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THE PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY OF ANGER AND VIOLENCE

THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY TO EMOTIONAL AGGRESSION

SUMMARY

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PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY OF ANGER AND VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

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Ellis²⁰ once wrote, “When people are angry, they frequently take on some of the worst characteristics of the people they hate, including bullying, prejudice, violence, and arrogance ...” (p xii). This article focuses on evidence for psychophysiologic factors related to such anger and violence. This does not preclude the important role of environmental factors^{4,7,65} but rather is set forth to highlight an area in a body of literature that suggests biologic influences on violent behavior.⁵⁷

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frequent responses to anger episodes were nonaggressive including calming activities, such as talking things over, and only 10% of the anger episodes included responses of direct physical aggression toward another person.

Furthermore, aggression or violence does not always occur within the context of angry affect. Different forms of aggression have long been described in the animal literature and generally can be classified into two types: predatory aggression and defensive aggression. In human beings, the corresponding categories have been referred to as instrumental (or proactive) aggression and hostile (or reactive) aggression.^{19,49} Instrumental/proactive aggression involves a relatively nonemotional display of aggressive behavior that is directed toward obtaining some goal. Hostile/reactive aggression, on the other hand, involves aggressive behavior that takes place within the context of associated anger and high emotionality. Hostile aggression is described as less controlled, more impulsive, and often arises as a defensive reaction in response to some perceived frustration, insult, or provocation.

Hostile aggression has been labeled by Berkowitz⁵ as “emotional aggression.” Berkowitz suggested that unpleasant situations produce generalized negative affect which, in turn, evokes a network of cognitive, physiologic arousal, and behavioral associations related to both fight (i.e., aggressive) and flight (i.e., escape) action tendencies. Berkowitz⁵ further suggested that more differentiated feelings, such as anger or fear, then occur as a consequence of additional thought or higher-order processing of these associations. Thus, emotional aggression often occurs in conjunction with anger and in response to the experience of negative affect.

Emotional aggression is the focus of this article. It is important to bear in mind, however, that alternative forms of aggression exist, which may or may not be related to the psychophysiologic findings described herein.

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