

Forgiveness, Moral Disengagement, and Reactive and Proactive Aggression in Young Social Activists in Hong Kong

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Abstracts

Social movements may bring positive social changes. However, escalated levels of violence and delinquency in some campaigns caused public concerns about infringing personal rights and destroying public property. In modern societies, we encourage mutual respect, peace, and appropriate conflict resolutions and avoid the use of aggression across situations. This cross-sectional study examined forgiveness, moral disengagement, and reactive and proactive aggression among different types of young social activists in Hong Kong. Findings would provide insights into intervention strategies for reducing aggressive behaviors in young people and helping them restore their quality of life. Our participants were 1046 local secondary school and tertiary students (583 males and 463 females) aged 12 to 25 years ($M = 16.95$, $SD = 3.29$). They completed a questionnaire about their participation in local campaigns, with psychological measures of forgiveness, moral disengagement, and aggression. The respondents were then divided into three categories: non-activists (NA), moderate activists (MA), and activists with delinquent/violent action (ADA). ANOVAs were used to examine the differences between these three types of social activists. Results indicated that ADA reported using more reactive and proactive aggression than NA, and MA reported using more reactive but not proactive aggression than NA. ADA had significantly higher levels of moral disengagement overall than NA and MA. Regarding forgiveness, both ADA and MA had significantly lower levels of absence of negative than NA. Implications for psychotherapy, education, and social policies will be discussed.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Hong Kong, Moral Disengagement, Proactive Aggression, Reactive Aggression, Social Movement.

Introduction

In 2019, the Hong Kong Government introduced the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill [1], intending to establish extradition arrangements with Mainland China and Taiwan. Some Hong Kong residents were concerned

that they might be detained in the Mainland and be under its jurisdiction. Demonstrations were held to request the withdrawal of the bill [2]. During this Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (the Movement), large-scale local campaigns started to appear in June 2019, with aggression and delinquency escalated to a disturbing level. The extensive violence involved in the Movement was unprecedented.

From June to December 2019, 740 sets of traffic lights, 52.8 km of railings, and 21,800 square meters of footpath paving blocks were damaged, requiring HK\$65 million (US\$8.4 million) to repair [3]. Moreover, 85 Mass Transit Railway (MTR) stations were vandalized, shops owned by residents who did not support the Movement were damaged, and people with different political views were assaulted (RTHK Radio 1 as cited in [4]). Despite the extensive violence, public condemnation was not strong. Nearly one fifth of respondents in a survey reported that they supported the activists' violent and unlawful tactics, such as attacking "opponents", damaging public facilities, and using petrol bombs [5]. This suggests that some people justified the aggressive and illegal acts as reasonable and acceptable to fight for their political demands. In addition, the activists expressed much anger toward the police and the Hong Kong government. They considered themselves victims of excessive force from the police [4]. Slogans such as "never forget, never forgive," "Hongkongers, revenge," and "death to the families of the evil police" were frequently used in demonstrations, graffiti, and propaganda [6]. Some activists perceived themselves as victims, but others held opposite perceptions. The social diversity during the Movement was highly apparent from the neutral perspective of a scientific researcher examining the motives and functions of aggressive behavior and the relationship with moral disengagement and forgiveness.

Reactive and Proactive Aggression

Although aggressive behavior can manifest in various forms (e.g., physical aggression, verbal aggression, property attacks) and through different media (e.g., face-to-face and online), it can be classified into two subtypes, namely reactive aggression and proactive aggression, each with distinct motives, features, and functions [7], [8]. Reactive (hostile) aggression refers to an emotion-driven response to protect oneself from or take revenge for a perceived threat or frustration. In contrast, proactive aggression (instrumental aggression) refers to goal-oriented behavior with the deliberate purpose of attaining external rewards such as money and power [9].

