

SOCI 324

GROUPS, ORGANISATIONS AND

THE INDIVIDUAL

Session 13 – Aggression & Bullying

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Session Overview

- A close observation of the world around us reveals the pervasiveness of aggression. Aggression is a universal and ageless phenomenon. It can produce very serious consequences hence, it has long been a major interest of social psychologists. This lesson is an attempt to provide some insights on the nature of aggression.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Definition of aggression
- The nature and types of aggression
- The theories that explain the origin of aggression
- The causes of Aggression
- The prevention and control of aggression



Reading List

- Read chapter 10 of the required text and the article on this session posted on Sakai



Topic One

DEFINING AGGRESSION AND BULLYING



What is Aggression?

- 'Behavior directed toward the goal of harming another living being, who is motivated to avoid such treatment (Baron, Byrne and Branscombe, 2009).
- 'Intentional behavior aimed at doing harm or causing pain to another person, (Aronson, Wilson and Akert, 2007).
- 'Any form of behavior that is intended to harm or injure some person, oneself or an object (Franzoi, 2000).



What is Aggression?

- In addition to these specific definitions, we could further say that aggression is an intentional behavior aimed at causing either physical or psychological pain.
- The action might be physical or verbal. It might succeed in its goal or not. It is still aggression. For instance, if someone throws a stone at you, but you managed to swerve so the stone misses your head; it is still an aggressive act, just as if the stone had hit you.
- The important thing is the intention. Again, if a drunk driver unintentionally runs over a child and kills her, it is not aggression even though the damage is severe and fatal.

Types of Aggression?

- Social psychologists have distinguished between two types of aggression namely **hostile** and **instrumental aggression**. Hostile aggression is the intentional use of harmful behavior, triggered by anger, in which the goal is simply to cause injury, pain, or death to someone. In this case, aggression is an end in itself.
- In instrumental aggression, there is intentional use of harmful behavior so that one can achieve some other goal. In other words, there is an intention to hurt another person, but the hurting leads to some goal other than causing pain. Thus, aggression as used here is a means to an end.
- A difference between the two is that instrumental aggression is motivated by an anticipation of rewards or the avoidance of punishment, i.e. it is relatively deliberate and rational. Hostile aggression however is impulsive and irrational (rewards and avoidance of punishments may be consequences).
- Despite these distinctions, it must be noted that many aggressive acts cannot be neatly or clearly put into one of these categories because an aggressive act might start out instrumentally but end up hostile.

Topic Two

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR AGGRESSION



Biology and Aggression

- The oldest explanations for human aggression centers on the view that humans are 'programmed' for violence by their biological nature. This theory was supported strongly by Sigmund Freud, (1930) who theorized that humans are born with an instinct towards life (Eros) and an equally powerful instinct towards death (Thanatos).
- About the death instinct Freud wrote "It is at work in every living being and is striving to bring it out to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter". Thus, he believed that aggressive energy must come out somehow lest it continues to build up and produce illness. This notion is best characterized as the '**hydraulic theory**'- the analogy is to water pressure building up in a container, when unless the energy is released, it will result in some explosion.
- Other psychologists (Lorenz (1974) developed this initial theorizing by Freud. These theorists suggest that aggression stems from an inherited fighting instinct that humans share with other species. Aggression has a survival value, helping the specie to survive in the evolutionar of the survival of the fittest.



Critique of the Drive Theory

- Human beings aggress against others in many different ways- from ignoring others to overt acts of violence. The question is how can such a huge range of behaviors be determined by genetic factors?
- The frequency of aggressive actions varies tremendously across human societies, such that they are more likely to occur in some societies than in others. Here, the question is, how can aggressive behavior be determined by genetic factors if such huge differences exist?

Frustration and Aggression

- **Drive Theories: The Motive to Harm Others:** Social psychologists who rejected Freud's views of aggression, countered it with an alternative of their own: the view that aggression stems mainly from externally elicited drive to harm others. This approach is reflected in several different drive theories. These theories suggest that various external stimuli arouse a strong motive to engage in harmful behavior or overt aggressive behavior.
- The most famous drive theory is **the frustration/ aggression hypothesis**. This suggests that frustration leads to a drive whose goal is to harm another person or object, especially the object of the frustration.
- Frustration occurs when something interferes with the achievement of a goal at 'its proper time in a behavior sequence'. When frustration occurs, the natural result according to this theory is aggression. The strength of the aggressive impulse is proportional to the intensity of the frustration.

