

# **Social Psychology**

## **Lecture 11: Aggression**

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In our previous discussion, we examined the critical distinctions between stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination, clarifying how each concept uniquely influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. We specifically addressed racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia. We then identified the social, motivational, and cognitive sources of prejudice, exploring how factors such as socialization, conformity, social identity, and mental shortcuts contribute to biased attitudes. We also explained the consequences of prejudice, including discrimination and stereotype threat. Finally, we proposed effective ways to combat prejudice and discrimination, highlighting strategies such as contact hypothesis, group interdependence, education, and motivation.

In this lesson, we will explore the concept of aggression, specifically distinguishing between its two main forms: hostile and instrumental aggression. We will examine gender and cultural variations in aggressive behavior, as well as the different causes of aggression as explained by various theories. We will also discuss the multiple influences that contribute to aggression. Considerable time will be devoted to understanding bullying. Finally, we will conclude with effective strategies for reducing aggression.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Define what is aggression.
2. Differentiate the expression of aggression across key demographic factors, specifically sex and culture.
3. Compare and contrast the major theories of aggression.
4. Identify and analyze the key biological, environmental, and social influences that contribute to aggressive behavior.
5. Explain how aggression can be reduced.

## **AGGRESSION**

- A behavior, either verbal or physical, that is used to intentionally harm another individual.
- Examples: rape, murder and armed assault, arguing with a coworker and sending a harsh email to a friend

### **FORMS OF AGGRESSION**

#### **A. Hostile Aggression**

- Also known as Affective aggression
- Occurs when anger leads to aggression and the primary goal of an action or behavior is to make the victim suffer
- Examples: hitting or yelling at someone who has made you angry; murdering out of rage

#### **B. Instrumental Aggression**

- Occurs when the primary goal of the action is not to make the victim suffer, but to attain a non-injurious goal.
- An individual who participates in instrumental aggression will harm or injure another as a way of obtaining various rewards such as control of a situation or improved self-esteem.
- Examples: killing someone to steal his money, killing as your job (a soldier), bullying others to make oneself feel better

### **GENDER & AGGRESSION**

- Males are more likely than females to engage in aggression that produces pain or physical injury.
  - When asked whether they had ever participated in any aggressive actions, males reported a higher incidence of aggressive behavior than did females (Harris, 1994).
- Men are more likely to use direct aggression

- Males are more likely than females to be targets of aggression (Buss, 2004).
- Women are more likely to use indirect aggression
  - Female aggression is more likely to manifest itself through hurting relationships by engaging in gossip, excluding a person from a group or activity, or telling lies.
- Men tend to report less guilt or anxiety about their aggressive behavior than women, while women report more concern about the possibility that their aggressive behavior could cause a threat to their personal safety, as in the case of retaliation.
- Women tend to hold an **EXPRESSIVE VIEW OF AGGRESSION** → a method of aggression in which aggression is used as a way to express anger and reduce stress.

## **CULTURE & AGGRESSION**

- **Culture of Honor** – a culture in which strong norms suggest that aggression is an appropriate response to an insult or threat to one's honor.
  - *Jose Rizal and Antonio Luna – aborted duel in defense of Rizal's and Nellie's honor.*
- **Honor killings** – occurs when one family member kills another because the victim has somehow “shamed” the family.
- Honor killings are based on the belief that women are considered the property of the family and their bodies are repositories of the family's honor.
- **“Honor is more precious than my own flesh and blood”**
  - In 1997, Marzouk Abdel Rahim brutally murdered his 25-year-old daughter and then dismembered her body because he felt that her relationship with a male friend dishonored their family.
  - In 2008, Texas teenagers Amina and Sarah Yaser Said were shot to death by their father because they supposedly dishonored their family by dating non-Muslim boys.