Both reactive and proactive aggression are associated with cognitive distortions according to the social information-processing model. Reactive aggression is linked to deficient encoding and interpretation of social cues, whereas proactive aggression is related to overestimated positive evaluation of the potential consequences of aggressive behavior [9]. Due to their hostile attributional bias, reactive aggressors are more likely to pick up negative cues from the social environment and attribute hostility to the intentions of others, thus increasing the risk of anger and aggressive responses [10]. In contrast, proactive aggressors tend to be over-confident in their ability to be aggressive and underestimate the adverse consequences of their aggressive acts. Their positive outcome expectancy and sense of superiority encourage their use of aggression to take advantage of others to obtain benefits [11]. Hence, reactive aggressors are regarded as hot-tempered while proactive aggressors appear cold-blooded [12].

The study took an objective viewpoint to investigate whether the aggression among the aggressive/delinquent activists was dominated by reactive aggression, proactive aggression, the co-occurrence of both, or neither. During the Movement, aggression was used as an instrument to fight for political demands, implying proactive aggression. In addition, the activists experienced intense anger towards the police and the government and retaliated against the police and parties holding contrary political views, reflecting reactive aggression. Reactive aggression, proactive aggression, and their co-occurrence have distinct psychosocial correlates [13], and specific interventions are warranted to address such behaviors and their psychosocial correlates [14], [15]. Thus, the present study can provide valuable insights for social workers, counselors, teachers, and policymakers for interventions to limit violent campaigns.

Moral Disengagement

Moral standards serve as guidelines and determinants of behavioral enactment. To maintain self-worth and avoid distress, individuals behave in ways that comply with internal moral standards but inhibit behavior that violates these standards. Disengagement from these internal behavioral controls makes it easier for individuals to behave unethically [16]. Moral disengagement is the cognitive process by which individuals convince themselves that certain moral standards do not apply to them in a specific situation, allowing them to perform immoral acts such as aggression without feeling guilt or remorse [16], [17].

According to the social cognitive theory of moral agency [16], there are eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: (i) moral justification (i.e., justifying an unethical behavior as socially acceptable to serve moral or social functions), (ii) euphemistic language (i.e., using sanitizing language to rationalize unethical behavior), (iii) advantageous comparison (i.e., comparing an unethical behavior with worse acts to make it sound less negative), (iv) diffusion of responsibility (i.e., dividing the responsibility by emphasizing group decision making and collective action),

(v) displacement of responsibility (i.e., dissociating from personal responsibility by viewing the behavior as the result of social pressure or authority), (vi) distortion of consequences (i.e., neglecting the harmful consequences of unethical behavior and emphasizing the positive outcomes), (vii) attribution of blame (i.e., blaming the victims for causing or deserving the consequences of unethical behavior), and (viii) dehumanization (i.e., disregarding the victim's human qualities and viewing them as subhuman objects without moral concerns).

A meta-analysis of 27 studies by Gini et al. [18] found that moral disengagement was positively correlated with aggressive behavior among children and adolescents. Adolescents who showed consistently high levels of moral disengagement were more prone to aggressive and violent behavior in late adolescence [19]. In addition, moral disengagement was found to be a partial mediator between anger and hostility and physical and verbal aggression among youngsters aged 15 to 25 [20]. Longitudinal studies have also found that moral disengagement significantly mediates the relation between hostile rumination and violence in young adults [21].

During the 2019–2020 Hong Kong campaigns, the activists and the public justified violent acts by expressing beliefs such as “disobeying the law to get justice is acceptable” and “violence is sometimes necessary under certain circumstances” [4], though it was unclear what mechanisms were used to rationalize these acts. Given this, the author used a highly reliable universalized

assessment tool in this study to test whether the aggressive/delinquent activists showed significantly greater moral disengagement than the moderate activists and non-activists.

Forgiveness

The feeling of being treated unjustly has been positively associated with the use of aggression in adolescents and adults [22], [23]. Anger and a desire for retaliation arise from perceived injustice. Nevertheless, forgiveness has been found to reduce the tendency to show aggression through improved self-control [24]. While conflict is inevitable in social life, forgiveness is essential to sustain social relationships by moving on from past negative emotions and recognizing the value of existing relationships [25]. Forgiveness refers to prosocial changes toward a perceived transgressor through which a victim forgoes revenge and avoidance motivation and expresses benevolence toward the transgressor [26], [27]. Subkoviak et al. [28] argued that forgiveness involves not only overcoming resentment toward transgressors but also showing a new stance of benevolence, tolerance, and compassion toward them.