Critique of Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

- This theory is no longer accepted as valid by most social psychologists as an explanation for aggressive behavior. Questions have been raised among which are that, frustrated people do not always engage in aggression. People show a wide range of responses ranging from sadness, depression, resignation and despair to making positive attempts to overcome the source of the frustration.
- Thus, frustration is only one of a host of causes and not the only important/sole/strongest cause of aggression. Despite these criticisms, the theory still enjoys widespread acceptance outside the field. Thus, drive theories have continued to impact discussions of human aggression.

Socialisation and Aggression

- **“Train up a child in the way s/he should go and when s/he grows, s/he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6)**
- The social learning theory emphasizes the fact that aggression like other complex forms of social behavior is largely learned. This theory begins with a reasonable explanation; that humans are not born with a wide array of aggressive responses at their disposal. Rather, they acquire these in much the same way as they acquire other complex forms of social behavior: through experience or by observing the behavior of others (live persons or characters in movies, on television or even in video games who behave aggressively) (Bushman & Anderson, 2002).

Socialisation and Aggression

Thus, depending on the past experience and the cultures in which they live, individuals learn:

- Various ways of seeking to harm others.
- Which persons or groups are appropriate targets for aggression.
- What actions by others justify retaliation and vengeance (aggressive response)
- What situations or contexts are ones in which aggression is permitted or even approved.
- How much aggression is justifiable?

The General Aggression Model

- This modern theory of aggression suggests that aggression is triggered by a wide range of input variables that influence arousal, affective stages (feelings and moods) and cognitions (thoughts and opinions) (Baron et al, 2006).
- Building on the social learning perspective, this newer framework (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) provides a more complete account of the foundations of human aggression. According to this model, a series of events that may lead to aggression can be initiated by two major types of input variables namely, **situational factors** (factors relating to the situation) and **person factors** (factors relating the persons involved).

The General Aggression Model

- **Situational factors** include frustration, provocation or attack; say an insult from another person, exposure to aggressive models, high temperatures, traffic or just anything that causes the individual discomfort.
- **Person factors** (individual differences) include traits that predispose person towards aggression (high irritability), certain beliefs and attitudes about violence (that it is appropriate and acceptable), a tendency to perceive hostile intentions in others behavior and specific skills related to aggression (knowing how to use various weapons).

Sample Question

- Which of the theoretical perspectives on the origins of aggression best explains the problem of domestic violence facing our society in present times?



Topic Three

CAUSES OF AGGRESSION



Causes of Aggression

- **Frustration:** It has been suggested that not getting what one wants or expects can sometimes lead to aggression.
- Frustration can be a powerful determinant of aggression especially under conditions where frustration is viewed as illegitimate or unjustified (Folger & Baron, 1996). Such is what usually leads to workplace aggression, where people think their efforts at progressing in their career are being thwarted by somebody.
- Thus, despite the criticisms leveled against the frustration aggression hypothesis, it is still being used to explain human aggression.



Causes of Aggression

- **Direct Provocation (Aggression Breeds Aggression):** Research has shown that attacks, both physical and verbal are reliable instigators of aggression. (Geen, 1996) provoked subjects with insults about their intelligence and motivation and received more aggression in response than those constructively criticized.
- Besides, the perceived intentionality of the provocation will determine whether a person will respond in like manner. When individuals perceive provocation to be intended, they respond in an aggressive manner and vice-versa. Thus, the attributions to the causes behind the provocative actions by others play a key role in determining how we would react to them.
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- The kinds of provocation that strongly push people towards aggression include condescension (expressions of disdain or arrogance on the part of others-(Harris, 1993). Harsh and unjustified criticism, especially one that attacks our person rather than our actions is another powerful form of provocation that leads to aggression. Again, many people may be able to take such derogatory remarks if they are directed at them personally but not when it is against their family- father, mother, spouse or siblings.

