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Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression

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Abstract

Many urban areas experienced an alarming growth of gang activity and violence during the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Gang members, motivated by various factors, commit a variety of different types of violent acts towards rivals and other targets. Our focus involves instances of displaced aggression, which generally refers to situations in which aggression is targeted towards individuals who have either not themselves committed an offense against the aggressor (s), or who provide an offense that is too mild to justify the aggression levels that are expressed towards them. We discuss how social-psychological mechanisms and models of two types of displaced aggression might help explain some aspects of the retaliatory behavior that is expressed by members of street gangs. We also propose general techniques that have the potential to reduce such aggressive behavior.

Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression

Imagine the following two situations involving juveniles:

Rene is 18 years old and a member of an urban gang. He is riding in a car with three fellow gang members, heading towards a neighborhood that is the home turf of a rival gang. They are heading towards that particular neighborhood to conduct a drive-by shooting against their rivals-- a reprisal for an attack against one of their own earlier that week. A few minutes later, Rene and his friends arrive in the neighborhood and identify a group of young men as targets. Rene aims the gun he carries with him at the young men standing in front of a house. Although Rene himself was not a target in the earlier attack, and although his current targets were probably not involved in the attack against gang, he nevertheless decides to shoot, as he perceives any member of the rival group to be an appropriate target.

A seventeen-year-old man named Jason and four of his friends, all members of a street gang, are walking towards a group of three young men whom they have identified as members of a rival gang. Although fist fights between rival gangs are common in that part of the city, Jason is especially motivated to severely injure other rivals that particular day. He works in a supermarket, and was sternly reprimanded and nearly fired from his job by his boss earlier that day. The incident at work angered Jason, who has not stopped thinking and ruminating about it all day long, and he wants to vent his anger at someone.

The previous scenarios involving members of youth gangs illustrate two distinct manifestations that can be generally categorized as *displaced aggression* (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), defined herein as a level of aggression towards a target that is greater than what is warranted or justified by a prior provocation (see Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller 2000). Whether the acts involve drive-by shootings against rival gangs or

beatings of siblings or romantic partners, we theorize that individuals who are members of gangs or have strong links to them have a greater risk of engaging in various forms of displaced aggression. Our goal, however, is not to claim that most aggressive acts committed by gang members involve displaced aggression. There are multiple reasons why people in gangs may be prone to aggression. Rather, our goals are 1) to discuss how social-psychological mechanisms and models of two types of displaced aggression might help explain some aspects of the retaliatory behavior that is expressed by members of street gangs, and 2) propose general techniques to diminish such aggressive behavior. These are important goals because most research on gangs has focused on forms of aggression and violence targeted directly at the instigators and has neglected to examine the role that displaced aggression plays in the expression of gang violence. Further, understanding the situational factors that produce various forms of displaced aggression in gang members augments the chances of developing more effective (and perhaps more cost-effective) techniques for decreasing aggression in these populations. Thus, an additional goal of this paper is to propose direct links between basic social-psychological and applied research in a serious, real-world problem, and stimulate further inquiry into this phenomenon.

This article is organized in the following manner: first, we introduce and discuss the concept of displaced aggression. Second, we discuss in more detail two different types of this behavior, namely, *triggered displaced aggression* (TDA; Pedersen, Gonzalez, & Miller, 2000), and *group-based or vicarious retribution* (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006), and how they might contribute to the expression of aggression in gang members, both at the interpersonal and at the inter-group levels. Third, we discuss and propose ways in which displaced aggression can be reduced.

Youth gangs have existed for generations and have attracted the attention of researchers for decades (e.g., Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Fleisher, 1998; Hagadorn 1988; Klein 1995; Short and Strodbeck 1965; Thrasher 1927; Vigil, 1998; see also Wood & Alleyne, this volume). Many urban areas experienced an alarming growth of gang activity and violence during the late 1980's and early 1990's and again from 2001 through 2007. The National Youth Gang Survey results indicate that an estimated 788,000 gang members and 27,000 gangs were active in the United States in 2007 (Egley and O'Donnell, 2009). During the last five years in Los Angeles, California alone, there were over 23,000 violent gang crimes in the city, including 784 homicides, nearly 12,000 felony assaults, approximately 10,000 robberies and just under 500 rapes (Los Angeles Police Department, 2009).

When people think of gang violence, they often think of one particular form of violence – the gang against gang “drive-by” shooting. Often, it is believed, this killing will beget more killing as the surviving targets (and their fellows) seek revenge, creating an endless cycle of killing in an out of control “gang war.” These impressions of gang violence, shaped in part by television and film depiction, loom large in the public mind. As a whole, however, gang members commit a variety of different types of violent acts towards rivals and other targets. Such acts may have different motivations, such as competition in the drug trade (Cohen, Cork, Engberg, & Tita, 1998; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), upholding one's status within the gang (Short & Strodbeck, 1965), or revenge (Decker, 1996). Our focus here, however, involves situations in which retaliatory behavior is targeted towards individuals who have either not themselves committed an offense against the aggressor (s), or who receive a punishment that is more severe than is justified. Thus, in these situations, aggression can be categorized as displaced because the targets, at least from an observer's point of view, are innocent or do not

deserve the *level* of punishment that they receive. Next, we discuss the concept of displaced aggression and some of the relevant research involving this phenomenon. We also discuss in a subsequent section the concept of group-based retribution, which may be especially relevant to understanding important aspects of inter-gang violence and its escalation.

Displaced Aggression

In their classic work linking frustration to aggressive behavior, Dollard et al., (1939) discuss the concept of displaced aggression, whereby an individual who encounters a provoking situation that precludes retaliation subsequently aggresses against a target that is not the source of the initial provocation (Dollard et al., 1939). Thus, the retaliation that would normally be targeted at the source of the provocation is displaced towards a different individual. Three factors can inhibit aggression against the original instigator and set a context for displacement (Dollard et al., 1939). One factor is the unavailability of the provoking individual, who may have left the immediate surroundings. A second factor involves intangible instigators, such as uncomfortable weather or an economic recession. A third factor involves fear of retaliation from the provocateur, as when the individual is more powerful. In such cases, direct aggression towards the instigator is inhibited in order to avoid punishment from the target. When any of these factors comes into play, aggression is more likely to be targeted towards individuals who are safer and/or available for punishment.

