

Attributions for Social Failure and Aggression in Incarcerated Delinquent Youth

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While a variety of cognitive deficits and biases have been found to characterize aggressive and delinquent children and youth, very little attention has focused on determining whether aggressive youth also display deviant attributional beliefs in response to social failure. Research in the more impersonal cognitive domains such as achievement has shown attributions for failure to be potent determinants of both affective reactions and subsequent responding. Thus, the present study was designed to investigate whether specific attributional patterns following social failure may also relate to aggressive behavior. The aim of this study was to determine the relation between the level of self-reported physical aggression and specific attributional patterns following hypothetical social failure in a sample of incarcerated delinquent males. While the general hypotheses were that increased aggressiveness would be related to a greater tendency to endorse attributions for social failure that are external, stable, and controllable, only the hypothesis with regard to controllability was supported. The findings are discussed in terms of the relation between cognition and aggression in delinquent youth.

The goal of the present study was to examine attributions for social failure as related to aggressive behavior in incarcerated delinquent youth. While distinct attributional styles have been implicated in a variety of maladaptive behaviors, surprisingly little attention has focused on the potential relation between causal attributions for social failure and aggression. This line of

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research seems warranted, however, particularly in view of the current interest in the role of cognitive processes in the development and maintenance of aggressive behavior in children and youth (Dodge, 1980, 1986; Guerra & Slaby, 1989; Huesmann, 1988), including recent attempts to extend this research to incarcerated delinquent youth (Hains & Ryan, 1983; Slaby & Guerra, 1988).

These recent studies have been derived from a well-articulated model of social cognition, whereby aggressive behavior has been found to relate to a variety of cognitive factors. These factors include deficits in sequential information-processing skills (Dodge, 1980, 1986; Guerra & Slaby, 1989); endorsement of social norms supporting aggression (Huesmann, 1988; Slaby & Guerra, 1988); and a bias toward attributing hostile intent to others under ambiguous conditions (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982). As such, these recent investigations have highlighted the importance of studying a range of cognitive variables, and of focusing on deficits in both information-processing skills, as well as beliefs which may differentiate aggressive individuals from their less aggressive peers.

Notably lacking in this area of research are studies of attributions following the failure of selected social responses, particularly as these attributions may relate to overall level of aggression, as well as directly mediate subsequent response choice. As Rubin & Krasnor (1986, p. 52) comment, "Whether or not these attributions play a role in mediating responses to social problem-solving failure is, as yet, unknown." The dearth of research in this area is relatively surprising in light of the extensive literature in the more impersonal, cognitive domains such as achievement, whereby nonproductive responses after failure (e.g., quitting) have been associated with attributing failure to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes such as lack of ability (see Dweck & Elliot, 1983, for a review).

The present study was designed to examine the relation between aggressive behavior and specific attributions in incarcerated delinquent youth in terms of (a) their attributions for social failure (locus of causality, stability, and controllability); (b) their prediction of affective reaction; and (c) their prediction of behavioral response. In view of recent efforts to categorize delinquents as a psychologically and behaviorally heterogeneous group (Quay, 1987), we felt it was informative to examine these cognitive factors within a delinquent group, and we expected that they would relate to aggression level within the delinquent population. Specifically, we expected that higher levels of aggression would correlate with attributing social failure to external, controllable, and stable factors, and with affective responses indicating anger or rage and behavioral responses selecting verbal and physical aggression.

These hypotheses were derived partially from related studies of *reactance*, whereby failure which is attributed to external, controllable causes

(e.g., the momentary actions of others) has been found to result in increased arousal level as well as negative evaluations of others (Worchel, 1974; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). In addition, we expected aggression level to be related to attributing social failure to stable causes because viewing behavior as stable might preclude a response which presupposes the changeability of behavior (e.g., negotiation or assertion).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 92 adolescent males ranging in age from 15 to 19 years ($M = 17.0$) who were incarcerated in a state correctional facility. Subjects were all of the residents for whom permission could be obtained. To determine level of aggression, subjects were administered the Physical Aggression Scale, a self-report measure which includes a 3-item hostility scale (e.g., "I get angry and smash things"), a 5-item scale measuring the number of times during the past year in which subjects engaged in physical aggression against males (e.g., "How many times in the past year have you hit or punched another male?"), and the same 5-item scale measuring physical aggression against females. This measure has been used with adolescents and young adults in several previous studies and has been found to correlate very significantly with peer nominations of aggression, measures of aggressive personality (scales F, 4, and 9 of the MMPI), spouse abuse, and seriousness of criminal behavior (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984). To further test the validity of this measure for this population, overall scores from the Physical Aggression Scale were compared with all subjects' scores on scales F, 4, and 9 from the MMPI and the total number of offenses involving physical aggression against others from each subject's official offense records and were found to correlate very significantly. Level of aggression was thus determined by each subject's score on the Physical Aggression Scale, with a maximum possible score of 17 points. Subjects' scores ranged from 0 to 17, with a mean score of 7.9. Although delinquency and aggression are generally intercorrelated, the delinquent subjects did vary widely in their level of aggression.

