

A critical evaluation on two theories of aggression



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Aggression is as a form of anti social behaviour, showing a lack of emotional concern for the welfare of others, as described by Baron and Richardson (1994). It is a cultural, cognitive process as well as a biological response, affecting every human being. Furthermore, it appears in many forms, verbal, physical, symbolic or injurious with the environment, personal beliefs and individual's society mediating its nature. In society, you will find some people more aggressive compared to others, with the levels varying when in different social situations. Some environments provoke aggression in people much more regularly, than others do. Yet such situations do not give rise to the same degree of aggressive behaviour in every person.

There are two main social psychological theories that proposed to explain the nature and application of aggression, the Social Learning Theory and the Deindividuation Theory. The social learning theory of Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. The theory suggests that for an individual to learn new behaviours this can only occur through direct experience. In the book, Social Learning Theory, Bandura (1977) states: " Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action."

Bandura argued that individuals, most likely children, learn aggressive responses from observing others in different social influences, i. e. role models in real life situations, their surroundings and the media. He also

mentioned, individuals believing aggression produces reinforcements. Siegel (1992) who suggested that these reinforcements could be gaining financial rewards, a rise in self-esteem or receiving praise from other people supports this. Skinner (1953) proposed that learning occurs through reinforcement. Vicarious reinforcement occurs when an individual observes the consequences of aggressive behaviour as being rewarding, for example a person achieving what they want through aggressive behaviour. If a child is to see this happening in a school playground, whereby a bully gets their way for instance, the child may become to think of such behaviour as appropriate and therefore worth repeating.

Bandura (1986) went on to suggest that for social learning to take place, the child had to form mental representations of certain events from their social environment to see possible rewards or punishments for the aggressive behaviour, alongside observational learning. The “ Bobo doll” studies by Bandura, demonstrated how children learn and imitate aggressive behaviours they have witnessed in other people. The young participants observed an adult acting violently towards a Bobo doll and when the children received permission to play in a room with the Bobo doll, they began to imitate the aggression they had previously observed. Bandura identified three basic models of observational learning. The first model involves an actual individual demonstrating a particular behaviour. The second model includes descriptions and explanations of any certain behaviour. The third model involves real or fake role models acting out behaviours in books, films, TV programs or web media.

Observational learning, also known as modelling consists of four phases, influenced by the observer's behaviour (Bandura, 1977). The first is where the individual pays attention and perceives the most important aspects of the models behaviour by observation. Therefore, a child would need to attend to the role model's actions or sayings (Allen & Santrock, 1993). For example, children exposed to aggressive behaviour within the home and by watching the consequences, slowly associate such behaviour as effective conduct. Hence, children learn aggressive responses largely through observation. The second stage of observational learning is the coding of this behaviour into memory, also known as retention, for the information to be retrievable when an appropriate situation arises. This is where mental representations form, including events from the individual's social environment. The child must be able to distinguish possible rewards or punishments expected in future outcomes, which is vital in observational learning. In the Bobo doll experiment, the children aggressively beat the doll because this information was stored in their memory.

The third process is rehearsing this acquired modelled behaviour, in conjunction with possessing the physical capabilities of the behaviour observed. If a child gains rewards i. e. appraisal, for their aggressive behaviour, they are more likely to repeat that same behaviour regularly. This is direct reinforcement and allows for the improvement of the behaviour. Moreover, individuals are more likely to repeat a modelled behaviour if the model is a role model or similar to them. Examples include parents or people of the same age group or race. Bandura (1976) proposed that members of the family were most influential in reinforcing aggressive behaviour in

children, as they are likely to imitate them when they are older. The final stage involves the individual being motivated to successfully repeat and reinforce this modelled behaviour with the expectation of receiving rewards. Additionally, the individual will gradually gain confidence in their will to carry out aggressive behaviours, thus self-efficacy expectancies are developed.

The second theory of deindividuation, originates from Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory (1895). In the book "The Crowd", he describes how an individual within the crowd is psychologically altered. He states, "Within the crowd, the collective mind of the group takes possession of the individual". As a result, a member of the crowd then becomes irrational. "The individual submerged in the crowd loses self-control and becomes a mindless puppet, sometimes controlled by the crowd's leader". Hence, they are capable of performing any impulsive and emotionally charged act, however undesirable or regressive to society. Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb (1952) defined deindividuation as "...a state of affairs in a group where members do not pay attention to other individuals qua individuals and, correspondingly, the members do not feel they are being singled out by others". Festinger believed that when one becomes deindividuated, he or she merges their identity with that of the group and therefore becomes anonymous. As a result of being unidentifiable in a large group, this has the psychological outcome of reducing individuals' inner restraints, and increasing deviant behaviour that is normally avoided. The causes of deindividuation were extended from anonymity in groups to other factors, such as reduction in responsibility, arousal and altered consciousness influenced by drugs or alcohol (Zimbardo, 1969). In today's society especially, this is evident, as

aggression seems to be the result of reduced inhibitions amongst individuals due to binge drinking, with excessive alcohol intake arousing aggressive acts such as fighting in a nightclub.