Causes of Aggression

- **Weapons Effect:** The notion that exposure to inanimate objects can encourage instances of aggression. This is termed the weapons effect.
- The suggestion here is that aggressive cues serve to illicit aggressive responses from persons who have been angered. The greater the presence of such cues on the scene, the higher the aggression that is likely to occur.
- Thus, according to Berkowitz “guns not only permit violence, they can stimulate it as well”; “The finger pulls the trigger but the trigger may also be pulling the finger”

Causes of Aggression

- **Aggression as a Subculture:** In some societies or groups, e.g. the Mafia or in gangs, aggression is a valued trait. It is a means to gaining status and recognition in the group. To survive in such societies or groups, one must exhibit same or similar levels of aggression.
- **'Cultures of Honor' and Sexual Jealousy:** Aggression has also been identified to stem from cultural factors. Thus, in some cultures, beliefs, norms and expectations exist that suggest that aggression is appropriate and permitted. Research has identified such 'cultures of honor', those in which strong norms indicate that aggression is an appropriate response to insults to ones honor.
- This theme is particularly visible in many Asian movies. Such norms develop because according to Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997, in some geographical areas, wealth was concentrated in assets that could easily be stolen (e.g. Cattle, slave). For this reason, people had to be aggressive to portray that they will not allow thefts of their property and well actually capable of protecting their own.

Culture and Aggression

- Cultural beliefs that condone aggression are especially apparent with respect to cultural jealousy in some societies. In such societies, infidelity by women (real or imagined) is seen as an affront to male honor and can result in serious consequences. (Baker, Gregware and Cassidy, 1999).
- For example, in Iraq, if a woman who is not married is found to have lost her virginity, her own family may execute her to restore its honor (Packer, 2004). Recent research evidence (Vandello and Cohen, 2003) shows that the code of male honor is especially strong in Latin and South America. Thus, situations that induce jealousy would be expected to produce stronger aggressive responses by the people in those cultures than in others. Again, persons in those honor-oriented cultures would tend to be more accepting of such aggression than would persons in other cultures (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996).
- Thus, overall several researches (Vandello & Cohen, 2003; Puente & Cohen, 2003) have portrayed that jealousy is indeed a powerful force of aggression. Moreover, aggression stemming from jealousy, which forms a slur on ones honor, are permitted and condoned in cultures of honor. Indeed aggression that stems from jealousy can even be seen as signs of love. Not getting jealous or showing aggression shows that the person whose partner is being unfaithful does not really care (Puente & Cohen, 2003).

Personality and Aggression

- **Type A Personality:** Some researchers have categorized people into two personality groups, A and B. People with personality type 'A' are said to be extremely competitive, always in a hurry, and very irritable.
- Type 'B's are the exact opposite. The suggestion is that type 'A's are more aggressive in a wide range of situations than type 'B's (Baron, Russel & Arms, 1985; Carver & Glass, 1978). Type 'A's unlike type 'B's are more likely to engage in hostile aggression – actions as spouse and child abuse (Strube et al, 1984).

Narcissism and Aggression

- **Narcissism:** The word narcissism came from the name Narcissus. Narcissus was a character in Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection in the water and drowned trying to reach it. His name has become a synonym for excessive self-love, for holding an overinflated view of one's ego, virtues and accomplishments.
- Studies (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) suggest that narcissism is a character trait associated with aggression. Narcissists react with exceptionally high and intense levels of anger and aggression to 'slights' from others because this feedback threatens their overinflated ego and self-image. This is because narcissists have doubts about their own self-image and the accuracy of the inflated ego; hence they react violently to anyone who tries to undermine it.
- Recent studies have also revealed that narcissistic people, because of their inflated self-images, perceive themselves as the victims of transgressions more often than non-narcissistic people.
- The challenge this explanation provides is that as we teach people, especially children to build positive self-esteem, we should not carry it too far. This is because of the possibility of producing children with unrealistic and over inflated images of themselves- a potential for aggression.

