Personality and Individual Differences 92 (2016) 135–142

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Direct and indirect aggression tactics as a function of domain-specific self-esteem

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 September 2015
Received in revised form 21 December 2015
Accepted 22 December 2015
Available online 30 December 2015

Keywords:
Aggression
Self-esteem
Indirect aggression
Direct aggression
Mate value

ABSTRACT

Most studies on aggression focus on direct aggression or fail to distinguish between types of aggression tactics. Similarly, the relationship between self-esteem and aggression is not well understood. The present research examines whether certain domains of self-esteem lead people to differentially employ direct and indirect aggression tactics. Overall, our findings suggest that people who are high in competitive types of self-esteem (mate value and dominance) are less likely to endorse indirect aggression or more likely to endorse direct aggression than those low in competitive types of self-esteem. In an online study, we found that men reported more direct aggression in response to provocation than women, while there was no sex difference in indirect aggression responses. Self-perceived mate value negatively predicted indirect aggression in men but positively predicted direct aggression in women. In a second study, experimentally manipulated mate value predicted indirect aggression in women. Furthermore, self-perceived mate value positively predicted direct aggression in women, while dominance predicted direct aggression in men. In Study 3, a replication of Study 2 using an undergraduate sample, we found that manipulated mate value predicted indirect aggression in men and women. We conclude that particular domains of self-esteem may calibrate preferred aggression tactics.

1. Introduction

1.1. Aggression and self-esteem

Aggression and self-esteem (SE) may be the two most studied topics in the history of psychology, yet little is known about the relationship between them (Baumeister & Boden, 1998; Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006). For decades social psychologists have assumed that low SE was associated with aggression (Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002), but empirical evidence for this relationship is mixed (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). In fact, many studies have found that high SE was associated with aggression. In light of this inconsistent evidence, researchers have suggested that no causal relationship exists (Baumeister et al., 1996).

Alternatively, the inconsistent relationships observed between aggression and SE may reflect a theoretical problem with the way SE and aggression have been conceptualized. Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2001) proposed that studying SE as a single, global construct is inherently flawed, as different types of social relationships involve different criteria for judging the quality of potential relationship partners. For example, choosing a mate will require a different set of decision rules than does assessing whether an opponent is formidable. Domain-specific SE theory states that humans evolved multiple self-assessment mechanisms, or *sociometers* (see, Leary & Downs, 1995) in functionally relevant domains such as mate value, social inclusion, and dominance (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002).

Examining domain-specific SE and aggression renders the relationship between SE and aggression less ambiguous. Kirkpatrick et al. (2002) conducted two studies in which they measured participants' global SE and domain-specific SEs and their aggression levels. Whereas global SE was uncorrelated with aggression, self-perceived superiority predicted increased levels of aggression, while self-perceived social inclusion had the opposite effect (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002). Higher levels of self-perceived mate value predicted increased levels of aggression when participants had been assigned to a mate competition induction condition. In a later study, Webster and Kirkpatrick (2006) found, again, that self-perceived mate value was positively predictive of aggression. However, little is known about the role between domain-specific SE and direct and indirect aggression tactics.

Aggression can take a variety of forms, from the hushed whisper of gossip to the violence of a physical assault. However, just as with global SE, studying aggression as a uniform measure overlooks functionally important differences. One such distinction is that between *indirect* and *direct* aggression. While there is currently no single, agreed-upon definition of this construct, for the purposes of this paper direct and indirect aggression are distinguished by whether or not the aggressive acts are witnessed by the target. Direct aggression includes behaviors such as verbal or physical assault and threats of harm. Indirect

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.12.038
0191-8869/

aggression, on the other hand, involves circuitous approaches and includes behaviors such as gossiping and social exclusion (Campbell, 1999). The present research focuses on the domain of intrasexual competition and, therefore, examines only aggression between members of the same sex.

1.2. Indirect and direct aggression

Researchers have consistently found that men use direct aggression more than women, but sex differences in the use of indirect aggression are equivocal. While some studies have found that females use more indirect aggression than men (e.g., Hess & Hagen, 2006), others report no sex difference (e.g., Archer & Coyne, 2005). One reason for the sex difference in direct aggression may be due to the fact that risk of bodily harm, inherent in direct aggression, would have been more costly for ancestral females as they would have been the primary caretakers of offspring. Furthermore, males, more than females, may have benefited from displays of direct aggression by enhancing their status (Campbell, 1999). Thus, direct aggression represents a high-cost and low-reward strategy for women.

Aggression tactics can be situational as well as sex-specific. For example, Griskevicius et al. (2009) found that men were more likely to self-report using direct aggression if competition was primed compared to the control condition, but they did not find this effect for women. Women who were in the competitive or courtship condition reported using more indirect aggression than women in the control condition, while neither condition resulted in men using more indirect aggression.

