

Restoring perceived control with aggression: Why, how, and who?

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From early experiments using uncontrollable noise through to modern research on domestic violence, there is evidence that aggressive behaviour, for some people, may restore a sense of being in control of one's world. There is however, little research that examines the mechanisms underlying this effect. We hypothesized that control-aggression effects may be underpinned by deeply-rooted beliefs that aggressive responses are a valid and effective way to restore a sense of situational control. For some individuals such beliefs may come to constitute 'control-aggression schemas' that are automatically activated during a perceived loss of situational control, and which impel the holder to respond with aggression. After devising a scale to test such beliefs, we gave 80 participants control or no control over an aversive noise and then measured aggression using the hot sauce paradigm of Lieberman et al (1999). In line with previous findings, the group who had the control-loss trigger were significantly more aggressive than the group with no control-loss trigger. When there was a control-loss trigger however, higher control-aggression schema scores strongly predicted greater aggression. Conversely, when there was no control-loss trigger, control-aggression schemas did not predict aggression at all. In a second study, high levels of control-aggression schemas were held by those with a high exposure to violent media, high levels of other maladaptive schemas, and a variety of personality traits including narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and shame. A third study found that certain maladaptive parenting styles, particularly from the mother, predicted a predisposition to hold such beliefs. Overall these findings suggest there is a substantial cognitive component to control-aggression effects, and that certain personality traits and childhood experiences may predispose an individual to respond to a control-loss situation with aggression.

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