

Teach[®]
Yourself

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A Complete Introduction

- ★ **Understand** social psychology faster
- ★ **Master** the subject step by step
- ★ **Test** your knowledge to help you **succeed**

Includes new
**BREAKTHROUGH
METHOD***
for easy learning



Paul Seager

Aggression

According to a report in the *Times* newspaper in 2005, an off-duty policeman was queuing for tickets outside a cinema when he spotted a brawl involving about forty teenage girls. Being a dutiful individual, he attempted to break up the fight but, instead of resolving the situation, he ended up being set upon first by one girl who punched him in the face and then by some of the others. Many passers-by watched what was happening but none went to his aid. This incident draws a nice link between the previous, and the current, chapter. Why did no one go to the aid of the policeman (hopefully you now have some ideas about how to explain this), and why did the girl(s) attack him in the first place?

This chapter attempts to supply a definition which encapsulates all of the various forms of aggression, and outlines the difficulties of actually measuring aggression. It looks at the two major theoretical positions – biological (nature) and social (nurture) – which attempt to explain aggression, before moving on to look at how individual differences and situational variables might account for aggressive behaviour.

Defining and measuring aggression

It is difficult to arrive at a comprehensive definition of aggression in all its various forms. For example, it would need to include verbal and physical behaviour, direct action leading to aggression and a failure to act which results in aggression, direct and indirect aggression, overt and covert aggression, aggression that is unprovoked and that which is retaliative, physical aggression and psychological aggression, and so on and so forth. On top of that, there are also cross-cultural issues to consider, such that what might be seen as acceptable behaviour in one culture may be seen as taboo in another: for example, a faction of Australian aborigines see violence as ordinary and necessary, but Western cultures would view it as anti-social and probably illegal (see Spotlight below).



Spotlight: Defining aggression

An early attempt to define aggression comes from Baron (1977) who states that it is 'any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment'.

A good definition should probably incorporate *intent*, the *expectancy* that an action will cause harm, that *avoidance* of aggression from the victim's point of view is preferable, and that any such behaviour is a *violation of social norms*.

It is generally accepted that there are two type of aggression:

- 1 Hostile aggression:** In this form, aggression is usually provoked by pain or upset, and is very emotional. Often it is performed as an end in itself. It might be illustrated by a boyfriend who punches his girlfriend after she yells at him.
- 2 Instrumental aggression:** This type of aggression is usually more calculated and has a specific aim. For example, the actions of an assassin, a boxing match or perhaps an act of terrorism.



Key idea: Hostile aggression

Behaviour with the intention of inflicting pain or harm to another, usually involving emotion.



Key idea: Instrumental aggression

Aggressive behaviour with some aim other than inflicting pain, usually as a means to an end.

On top of the difficulty of defining aggression comes the problem of measuring it objectively. Early studies used simple verbal measures. After enduring some form of provocation, participants were asked to rate another person on various characteristics, with the assumption being that negative ratings would be presumed to show aggressive behaviour (as a result of the provocation). This type of measure comes with at least two problems: there is a lack of consequences attached to the aggressive behaviour (very rarely the case in the real world); and there is the problem of social desirability, in that participants may not reveal the full extent of their feelings, or they will perhaps tailor their responses to those that they believe the experimenter is looking for.

An alternative technique was pioneered by Buss (1961) when he created the aggression machine. Essentially an electric shock generator (which of course delivered no such thing due to ethical reasons – though just having participants *believe* that they were delivering electric shocks to another person raises ethical questions), the machine was used to gauge the number, duration and intensity of shocks that one person would deliver to a target who had provoked them in some way.

Other experimental methods for measuring aggression include:

- **The teacher-learner paradigm:** used by Milgram in his obedience studies(see [Chapter 6](#)), whereby the learner is given some form of aversive stimuli (electric shocks in the early days, but replaced by loud noises and other less controversial methods in more recent studies) by the teacher (the real participant) when they fail at a task. The level of aversive stimuli administered is taken as a measure of aggression;
- **Essay evaluation:** participants are asked to write an essay and told that it will be evaluated by another participant (a confederate) who will judge it by the number of electric shocks (later replaced by other measures such as level of negative verbal feedback) they administer to the real

participant. Later, the participant gets to do the same to the confederate, and aggression is measured by the number of shocks (or verbal feedback) delivered.

