

Psychological Theories of Aggression. Critical Perspective

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Abstract

The present article, which is completely theoretical, with no attempts at empirical verification, presents several theories of aggression and aggressive behaviour, in an attempt to offer a critical perspective on them. Following G. Moser's classification, four major conceptions regarding aggressive behaviour shall be placed under analysis: instinctual theories - consider that aggression is a manifestation of an innate impulse or instinct; reactive theories - consider aggressive behaviour as a reaction to frustrating, unpleasant situations; theories of learning - according to which aggressive behaviour is a behaviour acquired through different mechanisms, such as learning through imitation and / or observation; cognitive approach - which emphasizes the internal central cognitive processes inserted between stimuli and the behavioural response of the individual. By addressing the main theoretical points, this paper deals with classical theories of aggression and their definition of aggression, displaying the limitations and shortcomings from the author's perspective without addressing also their relevance to clinical practice.

Key Words: theories of aggression, limitations, shortcomings, aggressive behaviour

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1. Introduction

Aggression is as a form of anti-social behaviour, showing a lack of emotional concern for the welfare of others, as described by Baron and Richardson (1994). It is a cultural, cognitive process as well as a biological response, affecting every human being. Furthermore, it appears in many forms, verbal, physical, symbolic or injurious with the environment, personal beliefs and individual's society mediating its nature. In society, you will find some people more aggressive compared to others, with the levels varying when in different social situations. Some environments provoke aggression in people much more regularly, than others do. Yet such situations do not give rise to the same degree of aggressive behaviour in every person.

According to G. Moser (apud Boncu, Ş., 2004), there are four major conceptions regarding aggressive behaviour :

- a) instinctual theories - consider that aggression is a manifestation of an innate impulse or instinct;
- b) reactive theories - consider aggressive behaviour as a reaction to frustrating, unpleasant situations;
- c) theories of learning - according to which aggressive behaviour is acquired through different mechanisms, such as learning through imitation and / or observation;
- d) cognitive approach - which emphasizes the internal central cognitive processes inserted between stimuli and the behavioural response of the individual.

2. Main theories of aggression

In the context of these classifications, the most well-known theories regarding the study and explanation of aggression will be presented in detail as follows:

2.1. Biological theories

Supporters of biological theories consider that aggression is a form of genetically determined behaviour having the role of conservation of the species against changes occurring in its natural environment. The hypothesis of genetic determinations of aggressive behaviour, as it is advanced at present, does not yet give us satisfactory answers. The definition of aggressive behaviour is very

complex, it does not allow unequivocal solutions regarding the solution of the problem. Aggressive behaviours, even within the same animal species, do not form a single behavioural or biological unit that allows reference to simple genetic determinism as suggested by the formulation.

The biological theory of aggressive behaviour stipulates that this would be the result of the activation of the control centres or the particular nervous substrates that are each charged with different types of aggressive behaviour. Considering the criterion used to explain the origin of aggressive behaviour, theories of biological conception embrace two fundamentally different orientations. The first orientation considers that aggression is a spontaneous internal behaviour, the result of an internal impulse, considered mostly inborn and even manifests through aggressive reactions (Samuel S. Kim, 1976). The second orientation supports the hypothesis that aggression is the body's response to an external stimulus.

Konrad Lorenz, known for analysing human behaviour from the perspective of aetiology, argues that the manifestation of this instinct in humans is flawed, although it has an adaptive and essential value for over-living, because the impulse is bursting stronger and more damaging (Samuel S. Kim, 1976).

2.2. Social learning theory

Learning theory was the dominant scientific approach to psychology in the first half of the twentieth century. The development and application of these theories to aggressive behaviour has been led by Arnold Buss and Albert Bandura. In sharp contrast to the instinct or drive views of aggression, which suggest that aggression stems from one or a limited number of crucial factors, the social learning framework holds that it may actually be elicited and established by a large and varied range of conditions. Buss's theory represented a transition by its emphasis on personality and social factors as variables affecting aggressive behaviour. Still, Bandura's theory is the most influential learning theory of aggression, and a natural first choice for presentation here.

According to Bandura, aggression is defined as: "Behaviour that results in personal injury and physical destruction. The injury may be physical, or it may involve psychological impairment through

disparagement and abusive exercise of coercive power.” (Bandura, 1983).

The emphasis on the attribution of personal responsibility and injurious intent to the harm-doer places this definition within the trigger-mechanism group. The important role of various types of reinforcement and punishment as regulators of aggression confirms that this is also a consequence-oriented definition.

2.3. The mechanistic theories of aggressive behaviour

The mechanistic conception of aggression is based on a cybernetic conception of the nervous system according to which the behavioural differences of an organism are the result of the social contexts in which the organism "worked" previously. Consequently, the behavioural variability depends on the elementary principle of learning which consists in keeping certain reactions and eliminating others, which leads to the formation of habits.

