

Describe and evaluate theories of aggression



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There are many forms of aggression used in society today, from name calling in the playground to domestic violence, a man or women being beaten by his or her spouse. There are several on-going debates regarding aggression development, one of the main debates is nature versus nurture with Konrad Lorenz supporting the nature theory by suggesting that aggression is an instinct that we are all born with and Albert Bandura supporting the nurture theory, believing that a child is influenced by their surroundings and by their upbringing. This leads to the question could aggression be genetically transferred to us like the colour of our hair or eyes or does it develop as we grow and mature and interact with the world around us.

Frustration and anger are common precursors to aggression but anger doesn't always turn into aggression; frustration arising from inability to control a situation leads to anger which may or may not escalate to full blown aggression. Anger can lead to irritation; when we get ready in the morning to go to work and the car does not start we may feel frustrated and sense the anger warming up our face, however, it may not escalate to aggression because the object did not choose to act that way. In other words, we feel angry or aggressive when we know that the source of frustration could have chosen to behave in a better or more desirable manner. A study by Averill and Weiner showed that " anger arises when someone who frustrates us could have chosen to act otherwise." (Myers 2005, p. 387)

The evolutionary explanation of human aggression suggests that aggression serves as an important function in terms of the individual's survival as well as its potential to procreate. Newman et al discovered genes that are linked

to aggression in Macaque monkeys and this gene has been present in them for at least 25 million years and so for that gene to have survived it must have provided some advantages.

One explanation for aggression in people is that humans are somehow programmed to be aggressive and violent and that it part of a person's basic nature. Another view suggests that aggression is an inherited fighting instinct that we share with other species. In the past males had to act aggressively to get rid of competition and get the mate they desire. They eliminated their competition either by driving them away or by killing them. Aggression can thus be seen to serve adaptive purposes. Because the males who were fittest survived and got the most access to females it may have lead to the aggressive gene to be passed on and so creates a more aggressive generation which is stronger and fitter than the last. Spriggs (1999) argued that our hunter-gatherer ancestors would have formed a social structure based on stamina, physical strength and stature. So our ancestors survived on their abilities and an adaptive aggressive tendency.

Males might also have become the aggressors was in order to win favour of the females and then pass on his genes. Since evolutionary success was built on the foundation of the aggressive male and responsive female, evolution continues to favour the social groups dominated by natural selection. There is however various factors that help prove the theory that genetics is a large component in aggression. Some hunters in groups were better than other; some groups produced more males, males that were better at gathering sources, which is why in some cultures it is seen more desirable to have males. Those men who have the combined traits of strength, stamina and <https://assignbuster.com/describe-and-evaluate-theories-of-aggression/>

cunning begin to outperform and bring back more than the others. As a result their stature grew and so did their chances of reproduction. The disadvantage with this theory is that the evidence given is based on thousands of years ago when humanity first began, so it is difficult to empirically test. Some scientists argue that this theory is defenseless and has no real evidence.

Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud agreed with the nature theory to aggression development, he believed in the instinct theory. He stated that everyone is born with an instinct to live, Eros, and an instinct to die, Thanatos, and that as our aggression builds up and builds up, we can turn our death instinct towards others in a movement of self preservation to stop us from destroying ourselves. This process is known as the hydraulic theory; Freud suggested that the only way around this was to find another way to vent our aggression build up possibly through some form of therapeutic release such as sport. Lorenz studied animals as he believed, like Darwin, that we evolved from animals and he found that we have inherited a fighting instinct from them. He supports the nature theory but his beliefs differ from Freud's as he finds aggression a beneficial instinct that doesn't come from an internal struggle between our life and death instincts but from an instinct to protect territory, partners and young from rivals of the same species. Megargee and Mendelsohn agreed with Freud's theories and completed a study on people who had committed brutally aggressive crimes, they found that their aggression had been repressed for so long until it built up so much that something trivial caused an aggressive outburst, and, as Freud's theory predicts, after the outburst the attacker returned to a normal calm state with

no signs of an aggressive nature. There are a lot of problems with the instinct theory one being that it is difficult to test and another being that not everyone displays the same levels of aggression in the same circumstances which suggests biological factors alone cannot be responsible. Also there are some societies that show almost no acts of aggression at all such as the Amish located in both America and Canada and the Nubians situated in Egypt.

