

LECTURE 3: Aggression



Main lecture content taken from Gross (2010)

Do genes make a person violent?

- ❑ Steven Mobley – white, middle class, US family, not abused or maltreated as a child
- ❑ In 1991, aged 25 - robbed and murdered the manager of a pizza store
- ❑ On death row. Lawyer appealed for clemency on grounds that he was 'born to kill'
- ❑ Aunt testified that several members of family were inexplicably very violent – murder, rape, robbery, suicide
- ❑ Blamed a gene mutation that causes a chemical imbalance
- ❑ Could Steven Mobley avoid being violent?

Defining Aggression

- We can recognise aggression
 - But what is it?
- Noun: Aggression
 - Behaviour that is intended to harm another or has that effect
 - Socially desirable/undesirable?
- Adjective: Aggressive
 - Action carried out with energy and persistence
 - Can be regarded as socially desirable – e.g. aggressively worked towards achieving...

Defining Aggression

- Aggression – involves **intention** to cause harm
(Berkowitz, 1993; Fiske, 2004)
 - Aggressive thoughts – not aggression

- Two types of intention (*Anderson, 2001a*)
 - Proximate (closest and most immediate)

 - Primary (ultimate) e.g. revenge, genocide, political control, self-enhancement, relief from tension

Defining Aggression

- Violence:

- Extreme form of aggression – deliberate attempt to inflict serious physical injury or damage to property

- Hostile aggression:

- Gratuitous aggression - angry, usually (but not always) impulsive

- Instrumental aggression:

- Means to an end – self-defence, usually (but not always) controlled, premeditated

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Ethological perspective

- Aggression instinctive in all species
 - Necessary for adaptation to environments
 - Survival and reproduction
 - Territoriality – competition for limited resources
e.g. space, food
 - Mating rights
- Much research evidence – non-mammals (fish/insects)

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Ethological perspective

- ▣ Konrad Lorenz – Instinct theory
- ▣ We can compare the aggression instinct in all species including humans
 - Aggression:
'...the fighting instinct in beast and man which is directed against members of the same species'
(Lorenz, 1966)

Aggression against other species?

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Ethological perspective

- ❑ Lorenz: 'steam boiler' model within instinct theory
- ❑ Aggressive energy produced continuously within organism until it is released by an external cue e.g. mating rival
- ❑ Aggressive energy then builds above threshold and overflows
- ❑ Even without external stimulus, aggression is inevitable – inevitable consequence of continuous production of aggressive energy

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Ethological perspective

❑ Support for Lorenz's model

- Megargee (1966): Violent crimes often committed by over-controlled individuals

❑ Challenge to Lorenz's model

- Appears to suggest that repeated acts of aggression are unlikely – once energy used time is needed to raise level of aggressive energy again
- Multiple killings e.g. school shootings in the US have shown that repeated acts of aggression are possible

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Behaviour genetics

- Twin and adoption studies
 - Genetically-related individuals – more similar in terms of their aggressive tendencies than those not related
 - Self-reports and other-reports of aggression suggest genetic make-up accounts for up to 41% variance of effects of genetic similarity
 - BUT – environmental influences stronger – up to 59% variance

(meta-analysis: Rhee and Waldman, 2002)

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Hormones

- ❑ **Testosterone** - male sex hormone
 - Gender differences in physical aggression
 - Testosterone linked to activation of fight impulses and inhibition of flight impulses/avoidance behaviour
 - Highly aggressive men found to have higher levels of testosterone (*meta-analysis: Archer, Birring and Wu, 1998*)
 - Men handling a gun or toy:
 - ❑ gun caused production of more testosterone than toy
 - ❑ More aggressive behaviour subsequently(*Klinesmith, Kasser and McAndrew, 2006*)

But much weaker instinct in humans than other animals
(*Van Goozen, 2005*)

Theories of Aggression: Biological

Hormones

- **Cortisol** – Low levels of cortisol linked to fearlessness, risk-taking and insensitivity to punishment
 - Low resting levels of cortisol predict aggressive behaviour over time (*Shoal, Giancola and Kirillova, 2003*)
 - Low cortisol levels – less susceptible to the fear of punishment that usually stops aggressive behaviour (*Raine, 1996*)

