Does Motivation to Control Affect Aggression?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between control a person feels they have in their life and their reported aggressiveness. College students answered three questionnaires: Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966), Desirability for Control (Burger & Cooper, 1979), and the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). A positive correlation between Desirability of Control and Verbal Aggression was predicted and confirmed. A positive correlation between Desirability of Control and Hostility was predicted and confirmed. Not related to the Desirability of Control were Physical Aggression and Anger. The results of this study suggest that a person identified with a high desire for control may express more aggressive tendencies, such as persuading or coercing through means of Verbal Aggression and Hostility. These findings are consistent with applied research with abusive men (Prince & Arias, 1994). A positive correlation between Locus of Control and Physical Aggression was found. A positive correlation between Locus of Control and Hostility was found. The results were interpreted to suggest that people with an internal locus of control might have relative confidence in non-aggressive strategies, whereas people with an external locus of control lack such confidence and find themselves more often using coercive means. It was further speculated that differential use of emotional versus problem-solving coping strategies (e.g., Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994) might account for the Locus of Control findings.

Introduction

Does motivation for control affect aggressiveness? The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between control (both a person’s need to control others and a generalized belief in his/her ability to control oneself) and aggressiveness (including physical, verbal, anger, and hostility components) toward another person.
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Why Desirability of Control?

The Desirability of Control (DC) Scale is a 20-question survey that was developed in response to the need “to measure individual differences in the level of motivation to control the events in one’s life” (Burger & Cooper, 1979). Examples of items include: “I enjoy being able to influence the actions of others,” and “I enjoy having control over my own destiny.” Persons who score high on the scale are described as decisive, assertive, and active. They generally seek to influence others when such influence is advantageous. They prefer to avoid unpleasant situations of failures by manipulating events to ensure desired outcomes. These persons usually seek leadership roles in group situations. The persons low in the desire for control is generally nonassertive, passive, and indecisive. These persons are less likely to attempt to influence others and may prefer that others make many of their daily decisions (Burger & Cooper, 1979).

The desire for control has been linked to anxiety (Wilkinson & Chamove, 1992), to gambling (Burger, 1992), to feelings of discomfort stemming from crowding (Burger, Oakman, & Bullard, 1983) and to the ability to cope with stress (Burger, 1992), among other constructs. The Desirability of Control has even been found to predict the likelihood of engaging in domestic violence (Prince & Arias, 1994).

Why Locus of Control?

One of the most widely researched personality variables has been Locus of Control, the generalized expectancy of reinforcement as either internal or external to the self (Strickland, 1989). Those with an external locus of control (externals) see themselves as relatively passive agents and believe that the events in their lives are due to uncontrollable forces. Externals feel that the things they want to achieve are dependent on luck, chance and powerful persons or institutions. They believe that the probability of being able to control their lives by their own actions and effort is low. Conversely, those with an internal locus of control (internals) see themselves as active agents, feel that they are masters of their fates and trust in their capacity to influence the environment. Internals assume that they can control the events in their lives by effort and skill (De Brabander, Hellemans, & Boorne, 1999). An individual does not have to have a clearly defined internal or external locus of control. Because the locus of control is a continuous variable, not a dichotomous one, a person can vary situationally (Chubb & Fertman 1997).

The Rotter (1966) I-E Scale consists of 23 forced-choice items and 6 filters. The Locus of Control Scale has been extensively used in studies in the Untied States as well as in other countries (Dyal, 1984). One choice
reflects an internal Locus of Control orientation, while the other reflects an external Locus of Control orientation. In addition, choosing internal answers reflects self-confidence and optimism while choosing external answers expresses a rather fatalistic attitude (De Brabander, Hellemans, & Boorne, 1990). Rotter (1966) proposed that people differ in the extent to which they typically expect that they will be able to control a given situation.

Since Rotter introduced the locus of control concept, hundreds, if not thousands, of studies have been conducted comparing internals and externals on nearly every relevant behavior and personality dimension you can imagine (Lefcourt, 1992). A large number of investigators have examined how Locus of Control relates to academic achievement, health behavior, and depression. Internal locus of control has been correlated with many socially desirable variables, such as staying in high school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986), taking responsibility for one’s own actions, being more independent, and exhibiting greater self-control (Lefcourt, 1976), reduced anxiety (Nunn, 1988), the ability to defer lesser short-term rewards for long-term goals (Miller, 1978; Strickland, 1973), positive adjustment at home, school, and with peer relationships (Nowicki & Duke, 1983; Nunn, 1987), and being raised in a home environment that is warm, protective, and nurturing (Chandler, Wolf, Cook, & Dugovics, 1980; Crandall 1983; Nowicki & Schneewind, 1982; Lefcourt, 1976).

Why Aggression?