Research on displaced aggression, however, has produced mixed findings. Whereas some studies have indeed shown that individuals who have been provoked can displaced aggression to innocent targets (e.g., Worchel, Hardy, & Hurley, 1976), other studies have not produced displacement (e.g., White, 1979). Nevertheless, a meta-analysis of the literature has shown that displaced aggression is a reliable phenomenon across studies (Marcus-Newhall et al.,

2000). One interesting finding in this meta-analysis is that, for participants who are previously provoked, the more negative the setting in which they interact with their target, the greater the levels of aggression they displace (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000). This suggests that when individuals are provoked, subsequent aversive events play a role in triggering the displacement of aggression towards other persons.

Triggered Displaced Aggression

More recent empirical work examining the effects of triggering events on displaced aggression show that provoked participants are indeed more likely to displace aggression towards targets who provide a second instigation, a phenomenon known as Triggered Displaced Aggression (TDA; Pedersen, et al., 2000). TDA differs from the classic notion of displaced aggression in that in the former, the target of aggression provides a second provocation termed a *trigger* (Pedersen et al., 2000). Thus, the aggressor encounters two instigations—a Time 1 or initial provocation and a subsequent (Time 2) trigger. One interesting aspect of TDA is that a trigger can be mild, such as faux pas, yet still elicit high levels of aggression towards its source when it is preceded by a more intense initial provocation (Pedersen et al., 2000; Vasquez, Denson, Pedersen, Stenstrom, & Miller, 2005).

It is important to note that although the target of retaliation in the TDA paradigm does provide an instigation (i.e. is not completely innocent), TDA is nevertheless conceptualized as a type of displaced aggression because level of retaliation is a function of a prior, unrelated provocation, and the target is punished to a degree that violates norms of reciprocity and escalation of aggression, such as the tit-for-tat rule (Axelrod, 1984). According to this rule, social norms guide retaliatory behavior such that aggression is typically escalated in small increments. TDA, however, violates such norms in that the interaction of a prior provocation

and a minor triggering event can produce a multiplicative or synergistic effect that augments aggression beyond the additive effects of either instigation (Miller, Pedersen, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003; Pedersen et al., 2000). Using Berkowitz's Neo-associationistic model (Berkowitz, 1993), researchers theorize that this occurs because provocations activate a network of aggression-related motives, cognitions, and emotions, which increase the readiness for aggressive responding. As a result, the negative features of subsequent interactions are likely to be made highly salient to provoked individuals, relative to unprovoked individuals, thereby instigating a stronger reaction to them. In essence, provocations prime individuals to interpret events in a more negative manner, and react more aggressively. Because of their ambiguity, mild triggering events are susceptible to a negative, biased attributional distortion as a result of prior provocations. The negative characteristics of the trigger appear more extreme, and this motivates higher levels of aggression (Miller et al., 2003). In addition, the anger-related arousal from the previous provocation can further energize an aggressive response to later events (Miller et al., 2003).

Rumination and Displaced Aggression

The time gap between the initial provocation and the trigger is an important factor in the TDA (Miller et al., 2003). This is because affective arousal from the provocation is likely to dissipate after a period of 15-20 minutes (Tyson, 1998). The likelihood that a provoked individual will engage in TDA diminishes as the time lapse between the initial provocation and the trigger increases (see Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005). The relatively short time gap between provocations that TDA requires could reduce its ecological validity and confine it primarily to a laboratory phenomenon because, in many real-world scenarios, the time between provocations and triggers is likely to exceed 15-20 minutes.

How could the TDA paradigm help explain instances when a man, berated by his boss hours earlier at work, yells and screams at his wife for a faux pas? One answer involves the effects of *ruminating* on maintaining negative affect and cognitive representations of instigating events. Rumination has been defined as self-focused attention toward one's thoughts and feelings and their causes (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). It can also be defined as provocation-focused thought (see Bushman et al., 2005; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). For our purposes, the important aspect of rumination is that it can increase as well as maintain angry feelings and aggression-related cognitions (Bushman et al., 2005; Martin & Tesser, 1989; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Ruminating individuals can remain primed for aggressive behavior for relatively long periods of time. As a result, an earlier provocation can interact with a subsequent trigger and produce displaced aggression even when the time gap between instigations is much greater than 20 minutes (Bushman et al., 2005). Bushman et al., (2005), for instance, had provoked participants ruminate about an instigation for 25 minutes (Studies 1 and 2) or eight hours (Study 3). Participants who ruminated and were subsequently triggered were more likely to engage in displaced aggression than those who were distracted (Bushman et al., 2005). Ruminative thought can explain why previously provoked individuals can "take it out" on others even hours after being provoked.

A variety of factors can potentially impact rumination. Individuals who experience high-intensity provocations (e.g. strong humiliations, physical assaults), for instance, may be more motivated to ruminate than those who experience weaker provocations. In addition, because anger has been identified as a high-activation emotion (Larsen & Diener, 1992) and involves self-justification for experiencing this negative emotion in provoked individuals (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990), it may be more difficult for angry persons to stop ruminative

thought, compared to other emotions (Tice & Baumeister, 1993). Personality characteristics can also moderate rumination. High trait ruminators, persons who tend to ruminate following aversive events, are more likely to remain primed for aggression for long periods of time following a provocation, and thus, engage in displaced aggression (Denson, Pedersen, & Miller 2006).

Gang Members and Displaced Aggression

To our knowledge, no research has been conducted specifically to assess how the processes that produce displaced aggression impact and contribute to the aggressive behavior of gang members. We propose, however, that various environmental and socio-psychological factors augment the risk of these individuals engaging in displaced aggression, which can be targeted to siblings, friends, or romantic partners. These factors may additionally contribute to inter-gang violence. Next, we discuss why gang members may be especially at risk for displacement.

