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The weapons effect

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In some societies, weapons are plentiful and highly visible. This review examines recent trends in research on the weapons effect, which is the finding that the mere presence of weapons can prime people to behave aggressively. The General Aggression Model provides a theoretical framework to explain why the weapons effect occurs. This model postulates that exposure to weapons increases aggressive thoughts and hostile appraisals, thus explaining why weapons facilitate aggressive behavior. Data from meta-analytic reviews are consistent with the General Aggression Model. These findings have important practical as well as theoretical implications. They suggest that the link between weapons and aggression is very strong in semantic memory, and that merely seeing a weapon can make people more aggressive.

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About 50 years ago, Berkowitz and LePage coined the term ‘weapons effect’ when they found that the mere presence of weapons increased aggression, especially in angered participants [1**]. In their seminal experiment, male college students were tested in pairs, one of whom was an accomplice posing as a participant. Participants were led to believe that they were rating each other’s performance on a task (*e.g.*, listing ideas a used car salesperson might use to sell more cars). The ‘evaluations’ were the number of unpleasant electrical shocks given to the partner. First, the accomplice evaluated the participant’s performance by using either one shock (low provocation condition) or seven shocks (high provocation condition). Next, the participant ‘evaluated’ the

accomplice’s performance. The number of electrical shocks the participant chose for the accomplice was used to measure aggression, which is behavior intended to harm another person. The participant was seated at a table that had a rifle and a handgun on it, or badminton racquets and shuttlecocks. The items on the table were described as part of another study that another experimenter had supposedly forgotten to put away. There was also a control condition with no items on the table. The experimenter told participants to ignore the items on the table, but apparently they could not. Provoked participants who saw the guns were the most aggressive.

This article examines the state of weapons effect research since that initial experiment, examining not only research on aggressive behavior, but also research on aggressive cognitive and hostile appraisals. It uses the General Aggression Model [2**] as a theoretical framework to explain the findings from weapons effect studies.

