INTRODUCTION

TRADITIONAL THEORIES AND RESEARCH ON AGGRESSION

In this part of the book, we describe and critically evaluate traditional approaches to the scientific study of aggression and violence. Aggression, violence, and related behaviors are studied in a variety of disciplines. The term aggression has been applied to an extraordinary range of phenomena: physical assaults, homicides, verbal insults, sarcasm, spouse and child abuse, international and civil wars, predatory behavior, and much else. It is not surprising, therefore, that aggression has been studied in many scientific disciplines. Although in the present book we are concerned primarily with social and psychological factors contributing to the phenomena of interest, it should be recognized that anthropologists, biologists, economists, political scientists, communications researchers, historians, and sociologists have also been involved in studying aggression.

Each scientific discipline has its own level of analysis and develops its own set of theories and methods to explain phenomena. Biologists focus on evolutionary principles, genetic codes, biochemical factors, or central nervous system activity as explanations of aggression. Psychologists tend to focus on internal tensions and frustrations, learned associations, emotions, and perceptions in developing their theories. Sociologists are more apt to
focus on social, demographic, and cultural factors to explain aggressive behavior. We examine each of these approaches and note their limitations.

Biologists, and some psychologists, have viewed aggression as responses pushed out by inner forces—such as aggressive drive, anger, hormones, and brain centers (cf. Geen, 1990; Moyer, 1987)—or automatically pulled out by external stimuli, such as frustration and aversive stimuli (Berkowitz, 1989). This type of aggression has been labeled angry aggression.

In chapter 1, we describe various mechanisms empirically examined by biologists and evaluate them in light of the available evidence. Among these mechanisms are instincts, hormones, genetic abnormalities, heritability of aggression, and brain centers. Much of the available research has been done with lower organisms, and each of these factors has been linked with aggressive behavior. However, as shall be seen, the generalizability of such findings to explain human aggression is questionable and is seldom corroborated when corresponding research is carried out with human subjects.

One might categorize biologically oriented researchers into strong and weak categories. A strong biological approach to aggression claims direct causal effects between physiological structures that themselves (to a large degree) are products of genetic inheritance and aggressive behavior. For example, one might claim that there is a direct relationship between the concentration of plasma testosterone and aggressive behavior. This hypothesis does not specify the causal path through which biochemicals can bring about complex social actions, such as assaults and homicides.

A weak biological approach claims only that biological factors in indirect ways affect the likelihood and magnitude of aggressive behavior. For example, A. H. Buss and Plomin (1984) have argued that temperament types, which may have heritability components, can indirectly affect aggression. A tendency to be impulsive may increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior, whereas a tendency to be fearful may inhibit it. Intelligence may be another factor indirectly and inversely related to aggressive and criminal conduct. In general, the weak biological approach views physiological structures as possible moderators of aggressive behavior, rather than as direct causal factors. From the evaluation made in chapter 1, we reject the strong biological view and accept the weaker position.

Classic frustration-aggression theory is presented in chapter 2. This theory is an important landmark in the study of aggression because it stimulated extensive laboratory research on aggression by psychologists. The theory attempts to combine built-in biological factors with learning mechanisms to explain aggressive behavior. There is an automatic, prewired connection between frustrating events and the buildup of aggressive drive in the organism, and there is a homeostatic mechanism operating so that the organism needs to reduce the drive by performing aggressive behaviors. Learning comes into play because organisms learn to avoid performing
responses that lead to punishment. We show in chapter 2 that research does not consistently support frustration-aggression theory and that there is reason to think that the theory refers to too narrow a range of phenomena.

A major revision of frustration-aggression theory has been developed by Berkowitz (1993), who proposed two systems of aggression: angry aggression and instrumental aggression. Basic to all aggression, according to Berkowitz, is a biological structure, which he refers to as a rudimentary emotional-response system. Aversive stimuli activate this system and create in the organism a desire to hurt others. Aggressive behavior that does hurt others serves to satisfy this desire. This rudimentary system is modified by learning and affected by cognitive-associative processes. Berkowitz assembled evidence to support these processes, much of it representing a lifetime of his own research and that of his students. Our evaluation in chapter 2 is that the evidence presented is inconsistent, is subject to demand cues, and has sometimes been misinterpreted by Berkowitz.

