus Moroccan out-group peers. Participants ($N = 137$, $M_{age} = 11.6$ years) completed a personal profile that was allegedly evaluated by Dutch peer judges. After randomly receiving negative or neutral feedback from these peers, participants were given the opportunity to aggress against other innocent Dutch and Moroccan peers by taking money earned away from them. Results showed that in response to negative feedback, participants displaced aggression disproportionately against innocent Moroccan out-group targets. This effect was not driven by ethnic prejudice; in both conditions, participants holding more negative attitudes of Moroccans engaged in higher levels of aggression regardless of the ethnicity of the target.

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Introduction

In today's society, human aggressive behavior is omnipresent and ranks among the most serious problems facing our species. *Aggression* is any behavior that is intended to harm another person (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). Aggression is *direct* when the target is the provocateur. Aggression is *displaced* when the target is innocent of any wrongdoing but is simply in the "wrong place at the wrong time." Prototypically, displaced aggression occurs when a person cannot aggress or is constrained from aggressing against the source of provocation. Direct retaliatory aggression might not be possible because the source of the initial provocation is unavailable (e.g., the provocateur has left the situation). Fear of retaliation or punishment from the provocateur may also constrain direct aggression (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). For example, if the provocateur is strong or powerful, people may be reluctant to aggress directly against the provocateur and may instead displace their aggression toward innocent targets, sometimes called scapegoats.

Meta-analytic findings have shown that displaced aggression among adults is a robust phenomenon (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000). Surprisingly, only one experimental study has investigated displaced aggression in youths (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Thomaes, Bushman, & Telch, *in press*). This is unfortunate because displaced aggression is clearly not confined to adults. School shootings may be extreme examples of displaced aggression among youths. More common examples include youths verbally or physically aggressing against innocent siblings or peers.

A recent study among young adolescents examined how situational factors (e.g., provocateur availability, provocation intensity) and dispositional factors (e.g., callousness, trait aggressiveness) interact to influence displaced aggression (Reijntjes et al., *in press*). Results revealed that displaced aggression was more likely to occur when the level of provocation was high and when provocateurs were unavailable for direct retaliation. Trait aggressiveness was positively associated with both types of aggression. In contrast, dispositional callousness (i.e., proneness to make use of others coldheartedly and the relative absence of guilt and empathy) predicted displaced but not direct aggression, suggesting that different factors may contribute to the propensity to harm innocent others versus provocateurs.

Targets of displaced aggression

Although previous research has increased our understanding of factors that incite displaced aggression, it is unclear which individuals are most likely to become the targets of displaced aggression. Are some people at increased risk to be chosen as the targets of displaced aggression? One possibility is that those who engage in displaced aggression want someone to "pay" for their maltreatment regardless of the attributes of the target. Consistent with this view, it appears that most school shooters targeted innocent bystanders "at random" regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. However, there are also good reasons to believe that displaced aggression may be disproportionately directed against individuals who the aggressor perceives as dissimilar (i.e., out-group members). Impression formation studies have shown that targets that differ in important ways from the self are typically liked less (Smeaton, Byrne, & Murnen, 1989). Because out-group status is associated with negativity, out-group members are more likely to prime a network of aggression-related thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in semantic memory (Miller, Pedersen, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003). Consequently, the stronger the dissimilarity between the aggressor and the potential targets of displaced aggression (particularly on salient attributes), the higher the level of displaced aggression may be.

Although dissimilarity between the aggressor and victim can exist along numerous attributes (e.g., age, gender, profession), events throughout human history have shown that under certain conditions people tend to behave more aggressively in particular toward others who are of a different race or ethnicity from their own. Race/ethnicity ranks among the most accessible criteria for constructing in-group versus out-group distinctions (Messick & Mackie, 1989), and although many societies have developed strong egalitarian traditions and norms that emphasize the importance of racial/ethnic equality, the categorization of people from different ethnicities into in-groups and out-groups is a pervasive automatic human tendency that is present from preschool age onward (Aboud, 1988; Hodson,

Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002). Moreover, even otherwise well-intentioned children demonstrate prejudiced attitudes toward ethnic out-groups—prejudiced attitudes that may lead to aggressive behaviors (Powlisha, Serbin, Doyle, & White, 1994). Therefore, we contend that ethnicity may be an important attribute influencing who will become the target of displaced aggression.

