



Shaping aggressive personality in adolescence: Exploring cross-lagged relations between aggressive thoughts, aggressive behaviour and self-control



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ABSTRACT

Aggressive ideations can be defined as thoughts, daydreams or fantasies of harming another. They feature in theoretical models of aggressive behaviour causation and are used in violence risk assessments. Little is known, however, about long term relations between aggressive ideations, aggressive behaviour and related variables such as self-control. We examined cross-lagged associations between these variables in the most recent two waves of the Zurich project on social development (z-proso) when the participants were aged 15 and 17. We found that aggressive ideations were highly stable across this time span. The only significant cross-lagged effects were between aggressive behaviour at age 15 and self-control and aggressive ideations at age 17. Results are consistent with the strength model of self-control in which changes in specific self-controlled behaviour can produce generalised changes in self-control. They are also consistent with the hypothesis that aggressive ideations are more a reaction to or a reflection of shared causes with, rather than a cause of, aggressive behaviour. Future studies should aim to integrate measurements across short and long time scales in order to further understand the causal interactions between aggressive ideations and behaviours as they play out across at the state and trait level.

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Given the significant human and societal costs of violence and aggression, considerable importance is placed on judging if and when an individual is at risk of behaving aggressively (e.g. Fazel, Singh, Doll, & Grann, 2012). Identifying predictors of aggression also facilitates the development of theoretical models of its causation. In both contexts, there is interest in aggressive ideations as possible red flags or causal antecedents of corresponding behaviours (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Constantinou, Freestone, Marsh, & Coid, 2015; Grisso, Davis, Vesselinov, Appelbaum, & Monahan, 2000). However, little is known about how aggressive ideations are related to the tendency to behave aggressively, particularly over longer time spans. In this study we explore, from a trait perspective, the extent and nature of interactions between aggressive thoughts, behaviours and an important risk factor for the latter: self-control.

Previous studies concerned with aggressive ideations have utilised variable and usually implicit conceptualisations, therefore, we here begin by defining them as thoughts, daydreams or fantasies of harming another individual, where harm includes both physical and non-physical harm but excludes sexual aggression (see Murray, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2016a). Examples of non-physical harm include humiliation, verbal abuse or bullying. We distinguish aggressive ideations from intentions to inflict harm and from aggressive delusions or hallucinations.

Otherwise, we use aggressive ideations as a general term that encompasses more specific cognitions such as anger ruminations (e.g. Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001) or homicidal ideations (e.g. Kenrick & Sheets, 1993). We note, however, that when discussing past research, variations on this definition may have – explicitly or otherwise – been used.

A positive association between aggressive thoughts and aggressive behaviour is reasonably well-established (Daff, Gilbert, & Daffern, 2015; Gilbert, Daffern, Talevski, & Ogloff, 2013; Kenrick & Sheets, 1993; Nagtegaal, Rassin, & Muris, 2006). The majority of this evidence is, however, based on concurrent assessments of the aggressive thoughts and past or present behaviour and thus has limited ability to speak to long-term causal relations. Understanding long-term causal relations is important because human aggression is not a purely state-like phenomenon; rather, it shows considerable rank-order stability over time (e.g. Tuvblad, Raine, Zheng, & Baker, 2009) and processes related to its expression play out over both short and long time scales (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Several theoretical perspectives propose long-term causal relations between aggressive ideations and aggressive behaviour (e.g. Duntley & Buss, 2005; Huesmann, 1988). In the general aggression model, for example, aggressive ideations can be thought of as the rehearsal, elaboration and integration of aggressive scripts into memory: a process which increases the likelihood of their later preferential reactivation and of aggressive behaviour (Huesmann, 1988; Grisso et al., 2000; Watt, Kohphet, Oberin, & Keating, 2013). This predicts that changes in

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the tendency to experience aggressive thoughts should precede changes in the tendency to behave aggressively. On the other hand, it has been suggested that engaging in aggressive behaviour could provide the fuel and content for future aggressive ideations (e.g. Gellerman & Suddath, 2005); a hypothesis that predicts exactly the opposite. Aggressive thought-behaviour associations do not, however, necessarily reflect directional causal influences and could be due to a common cause or set of common causes that influence both aggressive thoughts and behaviour e.g. an underlying 'aggressive personality' or other stable situational risk factors (e.g. Ferguson & Dyck, 2012).

The relation between aggressive thoughts and aggressive behaviour may also involve long-term interactions with other traits related to aggression, for example, both have been linked to self-control. Self-control refers to the capacity to regulate behaviour through effortful control, particularly with regard to the inhibition of prepotent responses and in the service of longer-term goals. Like aggression, while levels of self-control show cross-situation variability, the tendency to exercise it effectively is a relatively stable and enduring trait (e.g. Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008). Trait self-control is related to a range of important outcomes with individuals high in trait self-control tending to enjoy better physical and psychological health, achieving greater educational success, and experiencing better interpersonal relationships (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Moffitt et al., 2011).