As previously stated, a central aspect of models of displaced aggression involves aggressive priming induced through provoking situations that nevertheless preclude retaliation against the original provocateur (Dollard et al., 1939; Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000). Gang members may be more vulnerable than non-members to experiencing such situations because (1) much of their behavior is not normative in conventional society, which creates conflicts with other individuals, including authority figures and parents, and (2) because the social environments (e.g. neglectful or abusive parents, multiple marginality rooted in stressful social conditions or neighborhood environments) that produce maladaptive behaviors and lifestyles are also likely to produce more negative affect overall (see Vigil, 1998). With regards to the first point, for instance, parental figures may become aware and are likely to disapprove of many

instances of problematic, non-normative and/or illegal behaviors (e.g., school absenteeism, drug use, low performance in school). This, in turn, can increase conflicts between parent and child, leading to more arguments and punishment. With regards to the second point, strain from critical life events, one factor that can motivate juveniles to join a gang in the first place (Thornberry et al., 2003), can reasonably be expected to be continuous sources of negative affect. Long-term stressors such as these can be a constant source of instigations and negative affect for a child, even after he/she has joined a gang.

It is reasonable to expect that in most cases, the situations described above do not directly lead to retribution against parents or others. This may be especially true for younger individuals because they lack the physical size or self-efficacy to retaliate. As previously stated, however, they are likely to induce negative affect and aggressive priming, which can influence a gang member's perception of subsequent events in social interactions, as models of displaced aggression predict (Dollard, et al., 1939; Miller et al., 2003). In such environments, the combination of prior and subsequent instigations augment the chances that a gang member who is experiencing negative affect and is motivated to aggress will nevertheless avoid further conflict with a parent, friend, or neighbor, only to displace his aggressive behavior towards another person. These events are likely to be exacerbated by the aggressive nature of gang members, who are likely to have well-developed scripts/habits for reacting to aversive events with aggression, and may have a greater propensity to seek safe targets (i.e. find an outlet) once they have been previously provoked.

The influence of the processes involved in displaced aggression may additionally spread to inter-gang contact (group-based retribution, which is especially relevant to inter-group conflict, is discussed in another section below). Although it is often the case that gang members

attack rival gangs when they meet, there are many instances of inter-gang contact that do not result in violence. Rivals may exchange defiant looks, insults and verbal attacks, or even cautious looks from a distance in order to defend their honor (Moore, 2002; Vigil, 1998, 2002) without engaging in violent acts. Individuals who may have been previously primed with aggressive responding, however, may not limit themselves to verbal exchanges with rival gang members. Their state of augmented motivation to aggress readies them for more extreme interpretations of events and higher levels of aggressive acts. In such cases, when rivals come into contact, even a simple stare or membership in a rival gang may serve as a trigger that focuses attention towards a target, and the aggressive priming provides sufficient motivation to escalate the encounter to more extreme acts of violence.

We also propose that rumination may play an even greater role in displaced (as well as direct) aggression in gang members than in the normal population. There are at least two reasons for this. First, it has been suggested that persons who perceive anger as useful may be more likely to ruminate (Averill, 1982; Tice & Baumeister, 1993). We theorize that gang members generally fit in this category of individuals. For instance, gang members learn that aggression is typical and appropriate response to instigations (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995; Moore, 2002; Vigil, 1998), and thus, may be more likely to believe that anger (and any accompanying revenge planning and fantasizing) is a normal and useful response to instigating events. Indeed, ruminating about prior instigations may be a normative behavior among members of street gangs. Consequently, these individuals can be expected to more readily engage in ruminative thought and have greater difficulty in disengaging in this behavior. Second, gangs adopt codes or norms of honor that guide which behaviors are considered or not considered appropriate (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1995; Moore, 2002; Vigil, 1998,

2002). They can be categorized as cultures of honor in which breaking such norms of conduct is perceived as extremely disrespectful. Members of groups that adopt a culture of honor tend to react more strongly to provocations and instigations, and instances of disrespect or loss of face are more likely to invite retaliation (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwartz, 1996), often times in the form of extreme violence. Research has shown that provocation intensity is positively related to rumination (Horowitz, 1986). Thus, although research on rumination among members of cultures of honor is lacking, it is reasonable to expect that their more extreme affective reactions to provocations motivates them to ruminate. We also theorize that this applies to gang members. When circumstances preclude retaliation against the source of negative affect (e.g., a parent, the police, teachers), the thwarting may motivate engaging in rumination, thereby prolonging aggressive priming, which can interact with subsequent negative events and produce displaced aggression (Bushman et al., 2005). As a result, negative encounters with individuals, even hours after a prior instigation, can result in more intense levels of aggression than would occur in the absence of rumination.

It may be pointed out that, for gang members, their cultural context (i.e. being in a culture of honor) sufficiently provides them with norms and scripts for retaliatory behaviors, such that rumination might not be an important predictor of aggression. Although this is certainly a possibility, we argue that rumination can still be an important factor in gang violence and aggression because rumination can augment the existing motivation and commitment to retaliate via revenge planning and fantasizing. Rumination may exacerbate retaliatory behaviors by distorting cognitive representation of the original provoking events, attributions of blame, and justifications for retaliation over time. It may also prove to be a mediator of provocation and

aggression when the two are separated by long time intervals. These issues, of course, should be empirically addressed by researchers.

Group-Based Retribution as a Source of Gang-Related Violence

As we've discussed, the public generally imagines gang-related aggression as cycles of retributive violence or blood feuds between rival gangs. In fact, the evidence (though slim) indicates that group-based retributive violence is not likely to account for the majority of the violence committed by gang members. Instead, in at least some cities in which good data is available, acts of aggression committed by gang members appears to occur primarily during interpersonal provocations (with non gang members as well as with another member in their own gang) and in the commission of crimes, rather than gang-against-gang retributive violence (e.g., Decker & Curry, 2002). Nonetheless, though public impressions of its prevalence might be overblown, retributive violence between gangs and even between sets or cliques within the same gang is real and, during at least some time periods in Los Angeles, accounted for a large percentage of gang-related violence (Klein & Maxson, 1989).