# THEORIES OF AGGRESSION

## A. THE BIOLOGY OF AGGRESSION

### 1. Evolutionary Psychology

- Our evolutionary history may have led to the development of aggressive behavior patterns.
- Aggression increases the likelihood that an individual will survive and successfully reproduce.
- Konrad Lorenz argued that through evolution, humans developed a fighting instinct similar to that found in animals. Over the course of many years, our ancestors found that aggressive behavior benefited them as a method of gaining resources, eliminating competition, threatening rivals, and defending them against assailants.

### 2. Instinct Theory

- Aggression is an innate and inevitable force
- Aggressive energy is instinctual (unlearned and universal)
- Sigmund Freud believed that aggression stems from a self-destructive impulse and that humans must act out that impulse in order to release negative energy and return to a state of calm, a behavior Freud refers to as a “death drive.”
- Flaw: It does not take into account the differences in aggressive behavior among various societies. If all humans share the same desire to act aggressively, how can we explain why some societies are historically peaceful while others are violent, or why every human does not overtly express her aggressive desires.

### 3. Genetic Influences

- Twin studies suggest that aggressiveness is heritable, although there are limitations to the studies conducted thus far.
- Of convicted criminals who are twins, fully half of their identical twins (but only 1 in 5 fraternal twins) also have criminal records.

#### **4. Neural Influences**

- Abnormal brains can contribute to abnormally aggressive behavior.
- Scientists have used the Single Photon Emission Computerized Tomography (SPECT) system to identify regions of the brain that relate to aggression. SPECT generates a color picture of the blood flow and activity in the brain.
- Unusual increases and decreases in activity that are vital to causing aggression are typically found in the left temporal lobe.
- Aggressive men tend to have too much or too little activity in that area, limiting their ability to control their actions.
- Psychopathy, a risk factor for aggression, has been linked to abnormalities in brain regions associated with morality and emotions, as well as with reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex.
- Prefrontal cortex was 14% less active than normal in murderers and 15% smaller in the antisocial men.

#### **5. Biochemical Influences**

##### **a. Alcohol**

- alcohol unleashes aggression when people are provoked. It reduces people's self-awareness and reduced the ability to consider consequences.
- While aggressive behavior does not occur in every person who throws back a drink, it does have a strong correlation with heavy drinking, especially in the case of those who already expect that their disposition will become more aggressive when alcohol is involved.
- In 55 percent of in-home assaults and 65 percent of homicides, the assailant and/or the victim had been drinking (American Psychological Association, 2004).

##### **b. Testosterone**

- high testosterone levels are more prone to delinquency, hard drug use, and aggressive response to provocation.
- Researchers from Georgia State University studied the testosterone levels, crime, and prison misbehavior of 692 prison inmates and found that male

inmates who had committed personal crimes that were violent or sexual in nature had higher testosterone levels than inmates who committed property crimes of larceny, drug possession, and burglary.

- They also found that those inmates with higher levels of testosterone violated more prison rules, especially rules that involved confrontation (Dabbs, et al., 1995).
- While testosterone, like aggression, is typically associated with men, it impacts women as well. In one study, women who were given doses of testosterone so that their levels of the hormone became equal to those of men became less aware of aggression-detering threat signals like facial expressions of anger, fear, and disgust, making them more susceptible to aggression themselves (van Honk & Schutter, 2007).
- Injecting a person with testosterone, male or female, will not automatically make him or her aggressive, but in general, higher levels of this hormone are associated with aggressive behavior when a person is provoked, just as lower levels are associated with less aggressive behavior.
- Correlational studies show that there is a relationship between the amount of testosterone and the level of aggression in young boys, adults, and in women.
- However, it is important to note that additional research suggests that it is not the level of testosterone alone that accounts for increased aggression. Research comparing individuals of different income levels finds that men with high income levels have low rates of delinquency regardless of their levels of testosterone, yet the rate of delinquency for low-income men varies with level of testosterone (Dabbs & Morris, 1990).

