Studying aggression in the field: influences of dynamics of the setting on atmosphere and aggressive behavior.
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Aggression in an urban nightlife setting is more than just a physical fight or a verbal insult. Aggression is also the tension floating in the air; changes in which are noticed by visitors, police officers and security guards. It seems that when this tension in the atmosphere increases so does the likelihood of aggressive behavior in the crowd. Although most researchers acknowledge that aggression is a highly context dependent behavior, to date it has predominantly been studied in controlled laboratory settings. These studies have been advancing our understanding of how psychological variables (e.g., affect, frustration) and environmental stimuli and conditions (e.g., presence of weapons, or temperature) affect tendencies to aggress, however the lack of research in situ has not allowed a systematic study of interaction between environment (e.g. “atmosphere” and “tensions”) and behavior.

In the De-escalate project we investigate applications of dynamic lighting to prevent aggression and diffuse escalations in naturalistic settings (an urban nightlife area, which is also serving as a living lab in Eindhoven, the Netherlands). Our research differs from existing field research on aggression as the unit of analysis is not the individual acts of aggression, but the changing dynamics of the setting of which “atmosphere” is but a part. So far, we have conducted two field studies. The first qualitative, ethnographic study got us acquainted with the context and the role of tension in aggressive outbreaks. In a second field experiment we adapted conventional methods (observations, subjective mood reports, frustration-aggression tests) and tested the effect of a lighting manipulation on aggression and the tension in the atmosphere. In EDRA we would like to share our reflections on the suitability of these methods to study aggression in a naturalistic setting, and discuss possible improvements upon these methods and alternative approaches suited for this type of field research.