

CHAPTER 1

DISPLACED AGGRESSION

EXPANDING ON BERKOWITZ AND KNUREK (1969)

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CLASSIC STUDY

Berkowitz, L., & Knurek, D. A. (1969). Label-mediated hostility generalization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 13(3), 200-206.

We all have experienced someone who expresses excessive anger in response to a benign comment or behavior. Sometimes, we know the person had recently been rebuked or insulted and is just taking it out on us. But equally often we do not really know what preceded such an outburst. We might acknowledge that our eliciting remark or act was perhaps somewhat negative in tone, but we also know that, as posited by the 'matching rule', its negativity or criticality did not warrant the hostile outburst just received.

The matching rule typically guides social interaction. Normally people engage in tit-for-tat behavior. A nod from a co-worker begets a nod or solitary hello. A longer comment elicits a longer story in response (Axelrod, 1984). Instances of inexplicable anger clearly do not obey the matching rule, thus begging for clarification.

BACKGROUND TO THE CLASSIC STUDY: EXPLAINING UNWARRANTED ANGER

Berkowitz and Knurek (1969) tried to provide such an explanation. They presumed that angry outbursts were carry-over effects from a prior provocation or frustration that precluded hostile retaliation. Why? If the provocateur is one's boss, one might not want to risk reprimand, or with a friend, risk trouble to the relationship. Consequently, one might suppress one's anger. It may then dissipate or succumb to distraction, or alternatively, be directed at a new, undeserving person. Such displaced hostility might manifest itself as action – yelling at or slapping that new person for what is perceived as a negative comment. This type of generalization has been called *hostility displacement* or *displaced aggression* (Dollard et al., 1939).

Miller (1941) hypothesized that greater physical similarity between a target-person and the initial provocateur increases retaliatory aggression. Thus, the more similar a potential target person and the earlier provocateur (to whom one could not respond with retaliatory anger), the more that initial anger will carry-over. Physical similarity, however, is not the only relevant ingredient. One's attitude toward a person's category might matter. If one disliked the first name 'Karen,' someone bearing that name category might be a predisposed target for displaced aggression. Likewise, if one disliked Jews, this might also be true for a manifestly Jewish person.

THE CLASSIC STUDY: AN EXAMINATION OF BERKOWITZ AND KNUREK (1969)

Berkowitz and Knurek tested this notion experimentally by making participants negatively react to certain first-person names. If negative adjectives are consistently paired with the name Ed or George, attitudes toward these names will come to correspond to the affect elicited by words paired with them.

To do this, researchers led participants to believe they would participate in two unrelated studies. In the 'first' study, they were exposed to randomly ordered flash-cards, each containing one of ten common male first names, and all presented successively 180 times. One second after each, the experimenter spoke an adjective aloud, which the participant verbally repeated. The critical name, Ed or George, was paired with negative adjectives 16 times and twice with neutral adjectives; other names, not Ed or George, were paired 16 times with neutral or positive adjectives and twice with a negative adjective. Next, participants were told that they had performed reasonably well (viz., the non-provocation condition), or harshly told they performed very poorly and chastised for their disinterested attitude (viz., the provocation

condition). Thus, half of those for whom Ed or George were made negative were provoked. Then, after measurements, all were dismissed.

In the 'second' study, for the purpose of 'studying their interaction,' participants met group members Ed and George – who were experimental confederates, unbeknownst to participants – and discussed an arbitrary topic for five minutes. After ensuring they learned each other's names, they privately completed rating scales and assessments of group members and the two experimenters.

The results showed that those provoked in the first study evaluated the individual with the negatively associated name (Ed or George) more unfavorably than those unprovoked. Thus, provocation-elicited hostility only generalized to the discussion partner whose name matched that previously associated with negative adjectives.

The authors titled their article, 'Label-mediated Hostility Generalization,' emphasizing that the article is not about aggressive behavior, but instead, generalized perceptions of hostility toward persons bearing negatively-associated names. The key measure was ratings of discussion partners' friendliness. Clearly, friendliness ratings are not aggressive behavior, but rather, a perception. Further, the average hostility ratings of Ed (or George) fell on the positive side of the scale midpoint of 99 in all four conditions of the study. Thus, the negatively-associated names did not elicit perceptions of *unfriendliness*, but rather, relatively lower perceptions of *friendliness*. Given that most scholars define aggression as an act intending to harm another, one might question whether the study concerned aggression, much less hostility generalization. Finally, because the other names were positively associated (rather than neutrally) one cannot know whether positive or negative pairing accounts for the obtained differential perceptions.

