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Everyday Aggression Takes Many Forms

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Abstract

Aggression can take a variety of forms; people hurt one another in a variety of ways. This article summarizes a research program that has examined several questions regarding how people harm one another in their day-to-day lives. The evidence shows that (a) the people that we interact with most frequently (e.g., family members, friends, romantic partners) are the most likely to make us angry; (b) we can hurt people by direct (e.g., physical or verbal attack) or nondirect action (e.g., spreading rumors, giving someone the silent treatment); and (c) the way we hurt people depends on our relationship with them. Whether the harm takes the form of words or blows, aggression is harmful to individuals and to relationships.

Keywords

aggression, anger, retaliation, relationships

Our research group has tried to answer questions that relate to individuals' everyday experience with conflict and aggression. We have been trying to answer questions that you may ask yourself: (a) who is likely to make someone angry; (b) in what ways do people get back at someone who makes them angry; (c) and what characteristics, experiences, or events might affect the way people respond when someone makes them angry?

The response to the first question is that people are most likely to be angered by someone they know relatively well. Although some people do lash out against strangers, most targets of people's anger are those with whom they interact frequently; people's romantic partners, friends, family members, and coworkers are most likely to be the targets of their aggression (D. S. Richardson & Green, 2006). That is why our research program has focused on what we call "everyday aggression." We are trying to discover how and why people hurt one another in day-to-day interactions. Although this type of aggression may not be as dramatic or demand as much attention as more violent or extreme examples of aggression, everyday aggression is experienced by everyone who interacts with other people.

How Do We Hurt One Another?

We should first be clear about what we mean by *aggression*, given that there seems to be considerable misunderstanding about its nature, and the concept of

aggression that guided our research is fairly broad. Aggression involves the intention to hurt someone. Some people confuse assertiveness and aggressiveness, but assertiveness involves openly expressing one's own needs or concerns, not hurting or denying the needs of another person. Similarly, ambitious people are sometimes referred to as aggressive, perhaps because of their focus and energy. But neither assertiveness nor ambition would be consistent with the definition of aggression used in psychological research because they do not involve causing harm to someone.

Baron and Richardson (1994) defined aggression as "any behavior directed toward the goal of harming another living being" (p. 7). That definition has several important components necessary for articulating the nature of aggression as we have defined it in our research:

1. Aggression is a behavior, not a thought, idea, or attitude (in contrast to, e.g., hostility or anger).
2. Aggression is intentional. Accidental harm or harm done in order to help someone (e.g., a nurse giving a shot; a dentist drilling a tooth) would not qualify as aggression.

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3. Aggression involves intention to harm, and that harm may take various forms, as described below.
4. Aggression is directed toward a living being. Breaking a plate or throwing a chair to express general annoyance would not be aggression. Trying to hurt your mother by breaking her prized antique plate or throwing a chair *at* your friend in hopes of hurting him *would* be considered aggression.

Direct and indirect aggression

There are many ways to harm another person. The most obvious form of aggression involves direct physical or verbal attack—striking out with hurtful words or actions. Less obvious forms of aggression are those that are non-direct—those that do not confront the target directly, but in a roundabout way (D. R. Richardson & Green, 1997).

We have discovered the kinds of aggression people use in their day-to-day lives by asking them. The Richardson Conflict Response Questionnaire (RCRQ) asks people to identify how often they use specific behaviors when they are angry with someone. Our first version of the RCRQ distinguished between direct and indirect aggression (D. S. Richardson & Green, 2003). Directly aggressive behaviors (e.g., yelling, hitting) involved confronting another person with hurtful words or actions. Indirectly aggressive behaviors involved attempting to hurt someone by going through another person or object (e.g., spreading rumors, damaging property). The indirect aggression that we assess with the RCRQ is much like other researchers' concept of relational or social aggression, which involves harming someone by disrupting or damaging their relationships (Warren, Richardson, & McQuillin, 2011).