BUT – Hormones do not determine behaviour. They work together with a wide range of factors in the social environment that may reinforce or attenuate the impact of biological influences on aggression

Theories of Aggression: Psychoanalytic Approach

□ **Freud** – Instinct theory

- Aggression is an instinct distinct from sexuality
- Response to violence of WWI
- Life instinct (Eros); Death Instinct (Thanatos)
- **Thanatos** (death instinct):
 - Inborn destructiveness directed primarily against the self
 - Need to reduce then eliminate tension, or excitation, of living to achieve idyllic state of life
 - This state was enjoyed in the womb - all needs were met immediately
 - Can only achieve this state of Nirvana is through death

Theories of Aggression: Psychoanalytic Approach

- ❑ **Eros** (Life instinct)
- ❑ Self-directed aggression conflicts with the life instinct (self-preservation)
- ❑ Impulse to self-destruction is so strong it must be relieved
 - Aggression become eroticized with libido (sadism, masochism, sadomasochism)
 - Aggression is directed outward towards others – we must destroy some person or thing if we are not to destroy ourselves (*displaced* aggression)
 - Some outwardly directed aggression is taken back into our own personality in the form of the 'superego' (our 'moral' self)

Theories of Aggression: Psychoanalytic Approach

- Similar view to Lorenz
 - Aggression can be sublimated into sport, physical occupations and domination and mastery of the natural and/or social world
 - View of aggression as spontaneous and not reactive – it builds until has to be discharged in some way
- Freud argues that Thanatos always wins
 - Is this true?

Theories of Aggression: Behavioural Approach

❑ **Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis**

(Dollard, Doob, Mowerer and Sears, 1939)

- ❑ Aggression is always a consequence of frustration and the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression
- ❑ Argued - aggression is an innate response, but that it could only be triggered by frustration
- ❑ Frustration leads to arousal of a drive whose main goal is that of harming some person or object – primarily the perceived cause of frustration (links to Freudian Psychoanalytic approach/Thanatos)
- ❑ Evidence for indirect aggression (e.g. scape-goating innocent parties) stronger than for direct aggression (against provoking person)

(Marcus-Newhall et al, 2000)

Critique of Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

- ❑ Frustration is an instigator. But: situational factors (e.g. learned inhibition, fear of retaliation) can prevent aggressive behaviour (*Miller, 1941*)
- ❑ Frustration is a source of arousal. But: like any type of arousal, this can have a number of outcomes, which are linked learned patterns of behaviour and environmental cues (*Bandura, 1973*)
- ❑ Different responses in different people in different situations. Aggression a more likely response if:
 - Person is close to achieving goal
 - Frustrating event seems arbitrary or illegitimate (then it is seen as unfair)

(Miell, 1990)

Theories of Aggression: Attributional perspective

- Attribution of intention (Kulik and Brown, 1979)
- Was interference with our efforts intentional or improper?
- If so, cause is seen as internal to other person, controllable and improper
 - a violation of accepted rules of conduct
- We search for mitigating circumstances

Theories of Aggression: Attributional perspective

- Chronically aggressive children display a strong hostile attributional style (HAS), especially in ambiguous situations
 - Make attributions rapidly
 - Use only some information relating to the perceived threat

(Dodge and Tomlin, 1987)
 - They see hostile intent and retaliate with aggression
- State of chronic arousal and vigilance – persists and affects interpretations of new situation – can lead to misattribution
- Presence of aggressive cues is likely to trigger hostile attributions *(Fiske, 2004)*

Theories of Aggression: 'Aggressive Cues'

- ❑ **Aggressive Cue Theory** (ACT) (Berkowitz, 1966)
- ❑ Frustration is psychologically painful
- ❑ Psychological or physical pain produces **anger**, not aggression
- ❑ Cues needed to convert psychological pain into aggression
- ❑ Cues: environmental stimuli associated either with
 - Aggressive behaviour
 - Frustrating object or person
 - Unpleasant past experiences

