Group Aggression

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Group aggression is an important concern for societies around the world. The field of intergroup relations, a sub-field of social-psychology, offers critical insight into the emergence of group conflict and aggression. This review examines the most influential theoretical frameworks from the field of intergroup relations, namely realistic conflict theory, relative deprivation theory, social identity theory, social dominance theory, and deindividuation theory. Associated empirical findings regarding groups synonymous with aggression, such as street gangs, hate groups, rebel and insurgent groups, and terrorist organizations, are explored. This review thus provides a critical overview of the current state of the field. It concludes with implications for the future of intergroup aggression research, drawing on integrated theories that account for both personal and situational factors.

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Introduction

In societies around the world, groups commit and receive more aggression than individuals do [1]. When we speak of group aggression, we typically speak of *intergroup* aggression, whereby distinct groups of individuals are at odds with one another [2]. Two main sources of intergroup aggression have been identified. The first is competition for valued material resources, as described by 'realistic conflict theory' [3]. The second is competition for social rewards like status and esteem, as described by 'relative deprivation theory' [4]. However, other theories, such as 'social identity theory' [5], 'social dominance theory' [6••], and 'deindividuation theory' [7], offer critical insights into the dynamics of group aggression. Owing to space constraints, this review is organized around these different theoretical perspectives.

Realistic conflict theory

Realistic conflict theory was born out of the famous 1954 'Robbers Cave' field studies in which two groups of twelve-year-old boys became hostile and aggressive toward one another when they were placed into arbitrary competitive situations [8]. The theory informed early work on ethnocentrism [9] and was later extended to show how the mere *perception* of competition or resource scarcity can also motivate intergroup conflict [10–12]. Critics have challenged some of the theory's underlying assumptions. In particular, one important study found that resource *abundance* (not scarcity) leads to civil conflict [13••]. Another influential study found that poverty and institutional dysfunction were stronger predictors of civil violence than resource scarcity [14].

Relative deprivation theory

Relative deprivation refers to 'the gap between what one has and what one expects,' particularly in comparison to some specific reference group [15••,16]. Early studies used the concept as a post-hoc explanation of intergroup conflict [17]. Later attempts to study the direct effects of relative deprivation on aggression were often unsuccessful [4]. In recent years, however, relative deprivation has been used to explain social movements and rebellions [18–20] and why terrorists tend to be more highly educated and from wealthier families [21,22•,23]. An analysis of 172 global Salafi Mujahedin, for example, found evidence of relative deprivation between terrorists' occupational skills and their actual employment status [24].

Group-based relative deprivation, known as 'fraternal deprivation' [10], is more likely to result in collective action than is individual relative deprivation [25], and is also linked to outgroup prejudice and rejection of affirmative action for other groups [26••,27–29]. The mechanisms underlying these trends, however, are not well understood [30]. Evidence suggests that relative deprivation's affective component (*i.e.*, feelings of injustice) is more important than its cognitive component (*i.e.*, knowledge that inequality exists) [25], and that 'group identification' could act as a predictor of feelings of relative deprivation [31]. Still, as a recent review of the literature concluded, " . . . the perception of relative deprivation in and of itself does not seem to be a sufficient cause of anger, protest behavior, or participation in collective action" [30, p. 1135]. Instead, relative deprivation is part of a "dynamic interplay of a complicated set of social, psychological, and political variables" [30, p. 1136].

Social identity theory

Social identity theory emerged from the seminal minimal group studies [32] that documented the *minimal* conditions necessary and sufficient to produce negativity towards outgroups. A great deal of research has since been published about the profound effects of creating group boundaries or highlighting existing ones, a process known as *social categorization* [33,34], including how it causes in-group members to view out-group members as more similar to one another, a concept known as *outgroup homogeneity* [35]. Seeing out-group members as more similar to each other than they actually are generates more negative evaluations [5], stereotype consensus [36], and negative attributions [37] for the behavior of out-group members than for the behavior of in-group members. Evidence suggests that when social identity is salient, perceived threat is enhanced (for a discussion of intergroup threat, see Ref. [38]) and will more likely result in aggressive and retaliatory responses [39], including 'vicarious retribution' against out-group members (*i.e.*, when an in-group member avenges an assault or provocation that has no personal consequences for them, but which did harm a fellow in-group member) [40].

In recent years, social identity and social categorization have been used to explain street gang aggression (for a review, see Ref. [41]). Studies have examined the 'us-versus-them' mentality by which gangs form group identity in opposition to other gangs [42] and how group membership, especially membership in highly entitative or 'extreme' groups like street gangs, ameliorates individual feelings of uncertainty about personal identity [43•,44]. One study found that youth in gangs, who identify with their group, put the group norms of criminal activity ahead of their personal concerns regarding punishment for criminal activity [45]. Another study found that gang members dehumanize or denigrate out-group members to protect in-group identity and rationalize outward aggression [46].

The utility of social identity approaches extends beyond street gangs to understanding the echo chamber of prejudice in hate groups [47]. Essentialist religious and ethnic identities result in far more intense 'us versus them' relations than those displayed on the street [48–50]. Indeed, research shows that religious and political leaders will not only argue that people are *justified* in killing those of a different ethnic identity, but are *obligated* to do so, owing to some perceived 'moral violation' or the defacing of something they hold sacred [51].

