

The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the effect of thematic excitement and offensive remarks on aggression in children in the age group of 8 to 12 years. In a 2x2x2 factorial design (two levels of aggressive arousal - high and low, two levels of altruistic arousal - high and low, and two levels of offensive and non-offensive remarks), 160 subjects were equally assigned to eight treatment conditions. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that when subjects were thematically excited and insulted, exposure to different types of stimulation affected aggression. Among insulted subjects, exposure to aggressive thematic arousal and exposure to altruistic thematic arousal had a significant effect on enhancing aggression. The role of thematic arousal in understanding of aggression in children is emphasized.

Keywords: *Aggression, Thematic Arousal, Offensive Remarks*

In every walk of life, society seems to be teeming with violence. Wherever we are, perhaps in our homes, in other groups of social interaction, we can have several examples of violent aggressive behavior: If we go by historical information, we can have a large number of examples showing violent acts. Nor are they limited by cities, countries or cultures. It shows that acts of violence progress in parallel with the progress of modern culture.

Human aggression is a very real and frightening aspect of our lives. Aggression is behavior that involves violence or aggressive behavior. Aggression and violence have many negative social consequences, such as family conflict, crime, murder, rape, and theft. International issues such as war and terrorism are also linked. Any number of painful stimuli, such as an electric shock, physical blow, or intense heat, and threatening stimuli, such as an insult, can cause a change in behavior. These exogenous stimuli play a unique role in provoking a person to display aggressive behavior. A particular emotion is not experienced without excitement or cognition. Different types of arousal and accompanying cognition determine the quality and intensity of aggression (Fhayer, 1978). Such type of behavior shows that the

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The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

individual tends to move against people and objects in the environment. The relationship between arousal and aggression has received considerable attention in recent years.

Berkowitz (1962) presented anger as an intervening variable between frustration and aggression. In addition to frustration and anger, other emotional states are possible. They are usually referred to as general emotional arousal and play an important role in aggression. One of these variables is the cognitive state of the individual. According to Rule and Nesdale (1976), general arousal interacts with anger in a very specific way to influence frustration. Research on the relationship between arousal and anger provides another perspective from which to view aggression. Zillman et al. (1974) demonstrated an emotion labeling theory for the aggression paradigm. Research has suggested that arousal of any type can cause people to act more aggressively when frustrated (Zillman et.al. 1974)

Zillman et al. (1981) showed in an experiment that subjects who were sexually aroused and later angry were the most aggressive, and subjects who watched a non-exciting film were the least aggressive. Cotton (1983) cautioned that empirical support is still soft. Nevertheless, this provocative theory, which has certainly not been disproved by data, continues to generate interest and research. A cognitive label is usually associated with an event that produces arousal. It is a fact that attacks, both verbal and physical, are very reliable instigators of aggression. Not surprisingly, verbal attacks also prompt responses to aggressive behavior. When an insult occurs, one labels one's emotions as anger. Geen (1968) provoked subjects with insults about their intelligence and motivation. These subjects showed more aggression than the control group.

In an experiment by Hokanson et al. (1968) demonstrated that, under certain conditions, aggression reduces physiological arousal. They found that when the subject was insulted by a companion or experimenter, the subject's heart rate and blood pressure increased, but there was a significant decrease in these measures when the subjects were allowed to react to the substances. The decrease occurred when subjects were physically or verbally aggressed. Marina Kremar and Stephen Curtis (2003) tested the causal effect of television on children's moral conceptions of right and wrong and found that exposure to a single program containing fantasy violence can change children's short-term moral evaluation of aggression and can even adversely affect the strategies they use to do so, to make these ratings meaningful.

Based on these investigations, investigators have pointed out that when subjects are insulted and rudely or abusively treated by an experimental partner, their level of sympathetic arousal is substantially increased compared to the level before treatment and a suitable control (e.g., Younger & Doob 1978). Earlier research (Konecni et.al.1972) focuses on the effects of insults and displays of aggression on subjects' performance and shows that the level of anger is more responsible than the level of arousal. Other results obtained by Konečný (1975) indicate that variables expected to reduce arousal levels (such as confusion of offended subjects and delay in measuring aggression) reduce the amount of aggression and show that these effects are additive.

Indian psychologists Kool & Kumar (1977) also demonstrated the influence of offensive information on experimentally induced aggression. The results supported Berkowitz's (1962) hypothesis that even when aggressors themselves are not insulted, inflammatory comments about victims increase levels of aggression. From the previous point of view, it is clear that excitement and insulting remarks are essential determinants of aggression. The previous

The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

review strongly suggests that the actor's cognitive state before facing frustration is an important determinant of subsequent aggression and that aggression increases when it is associated with anger, given the above views it seems reasonable to assume that for the study of aggression in children, the role of stories depicting aggressive as well as altruistic themes deserves attention. Altruistic arousal along with aggressive arousal may prove useful in presenting a contrast in behavioral consequences. Marie-Louise Mares and Emory Woodard conducted a meta-analysis in 2005. Their analysis of thirty-four studies of the pro-social effects of television involving more than 5,000 children found an overall effect of 0.27 (a medium-sized effect), suggesting that viewing pro-social programming improves children's pro-social behavior.