Thus, though it is not the only source of gang-linked violence, retributive aggression between gangs (particularly that which spills out onto the streets and affects bystanders) is an important public safety concern. One might be tempted to view such violence as an outgrowth of gang-member pathology. However, when viewed in the broader scope of human social life, such behavior is not that surprising given the context in which gangs operate. Indeed, group-based retaliation is a wide-spread phenomenon at many levels of human social structure. For example, in international contexts, public attitudes about war are increasingly believed to often reflect group-based retribution motives (e.g., Liberman, 2006, 2007; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan 2006).

To date, the richest analysis of group-based retribution comes from historical and anthropological research in diverse agricultural, herding, and hunter-gatherer societies. Although seemingly a world away from the life of street gangs embedded in modern industrialized societies, the anthropological research (for a review, see chapter 10 of Daly & Wilson, 1988) provides some clues about why some street gangs might be prone to group-based retributive violence. For example, the anthropological research indicates that group-based retaliation is most common in situations which lack a centralized and coercive power that can exert external control of the parties involved in the altercation (Otterbein & Otterbein, 1965). In these instances, aggrieved people have little recourse to a higher power from which to secure justice and must resort to “self-help” to get justice. This self help justice often takes the form of “blood revenge” (e.g., Boehm, 1987) in which members of the aggrieved group retaliate against not only the direct perpetrator, but also (or instead) other members of the perpetrator’s group. This anthropological research also indicates that blood revenge is enhanced in cultural contexts in which there is competition over land and other resources and in which groups are, therefore, motivated to appear strong to protect these resources (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In these societies the “honor” of the group and its reputation for toughness and willingness to aggress against those who transgress against it are paramount (Boehm, 1987; Daly & Wilson, 1988).

These cultural contextual variables map to some degree onto aspects of gang life (see Decker and Van Winkle, 2002; Klein, 1995; Vigil, 1998). Gangs by definition live at least partially outside the law and thus cannot easily appeal to authorities to help them resolve disputes (or at least resolve them in a way that would satisfy their motives). Furthermore, many gangs do have territory or turf with both symbolic and practical value (e.g., an area in which drug sales are controlled). These conditions of low external control and the need for “self-help”

justice coupled with competition over turf suggest that at least some gangs might be prone to engage in group-based retaliatory aggression against rival gangs or other groups.

The anthropological research is, thus, very valuable for indicating that however undesirable retributive violence between gangs is for the communities in which they are located, such violence is to some degree understandable given the social space in which gangs operate. The anthropological research is also valuable for indicating some of the variables that may affect the likelihood of group-based violence. However, the step by step cognitive and affective processes that precede acts of retributive aggression have not generally been the focus of anthropologists. Instead, it is social psychological researchers who have recently begun to more closely examine the affective and cognitive factors that determine when and why people engage in group-based aggression. In our discussion, we rely on a recently developed framework (Lickel et al., 2006) that lays out a description of what occurs after an inter-group provocation to determine when and why that provocation results in retributive aggression between the members of different groups. Attention to these more fine-grained psychological processes may provide clues for how to intervene to reduce the gang violence that has its roots in the motivation for group-based retribution.

A key question for researchers on gang violence (and all examples of group-based aggression) is to understand how people who are not directly involved in an initial provocation between two individuals can nonetheless be drawn into the conflict. There are two parts to this question. First, why are people sometimes motivated to retaliate on behalf of others, even when they themselves have not been directly harmed? Second, why are out-group members beyond the direct perpetrator of the initial provocation sometimes considered appropriate targets for retaliation? When both of these conditions are met (i.e., people retaliating when they themselves

have not been directly harmed and directing that aggression against people who themselves were not directly responsible for the initial provocation), the ground is potentially set for a cycle of retributive tit-for-tat aggression between two groups. Note that in some ways, this phenomenon can be categorized as displaced aggression given that retaliatory behaviors can be targeted at individuals who are the original perpetrators. Nevertheless, retributive violence also shares similarities with direct forms of aggression in that an attack against the in-group is perceived as an attack on the self, and people are believed to be thinking consciously about the ways in which the targets of retribution share blame for the provocation. What are the steps that precede an act of group-based retribution? Below we sketch the cognitive and affective processes and variables that are believed to come into play preceding an act of group-based retribution.

Event construal and framing – Is it an inter-group provocation? Clearly, not all negative events produce group-based retribution. The seriousness of the event, for example, obviously moderates whether people attend to the event and consider its implications. A brief, ambiguous stare is less provocative than a verbal insult, and both are of course less serious than a gunshot. However, apart from the event's seriousness, the likelihood of retaliating on behalf of a fellow gang member is increased when the person harming their fellow in-group member is easily categorized as a member of a relevant out-group. In the context of gang violence, this is most likely to be an instance in which a member of another rival gang has committed the provocative act. Because of past rivalry, any negative act from a member of a rival gang is likely to be viewed as an inter-group provocation, even if it is an act that has its basis primarily in an interpersonal dispute.

How motivated are people to retaliate? - The importance of in-group identification.

Once an event has been categorized in inter-group terms, there is the potential for people not

directly harmed by the initial provocation are nonetheless motivated to retaliate on behalf of the group. This motivation for revenge may be targeted against either the direct provocateur or an entire group to which the provocateur belongs. For the moment, we'll consider people's motivation for either form of retribution that they might commit or support on behalf of their group. This motivation depends on a number of factors. Most important of these is believed to be the degree of a person's identification with the group. Group identification is a multifaceted concept, but can be defined in terms of a person's degree of attachment to members of an ingroup and the extent to which the group is an important and valued aspect of his or her identity (Brewer & Silver, 2000; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Smith & Henry, 1996).

