Cross-Cultural Differences in Perceived Hostile Intent, Blameworthiness, Anger and Aggression: Implications for Violent Conflict

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Abstract

Aggression and violence are important social problems that have been studied from a variety of perspectives. Recent surge of terrorist attacks on Western soil has further motivated social scientists to understand the root causes of violent conflict. In this paper, I attempt to underline social-cognitive aspects of hostility, blameworthiness, and the resultant anger and aggressive behavior. I argue that studying cross-cultural differences in attributional biases in conflict situations may help us understand how certain societies may become more vulnerable than others to terrorism. Perhaps it is now time to shift the focus from nations to individuals living in violent conflict regions emphasizing the importance of social cognition in the emergence of potential terrorists.

Keywords: Hostile attribution bias; Hostile intent, Perceived intent; Blame; Terrorism; Violence; Culture of honor; Collectivistic; Individualistic; Social learning

Introduction

Human aggression is an important societal problem that has been thoroughly explored by scientists. Decades of research have been devoted to understand its biological and sociocultural bases. Anthropological records show that a distinction between peaceful and violent cultures can be made [1-5]. The exact mechanisms for such differences remain unspecified, however. Social perception, modeling of aggressive behavior, and culture-specific traditions endorsing violent acts have been implicated among the factors that contribute to the cross-cultural differences in aggressive behavior [6-8]. Here, I propose that cross-cultural differences in aggression and violent conflict may be better understood by examining attributional biases regarding hostile intent, blameworthiness, and the resultant angry reaction.

Attribution of Hostile Intent

Aggressive individuals tend to see the world around them as more hostile than it actually is, and, react more aggressively. Numerous studies with preschoolers [9], school-aged children [10,11], adolescents, adults [12], and clinical populations [13,14] indicate that individuals rated as aggressive by clinical measures, self-reported questionnaires, teachers, and/or peers show a marked bias in attributing hostile intent to a provocateur when the intent of the provocateur is in fact ambiguous [11,13-15]. Largely led by Dodge et al. [16], this phenomenon is referred to as "Hostile Attribution Bias" or "Hostile Attribution of Intent". Perceived aggressive intent of the provocateur is in turn shown to increase aggression measured by the intensity of electrical shock, heightened autonomic arousal indicated by increased blood pressure, skin conductance rate, and self-reported anger [17].

Attribution of hostile intent is considered as a key element in the development and persistence of aggressive behavior [18]. Supporting evidence shows that biased attributions in childhood predict later aggression [15]. It is also shown that aggression is stable over time [19,20]. Both peer nominations and teacher ratings on aggression at age 8 and 14 predict criminality and self-reported aggression at age 26 [19]. According to a 22-year longitudinal study, future antisocial aggression is predictable from the agonistic behavior displayed by children in everyday life [20]. Taken together, these data provide support for a learning model of aggression [8,11,21]. If culture provides a context in which social perception and learning occur then some cultures may lack socio-cultural mechanisms to more effectively cope with aggressive acts, and as a result, be more conducive to aggressive behavior.

Individualistic, Collectivistic and Honor Cultures

Social perception is presumably influenced by the emphasis each society places on individuals, family, groups, norms and values. Indeed, there is evidence that perceptions on the causes of the same events are individual-focused in the US and group-focused in China [22]. Cross-cultural research classifies the US, as an individual and China as a group-oriented culture [23,24]. This categorization is a result of the focus the Western cultures, including the US, place on individuals, individual autonomy [23], and accountability [25] and Asian cultures, including China on group norms, family, and community [23,24].

Individual- and group-oriented cultures thus appear to provide two distinct cultural contexts in which social perception occurs. A third distinct societal characteristic that presumably influences social cognition is the emphasis placed on honor. Culture of honor has been studied extensively [26-35]. Middle Eastern cultures are generally considered as honor-oriented societies because violation of an honor code in social interactions has serious consequences [36].

Insults and threats in honor cultures result in a heightened angry and aggressive reaction towards the provocateur [27-29, 31, 36-38]. As an example of this reaction, the criminal law in certain Middle Eastern cultures permits reduced sentences in honor killings [36].