Trait self-control has also shown strong links to aggressive behaviour. For example, individual differences in self-control and associated brain regional volumes are related to variation in aggressive behaviour (e.g. Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Yang & Raine, 2009) and conversely, there is evidence that self-control interventions decrease aggression (Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, & Schofield, 2011; Piquero, Jennings, Farrington, & Jennings, 2010). The link has been attributed to high self-control facilitating the inhibition of aggressive behaviours at the points at which urges to aggress arise (Denson, DeWall, & Finkel, 2012).

Experimental studies have found that aggressive ideations may work against the self-control-based inhibition of aggressive impulses. Angry, revengeful thoughts appear to place a strain on an individual that consumes self-control resources and thus compromises the capacity to inhibit aggressive urges (Denson et al., 2011; White & Turner, 2014). Thus, in the short term high self-control may prevent aggressive thoughts from being translated to aggressive actions; however, these same aggressive thoughts can also temporarily erode the capacity for this kind of inhibition.

These short term interactions could engender long term changes in self-control, aggressive ideations and aggressive behaviours. For example, with regard to self-control, a number of studies have suggested that the trait is not only malleable, but can be trained like a muscle (e.g. Muraven, 2010). Evidence from intervention studies has indicated that practising small acts of self-control on a daily basis can increase self-control in a general way (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). It is, therefore, also possible that naturalistic changes in specific self-controlled behaviours — such as inhibiting aggressive urges — could mimic this training effect. Conversely, increases (or decreases) in trait self-control should translate into decreases (or increases) in trait aggression because an individual should be better (or worse) equipped to inhibit aggression over the long term.

Very few empirical studies have been conducted that speak to long-term interactions between aggressive ideations, aggressive behaviour and related variables. A study conducted in psychiatric patient samples found significant relations between aggressive ideations measured during hospitalisation and violent acts within 20 weeks of discharge (Grisso et al., 2000); however, because the analysis did not control for previous levels of aggressive behaviour it was not possible to disentangle the various possibilities regarding direction of causation. No studies have, to our knowledge, examined long term relations between aggressive ideations and aggressive behaviour considering the possible role of

trait self-control. It was, therefore, our aim in the current study to provide an exploration of how these three traits influence over the longer term.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The sample consisted of youths who participated in the most recent two waves of the Zurich study on the Social Development of Children and Youths (z-proso). Z-proso is a longitudinal cohort study focussed on the development, antecedents and consequences of pro- and anti-social behaviours in late childhood and adolescence. A comprehensive description of the study in terms of recruitment, attrition, measures and sample characteristics can be found in prior publications e.g. Eisner and Ribeaud (2007); Ribeaud and Eisner (2010) and on the study website: <http://www.z-proso.ethz.ch/>. In brief, participants were initially invited to participate in 2004 when aged 7 if they attended one of the schools selected for the study based on a stratified random sampling procedure that took into account school size and location. They have been followed-up at regular intervals since with the most recent measurement wave completed in 2015. As being based in Zurich, the sample is ethnically diverse with approximately 70 nationalities represented in the baseline sample. The most common nationalities were Switzerland (38.4%), Italy (8.8%), Serbia-Montenegro (8.7%), Germany (6%) and Portugal (5%). The sample is also diverse in terms of socioeconomic background, for example, (based on the parents from whom data was available) the highest educational levels of male primary caregivers were: 21% mandatory school or less, 35.2% apprenticeship, 7.8% A-levels, 15.5% higher vocational education, and 16% University. In the two waves of data included in the current study, the majorities of individuals were aged 15 and 17 respectively. At these ages, there were 1307 (660 male, 647 female) individuals who contributed data on the constructs of interest for this study. This represents 78% of the original target sample of $N = 1675$.

1.2. Measures

All measures were administered in German, reflecting the official language of Zurich: the study location. English translations of all items used in the study are provided in Table 1. Each measure is described in detail below. Information about the psychometric performance of the items in the current sample is provided in the Results section.

1.3. Aggressive ideations

As a measure of aggressive ideations, we used 4 item tapping thoughts of reactive aggression, instrumental aggression, relational aggression and serious physical aggression (homicide). The first three were presented following a vignette giving an example of the kind of behaviour referred to and were measured on a 4-point scale from 'never' to '(almost) every day'. These items were originally developed as part of a larger judgement and decision-making measure (see Averdijk, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2016) but their content and wording suggests that they capture aggressive ideations, consistent with our above-given definition (Murray et al., 2016a). The serious physical aggression (homicidal) ideation item was presented without vignette and was measured on a five-point scale from 'never' to 'very often'. All items referred to a time period covering the previous month. We examined the psychometric properties of these items in a previous study in the age 17 sample of the current study (Murray et al., 2016a). The vignette-based items correlated with an aggressive ideations latent factor defined by a 12-item aggressive ideation measure between at $r = .48$ and $r = .65$, supporting their concurrent validity. The serious physical aggression item is part of this 12-item measure and had a standardised factor loading in a one-factor confirmatory factor model of the 12 items of .78.

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