According to Hull (1943 quoted by Pahlavan, 1987), the formation of habits occurs whenever the organic activity is affected by a need or tendency of primary or secondary reaction (tendencies associated with primary tendencies). For Hull, these primary tendencies of an organic nature (such as food, sexual needs, etc.) cause the emergence of nerve impulses with the help of specialized receptors. The impulses are then sent to the specific organs (glands or muscles) to trigger the reactions needed to release the body from the felt need. Following the example of the mechanisms of formation of conditioned reflexes, the success of these reactions will produce the habit formation. According to Hull (1943), the reactions thus obtained are measurable, their parameters reflecting the affective state of the organism.

Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Seares (1939) advance the hypothesis that interrupting reactions during execution creates an emotional state called "frustration." The emotional state thus triggered would be translated, in the opinion of the authors, by a specific tendency to harm the other (provoking aggression). In this sense, all subsequent actions of frustration would be aggressive reactions whose quantitative characteristics correspond to the degree of challenge caused by the previous frustration.

Researchers believe that the intensity of the aggression challenge can be determined by three factors: (a) the interest with which the person pursues the goal, (b) the level of interference that overlaps his actions and (c) the number of frustrations previously felt. Therefore, the more severe the blockage exerted on a person pursuing a long-term goal and suffering more frustrations, the higher the degree of aggression. The effects of successive frustrations can be compounded, leading to much more intense aggressive reactions, which means that the effect of frustration is a lasting one.

Miller (1948) proposed a theory to define the moments of manifestation of the phenomenon of displacement. In the author's opinion, three factors influence the victim's choice to replace the frustrating agent: (a) the intensity of the aggression instigated, (b) the force of the inhibition exerted on the behaviour and (c) the similarity between the frustrating agent and the potential victim. Miller believes that victimization with the frustrating agent reduces inhibition of aggression much faster, but does not influence the intensity of instigating aggression. Thus, the displacement of aggression occurs in the direction of the victim if the force of inhibition remains negligible, but the similarity is quite strong. If a student is, for example, offended by his teacher, there is a great chance that he will attack his younger sister than assaulting another teacher.

Several points outlined by Miller intrigued the researchers, mainly because of ambiguities. Zillman (1979), for example, draws attention to the hypothesis that inhibition of aggression would be much weaker than its challenge. Zillman considers that Miller's arguments are based on experimental animal studies, referring to a study in which the animal in search of food receives at the end of an alley electric shock when it reaches there (two competing stimuli). The results of the experiment indicate that the tendency to avoid the place on the alley decreases as the animal moves away. The farther away the animal is, the more it wants to get closer to feeding itself. Therefore, the more the animal runs to get away from the shock, the more its tendency to approach increases, so at one point it stops. The experimental results were interpreted by Muller as evidence that the inhibition of aggression decreases much faster than the challenge of

aggression, as the similarity between the frustrating agent and the potential victim increases.

Critics of the frustration-aggression hypothesis began by analysing the work published by one of the authors. Miller (1948) believes that frustration causes a set of behaviours, including aggressive behaviour. Thus the idea that frustration always provokes aggression has been gradually abandoned by one of those who initially formulated the hypothesis.

Bandura (1973 quoted by Bandura, 1986) considers that, despite the obvious attractiveness of these statements, partly because of their simplicity, they are not sufficient to explain the mystery of much more complex social behaviour. Not all frustrated individuals react aggressively verbally or physically. They react through a wide range of behaviours, starting from resignation or despair to attempts to overcome the obstacles that appear in the way. Subsequent studies have shown that frustration causes aggression only when the individual has learned to react to such frustration (Berkowitz, 1969, cited by Berkowitz, 1993). Individuals who have other behavioural strategies react differently (Bandura, 1973 cited by Bandura, 1986)

Even though it has been widely criticized for its weak scientific basis, the frustration-aggression theory has the merit of being the first conceptualization of aggressive behaviour to propose an empirical model based on an experimental data set.

The initial version of the frustration-aggression model does not take into account the role of the possible factors in triggering and controlling the aggression. Only the association's models and the social learning model will introduce this probability.

Since its inception, the frustration-aggression theory has been widely criticized and revised. The most constructive criticisms were formulated by Berkowitz (1969) in association theory and Bandura (1973) in social learning theory.

2.4. The associative theory of aggressive behaviour

The associative theory was developed by Berkowitz, who added to the factors of the 1939 theory an additional condition: the aggressive reaction cannot be triggered without the presence of indicators associated with the causes of frustration or aggressive acts.

According to the author, the presence of these signals causes the individual to exhibit aggressive behaviours, cancelling the instigation of aggression caused by frustration that would prove to be dangerous for the body.

