

A Brief Study of Human Aggression

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Abstract – Human aggression is explained in many ways by psychologists, with any given explanation depending on the particular orientation of the individual. Even within the subspecialty of social psychology, variation in viewpoints can be found, with some stressing cognitive factors, others pinpointing emotional and affective determinants, and still others dealing with aggression as a part of broader social interaction system. On one matter, however, virtually all social psychologists agree: Aggression is a response to specific conditions in the environment; Definitions of aggression vary widely, because the term is taken from everyday speech and is used to refer to behaviour ranging from first-degree murder to verbal insults and social snubs.

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INTRODUCTION

A precise scientific definition that is universally accepted has yet to be devised. However, a formulation that serves as a good working definition is offered by Baron and Richardson (1994): "Aggression is any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment". World Health Organization (2002) defines, "Aggression, such as kicking, fighting and biting is a major concern for modern societies as the physical, emotional, cognitive and societal consequences of violent acts are serious, far reaching and long term."

Is Aggression Innate?

The study of aggression as a psychological phenomenon is of relatively recent origin. One question that has characterized this study from the beginning is to what extent is aggression behaviour related to innate processes that are acquired through biological inheritance? The theory of aggression that prevailed in early American psychology treated aggressive behaviour as something that flows from innate characteristics of the person, usually referred to as instinct. James believed that aggression is so much a part of innate human nature that it can be controlled only through substitute activity whereby people drain off their instinctual aggressive drive in to prosocially behaviour. "Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow" wrote James, "and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us (James 1910/1987). Earlier McDougall (1908) traced the innate aggressiveness of humans to a central affective emotional arousal that is elicited by situational

conditions, such as an attack or other provocation. Although the conditions that elicit this state and the behaviour that the state and engenders are subject to modification through learning, the central state (which McDougall called the instinct of pugnacity) does not change in the person's lifetime. It is fixed and "wired into" the person waiting only to be set off by some adequate conditions.

In the second decade of twentieth century, Freudian psychoanalysis began to receive serious attention in the United States. At that time, Freud's theorizing of the nature of aggression was based on the relation of the self to objects around it and whether those objects evoke pleasure or pain. "When the objects become a source of pleasurable feelings," Freud wrote, "We speak of the attraction, exercised by the pleasure-giving object and say that we 'love' that object. Conversely, when the object is the source of painful feelings, ---we feel 'repulsion' from the object and hate it; this hate can then be intensified to the point of an aggressive tendency towards the object, with the intention of destroying it" Freud (1915/1963). Later, however, Freud (1920/1959) revised his approach by linking aggression to his newly proposed construct of the death wish. The death wish leads ultimately to self-destructive action. However, if the person expresses anger and aggression toward other people, the consequences of the death wish may be turned away from the self and the person will survive. This idea had serious effects on Freud's overall view of life. He believed that war is inevitable because the "destructive instinct" that motivates war is really a form of self-preservation: We kill each other in order to avoid

turning our destructive wishes against ourselves (Freud 1932/1963).

Views about Aggression

Researchers have differentiated between various forms of aggression (i.e., the “what’s” of aggression, including direct, overt, physical, and verbal aggression vs. indirect, relational, social, and material aggression) and different function of aggression (i.e. the “whys” of the aggression, including proactive, offensive and instrumental aggression vs. reactive and defensive aggression). Despite the fact that various lines of research offer a complementary view on aggression, the different form and function of aggressive antisocial behaviour have not yet been examined and integrated into a unified measurement and analysis system. As a result, the dominant forms and functions of aggressive behaviour have not yet been adequately disaggregated and contrasted.

The “whats” of Aggression

Various forms of aggression have been identified in the literature, including direct, physical, verbal, material, relational, indirect, and social aggression. Although debates are ongoing regarding the labeling and conceptual distinctions among the various forms (Archer et al., 2001) our examination of the literature suggests that at most of these dimensions overlap considerably but at least two higher-order forms can be meaningfully distinguished, which can be chosen as overt and relational aggression. Overt aggression is generally defined as verbal and physical behaviours that are directed at individuals with the intent to harm them (e.g., pushing, kicking, hitting, threatening, insulting, etc.)- a more direct and “in your face” form of aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992) Relational aggression, on the other hand, is generally defined as acts that are intended to significantly damage another child’s friendships or feeling of inclusion in the peer group (e.g., purposefully withdrawing friendship or group acceptance from a child, ostracism, spreading, rumors, gossiping etc.)- A more indirect and relationship-based form of aggression (Cairns et al., 1989; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

The “whys” of aggression

Pluckier (1969) distinguished between defensive vs. offensive functional dimensions of aggression that parallel distinctions made more recently by Dodge and colleagues (1991), who have examined two dominant function: reaction and proactive (or instrumental) aggression. Reactive aggression is generally defined as aggression that occurs as an angry defensive response to social thwarting or provocation and includes responses that are primarily interpersonal and hostile in nature a definition that stems from the frustration- aggression model (Dullard et al., 1939). Instrumental aggression, on the other hand, is generally defined as aggression that occurs in

anticipation of self-serving outcomes and is a deliberate behaviour controlled by external reinforcements- a definition that stems from social learning theory formulations of aggression (Bandura, 1973).

Dullard and colleagues (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996) have shown that these functional aspects of aggression are associated with the differences in the way antisocial children process social information. This work has shown, for example, that some children have a bias to interpret ambiguous cues as engendering hostile intent. Although this bias is prediction of aggressive behaviour, it is not the goal of our study to assess interpretation biases. Instead, we assess only the “why” of aggressive behaviour regardless of whether the perception of harm or goal-thwarting is accurate or not.