Theories of Aggression: 'Aggressive Cues'

Berkowitz and Green (1966)

- Participants asked to write a solution to a problem
- Solution evaluated by a partner (stooge) who then administers either 1 or 7 electric shocks to participant
(half received 1/half received 7)
- Participants then asked to evaluate 'partner's' solution and to respond by administering between 1 and 10 electric shocks to 'partner'
- Shown a film beforehand:
 - Half saw a violent film about boxing starring Kirk Douglas
 - Half saw a non-violent film

Theories of Aggression: 'Aggressive Cues'

Findings:

- Higher number of electric shocks if participant :
 - had received a higher number of shocks from 'partner'
 - had seen violent film prior to administering shocks
 - Believed 'partner's' name to be Kirk
- Parallel study: 'partner' introduced as Bob Kelly, Bob Dunne or Bob Riley
 - Number of shocks particularly high if 'partner's' name was Bob Kelly (the loser in the boxing film, played by Kirk Douglas))

Theories of Aggression: 'Aggressive Cues'

- Partners named 'Kirk' or 'Kelly'
 - Reminded participants of the recipient of aggression they had witnessed in the film
 - Character was associated with successful (rewarded) aggression
 - Own feelings of anger elicited earlier was more likely to be converted into aggression/aggressive behaviour

(Berkowitz, 1993)

- Berkowitz and LePage (1967)
 - Higher number of shocks from angry participants (av. 5.8) if shotgun and revolver previously seen next to the shock machine, rather than sports equipment (av. 4.7) or no objects (av. 4.6)

Aggressive cues

Theories of Aggression: 'Aggressive Cues'

Evaluation of ACT

- Support for the weapons effect: meta-analysis of 57 studies: aggression-related cues do increase aggressive behaviour
(Carlson et al, 1990)

"The finger pulls the trigger, but the trigger may also be pulling the finger"
(Berkowitz, 1968, in Gross, 2010)

Exposure to a weapon produces **automatic priming**

- e.g. can identify aggression-related words more rapidly after seeing a weapon name or picture
(Anderson et al, 2002)
- Availability of firearms leads to increased aggression
"Guns also provoke aggression in their own right, simply by being there"
(Fiske, 2004, in Gross, 2010)

BREAK



10 MINUTES!

Theories of Aggression: Social Learning Approach

- ❑ **Social-Cognitive** approach
 - Effects of social reinforcements e.g. praise, reward on attention, memory, learning
- ❑ Social learning theory: behaviours learned through reinforcement and imitation of behaviour of 'models'
(Bandura, 1965, 1973, 1994)
- ❑ Observational learning and reinforcement/vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1965, 1973)
- ❑ Humans not born with large array of aggressive responses at their disposal
 - They acquire them through direct experience or observation (social interaction, TV, film, video games) (Anderson, 2004)

Theories of Aggression: Social Learning Approach

■ Bandura (1965) Bobo Doll experiment



Theories of Aggression: Social Learning Approach

- ❑ Bandura (1965) Bobo Doll experiment
- ❑ Learning and Performance: absence of aggression does not imply absence of learning
- ❑ When children saw:
 - Model neither rewarded nor punished – no imitation
 - Model rewarded for aggressive behaviour - imitation
 - Model punished for aggressive behaviour – no imitation

But – when later offered reward for imitation of aggressive behaviour, this group of children could enact aggression.