There is also the view that aggression is something we learn or imitate from people around us this is known as the social learning theory.

The Social Learning theory proposes that the cause of all aggressive behaviour is due to interactions with others in our social world. According to social learning theorists such as Bandura, aggressive behaviour is learned in either one of 2 ways, by direct experience which is based on operant conditioning or by vicarious (indirect) experience which is based on observational learning. Operant conditioning is for example, when a child pushes another child and, as a result, gets something they want; the action is then reinforced and is likely to occur in similar situations in the future. However observational learning is when a child sees a role model behaving in a particular way and imitates the behaviour of the model. It is thought that most aggression is learnt by observational learning, usually from those who are of a big significance to us. From these models we learn about the nature of aggressive behaviour and to which situations this behaviour is appropriate and also its likely consequences.

According to behaviourists, behaviour that is reinforced (rewarded) will be repeated and learned and aggression that is associated with a reward (e. g. Praise) is likely to be learned. However there are various factors that can determine whether a person will be aggressive in a certain situation, one of these is whether a person's previous experiences of aggression (either their own or aggression of another person) were good or bad experiences.

Another factor is whether these previous experiences were successful or not, this then allows them to assess how likely their aggressive behaviour will get them rewarded or punished in this certain situation. Finally, the cognitive, social and environmental factors that are operating at the same time, for example a person isn't likely to act aggressive if they fear that the 'victim' may retaliate. On the other hand, aggression is likely to increase if person is in a hostile situation.

Bandura combines the logic of both social psychology and cognitive psychology in his social cognitive perspective of human behaviour. Bandura thought that behaviour may be motivated not only by inherent psychological factors but also by more socio-environmental factors. He argued that the individual and the social environment were linked, something he called reciprocal determinism. Bandura social learning theory had four basic processes which are Attention, Retention, Reproduction and Motivation (Reinforcements). Attention only occurs if a person attends to the models behaviour. Retention happens as we code and remember the behaviour by placing it into long-term memory. Reproduction happens if an individual is capable of reproducing the model's behaviour. If an individual expects to

receive positive reinforcements this will then motivate an individual's behaviour, which is the motivation process.

The Social Learning theory's view on aggression is supported by various experiments. Bandura's most well-known study is the 'Bobo Doll Study' which involved child male and female participants from 3 to 5 years old with half the participants exposed to aggressive models interacting with a life-sized inflatable Bobo doll whilst the other half were exposed to models with no aggression. Children in the aggressive condition reproduced most of the physical and verbal aggressive behaviour whereas children in the non aggressive showed virtually no aggression. The findings support the Social Learning theory as the aggressive behaviour displayed came directly from watching an aggressive model.

Bandura also carried out variations of his study, one showing the model being rewarded or punished in a variety of ways, the kids were rewarded for their imitations, and the model was changed to be less attractive or less prestigious, and so on. Responding to criticism that Bobo dolls were supposed to be hit, he even did a film of the young woman beating up a live clown. When the children went into the other room, what should they find there but — the live clown! They proceeded to punch him, kick him, hit him with little hammers, and so on.

The variations support the Social Learning Theory even more because of its 4 processes with the last being motivation/reinforcements. One variation showed that from 3 different groups the group that had seen the model being rewarded for aggressive behaviour showed high levels of aggression,

however those who seen the model punished performed a lower level of aggression and the ones that saw the model neither punished nor rewarded fell between the other two levels. This supports Social Learning Theory's about reinforcements. However, the studies lack ecological validity because they were carried out in Laboratory conditions which means the results may not be able to be applied to real world situations.

On the other hand Social Learning Theory can explain inconsistencies in aggressive behaviour. For example, if someone is aggressive and overpowering at home, yet meek and passive at work then it means they have learned to behave differently in the two situations as aggression brings reward in one place but not the other. Therefore the theory makes logical sense that we have learned this.

SLT can also explain cultural differences in aggressive behaviour. The 'culture of violence theory' proposes that some cultures emphasize and model aggressive behaviour whilst others do the opposite and so are more likely to produce individuals with low levels of aggression. This means that there isn't cultural bias in the studies as they have studied various different cultures and explained the differences between them.

