

Describe and evaluate social explanations of aggression



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Describe and evaluate social explanations of aggression. Aggression can be defined in many different ways. Bandura suggests that it is the intent to cause harm to another human being who is motivated to avoid such treatment. One of the main social psychological explanations of aggression comes from Bandura and Walters in 1963. He suggests that aggression is learned either indirectly; through observational learning and only replicated if vicarious reinforcement occurs, or directly- where aggressive behaviour is directly reinforced.

While both are a form of operant conditioning, the direct approach parallels the ideas much closer. Bandura outlined the following three steps in the modelling process of SLT: Observation- by watching the behaviour of role models and then imitating that behaviour, mental representation- the child will only display the learned behaviour as long as the expectation of reward is greater than the expectation of punishment, and production of behaviour- if the child is rewarded (maintenance through direct experience) or by building the confidence from expectancies of like likely outcomes of their aggressive behaviour (self-efficacy).

In support of this theory, Bandura et al. proved that if children watch someone else behave aggressively towards a Bobo Doll, they were more likely to be aggressive themselves later on, specifically imitating individual actions they had previously seen. When the model was rewarded, the child was more likely to reproduce through vicarious reinforcement compared to those models punished, thus showing that observational learning only results in imitation when it is vicariously reinforced. This study however, does not take into account of the nature vs. nurture debate. Although it seems that

Bandura's research proves that behaviour is learnt (nurture), it must however be noted that there were many gender differences where the boys produced more physical aggression than girls, which consequently support the argument that such behaviour is innate (nature). In addition, research findings are not only culturally bound but may be due to demand characteristics. It was noted by Noble (1975), after the study occurred, that many of the parents told the children what to expect, consequently causing little face validity.

Furthermore, although this study tells us that children do acquire aggressive responses as a result of watching others, it does not tell us much about why a child would be motivated to do so in the absence of the model, nor does it include the cognition or biology of these behaviours. This study also holds many ethical issues. It was carried out in the knowledge that children may reproduce the aggressive behaviours they were exposed to and therefore it is difficult to establish the scientific credibility.

It is also difficult to further test the social learning theory experimentally due to the concern of needing to protect participants from psychological and psychical harm. Moreover, a weakness of the Social Learning Theory is that people are never consistently rewarded for aggression. Often, and if not in most cases they are punished, not rewarded. While media can sometimes portray certain acts as ethically ambiguous, it is rare to find these days aggressive behaviour rewarded in a mainstream way to suggest that the population are learning this behaviour through SLT.

Deindividuation, another social psychological theory is defined as the loss of a sense of personal identity that can occur when, for example, in a crowd or

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wearing a mask. It is associated with a reduced sense of personal responsibility and increased anti-social behaviour. The theory relies heavily on two components; anonymity and reduced self-awareness. Anonymity describes the presence of crowds (or groups) leading individual members to feel anonymous and act according to a different set of norms and values which are imposed or encouraged by them (Zimbardo 1969).

The alternate explanation for deindividuation to cause aggression is reduced self-awareness. Proposed by Prentice-Dunn ; Rogers 1982, they suggest that crowds do not lead necessarily to anonymity or public awareness (while this may contribute) but instead lead to a lack of private awareness, often strengthened by the presence of drugs and alcohol. Normally, people are aware of their personal morals, however within a group it is argued that they may lose sight of such 'private' principles and instead follow the group.

The majority of research evidence in deindividuation comes from the work of Zimbardo. He repeated the Milgram paradigm, where female participants were either wearing a nametag (individuated) or in a hood (deindividuated) and it was found that by wearing a hood, participants were much more likely to give shocks to the learner. Furthermore, Diener et al. observed the behaviour of over 1000 children on Halloween. The children were asked their name, and for those that didn't give it, rates of stealing candy or money when alone rose dramatically. These studies support the idea of anonymity and how they are more likely to carry out antisocial behaviour when they cannot be identified. Cannavale et al. (1970) found that male and female groups responded differently under deindividuated conditions and therefore reflecting gender bias in Zimbardo's research. This can further be linked to the

biological approach as it fails to consider the biology of aggression, such as the hormones.

The male sex hormone, testosterone, is thought to influence aggression from young adulthood onwards due to its action on brain areas involved in controlling aggression. This is supported by Dabbs et al. (1987) who measures salivary testosterone in violent and non-violent criminals. They found that those with higher levels of testosterone had a history of violent crime whereas those with the lowest levels had committed only non-violent crime. Dramatic support for the deadly influence of deindividuation comes from a study by anthropologist Robert Watson (1973).

He collected data from tribes on the extent to which they killed, tortured or mutilated their victims. He found that societies where warriors changed their appearance (through the use of war paint and tribal costumes etc.) were more destructive towards their victims compared to those who did not change their appearance. This study not only provides research support for the idea of anonymity, but also gives evidence that this theory takes account of cultural differences.

However, most of the research focuses on the relationship between deindividuation and antisocial behaviour. But Spivey and Prentice-Dunn (1990) found that deindividuation could lead to either prosocial or antisocial behaviour depending on the situational factors. When prosocial environmental cues were present (such as a prosocial model), deindividuated participants performed significantly more altruistic acts (giving money) and significantly fewer antisocial acts (giving electric shocks) compared to a control group.

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Furthermore, desirable effects of deindividuation can be found on cyberspace. Adolescents reported feeling significantly more comfortable seeking help with mental health problems under deindividuated circumstances of Internet chat rooms as opposed to individuated circumstances of a personal appointment with a health professional (Francis et al. 2006). This lends support to the deindividuation theory and displays the positive aspect of deindividuation.