

Social Psychological Approaches to Explaining Aggression

You are to cover the following for exam in 2014:

Aggression - See Appendix for issues and debates in Psychology	
Social psychological approaches to explaining aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social psychological theories of aggression for example, social learning theory, deindividuation• Institutional Aggression
Biological explanations of aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Neural and hormonal mechanisms in aggression• Genetic factors in aggressive behaviour
Evolution and human aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evolutionary explanations of human aggression, including infidelity and jealousy• Evolutionary explanations of group display in humans, for example sport and warfare

Essay: Outline and evaluate social psychological theories of aggression including social learning theory and deindividuation

Social Psychological Theories of Aggression, for example, Social Learning Theory, Deindividuation

What is Aggression?

All evaluative commentaries are in italics

Definition of aggression:

Aggression involves hurting others on purpose. Aggression encompasses a variety of verbal, psychological and emotional as well as physical attacks. It has been defined as “any form of behaviour directed towards the goal of harming or injuring another living person who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (Baron & Richardson 1993). The hurting has to be deliberate.

Psychologists have identified different types of aggression:

- **Hostile**: caused by being provoked or upset with the intention to harm. Characterised by displays of rage (screaming, shouting, crimes of passion). Most murders are hostile aggression. 50% erupt from arguments while others result from romantic triangles or brawls, while under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. Such murders are impulsive, emotional, & volatile outbursts.
- **Instrumental aggression**: where the goal is to gain reward, such as money (stealing by force). It is not motivated by anger or other emotion. This is cool, detached, & often pre-mediated. E.g., military, mafia
- **Pro-social aggression**: performed to prevent greater harm, e.g. police who shoots a terrorist.
- **Sanctioned aggression**: aggressive behaviour generally permitted, e.g. defending yourself during a robbery, etc.

Social Psychological Approaches to Explaining Aggression

Social Learning Theory

One of the most influential theories of aggression proposed by Bandura (1973). According to SLT aggression is learnt. Bandura said:

The specific forms that aggressive behaviour takes, the frequency with which it is displayed, and the specific targets selected for attack are largely determined by social learning factors

These three elements of social learning were demonstrated in Bandura's research with children and the Bobo Doll. In this study it was found that exposure to an aggressive model led to imitation of specific acts, generally increased levels of aggression, and aggression directed at the Bobo doll.

Direct and Indirect reinforcement

Behaviours are learnt indirectly as well as through direct reinforcement. Indirect reinforcement, also known as *vicarious reinforcement* occurs when another person is observed to be rewarded for actions. It is likely that an observer will *imitate* the actions. The imitator may not repeat the behaviour immediately, but at some time in the future. Therefore *observational learning* has taken place. The behaviour may be imitated or *modeled* at a later date. This means that a model of behaviour must be stored internally.

Children may also become confident in their ability to behave aggressively. Children will be more inclined to take on a task if they believe they can succeed. Children generally avoid tasks where their *self-efficacy* is low, but will engage in tasks where their self-efficacy is high.

There are four processes involved in socially learned behaviours are:

- **Attention** – someone can only learn through observation if they attend to the model's behaviour. E.g., children must attend to what the aggressor is doing and saying in order to reproduce the model's behaviour accurately (Allen & Santrock, 1993).
- **Retention** – To model the behaviour, it needs to be remembered and placed into LTM, this enables the behaviour to be retrieved.
- **Production** – the individual needs to be able to reproduce the behaviour. The observer must possess the physical capabilities of the modelled behaviour.
- **Motivation** – an individual expects to receive positive reinforcement for the modelled behaviour

When aggression is imitated, individuals are more likely to imitate another's behaviour if:

- ..
- ..
- ..

Vicarious punishment may also occur, leading to a reduced response, e.g. if you see someone else being told off for teasing, you are less likely to do it. This is an example of *disinhibition*. The unacceptable behaviour has been weakened.

Bandura believed aggressive reinforcement by family members was the most prominent source of behaviour modelling. E.g., the boy who watches his father attack his mother is more likely to become an abusive parent and husband (Siegal, 1992).