Based on this two-dimensional model, forgiveness can be measured by (i) the absence of negative responses, indicating the letting go of negative emotions (e.g., hostility), cognitions (e.g., retaliatory thoughts), and behavior (e.g., aggression), and (ii) the presence of positive responses (e.g., love, compassion, and tolerance) toward a wrongdoer [29]. Individuals with a higher tendency to forgive across situations have higher social desirability, lower state anger, a greater sense of religious well-being, and a more positive self-presentation [29].

The Movement disrupted the lives of ordinary people, such as by blocking highways and cross-harbor tunnels and damaging public facilities [4]. Thus, some Hong Kong residents did not support the Movement. During the campaigns, some activists used physical violence toward people who held contrary political views. Some people supported the use of aggressive behavior and damage to social property by violent activists. This study examined whether activists with higher levels of forgiveness were more able to control their negative cognitions and emotions triggered by the social unrest, showed respect to parties that did not support their political demands, and therefore showed less inclination to use aggression during the campaign.

The Present Study

The present study aimed to examine the differences in the use of reactive and proactive aggression, moral disengagement, and forgiveness (absence of negative responses and presence of positive responses) among different types of activists during the 2019–2020 Hong Kong activists: namely non-activists (NA), moderate activists (MA) (who did not show aggressive/unlawful behavior), and aggressive/delinquent activists (ADA) (who showed aggressive/unlawful behavior). As most of the activists were middle school and college students [4], they were invited to participate in the current study.

Hypothesis 1. ADA used more reactive aggression and proactive aggression than MA and NA.

Hypothesis 2. ADA displayed more moral disengagement than MA and NA.

Hypothesis 3. ADA displayed less forgiveness than MA and NA.

Methods

Participants

The study participants comprised 1,046 students (583 males, 463 females) aged 12 to 25 years ($M = 16.95$, $SD = 3.29$), of which 650 were middle school students (429 males, 221 females) aged 12 to 20 years ($M = 14.66$, $SD = 1.65$) and 396 were college students (154 males, 242 females) aged 17 to 25 years ($M = 20.48$, $SD = 1.67$). The selection criteria were (i) Hong Kong permanent resident who has lived in Hong Kong for seven or more years, (ii) aged 12 to 25 years, and (iv) studying at a local middle and high school, or college institution.

Procedures

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Committee of the City University of Hong Kong. The data were collected from June to November 2020. Consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed that the data collected would be kept anonymous and confidential, and used strictly for research purposes only.

Middle and High School Students. The author invited five schools in Hong Kong to participate in a study of youths' opinions, emotions, and behavior regarding the Movement. Three schools agreed to join with permission from the school administration. After obtaining parental consent and the students' assent, students from Grade Seven to Grade Eleven completed a questionnaire, either in electronic or paper-and-pencil format in groups of about 20 students, each in a classroom setting under the supervision of a research assistant. The students were not allowed to discuss the content of the questionnaire with others during the process.

College Students. On different social media platforms, the

author openly invited all local college students to participate in the study, with an incentive of HKD300 cash. The participants had to prove their student identity (e.g., student card) before participating, but no personally identifiable information was recorded. They completed an electronic questionnaire individually via a tablet or laptop provided by the author in person in a room at the City University of Hong Kong.

Measures

The survey consisted of demographic items, questions about political participation, and psychological measures of aggression, forgiveness, and moral disengagement.

Political Participation. The respondents were asked whether they had participated in the Movement and used any of the listed tactics, including moderate (e.g., demonstrations, signing of declarations or petitions) and aggressive or unlawful acts (e.g., destroying property, setting up roadblocks). The list of tactics is presented in Table I. The respondents also indicated whether they had ever partaken in physical aggression, verbal aggression, attacks on property, or cyberaggression toward another person for political reasons related to the Movement, see Table II.