Between 1960 and 1989 (Bushman, Cooper, & Lemke, 1991) the Hostility Inventory constructed by Buss and Durkee (1957) was one of the most prominent and frequently used questionnaires to assess aggressiveness. A major reason for its popularity was the division of the inventory into seven scales: Assault, Indirect Aggression, Irritability, Negativism, Resentment, Suspicion, and Verbal Aggression. Through the use of this instrument, researchers were able to discover not only how aggressive a person was, but how the aggression was manifested (i.e. “I sometimes am eaten up by jealousy.” or “I know friends talk about me behind my back.”). For example, violent prisoners have higher scores than nonviolent prisoners (Gunn & Gristwood, 1975) on the Hostility Inventory. Compared with controls, men who have committed domestic violence score higher on Assault, Indirect Aggression, Irritability, Resentment, and Suspicion but not on Negativism or Verbal Aggression (Maiuro, Cahn, Vitaliano, Wagner, & Zegree, 1988).

The current and contemporary Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) retains four major subscales: Verbal aggression, Physical
aggression, Hostility, and Anger within the 29-question format and withstood current psychometric standards.

I believe the current study will contribute a new understanding of how a person with high levels of control may exhibit aggressive tendencies toward a person with a low level of control.

The hypothesis of this study has two parts. 1.) A person identified with a high desire for control will express more aggressive tendencies, such as persuading or coercing another person through means of physical, verbal, angry or hostile behavior to accomplish what he/she desires. Conversely, a person with a low desire for control will express a lesser amount of aggressive tendencies. 2.) A person with an indicated internal locus of control will express more aggressive tendencies, whereas, a person with an external locus of control will express a lower amount of aggressive tendencies to get want they want to have. This study should indicate a greater degree of aggressiveness through higher scores in Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility for an internal locus of control.

Participants who are identified as internals through the use of the Locus of Control questionnaire (Rotter, 1966) and who score high on the Desirability for Control (Burger & Cooper, 1979) instrument would be expected to score high on the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). High scores on the control questionnaire mixed with an internal sense of control would describe a person who feels “masterful or assertive” (Rotter, 1966). Thus, a person with all of the above qualities would be expected to score a higher level in the different subscales of the Aggression Questionnaire: Verbal, Physical, Anger, and Hostility.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in this study were 181 students from various psychology and communication classes at a small, mid-western state university with an enrollment of 2,800 students. These included psychology and communication majors and minors as well as those students who were taking psychology or communication classes to fulfill general studies requirements. Most of the students who are enrolled at this university are from the middle to low socioeconomic class. The sample consisted of 70.6% females (n = 127), 29.4% males (n = 53), and unknown (n = 1). Ethnic makeup was 91.7% white (n = 165), 6.1% from other ethnic backgrounds (Asian, Chinese, Hispanic American, Italian American, Native American, and Puerto Rican American; n = 11), and 2.2% unknown (n = 4). Ages of participants were as follows: 18-19 years: 19.4% (n = 35), 20-21
years: 32.2% (n = 58), 22-24 years: 29.4% (n = 53), 25-30 years: 12.8% (n = 23), over 30 years: 6.1% (n = 11), and unknown (n = 1). The average age of participants was 22.9 years.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through various psychology and communication classes. The researcher explained the nature of the study to all of the possible participants before handing out individual packets. After participants signed a consent form, they were asked to complete demographic information (gender, ethnicity, and age), as well as to complete the following research protocols individually: 1.) Buss & Perry’s Aggression Questionnaire, 29-items (Buss-Perry Questionnaire, 1992), 2.) The Desirability of Control Scale, 20-items, (Burger & Cooper, 1979), and 3.) Locus of Control Scale, 29-items (Rotter, 1966). The opportunity to leave or stop at any time without penalty was stressed. Participants who signed a consent form were not obligated to complete the questionnaires. The consent forms with the participant’s signature were not traceable to the completed questionnaires.

The investigator’s name, email address, and telephone number as well as the investigator’s mentor’s name, email address, and telephone number were given to the participants in the event that they had any questions or concerns.

Results and Discussion

One hundred eighty-one participants were tested. Data screening led to the exclusion of data from fifteen participants because of missing data. Data from one subject were excluded for missing data in the Desirability of Control Scale, nine subjects for missing data in the Locus of Control Scale, four subjects for missing data in the Aggression Questionnaire. Data from one participant were excluded because that participant did not answer demographic questions, i.e., gender, age, or race.

Desirability of Control

A simple linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between Desirability of Control and the measure of physical aggression. The test of this regression was not significant, F (1,164) = 3.713; p > .05. Desirability of Control did not predict physical aggression even though Desirability of Control did predict the likelihood of engaging in domestic violence as reported by Prince and Arias, 1994.
As predicted, Desirability of Control did predict verbal aggression, F (1,164) = 7.450; p < .05. This finding suggests that individuals with a high motivation for control may express that motivation in elevated verbal aggression. Since this is a correlational finding, one cannot be sure of the causal relationship. It is possible that verbal aggression increases the motivation for control or that some third variable causes both motivation for control and verbal aggression. An experimental design is being discussed as a follow-up study. Its purpose would be to provide information about the direction of this relationship.

A linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between Desirability of Control and the measure of anger. The test of this regression was not significant F (1, 164) = 1.791; p > .05. Desirability of Control did not predict anger.

