

Assertiveness, Self-Esteem and Locus of Control as predictors of Aggression in a Nigerian sample

Blessing Nneka Ome
Nkemakolam Augustine Okorie
Ebele Evelyn Azubuiké

Abstract

The study is geared towards exploring some individual differences factors that could be implicated in aggression, which is a significant problem at both individual and societal levels. Hence, it investigated whether assertiveness, self-esteem and locus of control are significant predictors of aggression in a Nigerian sample. Four hundred and twelve participants, comprising 232 males and 180 females, with mean age of 23.25 years, completed a questionnaire pack which included the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS, Rathus, 1973), the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE, Hudson, 1982), the Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966), and the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ, Buss & Perry, 1992). Results showed that assertiveness positively predicted aggression ($\beta = .22$, $t = 3.36$, $p = .001$) likewise low levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .36$, $t = 5.31$, $p = .000$) and external locus of control ($\beta = .14$, $t = 2.17$, $p = .03$). Findings were discussed and recommendations made for further studies.

Introduction

Aggression is a significant problem at both individual and societal levels, and has a negative impact on both victims and perpetrators. Aggression is a behaviour whose immediate intent is to hurt someone. It is a destructive force in social relations, and as a result, an important social issue. Human aggression is any behaviour directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate intent to cause harm, and the perpetrator must believe that the behaviour will harm the target, and that the target is motivated to avoid the behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Myers, 2010). It is behaviour or a disposition that is forceful, hostile or attacking, which may occur either in retaliation or without provocation. It could also be an act to increase relative social dominance (Sidianus & Pratto, 1999).

Aggression stems from an individual's perceptions and interpretations of other people, their behaviour and the situation in which the behaviour occurs. Thus, it could take various forms and could be physical, or communicated verbally or non-verbally. According to Moyer (1976), aggression is no more than verbal or symbolic, though violence denotes a form of human aggression that involves inflicting physical damage on persons or property. Aggression could be classified into natural/positive aggression (which is aimed at self-defense, combating prejudice or social injustice) and pathological aggression (which results when an individual's inner nature has become twisted or

frustrated) (Maslow, 1968). It could be hostile (which is aimed solely at hurting another) or instrumental (which is used as a means to an end) (Geen, 1990).

Research has found considerable evidence that individual differences in aggression are relatively stable. Thus, some people tend to be more prone to aggressive outbursts than others (Farrington, 1994). According to Freud (1905, 1915), aggression is considered a perverse manifestation of libido, the sexual instinct, and the frustration of behaviour aimed at gaining pleasure or avoiding pain led to aggression, while Adler (1908) proposed the idea that aggression was an innate, primary instinctual drive. Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears (1939) opined that the occurrence of aggressive behaviour implies the existence of frustration, and Miller (1941) concurred that frustration produced instigations to various responses, one of which is expressed in form of aggression, while Mowrer (1960) suggested that aggression is a learned response to frustration. Thus, research shows that there is a direct relationship between frustration and aggressive behaviour (Lintner, 1991).

Other researchers, Berkowitz (1993) proposed that aversive events such as frustrations, provocations, loud noises, uncomfortable temperatures, and unpleasant odours produce negative affect, and these feelings automatically stimulate various thoughts, memories, expressive motor reactions, and physiological responses associated with both fight and flight tendencies (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In addition, the cognitive neo-association theory proposes that aggressive thoughts, emotions and behavioural tendencies are linked together in memory (Collins & Loftus, 1975), and aversive events increase aggressive inclinations via negative affect (Berkowitz, 1989). However, to the social theorists, aggressive responses are acquired in the same way other complex forms of social behaviour are acquired, either by direct experience or by observing others (Bandura, 2001). This is further buttressed by Huesmann (1998) who was of the opinion that scripts, which are sets of particularly well-rehearsed, highly associated concepts in memory often involving causal links, goals and action plans (Abelson, 1981), affect behaviour. Thus, they could change a person's expectations and intentions involving important social behaviours (Marsh, Hicks & Bink, 1998).

On the other hand, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) interpreted aggressive behaviour or coercive actions as social influence behaviour in which the actor is a decision-maker whose choices are directed by the expected rewards, costs and probabilities of obtaining different outcomes. Thus, expected rewards and outcomes could propel one to aggression, and one of the factors that could influence one's insistence on having their expected reinforcement is assertiveness. According to Onyeizugbo (2003), assertiveness is the expression of social boldness by which an individual claims right, and voices out true feelings in social settings in ways that would maximize reinforcement.

