



The behavioral approach and inhibition systems' role in shaping the displaced and direct aggressive reaction to ostracism and rejection



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ABSTRACT

The effect of rejection and ostracism, losing or failing to achieve the interpersonal belonging respectively, on aggressive behavior was already verified in multiple researches. In many cases people aggress more, when they are excluded, however the moderating role of temperament for the effect is not well established. In two studies participants first completed Carver and White's BIS/BAS questionnaire. Next, in Study 1 participants were ostracized or included in an online game and given the chance to be aggressive toward another individual not involved in an exclusion episode by setting the intensity of noise in a different online game. In Study 2 individuals were rejected or accepted by their study partner and completed a job evaluation form for the peer as a measure of aggression. In line with hypothesis, higher BAS drive led to more displaced aggression after exclusion and higher BIS restrained retaliatory aggression after rejection. Inhibition was also related to more displaced aggression independent of experimental conditions. Results were discussed in light of the Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory.

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1. Introduction

Aggressive behavior, according to Anderson and Bushman (2002) is an act toward another individual executed with an intention to harm the other person. What is also important, the perpetrator must believe that the behavior will harm the target and that the target is motivated to avoid the harm. Aggression has different causes, but often it is provoked. Provocation is a situation that is stressful or aversive (e.g. Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). In some cases the operating aversive stimuli is administrated or caused by another person. Aggression that follows such provocation may be directed toward the original provocateur (direct aggression) but also a person that is provoked may be unwilling or unable to retaliate and subsequently behaves aggressively toward an innocent target. Displaced aggression is thus defined as an aggressive behavior that is directed against a target other than the initial source of the provocation (Dollard et al., 1939; Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000; Vasquez, Denson, Pedersen, Stenstrom, & Miller, 2005). Since Dollard et al. (1939) frustration–aggression theory, developed further by Berkowitz, 1989, the blockage of a goal that is important for the individual is recognized as a possible instigator of direct but also displaced aggression. In our studies we are interested in ostracism and rejection – a situation that frustrates both the basic need to belong as well as

the need to feel control over the environment (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009) and subsequently lead to increased aggression (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). We also focus on the moderating role of the individual differences in the Behavioral Activation and Inhibition Systems (BAS/BAS) strength (Carver & White, 1994), as we suspect that these temperamental features may differently influence the exclusion–aggression relationship.

1.1. The behavioral activation and inhibition systems

Individual differences in the strength of the behavioral approach (activation) and avoidance (inhibition) systems (BAS/BIS) might affect direct, but possibly also displaced, aggressive responses to rejection and exclusion. The behavioral activation system (BAS; Fowles, 1988) underlies the engagement of behavior, approach motivation, and behavior in the presence of cues for reward. On the other hand the BIS (Fowles, 1988) lies at the base of avoidance motivation and inhibition of behavior in the presence of cues for threat or punishment. In Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST, Gray & McNaughton, 2003; Corr & Perkins, 2006) – a revision of Gray's (1990) original theory – a third system was also distinguished, namely the fight/flight/freeze system (FFFS) related to the emotion of fear in the presence of aversive stimuli (threats) in contrast to BIS that generates the emotion of anxiety in the presence of punishment or conflicts between other systems (e.g., approach vs. avoidance). Nevertheless there is still a debate whether BIS and FFFS can be separated (Pickering, 1997).

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Regarding BAS and BIS it was established that there are broad individual differences in their activation (Carver & White, 1994). High BAS strength was related to extraversion, impulsivity, novelty seeking, and positive affectivity (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2008; Revelle, 1995; Müller & Wytykowska, 2005), while BIS was linked to negative affect, neuroticism, state and trait anxiety, low effortful control and high emotional reactivity (Anett & Newman, 2000; Müller & Wytykowska, 2005). In particular it has been shown that individual differences in behavioral approach sensitivity are related to state and trait anger (Carver, 2004; Harmon-Jones, 2003; Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Furthermore, results showed that mostly the BAS Drive (BASD) Scale that reflects the persistent pursuit of goals was related to more anger experience (Smits & Kuppens, 2005; Cooper, Gomez, & Buck, 2008). It was argued that the appraisal of goal blocking (frustration) is an important determinant of anger (Berkowitz, 2012). High BASD individuals tend to pursue their goals harder than others, which results in encounters with more goal obstacles and therefore more anger experience (Smits & Kuppens, 2005). The action tendency accompanying anger is antagonism – the outward expression of anger which can result in aggression (Averill, 1983; Berkowitz, 1993). The behavioral approach system was related to an anger-out coping technique (Smits & Kuppens, 2005; Cooper et al., 2008) as well as with offensive aggression, aggressive inclinations, reactive (aggression as a response to provocation), proactive (instrumental, organized and “cold-blooded” aggression) and relational aggression (harming the social status of another individual, for example by excluding from a group), and physical and verbal aggression (Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001; Harmon-Jones, 2003; Harmon-Jones & Peterson, 2008; Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012; Cooper et al., 2008; Smits & Kuppens, 2005). In contrast, BIS was negatively related to aggressive reactions in the same studies. All studies cited above used declarative measures of aggression, however the study by Seibert, Miller, Pryor, Reidy, and Zeichner (2010) showed that individuals with high BASD, but not BIS were also more aggressive in Response Choice Aggression Paradigm (RCAP, Zeichner, Frey, Parrott, & Butryn, 1999; Taylor, 1967) designed to assess direct physical aggression via electrical shock in a laboratory setting.