They had learned it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmBqwWIJg8U>

- ❑ Methodological issues – difficult to generalise to 'real-world' media influence

Theories of Aggression: Social Learning Approach

❑ Social norms

- Pressure to conform

❑ Models

- Powerful / Authority figures
- Famous
- Attractive



Theories of Aggression: Social Learning Approach

- Individuals learn:
 - Various ways of seeking to harm others
 - Which people/groups are appropriate targets for aggression
 - What actions by others justify retaliation or vengeance on their part
 - What situations/contexts are ones in which aggression is permitted or even approved

- Aggressive behaviour depends on many factors including:
 - Person's past experience
 - Current associated rewards
 - Social/cultural attitudes and values

Theories of Aggression: General Aggression Model

- ❑ GAM (Anderson, 1997; Anderson and Bushman, 2002b)
- ❑ Attempt to combine **social learning** with **biological arousal**
- ❑ Includes both situational and personal variables
- ❑ Chain of events that may lead to aggression can be initiated by TWO major types of input variables:
 1. Factors relating to the current situation (situational factors)
e.g. frustration, provocation, aggressive models, hot weather
 2. Factors relating to the people involved (personal factors)
e.g. high irritability, attitudes/beliefs regarding violence, tendency to see hostile intentions, skills relating to aggression

Theories of Aggression: General Aggression Model

- ❑ Situational and personal variables lead to overt aggression through their impact on THREE basic processes:
 1. **Arousal** – may increase **physiological** arousal/excitement
 2. **Affective states** – may arouse hostile **feelings** and outwards signs of these (e.g. angry facial expressions)
 3. **Cognitions** – may cause activation of hostile **thoughts** and can bring beliefs about aggression to mind
- ❑ Individual's appraisals of the situation and restraining factors (e.g. police presence, threatening nature of other person) leads to either:
 - **Thoughtful action** – e.g. restraint
 - **Impulsive action** – e.g. aggression

Theories of Aggression: General Aggression Model

- ❑ GAM more complex than earlier theories
- ❑ Not just internal drives
- ❑ Not just due to frustration
- ❑ Likely to offer a more accurate view of the nature of human aggression than the earlier theories

Social Learning: Media Violence

<https://uk.screen.yahoo.com/sky-news-latest/latest-report-comes-american-psychological-054006245.html>

- ❑ People learn new ways of harming each other through mass-media portrayals of violence – could this contribute to increased levels of violence in society? *(Baron, 1977)*
- ❑ Bandura (1965): Distinction between learning and performance: learning does not mean aggressive actions
- ❑ Berkowitz - Need to know:
 - How much violence on TV?
 - How much TV do people watch?
 - How do viewers perceive violence?
 - What methods are used to study TV violence?
 - How does TV violence exert its effects?

Social Learning: Media Violence

- ❑ Cannot assume that viewers interpret violent TV content in the same ways as researchers do *(Gunter and McAleer, 1997)*
- ❑ So – frequency of occurrence of violent actions does not inform regarding significance/influence
- ❑ Objective counts of violence
 - May be high in cartoons, but may not be seen as violent
 - A single violent act in a documentary may be interpreted as extremely violent *(Gunter and McAleer, 1997)*

Social Learning: Media Violence

- Gunter (2000): potential for emotional upset is increased
 - By violent portrayals in realistic settings (news/documentaries)
 - When violence is depicted as justified or rewarded
 - When viewers strongly identify with the characters
 - When victims pain and suffering is graphic

Methods used to study TV violence

□ Correlational studies

e.g. use of

■ **Questionnaires relating to TV viewing**

and

■ **Measures of aggression** (self-reports or by parents, peers, teachers) to determine whether there is an association between the two variables

- Higher viewing levels of aggression associated with higher levels of aggressive behaviour = positive correlation
- Higher viewing levels of aggression associated with lower levels of aggressive behaviour = negative correlation
- No pattern of association = no correlation (zero correlation)

- But we cannot infer causation – could be due to other factors
e.g. might be some other difference between people who watch TV and those who don't

Methods used to study TV violence

□ Laboratory studies

- Experiments filter out as many other potential causes as possible – may then identify a cause of aggression

e.g. different groups watch different TV content then given the opportunity to interact with others and levels of aggression measured

Liebert and Baron (1972) Children randomly assigned:

- Group 1: watched a violent TV programme (The Untouchables)
- Group 2: watched a non-violent sports programme

When later allowed physical play, the Group 1 children behaved more aggressively

- But – lab studies lack ecological validity

e.g. short-term studies, lasting effects, presentation of stimuli, other influences controlled for