When faced with difficult situations, animals have two options; flight (non-assertion) or fight (aggression); humankind has a third option – assertiveness, which is essentially a considered response to difficult situations (Bishop, 2010). It focuses on the inalienable right of the individual to openly express his/her feelings to the person who generates the feeling (Ezeilo, 2005). It is social boldness and frankness (Rathus, 1973), and reflects people's expression of their genuine feelings, standing up for their legitimate rights, principles, values, goals, preferences and beliefs, as well as refusing unreasonable requests (Nevid & Rathus, 2007; Yong, 2010). It implies the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings with confidence, without having to resort to passive, aggressive or manipulative behaviours. Its communication involves respect for the boundaries of

oneself and others which presumes an interest in the fulfillment of needs and wants through cooperation (Gottman, 2000).

Assertiveness is communicated both verbally (Rose & Tyron, 1979) and non-verbally (McFall, Winnette, Bordewick & Bornstein, 1982). It is the behavioural middle ground lying between ineffective passive and aggressive responses (O'Donohue & Fisher, 2008), and emphasizes expressing feelings forthrightly, but in a way that will not spiral into aggression (Goleman, 1996). It is more adaptive than either passivity/submissiveness or aggressiveness (Alberti & Emmons, 1995) and enhances self-esteem, satisfactory interpersonal relationships and effective conflict management (Onyeizugbo, 2008; Weiten & Liroyd, 2003). However, it is sometimes conceived to imply the attempt to satisfy one's own needs and desires at the expense of the other person(s) being related with (Ojijji, 1998), and this could lead to aggressive responses or reactions. Cassell and Blackwell (2002) maintained that assertiveness exists on a continuum, including positively assertive, non-assertive and negatively assertive. To the layman, assertiveness often elicits aggressive responses.

Some causes of increased violence have been identified. For instance, the accessibility of guns (O' Donnell, 1995) both legally and illegally; global warming (Anderson, Bushman & Groom, 1997); violence against children in schools and homes (Straus, 2000); and the widespread exposure to violent entertainment media (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001), all contribute to the high level of violence and aggression in modern societies and self-perception could moderate its degree of influence. Thus, one aspect of self-perception that could be implicated in aggression is self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a personal sense of ability that is fundamental to an individual's identity, a motivation engine that powers one's cognitive machinery (Dunning & Sherman, 1997). It is characterized by one's subjective appraisal of self-worth (Myers, 2005), and refers to a person's overall self-evaluation (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). It is seen as how favourably individuals evaluate themselves (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008), and it is the relationship between one's real self and one's ideal self (Leary, 1999). High self-esteem individuals have a firing desire to maintain or enhance their self-esteem (Leary, 1999), while individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to feel awkward, shy, conspicuous and unable to express themselves with confidence (Amazue, 2011). Such individuals are always worried about making a mistake, being embarrassed, or exposed to ridicule, and they have a strong tendency to avoid people (Myers, 2005).

Findings concerning the association between self-esteem and aggression have been inconsistent. Some literature suggests that high self-esteem is linked to aggressive behaviour (Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia & Webster, 2002); while some researchers have noted a link between elevated levels of self-esteem (particularly in the form of narcissism) and aggression (Barry, Grafeman, Adler & Pickard, 2007), and others have shown an association between low self-esteem and aggression (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt & Caspi, 2005). The present study attempts to shed additional light on the association between self-perception (self-esteem) and aggression, particularly in a Nigerian sample.

Furthermore, locus of control may be a factor in one's self-perception as well as implicated in aggression. It refers to the extent to which someone believes that outcomes are based on his/her own actions or personal characteristics, or is a function of chance, luck, fate or circumstance, under the control of powerful others and simply unpredictable (Rotter, 1990). It is a perception of positive or negative events as being or not being a consequence of one's own action or personal control (Rotter, 1996). It is the degree to