1.3. Retaliation and aggression tactics

Defining direct and indirect aggression in terms of whether or not the target is aware of the aggressive act underlies a functionally important aspect of aggression: status regulation. Sell, Tooby, and Cosmides (2009) proposed a *recalibration theory* of anger, which states that anger is designed to resolve interpersonal conflicts in favor of the angry person. The anger system tracks one's own and others' *bargaining position* (ability to inflict costs and withhold benefits). Anger motivates the individual to aggress or withhold benefits from the transgressor (Sell, 2011; Sell et al., 2009). Empirical evidence supports the recalibration theory of anger. Individuals who have the ability to inflict costs (i.e., strong individuals) or withhold benefits (i.e. physically attractive individuals) are more likely to both become angry when in a conflict and more likely to win a conflict than those with lower cost-inflicting or resource-withholding abilities (Sell et al., 2009). These findings lead us to hypothesize that those high in certain types of SE (i.e., mate value or dominance) may use direct aggression to signal to others that their status should be valued more highly.

The costs and benefits of direct aggression are not the same for every individual. Those who do not have high status risk further retaliation and injury. Conversely, those with greater cost-inflicting or resource-withholding abilities are likely to obtain greater benefits from their direct aggression (e.g. increased status or dominance and deterrence from future aggression). Therefore, people may use indirect aggression as a retaliatory method when their status is low. While, indirect aggression may not be an effective way to confer status because the target, by definition, does not witness it, those with high status can use direct aggression not only as retaliation, but also as a signal of status that may deter from future maltreatment.

Just as people with greater status may be more easily angered, people may choose different aggression tactics based on certain individual characteristics. We hypothesize that certain specific domains of SE calibrate aggression tactics. Competitive domains of SE such as dominance, mate value, and superiority relate to one's ability to inflict costs (e.g. dominance) and withhold benefits (e.g. mate value). Therefore, just as sex differences in direct aggression are proposed to be due to higher risk incurred by direct aggression for women (i.e., Campbell, 1999), those low in competitive types of SE likely face greater risk than those high in competitive types of SE. On the other hand, those high in competitive types of SE are more likely to benefit from direct aggression than those low in competitive types of SE. Therefore, people should have evolved mechanisms to calibrate their cost-benefit ratio of aggression tactics and regulate their aggression tactic preference accordingly. Specific domains of SE may be one such calibrating factor.

1.4. Sex differences in predicting aggression from domain-specific SE

Different domains of SE may predict aggression tactics differently for men and women. Different traits make men and women attractive to the opposite sex. Specifically, dominance is especially predictive of male reproductive success, whereas physical attractiveness is highly predictive of female reproductive success (e.g., Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001).

However, attractiveness is still predictive of male reproductive success (Buss et al., 2001) and therefore may be useful in predicting male aggression as well. As discussed previously, there is evidence that self-perceived mate value predicts aggression in both laboratory settings and via self-reported measures for both men and women (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002; Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and that mate value was the strongest predictor of direct aggression in men (Archer & Thanzami, 2009). Indeed, Sell et al. (2009) found that men's physical attractiveness predicted their proneness to anger, success in conflict, and feelings of entitlement, although the effect of attractiveness was a much stronger predictor for women. However, Sell et al. (2009) demonstrated that, in men, strength was a more robust predictor of proneness to anger, history of fighting, feelings of entitlement, and success in conflict than was attractiveness. The relationship between domain-specific SE and aggression tactic choice for each sex has yet to be examined.

1.5. The present research

It is important to examine the role of SE separately for each sex because domains of SE have sex differentiated value. Study 1 replicates the methods of Griskevicius et al. (2009) that primed participants with competitive contexts before measuring self-reported direct and indirect aggression. We introduce domain-specific SEs as predictors of these aggression tactics. Studies 2 and 3 were designed to replicate these findings and experimentally test whether relative mate value predicts choice of aggression tactics. In these studies we experimentally manipulate the target's mate value, thus manipulating the level of perceived competition. When confronted by a target with high mate value, participant self-perceived mate value should be lower than the target's; thus, we expect a corresponding shift in aggression tactic preference. If our hypothesis of the role of SE and aggression tactic calibration is correct, relative SE (mate value, in this case) should predict aggression tactics. We also examine the relationship between the other domain-specific SE variables as well as global SE.

In summary, the costs and benefits of aggression are not equal for every individual. We propose that domain specific SE may be an important predictor in individuals' calibration of aggression tactics. Specifically, those with high cost-inflicting and resource-withholding potential (e.g., dominance and mate value) may benefit from utilizing direct aggression. However, for those low in these domains, direct aggression represents a high-risk strategy. Therefore, those who cannot “afford” to use direct aggression may utilize indirect aggression as an alternative strategy.

2. Study 1

Previous research on domain-specific SE and aggression (e.g. Kirkpatrick et al., 2002, Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006) has provided insights into the domains of SE that are predictive of overall aggression. We expand upon Kirkpatrick et al. (2002) and Webster and Kirkpatrick's (2006) SE and aggression research by differentiating two important facets of aggression – direct and