The focus in chapter 3 is on physiological arousal and its effects on aggressive behavior. Zillmann (1971) has proposed a theory of excitation transfer in which misattribution is an important factor. Under conditions in which arousal has dissipated sufficiently so that the individual is no longer aware that arousal is still above some quiescent level, he or she may misattribute the leftover arousal to a new situation in which new arousal occurs. The result is a greater cumulative amount of arousal than when the individual has no residual arousal available in the new situation.

According to Zillmann (1971), anger causes aggressive behavior. The arousal accompanying anger can be heightened by residual arousal so that the individual retaliates at a higher level of aggression against a provocer. High levels of arousal can also interfere with cognitive processes, so that cognitive controls (i.e., inhibitors) may be bypassed, and habitual and impulsive behavior may occur. An extensive research program to test the hypotheses of the theory has been carried out by Zillmann and his colleagues. This research is carefully reviewed and critically evaluated in chapter 3. We conclude that the evidence does not consistently support excitation transfer theory. Nevertheless, research has indicated that physiological arousal facilitates aggression but does not instigate it.

Public policy concern has stimulated interest in the effects of sexual arousal on aggressive behavior. We examine the research on viewing pornography and its effects on aggressive behavior. Erotic stimuli and pornography apparently do not instigate or facilitate aggressive behavior specifically directed toward women.

In chapter 4, we present theories that assume that aggression is learned like any other behavior and is a means to achieving goals (A. H. Buss, 1961). Biological theories, frustration-aggression theory, Berkowitz's (1993) theory of angry aggression, and Zillmann's (1971) theory of excitation transfer all treat aggression as a behavior system that is, in important
respects, different from other behavior systems. Instrumental and social learning theories (Bandura, 1983; A. H. Buss, 1961) focus on the conditions for learning, maintaining, and performing aggressive responses. According to A. H. Buss, learning any behavior, including aggression, is a function of rewards and punishments, association of stimuli and responses, and extinction processes. Personality, social norms, and other factors will affect the learning process and how an individual will react in a given situation.

Bandura (1983) moved away from the behaviorism expounded by A. H. Buss (1961) and proposed that learning is largely a function of cognitive processes. It is not so much the impact of past rewards that shapes behavior, but the expectation of future rewards that guides behavior. Furthermore, an individual does not need to learn by doing, but may learn by observing others. The central idea of social learning theory is that people learn from and imitate models. Children may learn to be aggressive from observing (often as targets) the punitive behavior of their parents or from viewing models on television or in the movies.

In chapter 4, we make important criticisms of modeling experiments. A review of experiments and field studies indicates that the impact of watching violence on television is very small. Little or no evidence exists for the mechanisms that mediate a relationship between viewing violence and subsequent aggressive behavior. There is evidence of intergenerational transmission of violence, but the relationship is not a strong one. We conclude that there can be little doubt that learning is an important, even a critical factor that must be incorporated into any theory of aggressive behavior. The effects of scripts, means–ends relations, and incentives on aggression have been firmly established.

Finally, sociological theories of violence and crime are discussed in chapter 5. These theories have sometimes been used to explain socio-demographic variation in criminal behavior. The subcultural approach focuses on variation across groups in values conducive to violence and delinquency. Blocked-opportunity theorists interpret crime as an alternative form of achievement or as a way of handling grievances when legitimate opportunities are blocked. Control theorists assume that the incentives for crime are constant but that costs and inhibitions vary. Criminal behavior is likely to occur when internal and external controls are weak and when the routine activities of people create opportunities to commit crime with impunity.

These theories provide ideas that are useful for the study of aggression, although the empirical evidence for some of the theories is mixed. A rational choice approach, which focuses on the instrumental character of crime, provides a basis for integrating many of these ideas (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Such an approach is compatible with the learning theories presented in chapter 4 and with the approach that we develop in part 2 of this book.