Table I Campaign Tactics Used by Participants

Type	Campaign Tactic	Middle/ High School Students <i>n</i>	College Students <i>n</i>
Non-participation	Never participated	275	31
Moderate	Street demonstration	145	257
	Demonstration in shopping malls	124	170
	Signing related declarations or petitions	99	226
	Patronizing or boycotting particular restaurants or shops	152	253
	Boycotting classes	89	181
	Creating or reposting online propaganda	125	182
	Posting on the Lennon Wall	106	139
	Non-cooperation movement	20	40
	Not taking the MTR	91	93
	Discussing or promoting the Movement on social media	131	195
	Seeking assistance from foreign politicians or organizations	33	45
Aggressive/ Unlawful	Setting up roadblocks	26	65
	Fare evasion in MTR stations	35	74
	Destroying public property	19	27
	Damaging shops and restaurants	16	12
Unclassified	Others	6	3
	Not willing to tell / Missing value	100	51

Note. As participants could indicate that they had used more than one tactic, the sum of the values may be larger than the number of participants.

Table II Forms of Aggression Related to the Movement Used by Participants

Form	Middle/ High School Student <i>n</i>	College Student <i>n</i>
Physical Aggression	59	13
Verbal Aggression	136	125
Attack on Property	50	10
Cyberaggression	100	77

For the following psychological measures, the respondents were instructed to answer based on their beliefs, emotions, and behavior since June 2019.

Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ). The RPQ [30] is a 23-item self-report questionnaire measuring reactive and proactive aggression. Items are rated on a 3-point scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often), with 11 items summed as Reactive Aggression (e.g., “got angry when others threatened you”) and 12 items summed as Proactive Aggression (e.g., “had fights with others to show who was on top”).

This study used the Chinese version of the RPQ, which has been validated for adolescents in Hong Kong (Fung et al., 2009). Cronbach’s alpha was .84 for Reactive Aggression and .88 for Proactive Aggression.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (MMDS). The MMDS [16] is a 32-item questionnaire assessing moral disengagement in children and adolescents. The respondents rated

their degree of acceptance of the moral exoneration on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = disagree, 1 = neutral, 2 = agree). The scale's eight disengagement mechanisms (the sum of 4 items each) are moral justification (e.g., "it is alright to fight to protect your friends"), euphemistic language (e.g., "slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking"), advantageous comparison (e.g., "damaging some property is no big deal when you consider that others are beating people up"), diffusion of responsibility (e.g., "a kid in a gang should not be blamed for the trouble the gang causes"), displacement of responsibility (e.g., "if kids are living under bad conditions they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively"), distortion of consequences (e.g., "it is okay to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm"), attribution of blame ("if kids fight and misbehave in school it is their teacher's fault") and dehumanization ("some people deserve to be treated like animals"). For this study, the author translated the MMDS into Chinese through back-translation. Cronbach's alpha was .94 for overall moral disengagement, .71 for moral justification, .71 for euphemistic language, .70 for advantageous comparison, .64 for diffusion of responsibility, .74 for displacement of responsibility, .65 for distortion of consequences, .59 for attribution of blame, and .70 for dehumanization.

Design

The present study used a cross-sectional design. Students were classified into three categories according to their participation in the Movement, namely NA, MA, and ADA. NA were those who indicated that they had never participated in any activities in the Movement, regardless of whether they agreed with the campaign. MA were those who indicated that they had participated in the Movement but only used moderate tactics. ADA were those who indicated that they had both participated in the Movement and used aggressive or unlawful tactics or some form of aggression for political reasons related to the Movement.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the differences between NA, MA, and ADA in the use of aggression, moral disengagement, and level of forgiveness.

Results

Classification of Activists

According to the categorization criteria, 306 respondents were NA, 391 were MA, and 198 were ADA. Among the middle school students, 275 were NA, 202 were MA, and 73 were ADA. Of the college students, 31 were NA, 189 were MA, and 125 were ADA. However, 151 respondents (100 middle/ high school and 51 college students) did not indicate whether they had participated in the Movement. The details of participation in the Movement and use of aggression related to the Movement are shown in Tables I and II. Include a note with your final paper indicating that you request color printing. Do not use color unless it is necessary for the proper interpretation of your figures. There is an additional charge for color printing.

Differences among Activists

The results of the ANOVA revealed significant differences in the use of aggression, level of forgiveness, and mechanisms of moral disengagement among the different types of Activists.