Group identification is likely to make a difference in predicting gang members' motivation for retaliation on behalf of the group for several reasons (Lickel et al., 2006). First, insofar as they share strong interpersonal attachments to members of their group who were harmed in the provocation, it may be that people feel empathically driven anger (Davis, 1994). Gang members may feel motivated to help their harmed in-group members, and aggressing against those who harmed their fellow gang members is a potentially powerful form of helping. Identification matters for a second reason as well, which is the importance of the shared identity of the gang. Attacks from a rival gang or other group may threaten the valued identity of the gang. Given that, according to Social identity theory, individuals are motivated to maintain a positive group identity (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these threats are likely to induce high levels of anger and motivation to even the score. In fact, outside of the gang context, research has shown that the strength of people's ingroup identification predicts their anger towards threatening out-groups (e.g., Stenstrom, Lickel, Miller, & Denson, 2008) and shifting self-

categorization away from the harmed ingroup to another identity can reduce anger (Ray, Mackie, Rydell, & Smith, 2008). This group-based anger predicts not only motivation for retaliation against the direct provocateur, but also motivation for retribution against the entire group when the provocation has been framed in intergroup terms (e.g., Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2006; Sadler, Lineberger, Correll, & Park, 2005; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006; Stenstrom et al., 2008; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). Furthermore, when people retaliate on behalf of the group, this satisfies the need for retribution and reduces anger amongst other ingroup members even when those other group members have not themselves participated in the retribution (Maitner et al., 2006). In addition, to the degree to which a gang is perceived as an aspect of the self (i.e., higher identification), an attack on any member of the gang should be perceived as an attack against the self, which should produce higher levels of retaliatory motivation. Such an attack against the another ingroup member is analogous to an attack against any body part belonging to a person; regardless of whether an attack is aimed at a person's legs, arms, or back, that individual is likely to perceive it as an attack against the self.

In addition to these anger-driven pathways to retribution, there is a third potentially important route, namely normative pressure to aggress on behalf of the gang. Norms represent an expected standard of behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) in a social context or group. It has been hypothesized (Lickel et al., 2006) that there is a generalized norm of group-based retribution that is relevant for all groups, but we think that this may be particularly true for gang memberships. Insofar as there is a strong norm of retribution on behalf of the gang, several things follow from this.

First, we hypothesize that these normative influences may be greatest for people who are most highly identified with the gang. For example, research on attitude-behavior consistency has

shown that individuals who are highly group identified are more likely to exhibit behavior that is influenced by the normative standards of their in-group (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Second, we expect that gang members who fail to retaliate on behalf will lose status and may be ostracized or expelled from the gang (or perhaps be the target of violence themselves.) Gang members may thus feel pressure to retaliate on behalf of the gang even when they do not want to. Third, we expect that retaliating on behalf of the gang may result in increased respect and status within the group. This may be particularly true for gang leaders who have a special role in upholding and embodying the norms of the group, and for gang initiates who are trying to prove themselves to other gang members.

Finally, we think it is important for gang researchers to consider the potential role of pluralistic ignorance in the perception of norms of retributive violence in gangs. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when one misperceives the extent to which others share one's views by falsely assuming that one's own view is in the minority (Miller & McFarland, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993). In the gang context, this might mean, for example, that gang members may privately not want to engage in acts that would escalate a confrontation with another gang, but believe that their view is in the minority. Because everyone is worried about the consequences of even broaching the idea of not retaliating, everyone keeps quiet. Gang members might then carry out acts of aggression because they are acting in line with the perceived norm, even when a majority of people in the gang share their reservations. We know of no evidence concerning pluralistic ignorance in gang violence contexts, but it does point towards one avenue for future research and potential interventions.

Who is an appropriate target? – Perceptions of out-group entitativity. In our view, anger and normative influences provide the motivation force for group-based retribution. However,

there is still the question of who should be the target for retribution. On the one hand, the direct perpetrator of the initial provocation represents an attractive target for retribution. However, often other people who are tied to that person through common group membership are also considered appropriate targets for retaliation. This spreading of retribution from the direct provocateur to other people is the hallmark of group-based retribution. Part of the answer concerns the initial framing of the provocation, when people discern whether this is an interpersonal incident between individuals whose group identities are (or are not) relevant to the self. This initial construal process highlights groups to which the provocateur belongs and which might (under some circumstances) be considered as targets for group-based retribution.

However, we also hypothesize that people consider the nature of these groups and the ties amongst the group members (particularly to the provocateur) when targeting their retaliation. In particular, we believe that people may attend to the perceived entitativity of the group. Entitativity is the perception of a group as being a cohesive unit, tied together by common traits, values, and particularly goals (Campbell, 1958; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Lickel, Hamilton, Wierzchowska, Lewis, Sherman, & Uhles, 2000; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). In many ways, it is the perceptual side of group cohesiveness – it is in essence the lay person's analysis of how the degree of cohesiveness and interdependence amongst members of a group.

Past research has linked perception of entitativity to collective blame, a precursor to group-based retaliation. Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton (2003) showed that people's assignment of blame to different groups linked to the Columbine High School shooters was strongly predicted by the degree to which those groups and the shooters had a highly interdependent relationship. Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames (2006) showed that across a wide

range of groups from social categories to task groups to intimacy groups (such as friends and family) that perceptions of group entitativity strongly predicted the extent to which membership in the group entailed collective responsibility for the group's wrong-doings. The picture becomes more complex though, when we examine the link between entitativity and group-based retribution. For example, Stenstrom et al. (2008) found that people's identification with their harmed in-group strongly predicted the degree to which they saw a provocative out-group as tight-knit (even when presented with highly diagnostic information about the true degree of cohesiveness between the group and the provocateur). Furthermore, anger and perceptions of out-group entitativity were also highly correlated. Thus, there is some evidence that in inter-group conflict situations, people's perceptions of the degree of out-group entitativity become biased in ways that justify retaliation against the out-group. Thus, even if the out-group is relatively low in cohesiveness, anger towards them and a desire for retaliation can promote motivated cognition (Kunda, 1990) that justifies the morality of engaging in retributive aggression.