- **Competitive reaction time:** participants are informed that they are taking part in a competitive reaction time task against an opponent. Whoever wins each trial gets to set the level of aversive stimuli delivered to their opponent (typically an electric shock, but later substituted with a loud noise, or the simple deduction of points from the opponent's total which will decrease the level of reward they are able to claim). The real participant always wins the first trial, and a measure is taken of their 'unprovoked' level of aggression. Their responses after their opponent has delivered shocks to them are then taken as a measure of their aggression;
- **The hot sauce paradigm:** avoids using electric shocks and instead measures the amount of hot spicy sauce that a participant puts on the food of a confederate who has provoked them, and who they know dislikes this type of sauce. The quantity of sauce administered is taken as a measure of the participant's aggression. Other studies have given the participant a choice of sauces which differ in their levels of hotness, in order to measure both the quantity and quality of aggressiveness after a participant plays a violent or non-violent video game. This method is perhaps more ethically acceptable than the others mentioned previously.

Whilst these methods may indeed measure aggression, there are **other explanations**: the participant may genuinely want to help the learner and thus their responses are actually prosocial and not aggressive; they may simply be complying with the cover story of the experiment; or the shock responses may be measuring some form of power or competitiveness.

There are also methodological limitations to these studies: for example, they are measuring aggressiveness where there is **no fear of retaliation** from the recipient of the aggression (perhaps not realistic in everyday life). Similarly, some methodologies **force the participant into an aggressive** response, when they might not want to deliver one, or would prefer to use a non-aggressive response. It has also been questioned as to whether these

artificial situations generate responses that equate to aggression found in the real-world (external validity).

An alternative, non-experimental, method for measuring aggression is to use observational techniques, whereby aggressive behaviour is observed in naturalistic settings, either as it unfolds in real time (*naturalistic observation*) or in a more systematic, but unobtrusive way (*field experiments*). Naturalistic observation could involve observing aggressive incidents at a football match or in a school playground; these observations in turn could lead to ideas to be tested in a more formal setting. Field experiments devise some kind of intervention in a real-world setting and then measure resulting aggression: for example, Baron (1976) investigated aggressive behaviour at a traffic light by manipulating the amount of time a confederate took to drive off after the traffic light turned green and measuring the number of times that other drivers honked their hooters (taken as aggressive behaviour). Whilst these types of studies are more likely to be free of social desirability responses, and thus more of an indication of aggression in a naturalistic environment, they suffer from a lack of control whereby other extraneous variables might intervene to compromise the aims of the studies (for example, the individual dispositions of the car drivers in Baron's study, an issue that would normally be controlled for by the random allocation of participants to conditions in experimental studies, but which is simply not possible in field studies).

Having looked at some of the issues to be resolved when studying aggression systematically, it is now possible to look at two general approaches – biological explanations (nature) vs. learning explanations (nurture) – which have attempted to account for why people behave aggressively.

Biological explanations for aggression

This approach takes the form of ‘instinct theories’ of aggression which explain why humans have an innate need to aggress. According to Freud, aggression is inevitable, and his early psychodynamic theory suggested that it was a reaction to frustration experienced in pursuit of pleasure and the satisfaction of the libido. He later modified his idea to allege that, alongside the desire for self-preservation, referred to as *Eros* (the life instinct), there was a second instinct more focused on destruction, referred to as *Thanatos* (the death instinct). He claimed that this destructive aggressive energy needed to be continually turned away from the individual towards the outside, in order to prevent self-destruction: aggressive behaviour thus serves as an outlet when *Eros* and *Thanatos* are in conflict. This is sometimes referred to as a hydraulic model – aggression is a way of dissipating the build-up of pressure. From Freud’s model we get the idea of *catharsis*, whereby hostility and aggression are diffused in a non-destructive way.



Key idea: Eros and Thanatos

According to psychodynamic theory, to protect *Eros* (the life instinct) within an individual, the destructive energies of *Thanatos* (the death instinct) must be continually deflected away, and this manifests outwardly as aggression.

.....