Yet, from their opening sentences, Berkowitz and Knurek clearly are interested in 'the victim's role in evoking the *aggression directed against him*.' They are not just concerned with the concept of *hostility displacement* – a perception – but also *displaced aggression* – an action. Moreover, they concluded: 'the men (participants) generally *acted more unfriendly* to the negatively named person than to one having a neutral name' (1969, p. 205, emphasis added/original emphasis). Clearly, this implies action (displaced aggression) rather than perception (hostility displacement) – despite there being no measure of the combined effects of insult and negative name on the former. Nonetheless, the study does reflect their broader interest in displaced aggression. Figure 1.1 contains the conceptual model stemming from the authors' theorizing and Table 1.1 defines key terms.

Ubiquity of Hostility Attribution Bias

The relationship between provocation and the exaggerated perception of hostility that Berkowitz and Knurek aimed to show is not ephemeral. Now called *hostility attribution bias*, it is well established and typically includes seeing the other's hostility as

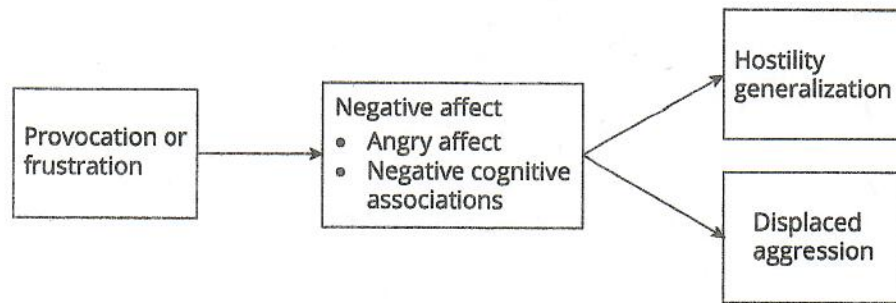


FIGURE 1.1 Implicit Berkowitz and Knurek model

TABLE 1.1 Key terms and definitions

Term	Definition	Example
Frustration-aggression hypothesis	When goal-related behaviors are blocked, a <i>frustration</i> is produced that orients one toward an <i>aggressive</i> reaction.	A long line at the coffee shop or forgetting something important at home may cause frustration, which can in turn orient one toward aggression.
Direct aggression	Any behavior intended to cause immediate harm toward the original provocateur who is motivated to avoid that harm.	A man punches another man after being verbally insulted.
Displaced aggression	Occurs when the victim is not the original provocateur, but instead, an innocent third party who has done nothing to provoke an aggressive response.	An employee who is reprimanded by their boss takes out their anger on an innocent family member or pet.
Triggered displaced aggression	The target is not the original provocateur, and the target (a) is not completely innocent but instead commits a second minor provocation (viz. a triggering action) or (b) some aspect of the situation or target person elicits negative affect.	A person who gets cut off in traffic is later aggressive toward an unhelpful customer service representative.

intended. Most reviews see it as a person or group membership variable. For instance, Tuerke and colleagues (2019) show its reliable occurrence in samples of distinct adult populations (e.g., students, psychiatric patients). Likewise, in an ambitious study, Dodge and colleagues (2015) examined it in 12 globally distinct regions, countries, and ethnicities. In all groups, provocation strongly increased hostility perceptions on multiple measures, despite also yielding reliable differences between groups.

Meta-analysis is a collection of statistical procedures for combining results of numerous studies that all focus on the same question. It determines whether a relationship between two variables holds up when the results from all studies that examine it are pooled statistically. Using this technique, DeCastro and colleagues (2003) confirmed hostility attribution's effect of augmenting children's aggressive behavior, an outcome replicated a decade later in a meta-analysis of adolescents (Yeager et al., 2013) and then again in a meta-analysis of studies on children (Verhoef et al., 2019).

Although most studies examine its effects when comparing distinct groups such as students and psychiatric patients, they also explore broad variables, not temporally immediate precursors. Thus, for example, they examine the effects of variation in socialization practices – a variable that cannot easily be manipulated. For instance, parental mistreatment increased it in children (Price & Glad, 2003). Studies, however, do show an augmenting influence of variables that immediately precede it. Provocation is its most prominent and consistent immediate antecedent (Dodge & Somberg, 1987). Thus, in studying the generalization of hostility displacement, Berkowitz and Knurek anticipated a reliable finding that had broad application.

