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The I³ Model: a metatheoretical framework for understanding aggression

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The I³ Model is a general-purpose metatheory. It posits that three orthogonal processes influence the likelihood and intensity of a given behavior, including aggressive behavior. *Instigation* encompasses immediate environmental stimuli (e.g., provocation) that normatively afford an aggressive response. *Impellance* encompasses situational or dispositional qualities (e.g., trait aggressiveness) that influence how strongly the instigator produces a proclivity to enact that response. *Inhibition* encompasses situational or dispositional qualities (e.g., alcohol intoxication) that influence how strongly the proclivity is overridden rather than manifesting in aggressive behavior. Extant evidence supports *Perfect Storm Theory*—a theoretical perspective derived from the I³ Model—which posits that aggression is especially likely, and especially intense, to the extent that instigation and impellance are strong and inhibition is weak.

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On a drunken night in 1947, Arthur Koestler threw a bar glass at Jean-Paul Sartre's head. The two men—both intellectual titans in postwar Europe—had grown increasingly irritated with each other over hours of political debate. But irritation alone was not sufficient to trigger Koestler's violence; as best we can tell, the event that precipitated the bar glass incident was Sartre's attempt to seduce Koestler's wife right there at their shared table [1]. It seems that this perfect storm of forces—Sartre's attempt at seduction, along with the hours of political debate and alcohol consumption that preceded it—combined to produce Koestler's aggressive act. Had any of these forces differed (if they had debated politics over coffee instead of alcohol, for example), the interaction

might have concluded without aggression, even if Sartre had still tried to seduce Koestler's wife.

The I³ Model and aggression

The I³ Model (pronounced 'I-cubed model') is a metatheoretical framework for understanding an individual's behavior regarding a given target object in a particular context, such as Koestler's aggression toward Sartre following the latter's seduction efforts. The model posits that three processes operate to produce behavior: instigation and impellance serve to increase the likelihood or intensity of aggression, whereas inhibition serves to decrease the likelihood or intensity of aggression.

The three processes are akin to forces or vectors—they represent the net strength of all relevant variables at play in a given situation. *Instigation*, for example, represents the net strength of the immediate environmental stimuli that normatively afford a proclivity to aggress [2**]. Such a proclivity is normative in the sense that it is a typical reaction to these stimuli in this context. In postwar Europe, as in most other contexts, witnessing another man try to seduce one's wife normatively renders aggression relevant, at least relative to witnessing the man shake one's wife's hand, for example. Other variables that normatively trigger a proclivity to aggress include social rejection [3–5], physical provocation [6,7*], and verbal provocation [8,9].

Given the importance of subjective construals [10], it is easy to forget that stimuli have objective properties, including how strongly they trigger a proclivity to aggress. Consider a study in which participants rated the offensiveness of a series of verbal statements [11]. Participants achieved reasonably broad consensus that, for example, "Keep trying, you can do better" is less offensive than "I'm kicking your sorry ass." Stimuli that produce consensus ratings of high offensiveness are strong instigators of the proclivity to aggress.