Also, the studies have lead to other developments in the real world so have importance in the fact the studies have practical applications. The studies have lead to changes such as focus on the effects of the visual media on both children and Adults. It has also led to implications on other different places such as classroom use. This is because now they can see certain reinforcements could be put into use, for example rewarded for answering a

very hard question in class or being punished for maybe hitting another pupil in the class. It is effective for increasing appropriate behaviour and also good for decreasing inappropriate behaviours.

However, although the theory has many strong points it also has its weaknesses such as the fact that the Social Learning Theory is also reductionist in the sense that it ignores biological factors. Biological theorists argue that Social Learning Theory ignores biological factors completely. It doesn't look at brain structures or possible learning difficulties and therefore the results collected could lack validity. It also means that SLT takes the nurture side of the nature/nurture debate.

Finally, one of the main issues with the Social Learning Theory's research studies; in particular Bandura is the fact that it is seen as very unethical and also morally wrong to encourage the children to be aggressive. David Skuse from the Institute of Child Health also conducted his own study on 224 former male child abuse victims he disagrees with Zeanah and Zeanah and found that only 12% of these abused children went on in later life to copy or imitate this abuse.

Myers (2005 p. 386), explains, " Displacement is the redirection of aggression to a target other than the source of frustration. Generally, the new target is a safer or more socially acceptable target." It is difficult to understand why people intentionally cause harm to others; however, it is even more complex to comprehend why an innocent third person would be targeted to express frustration. Several theories have emerged on the

subject and they give us better insight into the psychology of displaced aggression.

Conventional psychology suggested that displaced aggression was closely connected with low-self esteem. However since the breakthrough study by Baumeister (1996), conventional wisdom has given way to a startling revelation, i. e. people with high ego are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour than people with lower self esteem.

Baumeister and Bushman (1998) studied aggression in more detail and in greater depth than many other researchers. They were the first to suggest that low self-esteem may have not any link to aggression rather it is inflated ego that appears to lead to aggression. In their study they tested young adults for narcissism and found that those who scored higher on narcissist scale would react with significantly more aggression than those who scored low on this scale. Self-love, as they had put it, was thus found to be closely linked to aggression.

It would be important to understand here that self-esteem is not the same thing as ego. Some very egoistical people may not have high self-esteem. Even though these terms have been used interchangeably, it is wrong to assume that they are the same. The reason Baumeister and Bushman (1998) used them this way is because a person with low self-esteem doesn't really love himself and self-love was the main subject of this research.

Temperature can play an important role with aggression, (Baron/ Bell) did research involving the effects of heat on aggression by seeing how willing a participant would be to give electric shocks to another, they found that

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temperatures within the range of 92-95F generally increased the level of aggression. However when the temperatures became too extreme they found the levels of aggression decreased, in these conditions the participants were stressed and did not want to handle the person's angry reactions, because they didn't want the hassle of the added stress. Baron and Bell's study showed a curvilinear effect (where the relationship between heat and aggression both increase together but as it gets to a certain point the aggression decreases) between temperature and aggression which was predicted by the NAE theory saying that when temperature becomes very high an individual seeks to escape lowering aggression, but at lower temperatures the negative affect leads to aggression.

There have been many scientists that feel that outside factors are the cause of aggression, Berkowitz studied the effects of coldness on aggressive tendencies and found that students that held their hands in very cold water showed an increase in the likeliness of aggression towards fellow students. Whereas Carlsmith and Anderson studied 79 cities between 1967 and 1971 and they found that aggression was more likely to occur when it was particularly hot days. With so many studies showing different triggers and responses to aggression it is unlikely that we will ever find a definite cause. It could be a combination of all theories or just depend on the subject concerned however as long as there is aggression and violence in society it will continue to be researched and studied.

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Displaced aggression is an abnormal behavior even if found commonly in some people. It is continued as an easier form of aggression release if the aggressor has been successful the first time. If the aggression directed to the innocent target results in a positive outcome for the aggressor, the aggression is rewarded. The individual will recur to the same method of release of frustration the next time he faces similar situation if he feels that

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there are not consequences connected to the harm-doing. When punishment to this behavior is applied, it can teach the aggressor self-control.

Displaced Aggression in children and young adults

Unfortunately, when a parent has no control over the emotions caused by frustration and had tasted the reward of aggression, he/she is more likely to continue displacing the aggression toward his family; therefore, his children will learn aggression as a normal behavior. Displacement effects are, certainly, attached to ethnic and racial conflicts as well as many other social behaviors. Discrimination and prejudice are forms of aggression displacement. Motivation to restore equity may also produce displacement-like behavior.

