RUMINATION AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF AGGRESSION IN UK GANG-AFFILIATED YOUTH

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The common image of gang aggression is one of murders and inter-gang violence.

The drive-by shooting, for instance, is perceived by many to be a typical form of violent act.

However, aggression committed by gang members is complex and is influenced by many of the same variables observed in non-criminal populations.
Our focus herein involves displaced aggression (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), which can occur at the interpersonal and intergroup levels.
**Displaced Aggression (DA):** Aggressive action directed (displaced) towards a person or object that is NOT the original source of the provocation or negative affect.

**Triggered Displaced Aggression** *(Pedersen, Gonzalez & Miller 2000)*: disproportionate levels of aggression directed at an individual who provides a minor provocation, as a function of a prior provocation.

These refer to aggression against innocent targets, or those who have not provoked in a manner that justifies the level of retaliation *(see Vasquez, Denson, Pedersen, Stenstrom, & Miller, 2005).*
Three situations that preclude retaliation can set the context for displacing aggression:

1) The provoking situation has an immaterial source (e.g., the economy is bad).

2) The source of the provocation leaves before you retaliate (e.g., vandals damage your car and disappear before they are caught).

3) The provocateur has power over you (e.g., your boss informs you about how dumb he thinks you are).
Such situations can leave individuals primed for aggressive responding.

This influences their perceptions and reactions to subsequent events, and increase the chances of “venting” or over-reacting to what are normally just mild annoyances (Vasquez et al., 2005).
Why study displaced aggression in gang-affiliated youth?

We need to understand the different types of aggression and the factors related to them in order to develop effective interventions.

Various socio-psychological factors increase the risk of engaging in DA among gang members.

We can examine the applicability of existing models to gang-affiliated populations.
Why should we expect a greater tendency to displace aggression in this population (for a review, see Vasquez, Lickel, & Hennigan, 2010)?

1) Non-normative behaviours bring them into conflict with others, including authority figures. This leads to more aversive events that may prime them for aggression.

2) Social environments that produce maladaptive behaviours and lifestyles may also produce more negative affect overall (see Vigil, 1998), which also primes aggressive responding.
3) The previous factors may enhance rumination. Rumination has been defined as self-focused attention towards one's thoughts and feelings and their causes (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995).

It can also be defined as provocation-focused thought (see Bushman, Pedersen, Bonacci, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998).
Rumination can maintain negative affect and cognitive representations of provoking events, thus keeping individuals primed for aggressive responding (Bushman et al., 2005).

Gang members are expected to ruminate more than non-gang members because persons who perceive anger as useful may be more likely to ruminate (Averill, 1982; Tice & Baumeister, 1993).
Thus, we predicted that:

Gang affiliation would be correlated with rumination and with displaced aggression.

Gang affiliation and rumination would interact. Greatest tendency to displace aggression expected among those with high affiliation and tendency to ruminate.

Rumination would predict displaced aggression above and beyond other factors, such as trait aggression and trait hostility.
Method

A total of 310 adolescent students (186 males, 125 females) from 3 schools in London and complete our questionnaire. Age ranged from 14 to 16 years.
They completed:

1) The aggression subscale of the displaced aggression questionnaire (Denson, Pedersen & Miller, 2006).

2) Angry Rumination scale (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001): angry afterthoughts and angry memories subscales.

3) Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992): trait physical aggression, trait hostility, trait anger.

4) 5 items from Caprara’s irritability questionnaire (Caprara, Cinanni, D'Imperio, Passerini, Renzi, & Travaglia, 1985).

5) Five additional items about displacing aggression to siblings and friends and members of others groups.
Participants indicated their agreement with three statements, using a scale ranging from 1) disagree to 5) agree:

1) I have friends that are members of a gang.
2) I spend time with people who belong in a gang.
3) I consider myself as belonging to a gang.
Results

Correlations among gang affiliation, trait aggression, trait hostility, irritability, rumination, displaced aggression (DA), gender, and trait anger.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<td>.55*</td>
<td>.61*</td>
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</table>

* Significant at p < .01
We found:

A significant affiliation x rumination x gender interaction, 
\( b = -0.21 \), \( t(309) = 3.37 \), \( p = .001 \).

In addition, there was:

a significant gender x affiliation interaction, \( b = -0.14 \),
\( t(309) = 2.35 \), \( p = .02 \)

a significant affiliation x rumination interaction, \( b = -0.13 \),
\( t(309) = 3.40 \), \( p = .001 \).
Rumination

Gang affiliation

Tendency to displace aggression

.23**

.44** (.30**)

.65**

z = 4.05, p < .001
Unstandardized and Standardized Weights From Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Displaced Aggression.

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* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. 
Conclusions

Being strongly affiliated with a gang is positively related to rumination and displacing aggression to others.

Even after controlling for other factors.

Aggression towards others is not only related to individual differences and gang norms, but also by a tendency to ruminate about aversive events. This also mediates the relationship between gang affiliation and displaced aggression.
Interventions for effective coping with aversive events and for reducing rumination may prove beneficial for reducing aggression.

If a tendency to ruminate and displace aggression contribute to alienation, interpersonal conflict, and resentment that motivate affiliating with gangs, decreasing rumination may also help reduce the motivation to be involved in gang-related activities and increase desistence.