### **c. Serotonin**

- Low levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin can cause compromised impulse control in the frontal lobes, as serotonin plays a considerable role in the regulation of emotions and social functioning, domains that are closely related to aggression.
- Research has shown that in humans as well as primates, low serotonin is often found in violence-prone children and adults.

## **B. AGGRESSION AS A RESPONSE TO FRUSTRATION**

### **1. Frustration – aggression theory**

- **Frustration** – a feeling of being upset or annoyed by the inability to reach a goal or perform an activity
- proposed by Dollard et al., in 1939; states that frustration triggers the inclination for aggression because our motivation for aggression increases when our current behavior is interrupted or we are prevented from reaching a goal.
- A classic study of the frustration aggression theory occurred in 1941 when researchers showed a group of children a room full of attractive toys, but did not allow all of the children to play with the toys right away. Researchers found that the children who had to delay their play, and thus became frustrated, engaged in more aggressive behavior in their play once they were allowed access to the toys (Barker, Dembo, & Lewin, 1941).
- In 1989, Leonard Berkowitz revised the frustration aggression theory; he found that frustration produced anger, and anger could then lead to aggression, but did not necessarily always do so.
- **Relative deprivation** – the perception that one is less well off than others with whom one compares oneself.

### **2. Displacement**

- The redirection of aggression to a target other than the source of the frustration. The new target is a safer or more socially acceptable target.

### **3. Cognitive Neoassociation Theory**

- When a person experiences something with a negative result, such as pain and discomfort, aggressive behavior can often occur in the wake of that experience.
- Another aspect of the theory indicates that when a person is simply in the presence of an object related to aggression, that person is more likely to display aggression

## **C. AGGRESSION AS LEARNED SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

### **1. Social Learning theory**

- also referred to as social cognitive theory; developed by Albert Bandura in the 1960s.
- We learn social behavior by observing and imitating and by being rewarded and punished.
- Components of social learning:
  - a. Modeling
  - b. Reinforcement

#### **a. Modeling**

- Bandura's famous Bobo doll study demonstrated the power of modeling on aggression in children.
- Bobo doll Experiment:
  - Preschool-aged children watched a video of an adult physically and verbally abusing an inflatable Bobo doll (e.g., tossing, kicking, punching, sitting on it, hitting with a hammer, and saying phrases like "sock him," "kick him," "hit him down," "throw him in the air," and "pow").
  - After watching, children were placed in a mildly frustrating situation in which they were given some of their favorite toys only to have them taken away a few minutes later.
  - The children were eventually introduced to the Bobo doll and other toys and were observed for 20 minutes.
  - Children who watched the aggressive video were far more likely to strike the doll than a control group who did not watch the video.
  - This showed that children learned to display aggression through observation.
  - The Bobo doll study, along with follow-up studies using pre-recorded aggression, was among the first research to suggest a link between violence on TV and real-life violence.
- Family – punitive parents, absentee fathers

- Culture – those who have observed gun violence are at doubled risk for violent behavior.

### **b. Reinforcement**

- Reinforcement is an action or process that strengthens behavior. It can be **positive** (adding in something that is pleasant or desirable) or **negative** (the removal of an unpleasant or aversive stimulus).
- In a follow-up Bobo doll study (Bandura, 1965), children watched one of three video endings where an adult was either punished, rewarded, or received no consequences for aggressing against the Bobo doll.
- Children who saw the adult rewarded for beating the doll later showed the same aggressive behavior toward the doll.
- Unexpected finding: Children who saw the adult receive no consequences also engaged in aggressive behavior toward the doll.
- Possible reason: It appeared to the children that they could engage in violence without being punished.

