The Voodoo Doll Task

Introducing and Validating a Novel Method for Studying Aggressive Inclinations

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Aggression

“Aggression is defined as any behavior intended to cause harm to someone who is motivated to avoid the harm”

(Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Baron & Richardson, 1994; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010)
The Voodoo Doll Task (VDT) is “...a new behavioral method for measuring aggressive inclinations” (DeWall et al. 420)
VDT is designed to...

- Complement existing measures of aggression and address their limitations

(Taylor Aggression Paradigm, Hot Sauce Paradigm, The Physical Assault and Psychological Aggression Subscales of the Conflict Tactics Scales, Proximal Antecedents to Violence Episodes Scale, Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations)
- Have strong validity in a variety of research settings
  (one with no computers, a computer in a lab, internet data collection)
Be applicable to differing relationship contexts

(strangers, acquaintances, friends, romantic partners)
Conceptual Framework

- **Magical Thinking**
  - “...people transfer characteristics of a person onto a voodoo doll representing that person”

- **Law of Similarity**
  - “…the process of causing harm to a voodoo doll...has important psychological similarities to the process of causing actual harm to the person the voodoo doll represents” (DeWall et al. 420)
Participants:

- Complete individual difference measures to self-report on aggressive tendencies and behaviors
- OR
- Are exposed to a situational manipulation designed to stimulate an aggressive urge
Participants are told they can release their negative energy by stabbing the doll with as many pins as they wish

- not required in the instructions
- the word 'voodoo' is not used at any time

More pins = higher levels of aggressive intentions
Some Brief Results

- High test-retest reliability over a 4 week period
- Within-person reliability on a daily level
- Construct validity
- Convergent validity
- Consistent results online and in-person
Limitations

- Measuring affective vs. predatory aggression
- Does not measure force of insertion
- Does not take into account the location of insertion
- Does not assess underlying motivations of aggression
- Most people in the studies did not insert any pins, non-normal distribution
  - Not sensitive enough to measure variability at the nonaggressive end of the spectrum
Future Directions

- If VDT were framed as a means of gaining a desired goal, could it be used to measure instrumental or predatory aggression?
Do you think problems can arise by using a widely-known symbolic object for these studies?
Would you anticipate any differences between the results of a highly superstitious person and someone with less susceptibility to these beliefs?