Research on Displaced Aggression

Before proceeding, however, it is important to note that most of the variables that we next discuss can be viewed either as personal attributes of the actor, or as attributes of the setting. Specifically, one can discuss *individual differences in responding aggressively when provoked* (a personal attribute) or instead, *how strongly one was provoked* (a characteristic of the setting). Likewise, one can examine *individual differences in one's predisposition to ruminate about an event* (a personal attribute) or instead, *the effect of being told by another to think carefully about what just happened (ruminate), or not* (a situational event). Although both forms yield parallel results, we primarily focus on the latter, because, being manipulatable, they suggest ways whereby displaced aggression might be controlled.

Decades ago, Dollard (1938) noted that most displaced aggression is not directed at a totally innocent other, but instead, at someone who provided some justification for an angry attack. For instance, one cannot avoid jostling the person standing right next to you on a very crowded trolley. Dollard saw most displaced aggression as an exaggerated retaliatory response that exceeded that warranted by a target's triggering act. In addition to triggering resulting from some minor negative action of the target, however, he also emphasized that attributes of the target, such as racial outgroup membership, serve as a trigger. Berkowitz and Knurek showed how a target's formerly neutral attribute (viz. a name category) could acquire such

hostility-eliciting capacity, but also, by using a target's (acquired) negative attribute as a trigger, they tested Dollard's thinking. Many subsequent displaced aggression studies examined the effects of pre-existing target attributes, often focusing on out-group membership. Since then, studies have also shown that aggression-arousing and aggression-disinhibiting cues in the environment surrounding the innocent target (e.g., the sight of guns or alcohol consumption cues) augment displaced aggression (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000).

Thus, there are three types of triggers: (a) minor aggression-arousing behavioral acts emitted by the target person (i.e., a less than favorable comment or a minor disapproving facial expression); (b) the target's attributes (e.g., skin color or social-category membership), and (c) the attributes of the setting (e.g., does it contain guns or weapons or alcohol consumption cues) that cue aggressive responding (see Figure 1.2). Importantly, each can amplify direct aggression (viz. that immediately caused by a frustration or provocation) as well as displaced aggression. In most instances of displaced aggression, it seems likely that one of these factors triggered it. We discuss each of these triggers next.