Berkowitz believes that a stimulus turns into an aggressive signal and gets aggressive meanings when it is associated with positive aggression, suffering or unpleasant events that the individual has previously been subjected to. The stimuli regularly associated with the instigating factors of anger or aggression can gradually acquire the ability to trigger aggressive actions, especially in individuals previously provoked or frustrated. Thus, stimuli, individuals (policemen), their characteristics (uniforms), objects (weapons) can all acquire signal value that will trigger aggression in certain conditions.

In Berkowitz's opinion, frustration is neither a necessary condition nor sufficient to provoke an aggressive act. In certain conditions of challenge (including in the case of frustration) the individual becomes angry that at the slightest possible opportunity he will attack someone, author or not of the challenge. The inability to attack someone can in itself be a cause for frustration, increasing the likelihood of aggression. The anger thus triggered will cause to the individual a state of preparation for aggression (instigation) that will not materialize in an aggressive act unless the contextual stimuli associated with the violence will be present. Once engaged in aggressive behaviour, the individual will experience some kind of relief, a consequence of diminishing the internal tension generated by the initial challenge. This pleasant sensation will reduce the tendency of immediate manifestation of another aggressive behaviour without diminishing the likelihood of subsequent aggressive manifestations.

Thus Berkowitz opposes the principles set out by the frustration-aggression theory regarding the conditions of reducing the internal aggressive tension. catharsis (expression of all virtual forms of aggression). Opposing this idea, Berkowitz states that highly frustrated individuals can reduce their aggressive tendencies rather than aggressing the frustrating agent. Catharsis can only occur when the challenged individual reaches their goal, committing the sequence of aggressive acts. This is not just about an aggressive energy discharge. In Berkowitz's opinion, the individual's unsuccessful

attempts at attacking the causes of frustration are themselves a frustration, leading to the growth of aggressive tendencies and not to diminishing them. (Berkowitz, 1998).

3. Critical perspective on psychological theories of aggression

The primary focus of this part of the paper is on finding the shortcomings and limitations of psychological theories of human aggression.

3.1. Psychoanalytic theory

In approaching the topic of aggression from the perspective of psychoanalysis it is important to recognize that contemporary psychoanalysis is not a unified theory. As the original theory has been modified and expanded, it has gradually developed into several distinctive approaches. A basic disagreement exists between structural theorists, who tend to see aggression as an innate drive or instinct, and self psychologists, who tend to view aggression as secondary to narcissistic injury. Freud's death instinct is perhaps the most controversial element of psychoanalytic theory. Some authors are very harsh in their criticism of Freud's contribution to the theoretical understanding of human aggression: "The basic concepts of Freud's theories are metaphorical and do not yield testable hypotheses." (Tedeschi & Felson, cited by Johan M.G. van der Dennen, 2005). The mentioned author summarizes the other serious objections to Freud's theory of aggression such as follows:

- Is it really possible to understand aggression, which is a highly complex phenomenon, by means of a single explanatory factor, the death instinct?
- Freud's stance that aggression is of a primary (instinctual) nature, held up against strong empirical evidence of its reactive (secondary) character
- Lack of empirical documentation of the biological origins of aggression as a drive.
- According to Freud, the never-ceasing self-destructive impulses of the death instinct have to be transformed continuously into outwardly directed hostility and

aggression to ward off the lasting threat of discontinuation of life. Aggression is thus inevitable, and attempts to control and eliminate it can only be temporary (e.g., Bandura, 1973).

- Finally, Freud's reasoning on catharsis has been questioned: Is the reduction of tension a matter of seconds, minutes, days, or months? Does it happen quickly or very slowly? And, how is it possible to treat catharsis as an unquestionable mechanism in spite of strong negative research evidence on this point? (e.g., Zillman, 1979).

3.2. Drive theory

As described above, Freud's theory of aggression was heavily attacked by contemporary psychoanalysts and psychologists. In particular, the notion of spontaneity in aggression; that is, the endogenous build-up of aggressive energy, has been dismissed.

Still, in the late 1930s the energy concept was re-labelled "the drive concept" by the Yale researchers Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) in their formulation of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. This was motivated by a wish to translate the Freudian instinct propositions into more objective behavioural terms which could be put to empirical test.

Perhaps one of the strongest assets of the frustration-aggression hypothesis was the specifications of those factors which determine not only how frustrated an individual may become, but also how and when aggression will be expressed. The focus on these causative variables gave researchers the opportunity to test specific premises of the hypothesis empirically, resulting in intensive scientific scrutiny of the building blocks of the hypothesis. As a consequence, several specific predictions that were made from this hypothesis were validated (for reviews, Johan M.G. van der Dennen advises readers to further see Bandura, 1973; Feshbach, 1970; Parke & Slaby, 1983). In particular, the formulation that frustration was a necessary precipitant of aggression was questioned by a substantial number of researchers (e.g., Buss, 1963; Pastore, 1952, cited by Johan M.G. van der Dennen,

2005). Bandura criticized the drive (and instinct) theory because the internal determinants were inferred from the behaviour they caused. He pinpointed this by applying the term pseudo explanations on this process of circularity and clarified his position by stating that: “It should be emphasized here that it is not the existence of motivated behaviour that is being questioned, but rather whether such behaviour is at all explained by ascribing it to the action of drives or other inner forces.” (Bandura, 1973, p. 40).