Another biological theory of aggression, similar to Freud’s theory in as much that it is a hydraulic model, comes from Lorenz, who believed that aggression has a species serving function. Lorenz claimed that aggression is an innate behavioural disposition which derives from the idea of natural selection, and increases the species’ chance of survival. The potential for conflict leads to geographical dispersion which has the effect of ensuring that members of the same species have sufficient resources to survive and flourish. Applying an animal model to humans, he claimed that hierarchies developed and fights between rivals ensured selection of the strongest and healthiest to lead. Ultimately, aggression builds up and needs to be released in a socially acceptable way (hence it is referred to as a hydraulic model). In animals this is done through threat displays and the ritualization of aggression; very rarely do fights lead to permanent injury or death due to their use of appeasement gestures. It is questionable whether this model can

really be applied to humans, who have developed weapons that can kill from a distance.

These two models, whilst having an intuitive feel to them, do face some difficulties when it comes to being accepted by the scientific community. For example, Freud's theory is basically untestable – how does one measure Eros and Thanatos? Lorenz's theory, based on the animal model, and the false assumption that animals don't kill one another, is seen as oversimplifying the complexity of human behaviour. Both theories would suggest that if aggression was instinctual or biologically determined, then all societies should be equally aggressive, and this seems not to be the case.

Social learning explanations for aggression

A more accepted view of aggression is that it is a learned behaviour. As with prosocial behaviour, two of the main ways in which aggression is learned is through imitation and reinforcement. The former suggests that if children (and adults) see a 'model' (e.g. a parent or a respected other) behaving in a certain way then the behaviour, in this case aggression, is most likely to be replicated. For example, children seeing their footballing heroes engaging in fist fights on the football pitch are more likely to repeat the behaviour the next time the opportunity arises when they play football.

Reinforcement suggests that behaviours which are rewarded are repeated and those which are not rewarded will not be repeated. For example, a child (or adult) who acts aggressively to get something they desire, and who gets to keep it with no adverse effects, is more likely to repeat the behaviour; those who are punished for their actions (e.g. sent off on the football pitch) are less likely to repeat the behaviour in the future. One of the key studies to support these concepts comes from Bandura and his Bobo doll studies (see Case study below).

Case study: Bandura and the Bobo doll



Albert Bandura carried out a number of studies using a large inflatable (Bobo) doll to show that aggression is learned through imitation and reinforcement. In one study, four five-year-old children were taken into a room that contained a number of toys which included the Bobo doll. In the non-aggressive condition, they saw an adult playing with the toys but ignore the Bobo doll; in the aggressive condition, they saw the adult perform physical (sitting on it and punching it) and verbal (the adult said things like ‘Pow’) aggression against the doll. The children were then taken to another room where they experienced mild frustration (they weren’t able to play with the toys in the room). Finally they were taken to another room where there were more toys and a scaled-down version of the doll. Observations were made of the children and it was found that those who observed the aggressive adult were more aggressive (they imitated specific aggressive acts that they had seen) towards the doll than those who had observed the passive adult and, overall, boys were more aggressive than girls. This showed the role of imitation as a cause of aggression.

Another variation of the study showed that when children were shown a film of the adult model being either rewarded, reprimanded, or neither, for kicking and punching the Bobo doll, children in all three groups were again more likely to be aggressive (compared to a control group); but those who saw the adult model being rewarded for their aggressive behaviour were even more likely to be aggressive towards the doll. This showed the role of reinforcement as a cause of aggression.

A final variation of the study had children in one of four conditions: the children went into a room directly to play with the doll (control condition); the children viewed a video of an adult model kicking and punching the Bobo doll (video condition); the children viewed this behaviour directly (live condition); or the children saw the adult model dressed in a cat costume and the room in which they abused the Bobo doll was made-up to look like a cartoon (cartoon condition). It was found that children performed the most aggressive acts when they viewed the model’s aggressive behaviour live, and the least aggressive acts in the control condition; the video condition was second in terms of aggressive acts and the cartoon condition third. This tends to suggest that TV violence (and cartoons) doesn’t affect a child’s aggressive behaviour nearly as much as perhaps was thought – certainly compared to seeing it firsthand.