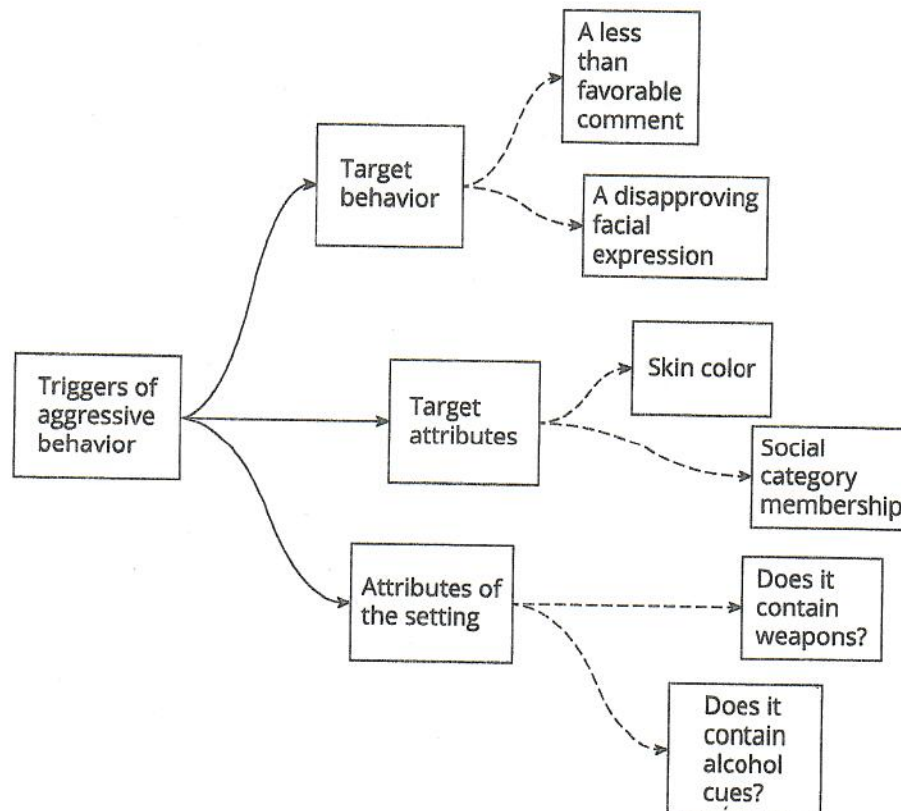


FIGURE 1.2 Triggers of aggressive behavior

Minor Negative Triggering Acts by the Target of Displaced Aggression

The basic trigger-displaced aggression design contains four cells, formed by manipulating the presence or absence of provocation and, within each of those, the presence or absence of a trigger. As in Berkowitz and Knurek, Pedersen and colleagues (2000) first provoked participants (or did not). Then, in a 'second study,' participants played a computerized trivia game. To trigger them, the undergrad assistant mispronounced words in the question, read them rapidly and intermixed foils to each question; when non-triggered, they heard slow, understandable questions and foils.

Convincingly confirming Berkowitz and Knurek's untested hypothesis about behavior, their results showed a provocation-trigger interaction. Trigger-presence or absence had no effect on unprovoked individuals; only the provocation-trigger combination augmented aggressiveness, increasing it to exceed the sum of the separate aggression-eliciting effects of provocation and trigger alone. Thus, a minor triggering act by an otherwise neutral target caused the unexpressed hostility elicited by a previous provocation to be displaced onto a triggering person. A major outcome of this paradigm is this interaction – an augmented combined effect that exceeds the sum of the independent aggression-eliciting effects of the provocation and the trigger. A key design feature is that the magnitude of anger induced by the trigger alone was substantially less than (approximately half) that elicited by the initial provocation. Obtaining these same results despite variation in the measure of trigger-displaced aggression (e.g., ratings that will competitively determine a target's qualification for a coveted research position; amount of hot sauce to be consumed by a target who hates spicy food; length of time a target must immerse his hand in a bucket of ice water; etc.) increases their importance.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Subsequently, numerous studies replicated these effects, confirming that the interactive effect of initial provocation and trigger requires a relatively inconsequential trigger intensity (e.g., Vasquez et al., 2005). They are nicely illustrated by the oft-repeated 'barking dog' effect. When the worker who was just fired later returns home, he is greeted by his happy dog who loudly barks and jumps all over him. Although the owner ordinarily responds with pets and shouts of endearment, he kicks him aside this time while simultaneously shouting 'get away.' In response to the anger of having just been fired, the dog's normally loving jumps on the owner are interpreted as aggravating or annoying (you're dirtying my clothing) and serve as a trigger for the owner to displace his aggression onto the dog. Although in this case the dog provided the minor negative behavior that triggered the displacement of aggression, more typically another human provides such triggering.

Target Attributes as Triggers for Displaced Aggression

In addition to actions of the target, numerous attributes of a target person can also serve as triggers, including group memberships, such as gender, political affiliation, age and work groups, or, as shown in Berkowitz and Knurek (1969), disliked name categories. Positively-valenced targets (because of their attitudinal similarity to the actor, their likeability or their ingroup membership) all elicited less triggered-displaced aggression than their counterparts (Pedersen et al., 2008). Similarly, when the differences among outgroup targets that distinguish them from one another had been emphasized (e.g., learning about their individual characteristics or attributes), it reduced triggered-displaced aggression (Vasquez et al., 2007).

Vicarious retribution, another type of aggression driven by target attributes, is a form of displaced aggression that operates entirely at a symbolic level. Neither a perpetrator nor a triggering target's minor triggering act are directly involved in a displaced retaliatory response (Lickel et al., 2006; Stenstrom et al., 2008). Instead, aggression occurs against an outgroup member for a provocation that had no personal consequence for the aggressor but did harm a fellow ingroup member (Lickel et al., 2006). Vicarious retribution is widespread.

For example, on September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was killed while planting flowers at his Mesa, Arizona gas station. To honor victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in the USA, Sodhi had purchased an American flag and flowers to display at his station. Later, while planting them, a vehicle approached, and its driver shot him. The 9/11 attacks had harmed neither the driver nor any of his relatives. Claiming he wanted to 'kill a Muslim,' he chose Sodhi because he had a beard and wore a turban – mistakenly identifying him as an Arab Muslim man (BBC, 2003; Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2003). Sodhi was an Indian immigrant and a member of the Sikh religion.

