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Study Finds Tie Between Attributing Hostile Intent and Aggression in Children and Youth

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PRESS RELEASE

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Hostile Intent Attribution and Aggressive Behavior in Children Revisited: A Meta-Analysis

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Children who tend to attribute hostile motives to other people are more likely to display aggression, however, the strength of this relationship varies. A new meta-analysis sought to determine the relation between attributing hostile intent and aggressive behavior. It found that the relation between the two is the strongest in tasks that are emotionally engaging, such as when someone is provoked or loses a game. It also found that attributing hostile intent to others guides the way individuals process information across a broad range of contexts, suggesting that learning to attribute hostile intent in one situation may contribute to aggression in other situations.

The analysis was done by researchers at Utrecht University and appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“These findings can inform our understanding of when and how attributing hostile intent is related to aggression, with clear implications for understanding aggression and treatment,” according to Rogier E.J. Verhoef, a Ph.D. candidate at Utrecht University, who led the study. “The findings also contribute to the debate on the effect of emotional and personal involvement in social situations on attributing hostile intent.”

Researchers examined 111 studies conducted from 1977 to 2017 and involving almost 30,000 participants from birth to 17 years. The studies came from all over the world but primarily from Western Countries. Participants were boys and girls who differed in their degrees of aggressive behavior problems, with some studies including children who were in care (e.g., psychiatric care, prison) for severe aggressive behavior problems or disruptive behavior disorders.

Typically, the studies measured attribution of hostile intent by presenting a child with multiple social situations involving a negative outcome caused by a peer with ambiguous intentions, then asking the child about the peer’s intentions. The studies assessed aggression via questionnaires and observations.

Aggression was defined as behaviors leading to psychological, physical, or material harm of others. The researchers looked at whether the strength of the relation between attributing hostile intent and aggression depended on:

- the level of emotional engagement in the task,
- the familiarity of interaction partners,
- the extent to which children were accepted or rejected by their peers,
- the type of aggression, and
- whether the children had attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The meta-analysis found that attributing hostile intent was related positively to aggression, and that the relation was stronger in certain children and with certain methods that measured attribution of hostile intent. It found that the strength of the relation depended on how emotionally engaged a child was in the situation, with a potentially stronger relation in social situations in which children are emotionally engaged and for children who are more severely aggressive to start.

The researchers also found that attributing hostile intent is a general thinking tendency that guides how children process information across a range of contexts, including in interactions with peers they don't know. They also found that the relation between attributing hostile intent and aggression is stronger in situations that remind children of specific memories, such as being rejected by peers.

"Our study can enlighten interventions to reduce aggressive behavior in children," suggests Bram Orobio de Castro, professor of psychology at Utrecht University, who coauthored the study. "By targeting attributing hostile intent, therapies could seek to change the way children process social information and their subsequent aggression."

The study was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, *Hostile Intent Attribution and Aggressive Behavior in Children Revisited: A Meta-Analysis* by Verhoef, REJ, Alsem, SC, Verhulp, EE, and de Castro, BO (Utrecht University).
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