which individuals believe that things that happen to them are due to internal versus external factors (Cooper, Okamura & McNeil, 1995). These beliefs are reflected in individuals' behaviour and actions (Valentine, Silver & Twigg, 1999). Thus, locus of control plays a role in one's perception of a situation and possible reactions to what is happening or should be happening (Breet, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2010). This could influence one's reactions to situations that are unacceptable. Internals are those who feel that they can influence the outcome of events in their lives, and achievement is attributed to skill, effort and ability, thereby taking pride in good outcome, and feeling ashamed/disappointed in bad outcomes. Externals view themselves as being generally at the mercy of environmental forces, fate, or luck, and tend to attribute achievements to chance, thereby experiencing less intense emotions when outcomes are bad, since they believe their actions could not influence any positive outcome (Bassey & Ezeh, 2005). An internal locus of control has been related to a host of positive outcomes, including high academic achievement in adults (Findley & Cooper, 1983), emotional well being in adolescent girls (Armstrong & Boothroyd, 2008), greater problem-solving skills/strategies (Grimes, Millea & Woodruff, 2004). They are more cognitively active, more socially adept, and perform better on a variety of skill-determined tasks than externals (Ozioko, 2000). Internality was also associated with increased awareness of significantly influential environmental factors, greater efforts to improve environmental conditions, and emphasis on skill and achievement reinforcement (Rotter, 1966). A person with a dominant external locus of control is convinced that anything that happens is the result of fate, chance or external powers (Swart, 2004), and these beliefs often cause feelings of anger, frustration and aggression (Stevens, 2002) and depression (Aiken & Baucom, 1982) in adults. Externals are found to be more easily swayed by group pressure and therefore have a higher sense of diffusion of responsibility (Sprinthall, Sprinthall & Oja, 1994).

Internal locus of control is a power of choice that carries with it both the freedom and the right to choose, and the burden of responsibility for one's choice (Lang, 1996). The inner control of a person develops from a conscious and active decision to accept responsibility for one's choices and to control one's feelings (Valentine, Silver & Twigg, 1999). Adolescents may become less aggressive if they believe in the idea that individuals have the ability to change. Those who have this idea consider that their actions have an influence on their current and future activities and those of others (Ridling, 2010). This is associated with a sense of self-worth. By contrast, aggressive and anti-social teenagers have been shown to have an external locus of control, and they believe that their current and future activities are governed by others or luck, and this is associated with low sense of self-worth (Ridling, 2010). Hence, they are more likely to believe that they cannot change. This could predispose them to being aggressive.

Individuals with low self-esteem may engage in aggression if they also feel they are helpless, and lack control in their lives (Wallace, Barry, Zeigler-Hill & Green, 2012). Thus, aggression may be one way to gain a sense of control and boost one's self-perception. It could also be that these individuals resort to aggression in an attempt to shield their low self-worth by acting in a hostile or coercive manner toward others. Although, both external locus of control and low self-esteem may each be risk factors for aggression, the presence of both variables may further heighten the risk for aggression (Wallace et al., 2012).

High self-esteem has been associated with an internal locus of control (Griffore, Kallen, Popovich & Powell, 1990), and has not been linked to strong concerns with social

status or the opinions of others (Kernis, 2003). Research suggests that an elevated internal locus of control is associated with improved emotional and behavioural outcomes among adults and pediatric population (Molassiotis, Nahas-Lopez, Chung, Lam & Lau, 2002). Thus, individuals with high self-esteem may not feel a need to use aggression to obtain social goals or exert control.

Based on the social influence theory of behaviour, where the actor is a decision-maker whose choices are directed by the expected rewards, costs and probabilities of obtaining different outcomes, individuals could be prone to assertive behaviours and aggressive tendencies, due to the results associated with the outcomes of such behaviours. In the same vein, these outcomes could be a function of one's own actions (internal locus of control), or personal characteristics such as self-esteem, or a function of chance, luck, circumstance, or fate (external locus of control).

On this premise, the study intends to explore if aggression could be predicted by multiple variables (assertiveness, self-esteem and locus of control) in a Nigerian sample. In addition, the study is proposed with the intention of contributing information on factors that could be implicated in the expression of aggression in natural settings, which will hopefully facilitate comparison across various cultures. Thus, the following hypotheses were postulated and tested:

- Assertiveness will significantly predict aggression.
- Self-esteem will significantly predict aggression.
- Locus of control will significantly predict aggression.

Four hundred and twelve (412) participants (232 males and 180 females) were purposively sampled and their ages ranged between 16 and 39 years, with a mean age of 23.25 years. They were of the Igbo ethnic group (91%), single (99%) and 98% were Christians. Four instruments were used in the study – the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS, Rathus, 1973), the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE, Hudson, 1982), the Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966) and the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ, Buss & Perry, 1992).