Impulsivity and Aggression

- **Sensation Seeking (Impulsivity):** A sensation seeker refers to someone who seeks lots of adventure, thrills, new experiences especially ones with an element of risk and are easily bored. These kinds of people are generally uninhibited and impulsive.
- Sensation seekers have been associated with higher aggression because they have the tendency to be easily aroused and thus, more prone to anger. Their tendency to get bored easily may lead them to have more hostile thoughts. They are attracted to aggression-eliciting situations, which they find exciting and appealing (in movies for example). Usually, they are more likely to focus on the immediate pleasure derived from their behavior and not the delayed consequences of it.

Gender and Aggression

- **Gender Differences:** Both folklore and research suggest that males more than females are more likely to be aggressive. However, a close examination reveals some that some specific differences exist. For instance, males more than females are more likely to serve as the target of aggression as well as be the target of such aggression (Harris, 1992,1994).
- Again, males are more likely than females to aggress against others even when these persons have not provoked them in anyway. However, when provocation is present and intense, these differences disappear (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996).
- Another difference between the sexes in relation to aggression is that, males are more likely to engage in various forms of direct aggression (physical assaults, shoving, punching, shouting, etc) according to Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Buck, 1994. Females on the other hand are more likely to engage in indirect aggression-spreading vicious rumors against the target person, gossiping behind his back, making up stories to get the person into trouble etc. These differences with respect to indirect aggression are present among children as young as eight years and increase through age fifteen (Osterman et al, 1996).

High Temperatures and Aggression

- **High Temperatures:** Some research evidence exists to suggest that violence increases as a function of high temperatures. However, this is only up to a point; beyond some level, aggression declines as temperatures rise. The explanation provided is that when people are very hot, they do seem lethargic and concentrate on reducing their discomfort rather than on aggressing against others.
- Anderson, Bushman & Groom, in their forty five years studies (1950-1995) of fifty cities in the United States, revealed that hotter years indeed produced higher rates of violent crimes but did not produce increases in property crimes or rape.

Anonymity and Aggression

- **De-individuation (Anonymity):** De-individuation refers to the lack of feelings of distinctiveness and uniqueness. When people are in a de-individuated state, they are more likely to act aggressively because they know the likelihood of being identified is less and the social concern then is lowered (Zimbardo, 1969).
- Watson (1973) confirmed the effects of de-individuation when he examined war records in twenty-three countries. Extreme aggression (torture, execution of the enemy) was more in those countries whose soldiers used some sort of disguise. The Ku-Klux-Klan and their attacks on blacks and property are an example of the link between anonymity and aggression.

Alcohol and Aggression

- **Alcohol and Aggression:** Common sense suggests a relationship between alcohol usage and aggressive behavior. After all, bars and clubs are notorious for fights and aggressive behavior. Systematic research on the subject has also provided evidence that some correlation exists between alcohol usage and aggression. In several experiments participants who consumed substantial doses of alcohol were found to behave more aggressively than those who did not consume alcohol.
- The explanations provided include the fact that alcohol eliminates inhibitions against acting in an impulsive and dangerous manner. It makes people very sensitive to provocation. Most importantly, it has been explained that alcohol impairs higher-order cognitive functions.
- Jeavons & Taylor (1985) suggest that alcohol does not automatically increase aggression in its consumers. Such persons may become aggressive but only in the context of social or situational cues suggesting that such behavior is appropriate (e.g. provocation, crowding which leads people to jostle one another) and even smoking, which irritates some people (Zillman, Baron & Tamborini, 1981).
- Thus, though alcohol and aggressive are related, alcohol does not necessarily 'program' people for violence.

