Main theories of aggression

Outline and assess the main theories of aggression Aggression is an act of hostility with deliberate intention to harm another person against his or her will. Some psychologists believe that aggression is an important aspect of our evolutionary ancestry and it is understood better in that context, whereas others believe that aggression is best explained in physiological terms e. g. the imbalance of hormones or neurotransmitters in the brain. There are many definitions used to explain why humans/ animals become aggressive (http://www. essortment. com/all/whatisaggress_rxeo. tm). In the social learning theory (SLT) of aggression, Bandura (1962) suggested that the expression of aggression is learnt through social learning not ignoring the fact that the potential for the human aggression was biological. Bandura claimed that we learn specific aggressive behaviours for example, the form in which the aggression takes and how it is addressed to the target. Skinner, 1953 suggested that a child learns the aggressive behaviour through direct reinforcement while Bandura argues that a child learns by observing role models indirectly.

Moreover, the SLT can be used to explain other behaviours such aseating disorders, personalityetc. Research carried out by Phillip (1986) suggested the daily homicide rate in the US almost increased in the following of a major boxing match this suggested that the viewers were imitating the behaviour they watched from their ' role models'. This clear shows that the SLT can also be used to explain the behaviour of both the children and adults. This is because aggressive behaviour is witnessed at home and at school as well as through the media i. . reading books, watching television and listening to a certain type ofmusic. By observing the consequences of other's actions,

children learn the aggressive behaviour indirectly. This whole process is known as the ' vicarious reinforcement' whereby a child learns the likely outcome of the aggressive behaviour and from thatobservation; they obtain the behaviour that is considered appropriate. Not only does a child learn the behaviour but the child also observes if the behaviour is worth repeating.

In the future, the child is likely to repeat the behaviour when the expectation of a reward is greater than the expectations of being punished (Bandura, 1962). Looking at the Bobo doll studies, Bandura et al found that children who watched an aggressive model became more aggressive and imitated the behaviour portrayed by the model. This is clear evidence to support the SLT for the fact a child learnt the aggressive behaviour by observing the ' role' model.

On the other hand, the aggression was imposed towards a ' doll' affecting the reliability of the conclusion because this was a ' still' figure that could not use self-defence. As a result to this, Bandura repeated the study using a film of woman hitting a live clown, therefore this influenced the children to also hit a live clown when given the opportunity. This can explain the cultural differences, for the fact that societies such as the US are highly violent compared to other pygmies of central Africa who manage to live in cooperative friendliness (Aronson, 1999).

These findings could be explained by the differences due to social learning whereby the different societies influence the behaviour of the two cultures. However, people also react differently in term of different situations because aggressive behaviour is rewarded in certain situations than others (i. e.

Competitive sports such rugby, boxing etc.). The appropriate behaviour is learnt for particular situations. Moreover, aggression could also be explained as a result of the loss of personal identity this could be due to the relative anonymity of being in a crowd or wearing a uniform.

The Stanford Prison Experiment illustrates this effect; this is whereby Zimbardo showed how the guards who were deindividuated by mirrored glasses and uniforms behaved aggressively towards the prisoners. The Stanford Prison Experiment is an empirical support for the deindividuated theory because it shows how the behaviour of the ' normal' students changed after they had been assigned to adopt the role of guards. However, the brutality could be explained in terms of the perceived social roles because they were not shown the exact way that the ' actual' guards behaved.

Psychologist Zimbardo believes that deindividuated people are likely to behave aggressively because the loss of a sense in the individual can lead to reduced self- restraint. This in turn leads to impulsive and deviant behaviour and a less concern over negative evaluation from others. Being anonymous in a crowd has the psychological consequence of reducing restraints and increasing behaviours that are usually inhibited. Prentice- Dunn and Rogers (1982) suggested that an increase in aggressive behaviour following deindividuation might be caused by the reduced privacy rather than public self- awareness, i. . becoming less self-aware rather than being anonymous to others. A problem for the theory is that deindividuation does not always lead to aggression, and may actually lead to pro-social behaviour. In a meta-analysis of 60 studies of deindividuation, Postmes and Spears (1998) found

that deindividuation does not always lead to aggression for example, an individual part of an angry mob is likely to behave aggressively while a member of a peace rally is likely to become to peaceful.

This clearly shows that frustration leads to aggression. Frustration determines whether aggression is effective in that situation. Dollard et al (1939) outlined the frustration-aggression theory suggesting that frustration leads to aggression and that aggression is forced by the aggression. Therefore, aggression is the consequence of generalised physiological arousal.