

Cathartic effects of aggression: theories



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Psychology—the systematic study of mental and behavioural processes (Coon & Mitterer, 2012)—stemmed from Wilhelm Wundt’s founding of the first laboratory in experimental psychology in 1979. Wundt presented his discoveries about the human mind and behaviour in public lectures and soon had halls of people learning about his theories and experiments (Abbott, 2012, para. 7). Some even started setting up their own experimental laboratories and taking up the new science (Abbott, 2012, para. 7). However, many people see psychology as common sense because psychological findings and research all seem self-evident (Dean, 2008). This essay will touch on three reasons as to why psychology is not just common sense based on a common sense topic that frustrated people tend to vent their anger on inanimate objects for mood repair.

People who believe in the value of cathartic venting feel worse after aggression. Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips (2001) conducted a study whereby a group of participants had their emotional states assessed immediately after manipulated provocations (p. 25). Provocations include receiving negative feedback of their essays and blasts of noises of high intensity from “ another participant” during the competitive time reaction task (Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips, 2001, p. 19-20). They found that participants were emotionally negatively affected by the stimuli and felt more hostile feelings towards the “ provoker”. This is supported by Bohart’s (1980) study which found that after recalling about a recent incident that angered them, participants in the discharge group showed more anger and hostile attitudes compared to intellectual analysis, role play, and control

groups, based on the level of aversive noise each participant gave as punishment to a subject whenever a mistake was made on the learning task (p. 193). A louder noise administered meant higher feelings of aggression. Ebbesen, Duncan and Konecni (1974) tested whether subjects who were being laid off their jobs would increase or decrease in verbal aggression compared to those who were leaving their jobs for other reasons when induced to aggress verbally against the company, their supervisor, themselves, or to talk about neutral topics. The results indicated that when angered subjects directed verbal aggression at a specific target, their subsequent verbal aggression increased only when it was directed at the same target. It was also discovered that individuals with higher levels of testosterone responded more aggressively to social provocations (Mehta & Beer, 2009, p. 2363). Aggression is therefore relatively useless at getting rid of anger and frustration even though positive feelings are increased during the act of venting. Be it as it may, why is it that the mass media still constantly supporting the idea of the catharsis hypothesis through mediums like self-help books, magazines, and television (Shaffer & Merrens, 2001)?

Angry people feel better when venting their anger through a cathartic process. This popular belief is known as the catharsis theory (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001, p. 18). The theory sees emotions as entities that will build up and cause internal pressure if they are not expressed, leading to physiological harm (Bohart, 1980, p. 192). The repression of negative feelings without release may be due to the fear of retaliation or punishment from the provocateur, like in the case of when the source is an employer, thus constraining direct aggression (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer,

& Sears, 1939). Aggression is any behaviour that is intended to inflict harm on an unwilling person (Bushman & Anderson, 2001, p. 274). A study found that angry people did positively enjoy some of the cathartic activities, such as hitting a punching bag (Bushman et al., 1999). Since catharsis supports rumination, which is study investigated whether if getting rid of anger by rumination works better than by distraction. angered participants hit a punching bag and thought about the person who had angered them (rumination group) or thought about becoming physically fit (distraction group). The venting of anger is thus considered a healthy act and people in anger would often hear advice like "let it off your chest" and "don't bottle your anger up inside" from their friends (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001, p. 18).

The effectiveness of the expression of negative emotions on mood applies differently for different genders. Bushman, Baumeister and Philips (2001) conducted a study which examined how mood-freeze manipulation and pro-catharsis messages affect aggressive behaviour (p. 19). Half the subjects in the pro-cathartic group would read a counterfeit newspaper article supporting the venting of anger by hitting a pillow, while the other half in the anti-cathartic group would read one discouraging the venting of anger by hitting a pillow (Bushman, Baumeister and Philips, 2001, p. 25). Half of the participants in the mood-freeze manipulation group were told that the pill, Bramitol, would freeze their mood for an hour after consumption (Bushman, Baumeister and Philips, 2001, p. 20). The other half were free to control their moods. It was found that for women, the venting of anger improved their mood only when they believe that their moods are open to change, as

observed from the female participants reporting that they felt more positive feelings following aggression in the changeable mood condition compared to those in the mood-freeze condition (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001, p. 28). As for men, they were found to be generally more aggressive than women (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001, p. 20) and that those who most believed in the efficacy of venting felt the least improvement in their moods after venting their anger in the changeable mood condition (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001, p. 28). This observation can be supported by The evidence of how different men and women handle their emotions shows that the effectiveness of catharsis venting differs between genders.

Angry impulses and hostile tendencies are not reduced by acting aggressively.

It was found that when given the chance to aggress nonverbally against their tormentors, angry participants engaged in less nonverbal aggression afterwards (Doob, 1970; Doob and Wood, 1972; Konecni and Doob, 1972; Konecni, 1973). However, an opposite effect was witnessed for verbal aggression (DeCharms & Wilkins, 1963; Kahn, 1966). the annoyer is still derogated and highly disliked at the end of the experiment (Konecni, 1973; Konecni and Doob, 1972). Konecni and Doob (1972) found that nonverbal aggression directed at a scapegoat reduced future nonverbal aggression directed at one's tormentor. If verbal hostility does serve the same function as covert rumination about one's plight, then generalization from scapegoat to tormentor might well be expected to occur. Doob (1972) found that

nonverbal aggression directed at someone reduced future nonverbal aggression directed at one's tormentor.

Showed that verbally expressing one's boiling anger toward a given entity increases subsequent verbal aggression towards the same entity but does not affect how their emotions are directed at others (p. 198-199) The angered subjects were more hostile towards the company after telling the personnel manager negative things about the company and that the increase in hostility was significantly enhanced by the comparable interview session.

However, in Bohart's study, the overall difference between catharsis and the other measures narrowed over several sessions, suggesting that venting through a cathartic process requires time and practice in order for the dilution of negative feelings to be effective (Bohart, 1980, p. 194). This is probably the reason why the belief in catharsis survives today despite all the contrary research findings.

In essence, the common sense belief in the efficacy of catharsis can be proven correct by some psychologists and otherwise by others. The field of psychology really involves data collection of human thought process and behaviour though scientific or observational means to prove a common sense hypothesis either correct or false. Many of our intuitions have been rectified through the years and like the intuition that the release of anger on a pillow lessens feelings of aggression, we cannot always depend on common sense to reason things. Psychology is therefore not just common

sense, but also based on proper research, meticulous testing, and applications of theory.

References

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