## **INFLUENCES ON AGGRESSION**

### **A. Aversive Incidents**

#### **1. Pain**

- **Experiment:** Berkowitz, et al. (1981)
  - Method: Students submerged one hand in either tepid water or bitterly cold water
  - Findings: Students with hands in bitterly cold water reported more irritability and annoyance than the tepid water group. This group was also more willing to inflict an unpleasant noise on another study participant
  - Conclusion: Aversive experience, rather than frustration, is the primary instigator of aggressive behavior
- **Experiment:** Ulrich & Azrin (1962)
  - Displacement in shocked rats and other species

- Electric shock directly elicits reflexive fighting between paired rats—no prior learning required.
  - Fighting style: Stereotyped, distinct from normal behavior, not driven by operant reinforcement.
  - Generalizability: Occurs regardless of sex, strain, familiarity, or number of rats present.
  - Durability: Fighting persists with repeated shocks until physical exhaustion.
  - Specificity: Rats attack other small animals (not inanimate objects); reciprocal attack not needed (guinea pigs don't fight back, rats still attack).
2. **Heat** – there are more riots and crimes in hot weather (including assaults, wife-beatings, rapes, murders, and urban riots)
  3. **Attacks** – being attacked or insulted by another is especially conducive to aggression.

## **B. Arousal**

- A given state of bodily arousal feeds one emotion or another, depending on how the person interprets and labels the arousal.
- Experiment:
  - Researchers: Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962)
  - Participants: 184 male college students
  - Procedure: Participants were told that the study was about "vitamin injections" on visual skill. They received injection of either adrenaline or saline (placebo)
  - Adrenaline group was divided into three:
    - Informed: told true side effects (shaking, pounding heart) – prepared for arousal
    - Misinformed: told false effects (e.g., numb feet)
    - Ignorant: given no instructions
  - Participants were then placed in waiting room with a confederate creating either a euphoria or anger situation

- Findings:
  - Informed group: Showed the least emotion in both situations because they had an explanation for their arousal (attributed it to the drug, not the confederate's behavior)
  - Misinformed & Ignorant groups:
    - Epinephrine + euphoric model produce euphoria
    - Epinephrine + angry model produce anger
    - ... because they could not explain why they felt aroused

### C. Cues in the environment

- **Cognitive neoassociation theory** – when a person is simply in the presence of an object related to aggression, that person is more likely to display aggression.
- Guns not only permit violence, they can stimulate it as well.
- Experiment:
  - Researchers: Berkowitz & LePage (1967)
  - Method: Participants were given electric shocks by a study administrator, then later given the opportunity to shock the administrator back.
  - Conditions:
    - Some participants sat at a table with the shock machine + two badminton rackets
    - Others sat at a table with the shock machine + a 12-gauge shotgun and a .38-caliber revolver (supposedly left from a prior experiment)
  - Result: Participants near guns gave more electric shocks to the administrator than those near badminton rackets.
  - Conclusion: Presence of weapons increases aggressive behavior (weapons effect).
- Countries that ban handguns have lower murder rates.
- Those who kept a gun in the home (for protection) were 2.7 times as likely to be murdered by a family member or close acquaintance.
- The risk of suicide in homes with guns was 5 times as high as in homes without them.

## D. Media Influences

### Pornography and Sexual Violence

- The increased rates of criminal violence coincide with the increased availability of violent and sexual material in the media that started in 1960.
- Viewing fictional scenes of a man overpowering and arousing a woman can distort one's perception of how women actually respond to sexual coercion and increase men's aggression against women.
- Exposure to pornography increases the acceptance of **rape myth** → women would welcome sexual assault.
- Those who watched sexually violent movies became less bothered by the raping and slashing. And they expressed less sympathy for domestic violence victims.
- Pornography contributes to men's actual aggression toward women (increased # of rape cases).
  - Except for Japan
- When college males were asked if there were any chance they would rape a woman, "if you could be assured that no one would know and that you could in no way be punished," 33% might rape if they could get away with it (Malamuth, 1981).