Overview of the current study

The current study was designed to examine whether Dutch majority youths are more likely to exhibit displaced aggression against Arab ethnic minority out-group peers (i.e., Moroccan youths) than against native Dutch in-group peers. Moroccan children were selected because in the Netherlands people of Moroccan descent have been increasingly stigmatized over the past decades. Some have argued that their low economic status and social isolation have “made them both the underclass citizens of the Dutch society and the scapegoats for the ills of society” (Ghorashi, 2005, p. 1). A bogus negative peer feedback manipulation served as the aggression-eliciting event. This stressor was used because both laboratory and field studies have shown that aggressive behavior is often triggered by events in which people are devalued, unaccepted, or socially rejected (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). As in our previous work (Reijntjes et al., *in press*), young adolescents were studied. One reason for examining youths in this developmental stage is that negative attitudes toward out-group members may still be relatively malleable compared with later ages when negative attitudes toward out-groups may be more deeply ingrained and resistant to change (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007). Hence, results pertaining to younger adolescents may have more relevance for aggression intervention programs. Second, young adolescents attach great importance to the opinions and appraisals of peers and are greatly concerned about interpersonal acceptance, more so than younger children (Damon & Hart, 1988; Harter, 2006). Moreover, during this developmental stage, experiences of acute peer rejection occur frequently (Asher, Rose, & Gabriel, 2001; Storch & Ledley, 2005).

Participants were Dutch youths who were randomly assigned to receive either negative or neutral peer feedback from other same-gender, same-age Dutch youths. Subsequently, they were provided with the opportunity to aggress against four other uninvolved same-gender, same-age peers: two Dutch and two Moroccan. Thus, the ethnicity of the peers served as the manipulated within-participants factor. The index of aggression was modeled after the widely used point subtraction aggression paradigm (Cherek, 1981) and consisted of giving participants the option of taking away game earnings from each of the four peers. We also examined the role of participants' attitudes toward Moroccan peers.

We hypothesized that participants who received negative peer feedback would exhibit greater levels of displaced aggression against out-group Moroccan peers than against in-group Dutch peers. We expected that this effect would be stronger among participants holding more negative prejudiced attitudes toward Moroccan peers. Low levels of aggression were expected for participants who received neutral feedback regardless of the ethnic background of the target.

Method

Participants

Participants were 137 Dutch youths aged 10 to 13 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 11.6$ years, $SD = 0.8$, 51% boys, 100% Caucasian, predominantly middle class) from public schools in the Netherlands. Participants obtained parental consent (consent rate = 84%) and provided their own assent (assent rate = 100%). Participants received a small gift (e.g., mechanical pencils) for participating.

Procedure and measures

Approximately 2 weeks before the experiment proper, children completed a 5-item measure assessing attitudes toward Moroccan peers (“Most Moroccan children are untidy,” “Most Moroccan children do not have a good character,” “Most Moroccan children are smart,” “Most Moroccan children

are unkind,” and “Most Moroccan children are helpful”). To disguise the purposes of the instrument, 15 filler items were added (e.g., “Most children like reading,” “Most children do not try hard at school”). The 5 attitude items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*), negative items were recoded, and all items were summed to yield a total score (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes ($M = 14.1$, $SD = 3.0$, range = 5–20).

In the experiment proper, participants were tested individually at their schools. They were told that they would compete in an internet contest called “Survivor” in which players are evaluated by a panel of four same-gender Dutch peer judges from different schools (see Reijntjes, Dekovic, & Telch, 2007). First, a digital photo was taken of participants to post on the (bogus) Survivor website for the peer judges to see. Next, participants completed a personal profile (e.g., favorite hobbies, things they like and dislike about themselves, occupation goals, personality traits). After a short wait, participants were given 3 min to look over the judges' feedback. By clicking on a judge's photo, participants could read what that particular judge (allegedly) said about them. Each judge wrote four statements. Participants were randomly assigned to receive negative feedback or neutral feedback from judges. Negative feedback consisted of three negative statements (e.g., “I would not like to be friends with this person,” “He seems dull,” “I think he is sneaky”) and one neutral statement (e.g., “I think he likes reading”) from each judge. Neutral feedback consisted of two neutral statements, one positive statement (e.g., “I think he is clever”), and one negative statement (e.g., “I don't think he has many friends”) from each judge. As a manipulation check, participants rated two statements: “The judges mostly said positive things about you” and “Most judges did not seem to like you very much” (1 = *completely agree* to 5 = *completely disagree*).

Next, participants were provided with the opportunity to aggress against four other uninvolved same-age, same-gender peers by deciding how much money they should receive for participating in the study (see Reijntjes et al., 2010, *in press*). Two were Dutch peers and two were Moroccan peers. These uninvolved peers were introduced via a short profile that included their picture, age, name, and residence and the number of siblings. A pilot study was conducted to ensure that potential targets did not differ in terms of facial attractiveness.