The RAS is a standardized psychological assessment instrument developed by Rathus (1973) and validated for use with Nigerian samples by Anumba (1995). It is a 30-item inventory designed to assess assertive behaviour as a component of personality. The RAS requires participants to describe themselves using a code (3 = very much like me; 2 = rather like me; 1 = slightly like me; -3 = very much unlike me; -2 = rather unlike me; -1 = slightly unlike me). In terms of scoring, more than half of the items (1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 30) are reverse scored, and a sum of the results of the direct and reverse scored items gives the client's overall score, which could range from +90 to -90. Separate norms have been reported for male and female Nigerian samples as follows; males = 48.25, females = 48.61, (Anumba, 1995). The Nigerian norms were the basis for interpreting the scores of the participants. Scores higher than the norms indicate that the client is assertive, while scores lower than the norms indicate non-assertiveness. Previous research showed that RAS has high reliability (Del Greco, Breitbach, Rumer, McCarthy & Suissa, 1986; Rathus, 1972, 1973), and high validity (Takashi, Shiomi, Masako, Ayako, Shinya, Norio & Shoji, 2003). Rathus (1973) reported a split-half reliability coefficient .77, and an eight-week interval test-retest coefficient .78, while Anumba (1995) obtained a concurrent validity coefficient .25 by correlating RAS with Index of Peer Relations (IPR) (Hudson, Nurius, Daley & Newsome, 1986).

The ISE is a 25-item scale developed by Hudson (1982). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert format ranging from rarely or none of the time (1) to most of or all of the time (5). Items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 21, 22, 23, and 25 were scored in the reverse direction, while the rest were directly scored. Hudson (1982) provided the psychometric properties of the scale as follows: $M (n = 1, 745) = .30$; with a coefficient alpha .93, and two-hour test re-test coefficient .92. This instrument was further validated by Onighaiye (1996) in a Nigerian sample and he obtained the following coefficients of validity - by correlating ISE with the Symptom Check List (SCL) (Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973), - in scale C – interpersonal sensitivity = .46, scale D – Depression = .38. The ISE is scored in the direction of low self-esteem, and Onighaiye (1996) reported norms for males and females – $M (30.89)$, $F (32.04)$. Thus, scores higher than the norms indicate that the participant has low self-esteem, while the lower a score below the norm, the higher the respondent’s self-esteem.

The Locus of Control Scale developed by Rotter (1966) is a 29 – item inventory with 23 forced-choice and 6 filler items, which measures internal and external belief systems of individuals. Using internal consistency and test-retest reliability, Rotter (1966) obtained a correlation that ranged from .65 to .79, and .49 to .83, respectively. He also reported validity indices of between .55 and .60 in his scale and that of James (1957) Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement Scale. Also, Mohammed (1988) found the Rotter Locus of Control Scale usable in the Nigerian context, while Salami (1991) reported test-retest reliability coefficient .79 for the scale in a Nigerian sample. The scale is scored in the external direction. As a result, the higher the score, the more external the individual is in terms of global control beliefs.

The BPAQ is a 29-item questionnaire developed by Buss and Perry (1992), which measures four factors of aggression - Physical aggression (9 items), Verbal aggression (5 items), Anger (7 items) and Hostility (8 items). Two of the items are reverse-scored (9, 16), and the total score for aggression is the sum of the factor scores. Buss and Perry (1992) reported that internal consistency for the four subscales ranged from .72 (Verbal Aggression) to .89 (total BPAQ score), while test-retest reliability coefficients for the four subscales over nine weeks interval ranged from .72 for Anger to .80 for physical aggression, with the highest subscale correlations involving the Anger subscale ($r = .48$) with physical aggression and ($r = .48$) with verbal aggression. For the purpose of the present study, the instrument was validated in a Nigerian sample involving two hundred and thirty-five (235) participants (147 males and 88 females). The analysis of the data yielded a Cronbach alpha .81.

A total of 420 questionnaires were administered to the selected students and each questionnaire contained specific instructions on how to respond to the items. The 420 questionnaires were returned. Out of these copies returned, 8 were discarded due to improper completion and the remaining 412 were used for the data analysis. The study was a cross-sectional survey and a hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis was performed on the data using SPSS 17 statistical package. Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses of the study because it has predictive relationship ability.

Results

Table 1: Summary of Regression Coefficients for Assertiveness, Self-Esteem and Locus of Control as Predictors of Aggression.

	R ² change	F change	B	β	t
Age	.01	1.8	.41	.09	1.34

Gender	.01	1.33	-2.55	-.08	-1.16
Religion	.01	2.71	-6.78	-.11	-1.65
Ethnic Group	.00	.46	.90	.05	.68
Marital Status	.00	.57	-9.07	-.06	-.76
Assertiveness	.04	7.94	.62	.14	2.17**
Self-Esteem	.02	3.51	.20	.22	3.36***
Locus of control	.11	28.16	.49	.36	5.31***

Key: *** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$.