Procedure

All subjects were tested in small groups at the juvenile facility by two female graduate students in two separate testing sessions. In the second sessions, the two attribution measures were given. For all measures, the experimenter read all items aloud, allowing the subjects adequate time to respond.

Measures. Two measures were used to assess causal attributions for failure: (1) the Multidimensional Measure of Children's Perceptions of Control (MMCPC) (Connell, 1985), and (2) the Assessment for Social Failure (ASF). The first measure is a questionnaire that assesses the perceived locus of causality (internal, external, and unknown) within the four domains (academic, social, physical, and general), resulting in 12 separated scores. Since the present study focused on attributions following failure, only those 24 items reflecting failure were included.

In order to assess all three causal dimensions (locus of causality, stability, and controllability) as well as subsequent affective reactions and responses endorsement following social failure the second measure, Assessment for Social Failure, was developed for the present study. The subject answers several questions about each of four stimulus stories depicting social situations in which another person frustrates the subject. This measure assesses locus of causality, stability, and controllability using the questions from the Causal Dimension Scale (Russell, 1982). However, the stimulus stories are constructed to portray social failure instead of academic failure. Two of these situations involved resolution of a peer-group entry conflict with either a same-gender or opposite-gender peer, and the other two situations involved blocked attainment of an instrumental goal from either a same-gender or opposite-gender peer. Both types of situations have been identified by incarcerated adolescents as being among their most common social problems (Guerra & Slaby, 1990; Larsen, 1984). To control for possible order effects, four different random orders of the situations were used.

Instead of supplying the subjects with potential causes of failure, as Russell (1982) did, we asked subjects to "state the one reason" why the social failure "would happen to you." Similar to the procedure used by Russell & McAuley (1986), they were then asked to rate the cause they had stated on the questions from the Causal Dimension Scale. To control for response bias, the order of responses was reversed for one-third of the items. A total score for each of the three causal dimensions of locus of causality, stability, and controllability was arrived at by summing the responses to each of the three items within each scale. After each story, the subjects were asked to rate on a 10-point scale how they would feel after the outcome on four affective dimensions: guilt, shame, anger, and rage. Finally, subjects were asked to rate on a 5-point scale the likelihood of their reacting in each of four ways: withdrawal, prosocial-assertion, verbal aggression, or physical aggression. The phrasing of all responses was altered slightly from story to story in order to help prevent response set.

Since the stimulus stories for the Assessment for Social Failure were new for this study, its internal consistency was first checked by administer-

ing it to a sample of 61 subjects not included in the actual study. Coefficient alphas for each scale were: locus of causality (.61), stability (.71), and controllability (.70).

RESULTS

To test the hypothesis that characteristic level of aggression should be significantly related to locus of causality (internal, external, unknown), ratings of causal dimensions, predicted affect, and response endorsement, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between physical aggression scores and these variables. The correlations for the variables from the ASF measure were computed both for scores aggregated across all four stories and for scores aggregated across the two stories for each type of situation and each gender of antagonist.

No significant relation was found between physical aggression scores and any of the locus of causality scores derived from the MMCPC Measure. However, physical aggression scores did correlate with some of the variables from the ASF Measure. The significant correlations for this measure are reported in Table I. Because 11 correlations are tested in each column,

Table I. Intercorrelations of Self-Reported Physical Aggression with Causal Dimensions, Ratings of Affect, and Response Endorsement ($N = 92$)

| Measure | Situational context | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Combined | Instrumental | Peer entry | Male | Female |
| Causal dimensions | | | | | |
| Externality | — | — | — | — | — |
| Stability | — | — | — | — | — |
| Controllability | .30 ^{b,d} | .30 ^{b,d} | — | — | .37 ^{b,c} |
| Affect ratings | | | | | |
| Guilt | — | — | — | — | — |
| Shame | — | — | -.23 ^a | — | — |
| Rage | .33 ^{b,d} | .37 ^{c,d} | .26 ^{b,d} | .41 ^{b,d} | .23 ^a |
| Anger | .23 ^a | .21 ^a | .24 ^a | — | .24 ^a |
| Response endorsement | | | | | |
| Withdrawal | — | -.30 ^{b,d} | — | — | — |
| Prosocial-assertion | — | — | -.25 ^a | — | -.28 ^{b,d} |
| Verbal aggression | — | — | — | — | .30 ^{b,d} |
| Physical aggression | .40 ^{c,d} | .41 ^{c,d} | .34 ^{b,d} | .27 ^{b,d} | .42 ^{c,d} |

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .001$.

^dAlso significant using a Bonferroni correction with an overall protection level of .05.