### Media influences: Television

- In a survey of 208 prison convicts, 9 of 10 admitted learning new criminal tricks by watching crime programs.
- 4 out of 10 had attempted specific crimes seen on television.
- The more violent the content of the child's TV viewing, the more aggressive the child.
- Where television goes, increased violence follows.

## BULLYING

- a REPEATED negative treatment of another person, often an adolescent, over time.
- The negative treatment typical in bullying is the attempt to inflict harm, injury, or humiliation, and bullying can include physical or verbal attacks.

- Bullying can also be psychological.

### **Gender differences on bullying:**

- Boys tend to engage in direct, physical aggression such as physically harming others.
- Girls tend to engage in indirect, social forms of aggression such as spreading rumors, ignoring, or socially isolating others.

Bullying involves three parties:

1. the bully
  2. the victim
  3. witnesses or bystanders
- The act of bullying involves an **IMBALANCE OF POWER** with the bully holding more power—physically, emotionally, and/or socially over the victim.
  - The experience of bullying can be positive for the bully, who may enjoy a boost to self-esteem.
  - The victim may experience:
    - decreased mental health, including experiencing anxiety and depression
    - underperform in schoolwork
    - committing suicide

### **Who is at a greater risk of being bullied?**

- Children who are emotionally reactive
- Children who are different from others
  - overweight
  - cognitively impaired
  - racially or ethnically different
  - gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens

### **CYBERBULLYING**

- a repeated behavior that is intended to cause psychological or emotional harm to another person.

- What is unique about cyberbullying is that it is typically covert, concealed, done in private, and the bully can remain anonymous.
- This anonymity gives the bully power, and the victim may feel helpless, unable to escape the harassment, and unable to retaliate.
- In cyberbullying, it is more common for girls to be the bullies and victims because cyberbullying is nonphysical and is a less direct form of bullying.
- Girls who become cyberbullies often have been the victims of cyberbullying at one time (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).
- The effects of cyberbullying include the victim feeling frustration, anger, sadness, helplessness, powerlessness, and fear. Victims will also experience lower self-esteem
- Research suggests that both cyberbullying victims and perpetrators are more likely to experience suicidal ideation, and they are more likely to attempt suicide than individuals who have no experience with cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

## **HOW CAN WE REDUCE AGGRESSION?**

### **1. Punishment**

- **Social learning theory** (Bandura) states that children model aggressive behavior if they see it rewarded and they are less likely to model aggression if it is punished.
- Legal systems worldwide use punishment (including the death penalty) to deal with violent criminals
- ***Is punishment truly effective? Several limitations exist:***
  - The punisher may serve as an aggressive model (underlying the cycle of family violence)
  - Punishment reduces aggression but does not teach new prosocial behaviors
  - Fear of punishment or retaliation reduces aggression only in the immediate situation
  - Many aggressive acts (e.g., murder) stem from impulsive reactions, leaving no time to think about consequences
- Example: Death penalty

- No more effective as a deterrent for murder than imprisonment
- States with the death penalty do not have lower homicide rates than states without it
- Abolishing the death penalty does not raise violence in the community

## **2. Modeling non-aggression**

- Modeling can lower inhibitions and encourage imitation when aggressive behavior is observed
- It can also increase self-control and encourage obedience
- Example of non-aggressive model: A TV protagonist who does the "right thing" (solves conflicts with peaceful discussion, displays self-control)
- Practical implication: Incorporating non-aggressive models through positive TV programming or organizations helps children learn to control aggression and become less violent adults

## **3. Training**

- Best method for reducing aggression → Prevent it before it happens. Train individuals in non-aggressive conflict resolution strategies.
- Study: Wilson & Lipsey (2006) collected data from 249 studies of school violence prevention programs.
- Findings: These programs were effective in reducing violence, especially for students with behavioral problems. Percentage of students engaging in violent/disruptive behavior dropped from 20% to 13% after program completion
- What students were taught:
  - Problem-solving skills
  - Conflict resolution techniques
  - Emotion-control strategies

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