Of course, just because an individual sees an act doesn’t mean that they will always repeat it; it is likely that learning also takes place as to when imitation is appropriate. Critics of Bandura’s research have argued that the behaviour seen in his studies is not actually aggression because it is not carried out against another person. They also argue that just because the children imitated the aggressive behaviour in the lab doesn’t mean that they would imitate the behaviour in the real world.

Another social theory that attempts to explain aggressive acts is the **frustration-aggression hypothesis** put forward by Dollard at al. (1939). This is built on the premise that we feel frustration when we are blocked from achieving a goal. The strength of our frustration is determined by a number of factors such as how many times we are blocked, whether the blocking is total or partial, and how strong our desire is to achieve the goal in the first place. The frustration-aggression hypothesis in its simple form has two basic premises:

1 Frustration always leads to some type of aggression.

2 Aggression always comes from some form of frustration.

A basic experiment to demonstrate this would be to prevent (or not) an adult or a child from getting something they desired, and then measuring their aggression. Those who were frustrated show more aggression than those who were not.



Key idea: Frustration-aggression hypothesis

The idea that all frustration leads to aggression and all aggression is caused by some form of frustration.

.....

Some other variables that have been shown to exacerbate the frustration-aggression phenomenon include:

- when the interruption of a goal is unexpected;
- when the interruption of a goal is seen as illegitimate;
- when the goal is closer to being achieved.

However, many critics have claimed that the frustration-aggression explanation is far too simplistic. For example, there are other responses to frustration, such as crying, apathy, or running away (personally I tend to eat chocolate if I'm frustrated!); aggression isn't always a consequence of frustration. Additionally, if aggression does result from frustration, it is not always straightforward to predict the target of the aggression. For example, if you've had a bad day at the office you are more likely to go home and (metaphorically) kick the cat than you are to kick your boss (although you may be sorely tempted!).

To circumvent some of these criticisms, the theory was modified to suggest that frustration is only one of a number of possible stimuli for aggression. However, aggression was still seen as a 'dominant response tendency' following frustration. A number of researchers investigated further as to which specific external stimuli might lead to aggression.

Berkowitz formulated the idea of the ‘**weapons effect**’ whereby the presence of weapons (in all their different forms, e.g. guns, knives, clubs, etc.) are more likely to cause aggression than when they are not present. This led to the coining of the phrase that ‘the finger might pull the trigger, but the trigger can also pull the finger’. Many studies show that more aggression is displayed when weapons are present (e.g. shotgun and pistol) than when neutral items are displayed (e.g. badminton racquet). However, these experiments have been criticized as they tend to use male students more often than not, and there are studies that have not replicated the effect. It may be that it isn’t the mere presence of the weapons that causes aggression, but instead how individuals interpret the weapons usage.



Key idea: The weapons effect

The notion that the mere presence of a weapon is more likely to increase the incidence of aggression.

A further social explanation suggests that arousal can lead to the triggering of aggressive tendencies. Whilst Berkowitz suggests that a very specific form of arousal – namely anger – can lead to aggression, Zillman proposed the *excitation-transfer model* which used the idea that any form of arousal can have the potential to make us more aggressive. We could, for example, have experienced any event which caused us to become aroused, whether it was through feelings of love, excitement, fear, or the like; however, when we remove ourselves from the event, some residual arousal (excitation) remains. According to this model, the lingering arousal can be carried over (transferred) to another (anger-eliciting) situation, and if we experience frustration or annoyance, then the remaining arousal may cause us to behave more extremely in the situation than if we had not been previously aroused. However, it is important that the attribution for the lingering arousal is not able to be linked to the previous event, but is instead misattributed to the current event which therefore strengthens the aggressive response.

The model has been supported empirically and can be used to explain aggression in a number of real-world situations, such as violence at football matches. For example, the model would suggest that the sheer excitement

of watching your team play, or perhaps the disappointment at seeing them lose, may cause you to be aroused. If, at a later time, you then encounter some opposition supporters who then irritate you in some way, the remaining arousal from the previous event (watching your team) might cause you to be more aggressive towards them than if you had encountered them when you were experiencing no residual arousal (perhaps on a non-match day). Some recent research does lend credence to this theory as an explanation for football-related violence, but it does also suggest that the level of identification with your team will play a mitigating role: high identifiers will be more likely to aggress whereas low identifiers are more likely to simply feel sad and avoid any potentially violent situations.