The assumption that an organism is programmed so that frustration always creates an instigation to aggress, and that this remains until it is discharged by aggressive behaviour has been contradicted by two lines of evidence. Firstly, efforts to provide empirical support have failed to do so and, more fundamentally, biologists have found that an organism is simply not capable of storing energy or of cumulating energy over time.

In a midway point on the continuum of critics, Leonard Berkowitz (e.g., Berkowitz, 1993) emerged as a proponent of both support to, and criticism of the original formulation. He reformulated the hypothesis by lending increased emphasis to the impact of social context and social judgment. By this he more or less discarded the original linear stimulus-drive conceptualization. One of his theoretical building blocks was to comprehend frustration to be an aversive event that generates aggression only to the extent that it produces negative affect.

The attractiveness of the actual goal, the character of associated cognitions and situational cues have an important influence on the strength of the instigation to aggression and the reader is referred, for example, to Tedeschi and Felson (1994) for a critical review of Berkowitz’s theory of aggression. In sum, the frustration—aggression theory was sufficiently accurate to allow for experimental disconfirmations as well as support for the theory. Thus, as is the case with all good scientific theories, it produced evidence of its own limitations.

3.3. Social learning theory

Learning theory was the dominant scientific approach to psychology in the first half of the twentieth century. The development

and application of these theories to aggressive behaviour has been led by Arnold Buss and Albert Bandura. In sharp contrast to the instinct or drive views of aggression, which suggest that aggression stems from one or a limited number of crucial factors, the social learning framework holds that it may actually be elicited and established by a large and varied range of conditions.

Buss's theory represented a transition by its emphasis on personality and social factors as variables affecting aggressive behaviour. Still, Bandura's theory is the most influential learning theory of aggression.

Bandura's social learning theory has been criticized for not being a specific aggression theory per se (e.g., Pepitone, 1974, cited by Johan M.G. van der Dennen, 2005).). This concurs well with Bandura's learning theory position claiming that even though deviant, e.g., aggressive, and constructive, e.g., pro-social, behaviour are topographically different, they are established and maintained by the same basic learning principles. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) have focused on two main shortcomings in Bandura's theory of aggression. Firstly, they question the evidence for the role of self-regulation as applied to aggressive behaviour. Their main point is that the development of self-regulatory processes do not place all aggressive behaviour under self-control:

“Cognitive reinterpretations can take the form of justifying the aggressive behaviour, by minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences, or by Psychological Theories of Aggression dehumanizing or blaming the victim. Such justifications disinhibit behaviour that otherwise would be considered reprehensible and would be inhibited by anticipations of self-punishment.” (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994, p. 108, in Samuel S. Kim's article, 1976).

Secondly, they claim that social learning theory ignores the social context within which behaviour is learned or performed. More specifically, this relates to limitations set by the laboratory design that has dominated social learning theory studies on aggression. The generalizability or external validity of laboratory findings is questioned by stating that, in spite of the name, the focus of social learning theory is on the individual, and the theory tends to underestimate the reciprocal behaviour of people engaged in social

interactions. Others have pointed at considerable ambiguity concerning the various mechanisms posited to explain the empirically demonstrated modelling effects in aggressive behaviour (e.g. Zillmann, 1979). Exposure to models is a basic element for any kind of model learning. In his research Bandura has addressed important determining factors of this exposure (origins, instigators and regulators of aggression). Yet, basic questions remain unanswered concerning which of the mechanisms proposed is mainly responsible for the modelling effect: What type of model achieves what effect, on what kind of individuals, under what circumstances?

The informative function, vicarious conditioning, and changes in the perception of salient features of the individuals involved are confounded: Is it possible to test their involvement or their respective contributions in the modelling process?

Whatever its shortcomings, Bandura's theory is the most sophisticated theory of aggression from a learning perspective.

4. Conclusions

Aggression is a very frequently used term, even in daily communication. This article is intended to present in a short form a review of the main theories of aggression, with an accent placed on a critique perspective over the psychological explanatory theories. It is more than obvious that a more extended approach of the theories should be elaborated and explained by the greatest researchers of all time. The present article is meant to merely offer a review and draw attention upon the diversity of the theories and the lack of consensus regarding the predictors of the aggressive behaviour and also urging for questioning the importance of modelling in the study of human behaviour or the view that anticipations of future consequences guide human behaviour.

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