Later versions of the theory focus on the psychological process of reduced private self-awareness as the key element of deindividuation, i. e. the individual's attitudes and norms (Prentice-Dunn and Rogers, 1982). In their study, they induced a sense of reduced self-awareness by continuously instructing participants to focus their attention outwards. Conditions for external attention cues included sitting in a dimly lit room with loud music playing, verbal interaction and stimulating video games to play, to increase deindividuation amongst the participants. In the controlled condition, participants were required to focus on internal attention, through no interaction and sitting in silence. The findings showed that when required to administer electric shocks to confederates, deindividuated participants that focused on external attention cues, produced higher aggressive behaviour by delivering shocks that were more painful, than the control group. This is because the experimental group was made to ignore their own beliefs and self-identity, when their attention focussed on other aspects such as loud music and video games. In turn, this supports the idea that becoming less self aware, rather than just anonymity in a group, leads to deindividuation having the effect of producing aggression.

Empirical support for the deindividuation theory is minimal. Zimbardo (1969) conducted a study to demonstrate the effects of deindividuation on aggression. Some of the female participants used wore oversized lab coats and hoods, and sat in a dimly lit room; increasing anonymity. In contrast,

<https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-evaluation-on-two-theories-of-aggression/>

those in the control group wore normal clothes, nametags and were placed in a bright room, making them easily identifiable. The participants' task was to shock a confederate and findings suggested that anonymous participants shocked longer and therefore more painfully than identifiable participants did. This gives support to the theory, as the study suggests that deindividuation or anonymity played a huge role, because when one is appearing as anonymous, they are likely to act in an aggressive approach than they would if their identity was easily available. Other research to support the deindividuation theory (Deiner et al., 1976) showed that American children who wore halloween costumes that hid their identities stole more sweets and money than those who wore costumes where they remained identifiable.

The Stanford Prison Experiment by Haney et al. (1973) illustrated how college students assigned to act out the role of guards in a mock prison, behaved very aggressively in the cruelty they showed towards those assigned to the role of prisoners. This is largely due to the guards wearing mirrored glasses, thus rendering them anonymous, as their eyes were not visible to the prisoners. The brutality posed by the guards can be explained in terms of social norms. The guards only did what they thought was expected of them, although the state of deindividuation did cause them to ignore personal beliefs and perform the expected aggressive behaviour. This is one criticism of the study, as it did not show how real guards actually behave. Hence, the findings may have no real-life validity with the possibility of demand characteristics coming into play.

In contrast, Bandura et al., (1961) were successful in showing that children learn aggressive behaviour through observation, which is reinforced by rewards and avoided by punishment (1962). A major strength of the Bobo doll studies is high control achieved by the use of laboratories, which produced sufficient applicable results. However, a problem with this is that the studies hold no ecological validity because of where and the manner in which they were carried out. In addition, it is possible to argue that the children also reacted aggressively to the Bobo doll as they were responding to demand characteristics. The children may have known what they had to do for the experiment. Another limitation is that the Bobo doll is fictional as was unable to fight back which a real person would have done; hence, this could also have influenced the children's behaviour. Although the Bobo doll experiment shows that for an individual to express aggressive behaviours, observational learning has to take place, individuals may not always display such behaviour due to social constraints, or fear of receiving punishment. This means that even if an individual has learnt of an aggressive behaviour, he or she will not necessarily act it out, especially if perceived to be socially undesirable. Nonetheless, if the opportunity arises where they can demonstrate the behaviour without being punished for it, such as when they are deindividuated, then it is possible that they will behave aggressively.

The social learning theory places great emphasis on individuals, especially children, imitating observed behaviour from watching others individually, the environment, and the mass media. However, the biological approach would argue that a person's state of biology is not taken into account within the Social Learning Theory. Moreover, it ignores individual genetic differences

(Jeffery, 1985). For example, if an individual were to observe a brutal killing, they will respond differently when compared to someone else. Biological theorists would suggest that, heart rate and blood pressure would possibly rise, as a response made by the autonomic nervous system when in this particular circumstance. Hence, the response or behaviour acquired is genetically inherited to some extent. In addition, other research has shown increased aggressive behaviour to be associated with testosterone (Kalat, 1998). This hormone is higher in males, which may explain higher aggression in males than in females.