Table II. Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Response Endorsement from Self-Reported Physical Aggression, Causal Dimensions, and Ratings of Affect ($N = 78$)

| Predictors | Criterion variable | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Withdrawal | Prosocial-assertion | Verbal aggression | Physical aggression |
| Self-reported physical aggression | — | -.30 ^c | — | .32 ^c |
| Causal dimensions: | | | | |
| Externality | — | — | — | — |
| Stability | — | -.24 ^b | — | .18 ^a |
| Controllability | -.43 ^c | — | — | — |
| Affect ratings: | | | | |
| Guilt | .23 ^b | .33 ^c | -.33 ^c | -.28 ^c |
| Shame | — | — | — | — |
| Rage | — | — | — | .26 ^b |
| Anger | — | — | — | — |
| R ² | .25 ^c | .31 ^c | .19 ^c | .36 ^c |

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .001$.

we also note in Table I which correlations are significant using a Bonferroni correction to ensure an overall error rate of .05.

Generally, higher overall aggression scores were related to greater perceptions that social failure was due to controllable causes, consistent with the hypothesis of this study. However, no significant relation was found between aggression scores and perceptions that social failure was due to external and stable causes. Interestingly, the relation between controllability and aggression was only significant in the instrumental stories and in those stories involving females. However, these findings held regardless of whether the subject had aggressed in the past against males or against females.³

As predicted, aggressiveness did correlate positively with ratings of rage and anger and with the endorsement of a physically aggressive response. The relation between the aggression score and predicted feelings of rage and anger was significant regardless of the type of situation, and for rage regardless of the gender of the protagonist. Aggression score was also strongly positively correlated with endorsement of a physically aggressive response to social failure regardless of type of situation. However, previous aggression against females was a much stronger predictor of rage and anger and of endorsement of an aggressive response than was previous aggression against males, regardless of the type of situation or gender of antagonist.⁴

³For controllability (instrumental stories), $r = .26$, $p < .01$ for AAF, $r = .22$, $p < .05$ for AAM. For controllability (female-gender stories), $r = .28$, $p < .01$ for AAF, $r = .30$, $p < .01$ for AAM.

⁴For overall anger, $r = .25$, $p < .01$ for AAF, $r = .11$ (n.s.) for AAM. For overall rage, $r = .37$, $p < .001$ for AAF, $r = .18$ (n.s.) for AAM. For overall endorsement of physical aggression, $r = .46$, $p < .001$ for AAF, $r = .15$ (n.s.) for AAM.

To test the hypothesis that a particular type of response endorsement was related to ratings of causal dimensions, affective ratings, and individual aggression, we conducted separate multiple regression analyses to predict endorsement of each type of response on the ASF Measure from these eight predictors. These analyses were conducted for all four stories and are presented in Table II.

One can see that ratings indicating greater stability, lowered guilt, and heightened rage added independently to the endorsement of a physical aggressive response, even when the overall level of individual aggression was first entered into the analysis. However, only lowered guilt contributed independently to the endorsement of a verbally aggressive response using the same procedure. Endorsement of an assertive-prosocial response was independently predicted by both higher guilt ratings and lower stability ratings as well as by the level of aggression. Endorsement of a withdrawal response was independently predicted by higher ratings of guilt and lower ratings of controllability. However, when these regression analyses were conducted for each type of story separately, no consistent patterns emerged that could be related to the type of situation or gender of the antagonist.

DISCUSSION

The level of physical aggression of incarcerated delinquent youth was significantly correlated with their tendency to attribute social failure to controllable causes, but was not significantly correlated with their tendency to attribute this failure to external or stable causes, when ratings of causal dimensions for all four stories were combined. In addition, no significant relation between the level of physical aggression and the three locus of causality scores (internal, external, unknown) for failure was found. Taken together, these two findings shed some doubt on the utility of the locus of causality construct in understanding aggressive behavior among delinquents, but do suggest that investigations focused on controllability may prove fruitful.

Of further interest is the relation between guilt, rage, and stability as related to the subjects' endorsement of behavioral responses. While endorsement of a prosocial-assertive response was independently predicted by higher levels of guilt and a lower belief in the stability of the causes of social failure, endorsement of a physically aggressive response was independently predicted by lower levels of guilt, higher levels of rage, and a higher belief in the stability of the causes of social failure. Hence, if social failure is believed to result from stable causes, and the individual feels little guilt, he or she may have little motivation to change the antagonist's behavior with a prosocial-assertive response. Instead, an aggressive response reflecting the individual's underlying rage and judgment that the other's behavior is hard to change

may be selected. In particular, these findings appear to present a consistent pattern of responses when endorsement of prosocial-assertive and aggressive responses are considered together.

These findings suggest that a relation exists between specific types of antisocial behavior, such as aggression, and specific affective and cognitive factors. However, while some findings were consistent across different types of stories, some were different for each story, suggesting that these factors may be further mediated by a particular situational context. Furthermore, this study involved a relatively small and somewhat extreme (i.e., incarcerated delinquent) sample of youth, and this topic warrants further investigation with a broader sample of adolescents.

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