VIOLENCE IN AMERICA
An Encyclopedia

RONALD GOTTESMAN
Editor in Chief

RICHARD MAXWELL BROWN
Consulting Editor

VOLUME 3

Material may be protected by law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

Charles Scribner's Sons
An Imprint of The Gale Group
New York

Michael J. Webber
Jennifer Turpin

See also Sociobiology; Structural Violence.

PSYCHOLOGY

Psychological theories of aggression and violence are rooted in a long-standing debate about whether humans are innately brutal or benign. Two contrasting views of human nature are found in the classical writings of philosophers and scientific thinkers. On the one hand, Thomas Hobbes argued in Leviathan (1651) that humans are naturally brutal and that societal laws and their enforcement are consequently required to curb our natural aggressive instincts. Conversely, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762 conceptualized the noble savage, who is naturally benign, happy, and good. According to Rousseau, the restrictions imposed by society lead to aggression and corrupt behavior.

These opposing viewpoints emerge in psychological theories of human aggression. The pessimistic Hobbesian view of innate aggressive instincts is found in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, developed in the 1920s. Rousseau’s perspective is more clearly seen in social psychological theories of the 1960s, which emphasize the role of external factors in producing aggressive outcomes. It is noteworthy, however, that most psychological theories of aggression and violence, including those that emphasize situational factors and learning, place some importance on underlying biological processes.

Instincts and Innate Aggressive Drives

In his psychoanalytic theory, Freud (1930) argued that each human is born with equally powerful instincts toward life (Eros) and death (Thanatos). When the death instinct is turned inward, it results in self-punishment (in the extreme, suicide). When directed outward, it results in hostility and anger, leading to destructive behavior and even murder. Freud believed that aggressive energy would build up and produce illness unless relieved, ideally in acceptable behavior.

The idea of innate, biologically based aggressive instincts dominated psychologists’ thinking during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Support for this view was provided by discoveries of brain mechanisms in aggressive behavior (e.g., Cannon 1925), as well as studies demonstrating that animals could be bred for high levels of aggression. In fact, the biological basis for aggression was explored throughout the twentieth century and remained an important and popular perspective in the broader scientific community (including many psychologists).

Konrad Lorenz (1966) and E. O. Wilson (1975) later developed an evolutionary perspective of human aggression, by emphasizing the place of human beings within the animal kingdom and pointing to the apparent universality of aggression among vertebrates. Aggression is considered a valuable instinct necessary for survival, because it enhances the ability to hunt, defend territories, and compete successfully for desirable mates. However, strong inhibitory mechanisms coevolved, enabling humans to suppress aggression when needed.

Although most psychologists accept the role of biological factors in aggression at some level, some have focused on the external factors that elicit such behaviors. The frustration-aggression hypothesis was the first systematic explanation of human aggression as a reaction to environmental factors. This theory was originally formulated, in 1939, by John Dollard et al., who proposed that frustration always leads to aggression and vice versa. Other research demonstrated, however, that frustration does not necessarily lead to aggression and instead may cause depression and lethargy (Seligman 1975). In his revised frustration-aggression hypothesis, Leonard Berkowitz (1980) proposed that frustration leads to anger, which may in turn instigate aggression in the presence of certain external cues.

To social psychologists of the 1990s biological factors provided “background conditions that moderate the effects of aversive stimuli in the individual’s immediate situation, particularly those that involve conflict with other people” (Geen 1998). In this regard, aggression is viewed not simply as an innate drive but as a response to external stimuli.
Situational Factors Important to Aggression

Extensive research in the last half of the twentieth century demonstrated that a variety of social situations may lead to aggression, including frustration. Frustration may indeed increase the chances of aggressive behavior. Frustration may be exacerbated by the proximity of desired goals or objects, the attainment of which has been thwarted: the closer the goal when blocked, the greater the frustration and its aggressive outcome. However, while frustration may not always produce aggression, it may produce anger, annoyance, or readiness to aggression if the situation is conducive (for example, if the victim seems unlikely to reciprocate, due to small size or physical distance). Also, if the frustration is understandable, legitimate, or unintended, there may be less chance of aggression.