Mediating factors in aggression

In addition to the set theories that attempt to explain aggression, there are many other factors that have been shown to play a mediating role in whether or not aggression occurs. These include individual characteristics such as personality or gender, and environmental factors such as alcohol, temperature and, of course, the media.

Personality characteristics such as a 'Type A' personality have been found to be linked to higher levels of aggression. Type A personalities are highly motivated, assertive and competitive compared to more controlled and laid back Type B personalities. Similarly, those individuals who score highly in measures of trait anger, irritability, emotional susceptibility, or who show a hostile attributional style, are more likely to show higher levels of aggression than individuals who show increased levels of self-control or perspective taking. The belief that there is a link between low self-esteem and aggression has been shown to be more complex than was first believed: it may be that low self-esteem leads to aggression through experiencing shame and humiliation, but many types of aggression require some form of risk-taking that wouldn't be characteristic of individuals with low self-esteem. Similarly, high self-esteem doesn't necessarily making an individual immune to being aggressive (see also [Chapter 2](#)).

The obvious *gender differences* with regards to aggression would suggest that males are more aggressive than females, and there is much evidence to support this common sense view. For example, one review of a number of studies showed that men evidenced far higher levels of aggression (both physical and verbal) compared to women in early adulthood, and the largest gender difference seems to occur between the ages of 18–30 (young adults). However, divergence in aggression levels start very early in life, and by pre-school there is a marked difference in levels of personal aggression between boys and girls, though some research claims that the difference may start to appear in toddlerhood. Boys generally show physical aggression and girls are more likely to show indirect aggression.

There have been a number of explanations proposed to account for gender differences in aggression. For example, in childhood, the quicker maturation of girls in infancy may lead to higher levels of self-regulation, or the greater prevalence of rough-and-tumble play by boys, which spills over into aggression, quickly helps to normalize the acceptance of aggressive behaviour. Equally, gender role norms, whereby boys are expected to be more aggressive, and girls are expected to refrain from such behaviour, may have an effect on the development and frequency of aggression.

In adulthood, explanations for gender differences in aggression have included *hormonal differences* (e.g. testosterone), an *evolutionary perspective* and *socialization pressures*. Whilst there is some evidence for a link between an increase in testosterone in males and the greater likelihood of aggression, overall the link is quite weak and tends to rely more on animal studies. Strong evidence would show a variation in male aggression as levels of testosterone fluctuated within the individual and this type of evidence has not been found in a number of studies that have looked for it.

The evolutionary perspective argues that in order to procure a prime female mate, males are required to show more aggression to do so. Evidence from experimental studies (as well as crime statistics) to support this idea has shown that it is primarily young males who show higher levels of physical aggression. Linked to this perspective is the idea that male aggression also occurs to demonstrate their status and power, and to protect it when it is under threat. Accordingly, research shows that males whose status is under threat are far more likely to show aggression than those whose status is not

under threat; however, such studies tend to be correlational and not causal in nature. Females, on the other hand, tend to show more indirect aggression than men. The evolutionary perspective suggests that this is because it carries less risk of harm to self than physical aggression, and females cannot afford to jeopardize their traditional nurturing role in bringing up offspring.

Finally, gender differences in aggression can be **explained by socialization**. It is likely that males learn that it is acceptable for them to be aggressive ('boys will be boys') whereas females learn that it is not acceptable to be aggressive ('it is very unladylike'). The stereotypes will be reinforced by parental reinforcement, such as praise for boys who stand up for themselves and girls who avoid aggressive situations. They are also reinforced by the toys that they are given and the role models to whom they are exposed on television and in real life (there are more aggressive male role models than female, and more nurturing female role models than male). Learning is a very powerful factor in explaining why males are likely to be more aggressive than females.

Whilst individual characteristics go a long way to explaining why aggression occurs, environmental factors should not be dismissed lightly. For instance, it is believed that increased *alcohol* consumption leads to higher levels of aggression, and this is indeed supported by many studies. However, other research has shown that there is no apparent link between the two. The most likely explanation for the apparent contradiction in research findings suggests that alcohol hinders our normal cognitive functioning, and changes the extent to which we allow situational and contextual cues to influence our behaviour. Thus when we are drunk, we might be more influenced by those around us chanting 'fight, fight, fight', than if we were sober in the same situation; in the former situation, we may find ourselves engaging in a brawl that we would have avoided when we were sober by simply ignoring the chants of those around us.