The default fee was 2 euros (2€). Participants could leave this amount unchanged, subtract 1€ or 2€, or add 1€ or 2€. Displaced aggression was indexed as the total number of euros participants subtracted from the earnings of the innocent peers. This aggression measure is a variant of the widely used point subtraction aggression paradigm (Cherek, 1981).

Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed. They were told that there were no judges and that the feedback they received was bogus. They were informed about the true purpose of the study and the need for deception. Research has shown that these debriefing procedures are effective for youths (Hurley & Underwood, 2002). During the debriefing, no participant expressed suspicion about the study, guessed what the study was about when explicitly asked, or expressed negative feelings about being deceived. In fact, most participants expressed that they enjoyed participating (see Thomaes et al., 2010, for ethical considerations regarding the Survivor experiment).

Results

Gender and age differences

Because there were no main or interactive effects of gender or age on displaced aggression, the data of all participants were combined for subsequent analyses.

Equivalence of experimental groups

Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed that participants in the two conditions did not differ in terms of age, gender, and attitude scores toward Moroccan peers ($ps > .10$), indicating that random assignment to conditions was effective.

Manipulation check

Compared with participants who received neutral feedback, participants who received negative feedback rated the feedback as more negative, $F(1,135) = 122.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.96$, and also rated the judges as liking them less, $F(1,135) = 57.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.31$. These results indicate that the manipulation achieved its intended purpose.

Displaced aggression

To examine our main research question, a mixed model ANOVA was performed. Ethnicity of the potential targets served as the within-participants factor, and peer feedback condition (negative vs. neutral) was the between-participants factor. Attitudes toward Moroccan peers were entered as a covariate. In addition to investigating the effects for ethnicity, feedback condition, and their interaction, this approach enabled examination of the interaction effects (a) between attitudes and ethnicity, (b) between attitudes and feedback condition, and (c) among attitudes, ethnicity, and feedback condition.

As expected, total aggression was higher for participants who received negative feedback ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 2.48$) than for participants who received neutral feedback ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 1.69$), $F(1, 134) = 20.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$. More important given our central research question, this main effect for condition was qualified by the predicted interaction between condition and target ethnicity, $F(1, 134) = 4.23$, $p < .05$. Contrary to expectation, this interaction effect was not further moderated by attitudes toward Moroccan peers, as evidenced by a nonsignificant three-way interaction effect among feedback condition, ethnicity, and attitudes ($p > .30$). Instead, results showed that in both conditions participants who reported more negative attitudes toward Moroccan peers engaged in higher levels of total aggression regardless of the ethnicity of the target, $F(1, 134) = 18.65$, $p < .001$.

Subsequent simple effects analyses (see Fig. 1) showed that participants who received negative peer feedback displayed higher levels of displaced aggression against Moroccan out-group targets ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.43$) than against Dutch in-group targets ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.34$), $F(1, 74) = 4.21$,

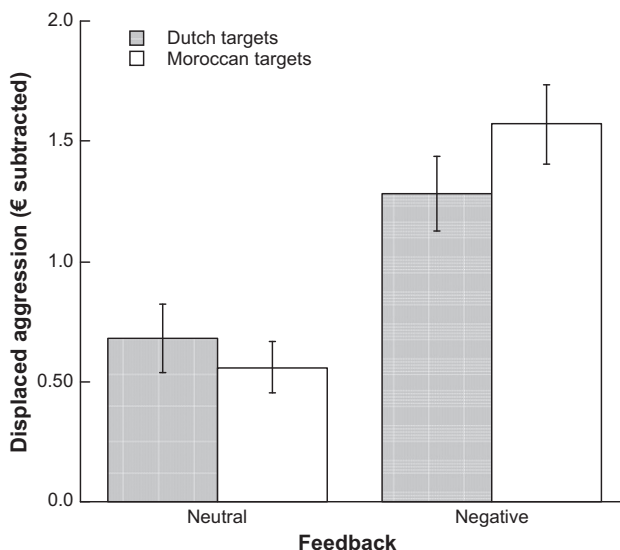


Fig. 1. Moderating effects of feedback condition on displaced aggression directed against Dutch in-group peers versus Moroccan out-group peers.

$p < .05$, $d = 0.23$. Participants who received neutral peer feedback displayed similar levels of displaced aggression against Moroccan targets ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.86$) and Dutch targets ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 1.11$), $F(1, 61) = 0.71$, $p > .40$.