It follows that the degree to which people attribute hostile intent and blameworthiness in the negative action of others, and, display anger and aggression as a result of this negative interaction should differ in distinct cultures; namely individualistic, collectivistic, and honor-societies. Indeed, there is evidence that people from honor cultures in the Middle East are more likely than their collectivistic counterparts to perceive aggressive intent in a hypothetical provocateur's actions and blame the provocateur for the negative outcome in ambiguous social interactions. They are also more angered by this negative interaction compared to the collectivistic cultures [39]. People in honor cultures are also more likely to show indirect ("do something to get even") and overt ("have it out with him/her right then and there!") aggression towards the hypothetical provocateur compared to both individualistic and collectivistic cultures [39].

Because perceiving hostile intent is closely associated with blaming the provocateur [40], an important precursor of aggression [41], studying cross-cultural differences in blameworthiness may help social scientists to examine root causes of agonistic behavior. Indeed, blameworthiness was a more potent instigator of overt aggression than perceived intent in a study that examined individualistic, collectivistic, and honor-cultures [39].

Discussion

Cultural differences in attribution of causality

Several reasons may help explain cross-cultural differences in attributions of intent, blame, anger, and aggression. Previous research on the relationship between perceived hostile intent and subsequent aggressive response has focused on individual-oriented cultures in North America. Individual-oriented cultures are known to display a marked tendency to attribute causality to personal factors while interpreting events surrounding them [42,43]. On the contrary, group-oriented cultures do not show this tendency [23]. There is suggestive evidence that perceptions on the causes of the same violent events, such as a murder, are individual-focused (e.g., bad temper) in the US and group focused (e.g. isolation from the community) in China. The tendency for the collectivistic cultures to favor situational explanations for negative events is likely to account for their lower scores on perceived hostile intent, blameworthiness, thus, anger in a survey experiment compared to individualistic and honor cultures [39].

Honor societies and aggressive conflict

There is strong evidence that threats and insults in honor cultures are met with strong aggressive reactions to preserve the self-image and protect one's honor [26-29,31,36]. Justice may in turn be served with extreme forms of punishment, including murder. Many honor cultures in the Middle East have reduced sentences for honor killings due to insults [28,36], suggesting that preserving one's reputation is an integral part of maintaining social order. Hypothetical scenarios used in the previous study [39] involved social settings where the actor faced public humiliation or a clear threat towards the achievement of a goal. People in honor cultures may react to these negative acts in more hostile terms because of the violation of an honor code.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout the paper, I emphasized the importance of social cognition in overt expression of aggressive behavior. It will be overly simplistic to state that the root causes of violent conflict and surge of terrorism, especially in the Middle East lie in cross-cultural differences in attributing causality, hostile intent, blameworthiness, and reactive aggression. Terrorist organizations, including ISIS operate just like a criminal organization and should be studied as such. However, hyper vigilance to threats and insults, as generally experienced in honor cultures in the Middle East may constitute an important precursor of hostility and aggression. This may in turn used to recruit followers to the terrorist organizations far more easily. After all, any organized crime syndicate, and many terrorist organizations, ISIS included, require a large number of followers to advance their agenda. Honor is one of the prevalent societal characteristics of the Middle Eastern countries [33,35]. It has been suggested that honor cultures predate Islam [36], and they are based on land and property ownership, as well as herding economies of the past [29,31].

Therefore, we must perhaps not only consider religious fundamentalism, but violation of an honor code in fighting terrorist threats of the modern world. International military interventions and training of local military forces have so far failed to provide answers, but certainly enabled terrorist leaders to recruit more followers. Perceived external and internal threats constitute the core of national security policies and are often used by political decision makers to initiate armed conflict. Perhaps it is now time to shift the focus from nations to individuals living in violent conflict regions emphasizing the importance of social cognition in the emergence of potential terrorists. This will be a worthwhile effort as wars uproot young men and women from their homes and families, interrupt their formal education, leaving them vulnerable, unemployed, and with ample opportunities to blame someone for their bleak future.

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