There is still some doubt in establishing the effects of violent television on children's aggression. Although, some studies have reported that there is no link between the two, and that aggression viewed on television is not always related to aggressive behaviour. For instance, one study had findings to suggest that juvenile boys, who regularly watched non-violent television shows, were more likely to express aggressive behaviour than those who witnessed the violent programs. This is because watching violent shows enabled the viewer to use the media as a way of relieving their own inner inhibitions or aggressive thoughts and ideas (Feshback & Singer, 1971). As a result, the individual is less likely to be aggressive than if they had watched non-violent television. In addition to this, there is a theory that suggests; a way to reduce aggressive behaviour is by viewing violent television programs, known as the Catharsis effect (Gerbner. G, Gross. L, and Melody. W. H). As television is highly influential, then positive and non-aggressive programs can aid in reducing aggression among viewers. Cooke (1993) believed that positive and kind-hearted television shows should encourage

viewers to be more courteous to one another, if aggression in people is triggered by violent television. Therefore, the media can serve as a prevention method if individuals focus solely on the positive aspects, or use violent media to channel their own personal aggressive inhibitions.

In comparison, one likely reason for the minimal support for the deindividuation concept is that the theory, which is based on Le Bon's analysis of the crowd, is too simplified. According to Le Bon, collective behaviour is always irrational i. e. the individual in the crowd loses cognitive control. Researchers argue that deindividuation settings do not account for a loss of self-identity. Instead, they alter a person from an individual identity to a collective identity as a member of the group. Therefore, deindividuation leads to individuals conforming to the group norms. A meta-analysis of sixty studies on deindividuation conducted gave no results suggesting that deindividuation is the cause for increased anti-normative and disinhibited behaviour. Instead, individuals under anonymity complied more rather than less strongly with situational norms (Postmes and Spears, 1998).

Overall, aggression is extremely difficult to define as well as investigate as not one theory can be used to explain it fully, even though it affects our every day-to-day life, either personally or through observation. The difficulty is when trying to measure and control this behaviour because it is quite impossible to reproduce aggression in a laboratory to bring about results and findings that fully apply to real life situations.

However, these two theories by Bandura and Zimbardo have tried in their attempt to explain aggression. One advantage with the Social learning

theory is that not only can it be applied to explaining children's behaviour, adults too. Philips (1896) found that the daily rate of homicide in the US usually rose a week after a major boxing match. This suggests that the culprits may have been viewers imitating the aggressive behaviour they watched. Hence, social learning is evident in adults. In contrast, the deindividuation theory does not clearly state whether deindividuation occurs amongst young children as well. Instead, it focuses on mainly adults, which maybe another reason for the minimal empirical research to support the theory. Although the social learning theory was initially an explanation for aggression, it has recently been extended to explain other behaviours such as anorexia. Furthermore, the theory can explain differences between and within individuals, in terms of cultural variation, with one study showing the US to be highly violent compared to societies in Central Africa, which manage to live in harmony (Aronson, 1999). Differences within individuals are due to selective reinforcement; with people reacting differently as each individual will observe that aggression is rewarded in some cases and not others. Hence, people learn about behaviours differently along with the circumstances in which they are applicable, and so these differences should be a result of social learning. However, Bandura's theory has its limitations because it does not suggest what leads people to aggress once they have witnessed aggressive behaviour. Thus, it does not explain the possibility of acting out a modelled behaviour for example, if an individual has been angered. Nevertheless, Dollard et al. (1939) who proposed the frustration - aggression theory, explored this. The theory suggests that frustration always leads to aggression and aggression is only a cause of frustration.

When looking at the deindividuation theory, one study that both supports as well as criticises the theory, suggests that anonymity increases the possibility of an individual conforming to the social group norms. Participants were made anonymous by either wearing overalls and hoods similar to those of the racist Ku Klux Klan, or wearing nurse's uniforms. Results showed that participants to deliver more shocks when dressed as the racist group, and fewer, as nurses (Johnson and Downing, 1979). Hence, this also showed that anonymity does not always lead to aggressive behaviour, instead individuals may simply be responding to the norms of the group and doing what is expected.

One realistic approach to aggression is one that covers a number of explanations, from neuro-physiological and evolutionary ones to social-psychological theories. In conclusion, the social learning theory supported by extensive research compared to the deindividuation theory, has shown to conclusively illustrate that the acquisition and behavioural expression of aggression is socially influenced, and is therefore more successful in explaining this behaviour.