Why would one seek retribution for an event that directly involved neither him nor the retribution target? Some groups, such as gangs, cannot control provocateurs by appealing to police forces or governments. Consequently, they aim retribution beyond the initial provocateur and target other outgroup members (Vasquez et al., 2009), who may be less formidable and more available than the original provocateur (Cadinu & Reggiori, 2002). Thus, although Sodhi was murdered because he appeared to be an outgroup member, perhaps too it was because he was unarmed and within reach.

Ingroup identification also matters. Social Identity Theory proposes that people evaluate themselves within the context of their ingroup (Stenstrom et al., 2008; Tajfel, 1974), making ingroup identification central to their self-worth and self-concept. Thus, a positive group identity becomes key to an overall positive self-identity. When group membership strongly contributes to one's self-concept, it augments ingroup favoritism (Doosje et al., 1995). Threats to the ingroup become self-threats. Consequently, strong ingroup identification augments retribution

because harm to any member threatens all ingroup members, including oneself. Perhaps this was true for Sodhi's murderer.

Although ingroup identification explains retribution against one who attacks other ingroup members, it does not explain retribution against non-attacking outgroup members. Because outgroup cohesiveness increases perceived outgroup threat, it motivates retribution against them. Individuals who both highly identify with their ingroup and see the outgroup as tightly knit, more strongly exhibit vicarious retribution (Stenstrom et al., 2008).

Aggression-Eliciting Attributes of the Setting

When meta-analytic procedures were used to assess whether aggression-related environmental cues facilitate aggression, weapons present, name-mediation (as in Berkowitz and Knurek), and other aggression-arousing cues were shown to facilitate it (Benjamin et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 1990). That this is true for those unprovoked, as well as provoked, emphasizes the causal importance of cognitive factors because the contribution of arousal must necessarily be minimal when there is no anger or insult manipulation.

Though neither analysis was constrained to studies that only employed a trigger-displaced aggression paradigm, there is no reason their results would not apply similarly. Thus, after participants consumed either an alcohol or a placebo beverage, were all provoked, and half triggered, the placebo group's results replicated standard triggered-displaced aggression effects, but alcohol ingestion increased their magnitude (Aviles et al., 2005). An alcohol prime yielded similar results (Vessels et al., 2025).

To preclude a contribution from lingering arousal produced by the initial provocation, studies on the impact of rumination on displaced aggression used provocation/trigger gaps exceeding 25 minutes and as lengthy as eight hours (Bushman et al., 2005). Still, rumination increased displaced aggression only among those triggered. Examining rumination's real-world links to criminal behavior further emphasizes its importance. Gang affiliation augments both rumination about provocations and displaced aggression (Vasquez et al., 2012). Other factors also increase displaced aggression, as when provocation is anonymous (Vasquez & Howard-Field, 2016). And public provocation, as compared to private provocation, augments it by increasing its perceived strength (Vasquez et al., 2015).

Social exclusion provides another aggression-eliciting impetus for displaced aggression. Researchers frequently implement it via a computer-based on-line ball-toss game wherein the experimental confederates who comprise the rest of the group repeatedly pass the ball to one another and ignore the participant. It is relevant to the bearing of this chapter on political behavior because losing a political election is typically experienced by voters as social exclusion (Aydin et al., 2024). However, it

also has a bearing on the question of whether displaced aggression can occur in the absence of any kind triggering event. The social exclusion paradigm shares conceptual similarities with the triggered-displaced aggression paradigm. In both, provocation elicits similar emotions (anger). It causes both direct (e.g., DeBono & Muraven, 2014) and displaced (e.g., DeWall et al., 2010) aggression. Yet, with a trigger absent, the triggered-displaced aggression paradigm uniformly fails to evidence displaced aggression whereas social exclusion research, though never employing triggers, routinely elicits it.

Thus, although this shows that displaced aggression can in fact occur in the absence of a trigger, no research directly explains the cause of this discrepancy. Between-study comparisons, however, point to differences in the strength of arousal as its explanation. Note that connectedness with others is fundamental and likely has evolutionary roots (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Thus, ostracism may well be much more painful than the provocations used in trigger-displaced aggression research. Supporting this explanation, stronger initial provocation yielded greater triggered-displaced aggression (Vasquez et al., 2015).