The means and standard deviations of the measures and the effect sizes of the post hoc comparisons (Cohen's *d*) are presented in Table III.

Table III Means and Standard Deviations of Aggression, Forgiveness, and Moral Disengagement by Activists

Measures	NA		MA		ADA		Pairwise Comparison		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i> (MA - NA)	<i>d</i> (ADA - MA)	<i>d</i> (ADA - NA)
Reactive									
Aggression	3.11	3.36	4.08	3.21	4.93	3.58	.30	.25	.52
Proactive									
Aggression	.50	1.85	.59	1.54	.97	2.51	-	-	.22
Overall Moral									
Disengagement	7.94	9.30	10.25	8.56	14.25	10.43	.26	.42	.64
Moral Justification	1.75	1.77	2.29	1.83	3.00	1.94	.30	.38	.67
Euphemistic									
Language	.87	1.42	.96	1.32	1.51	1.55	-	.38	.43
Advantageous									
Comparison	.57	1.24	.88	1.31	1.46	1.59	.24	.40	.63
Diffusion of									
Responsibility	.92	1.39	1.30	1.57	1.89	1.76	.25	.35	.61
Displacement of									
Responsibility	.90	1.40	1.30	1.51	1.73	1.72	.28	.27	.53
Distortion of									
Consequences	1.11	1.38	1.45	1.37	1.71	1.60	.25	-	.40
Attribution of									
Blame	1.22	1.48	1.39	1.34	1.80	1.52	-	.29	.39
Dehumanization	.67	1.25	.82	1.24	1.24	1.53	-	.30	.40
Absence of									
Negative Response	33.87	5.88	32.70	5.67	32.37	6.21	-.20	-	-.25
Presence of Positive									
Response	11.59	4.02	11.91	3.53	11.60	3.59	-	-	-

Hypothesis 1 – Reactive and Proactive Aggression. There were significant differences among the different types of activists in the use of reactive aggression, $F(2, 889) = 18.39$, $p < .001$, and proactive aggression, $F(2, 890) = 4.01$, $p = .018$. The results of the Bonferroni post hoc tests indicated that ADA and MA made much greater use of reactive aggression than NA and that ADA also engaged in more reactive aggression than MA. Proactive aggression was used far more by ADA than by NA, but its use was not significantly different for ADA vs. MA and NA vs. MA.

Hypothesis 2 – Moral disengagement. There were significant differences in overall moral disengagement among the different types of activists, $F(2, 876) = 27.61$, $p < .001$, and significant differences in each of the eight individual mechanisms: moral justification, $F(2, 888) = 27.61$, $p < .001$; euphemistic language, $F(2, 891) = 13.77$, $p < .001$; advantageous comparison, $F(2, 886) = 25.99$, $p < .001$; diffusion of responsibility, $F(2, 889) = 23.08$, $p < .001$; displacement of responsibility, $F(2, 888) = 18.29$, $p < .001$; distortion of consequences, $F(2, 888) = 11.24$, $p < .001$; attribution of blame, $F(2, 890) = 10.12$, $p < .001$; and dehumanization, $F(2, 889) = 11.46$, $p < .001$.

The Bonferroni post hoc tests found that ADA showed significantly more overall moral disengagement and significantly more use of all specific mechanisms of moral disengagement than NA. ADA also showed significantly more overall moral disengagement than MA and more use of all specific moral disengagement mechanisms except for distortion of consequences. Compared with NA, MA showed significantly more overall moral disengagement, moral justification, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, displacement of responsibility, and distortion of consequences, but no greater use of euphemistic language, attribution of blame, or dehumanization.

Hypothesis 3 – Forgiveness. There were significant differences in the absence of negative responses to wrongdoing among the different types of activists, $F(2, 887) = 4.95, p = .007$. The Bonferroni post hoc test results indicated that NA was significantly less prone to negative responses than MA and ADA, but there were no significant differences between ADA and MA. Nevertheless, the three types of activists showed no significant differences in the presence of positive responses, $F(2, 890) = .79, p = .45$.

