

Social Psychology

Lesson 11: Aggression

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Topics

- ☑ Forms of Aggression
- ☑ Gender and Cultural Variations in Aggression
- ☑ Theories of Aggression
- ☑ Influences on Aggression
- ☑ Bullying
- ☑ How to Reduce Aggression

Lesson Objectives

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

Which is a form of aggression?

01

A woman is knocked unconscious and sexually assaulted on her way home.

02

A driver honks and screams at another driver for not moving instantly at a green light.

03

A teen texting while driving causes a collision that kills a family of four.

04

A person hits his dog with a newspaper for disobeying a command.

Aggression

- A behavior, either verbal or physical, that is used to intentionally harm another individual.
- Examples:
 - Rape
 - Murder
 - Armed assault
 - Sending a harsh email to a friend



Forms of Aggression

A. HOSTILE



- or affective aggression; occurs when anger leads to aggression and the primary goal of an action or behavior is to make the victim suffer
- E.g., hitting or yelling at someone who has made you angry; murdering out of rage

B. INSTRUMENTAL



- Occurs when the primary goal of the action is not to make the victim suffer, but to attain a non-injurious goal
- E.g., 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 to engage in physical aggression causing pain/injury.***
 - o Males report higher incidence of aggressive behavior (Harris, 1994).

- ☑ ***Men are more likely to use direct aggression.***
 - o Males are more likely than females to be targets of aggression (Buss, 2004).

- ☑ ***Women are more likely to use indirect aggression.***
 - o Women are likely to engage 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.
- ☑ 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 and 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's 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.

- It is based on the belief that women are considered the property of the family and their bodies are repositories of the family's honor.

- 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.

**“Honor is more precious than
my own flesh and blood”**

- 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

Biology of Aggression

Evolutionary Theory

Neural Influences

Instinct Theory

Genetic Influences

Biochemical Influences

1. Evolutionary Theory

- Aggression may be rooted in our evolutionary history
- Increases likelihood of survival and reproduction
- **Konrad Lorenz:** Humans developed a fighting instinct similar to animals. Ancestors benefited from aggression for:
 - Gaining resources
 - Eliminating competition
 - Threatening rivals
 - Defending against assailants

2. Instinct Theory

- **Sigmund Freud** believed aggression stems from a self-destructive impulse
- Humans must act out this impulse to release negative energy and return to a state of calm
- Referred to this behavior as the "**death drive**"
- **Major Flaw of Freud's Theory:** Does not account for differences in aggressive behavior across 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?*
 - *Why not every human overtly expresses aggressive desires?*

3. Genetic Influences

- Twin studies suggest aggressiveness is heritable.
- Limitations exist in studies conducted thus far.
- Key finding among convicted criminals with twins:
 - Identical twins: **50%** also have criminal records
 - Fraternal twins: Only **20%** also have criminal records
- **Implication:** Higher genetic similarity (identical twins) shows stronger concordance for criminal behavior

4. Neural Influences

- **Premise:** Abnormal brains can contribute to abnormally aggressive behavior
- **Measurement tool:** SPECT (Single Photon Emission Computerized Tomography) generates color images of brain blood flow and activity
- **Key brain region: *Left temporal lobe***
 - Unusual increases/decreases in activity found here
 - Aggressive men tend to have too much or too little activity → limits impulse control
- **Psychopathy link:** Abnormalities in brain regions for morality, emotions, and reduced prefrontal cortex activity
- **Prefrontal cortex findings:**
 - 14% less active than normal in murderers
 - 15% smaller in antisocial men

5. Biochemical Influences: ALCOHOL

- Alcohol unleashes aggression when people are provoked
 - Reduces self-awareness
 - Reduces ability to consider consequences
- **Not universal, but correlated:** Not everyone becomes aggressive, but strong correlation with heavy drinking exists
- Especially true for those who EXPECT to become more aggressive when drinking

Real-world data (APA, 2004):

- 55% of in-home assaults → assailant and/or victim had been drinking
- 65% of homicides → assailant and/or victim had been drinking

5. Biochemical Influences: TESTOSTERONE

- High testosterone linked to delinquency, hard drug use, & provoked aggression
- Violent/sexual offenders had higher testosterone than property criminals (Dabbs et al., 1995)
- Higher testosterone inmates broke more rules, especially confrontational ones
- Women given testosterone missed threat cues, raising aggression risk (van Honk & Schutter, 2007)
- Testosterone doesn't directly cause aggression—but increases it under provocation
- Testosterone-aggression link found in boys, adults, and women
- Income effect:
 - ☑ ***High-income men = low delinquency regardless of testosterone***
 - ☑ ***Low-income men = delinquency varies with testosterone***