Methods used to study TV violence

□ Field experiments

- More ecological validity
- Longer testing periods (days, weeks, months)
- Measures taken before, during and after the periods of controlled viewing
- Controlled viewing stems from use of participants in residential schools or institutions (adolescents)
- Children who watch violent TV are more aggressive than those who do not
(Parke et al. 1977)

■ But

- lack of control of other possible influences, so uncertainty regarding actual cause of aggression (TV viewing or something else?)
- samples often unrepresentative (e.g. delinquent adolescents)

Methods used to study TV violence

□ Natural experiments

- No manipulation of the variables
- Uses naturally occurring events

e.g. Williams (1986) compared 6 – 11 year-olds in

- Community 1: Canadian community ('Notel') - TV just introduced
- Community 2: One TV channel
- Community 3: Several TV channels

Findings:

Over following two years verbal and physical aggression increased in community 1. No such increase in communities 2 and 3.

□ Longitudinal panel studies

- Seek to identify any relationship that exist or develop over time
- Consider cumulative viewing
- Usually representative samples

Effects of media violence

(Huesmann et al, 2003)

Psychological processes underlying effects of exposure to TV and films

Short-term effects

1. Priming of already existing cognitions or scripts for behaviour
2. Immediate mimicking of behaviour (only one exposure to behaviour needed)
3. Changes in emotional arousal and the misattribution of that arousal (excitation transfer)

Long-term effects

1. Observational learning of behavioural scripts, world schemas and normative beliefs (repeated exposure over a period of time. Concepts etc. become more complex)
2. Activation and desensitisation of emotional processes (Habituation - need increasingly violent scenes for physiological arousal)
3. Didactic learning processes (persuasive messages - conscious processing)

Effects of media violence

- Social learning: cognitive factors mediate between stimulus and response (Bandura, 1994)
- So – it is how we perceive and interpret TV violence
 - How real we see it to be influences our understandings of the appropriateness of violent and aggressive behaviours

Effects of media violence: Evidence

- ❑ Bailey, 1995:
 - Study of 40 adolescent murderers
 - Viewing of violence/pornography was 'a significant causal factor'
- ❑ Eron and Huesmann, 1986: cross-national survey
 - TV viewing TV violence at an early age is a predictor of later aggression
- ❑ Paik and Comstock, 1994:
 - Meta-analysis (217 studies, 1957-90)
 - Small, but significant effect sizes – preschool to college age
- ❑ Bushman and Anderson, 2002:
 - Meta-analysis (280 studies to 2000)

'...evidence for a link is almost as strong as that between smoking and cancer, and even stronger than that between condom use and HIV prevention'

(quote in Gross, 2010, p.459)

Effects of media violence: Evidence

But

- ❑ Milavsky et al (1982):
 - Found that family background, social environment and school performance to be more predictive factors
- ❑ Taylor (1997):
 - Media violence is not a sufficient condition to produce aggressive behaviour, nor is it a necessary one.

Deindividuation and Dehumanisation

- ❑ Deindividuation: Membership of a crowd results in:
 - ❑ Arousal (e.g. noise, extreme behaviours)
 - ❑ Anonymity (e.g. wearing of masks/uniforms)
 - ❑ Diffused responsibility (sharing of responsibility)
- ❑ Dehumanisation: Aggressors seek to dehumanise by:
 - Attributing certain beliefs, values, behaviours to the target of their aggression
 - Seeing groups of others as less than human (can lead to genocide)
 - Ingroup – see different individuals / Outgroup – ‘they’re all the same’

Environmental influences on Aggression

For example:

□ Crowding

- e.g. Studies of rats have found higher levels of aggression in crowded environments – competing for resources

□ Noise

- e.g. higher levels of aggression in noisy environments (e.g. prolonged loud music, traffic noise, airplane noise)

□ Temperature

- e.g. hot seasons

But - hot weather causes more people to be outside at the same time (more crowded) - which usually increases the noise level

Reading

- The key reading for this topic is

Gross, R. (2010). *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour*. London: Hodder and Stoughton

Chapter 29: Aggression and Anti-social Behaviour