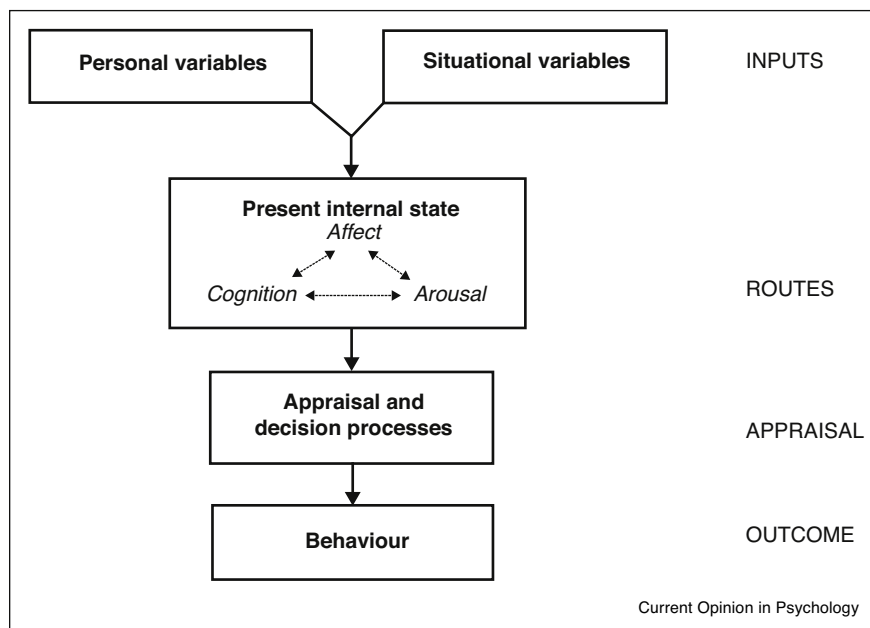
General Aggression Model

The General Aggression Model provides the theoretical basis of this research [2**]. According to the General Aggression Model, personal and situational factors influence one’s internal state, which can include aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and physiological arousal levels (see Figure 1). Thus, there are three possible routes to aggression—through aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and physiological arousal. However, these routes are not mutually exclusive or even independent, as indicated by the bidirectional lines in Figure 1. For example, someone who has aggressive ideas might also feel angry and have elevated blood pressure. These internal states, in turn, can influence appraisal and decision processes. First, there is an immediate initial appraisal of whether the situation is dangerous, threatening, or warrants aggression. This initial appraisal might lead directly to an automatic or impulsive behavior, or it might lead to a reappraisal. If the initial appraisal is judged to be unsatisfactory and if the person has sufficient time and cognitive resources, secondary appraisal or reappraisal occurs [3]. For example, someone primed by aggressive stimuli might be more prone to misperceive others’ actions as hostile, or misidentify objects as weapons. These appraisal and decision processes can influence subsequent behavior. In the following, we focus on how weapons can prime aggressive cognition and hostile appraisals, which can lead to aggressive behavior.

Aggressive cognition

In the 1990s, attention turned to the processes underlying the weapons effect. The first process considered was the

Figure 1



The General Aggression Model [2^{**},29].

priming of aggressive thoughts. The first article published on this topic described the results from two experiments [4^{*}]. In the first experiment, participants saw stimulus words paired with target words. The stimulus words were either weapons (*e.g.*, *shotgun*, *machete*) or animals (*e.g.*, *rabbit*, *bird*), and the target words were either aggressive (*e.g.*, *attack*, *shoot*) or nonaggressive (*e.g.*, *listen*, *rent*). Participants read each target word aloud into a microphone. Results showed that reading times for the aggressive target words were significantly faster when the aggressive target words were paired with weapon-related words than when they were paired with animal-related words. The second experiment replicated the findings of the first experiment, except that pictures of weapons (guns, swords, or clubs) or neutral objects (trees, flowers, or fruits) were used as primes instead of words. These initial experiments have been replicated in later studies [5,6].

Several other experiments have demonstrated the robustness of the priming of aggressive thoughts using weapons. We give three additional examples, although there are many more. In one experiment, participants were exposed to picture–word pairs. The picture in each pair was an alcohol prime (*e.g.*, beer bottle, martini glass), a weapon prime (*e.g.*, gun, knife), or a neutral prime (*e.g.*, plants). The target word was an aggressive word, a non-aggressive word, or a non-word. Participants determined as quickly as possible if the second item in each pair was a real word or a non-word, a procedure called a lexical decision task. The researchers found that participants

responded significantly faster to aggressive words than nonaggressive words when primed with weapon and alcohol pictures [7]. In a subsequent experiment conducted in France, participants were exposed to photo–word pairs. The photo in each pair was a weapon prime (*e.g.*, gun, knife), an alcohol bottle prime (*e.g.*, beer, whiskey), or a nonalcoholic bottle prime (*e.g.*, sparkling water, orange juice). The target word was an aggressive word (*e.g.*, *kill*, *assault*), a neutral word (*e.g.*, *glide*, *suggest*), or a non-word (*e.g.*, *sritter*, *marfle*). In the lexical decision task, participants determined as quickly as possible if the second item in each pair was a word or a non-word. The researchers found that reaction times to aggressive words were relative faster than reaction times to neutral words when primed with weapon-related photos and alcohol-related photos than when primed with neutral photos [8^{*}], thus replicating the findings of the US experiment [7]. Finally, a recent experiment conducted in China found evidence of a weapons priming effect in a sample of children [9^{*}]. Children between the ages of 9 and 13 were exposed to photo–word pairs. The photos were weapon images (guns, knives) or neutral images (animals, plants). The target words in each pair were aggressive (*e.g.*, *destroy*, *hurt*) or nonaggressive (*e.g.*, *leave*, *listen*). Participants were instructed to look at each photo and then to determine if each target word was aggressive or nonaggressive by pressing one of two keys on a keyboard. Participants were significantly faster at correctly identifying aggressive words when primed with weapon images than when primed with neutral images. No such

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