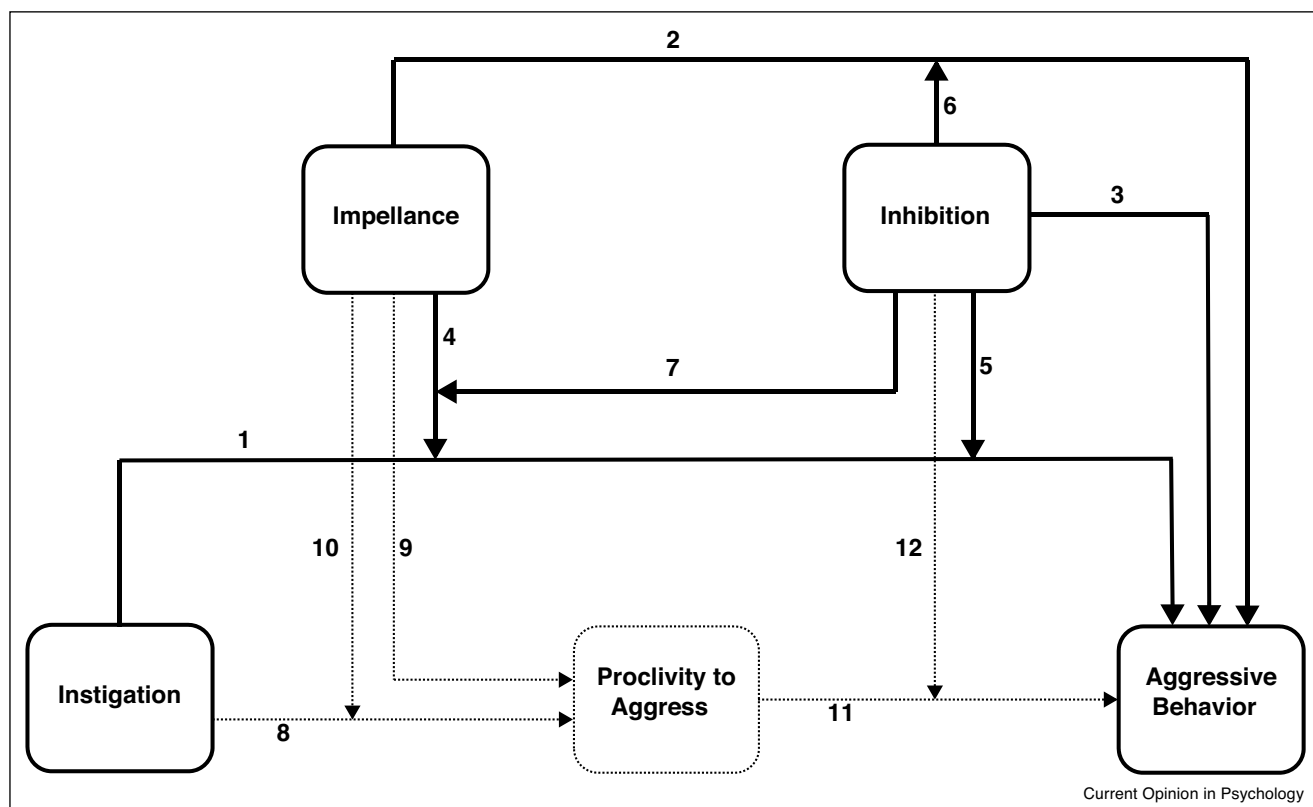
Impellance represents the net strength of situational or dispositional qualities that influence how strongly the instigator, for this individual in this situation, fosters a proclivity to aggress [2**]. It seems likely that Koestler's proclivity to aggress in response to Sartre's efforts at seduction were stronger because of the preceding political disputes than they would have been if the two men had instead spent those hours in convivial revelry. Other variables that contribute to impellance strength include

the dark tetrad of personality variables (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism) [12,13], trait anger and hostile rumination [14,15,16*], and the presence of a weapon [17,18].

Inhibition represents the net strength of situational or dispositional qualities that influence how strongly the proclivity to enact an aggressive response manifests in aggressive behavior—how strongly this individual, in this situation, acts upon the proclivity to aggress rather than inhibiting that proclivity in favor of nonaggressive responding [2]. It seems likely that Koestler's inclination to override his proclivity to aggress against Sartre was weaker than usual because he (Koestler) was drunk rather than sober. Other variables that contribute to inhibition strength include self-control [19,20], frontal lobe functioning [21], and psychological commitment to the relationship with the potential target of the aggressive behavior [22,23].

Figure 1 depicts the associations of Instigation (Path 1), Impellance (Path 2), and Inhibition (Path 3) with aggressive behavior. It also depicts the nine other causal arrows that researchers might wish to investigate in light of the preceding conceptual analysis of the I³ Model. Path 4 represents an instigator × impellor effect, as when the effect of provocation (instigator) on aggression is stronger among people with stronger narcissistic tendencies (impellor) [8]. Path 5 represents an instigator × inhibitor effect, as when the effect of provocation (instigator) on aggression is weaker among people with stronger frontal lobe functioning (inhibitor) [21]. Path 6 represents an impellor × inhibitor effect, as when the association of trait aggressiveness (impellor) on aggression is weaker among people who are sober rather than drunk (inhibitor) [24]. Path 7 represents an instigator × impellor × inhibitor effect, which is the focus of the next section. Paths 8–12 represent the ways in which the model's key mediating process—proclivity to

Figure 1



The I³ Model's 12 paths. Paths 1–7 (solid lines) represent the model's core main and interactive effects, whereas paths 8–12 (dotted lines) represent its mediation effects. Paths 1–3 represent the main effects of instigation, impellance, and inhibition, respectively. Paths 4–6 represent the 2-way interaction effects: instigation × impellance (path 4), instigation × inhibition (path 5), and impellance × inhibition (path 6). Path 7 represents the instigation × impellance × inhibition 3-way interaction effect. Paths 8 and 9 represent the links of instigation and impellance, respectively, with the behavioral proclivity (the mediator). Path 10 represents the moderation of path 8 by impellance. Path 11 represents the link between the behavioral proclivity and the actual enactment of the behavior. Path 12 represents the moderation of path 11 by inhibition. Figure adapted from Finkel [2**].

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