

# Noise and Social Behaviour



Not only can noise be shown to have a detrimental effect on cognitive processes, it has also been found to exert a negative effect on social behaviour. Generally, research has indicated that increased levels of noise are associated with lower levels of social interaction (Appleyard and Lintell, 1972), increased aggressiveness (Geen and O'Neil, 1969) and lower levels of **altruistic** behaviour (Mathews and Canon, 1975). Predictably, these types of effects seem to be more marked when there is poor perceived control over the source of the noise. Given society's current concern with the apparent increase in violent crime and the fact that noise levels, especially in urban areas, look set to increase for the foreseeable future, this section will focus on some of the research that has linked noise and aggressive behaviour.

## Noise, Aggression and Violence

Social psychologists have for some time known that noise can be a proximal determinant of aggressive behaviour. That is, noise on its own does not necessarily increase aggressiveness, but instead may increase the likelihood of an aggressive response in someone who has already been angered, annoyed or in some way 'prepared' to behave aggressively. Experimental evidence for this comes from a study by Geen and O'Neil (1975) in which it was

found that participants produced more aggressive responses when exposed to noise *if* they had already been exposed to a violent film (which had cued or predisposed them to behave aggressively). Further research by Donnerstein and Wilson (1976) highlighted the role of perceived control as a mediating factor in the effects of noise on aggression. Participants were initially divided into two groups. One group was angered by a confederate. The participants were then given the opportunity to give electric shocks to another person under one of three conditions. In the first condition, participants were exposed to uncontrollable noise. In the second, they were exposed to noise they could turn off. The third condition was a control (no noise). The results showed that overall, angry participants gave higher intensity shocks than non-angry participants. However, both angry and non-angry participants gave the lowest intensity shocks when they were subject to noise they could control. The highest intensity of shock was given by participants exposed to uncontrollable noise. Studies like these suggest that, whilst noise does not in itself cause people to become more aggressive, it can be an important factor in precipitating an aggressive response in people that are already aroused or irritated.

### Try This...

Look out in your local newspaper for reports of noise-related complaints and incidents. Keep a record of the articles you find. When noise-related incident occur, is noise the only factor involved, or do other things contribute?

One criticism of these studies, however, is their artificiality. For obvious ethical reasons field experiments into the effects of noise on aggression are problematic to conduct, so it is difficult to test the validity of these findings in the real world. However, there have been incidents reported in the UK and US of violent assault – and even murder – where noise from neighbours has been cited as a precipitating factor in the crime. In the majority of these cases it appears that the attack (by the 'victim' of the noise on its 'perpetrator') is the conclusion of a lengthy process of complaint and lack of action from the person deemed to be the source of the noise (often music). Such cases appear to be consistent with the research evidence insofar as the crucial factor appears to be the lack of control the complainant exerted over their neighbour's noise. However, it can not be the case that noise is the *only* factor in precipitating these violent incidents if only for the reason that the majority of people affected by 'neighbour noise' do not resort to violence.

Environmental health data seem to indicate that the rate of increase in complaints about noise is greater than the rate of increase in actual noise, suggesting that people are becoming more intolerant of noise, or at the very least, are more inclined to report it to the authorities. It is a measure of societal concern over the quality of life issues caused by noisy neighbours that, over recent years, the British government has targeted noise from neighbours, clubs and concert venues with increasingly severe sanctions including Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and other legal measures including the confiscation of sound equipment for repeat offenders.

