

The moderating effect of trigger intensity on triggered displaced aggression[☆]

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Abstract

Many instances of aggression result in excessive retaliation in response to a seemingly trivial triggering event. The triggered displaced aggression paradigm (TDA; Miller, Pedersen, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003) provides an experimental vehicle for exploring such occurrences. Participants were either provoked or not and were subsequently exposed to a neutral, mild, or moderately strong triggering event from a second bogus participant. Consistent with TDA theory (Miller et al., 2003), disjunctively escalated aggressive behavior occurred only among previously provoked participants when responding to the mild triggering event, but not the moderately strong or neutral trigger. Independent of provocation, the neutral triggering event elicited very low levels of aggression, whereas the moderately strong trigger elicited moderate levels of aggression. Implications for instances of real world aggression are discussed.

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Introduction

Displaced aggression occurs when a person is provoked, is prevented from retaliating against the original provocateur, and subsequently aggresses against a seemingly innocent target (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; Hovland & Sears, 1940; Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). For instance, a man insults his wife for no apparent reason after having been berated previously by his boss. In this case, the target has provided no justification or instigation to warrant a retaliatory response from the aggressor.

Of greater theoretical and ecological interest is *triggered* displaced aggression (TDA; Miller et al., 2003; Pedersen, Gonzales, & Miller, 2000). In the TDA paradigm, participants are exposed to an initial Time 1 provocation under conditions that preclude retaliation against the provocateur. At Time 2, a second, usually trivial and ambiguous triggering event is presented as an instigation to aggress. Aggression directed toward the source of this Time 2 triggering event can disjunctively exceed the independent additive effects of the Time 1 provocation and Time 2 trigger (Pedersen et al., 2000). For instance, the same man who is berated by his boss and later severely physically abuses his wife in response to her query about why he did not mow the lawn anecdotally illustrates the disjunctive escalation of aggression that can be seen in triggered displaced aggression.

Recently, Miller et al. (2003) have suggested that the intensity of the Time 2 trigger is of theoretical importance. Specifically, compared to participants exposed to

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a moderately strong trigger or no trigger at all, only previously provoked participants exposed to a relatively mild triggering event should display disjunctively escalated displaced aggression. There are two reasons for this. First, consistent with the cognitive neoassociationist model of aggression (CNA; Berkowitz, 1993) and the more recent general aggression model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002), provocation primes aggression related cognition, affect, and arousal, such that negative features of subsequent events are likely to be made highly salient to provoked individuals relative to unprovoked individuals. Indeed, participants simply primed with aggressive constructs interpret ambiguous situations in a more aggressive manner than control participants (for a review see Todorov & Bargh, 2002). Second, mild triggering events are susceptible to attributional distortion whereas strong triggers are always highly salient and unambiguously perceived as provocations in and of themselves. Thus, strong triggering events lend themselves to the tit-for-tat “matching rule” (Axelrod, 1984) and norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) whereas mild triggers are ambiguous and leave room for biased interpretation as a result of prior provocation.

To date, only five published aggression studies have orthogonally manipulated both a Time 1 provocation and Time 2 triggering event (Baron, 1972; Baron & Bell, 1975; Pedersen et al., 2000, Studies 1 & 2; Worchel, 1966). Although the three earlier studies failed to find disjunctive escalation (Baron, 1972; Baron & Bell, 1975; Worchel, 1966), two more recent studies did find the expected interaction (Pedersen et al., 2000; studies 1 and 2). In the first three studies the intensity of the Time 2 trigger matched or exceeded the intensity of the Time 1 provocation. For instance, in Worchel (1966) students in a psychology course were told by a graduate teaching assistant that the entire class would be subjected to a pop quiz (Time 1 provocation). Subsequently, they were interrupted and insulted by the course instructor as they completed a bogus intelligence test (Time 2 triggering event). Clearly, the Time 2 triggering event was not trivial. More likely is that it was of similar if not greater intensity than the Time 1 provocation. Although a slight increase in aggression did occur relative to the Time 1 provocation only condition, not even additive effects were obtained.

In two studies by Baron (1972) and Baron and Bell (1975) the Time 1 provocation entailed spending the experimental session in a very hot room (91.1–95.5 °F). In both studies, the Time 2 triggering events were neither mild nor ambiguous. In the Baron (1972) study, triggered participants received nine electric shocks and a negative task evaluation. In Baron and Bell (1975), participants were triggered by an experimental confederate who, in a written statement, insulted the participant. Interestingly, in both studies participants who

were in both the hot room and trigger conditions, reacted with decreased aggression compared to participants who received the trigger in a cooler (74–75 °) room.

Pedersen et al. (2000), however, employed a mild Time 2 triggering event. In these two studies, the predicted interaction between the Time 1 provocation and Time 2 trigger was observed such that previously provoked participants exposed to the mild trigger displayed greater disjunctively escalated displaced aggression than participants who were not provoked, exceeding the independent additive effects of the Time 1 provocation and Time 2 trigger. In Study 1, the experimenter insulted participants on their (poor) performance on a difficult anagram task (Time 1 provocation) or not (no provocation control condition). Participants then performed a second trivia game task that was presented to them by either an annoying and incompetent research assistant (Time 2 trigger) or a competent research assistant (no trigger control condition). Participants were then given the opportunity to evaluate the research assistant. Participants evaluated the research assistant negatively only when they had previously been provoked. In Study 2, an experimenter provoked participants by telling them to speak louder in a contemptuous and irritated tone of voice during the same difficult anagram task used in Study 1. A second (bogus) participant then informed the participants in writing that their performance on the anagram task could have been “somewhat stronger” (Time 2 trigger) or were given a neutral evaluation (no trigger control). Participants were then asked to evaluate the bogus participant for a coveted research position job. The same pattern of results as observed in Study 1 were obtained. Thus, despite the distinctly different experimental manipulations of triggering events in these two studies, participants exhibited disjunctively escalated aggression in the presence of a mild triggering event only when previously provoked. The mild trigger by itself did not affect displaced aggression.

The current research

The between-study differences in outcomes that we have described suggest that within the TDA paradigm, mild triggers are more likely to elicit disjunctive escalation of aggression than are strong triggering events. Thus, in the research we report herein, our primary purpose was to investigate the effects of differences in intensity of triggering events on displaced aggression within a single study. Half of the participants were exposed to a Time 1 provocation and half were not provoked. Participants were then exposed to either a moderately strong trigger, mild trigger, or neutral trigger. We expected differences in trigger intensity to moderate the interaction between the Time 1 provocation and Time 2 triggering event, yielding a disjunctive

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