As predicted, Desirability of Control did predict hostility score, F (1,164) = 8.513, p < .05). This finding suggests that individuals with a high motivation for control may express that motivation in elevated hostility.

A linear regression was used to test the relationship between Desirability of Control and the measure of the sum of the four subscales on the Aggression Questionnaire. The test of the regression was not significant, F (1, 164) = .452; p > .05). The Desirability of Control may predict some types of aggression but not other types.

A person identified with a high desire for control expressed more aggressive tendencies, such as persuading or coercing another person through means of verbal and hostile behavior to accomplish what is desired. Conversely, a person with a low desire for control expressed a lesser amount of aggressive tendencies. Physical aggression, anger, and the sum of the four subscales were not found to be significant to the Desirability of Control Scale.

Two of the four aggression scales were related to Desirability of Control. Two scales were not. There are multiple determinants of physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. The expressions of these behaviors likely have different thresholds. In this particular study and with this population of participants other motivations than Desirability of Control may have had more of an effect than Desirability of Control. One possibility might be that of demand characteristics (Aronson, Brewer, & Carlsmith, 1985). It may be less threatening to admit to the experimenter that one has engaged in verbal aggression and hostility than physical aggression and anger. The majority of participants were females and the expression of physical aggression and anger is less socially acceptable for females than males (Hyde, 2004).
Predictions involving the Locus of Control were not confirmed. Some correlations were not significant, while other correlations were significant. However, those correlations found significant were in the opposite direction of the prediction.

The relationship between the Locus of Control and physical aggression was significant, $F(1, 164) = 9.710; p < .05)$. Subjects’ predicted physical aggression score is equal to $14.273 + .474 \text{ (Locus of Control)}$. However, the direction of the relationship was opposite to the prediction. External participants were more physically aggressive than internal participants.

The relationship between the Locus of Control and verbal aggression was found to be non-significant, $F(1, 164) = .134; p > .05)$, as well as, the relationship with anger, $F(1, 164) = .356; p > .05)$.

The test of regression between the Locus of Control and hostility was significant, $F(1, 164) = 20.906; p < .001)$. Subjects’ predicted hostility score was equal to $14.860 + .597 \text{ (Locus of Control)}$. However, the direction of the relationship was opposite to the prediction. External participants were more hostile than internal participants.

The test of regression between the Locus of Control and the sum of the four subscales on the Aggression Questionnaire was significant, $F(1, 164) = 11.457; p < .001)$. Subjects’ predicted total score on the Aggression Questionnaire is equal to $59.038 + 1.165 \text{ (Locus of Control)}$. The sum of the four subscales on the Aggression Questionnaire increased for external participants, but did not increase with internal participants.

“Tedeschi et al. (1977) suggest that coercive power is a means of influence that results in aggression when other means are inadequate. Consistent with that theoretical position, Stets (1988) reports that abusive men report that they do not use violence when they when they can influence their partner without the use of violence. Abusive men resort to violence when other means of violence are inadequate” (as cited in Prince & Arias, 1994).

Analogously, people with an internal locus of control may have relative confidence in non-aggressive strategies to fulfill wishes, whereas people with an external locus of control lack such confidence and find themselves more often using coercive means.

A Speculated Theory about the Locus of Control

It could be speculated that another reason internals did not show more aggressive tendencies than an externals is the fact that they have different coping strategies. An internal person would be more prone to use
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a problem solving coping method; whereas, an external may use more of an emotional coping mechanism.

Lazarus & Lazarus (1994) argues that one coping strategy is to mount an action to change a troubling situation. They argue that such problem-solving coping is directed to change what other people think or do (p. 153). “In trying to change the behavior of others, it is usually necessary to consider how to approach them. Instead of bluntly communicating your annoyance to the friend who is too demanding, you might figure out how to approach him/her more sensitively” (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). De Brabander, Hellemans, & Boorne (1999) stated that internals assume that they can control the events in their lives by effort and skill.

As Lazarus & Lazarus (1994) continue to argue, if a situation cannot be problem solved, a person could “subdue or otherwise manage the distressing emotions it causes” (p. 156). “Emotion-centered coping strategies, which are internal and private, are mounted to control distress and the dysfunction it might cause when there is little or nothing else we can do. Emotion-centered coping consists of what we tell ourselves in the effort at such control. It changes the way we think about what is happening from a threatening to a more benign or positive appraisal” (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). De Brabander, Hellemans, & Boorne, (1999) suggests that “a person with an external locus of control see themselves as relatively passive agents and believe that the events in their lives are due to uncontrollable forces.”

The sample was one of convenience, predominately white, and was recruited at a small, mid-western state university with an enrollment of 2,800 students. Follow-up research will determine whether these results will generalize to other populations.

Follow-up research will be needed to understand the mechanisms underlying the relationship between the desire to control and aggression. This study suggests ways to expand earlier research about the motivation to control and aggression. Follow-up research should look at the interaction of additional variables that may limit these conclusions and expand understanding.
Works Cited


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