

The following is a description of the findings from research projects that were completed in 2016 in Associate Professor Tom Denson's laboratory (t.denson@unsw.edu.au).

Title: Reducing Group-based Aggression: The Effects of an Apology and Group Discussion

Experimenter: Jane Ma

Collective angry rumination occurs when ingroup members repetitively share angry thoughts and feelings about an outgroup. This type of rumination increases aggressive behaviour towards the outgroup. Conversely, an empathic ingroup discussion (i.e. sharing empathic thoughts) about an outgroup member who apologised for a wrongdoing, reduces aggressive behaviour. The current study investigated the importance of an apology as a moderator of empathic group discussion and collective rumination on aggression. All participants (N = 198) and their ingroup were provoked by the experimenter; then either received an apology or not. Half the participants then engaged in collective rumination; the other half engaged in empathic group discussion. All participants were given the chance to retaliate by completing an experimenter evaluation in which they could recommend the experimenter for a paid postdoctoral fellowship (i.e., the measure of aggression). Participants in the empathic group discussion condition showed lower aggression compared to participants in the collective rumination condition. There was no effect of apology on aggression or an interaction. The effect of discussion-type on aggression was mediated by annoyance toward the experimenter. Findings imply that social communication processes play an important role in directing aggressive behaviour in hostile intergroup contexts. These findings have implications for reducing intergroup aggression such as gang-based violence and racial conflicts.

Title: The Effects of Mindfulness on Conflict Discussions among Intimate Partners

Experimenter: Siobhan O'Dean

People in violent and distressed intimate relationships tend to have negative and hostile conflict discussions. Mindfulness may be a potential strategy to reduce hostility and increase positive communication in couples. The present study tested whether 7 days of mindfulness meditation practice could help couples have more positive and effective conflict discussions. Couples either underwent a week of mindfulness training or an audio-book listening control condition. Subsequently, couples attended a laboratory session where they engaged in a brief mindfulness meditation (or audio-book listening control), prior to discussing an important source of conflict. Results showed that mindfulness reduced negativity and conflict, and increased positive communication during the conflict discussion. However, mindfulness did not influence aggressive communication tactics. Significant findings are discussed in terms of two potential mechanisms behind mindfulness: emotion regulation and empathy. Specifically, mindfulness may have attenuated negativity and conflict, and increased positive communication by enhancing emotion regulation and empathy. Unexpected findings for mindfulness on aggression are explained with relation to objective self-awareness theory. The present findings indicate that mindfulness may provide a novel strategy for couples dealing with communication deficits during conflict.

Title: An Investigation of Intimate Partner Conflict: Can Cognitive Control Training Reduce Reactive Aggression?

Experimenter: Mathew Marchant

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is behaviour that is intended to inflict harm upon a romantic partner who is motivated to avoid such harm. Given the high prevalence and adverse consequences of IPV, as well as a paucity of empirically-validated interventions, there is a crucial need for research in this area. This study investigated whether training individuals to delay responding in hostile situations could reduce aggression towards a romantic partner. Individuals were required to attend the laboratory with their romantic partner present. Participants were 64 romantic couples, where each member was randomly allocated to a training or control condition. Participants completed a perceptual judgement task that required those in the training condition to delay responses following hostile word primes. Afterwards, all participants completed a laboratory aggression task where they were ostensibly provoked by their romantic partner, and were given the option of retaliating. Contrary to hypotheses, participants that received training were no less likely to retaliate to provocations. Several explanations are offered for this result, including that participants in the training condition may not have been effectively trained to delay responses when cued with hostility. Implications are discussed in terms of the design and clinical utility of brief cognitive training-based interventions.

Title: Men Are More Aggressive Toward Sexualized Women: The Mediating Role of Sex Goal Activation on Male-to-Female Aggression

Experimenter: Khandis Blake

Scientific research from a variety of disciplines suggests a positive relationship between Western cultural hypersexualization and women's likelihood of suffering harm. The aim of the current research was to experimentally test the relationship between female sexualization and aggressive victimization. Specifically, we investigated whether men were more aggressive toward a sexualized versus non-sexualized woman after an episode of romantic rejection. We tested whether this effect was mediated by the activation of sexual goals in men. We also tested whether behaving aggressively toward a woman would increase feelings of sexual dominance in male participants. Results showed that interacting with a sexualized woman increased men's sex goals. Heightened sex goal activation, in turn, predicted increased aggression. This result remained significant despite controlling for the effects of trait aggressiveness, physical aggressiveness, hostility, and negative affect on the mediator and outcome variable. We also found that after being romantically rejected, greater behavioral aggression positively correlated with heightened feelings of sexual dominance regardless of sexualization. Findings imply that by encouraging heightened sex goal activation in men, Western cultural hypersexualization may increase the likelihood that men will perpetrate aggression against women who reject them.

Title: High Estradiol and Low Progesterone are Associated with High Assertiveness in Women

Experimenter: Khandis Blake

Sexual selection theory posits that women are more selective than men are when choosing a mate. This evolutionary theory suggests that "choosiness" increases during the fertile window because the costs

and benefits of mate selection are highest when women are likely to conceive. Little research has directly investigated reproductive correlates of choice assertion. To address this gap, in the present research we investigated whether fertility, estradiol, and progesterone influenced general assertiveness in women. We recruited 98 naturally cycling, ethnically diverse women. Using a within-subjects design and ovarian hormone concentrations at fertile and non-fertile menstrual cycle phases, we measured implicit assertiveness and self-reported assertive behavior. To see if fertility-induced high assertiveness was related to increased sexual motivation, we also measured women's implicit sexual availability and interest in buying sexy clothes. Results showed that high estradiol and low progesterone predicted higher assertiveness. Sexual availability increased during periods of high fertility. Low progesterone combined with high estradiol predicted greater interest in buying sexy clothes. Results held when controlling for individual differences in mate value and sociosexual orientation. Our findings support the role of fluctuating ovarian hormones in the expression and magnitude of women's assertiveness. High assertiveness during the fertile window may be a psychological adaptation that promotes mate selectivity and safeguards against indiscriminate mate choice when conception risk is highest.

If your experiment is not listed here, it may still be ongoing. Please contact Associate Professor Tom Denson at t.denson@unsw.edu.au if you have questions.

Thank you for participating in our research!