Passive aggression: Another form of nondirect aggression

Students who worked on this research program argued that direct and indirect aggression did not capture some of the behaviors that they or their acquaintances used when they were angry. They gave examples of romantic partners' refusing to answer phone calls or friends' ignoring them—behaviors through which people hurt them by being nonresponsive. So, we added items to the RCRQ to measure this form of aggressive behavior (e.g., giving someone the silent treatment, showing up late). Our research revealed that the students' intuitions were correct: People indicated that they would be more likely to use passive than either direct or indirect aggression in most circumstances (D. S. Richardson & Hammock, 2011). We refer to the various forms of aggression that do

not involve direct confrontation (i.e., indirect, relational, or passive aggression) as *nondirect* forms of aggression.

Who Hurts How?

The participants in our studies have generally reported that they were more likely to use the nondirect strategies than direct aggression when they were angry with someone. However, a person's background, personal characteristics, and experience also relate to the form of aggression that they are most likely to employ.

Does aggressive response vary by gender?

People tend to see men and women as being quite different from one another, even to the point of referring to them as originating on different planets (as in "men are from Mars, women are from Venus"). Notions of maleness and femaleness are similarly mixed up with expectations about how people are likely to respond when they are angry. Some argue that males and females have different conceptions of aggression: Whereas males view aggression as a means of acquiring rewards, females consider aggression as an inappropriate expression of anger (Campbell, Muncer, & Gorman, 1993). Aggressiveness is a central aspect of a definition of masculinity, but women are often stereotyped as relatively weak and nonaggressive, and researchers frequently seek evidence that males are more aggressive than females (D. S. Richardson, 2005; D. S. Richardson & Hammock, 2007).

The findings from the studies in our research program do not support these notions of gender differences in aggression. Males use direct aggression, and especially sexual aggression, more than females do in many contexts. However, males and females do not differ in their reported indirect aggression (Green, Richardson, & Lago, 1996; D. R. Richardson & Green, 1999; Warren et al., 2011). Both males and females report using indirect aggression more often than direct aggression, whether they are eighth graders (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Richardson, 2004), college students (D. R. Richardson & Green, 1999), or older adults (Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2000).

Social connections

The connections among you and the people you know constitute your social network. Some people feel like *everyone* knows what they do because the members of their social network are connected to one another—so news can travel fast. People who have less connected networks can isolate themselves more, so that one

person's knowing something about them does not mean that others know.

Think about how this might affect aggressive action. If you have a very connected network, what you tell one person is likely to travel to others—for instance, your sister talks to your mutual friend, who talks to another friend, who shares that information with a coworker—so, if you are trying to hurt someone by talking behind their back or gossiping about them, you have an easy opportunity to distribute that harm broadly. Social networks with many connections among members thus provide opportunities for indirect aggression through gossiping, creating stories, or spreading rumors among members. If members of a network are not closely connected, then there will be fewer opportunities for these harmful behaviors (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988).

We developed a measure of social networks that asked people to identify the 10 people they interacted with most frequently. Then we asked which of those people knew other people in the network. In this way, we were able to identify how many connections there were among the people in each person's social network; we call this *network density*. The more connections found in the social network, the denser the network.

We found that male college students who reported very dense social networks also reported using indirect aggression more than those who had networks with fewer connections among the members (Green et al., 1996). We also found that males with dense networks reported less direct aggression. Thus, dense networks seem to provide opportunities for indirect aggression, and close connections among members of the network may discourage the more confrontational behaviors of direct aggression.

In a study of aggressive responding among older adults (Walker et al., 2000), we asked respondents also to indicate how well members of their network knew one another, creating an index of *knowingness*. We had predicted that a closely connected network in which people knew one another well would be a good breeding ground for gossip and rumor spreading (i.e., indirect aggression). We were surprised to find that those who had large social networks of people who did not know one another well used more indirect aggression. Perhaps a network of individuals who do not know one another well protects aggressors from being identified and from possible subsequent retaliation from targets of their aggression while simultaneously providing an outlet for the expression of indirect aggression.

In sum, in response to the question of "Who hurts how?" our research leads us to conclude that (a) males hurt with direct strategies more than females do; (b) males and females both use indirect strategies for delivering harm; (c) people with well-connected, dense networks

may use indirect aggression more frequently; and (d) those with dense networks of people who do not know one another well may use indirect aggression as a "safe" outlet for their aggression.

Whom Do We Hurt, and How?

