

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Child Abuse & Neglect



The benefits of aggressive traits: A study with current and former street children in Burundi



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 July 2013

Received in revised form

15 November 2013

Accepted 2 December 2013

Available online 7 January 2014

Keywords:

Burundi

Violent behavior

Resilience against PTSD

Street children

Reactive aggression

Appetitive aggression

ABSTRACT

Aggressive behavior in children and youths is commonly associated with exposure to violence and maltreatment. Consequently, aggressive behavior has often been explained as a form of reactive behavior in response to violence-inflicted mental suffering. However, perpetrating violence can become appealing, fascinating and exciting, i.e., may acquire appetitive, self-rewarding aspects. We postulated that this appetitive form of aggression reduces the vulnerability for developing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in insecure and violent environments. Furthermore we investigated the extent to which reactive aggression and appetitive aggression account for recent violent behavior in children and youths. We conducted semi-structured interviews in a sample of 112 children and youths ($M_{age} = 15.9$ years) recruited from the streets, families and a residential center for vulnerable children in Burundi. We investigated the cumulative exposure to traumatic events and to domestic and community violence, assessed the recently committed offenses, the severity of PTSD symptoms, and the potential for reactive and appetitive aggression. Reactive aggression was positively related to PTSD, whilst appetitive aggression was negatively related to PTSD. Children higher in appetitive aggression were also more likely to display violent behavior. These results suggest that an appetitive perception of violence may be an useful adaption to insecure and violent living conditions reducing the vulnerability of children for trauma-related mental disorders. However, positive feelings experienced through violent or cruel behavior are also an important risk factor for ongoing aggressive behavior and therefore need to be considered in prevention strategies.

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Introduction

In Bujumbura street children call themselves “abatimbayi”. [...] That means “persons who support everything, who are not afraid of anything, persons with cold blood.”

Translation by the authors; [Nsengiyumva, 2010, p. 6](#)

Fifty years ago, [Curtis \(1963, p. 386\)](#) expressed the concern that “abused and neglected children would become tomorrow’s murderers and perpetrators of other crimes of violence”. Since that time, substantial evidence has accumulated demonstrating that experiencing violence is related to expressing violence (e.g., [Elbert, Rockstroh, Kolassa, Schauer, & Neuner, 2006](#);

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Weaver, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2008). In the Western countries, a large proportion of homicide offenders come from unfavorable home environments and up to 80% of subjects within delinquent samples report exposure to violent acts during their childhood or adolescence. Commonly, it is assumed that the subsequent aggressiveness results as a direct reaction from an explosive, uncontrolled and impulsive response to perceived threats or provocations in the environment. The underlying emotions of this reactive or relieving form of aggression are fear, anxiety and anger. The fundamental function of this type of aggression is to alleviate the tension and discomfort experienced with these emotions, and to eliminate or reduce the perceived danger or damage (Fontaine, 2007; Kempes, Matthys, de Vries, & van Engeland, 2005; Weierstall & Elbert, 2012).

However, it has become increasingly obvious that perpetration of violence is experienced very differently than exposure to violence and is not necessarily linked to a purely aversive emotional state. Deliberately aggressive thoughts and behavior can be intrinsically rewarding (Elbert, Weierstall, & Schauer, 2010). In fact studies with former child soldiers, combatants, and genocide offenders have revealed that the perpetration of violence is often experienced as exciting, appealing, and fascinating (e.g., Weierstall, Bueno Castellanos, Neuner, & Elbert, 2013; Weierstall, Schaal, Schalinski, & Elbert, 2011). Many offenders reported the development of *appetitive aggression*, i.e., the perpetration of violence and/or the infliction of harm upon a victim for the purpose of experiencing violence-related enjoyment. This appetite for aggression can even result in risk-seeking behavior, which motivates individuals to look for opportunities to act out violently. Growing up in a culture of cruelty may strongly imprint and alter neurophysiological pathways of processing violent cues and emotional responses in former child soldiers, even years after returning to a peaceful society (Elbert et al., 2006, 2010). In the insecure and dangerous environment of combat, appetitive aggression seems to constitute a potential adaptation enabling individuals to cope with violence and atrocities around them. As recent studies indicate, individuals capable of engaging in higher levels of appetitive aggression were more resilient against developing symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This protective factor can counter only a certain load of exposure to traumatic stressors. When exposure becomes too severe, even individuals with a high level of appetitive aggression will suffer from PTSD (Hecker, Hermenau, Maedl, Hinkel, et al., 2013; Hecker, Hermenau, Maedl, Schauer, & Elbert, 2013; Weierstall et al., 2013, 2011; Weierstall, Schalinski, Crombach, Hecker, & Elbert, 2012).