Hostile vs. Instrumental Aggression

Hostile aggression has historically been conceived as being impulsive, thoughtless (i.e., unplanned), driven by anger, having the ultimate motive of harming the target, and occurring as a reaction to some perceived provocation. It is sometimes called affective, impulsive, or reactive aggression. Instrumental aggression is conceived as a premeditated means of obtaining some goal other than harming the victim, and being proactive rather than reactive (Berkowitz 1993, Geen 2001). Recent analysis (Bushman & Anderson 2001) modifies these definitions in two ways. First, which distinguishes between proximate and ultimate goals. It is view intention to harm as a necessary feature of all aggression (as in purely hostile aggression models), but it is necessary only as a proximate goal. Second, we distinguish between different types of aggression at the level of ultimate goal. Thus, both robbery and physical assault are acts of aggression because both include intention to harm the victim at a proximate level. However, they typically differ in ultimate goals, with robbery serving primarily profit- based goals and assault serving primarily harm-based goals. In short, our definition allows us to discuss the commonalities in and distinctions between affective and instrumental aggression, while including aggression that has mixed motives.

Moyer’s Classification of Aggression

Moyer (1968) presented an early and influential classification of seven different forms of aggression, from a biological and evolutionary point of view.

- Predatory aggression: attack on prey by a predator.
- Inter-male aggression: competition between males of the same species over access to

resources such as females, dominance, status, etc.

- Fear-induced aggression: aggression associated with attempts to flee from a threat.
- Irritable aggression: aggression induced by frustration and directed against an available target.
- Territorial aggression: defense of a fixed area against intruders, typically co-specifics.
- Maternal aggression: a female's aggression to protect her offspring from a threat. Paternal aggression also exists.
- Instrumental aggression: aggression directed towards obtaining some goal, considered to be a learned response to a situation.

Currently, there is a consensus in the scientific community for at least two broad categories of aggression, variously known as hostile, affective, or retaliatory aggression, vs. instrumental, overt aggression, physical aggression, predatory, or goal-oriented aggression (Behar et al., 1990). Empirical research indicates that this is a critical difference, both psychologically and physiologically. Some research indicates that people with tendencies toward affective aggression have lower IQs than those with tendencies toward predatory aggression. If the definition of aggression is limited to physical strategies only, then it is true that in some cases, males are more aggressive than females. One explanation for this difference is that females are physically weaker than men so they need to develop other means to obtain successful results and defend themselves (Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Females of different cultures have a variety of aggressive means through which they can get even with their husbands (e.g. locking them out of the house), all of which could be seen as forms of non-physical aggression. On Bellona Island, a culture that is based on male dominance and physical violence, women tend to get into conflicts with other women more frequently than men. When they do get into conflicts with their husbands, they rarely use physical means. Instead, they make up songs that mock their husbands, which spread across the island, humiliating their husband. If a woman wanted to kill a man, she would either convince her relatives to kill him or hire an assassin. These are both forms of indirect aggression since the aggressor (female) is trying to hurt another individual without putting herself in direct danger (Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Correlates of Aggressive Behaviour

In examining the social-cognitive and behavioural correlates of aggression, a distinction was made between the two subtypes of aggressive behaviour posited by Dodge and Coie (1987): reactive aggression and proactive aggression. According to these researchers, reactive aggression is a "hot-blooded" angry retaliatory response to a perceived provocation or frustration. Proactive aggression, on the other hand, is a goal-directed behaviour that is maintained by positive environmental contingencies and is generally not associated with underlying states of anger or frustration. Proactive aggression includes unprovoked behaviours that are oriented toward specific social goals as well as behaviours directed toward position or object acquisition (Dodge, 1991).

Investigation of the social and psychological mechanisms underlying these subtypes of aggression is an important task, given evidence that reactive and proactive aggression are associated with distinct developmental outcomes. Dodge et al. (1997) found that reactively aggressive boys display higher rates of other behaviour problems than proactively aggressive boys, and tend to be characterized by an earlier onset of such difficulties. These researchers also reported that, among chronically assaultive youth, reactively aggressive boys experience psychiatric disturbance more frequently than do proactively aggressive boys. Other investigators have found that reactive aggression is more strongly associated with peer rejection than is proactive aggression.

These findings notwithstanding, a potential limitation of past investigations in this domain is that teachers and parents have served as the most common sources of information regarding the subtypes of aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987). The resulting assessments of reactive and proactive aggression are often highly correlated. In the current investigation, we relied on direct observations of reactive and proactive aggression, which yield more distinct estimates (Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993).

BIOLOGY OF AGGRESSION

Neuroplasticity

Aggression is directed to and often originates from outside stimuli, but has a very distinct internal character. Using various techniques and experiments, scientists have been able to explore the relationships between parts of body and aggression.

Aggression in the brain

Many researchers focus on the brain to explain aggression. The areas involved in aggression in mammals include the amygdala, hypothalamus, prefrontal cortex, cingulate cortex, hippocampus, septal nuclei, and periaqueductal gray of the midbrain. Because of the difficulties in determining the intentions of animals, aggression is defined in neuroscience research as behaviour directed at an object or animal which results in damage or harm to that object or animal.

The hypothalamus and periaqueductal gray of the midbrain are the most critical areas controlling aggression in mammals, as shown in studies on cats, rats and monkeys. These brain areas control the expression of all the behavioural and autonomic components of aggression in these species, including vocalization. They have direct connections with both the brainstem nuclei controlling these functions and areas such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex. Electrical stimulation of the hypothalamus causes aggressive behavior.

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