Discussion

Hypothesis I – Reactive and Proactive Aggression

Compared with NA, ADA used significantly more reactive and proactive aggression, implying that the violence involved in the Movement was complicated. Violence was used not only as an instrumental means to fight for political demands but also as a hostile response to protect themselves or take revenge against perceived threats (e.g., force by the police) or frustrations (e.g., demands unaddressed by the government). While some activists may have been campaigning to express their demands, the ADA with proactive aggression may also have been manipulating the other ADA (those with reactive aggression) to achieve their personal goals and rewards through violence. Activists with proactive aggression had the common features of being well-planned, calm and lacking remorse or a sense of guilt after injuring people in the streets who held an opposing political stance. Manipulation by the proactive aggressors may have led ADA with reactive aggression to follow their violent behavior and subsequently become recognized as members of the gang. Hence, the gang members could confirm their esteemed identity and collectively release their anger through attacks on property and physical aggression. In addition, the co-occurrence of reactive and proactive aggression may have existed among some ADA, which is consistent with the observation that the ADA showed the highest and most serious levels of aggressive behavior combined with both instrumental and hostile aggression.

Furthermore, compared with NA, the MA used significantly more reactive but not proactive aggression. This finding is consistent with the observation that most activists experienced a lot of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression). During the social unrest in 2019 and 2020, Ni et al. [31] reported the prevalence of depression at 11.2% and that of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at 12.8% among the adults participating in the study. Symptoms of PTSD were also found in some activists [32]. Studies have consistently revealed that reactive aggression is positively associated with anger, anxiety, depression, impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and paranoid ideation [13], [33]–[36]. With unresolved and unstable emotions triggered by the social

unrest, activists may also have shown reactively aggressive responses toward their peers and family members.

Hypothesis II – Moral Disengagement

ADA showed significantly more overall moral disengagement than MA and NA. Furthermore, they showed significantly more moral disengagement than NA on all eight mechanisms. These results are consistent with previous findings that moral disengagement is positively associated with the use of aggression [18], [19], [37]. The ADA disengaged from their moral standards and convinced themselves that aggression was acceptable in the fight for their political demands. In addition, the MA showed significantly greater overall moral disengagement than the NA. This explains why the ADA did not receive strong public condemnation despite the escalating violence and vandalism during the campaigns. “Do not split,” and “climbing the mountains together, making your own effort” were the action protocols frequently mentioned by the activists, emphasizing solidarity and mutual respect between nonviolent and violent activists

[38]. In other words, although the MA themselves did not use aggression during the campaigns, they unconditionally supported the aggressive tactics of other activists. Therefore, they disengaged from their moral standards, but to a lesser extent, to convince themselves to support the aggressive behavior they would not themselves enact.

Nevertheless, the MA and ADA did not differ significantly in the distortion of consequences, which refers to disregarding the negative consequences of violent tactics while emphasizing the positive outcomes. As the MA and ADA emphasized unity, a “do not split” groupthink occurred, creating excessive optimism and causing activists to ignore the negative consequences for the innocent public [39].

However, the MA and NA showed no significant differences in euphemistic language, attribution of blame, and dehumanization. Describing damage to shops as “renovation,” and assaults on other people as “massage” are examples of the euphemistic language that was used by some activists. The use of attribution of blame and dehumanization may also have resulted in the harming of innocent people. For example, a man was set on fire for disagreeing with a group of activists who had vandalized an MTR station on 11 November 2019 [40]. The findings suggest that MA may not have agreed with these vigilante attacks but turned a blind eye because of the “do not split” protocol.

Hypothesis III - Forgiveness

The ADA and MA were significantly more prone to negative responses to wrongdoing than NA, with no significant difference between them in this regard. The findings suggest that the activists in general could not forgo negative thoughts and feelings toward a perceived wrongdoer, regardless of whether they committed violent acts in the Movement. According to Shek [4], the Movement polarized people with different political views in families, social groups, and work settings, thus creating conflict among them. Forster et al. [25] proposed that forgiveness could be conceptualized as prosocial changes ranging from hostility to friendliness on a single attitudinal continuum. Hence, the failure to forgive is primarily motivated by individuals’ inability to overcome resentment through attempts to understand others’ perspectives and accept their own negative feelings. Ni et al. [41] found that even nonviolent campaigns could be

associated with adverse mental health outcomes (e.g., depression). Therefore, both MA and ADA could have had a lot of unresolved negative emotions, probably toward the police, the government, and people with contrary political views.