The Evolution of a Theoretical Understanding of Displaced Aggression

Early aggression researchers posited that displaced aggression inevitably stemmed from frustration – the blocked achievement of a desired goal (Doob et al., 1939). Subsequently, such inevitability was effectively challenged (Buss, 1963). Later, Berkowitz (1993) saw negative affect as its precursor (see Figure 1.1). Many types of negative affect, such as sadness, fear, guilt, and remorse, however, do not elicit aggression (e.g., Baron & Bell, 1976). This led instead to the view that anger is a primary emotional antecedent.

Figure 1.3 presents a more modern description of the process that underlies displaced aggression. When one cannot retaliate, angry or hostile feelings nonetheless arise. As depicted, angry affect is the emotion typically elicited by provocation, but aggression-arousing cognitive processes, such as aggressive motives, cognitions, schemas and scripts, co-occur. Hostility attribution bias and its justification (Spanovic, 2013) ensue. With rumination, all remain salient and are available to be cued and momentarily increased in salience by subsequent environmental events. When a suitable target presents itself, hostility attribution bias re-occurs. It re-ignites and augments the actor's angry affect and recruits cognitive processes such as justificatory thoughts for the hostility attribution bias and revenge planning. Minor negative target acts, aggression-arousing attributes of the target, and aggression-arousing features in the environment can augment these internal processes to further propel the actor to displace aggression.