Discussion

The current experiment tested the hypothesis that when youths are faced with negative feedback from in-group peers, they are especially likely to lash out aggressively against innocent members of an ethnic minority out-group (i.e., Moroccan peers). To our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate that ethnicity of potential targets moderates displaced aggression. As expected, in response to negative feedback, participants showed more displaced aggression toward Moroccan out-group targets than they did toward Dutch in-group targets. Importantly, in the absence of negative feedback, participants did not show more aggression against Moroccan peers. Thus, the aggression against Moroccan peers appears to be interpersonally meaningful, and occurs only when youths are provoked.

Contrary to expectations, more negative attitudes toward Moroccan peers did not predict more aggression against the Moroccan targets. Rather, in both feedback conditions, more prejudiced participants emitted more aggression against both Moroccan and Dutch peers. This observation is in line with research examining direct aggression among adults in which it was observed that both White and Black prejudiced participants were more aggressive toward victims of both races (e.g., Genter, Shuntich, & Bunting, 1975; Wilson & Rogers, 1975). Taken together, it appears that more aggression against out-groups does not necessarily stem directly from more negative attitudes toward out-group members. However, it should be noted that a strong positive in-group bias, which does not necessarily coincide with a strong negative out-group bias, may account for elevated displaced aggression toward these out-groups.

Our finding that young adolescents engage in higher levels of displaced aggression against out-group members points to the potential significance of incorporating strategies that target ethnic group categorization into aggression intervention programs for youths. For instance, the decategorization approach (Brewer & Miller, 1984) aims to reduce intergroup aggression via personalized interactions that undermine the salience of group categorization. Research with adults has shown that certain strategies based on this approach reduce displaced aggression toward out-group targets (Vasquez, Ensari, Pedersen, Tan, & Miller, 2007). Another approach to reduce aggression between preexisting groups is to promote recategorization of former in- and out-groups into one common in-group (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993).

Limitations

Our study has limitations. First, our findings are based on a sample of primarily middle-class Dutch youths attending schools where ethnic diversity is relatively low (~18% of students in the participating schools were of non-Dutch descent). Second, the current research focused rather narrowly on displaced aggression directed against same-gender peers of a single stigmatized out-group. Hence, the generalizability of our findings remains to be investigated. Third, with regard to external validity, we acknowledge that our laboratory aggression measure shares few surface features with real-world physical aggression. However, this aggression measure does share the conceptual features of delivering a noxious stimulus to a victim with the intent and expectation of harming the victim. The theoretically meaningful linkage that was observed between more negative peer feedback and higher levels of aggression as indexed by our measure provides support for its credibility. Our measure was modeled after the widely used point subtraction aggression paradigm (Cherek, 1981) and has been successfully used in previous research (e.g., Reijntjes et al., 2010, in press). In addition, research has shown that situational (e.g., provocation) and individual difference (e.g., trait aggressiveness) factors have similar effects on aggression inside and outside the laboratory (Anderson & Bushman, 1997). Both in the real world and in the laboratory, people show more aggression against out-group members than against in-group members. In the real world, people also harm others by taking money away from them.

Directions for future research

First, future research should examine children from younger and older age groups as well as children who interact more frequently with members of ethnic out-groups at school or in their neighborhoods. Second, future research should examine the extent to which native Dutch youths are also inclined to displace aggression against other out-groups such as less stigmatized ethnic minority groups (e.g., youths of East Asian descent in the Netherlands) and members of the opposite gender. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine displaced aggression among ethnic minority groups and assess their preferred targets. Finally, future research is needed to identify variables mediating or moderating the link between negative feedback and higher levels of displaced aggression against out-group members. Research with adults suggests that higher levels of aggression toward an out-group may stem in part from perceived conflict with the out-group (Brown, 1984). Previous research has found that once people perceive such conflict, they tend to dehumanize members of the out-group, to perceive their values as different from those of the out-group, and to perceive a strong and impermeable boundary between the in-group and the out-group (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). These factors, in turn, foster increased aggression against the out-group. Another possible candidate is negative affect, in particular anger.

Conclusions

Negative peer feedback can yield substantial levels of displaced aggression. The current research shows that out-group peers (“them”) are more likely than in-group peers (“us”) to be chosen as targets of displaced aggression. It is noteworthy that the provocateurs in our experiment were Dutch youths. Perhaps it would not be too surprising to find that Dutch youths are more likely to displace their aggression against innocent Moroccan peers than against innocent Dutch peers if Moroccan peers would have provoked them first. Yet the Dutch participants in our experiment displaced their aggression against Moroccan peers even though the peers who provoked them were Dutch, not Moroccan. Hence, our findings demonstrate that innocent members of the ethnic out-group served as genuine scapegoats.

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