

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AGGRESSION

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ملخص.

يهدف هذا المقال إلى مراجعة و تحليل أهم نظريات العدوانية المقدمة من طرف الباحثين الذين ركزوا على الجانب البيولوجي في تفسير ظاهرة العدوانية. و قد تم نقد تلك النظريات في ضوء ما جاءت به المدارس النفسية الإجتماعية الحديثة وكذلك نظرية التفاعل. و خلاصة القول هو أنه يجب النظر إلى العدوانية على أنها ظاهرة وسلوك متعلم يتأثر إلى حد كبير بشخصية الفرد و خبراته السابقة.

RESUME

Le but de cet article est de présenter une reflexion critique sur les principales théories de l'agressivité et principalement celles qui se fondent sur l'approche biologique. L'esquisse des théories psychologiques modernes et notamment celle de l'interaction symbolique suggère que l'agressivité ne doit pas être considérée seulement comme un phénomène inné mais plutôt comme un comportement qui depend largement de la personnalité de l'individu et de ses experiences vécues.

SUMMARY

This article is an attempt to examine the theories and ideas developed by those who advocate and support the biological point of view on aggression. Those ideas are rejected in view of modern psychological theories and especially the symbolic interaction theory. It is suggested that aggression should be regarded mainly as a learned phenomenon which in turn is largely affected by the personality of the individual and by his past experiences.

The literature on aggressive behaviour presents a rather confusing picture for students and professionals interested by the problem of aggression. However one can assume that in the field of psychology and the social sciences theories relating to aggression divide themselves roughly along a continuum which ranges from a biological and instinctive interpretation of man as being brutal to the social psychological view which regards human behaviour as being a product of both his personality and his social environment.

This article attempts to examine and clarify the ideas presented by those who support the biological interpretations of aggression and furthermore provide and support an alternative view which states that no specific human behaviour is genetically determined, and that human beings are capable of any kind of behaviour including aggressive behaviour, kindness, cruelty, nobility and so on.

In recent years facts and arguments have been presented to an enormous public by a group of popular writers who describe human beings as inescapably killers who, because of their heritage, are genetically and instinctively aggressive when put in a situation of deprivation or frustration and cannot be otherwise (Berkowitz, 1980). Obviously such writers like Lorenz (1966), Desmond (1969) and Tinbergen (1951) base their interpretations of aggressive behaviour on physiological theories which consider man as being just a phylogenetic product with residual aggressive tendencies. In fact their views could be traced back to the Hobbesian philosophy about man as a brutal creature.

Before attempting to review the basic concepts of these authors and others it is wise to define first what it is meant by aggression although the real task of the psychologist is not to find a pithy definition of aggression but to provide people who interest themselves by the problem, with insights with regard to the dynamics underlying aggressive behaviour. The term aggression has so many meanings and connotations that make it difficult to define, because there is no single kind of behaviour which can be called aggression nor is there any single process which represents aggression. As Feshback (1971) has pointed out, distinctions should be made between those definitions which are descriptive and those which are based on some theoretical construct. Thus an individual may be said to be aggressive, that is he has an aggressive personality with which he expresses in so many different ways. On the other hand some people are considered not "basically" aggressive meaning that they are not always aggressive even in situations known previously as arousing in them aggressive feelings. What is obvious in human behaviour is that all people regardless of their type of personality do show aggressive behaviour sometimes. Furthermore aggressive behaviour is expressed in so many different ways that it is very tedious to try to find a single and satisfactory definition of aggressive behaviour. The important challenge in our point of view is rather to be able to sort out the different behavioural processes involved in aggression and the many interacting factors which influence them.

Bearing in mind what was said previously we can say that if one had to define aggression or aggressiveness then the most appropriate definition could be the one provided by Berkowitz which states that it is "the tendency to attack another individual or individuals with the intent of causing physical or psychological harm" (Berkowitz, 1980)? According to this definition overt physical force as well as verbal abuse constitute forms of aggressive behaviour. If the intention to do injury is an end in itself it is known as an angry or irritable aggression. It is a form of aggression more likely to arise when people feel very angry or are in a highly emotional state. Another form of aggression (the instrumental aggression) arises when the intention is combined with other motives and is a means to some other end. Moreover there are situations where people exhibit aggression without being provoked or irritated. This happens for example when a person feels pain or goes through difficult times.

Keeping in mind our definition of aggression let us review the basic ideas of those who advocated the innate aggressiveness point of view. according to them something inside us and independently of our will makes us attack others and hurt them. That is to say that our aggressive behaviour when it happens is merely the product of our biological nature. Freud was among the first writers to inform us that it is people's endowment that drives them to attack others. He developed a theory of aggression which states that aggression is always a consequence of frustration which is in turn, a direct consequence of a blocking of libidinal forces. Thus Freud and his followers interpreted aggression and hostility as consequences of two basic elements in personality: the death instinct and the inadequate satisfaction of the developing infant's instinctive during his own socialization process.