Displacement of aggression can also be observed in children at schools when they decide to transfer the frustration caused by a teacher's negative attitude against them, toward others students. They cannot attack physically or verbally the teacher so displacement of the aggression is redirected to " a target other than the source of frustration. Generally, the new target is a safer or more socially acceptable target." (Myers, 2005, p. 386). In this case, the targets are those kids to whom the teacher pays more attention. The teacher represents the authority, problem-solver person in charge and, in many cases, the children cannot approach them to talk about their feelings and even the needs they have about a subject. Then, the frustration turns into anger and without self control, in aggressive behavior. The student will feel rewarded by the displacement aggressive act even if the release of frustration is temporary.

Displaced Aggression and Self-esteem

Choice of Target

It has also been found that aggressor's choice of the innocent target is dependent on some important factors such as similarity of the target to the actual source or similarity of the situation in which the target was found. In other words, a person who behaves violently towards his wife when she asks him why he never mowed the lawn chose his wife as the target because her request bore some resemblance to the aggressive requests made by his boss. Miller (1948) suggested that choice of target is not a random act. It is based on three factors:

- a. " the strength of the instigation to aggression
 - b. the strength of inhibitions against such behavior
 - c. The stimulus similarity of each potential victim to the frustrating agent".
- (Baron, 1977, p. 24)

The third factor explains that a target is chosen because it resembled the frustrating agent. The person may have used the same tone, asked for something similar, or made a demand in similar manner. It can be anything but as long as in the aggressor's mind, it resembled the source, this target would be chosen. But this is not the only factor. It has also been found that the resembling target must also exhibit certain weakness. He/she must appear weaker than the original source and also weaker than the aggressor himself. A strong target no matter how much it resembles the source is most

often not selected because the aggressor cannot hope to be successful against him.

Triggers and Displaced Aggression

In this regard, triggered displaced aggression studies have offered some interesting insights. Triggered displaced aggression suggests that strength of the trigger is closely connected with level of displaced aggression. Mild triggers were most often responded to with very high levels of displaced aggression compared to moderate or strong trigger. Vasquez et al. (2004) used triggers to examine the situations in which a person may choose to display displaced aggression. He found that mild triggers were more likely to result in serious displaced aggression compared to moderate or strong triggers.

“ For example, episodes of road rage or spousal abuse are frequently elicited by minor events. Thus, in many of these episodes, a prior provocation or frustration may have contributed to the aggression observed in response to a minor impoliteness on the highway or a wife’s reminder about the uncut lawn. Moreover, aggressive individuals may not even be explicitly aware that their response to the person who provided the minor triggering event may be inordinately disproportionate. Although the process details presented here are incomplete, future research conducted within the TDA paradigm may eventually lead to a complete understanding of situational and individual moderators of aggressive responding among previously provoked participants in response to a mild triggering provocation. It is hoped that

through understanding these moderators and process variables, efforts to limit aggressive responding may be developed.”

Vasquez (2004) and others who have studied triggered displaced aggression used terms that might confuse a person regarding the connection between strength of triggers and displaced aggression. In simple terms, the reason a mild trigger elicits highest level of displaced aggression is because of the inherent weakness of the trigger. The target chose to use a mild trigger because he/she apparently lacked the strength to make a stronger provocation. The aggressor takes it as a sign of weakness that gives him the confidence to lash out and choose the person as a target.

Conclusion

We have often come across cases of displaced aggression. We may have also been guilty of engaging in it ourselves too without realizing that our aggression was displaced. Displaced aggression is not only found in adults but is also exhibited by children. It is a common not highly undesirable way to react to a provocative situation. The behavior is considered abnormal and is closely linked to inflated ego instead of self esteem. Children can learn displaced aggression as a normal way of reacting to frustration because that is how their parents behaved. Aggressors choose their targets based on some important characteristics. Most importantly this target should resemble the actual source in some manner and must also exhibit certain degree of weakness. It is important to understand that our research revealed no direct link between self esteem but was linked to narcissist behavior. A person who loves himself in an abnormal manner fails to take insults in its proper

perspective and decides that he would react strongly even if the actual source remains unmoved. This is when an innocent third person is chosen. Displaced aggression can be treated through carefully administered punishment that sends a message that this kind of behavior is undesired and must be discontinued.