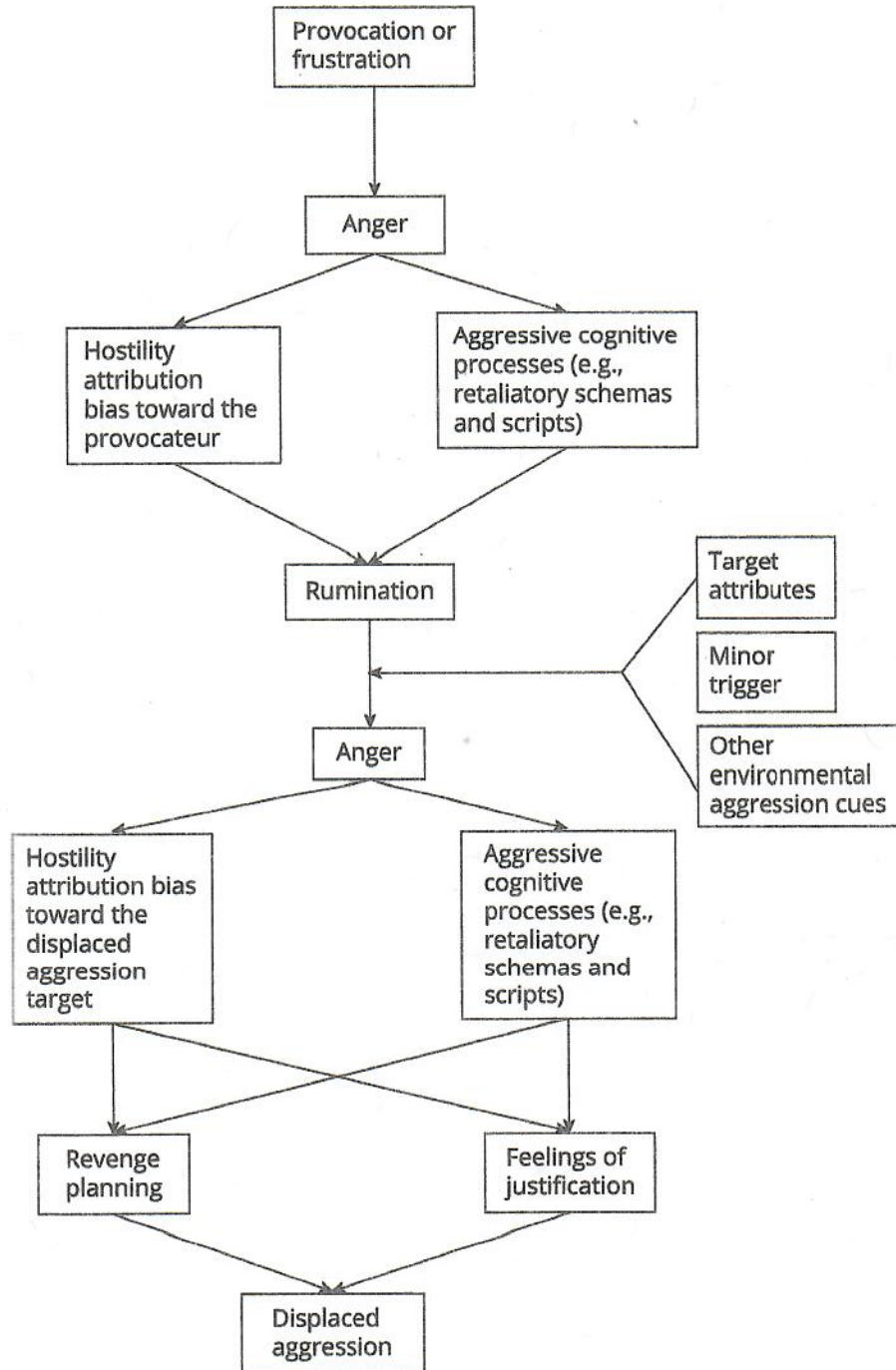


FIGURE 1.3 Conceptual model of displaced aggression

Note: Vertical lines indicate casual effects and horizontal lines indicate moderating effects.

Although the theoretical model presented in Figure 1.3 may have intuitive appeal, little research has examined the role of some of its components. For instance, although self-justification is widely employed by humans, its more specific role as a reaction or antecedent to hostile attribution bias (as studied by Berkowitz and Knurek) is noticeably un-researched. Its role in this regard is supported by the fact that when hostility attribution bias has been elicited by some minor negative behavior on the part of the target of displaced aggression, it is typically accompanied by attributions of intent. Such mis-perceived intention can obviously justify an actor's subsequent inclination to retaliate and displace his aggression. But no research has directly examined or measured whether such justifying perceptions do indeed occur when hostility attribution has been triggered.

Finally, like most experimental psychological research, the studies cited herein mainly rely on samples of college participants raised in Westernized cultures (viz. USA and Europe). The few instances that use participants from other geographical areas and nations, however, while suggesting cultural moderation, show no opposing reversal of results. For instance, three studies of Chinese participants (Liu et al., 2024) confirm well-established displaced aggression affects. And in Dodge et al.'s (2015) study of hostility attribution bias, although it was very high in Jordan and among African Americans living in the USA at Durham, North Carolina, and substantially lowest in China and the Philippines, it directionally augmented aggression in all four – confirming a unidirectional effect across nations/culture.

CONCLUSION

We have presented ample evidence supporting a process whereby hostility is extended and exaggerated – called hostility generalization by Berkowitz and Knurek, and subsequently hostility attribution bias. We have shown that when anger from an initial provocation is suppressed, it often is later vented on an innocent target. Hostility attribution bias promotes this process. Additionally, we examined the role of three types of triggering events in eliciting displaced aggression – minor negative triggering actions by the target of displaced aggression, the aggression-augmenting effect of negative attitudes toward a target's category, and the presence of aggression-arousing cues in the setting.

We have also argued that social exclusion research maps onto displaced aggression research and that vicarious retribution also coalesces with it and can be viewed as a symbolic form of it and one that is most relevant to national and world politics. Though our understanding of displaced and trigger-displaced aggression is far from complete, it clearly has progressed substantially beyond that provided by Berkowitz and Knurek.

FURTHER READING

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The first modern-day theoretical discussion and extension of triggered-displacement theory moderators of displaced aggression.

Dollard, J. (1938). Hostility and fear in social life. *Social Forces*, 17, 15-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2571143>

The first presentation of the idea of triggered displaced aggression.

Dollard, J., Miller, N. E., Doob, L. W., Mowrer, O. H., & Sears, R. R. (1939). *Frustration and aggression*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10022-000>

The first elaboration of frustration-aggression theory.

Vasquez, E. A., Wenborne, L., Peers, M., Alleyne, E., & Ellis, K. (2015). Any of them will do: In-group identification, out-group entitativity, and gang membership as predictors of group-based retribution. *Aggressive Behavior*, 41, 242-252. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21581>

An excellent application of the concept of vicarious retribution, showing the roles of ingroup identification and outgroup solidarity in the vicarious retribution of gangs in London.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe an instance in which someone you know engaged in displaced aggression in the last year and discuss how it relates to Figure 1.3. Try to unpack the actor's behavior based on the various factors and mechanisms in the figure.
2. How might the current political climate (e.g., factionalism, far-right movements, political violence) reflect the psychological processes of displaced aggression and hostility attribution bias?
3. How do the three different types of triggers contribute to the incidence of displaced aggression, and what implications might this have for understanding and mitigating it in real-world political settings?

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