5. Biochemical Influences: **SEROTONIN**

- Low serotonin levels → compromised impulse control in the **frontal lobes**
- Research finding (humans & primates):
 - ☑ Low serotonin is often found in violence-prone children and adults

Serotonin plays a key role in:

- ☑ Regulation of emotions
- ☑ Social functioning
- ☑ Domains closely related to aggression

Aggression as a Response to Frustration

Frustration-aggression theory

Displacement

Cognitive Neoassociation theory

Frustration – aggression theory

- **Frustration** – feeling of being upset or annoyed by inability to reach a goal or perform an activity
- **Frustration – aggression theory:**
 - Proposed by Dollard et al. (1939)
 - Frustration triggers inclination for aggression
 - Motivation for aggression increases when current behavior is interrupted or goal is blocked

Classic study (Barker, Dembo, & Lewin, 1941):

- Children delayed from playing with attractive toys → became frustrated
- Result: More aggressive behavior once allowed to play

Berkowitz's revision (1989):

- Frustration produces **anger**
- Anger *can* lead to aggression, but does not necessarily always do so

Relative deprivation

- the perception that one is less well off than others with whom one compares oneself.

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.



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.
- When a person is simply in the presence of an object related to aggression, that person is more likely to display aggression.

Aggression as Learned Social Behavior



Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory

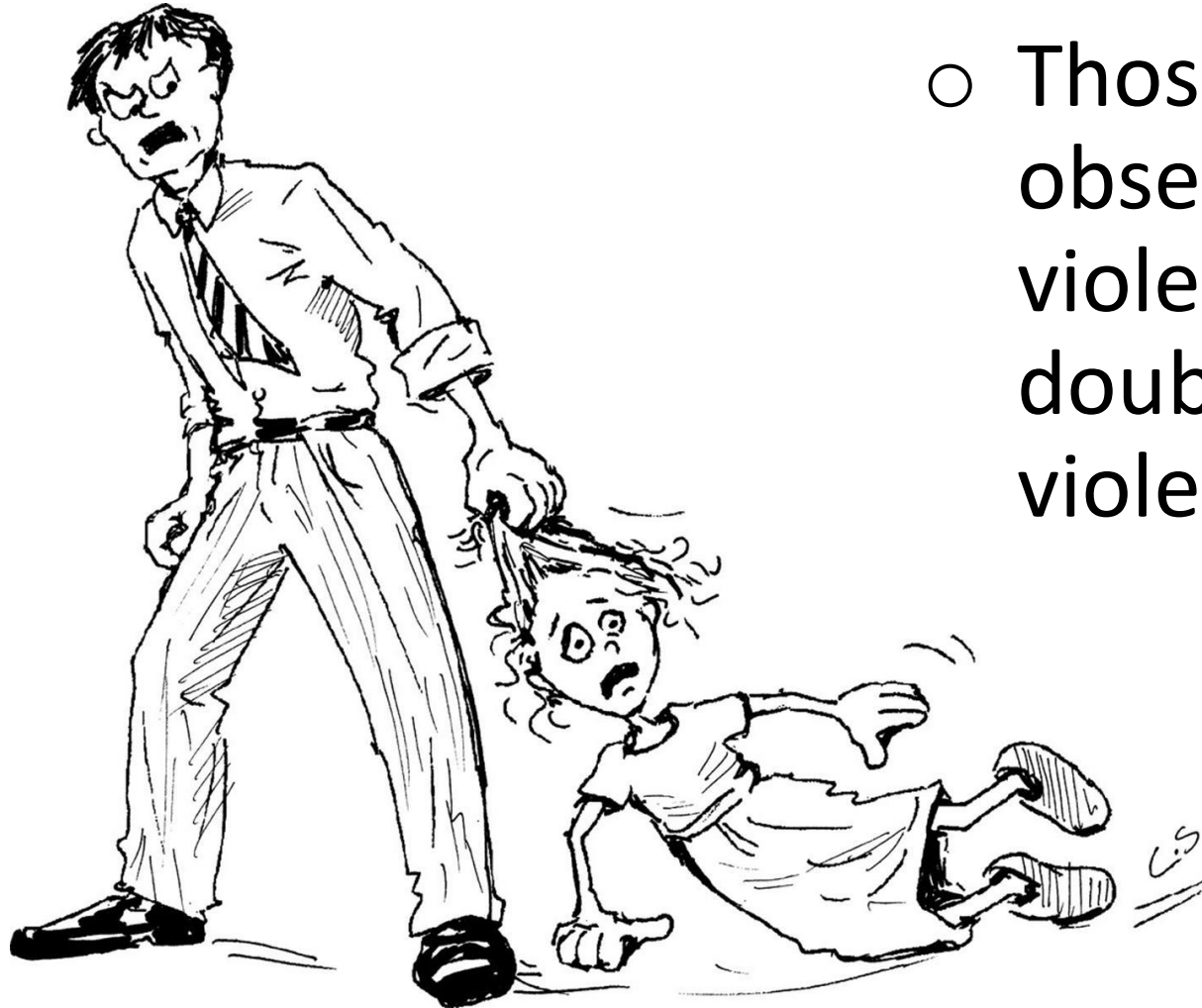
- also referred to as **social cognitive theory**
- developed by **Albert Bandura** in the 1960s
- we learn social behavior by observing and imitating and by being rewarded and punished.
- Components of social learning:
 - A. Modeling
 - B. Reinforcement

