

Theories for causes of aggressive behaviour



Compare and contrast social and biological accounts of the causes of aggressive behaviour.

Aggression is defined as: (a) ' a quality of anger and determination that makes you ready to attack other people'; (b) ' violent and attacking behaviour' (Collins, 2003). Whereas love, friendship and affiliation are positive, adaptive and constructive social influences, aggression is associated with violence, antisocial behaviour and destruction. Examples of aggressive behaviour range from arguments, to road rage, terrorism and war. Aggression then is physical or verbal behaviour that is intended to harm another person. This work examines aggressive behaviour in terms of biological and social-learning processes providing theoretical and research evidence.

Ethologists like Konrad Lorenz (2002) have identified several human behaviours, including aggression, that allow animals to gather and keep the fundamental resources for survival, mating, reproducing and caring for children. Discovering, taking and holding a territory provides the background on which the life cycle occurs. Many animals engage in territorial signalling to defend their territory mostly for mating and feeding purposes. Territorial signalling is adaptive because it prevents potentially destructive aggressive behaviours. The majority of animal aggression is due to mating, therefore, natural selection predisposes animals towards aggressive behaviour. Male and female animals compete for mates and patterns of sexual behaviour help us understand various form of aggressive behaviour.

Nevertheless, psychologists disagree about which of these biological inferences of other animals are relevant to humans. Evolutionary psychologists claim that they do apply to humans and postulate that territorial behaviour exists both in humans and in animals for the same reasons (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Most adults attempt to restrict their mate's sexual activities, using territorial signalling and emotional displays. For example, jealousy and aggression during courtship and mating are seen in arguments (territorial signalling) and physical fighting (when signalling fails). This is obvious in that men in many cultures and subcultures continue to think of their wives as property – part of the territory they defend.

Furthermore, comparison studies of identical twins that were brought up together and apart reveal a genetic effect on aggression. Twin studies (Miles & Carey, 1997; Rowe, Almeida & Jacobson, 1999) and the existence of gender differences (Buss & Perry, 1992; Loeber & Hay, 1997) support the idea that genes predispose a person towards being aggressive. The presence of the male hormone testosterone is also related to aggression. Laboratory experiments with mice and monkeys have shown that castration both lowers the levels of testosterone and aggressive behaviour. Contrary, the administration of testosterone to castrated animals and normal animals increase aggressive behaviour. Moreover, males who have been imprisoned for violent crimes and who are more violent than others while imprisoned, have higher testosterone levels than less violent prisoners (Dabbs, Carr, Frady & Riad, 1995).

In order to be able to decide effectively whether children learn aggressive behaviour, the theories of aggression which claim that it is an innate capacity will be considered. The view that aggression is innate comes from the fact that few parents actually teach their children to be aggressive. However, Bandura's (1971) early work indicated that children who have seen another person behaving aggressively will be increasingly likely to demonstrate aggressive behaviour. Later he proposed that aggression is actually something we learn to demonstrate because it seems to be useful to us. The likelihood of children imitating the behaviour will increase if they see the person being rewarded (reinforced) for their aggression by getting what they want. For example, a child who has become a very aggressive bully at school because he has learned that he will get what he wants. Where has he learned to be aggressive? Bandura (1971) argues that children learn by seeing others behaving aggressively during their childhood, or adolescence, through their own experience of being bullied or through observation of the media.

Knowing that we learn by observation is relevant to what we see on television. A number of studies have been conducted to discover whether television and cinema violence really does result in violent behaviour. Bandura (1971) reported that children who watched a video of other children punching an inflated stand-up toy (a 'Bobo doll') were more likely than others to behave in the same way when given the opportunity. In a follow-up to Bandura's studies, children who watched 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' later imitated these character's Karate kicks and mimicked their violent acts during play sessions with peers (Boyatzis, Matillo & Nesbitt, 1995).

Considering boys play which tends to include wrestling and fighting, Geary (1999) has claimed that play patterns represent an evolved adaptation that prepares boys for hunting and primitive warfare. Several researchers have reported short-term effects of television violence: young children (Singer & Singer, 1986) and adolescents (Wood et al., 1991) behaved more aggressively immediately after watching a violent TV program. The causes of their immediate changes in behaviour were probably a result of heightened arousal and desensitisation from repeated viewings (Gunter & McAleer, 1990). Overall, however, research results have been equivocal, suggesting to some psychologists that TV violence may cause less harm than first suspected (McGuire, 1986).

Furthermore, environmental influences have been viewed as determinants of aggression. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, a person is more likely to become aggressive when frustrated; therefore, aggression is a predictable response to frustration (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mower & Sears, 1939). This theory, though, by itself does not predict aggressive behaviour but, for example, hot weather makes people uncomfortable and this result into some people behaving aggressively. Triandis (1994) claimed that the relationship between heat and violence is confounded by the gap between rich and poor and by single parent families.

On the whole, research evidence supports that both biological and social learning approaches explain aggressive behaviour as internal and external influences respectively. Twin studies and differences in the way boys and girls play indicate a strong biological foundation for aggressive behaviour. People with higher levels of testosterone are more aggressive than those

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with lower levels. In addition, heat, poor economic conditions and TV violence are all associated with increases in violent behaviour. Nevertheless, it has been argued that some cultures are more aggressive than others. A person is 80 percent less likely to be murdered in Canada than in the United States (United Nations, 1997). The socio-biological approach postulates that genes interact with culture to produce unique examples of aggressive behaviour.

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