Later on, the neo-freudians such as Sullivan Horney and Fromm attempted to correct the biological foundations of the Freudian theory with respect to the socialization process but did not adequately resolve the complications caused by the death instinct concept. The main reason was the tremendous methodological obstacles they encountered in trying to operationally define the death instinct concept, and in empirically verifying the effect of the socialization process on the development of aggression.

In the same line of thought Lorenz (1966) also maintained that humans have a natural urge to violence which can occur even without external stimulation especially if an accumulating excitation has not been discharged through earlier aggression. He believed that modern man is highly aggressive because of the insufficient discharge of his aggressive drive. According to Lorenz, mild aggressive activity in order to reduce aggressive habits is something innate and normal. Finally in his book "the naked ape" the zoologist Desmond tried to show that human beings, despite of their level of intelligence, are unable to cope with the stress of overcrowding overpopulation and loss of privacy and therefore cannot dominate their basic biological nature nor can they control their aggressive drives (Desmond 1969).

Another completely different approach to the study of aggression began with the development of psychological theories such as the gestalt theory, the field and reinforcement theories, and others such as Miller (1941) who developed the frustration-aggression hypothesis and Skinner (1953) and his concept of operant conditioning. These men dealt in the main with learning and behaviour modification within experimental designs and provided psychology with some interesting experiments on aggression.

What is then the modern view on the nature of human aggression? Contemporary psychologists such as Bandura (1972) answer that question by saying that it is true humans have an inborn capacity for aggression, however behaving in an aggressive manner is influenced by psychological factors that arise from interactions with the environment. Such factors may be frustrations, an individual's past experiences, or his symbolic interpretation of the situations. They reject the idea that human behaviour is genetically determined and that in each of us exists a reservoir of

potential aggressiveness. If that were true we could prevent people from fighting or aggressing each other simply by providing them with ways of venting their aggressive urges. Unfortunately neither real life situations nor behavioural evidence or the experiments conducted by many researchers give support to that claim. On the contrary research conducted with children has shown that if the play aggression situation is suitably rewarded then the children were more apt to be aggressive in their later encounter with a peer (Berkowitz, 1980). Furthermore competitive sports do not provide a way for venting our aggressive drives and studies conducted on the subject demonstrated that athletic contests have stimulated fights between the players and also between spectators (Berkowitz, 1980).

Frustration was among the first important psychological factors thought to be highly related to aggression. A state of frustration is usually defined as a blocking of an ongoing goal directed activity (Berkowitz, 1980:344). This view implies that an aggressive act is not an unthinking and impulsive attack on others. A group of psychologists at Yale university led by John Dollard Leonard Doob Neal Miller Mowrer and Sears have shown in 1939 that every frustration produces an instigation to aggression so that every aggressive act can be traced back a prior thwarting. They were the first to attempt to express the major concepts of frustration and aggression found in psychoanalytic theory in behavioural terms. Their basic postulate was that all aggressive acts are caused by frustration and every frustration is always accompanied by anger. Aggression therefore is always a consequence of aggression and one does not exist without the other. In other words, if one were to take time, any act of aggression could be traced back to some form of frustration.

Dollard, Miller, and others (1939) were among the first psychologists who investigated aggression as a means to some other end (instrumental aggression). Examples of that kind of aggression may be forcing the other to relinquish his valued possession or obtaining an authoritarian person's approval through imitation of his aggressive behaviour. Their studies showed that earlier theories of aggressive behaviour which were limited only to angry aggression gave very incomplete results.

Their findings suggest that an aggressive reaction is more probable if the individual thinks the thwarting was deliberate or unfair than if he regards it as accidental. Their results also indicate that social approval as well as the successful injury of the intended victim can reinforce aggression and therefore automatically increase the probability that the person will be aggressive again. Parents play a major role in a child's likelihood of acting aggressively. Research conducted by the same authors and others such as Berkowitz (1962) indicates that while punishment can be effective in inhibiting behaviour under limited circumstances parents who use excessive punishment are likely to have aggressive children. Finally certain environmental cues can elicit aggression in certain persons disposed to be aggressive. It was shown that external stimuli can acquire this capacity through associations with aversive events or with reinforced aggression. The findings of the study conducted by Berkowitz (1967) clearly demonstrate that aggression cannot be completely understood without a consideration of both external and internal factors. Anger does create a readiness

to act in a hostile manner if combined with appropriate cues such as the sight of a weapon or a knife. Movie or the violence can also stimulate aggressive dispositions in the viewers simply by watching others fight, especially if the viewers are excited at the time of watching and have a weak inhibition against aggression.