We identify several questions/issues about inter-gang violence that we believe should be addressed by researchers in the future. First, to what degree is group-based retribution a source of gang-related violence, and can we identify which individuals and gangs are most likely to engage in this behavior? The proportion of violence that is accounted for by the processes involved in group-based retribution is not known, but assessing its contribution is an important first step in developing effective interventions. A second issue involves group identification. Members of groups differ in their degree of identification. However, is there evidence that it is the more highly identified gang members who commit much of this group-based violence? Apart from strength of identification, are there other aspects that influence the likelihood of

engaging in retribution? Do gang leaders or new initiates face greater pressure to aggress on behalf of their group? Gangs differ in the ways that normative pressures are brought to bear on members. How do these “loosely knit” groups induce compliance that leads members to engage in group-based retribution? Past research (Lickel et al., 2000) shows that lay people perceive street gangs to be highly cohesive, on the par with families and sports teams. Research on actual gang cohesiveness, however, indicates that gangs are generally not close and cohesive groups (Klein and Maxson, 2006), though outside threat may be used to rally the group to action (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965).

Another set of questions involve perceptions of the rival out-groups. For instance, how do gangs discriminate in who they target? Do gang members perceive rival groups to be cohesive (in much the same way lay people perceive their group to be)? Do these perceptions influence the way conflict with a rival group is expressed? Is it only rival gangs who they engage in group-based retaliation? Could a loose knit tagger or skate group also be targeted for collective retaliation if one group member got into a provocation with a gang?

Research in the gang area has a long history of interest in concepts such as *core to fringe* gang members (that vary in their level of commitment to the group and involvement in activities) and *gang cohesiveness* (that is heightened and maintained in part through inter-group conflict; see Klein and Maxson, 2006 for a review). The act of attacking any member of a rival gang in the context of a “gang war” mentality (Unamoto, 2006) that can be observed on a large or on a small scale is routinely observed in the street gang context. However, there is little research at present that measures these constructs and tests these relationships empirically in the gang context. We believe that future research of this type holds great promise for extending our theoretical knowledge in ways that can lead to practical information that can be applied to the

problems of reducing gang violence.

Reducing Displaced Aggression

Needless to say, reducing the levels of aggression expressed by gang members poses difficult and complex challenges. Not to be under-estimated is the issue of logistics, involving the dissemination of interventions and treatments among gang members. Who should participate in workshops and treatment designed to reduce aggression? It is likely impossible to treat whole gang populations in communities, but could those who are already motivated to leave their gangs be reached? How is cooperation from gang members achieved? We acknowledge that these matters are, for the most part, beyond the scope of this article. Thus, our recommendations in the following sections assume that such problems can be sufficiently dealt with to allow the implementation of interventions. In addition, we point out that our focus is the reduction of displaced aggression and group-based retribution, though some of these recommendations may also be useful in reducing aggressive behavior in general.

Potentially beneficial interventions for decreasing displaced aggression involve the reduction of ruminative thinking. This is likely to prove useful for several reasons. First, decreasing the time that an individual spends ruminating is expected to reduce the amount of time that an individual is motivated and primed to aggress (Bushman et al., 2005; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). As a result, a provoked individual is less likely to encounter a suitable/safe target on which to displace aggressive behavior. Second, a reduction in rumination also diminishes the opportunity for triggering events to interact with prior provocations to produce TDA (Bushman et al., 2005). Third, avoiding ruminative thought should also decrease revenge planning and the attributional processes that may serve to further motivate and justify instances of retributive violence, thereby potentially reducing actual instances of revenge against

instigators and/or their in-group members. This may prove especially important in diminishing group-based retribution.

Research that investigates and compares various potentially effective means for reducing rumination is certainly lacking. It is clear, however, that reducing rumination involves more than just the attempt of suppressing thoughts about a prior aversive event. For instance, under cognitive load, instructing individuals to avoid thinking about a provocation has the paradoxical effect of augmenting rumination (Wegner & Erber, 1992; Wegner & Gold, 1995). This may be due to actually increasing the availability of cognitions when an individual consciously tries to suppress them. Nevertheless, the existing body of research on rumination shows that factors that reduce ruminative thought generally involve distracting behaviors and cognitions (Bushman et al., 2005; Fennell & Teasdale, 1984; Morrow, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Rustings, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). For example, specific strategies for distracting individuals to effectively keep them from rumination have included exercise and listening to music (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994). Other types of activities that might prove useful against ruminating include meditation and relaxation techniques, hobbies, or reading. Such distractions regulate negative affect by keeping negative cognitions from being readily accessible and/or by drawing the focus of attention away from negative moods (Fennell & Teasdale, 1984; Morrow, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Rustings, Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998).

Little is known about the effectiveness of various distractions in reducing rumination in gang members. Indeed, certain distractions that might be helpful for non-gang members (e.g. reading, meditation) may be ineffective among gang members, especially since gang members are less involved in sports or any other conventional activities that may occupy considerable time for non gang members (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Nevertheless, distraction is potentially a

cost-effective way to decrease aggression by diminishing the detrimental effects of rumination. Specific distracting activities will likely need to be tailored to specific preferences and idiosyncrasies of individuals (such as those with an interest and talent in art). Thus, we propose that research be conducted to assess the impact of rumination on aggression among gang members. Additionally, researchers should examine specific strategies for reducing ruminative thinking in this population in order to assess their potential effectiveness.

Reducing Group-Based Aggression Between Gangs

The prior section discussed ways in which the skills and coping abilities of individual gang members can be addressed in ways that may reduce their propensity for aggression. In the next section, we consider two strategies for addressing group-based retribution in the gang context. First, we consider the effect of interventions to reduce gang cohesiveness and gang member identification on the propensity for group-based retribution. Second, we consider the potential role of (structured) positive interpersonal contact between members of gangs as a means of improving inter-gang attitudes and attitudes about violence towards members of other gangs.