To study the interactive effect of thematic arousal and Offensive Remarks on aggression in children, the following testable hypotheses are formulated:

- i. There would be a significant relationship between thematic arousal and aggression.
- ii. Aggressively excited subjects would differ significantly from altruistically excited subjects in their aggression scores.
- iii. Offensive subjects would show more aggression compared to non-offensive subjects in both thematic arousal groups.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A random sample of eighty urban school children aged 8 to 12 served as subjects. There are 112 and 48 girls in 160 subjects.

Materials

- i. **Thematic arousal stories:** Aggressive and altruistic thematic arousal stories were created. In the aggressive theme of excitement, the hero of the story, the model behaves aggressively and wins. In the theme of altruistic excitement, the hero of the story, the model, acts altruistically to show sacrifice and loss. Two stories were created for altruistic arousal and two stories for aggressive arousal. Five experts evaluated the stories and determined whether the story had high or low thematic excitement and whether it would significantly excite the children. Each story contained five hundred words and was read in approximately five minutes using experiments.
- ii. **Problems:** Simple numerical problems were selected (16 problems = 4 addition, 4 division, 4 subtraction and 4 multiplication). A pre-test showed that the students could solve these problems. The problems were below the average math ability of an eight-year-old child.
- iii. **Stopwatch** This was used to show the subjects that time was being recorded and the subjects should work quickly and accurately.
- iv. **Aggression Questionnaire-** The Aggression Questionnaire (constructed and standardized by G.C. Pati 1976) was used to measure the aggressive behavior of the subjects. It consists of sixteen items. The reliability of the test is 0.71 for the whole questionnaire, reliability for half. 55 the validity coefficient with Murray's Aggression Questionnaire as criterion was 0.82

Experimental design

In different treatment conditions, subjects are studied in a 2x2x2 factorial design as shown in Table 1. There are two levels of aggressive arousal (high and low), two levels of altruistic

The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

arousal (high and low), and two levels of offensive remarks (offensive and non - offensive conditions).

Table 1. Subjects in different treatment conditions

Altruistic Arousal Group				Aggressive Arousal Group			
High		Low		High		Low	
O	N.O.	O	N.O.	O	N.O.	O	N.O.
20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

* O - Offensive, N.O. - Non - Offensive

Experimental Procedure:

Each child was individually exposed to different experimental conditions. The experimenter instructed the subject:

"I'm going to tell you stories. These stories are interesting. I'm sure you'd like them. Please don't interrupt me while I'm telling you. When the story is completely told, you can ask anything."

The experimenter performed the experiment individually. Each subject was told a story (either with themes or with altruistic objects). After the story was completed, the experimenter instructed the subject.

"Now I'm going to give you some numerical problems and you'll have to solve them quickly." The time will be recorded by a stopwatch. You will be marked according to your performance so you do it carefully with full accuracy. After the time is up, I will take the answer sheets at once. I will also give you a questionnaire about aggression and you will have to answer it.'

The experimenter read the story and the subject listened. The experimenter gave him sixteen numerical problems to solve as quickly as possible. A stopwatch has been started. In all conditions, subjects were frustrated by interruptions after completing 12 numerical tasks. A numerical problem sheet was taken and "E" began to evaluate it. When correcting the paper, 'E' insulted half of the subjects in both groups with a remark. "You're useless. Your friends did better." A two-minute gap was allowed to elapse after the remarks. The subject answered a questionnaire about aggression. Subjects in the no-insult group received identical treatment but were not given the insulting remarks, i.e., they also faced the distraction but were not insulted.

RESULTS

Responses to the aggression questionnaire were scored. For both arousal thematic groups, the mean and standard deviation of the scores obtained in the questionnaire are calculated. Table 2 shows the results. From Table 2, it is clear that aggression means that the score of aggressively excited subjects is higher than that of altruistically excited subjects. In addition, the mean score of insulted subjects is also higher than that of non-insulted subjects. Subjects' obtained scores under different experimental conditions were analyzed in a 2x2x2 factorial design, and the ANOVA results are shown in Table 3.

The ANOVA indicated a significant interaction between thematic arousal (aggression & altruism) between aggression and offensive remarks and between altruistic arousal and offensive remarks. It also shows the joint effect of all three variables on aggression.