Furthermore, no significant differences were found in the presence of positive responses among the three groups, suggesting a floor effect. At the time of the survey, Hong Kong society was still polarized and there were some unresolved issues affecting people's quality of life and well-being [4]. Bono et al. [42] found that forgiveness was more strongly associated with better psychological well-being and greater life satisfaction among people who were more connected to the transgressor, and in situations where the transgressor had apologized or made amendments for the transgression. In the case of the present study, however, most of the activists' political demands were not being met by the government, and from the NA's side, some suspects in the violent campaigns could not be prosecuted due to their anonymity or abscondence. Hence, people in general may have found it harder to show benevolence, tolerance, and compassion toward each other.

Public Implications

Overall, based on the findings, it is suggested that students should be educated about the potentially negative impact of aggressive and delinquent behavior. Interventions and policy efforts could focus on helping youngsters to develop appropriate ways to express their political opinions and goals and effective strategies to enhance their ability to regulate their emotions and cope with anger and negative affect. Furthermore, moral and civic education could be strengthened to promote moral values and enhance students' sense of belonging to the local society. In addition, students should be made aware that they may have to bear the legal consequences of their acts of violence and vandalism.

First, anti-bullying or anti-aggression should be included in the core curriculum in elementary and middle schools. Teachers and parents should not solely emphasize academic achievement and materialism, which have been identified as common distorted life values in Hong Kong and constitute a significant ecological risk of psychosocial maladjustment among local youths [43]. Teachers should focus more on promoting students' all-round development, personal growth, and sense of belonging to the school while enhancing school cohesion and creating a harmonious atmosphere in the school.

Second, schools should provide life skills training for students concerning emotional management and coping with anger. Emotional competence is especially important for youngsters who engage in aggressive and delinquent behavior motivated by negative emotions such as anger and anxiety during social unrest. If students acquire socially desirable ways to express their anger, they may become more capable of avoiding negative vengeful thoughts and behavior, and hence be less likely to participate in aggressive and violent acts during campaigns.

Moreover, moral education should be strengthened to prevent students from disengaging from moral conduct. Students should be given proper guidance to distinguish what is right and wrong. Regardless of whether their actions were influenced by group decision-making, political demands, or social pressure, the students should be made aware that they will need to bear legal responsibility for their aggressive and delinquent acts. Violence and vandalism result in damage

and disruption to society, yet they do not bring about the intended outcome. Moreover, positive values should be promoted to students, such as mutual respect for each person's freedom of speech and political stance, and the importance of maintaining law and order in society. Students' knowledge of appropriate channels for expressing their opinions and demands should also be strengthened, so that they understand how to express their opinions and demands constructively.

Limitations

A major limitation of the present study is that the data was not collected by random sampling. Because of the political sensitivity of the topic and class suspensions during the COVID-19 pandemic, few middle schools were willing to participate in the study. Although college students were recruited openly on social media platforms and a financial incentive was provided, it is not clear whether their interest in participation was related to any of the psychosocial measures under investigation in this study. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all adolescents in Hong Kong.

Another limitation is that the current study was cross-sectional, hence causality could not be determined. The findings do not tell us whether greater moral disengagement led the activists to use violence or the activists' use of violence increased their moral disengagement, or whether both were true. Interactions between cognition and behavior are common in psychological studies.

Finally, reproducibility is an issue. Due to the specific cultural and political context of the current study, it cannot be easily repeated. However, as human history is replete with social movements, riots, and revolutions, the present findings could be replicated in another context.

Conclusion

The current study revealed that among the activists who participated in the Movement from June 2019, ADA displayed far greater use of both proactive and reactive aggression and greater overall moral disengagement than MA and NA. The ADA and MA were also significantly more prone to negative responses, suggesting that they could not easily forgo negative thoughts and feelings toward perceived wrongdoers. These results highlight the importance of providing training in emotional management and coping with anger in schools to enhance students' emotional competence and thus reduce the chances of them using aggression to express their anxiety in society in future.

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