Reducing Gang Cohesiveness and Gang Member Identification

In reviewing past research and models of group-based aggression, we noted that ingroup identification provides the motivational force for retaliation. When their gang is attacked, highly identified gang members are likely to experience anger about harmed comrades and also anger about their gang's reputation being weakened. This anger will motivate highly identified members of the gang to retaliate against the group which has harmed their gang. Furthermore, even if they are not personally angered, members of a gang may feel pressured to engage in retaliation against a rival group in order to maintain their status in the gang.

It is likely that many gang interventions have a capacity to affect gang cohesiveness and gang member identification. Insofar as gang cohesiveness and gang member identification can be reduced, it should have the effect of reducing the motivation for group-based retaliation. As has been discussed elsewhere (Maxson, Hennigan and Sloane, 2003, 2005), aggressive policing may sometimes have paradoxical effects of drawing members of a gang closer together in the face of a common threat. Likewise, past community-based gang interventions which focused on activities of the gang as a unit (as described by Klein, 1995) may have also ironically led to increased gang cohesion and identification. Thus, in the long run, such programs might actually set the stage for more gang against gang violence. Conversely, there is evidence that other kinds of interventions, particularly jobs programs, may be effective at reducing gang cohesion and gang-member identification. These job programs provide gang members with another valued identity apart from the gang (as well as a means of providing money for themselves and family). As gang members become less identified with the gang, they are likely to both feel less anger when their gang is provoked and less normative pressure to retaliate on behalf of the gang. Although these ideas are promising and past work indicates likely benefits (Thornberry et al., 2003; see also Shore and Massimo, 1979), more research is needed to fully understand how gang interventions affect group-based retribution between gangs.

Positive Inter-group Contact and the Reduction of Aggression

A second approach to reducing group-based retribution is based on the *contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954), which proposes that direct contact between/among members of rival groups is crucial for reducing inter-group conflict. History and research have shown that such contact is not always beneficial, and can often times serve to augment inter-group conflict (Hewstone & Greenland, 2000; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). For instance, it is not difficult to

imagine how members of two rival gangs that are trying to end a devastating feud can revert to violence if they perceive any hostility or threat from members of the out-group during a specific instance of inter-group contact. It will be important to take steps to structure the contact at an interpersonal level. Researchers have examined various processes involved in social categorization in order to modify the contact hypothesis, such that positive contact does bring about a reduction in inter-group conflict (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Pettigrew, 1998). Below, we discuss some of the central aspects of these processes and how they can be employed to reduce aggression. The basic approach for employing contact among members of rival group to reduce conflict is to have members of the groups interact in a positive manner in order to generate positive affect and cognitions (towards and about the out-group members) that are generalizable to the groups as a whole. Generalizing the positive effects of contact to the rest of the out-group disrupts the categorization processes that motivate group members to retaliate not only to an instigating out-group member but also to the rest of the out-group.

An important process for positive contact to occur is de-categorization, which reduces reliance on category-based information when forming impressions of and interacting with out-group members. For instance, can we lead two individuals who are members of rival gangs to avoid perceiving each other as part of a hated out-group, relying on negative stereotypes and prior negative contact and instead interact on an interpersonal level? Category-based interaction is likely to preclude the induction of positive affect and cognitions. Although we can identify several top-down modes of information processing that may reduce category-based responding and induce de-categorization, each with its own advantages and disadvantages, we focus on *personalization*, a bottom-up mode of information processing, as a particularly useful process for positive inter-group contact (Miller & Brewer, 1984; Ensari & Miller, 2001; Miller, 2002).

Personalized interaction is a process in which the information about an out-group member that is encoded and employed during an interaction is not dominated by the relevant social category (e.g., the aggressive characteristics of a rival gang), but rather, by unique attributes of that individual. Personalized interaction can reduce bias against the out-group member involved in the interaction (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Its positive effects can additionally extend to other members of the out-group when the out-group member with whom such interaction has occurred is perceived as being typical or representative of that particular category (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Ensari & Miller, 2002; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). For instance, rather than keeping in mind aspects and characteristics of the rival gang, the two interacting gang members can focus on individual characteristics of the other person (e.g., favorite TV shows, favorite foods, level of enthusiasm) when forming an impression. This increases the chances of contact producing positive out-comes.

Personalization is a complex construct that consists of a number of distinct bottom-up processes. We discuss herein two modes of personalized interactions, self-other comparison and self-disclosure, both of which have shown promise in reducing displaced aggression towards out-group members (see Vasquez, Ensari, Pedersen, Yunzi-Tan, & Miller, 2007). There are other components of personalization that may have aggression-reducing effects, but research in this area is lacking and detailed discussion about them is largely outside the scope of this article.

Self-other comparison involves the comparison of one's personal attributes with another's personal attributes, and not with the stereotyped image of out-group to which he/she belongs (Brewer & Miller, 1984). During such comparison, the out-group person involved in self-other comparison becomes individuated and de-categorized (i.e., perceived as an individual and less as a part of a category). Further, self-other comparison involves noticing similarities and

differences between the self and the other person, which further reduces reliance on stereotypes, and increases out-group variability. In consequence, the evaluation of an out-group member is more likely to be based on personal/unique characteristics and not on perceptions of the out-group, a process that is expected to reduce negative bias and prejudice towards that out-group member (Miller, 2002).

Self-other comparison has been shown to reduce TDA towards out-group members who trigger a previously provoked individual (Vasquez et al., 2007). Vasquez et al., (2007), for example, showed that relative to those in a control condition (i.e. no self-other comparison) provoked participants who compared themselves with an out-group member on a list of personality traits (balanced for valence) displaced less aggression towards the out-group member when she provided a trigger. The authors hypothesized that self-other comparison de-categorized the out-group member, who then appeared less negative (Vasquez et al., 2007). This is consistent with other research on TDA that shows that more positively valenced targets receive lower levels of displaced aggression (Pedersen, Bushman, Vasquez, & Miller, 2008).

