

Summary of the Ph.D. Thesis

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The title of the thesis:

Cognitive, individual, and relational factors related to hostile attributions

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Abstract

The aim of the current project was to improve and complement our knowledge of the cognitive, individual, and relational correlates of hostile attributions, a scientifically and socially important topic because making hostile attributions – that is, interpreting the behaviour of others as intentional and hostile – is one of the most important factors explaining individual differences in the frequency and severity of reactive-aggressive behaviour. However, the questions of which particular, personal variables are associated with hostile attributions, how stable these relationships are (depending on their socio-relational context), and what leads to the development of a hostile attributional style, all remain open.

This dissertation is based on a series of seven articles, published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, employing a diverse set of methodologies (e.g., different methods of measuring hostile attributions) and research techniques (e.g., eye tracking technique). Study participants included a variety of socio-demographic groups (e.g., men and women convicted of violent crimes, father-son pairs, and patients). Collectively, an analysis of these papers provides new and relevant information to the scholarly discussion of hostile attributions, particularly those that constitute an element of scientific polemics.

In papers 1 and 2, written in collaboration with an international research team, we examine patterns of encoding and interpreting ambiguous social signals, by people convicted of violent crimes. Here, we conduct one of the few research studies of this type, not only among men but also among female inmates. The results described in the first two articles demonstrate, among other things, that those prone to aggression show deficits in attentiveness to eyes and faces, which can result in difficulty in adequately understanding social situations.

Papers 3 and 4 represent a line of research on the personality correlates of hostile attributions. In article 3, we describe differences in terms of trait anger and sensitivity to provocation, as well as the history of incarceration in the families of the subjects studied. Subsequently, in paper 4, we examine whether sensitivity to provocation predicts the tendency to interpret ambiguous emotional, facial expressions as angry.

In papers 5 and 6, we deal with the relational factors associated with hostile attributions. We verify the association of vulnerable narcissism with elevated levels of hostile attributions, according to the socio-relational context, and examine whether a father's level of hostile attributions correlates with his son's level of hostile attributions. We also examine the relevance of a father's level of vulnerable narcissism to this relationship. In turn, in paper 7, we describe a method for reducing the tendency to make hostile attributions.

The results of the research add several significant elements to the model on hostile attributions, emphasizing the importance of gender, socio-relational context, and the level of the ambiguity in the assessed situation, among other factors. The findings also confirm the assumption that making hostile attributions is a very complex process, and further research is warranted to more fully understand the phenomenon—and to enable the design of effective, practical measures to reduce hostile attributions.