Who is likely to be the target of people's everyday aggression? As noted above, aggression is viewed as a gendered behavior, such that there are specific expectations about males and females as aggressors—and as targets.

Gender of target

Males are typically viewed as more threatening than females (Campbell, 1993). So, we might anticipate that fear of retaliation from a male target would in turn discourage responding directly. Females, by contrast, may be perceived as relatively vulnerable and unlikely to retaliate (D. R. Richardson, Vandenberg, & Humphries, 1986). So, we might expect males to hesitate to aggress against these relatively nonthreatening females.

With these considerations in mind, we asked male and female college students to answer the RCRQ with either a male or a female in mind as the target of their behavior (D. R. Richardson & Green, 1999). We found that the highest levels of direct aggression were reported when males reported how they behaved toward another male: They reported more direct aggression to males than to females. Females reported using indirect aggression more often than direct aggression, regardless of the gender of the target of their aggression. Males reported using direct aggression more frequently than females did, but males and females reported the same frequency of indirect aggression.

Although these findings address the link between gender and aggression, and support much of what one might expect with regard to gender and aggression, they leave an important question unanswered: Who *are* these male and female targets of aggression? For example, are females likely to use indirect aggression in interactions with romantic partners and with friends? Are males likely to use direct aggression in interactions with their fathers as well as their brothers?

Relationship to target

Our next question is, "What is the relationship between aggressors and the people they hurt?" (D. S. Richardson & Green, 2006). We asked college students to identify a person with whom they had been angry in the last month and to complete the RCRQ with that person in mind.

The first interesting question we were able to answer was, "Whom had they been angry with?" Both males and

females selected romantic partners and friends (35% each) more frequently than siblings (16%) or parents (14%) as targets of aggression. With regard to the form of harm they used, both males and females reported more direct aggression toward siblings and more indirect aggression toward friends than toward other targets. They also reported more direct than indirect aggression in interactions with romantic partners and siblings, more indirect than direct aggression toward friends, and equal levels of direct and indirect aggression toward parents. These findings suggest that when people are angry with a romantic partner or sibling, they are likely to confront them face-to-face. However, when people are angry with a friend, they are likely to avoid direct confrontation by delivering harm circuitously—for instance, by spreading rumors or talking behind his or her back.

The simple answer to the “Whom do we hurt, and how?” question is that the likelihood of aggression and the kind of aggression people use depends on their relationship to the person who has angered them.

Everyday Aggression: A Question Remains

Our program of research has answered a set of questions about individuals’ everyday experience with aggression. However, an important question remains unanswered: “What is the harm?” This is a question that also raises issues about our general definition of aggression.

Aggression is defined as behavior intended to cause harm. This definition focuses on the intentions underlying the perpetrator’s potentially harmful behavior; it does not consider actual harm to the victim. We do have some knowledge of the nature and extent of harm associated with some aggressive behaviors: national (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control) and international (e.g., the World Health Organization) organizations report the extensive costs, in dollars and deaths, of abuse; psychological aggression is associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997); victims of intimate-partner violence report negative effects on their self-esteem and self-image (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Seff, Beaulaurier, & Newman, 2008). However, we have little information about the harmful consequences of the forms of everyday aggression addressed here.

We expect that everyday aggression leads to emotional harm to the victim and disruption to the relationship between aggressor and target, but we have not yet collected data to answer that question. Answering this remaining question will not only lead to a better understanding of the impact of everyday aggression but may also allow us to more clearly define aggression in terms

of its effects on victims as well as the intentions of its perpetrators.

Recommended Reading

- Campbell, A. (1993). (See References). A book that presents the view that motivations behind and expressions of aggression vary by gender.
- Richardson, D. S. (2005). (See References). A review of evidence from one research lab that reveals few gender differences in aggressive behavior and argues for a reconceptualization of research on female aggression.
- Richardson, D. S., & Hammock, G. S. (2007). (See References). A review article that argues that factors other than gender, such as relationships between aggressors and targets, are better predictors of aggressive behavior.
- Warren, P., Richardson, D. S., & McQuillin, S. (2011). (See References). An article that distinguishes among various concepts and measures of direct and nondirect forms of aggression.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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