Provocation, such as that arising from the need to reciprocate in reaction to another’s aggressive behavior, can also produce aggression, but not always. Reciprocation is more likely if the victim perceives the provocation as intentional. Objects of aggression, such as weapons, might also stimulate human aggression. In a classic experiment conducted by Berkowitz and Anthony LePage (1967), college students were more aggressive (delivered more shocks to a victim) when made angry in the presence of a gun than in the presence of a badminton racket. Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner (1984) have also shown a correlation between handgun availability and homicide rate across countries.

Psychological Processes Involved in Aggression

Beyond considering the external stimuli that may invoke aggression, several lines of research have explored the psychological processes and underlying mechanisms involved in aggression. The importance of cognitive processes, including perception, memory, and appraisal, in responding aggressively has been emphasized in social cognition. Examples of this focus include Berkowitz’s (1989) theory of cognitive neo-associationism, which posits that negative affective states (elicited by aversive conditions) become associated in long-term memory with specific motor tendencies to fight or flight. Individual reactions to anger or flee depend on genetic predispositions, prior conditioning and learning, and recognition of situational factors that inhibit or promote aggression.

The acquisition and maintenance of aggressive-response tendencies are also emphasized in Albert Bandura’s social-learning theory (1963; 1973; 1983), which considers the effects of learning via modeling and imitation. Through observation of role models at home, at school, and through the media, children learn social-conduct rules and a repertoire of social behaviors, including aggression. Rewards and punishments then shape the child’s behavior, determining the chances of responding aggressively in future situations. In the presence of suitable incentives the probability of aggressive behavior increases.

Reducing Aggression

Psychologists have considered various methods for reducing aggressive behavior in both children and adults. Much of this research has focused on the effects of punishment. Mild threats of punishment appear to have a greater effect than severe threats in reducing the attractiveness of aggressive actions (Aronson and Carlsmith 1963). Also, teacher-training programs that emphasize the use of swift and nonsevere punishment have significantly reduced bullying behavior in schoolchildren (Olweus 1991). In adults severe punishment does not seem to deter violent crimes, in part because it is not swift and not certain for most violent acts (for example, countries with the death penalty do not have lower violent-crime rates). An interesting study by the Minneapolis police found that the immediate arrest of domestic abusers dramatically reduced the chances of repeat offense (Sherman and Berk 1984).

Another psychological concept thought to be important in reducing aggression is catharsis. Several theorists, including Freud (1933) and Dollard et al. (1939), have proposed that unreleased aggressive impulses lead to a buildup of pressure. Thus it is necessary to release this pressure, ideally through socially acceptable forms of behavior, to avoid the risk of illness or uncontrollable behavior. This aggressive energy is thought to be released in various ways, including physical activity, such as competitive sport; watching other people engage in aggressive play—in other words, experiencing a vicarious discharge of aggressive energy; and engaging in direct aggression—lashing out, hurting someone, saying something nasty. Research has provided no evidence, however, to support the idea that participation in competitive sports has any effect. For example, football players do not become less hostile over the course of a season or immediately after a game. Moreover, some research suggests an increase of aggression among
Theories of Violence: Religion

spectators at sports events (e.g., soccer matches) or immediately following a game (one study reported greater rates of domestic abuse after Super Bowl games). Similarly, the majority of studies on the effects of direct aggression suggest no reduction but sometimes an increase in the tendency toward future aggression (see Geen and Quany 1977). Thus, catharsis is not a viable mechanism for reducing aggression.

Summary

Throughout the twentieth century the pendulum swung between nature or nurture as more important in determining human aggression. At the turn of the millennium a more balanced perspective was prevalent, in which both nature and nurture were considered essential in understanding the causes of individual aggressive and violent behavior. While aggression most likely evolved as a strategy in many species, whether or not it is expressed depends on previous social experiences, as well as the specific social context in which the animal finds itself. There are also important individual differences in the propensity for aggression, depending on both genetic and environmental factors, as well as their interaction. Any psychological explanation for aggression and violence must consider the role of both biological and situational factors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