The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

The interaction effects of AxB (two types of thematic arousal) are significant at the 0.01 confidence level $F=[(1,72) 11.28] p<0.05$. There is also a significant interaction between AxCxC (Aggressive Arousal and Offensive Remarks) $F=[(1,72) 4.83] P<.05$. There is also a significant interaction between BxC (altruistic arousal and insulting remarks) $FI=(1,72) 16.16) p<.01$. AxBxC interaction is also significant $F=[(1,72)-10.83] p<0.01$.

Table 2. Showing mean and standard deviation scores of the subject on the aggression questionnaire under various experimental conditions.

	Aggression				Altruism			
	High		Low		High		Low	
Conditions	O	N.O.	O	N.O.	O	N.O.	O	N.O.
Mean	613.1	555.4	528.9	525.9	521.0	471.4	486.1	441.1
S.D.	22.53	20.67	14.06	14.06	19.68	12.08	7.09	12.8

* O - Offensive, N.O. - Non - Offensive

Table 3. Summary Table of ANOVA Showing the differential influence of thematic arousal and insulting remarks on aggression.

	Source of variance	Ss	df	Ms	F Ratio	Significance level
A.	Aggressive Arousal(High: Low)	114307.4	1	114307.4	416.02	**
B.	Altruistic Arousal(High: Low)	30032.0	1	30032.0	109.30	**
C.	Offensive & Non- Offensive)	39873.2	1	39873.2	145.92	**
AxB		3100.05	1	3100.05	11.28	**
AxC		1328.45	1	1328.45	4.83	*
BxC		4440.2	1	4440.2	16.16	**
AxBxC		2975.9	1	2975.9	10.83	**
Error (Within)		19782.8	72	274.76		
	Total	215840.00				

**Significant at .01 level.

*Significant at .05 level.

The results support the arousal hypothesis. In Hypothesis I, the researcher stated that thematic arousal will have a detrimental effect on insult-induced aggression. The result confirms that, under certain conditions, the level of psychological arousal and the level of aggressive behavior are closely related. When anger is present, such levels of arousal affect the amount of aggression, presumably by amplifying the emotion. The results are consistent with those obtained by Zillman et.al. (1972). A study conducted by Avsalom Caspi and colleagues (2002) found evidence for a situational interaction in determining aggression. They found evidence for a situational interaction regarding the role of genetics and parental treatment in aggression.

The second hypothesis was also confirmed as aggressively agitated but insulted subjects scored very high compared to altruistically agitated insulted subjects. Both groups of

The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

thematically excited but insulted subjects differed from non-isolated subjects. Only the arousal level effect shows less aggression, but when accompanied by the insulting remarks condition, there is a joint effect of arousal level and insulting remarks, resulting in higher aggression scores. Two factors together have been shown to exceed one factor.

A significant interaction of AxB (two types of thematic arousal) reveals that the two levels of thematic arousal act differently. Both work in a different direction and fulfill their separate role. A significant interaction of AxC (Aggressive Arousal and Offensive Remarks) shows the contribution of both level of arousal and offensive remarks. Here, not only one factor is dominant, but when combined with the level of arousal, insulting remarks become more effective. Therefore, its interaction is smaller than that of levels 01. The significant interaction between BxC (altruistic arousal and insulting remarks) suggests that these two factors also operate together. But there was less aggression because the subjects were altruistically aroused and subsequently insulted. The ABC interaction is also significant. It is assumed to be significant due to the different patterns of mean scores in the different treatment conditions.

This study strongly suggests that insult is a potential factor in evoking aggressive behavior. It is a much stronger instigator of aggression than mere frustration. Frustration combined with insult has a very significant effect on aggression measured by the questionnaire. When a person is verbally assaulted by a companion or an experimenter, numerous processes are involved that usually combine to produce a relative attack with high probability. As Kormenter exemplifies, the influence of the aggressive model, especially when we are frustrated (Jdanrotty, I'Neal & Sulzer, 1971), can be particularly strong. Insults or verbal attacks often involve a component of frustration, either as an intrinsic aspect of the attack or as an accompanying feature of the episode. Anger is reflected across different components, including an arousal component such as stress reactivity with concomitant autonomic arousal; cognitive components, including heightened attention to threats, hypervigilance, and hostile attributes (Novaco, 2016)

The results of this study have some implications for the study of aggression in children. It is reasonable to say that both types of aggressive or altruistic arousal themes enhanced aggression. In addition, offensive remarks; combined with thematic excitement, they produce more aggression. To prevent the development of aggression and violence, it is suggested that the stories that elders read in their textbooks contain more stories with altruistic themes than with themes of aggression. The story books that children need should also contain themes of prosocial behavior. The study may prove useful in creating reading material for school children.

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The Effect of Thematic Arousal and Offensive Remarks on Aggression in Children

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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