Social dominance theory

Social dominance theory posits that major forms of intergroup conflict and oppression, namely racism, classism and patriarchy, are derived from the human predisposition to form and maintain hierarchical and group-based systems of social organization [6••]. At the societal level, social dominance is perpetuated by "legitimizing myths", consensually shared social ideologies such as sexism and racism, that provide moral and intellectual justification for group-based hierarchy [6••, p. 275]. At the individual level, social dominance orientation is a measure of one's predisposition to support group-based hierarchies in which 'superior' groups dominate 'inferior' groups.

Social dominance theory has received considerable empirical support [52] and is somewhat consistent with work highlighting 'specific belief domains' (*e.g.*, superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness) relevant to group conflict [53]. One study found that members of extreme right-wing groups were convinced that they belonged to a superior group [54]. Another study found elevated levels of social dominance orientation among street gang members and noted potential for social dominance theory to explain inter-gang conflict [55•].

Deindividuation theory

Grounded in the notion of 'submergence' [56], deindividuation theory proposed that when large groups of people converge (*e.g.*, at a sporting event or rock concert), individuals lose their sense of self and personal responsibility. Crowds diffuse 'moral responsibility for blame-worthy acts' [57] and curb typical concerns about self-evaluation, self-restraint, and social comparison, resulting in mob-like and aggressive behavior [7,58].

There are competing casual mechanisms at the heart of deindividuation. The first is the condition of being anonymous or unidentifiable. One early study of anonymity found warriors who changed their appearance before going into battle were more likely to torture and mutilate their enemies than warriors that retained their own appearance [58]. An examination of violent attacks in Northern Ireland [59] similarly found a significant relationship between wearing a mask to disguise one's identity and increased aggression. The role of anonymity in aggression has also been observed on the Internet [60,61]. A recent examination of college students' gaming behavior found that anonymous students used more verbally aggressive behavior and expressed more desire to be aggressive than non-anonymous students on the same task [62]. In another study, anonymity, with an associated lack of accountability, was found to encourage unconstrained commenting online [63], which, in turn, contributed to aggression [64]. Such 'cyber-disinhibition' [65] manifests itself regularly in such ways such as "flame wars" (*i.e.*, sending or posting messages that are deliberately insulting), cyber-bullying, and hostile blog comments.

The second mechanism is conformity—the social process of changing one's behavior because of direct or indirect group pressure, either real or imagined [66]. One study found that the desire to be accepted within one's own group is a stronger motivator to commit hate crime than hate directed at an out-group [67]. Conformity to group aggression has also been observed on the playground. One study found that class context and group norms had a stronger influence on bullying behavior among 1200 elementary students than individual attitudes [68]. A longitudinal study of 165 adolescents also found that 'coercive joining' in friendship groups at age 16 and 17 predicted later violent behavior, even after controlling for individual risk factors [69]. And a recent study of high school students found that members of aggressive peer groups were more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of dating violence, also after controlling for individual risk factors [70].

Conformity seems to be important for sexually aggressive behavior as well. In a study of 400 male college students, perceived peer norms about sexual aggression were more likely to influence one's willingness to intervene than one's own norms [71]. Another study of over 300 male undergraduate students examined the role of masculine norms (*e.g.*, sexual promiscuity and power over women), Facebook use, and pornography use in predicting unwanted sexual advancements on women. They found that having an abusive male peer group moderated the relationship, emphasizing the importance of peer group norms in facilitating sexual aggression [72]. As a person shifts from the personal to the social self, internal controls can be replaced by external, social controls—an idea captured by the social identity model of deindividuation effects [73**].

Discussion and conclusion
This article has discussed the most influential theories of group aggression. One limitation of these theories, however, is they at times emphasize the group at the expense of the individual. The adage, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," credited to Aristotle, highlights the importance of *intragroup* processes that develop esprit de corps and collective identity and *intergroup* interactions that reinforce group boundaries and cohesion, but what of the parts that make the whole? More integrated or interdisciplinary theories help us account for both aspects [74**]. A recent extension of the general aggression model [75**], for example, highlights its utility in explaining intergroup violence [76**] to the extent that its model of 'violence escalation' overlaps almost perfectly with the "cycle of gang violence" that criminologists use to explain how gangs get embedded in cyclical exchanges of violence with a mutual expectation of preemption and retaliation [77**,78]. Another extension of the general aggression model [79**] offers the valuable insight that the extent of aggression to be committed

depends on the composition of both source (*i.e.*, perpetrators) and target (*i.e.*, victims) groups. One study found that accessible hostile thoughts and angry feelings predicted more aggression committed *toward* groups versus individuals, whereas disinhibition processes and arousal predicted more aggression committed *by* groups versus individuals [79**].

In this vein, future research is needed to uncover precisely what amount of the relationship between group membership and aggression can be attributed to the 'kinds of individuals' who select into groups, and the 'kinds of groups' these individuals select into [80]. A recent analysis of court transcripts of 80 perpetrators of genocide [81], for instance, found it is critically important to examine the individual psychological motivations of leaders of mass violence, rather than a solely focusing on the group processes that perpetuate genocide. Selection is an important concept [82]. Groups that contain members with known risk factors for violence are more likely to engage in collective violence; especially if these individuals are dynamic leaders, encouraging obedience and conformity from their comrades [83]. A recent study into the interaction between psychopathic personality traits and group dynamics on group performance found that the individual attributes of the group members strongly influenced how the group functioned [84].

Stanford psychologist Phillip Zimbardo posits there are bad *apples*, or individuals predisposed to aggression, bad *barrels*, that is groups and situational forces that facilitate aggression, and bad *barrel makers*, referring to the broader systems that facilitate group aggression, including the people with the power to shape them [85]. Only by accounting for all three will researchers ever fully account for causes of group aggression.

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