Topic Four

PREVENTING/CONTROL OF AGGRESSION



Punishment

- There are a number of ways to prevent the occurrence of aggression or to control intensity when it does occur. These include:
- **Punishment: Just Desserts and Deterrence:** Punishments may refer to procedures in which aversive consequences are delivered to individuals when they engage in specific actions (Baron et al, 2006). Punishments may take many forms ranging from fines, house arrests, prison, physical or even capital punishment.
- But, why is punishment used against aggressive people? Punishment is used against aggression for three main reasons namely; **retribution** (making amends for the harm done), **deterrence** (them or others from engaging in such behavior in the future) and **protecting future victims from possible h**



Making Punishment Effective

- Punishment is effective only to the extent that it prevents people from repeating aggressive acts. (Baron et al, 2006), suggest that for punishment to be effective it must meet four conditions namely;
- It must be **prompt (immediate)** - follow aggressive acts as quickly as possible
- It must be **Intense (severe)**- strong enough or of a sufficient magnitude to be aversive to the potential recipients
- It must be **Probable/Escapeless** (certain to occur)-The likelihood that it will follow aggressive acts must be very high
- The recipients must **perceive it as justified or deserved** (lest they think they are being provoked and being aggressed against).
- Punishment if used rightly has the potential to inhibit people particularly children from aggressive behavior. However, if it is done in the wrong way, it would provide a rather adverse effect, encouraging aggression.

Preventing Aggression

- **Cognitive Interventions: Apologies:** Apologies (admissions of wrongdoing that include a request or appeal for forgiveness) often go a long way to diffuse aggression (Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989). Research indicates that excuses that make reference to external events beyond the individual's control are more effective (Weiner et al, 1987).

Preventing Aggression

- **Catharsis (Getting it out of your system):** The catharsis hypothesis is a view that suggests that providing angry persons with an opportunity to express their aggressive impulses in relatively safe ways will reduce their tendencies to engage in more harmful forms of aggression. It suggests that angry persons can blow off steam by participating in vigorous activities. Activity helps to reduce emotional tension and thus makes people less likely to engage in subsequent aggressive behavior.
- It also suggests that aggression may be controlled by fantasizing about aggression (watching an aggressive movie) or imagining unpleasant things happening to the tormentor. For instance in Japan, several companies provide a special room where workers can take out their aggression on a toy replica of their boss to relieve their tensions. However, the catharsis hypothesis has been critiqued as providing only a temporary relief or reduction for aggression as frustration and provocation may reappear.

Preventing Aggression

- **Forgiveness (Compassion instead of Revenge):** It feels very normal and justified to want to pay back those who have offended us. This often leads to several acts of violence. Thus it has been suggested that to control violence and aggression we must choose to forgive. Forgiveness is giving up the desire to punish those who have hurt us, and seeking instead to act in a kind, helpful way towards them (Baron et al, 2009).
- To be able to forgive, one must have empathy- trying to understand the feelings, emotions and circumstances that cause others to hurt us. It is also important not to record wrongs or ruminate (constantly bring to mind/ remember) wrongs done you.
- Forgiveness holds substantial benefits for both the forgiver and the forgiven. These benefits are even stronger for relationships that are close. Thus, there is a real truth in the maxim, 'to err is human, and to forgive is divine'!

Preventing Aggression

- **Social Learning (Learning not to be Aggressive):** The suggestion here is that, if aggression is learnt, then it can also be unlearnt. Individuals can be exposed to non-aggressive models to reduce aggression.
- **Strict Gun Legislation:** Research, indicates that about less than five percent (5%) of all known killings are pre-meditated, planned and intentional. The other ninety-five percent (95%) occur in the heat of passion aided by the presence of guns (weapons effect). If legislation provides the use of these guns only to the forces or licensed holders, aggression may be controlled somewhat.

Preventing Aggression

- **Training in Social Skills (learning to get along with others):** A reason for aggression is that some people sorely lack basic social skills that would enable them provide feedback (criticism) to others. Thus, they do so in a way that angers them. This abrasive style of self-expression and insensitivity to others emotional states can be problematic. Toch (1985) asserts that people lacking in social skills account for a high proportion of violence in many societies. The solution then is to teach people how to communicate without creating offense.
- **The use of Positive Effect:** The point here is that, it is impossible for people to engage in two incompatible responses at the same time. Thus, if angry persons are exposed to stimuli that are incompatible with anger (Humor, empathy), the anger may be controlled and violence averted.
- **Reducing Anonymity in urban centers:** this can be done by designing buildings and the community in a manner that would bring people together and increase their defensible space.

Sample Question

- 'Alcohol abuse leads to aggression'. Do you agree with this statement? Provide a basis for your reasoning.



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