The Table shows that assertiveness had a significant positive relationship with aggression ($\beta = .14$, $p = .001$), likewise self-esteem ($\beta = .22$, $p = .000$) and locus of control ($\beta = .36$, $p = .03$).

Thus, the more assertive one is, the more aggressive one tends to be. This finding confirmed the hypothesis that assertiveness will significantly predict aggression and supports some conventional beliefs, postulations and findings on the relatedness of assertiveness and aggression (Cassell & Blackwell, 2002; Ojijji, 1998). It could be that assertiveness is misconstrued for aggression. Hence, when one tries to stand for his/her rights and responsibilities, or insist on having the desired reinforcement, he/she is seen to be aggressive, and might elicit an aggressive response from the other party which could degenerate to disagreement.

On the other hand, the hypothesis that self-esteem will significantly predict aggression was also confirmed because self-esteem positively predicted aggression, with those low in self-esteem being prone to aggressive behaviours. Thus, the lower one's self-esteem, the more aggressive one tends to be. This is in line with other findings, that low self-esteem is linked to aggressive behaviour (Wallace, et al., 2012), which implies that people with low self-esteem may use it as a defense mechanism, and in a bid to shield their low sense of self-worth they act in a hostile or coercive manner toward others. However, the finding is inconsistent with some literature which suggest that high self-esteem is linked to aggressive behaviour (Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia & Webster, 2002); and disagrees with some researchers who noted a link between elevated levels of self-esteem (particularly in the form of narcissism) and aggression (Barry, Grafeman, Adler & Pickard, 2007; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke & Silver, 2004). Based on the finding, aggression may be one way to boost one's self-perception and sense of self-worth.

In addition, the hypothesis that locus of control will significantly predict aggression was confirmed because locus of control positively predicted aggression, with the externals indicating aggressive tendencies. The results support previous findings that external locus of control relates to aggression (Stevens, 2002). Thus, a person with a dominant external locus of control is convinced that anything that happens is the result of fate, chance or external powers (Swart, 2004), and these beliefs often cause feelings of anger, frustration and aggression (Stevens, 2002). In other words, aggression could be used as a means to an end (gaining a sense of control), and could be an act to increase relative social dominance (Sidianus & Pratto, 1999).

Implication of Findings

These findings imply that on the assertiveness continuum, assertive individuals are more predisposed to aggressive tendencies than passivity. Thus, assertiveness which implies expressiveness has different connotation for different individuals, and is context-sensitive. Therefore, individuals need to be properly and adequately tutored on the

appropriateness of an assertive behaviour, because assertiveness is less extolled in Nigeria which has a collectivist culture. Otherwise, assertiveness would create more problems other than proffering solutions. Hence, high assertiveness may have negative connotations in Nigeria, giving the impression that one is rude or arrogant which might in turn elicit aggressive responses. It is noteworthy, that assertiveness is not just developed, it is a skill that is acquired with adequate training and trainers should endeavour to sufficiently inculcate definite demarcation between assertiveness and aggression while carrying out assertiveness training. On the other hand, there is a need to create awareness on how to boost people's self-esteem as well as promote positive self-perception, since it has been proven to a great extent that low self-esteem significantly accounts for aggressive behaviours. In addition, individuals need to realize that they have power of choice that carries with it both the freedom and the right to choose as well as the burden of responsibility for one's choice. This realization would not only foster internalization of outcomes but also reduce susceptibility to feelings of anger, frustration and aggression when outcomes are seemingly unfavourable.

Limitations of Findings

One limitation of this study is that the generalisability of the findings may be limited to university undergraduates. Another limitation is in the attribution of relationship to the variables studied. There are other variables – both individual differences variables and demographic variables - that may bring about differences in aggressive tendencies. These factors could be confounding variables to the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Following the limitations highlighted above, it is recommended that in subsequent research, it will be necessary to carry out further studies on the moderating effects of the individual variables used in this study as well as other demographic, social and personality variables. These further studies could involve different populations and samples to foster the study's generalisability.

Conclusion

In sum, assertiveness, self-esteem and the externality of one's locus of control are factors that are significantly implicated in aggression, and should be taken into consideration when handling conflict in social settings. These findings will enable psychologists, sociologists/social workers and indeed administrators at different facets manage, educate, reform and rehabilitate the people as well promote effective resolution.

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