Overall, it seems that whilst a large body of evidence supports the idea that alcohol plays a strong role in aggressive behaviour, given that not all intoxicated individuals act aggressively, we should perhaps be cautious in concluding that it has an unmediated role in leading to aggressive behaviour.

Temperature has also been investigated as a factor in the occurrence of aggression. Many studies have shown that as temperature increases, so the likelihood of aggression also increases. Crime statistics suggest that more violence is perpetrated during hot weather. However, when the temperature gets too hot, violence decreases. Studies investigating the geographic effects seem to show that aggression is more prevalent in hotter regions (e.g. southern states of America) than in cooler regions (e.g. northern states of America). Of course, these kinds of findings are correlational and should be treated with caution, and other regional explanations for the increase in aggression may exist. Other research has looked at the temporal effect of temperature: that is, they have mapped aggression within a stable population over a longer period of time as temperature fluctuates. Findings here suggest that violent crimes peak in the summer months (hotter periods) rather than in winter months (cooler periods). Again, other explanations for this pattern of aggression are possible, such as aggression being due to a change in people's routines across the seasons rather than to temperature fluctuation. More controlled experimental research also suggests that an increase in temperature leads to more aggression, though, as previously mentioned, when the temperature was too high, aggression decreased. Overall, there is a strong link between increased temperature and aggression, which may have worrying implications for the future (see Spotlight below).



Spotlight: Aggression and global warming

Krahe (2013) suggests that maybe we should be concerned regarding the findings of links between temperature and aggression:

‘The implications of studies that support the heat hypothesis are worrying in the face of global warming. If increases in temperature are systematically related to increases in violent crime, then the continuous rise in global temperature will represent a risk factor for the rise in violent crime.’ (p. 113).

.....

There are other environmental factors that have also been linked to an increase in aggression and these include noise, crowding and air pollution. However, no discussion of environmental factors would be complete without looking at the often-debated effect of media on violent behaviour.

The role of the media

Whether or not the media has an effect on aggressive behaviour has been discussed for many years. Generally, research has looked at the effect that violent TV programmes (and films) and computer games may have; however, other research also suggests further media effects, such as violent lyrics in songs, may also have an exacerbating effect.

For the media to have a significant effect on aggression it must first be shown that viewers are exposed to violent and aggressive content in television programmes and films; and research shows that this is indeed the case. In fact, one recent study suggested that UK audiences were exposed to 42.5 violent acts per hour, though it was restricted to just ten television programmes. It was also found that in many cases, violent actions were shown to have a beneficial effect (any readers of my age who were avid watchers of *The 'A' Team* television programme will know exactly what I mean). Similarly, violent content was found to be prevalent in video games and even in music videos (though this did vary considerably by genre: rap videos – 29 per cent; R&B – 9 per cent).

With regards to the effect of media violence, some cross-sectional studies suggest that individual self-report of watching programmes with violent content correlates positively to the ratings of others in terms of their aggressive behaviour. Experimental studies that used computer games with violent content found that violence that is rewarded with some form of positive consequence leads to the promotion of more aggressive thoughts and aggressive behaviour. A vast literature exists that has attempted to address this question, and the finding does tend to suggest that there is anywhere from a weak to a strong positive effect for media violence affecting aggressive tendencies (but the effect is definitely there). Generally, media violence has the greatest effect if it is shown to be either rewarded or to go unpunished, or to be justified in some way. Likewise, if the violence is perpetrated by a respected media figure (role model), then this is also more likely to lead to aggressive behaviour by the viewer. These tendencies have been found to have both short-term and long-term effects.

