

Psychologists discover links between angry thoughts and displaced aggression in male gang affiliates

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(Medical Xpress) -- Research conducted among pupils in three London schools has shown that male street gang affiliates who engage in angry rumination (i.e. think continuously about provoking or negative events and situations) have the greatest tendency towards displaced aggression against innocent others.

This is partly because angry rumination can provide an opportunity for revenge planning and fantasising, as well as justifying the anger that a person feels, which can make provoked persons feel better. As a result, the desire and motivation for revenge is maintained, prolonged or exacerbated, and ruminating individuals are more likely to be primed with aggressive tendencies.

The research, which was conducted by psychologist Dr Eduardo Vasquez and colleagues at the University of Kent, also concluded that angry rumination could be the psychological path that links gang affiliation to displaced aggression. In other words, if rumination did not occur, displaced aggression might be reduced in gang affiliates. Furthermore, their study showed that rumination is an important predictor of displaced aggression above and beyond other [personality characteristics](#) such as trait aggression, anger, hostility, and [irritability](#).

Dr Vasquez, an expert on [aggressive behaviour](#) and inter-[gang violence](#), explained that ruminating about provoking incidents 'can prime

individuals for aggressive responding and facilitates not only direct [retaliation](#) against a provocateur, but also displaced aggression toward innocent targets. This is because aggressive priming makes individuals perceive more hostility from others and increases the motivation to lash out, especially if they encounter a safe target, such as a [sibling](#) or [romantic partner](#), who might not retaliate in a severe manner.

'Therefore, gang-affiliated youth may be at an increased risk of engaging in displaced aggression as they are more likely to encounter provoking situations and spend more time thinking about aggression-related ideas, such as revenge and getting even.'

Dr Vasquez, who lectures in forensic psychology at the University's School of Psychology, also explained that the team's findings suggest that gang affiliated youth might not aggress simply as a function of highly aggressive personalities. 'Rather, they may be part of a population that is more likely to experience situations that produce a wide range of aggressive behaviours,' he said. 'For instance, their tendency to experience aversive events and to ruminate increases the likelihood that gang-affiliated youth will aggress, even in the absence of proper subsequent justification.'

This research by Dr Vasquez and colleagues is important in that it has also revealed that one promising route for reducing aggression and violence within male street gang affiliates involves developing interventions that focus on decreasing rumination. This may include 'distraction techniques' such as exercise or sporting activity and listening to music. Other types of activities that might prove useful against ruminating include meditation and relaxation techniques, hobbies or reading. 'Such distractions,' he said, 'regulate negative affect by keeping negative thought from being readily accessible and/or by drawing the focus of attention away from negative moods.'

More information: 'Rumination and the Displacement of Aggression in United Kingdom Gang-Affiliated Youth' (Eduardo A. Vasquez, Sarah Osman and Jane L. Wood, School of Psychology, University of Kent) was published in *Aggressive Behavior*, Volume 38, pages 89–97 (2012).

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