In our studies we were also interested in experimentally induced and laboratory measured aggressive behavior. What is more, we wanted to explore two facets of aggression: direct (retaliation toward the rejecting agent), and also displaced aggression, directed at an innocent target in the context of previous exclusion. There are only two studies that we are aware of that deal to some extent with this problem. In the first study the relation between BIS/BAS and trait-displaced aggression was explored (Denson, Pedersen, & Miller, 2006). The study shows that behavioral inhibition but not approach is positively related to displaced aggression because only high BIS individuals are able to hold the immediate reaction to provocation and shift the aggression against some other target. In the second study (Wingrove & Bond, 1998) the effect of BAS and BIS on displaced aggression after provocation was examined. Sending negative feedback to the partner (a measure of aggression) was negatively correlated with scores on the BIS. Scores on the BASD Scale were positively correlated with aggression even if the provocation was not the fault of the partner. It was suggested that high BASD individuals were more aroused and thus their cognitive processes that inhibit aggression were less available.

1.2. Interpersonal exclusion and aggressive behavior

Rejection is a social situation in which an individual, who is a part of a group, realizes that he or she will no longer belong to this group, will be an outcast. It is explicit, active and direct. On the other hand exclusion and particularly ostracism resembles a situation in which someone is kept outside a group, to which he or she wants to belong. It is implicit, passive and indirect (Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009). Those two situations have one common feature: ‘Need to belong is a powerful motivational base for interpersonal behavior and it is

thwarted by social exclusion and rejection’ (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007, p. 506). Exclusion results in changes at the neuropsychological, emotional and cognitive levels (Williams, 2007). Being ignored or excluded derogates self-esteem, reduces the global perception of life as meaningful and feelings of being in control, causes emotional numbness and decreases cognitive functioning (Stillman et al., 2009; DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002).

Being socially excluded or rejected has also destructive behavioral consequences, such as increased aggressive behavior (for a review see Baumeister et al., 2007; Leary et al., 2006), that could be direct or displaced (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; DeWall, Twenge, Bushman, Im, & Williams, 2010). What is more, the effect of social rejection and exclusion on aggression is moderated by individual differences. Participants who score highly on measures of narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2003) or are characterized by a more hostile cognitive bias (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009) behave more aggressively toward someone, who excluded or rejected them, than those with lower levels of these features.

However, it was shown that exclusion and rejection may also differ in their effects. Being accepted before rejection has more detrimental effects on behavior than constant exclusion (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). Manner, Baumeister, Tanner & Shaler explored the risk and rewards expected in further contact after exclusion and concluded that behavior after threats to belonging depend on the possibility of rebuilding the social connection. Research by Molden et al. (2009) based on extended research program by Higgins on motivational concerns with security versus advancement (Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008) indicated that different experiences of exclusion might bear specific consequences. Rejection is experienced as a “loss of social connection” and diminished standing in a current social relationship, while ostracism evokes distress related mostly to the “clear absence of positive feedback” and experience of failure to gain social connection (Molden et al., 2009, p. 417). Molden et al. (2009) further argue that concerns with loss evoke motivations for safety (avoidance of negative outcomes, enhanced vigilance) and feelings of failure to obtain gains evoke motivation for growth and advancement (avoiding the absence of positive outcomes, enhanced eagerness). In four studies they verify this assumption and show that rejection leads to more prevention-focused responses such as withdrawal from social contact, and thoughts about one’s past actions, while exclusion produces a sense of failure to achieve social gain and leads to more promotion-focused responses such as re-engagement in social reactions and thoughts about future actions. Exclusion might be then seen as a kind of a loss of social reward (in the form of being included) fostering approach motivation, while rejection encompasses the aspects of punishment and increases avoidance motivation.

In light of such findings we wondered whether BIS/BAS strength would explain possible variability in direct and displaced aggressive reactions to exclusion and rejection, as BIS strength reflects sensitivity to punishment and BAS strength is associated with reward sensitivity (e.g. Corr, 2004).

There were no studies on temperamental features in context of exclusion and aggression and also very little number of studies investigated the influence of BIS and BAS strength on direct and displaced aggressive behavior in laboratory setting. Since high BIS people are more sensitive to punishment and high BAS (especially BAS drive) individuals are more responsive to frustration, we supposed that there might be differences in their behavioral reactions to events that are perceived as punishing (aversive) or rewarding (appetitive). Exclusion and rejection bear features of such events. Ostracism is a situation in which someone is deprived of the reward of a relationship, of being connected to others, of taking part in a social activity that gives pleasure rather than punishment. Rejection on the other hand has more features of punishment, because someone is being denied of the relationship as a consequence of a particular feature that is usually internal (related to

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