Of course, there are critics who suggest that the role of media violence is over-played, and evidence certainly exists that has shown very little (if any) effect of media violence on aggressive tendencies. They point to studies such as Bandura's (see Case study above), and add the common sense view that not everyone who is exposed to media violence necessarily becomes more aggressive (there was even a thought for a number of years that watching violence on TV had a cathartic effect – see 'Reducing aggression' below). There are certainly some moderator variables that can affect whether or not an individual is likely to become more aggressive in the face of media violence; these include personality variables such as trait aggression, past experience with media violence, the way in which the violence is presented, and passive vs. active exposure. Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence does suggest that media violence leads to increased levels of aggression, and thus ways to reduce aggression in society would certainly be welcomed.

Reducing aggression

For many years it was thought that the controlled release of pent-up aggressive feelings was a successful way to reduce aggression. Thus it was believed that watching violence on TV or in films might dissipate aggressive tendencies. Similarly, participating in physical activity, such as taking up boxing classes, might help to release steam. Referred to as *catharsis*, this method of aggression reduction relied on biological theories, such as those of Freud and Lorenz (see above). However, this idea was quickly refuted and shown to be counterproductive. For example, one study showed that people who hit a punch bag believing that it reduced stress were later more likely to punish someone who had transgressed against them compared to individuals who had not used a punch bag. As Bushman (2002) remarked, 'venting to reduce anger is like using gasoline to put out a fire – it only feeds the flame'.

One of the main approaches to understanding aggression has also been used in its reduction. The *learning approach* suggests that we are more likely to aggress by watching others be aggressive (imitation) or by being rewarded,

or at least not punished, for being aggressive. Consequently, these methods have been used reasonably successfully to reduce aggression.

The use of punishment in preventing aggression has been shown to be effective but it has a number of stipulations attached to it. These include:

- The punishment must be sufficiently adverse.
- The punishment must have a high probability of being imposed.
- Its effectiveness is increased if other, more attractive, behavioural alternatives are available.
- The offender must be rational enough to be able to calculate the costs of the punishment against the perceived rewards of the aggression.
- The punishment must follow immediately after the transgression in order for it to be perceived as being contingent upon the aggressive behaviour

Only if these conditions are fulfilled is punishment likely to be effective. It is more likely that for many forms of aggression these conditions will not co-occur, and therefore a more effective intervention will be required.

One such intervention is observational learning. Built on the principle of Bandura's social learning theory, exposure to a non-violent role model has been found to be an effective way of reducing aggression. This will allow the observer to acquire an alternative behaviour to reduce aggression. It is, however, more likely that observation in combination with learning strategies for implementing the observed behaviour will be more effective than observation on its own.

Whilst learning theory has been shown to be an effective intervention for reducing aggression, other methods have also been shown to have an effect. At an individual level, these include anger management techniques, and training individuals to elicit behaviour incompatible with aggression (for example, studies found that using calming music helped to reduce frustration and stress levels on a stressful commute to work by car). At a societal level, these include the use of legislation, and the removal of

violent stimuli from the environment (such as the restriction of access to firearms).

Summary

Aggressive behaviour is a complex topic to study, partly due to the myriad forms that it takes, and the requirement that psychologists investigate the topic in an ethical way. The most effective way of explaining aggressive behaviour has been found in the learning approach, with a number of social models attempting to explain the presence and prevalence of aggression. Many mediating factors, at both an individual and environmental level, have been shown to affect the occurrence of aggression, and the same theories used to explain aggression have also been shown to be the most effective at reducing it. There can be no doubt that violence in society is a worry, but by understanding its origins, and the factors involved in its sustenance, it may be possible to reduce its prevalence – though a complete eradication of aggression is an unlikely, and perhaps even an undesirable, outcome.

Food for thought

As the managing director of a football club, or perhaps the local chief constable, how would you use the theories outlined in this chapter to prevent aggressive behaviour by the football fans (for both home and away supporters) in and around your stadium? How would you measure (ethically) whether your efforts were having a significant effect?



Dig deeper

Anderson, C. A. et al. (2010). 'Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in Eastern and Western countries: A meta-analytic review'. *Psychological Bulletin*, **136**(2), 151–173.

Krahe, B. (2013) *The Social Psychology of Aggression*. Second edition. Psychology Press.

Lorenz, K. (2002). *On Aggression*. Routledge.

Ritter, D. & Eslea, M. J. (2005) 'Hot sauce, toy guns, and graffiti: A critical account of current laboratory aggression paradigms'. *Aggressive Behavior*, **31**, 407–419.