Self-disclosure is another component of personalized interactions that refers to the sharing of intimate, personal information with another (see Collins & Miller, 1994; Miller, 2002). Thus, as with self-other comparison, self-disclosure also individuates and de-categorizes. It may also induce self-other comparison because the discloser shares individuating information, which then may elicit comparisons between attributes of the other person and those of the self along relevant dimensions. Importantly, self-disclosure may have other beneficial effects, such as decreasing anxiety and increasing familiarity with the other individual. A decrease on anxiety via self-disclosure can then lead to improved processing of individuating information (Rothbart & John, 1985; Sears, 1983; Wilder, 1984). Inter-group anxiety has been shown to be an

important factor for inter-group relations. Anxiety, for instance, mediates the relationship between inter-group contact and prejudice such that anxiety decreases the willingness to have contact with out-group members (Wilder & Simon, 2001; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). It also interferes with the processes that produce beneficial outcomes (Plant & Devine, 2003; Wilder & Simon, 2001). Anxiety and fear are likely to be important factors for inter-gang contact given the high levels of perceived (and real) threat and aggression that rival gangs encounter.

Relative to self-other comparison, self-disclosure makes an additional unique (and important) contribution because it carries the implicit message that the discloser trusts the recipient (Steel, 1991; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). This effect is likely to increase liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Halverson & Shore, 1969; Vasquez et al., 2007) and feelings of friendship toward the discloser (Cook, 1978; Pettigrew, 1997), and thus, reduce bias (Ensari & Miller, 2001, 2005; Miller, 2002). Importantly, self-disclosure has been shown to decrease triggered displaced aggression towards out-group members (Vasquez et al., 2007). Vasquez et al., (2007) led provoked participants in the self-disclosure condition to believe that an out-group bogus partner willingly shared (i.e., self-disclosed) personal information with them. The bogus partner subsequently ostensibly gave the participant negative feedback about her performance in a cognitive task (i.e. triggered the participant). Participants in the self-disclosure condition were less aggressive than those in the control conditions. Self-disclosure produced higher levels of liking for and comfort with the bogus partner, which partly mediated a reduction in triggered displaced aggression (Vasquez et al., 2007).

The basic findings of research on personalized interactions with out-group members and TDA suggest that aggression decreases when out-group targets are perceived more positively. Although these are promising findings, three issues arise. First, Vasquez et al. (2007) did not

establish if de-categorization had a beneficial effect on aggression given that the authors did employ measures of de-categorization in their studies. Second, there was no assessment of the degree to which the positive effects of personalization can generalize to other members of the out-group and diminish aggression towards them. Research has shown that positive contact with an out-group member can lead to sub-typing that individual. Sub-typing refers to the perception that the individual out-group member involved in the interaction is a special case and not representative of the category as a whole (Hewstone & Lord, 1998). As a result, the benefits of a positive interaction do not necessarily generalize to the rest of the out-group, and prejudice and bias remain. Third, Vasquez et al., (2007) employed a relatively minor trigger. It may be that personalization processes were effective in reducing aggression because the triggering provocations were easily forgiven. It is possible that more intense provocations are resistant to the effects of personalization.

With regards to the first issue, assessing the link between personalization and de-categorization in aggressive contexts is important because we propose that de-categorization should increase perceptions of out-group variability and thus, reduce entitativity. Lower levels of entitativity, which should diminish collective blame, are expected to lead to lower levels of group-based retribution. Regarding the second issue, ensuring that the positive effects of personalization indeed generalize to an out-group is important likely to reduce collective blame and the desire to retaliate against the out-group in general. If the processes that induce positive contact between members of rival gangs do not generalize to the rest of the out-groups, it is likely that all the members of a rival gang will continue to be perceived as deserving punishment, thereby maintaining vicious cycles of retributive violence. With respect to the third issue, it is important to understand how provocation intensity interacts with categorization processes. Gang

violence is an extreme form of aggression, and members of gang with a history of violent conflict may be resistant to positive inter-group contact, especially those who identify very strongly with their gang.

Given the limited amount of research on the aggression-reducing effects of personalization and other de-categorization processes, we propose several steps towards understanding how these factors might be useful in diminishing inter-gang violence. First, we recommend that researchers further assess the effects of personalization on retaliatory behavior among gang members. Inquiry into processes that reduce inter-group anxiety and perceptions of threat is especially important because these factors are powerful motivators of negative contact and they maintain negative perceptions and attitudes. Second, further studies should examine the degree to which de-categorization and personalization processes promote the generalization of positive contact to other out-group members. Thus, additional studies that assess the degree to which personalization reduces aggression at inter-group levels are important next steps for researchers. Third, we recommend that researcher examine how these factors impact perceptions of entitativity, which is an important variable in group-based retribution.

Summary

Gang violence is a complex phenomenon of great concern for many urban communities. As a result, many researchers have undertaken the task of examining the various factors that produce and contribute to aggressive behavior in members of street gangs. In this article we have focused our discussion on displaced aggression and group-based retribution, both of which can involve aggression targeted against individuals who not the original sources of instigations. We have proposed that members of street gangs have a greater risk of engaging in these categories of retaliatory behavior. In support of our proposals, we have discussed models of

displaced aggression and group-based aggression and why we hypothesize that they may be useful for understand some aspects of gang aggression, both at inter-personal and inter-group levels. We have also recommended general ways to reduce displaced aggression. One recommendation involves distracting activities that diminish ruminative thinking as aw way to reduce aggressive priming and revenge planning. Other recommendations are more focused on reducing inter-gang violence and are based on processes that de-categorize members of rival gangs and promote positive inter-group contact that can generalize to the out-group. We additionally make the point that empirical studies that examine the proportion of violence that is accounted for by models of displaced aggression and group-based retribution are currently limited. Thus, we propose that future research address the issues we have mentioned in an attempt to further augment our understanding of gang-related aggression.

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