A. Modeling: Bobo doll Experiment

- **Method:** Preschoolers watched an adult abuse a Bobo doll (hitting, kicking, hammer, phrases like “sock him”).
- **Procedure:** After viewing, children faced mild frustration (toys taken away), then played with Bobo doll for 20 min.
- **Result:** Observers were far more likely to hit the doll than controls.
- **Conclusion:** Aggression learned through observation (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).
- **Significance:** Early evidence linking TV violence to real-life aggression.

Family

- Punitive parents
- Absentee fathers



Culture

- Those who have observed gun violence are at doubled risk for violent behavior.

B. Reinforcement

Reinforcement: Strengthens behavior

- + Add pleasant/desirable stimulus
- Remove unpleasant/aversive stimulus

Bobo doll follow-up (Bandura):

Kids watched adult either rewarded, punished, or given no consequences for aggression.

Findings:

- **Rewarded** → kids imitated aggression.
- **No consequences** → kids engaged in aggression (assumed no punishment).
- **Punished** → reduced imitation.

Influences on Aggression

Aversive Experiences

Arousal

Cues in Environment

Media Influence

01. Aversive Experience: PAIN

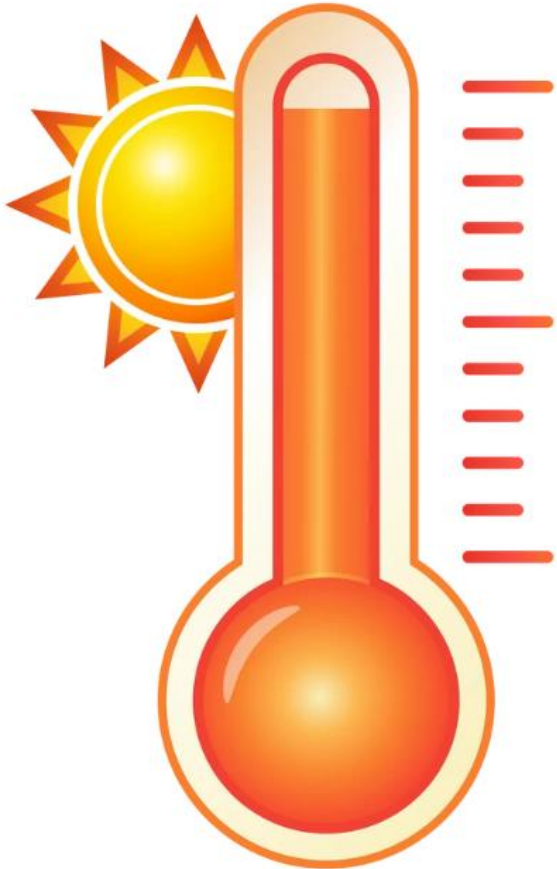
Experiment: Berkowitz et al. (1981)

- **Method:** Students submerged hand in tepid vs. bitterly cold water
- **Findings:** Cold water group → more irritable, more willing to inflict noise on others
- **Conclusion:** Aversive experience (not frustration) is primary trigger of aggression

Experiment: Ulrich & Azrin (1962)

- Electric shock directly triggers reflexive fighting (no learning needed)
- Stereotyped fighting, not driven by reinforcement
- Occurs regardless of sex, strain, familiarity, or group size
- Rats attack live animals (not objects); no reciprocal attack required

01. Aversive Experience: HEAT



There are more riots and crimes in hot weather, including:

- Assaults
- Wife-beatings
- Rapes
- Murders
- Urban riots

01. Aversive Experience: **ATTACKS**



Being attacked or insulted by another is especially conducive to aggression.