In later modifications of the hypothesis by Miller (1941), aggression was regarded as a natural though not inevitable consequence of frustration since non aggressive responses to frustration could be learned. The authors maintain however that aggression is primarily a response to frustration and that a non aggressive response is likely to occur only if aggressive behaviour was previously been met with non reward or punishment. The author though a series of experiences highlighted the importance of positive reinforcement in the acquisition and maintenance of aggressive behaviour. He stated that positive reinforcement in the form of verbal approval or material rewards will increase the frequency of children aggressive behaviour. The results indicate that reinforcement of one class of aggressive responses may result in an increment in another class of aggressive responses and rewarding aggressive behaviours in relatively impersonal play situations can lead to a transfer of these aggressive responses to new social situations.

Frustration can be goal specific when the strongest instigation aroused by a frustration feeling directs the aggressive act toward the source or the agent believed to be responsible for the state of frustration. On the other hand frustration may not lead to an aggressive behaviour against a specific agent. That is what happen for example when a person experience catharsis. Catharsis is a process explained by the fact that an expression of any act of aggressive will reduce the overall level of instigation to all other acts of aggression. Furthermore catharsis and displacement combine for a functional unity, since it is known that when any response of aggression is inhibited it may be displaced to other forms of aggression. Conversely when any aggression is expressed its cathartic effect lessen the instigation to other aggressive responses.

Research also demonstrated that not every frustrating situation produces overt or covert aggression. A child's past learning experiences are also important since they determine how the child learned to restrain his overly aggressive tendencies. Punishment is also another main factor that contributes in producing aggression. Different studies have shown that the strength of the inhibitions against aggression is a direct function of the amount of punishment expected for aggressive behaviour, so that instigation to aggression held constant over hostile behaviour is less likely the stronger the anticipated punishment and the more probable the occurrence of the punishment (Berkowitz 1962). The effect of this principle is that overt acts of aggression are punished more than covert acts. Punishment is therefore selective since individuals learn from experience which acts of aggression are punished and thus eliminate them. Available date (Berkowitz 1962) also suggest that verbal or physical punishment by an authority figure tends to inhibit aggression in the presence of he punitive agent. Children who have received a great deal of punitive training display aggression towards objects other than the punishing agent.

Montagu (1976) is among other authors who argued strongly against the position taken by Freud and other ethnologists. His negation of the Lorenzian aggression hypothesis represents the essence of the cultural anthropological view which regards man as a product of his cultural environment. According to Montagu, claiming that man is little than a mechanic driven by innate instincts is nonsense. It is true, he says, that history is full of facts relating cruelties perpetrated by some men. However these men are fortunately a minority and there is no reason for us to blame the whole specie for the terrible excess committed by a few individuals. He thus strongly blamed Lorenz for perpetuating the erroneous interpretation of human nature.

Montagu recognizes the similarities between man's aggressive behaviour and aggressiveness as seen in certain animals, but remind us to be careful in drawing analogies from work on animals to man. Genetic contributions are certainly involved in human behaviour but what should be underlined is that human behaviour is far less under the direction of genes than that of other species. A person's tendency to act in an aggressive way depends primarily on the kind of socialization and conditioning he has undergone from infancy.

Another view close to the one developed by Montagu is the one developed by the symbolic interactionists such as Blumer (1969) and others. These authors emphasize the interpretative aspect of human behaviour within a sociocultural context and view man as an actor and a symbol manipulator. Thus all the symbols which a person internalizes are considered to be a direct consequence of the communication process and of his interaction with others as well as one's self.

What is implied is that by taking on the meaning of others the individual becomes able to take the perspective of others that is to put himself in the place of others. The important assumption which bears strongly on aggressive behaviour is the fact that through the socialization process the individual comes to develop great number of definitions for different situations and to put himself into the position not only of one other person but of a generalized other and thus behaves toward himself as he would behave toward others and as they would behave toward him.

In symbolic interaction theory aggression is therefore seen as emerging from interaction situations where actors perceive the meaning of their own acts as well as the acts of others. It is suggested that aggression in every day life situations involve the treatment of another person in a manner such as the other views the gestures as being threatening harmful or socially negative. The most important thing upon which symbolic interaction centres is founded in the interpretative character of human behaviour.

The symbolic interaction theorists strongly argue against the frustration aggression hypothesis saying that it neglects the role of the mind and the self in human behaviour. For example a small infant who is deprived of something will or will not define his deprivation as being frustrating depending on how he interprets the behav-

behaviour of his mother. Therefore aggression behaviour occurs only if a person intends to act aggressively and not as an automatic response.

In conclusion and in view of what has been said previously it can be said therefore that aggression is essentially a learned phenomenon. Aggression or any kind of human behaviour a person displays in any circumstance is determined not by his genes, although of course there is some genetic contribution, but largely by the situation and by his personality which was shaped by the different experiences he has undergone during his life.

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