So far studies assessing appetitive aggression have focused almost exclusively on male populations that were heavily involved in the perpetration of violence. The majority of the participants were ex-combatants and had severely injured at least one other individual and many had even frequently killed or tortured. They were all adults at the time of the investigation. We assume, however, that the development of appetitive aggression is not limited to these extreme populations but is also present in less dangerous and violent environments. An insecure and violent environment not only provokes reactive aggression but also seems to foster a trait for appetitive aggression. Becoming a perpetrator instead of a victim, winning fights and thereby regaining a feeling of control in insecure and dangerous living conditions such as in the streets, could be the prerequisite for the activation of this trait. Feelings of power, control, and effectiveness in violent situations lead to the enjoyment of violence and a craving for more.

In this study we want to test if the development of appetitive aggression in children and adolescents growing up in insecure environments strengthens their resilience against PTSD. We also wanted to assess the positive emotions toward aggression and their role in maintaining violent behavior. As physical violence is more common in males, and appetitive aggression has only been assessed so far in male combatants, we focused in this study on boys and young men (Elbert et al., 2010).

Reactive aggression has been consistently linked to PTSD. Research suggests that this is due to the emotional dysregulation, i.e., the diminished emotional control, affective instability, and impulsive angry reactions that is associated with PTSD (Marsee, 2008). Furthermore the ability to adequately process social information seems to be diminished in individuals affected by trauma-related mental disorders. Everyday cues are more often perceived as threatening, hence leading to fearful and angry reactions (Ford, 2002). In children and adolescents evidence for this relation has been provided by several studies showing that effects of experienced violence during childhood on aggressive behavior were amplified by the presence of PTSD symptoms (Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, & Reebye, 2006; Wood, Foy, Layne, Pynoos, & Boyd, 2002) and that children who had experienced traumatic incidences reported more reactive aggression than children without traumatic life events (Connor, Doerfler, Volungis, Steingard, & Melloni, 2003). Moreover, regular exposure to violence at home, in school or anywhere else in the community amplifies not only PTSD symptoms but also the probability of aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (Flannery, Wester, & Singer, 2004; Shields & Cicchetti, 1998, 2001; Turnera, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006).

For the assessment of our hypotheses we decided to study male children and adolescents growing up in the post-conflict country Burundi, which is situated in Eastern Africa. In 2006 a civil war that shook the whole country for 13 years ended. Today, the population still suffers from its consequences (e.g., severe poverty, violence in daily life). Constant feelings of insecurity arise from lack of food and politically motivated killings. The latter are often committed on a communal level by ordinary people (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In the Burundian culture violence is widely accepted as a means of punishment for thieves or as a means of authority in educational matters. Children risk being punished by beating every day in school, at home, or on the streets (Sommer, 2013).

Although the vast majority of children and adolescents in Burundi have been exposed to violence, war events, and insecurity (Jordans, Tol, Komproe, Susanty, & Vallipuram, 2010; Warf, Eisenstein, & Stahl, 2009), we aimed to include children from different backgrounds to ensure sufficient variance in both exposure to violence and the committing of violence for the scientific questions of our enquiry. Hence, we included children and adolescents growing up in families with different

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