02. AROUSAL

A given state of bodily arousal feeds one emotion or another, depending on how the person interprets and labels the arousal.

Experiment: Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962)

Method: 184 male students injected with adrenaline (or placebo), then placed with a euphoric or angry confederate

Groups:

- Informed (knew real side effects) → least emotional (explained arousal as drug)
- Misinformed/Ignorant (no explanation) → matched confederate's emotion (euphoria or anger)

Conclusion: Same arousal labeled differently depending on context

03. Cues in the Environment

Guns not only permit violence, but they can also stimulate it as well.

Cognitive Neoassociation Theory – presence of aggression-related object increases aggression.

Experiment: Berkowitz & LePage (1967) – Weapons Effect

- **Method:** Participants shocked by administrator, later could retaliate
- **Conditions:** Table with badminton rackets vs. table with shotgun + revolver
- **Result:** Guns present → more shocks given
- **Conclusion:** Weapons stimulate aggression



- Handgun bans → lower murder rates
- Home gun for protection → 2.7x more likely murdered by family/acquaintance
- Home gun → 5x higher suicide risk

04. Media Influence

Pornography and Sexual Violence

- Since 1960s: Rise in criminal violence coincides with violent/sexual media availability
- Men overpowering/arousing women in media → distorts perceptions of women's response to coercion, increases male aggression
- Pornography exposure → increases acceptance of **rape myths** (women welcome assault)



- Sexually violent movies → reduced sensitivity to rape/violence, less sympathy for domestic violence victims
- Pornography linked to real aggression against women (more rape cases)
 - **Exemption:** Japan
- 33% of college males said they might rape a woman if guaranteed no punishment or discovery (Malamuth, 1981).

Media Influence: TELEVISION

- In a survey of 208 prison convicts, 9 out 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.

Source: Image by Mikhail Nolov in Canva. (n.d.).

GENDER DIFFERENCES



Boys tend to engage in direct, physical aggression such as physically harming others.



PARTIES INVOLVED



the bully



the victim



witnesses or bystanders



Girls tend to engage in indirect, social forms of aggression such as spreading rumors, ignoring, or socially isolating others.

- **Imbalance of power:**
Bully holds more physical, emotional, and/or social power
- Positive for bully → Boost in self-esteem
- Negative for victim:
 - Anxiety & depression
 - Lower school performance
 - Risk of suicide

Who is at a greater risk of being bullied?

1. Emotionally reactive children
2. Those who are "different":
 - Overweight
 - Cognitively impaired
 - Racially/ethnically different
 - LGBTQ+ teens

CYBERBULLYING



- Repeated behavior intended to cause psychological/emotional harm
- Unique: Covert, private, anonymous
- Anonymity → bully's power, victim's helplessness (no escape, no retaliation)
- More common among girls (nonphysical, less direct)



- Girls who become cyberbullies often have been the victims of cyberbullying at one time (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).
- **Victim effects** – Frustration, anger, sadness, helplessness, fear, lower self-esteem
- **Suicide risk** – Both victims AND perpetrators more likely to have suicidal ideation and attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)

How to Reduce Aggression?

PUNISHMENT

MODELING NON-
AGGRESSION

TRAINING

01. PUNISHMENT

- **Bandura's Social Learning Theory:** Children model aggression if rewarded; less likely if punished
- **Legal systems** use punishment for violent criminals
- **Limitations:**
 - Punisher models aggression (fuels family violence cycle)
 - Reduces aggression but doesn't teach prosocial behavior
 - Fear of punishment only works immediately
 - Impulsive acts (e.g., murder) bypass consequence thinking

Example: Death penalty

- No more effective deterrent for murder than imprisonment
- States with death penalty → NOT lower homicide rates
- Abolishing death penalty → does NOT raise community violence

02. 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

03. 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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Images:

- All graphic images were taken from Canva at <https://www.canva.com>