Aggression And Its Intricacies Essay, Research Paper

Aggression is a critical part of animal existence, which is an inherent driving force to humans, as we, too, are animals. The source of aggression within humans is a long summative list, but before trying to understand its source one must apply a working definition of aggression. Aggressive behavior is defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as any action of an animal that serves to injure an opponent or prey animal or to cause an opponent to retreat. (7) David G. Myers states that aggression is any physical or verbal behavior intended to hurt or destroy.(9) There are many types of aggressive behaviors, which can be differentiated from the factual act to the hidden motives. For example, an aggressive behavior can be negative or positive, accidental or intended, and physical or mental. Aggression can take numerous forms, the act of hitting a wall to release aggression has some of the same roots as playing football and enjoying hitting the quarterback. A child yelling at his parents could be equated, in its aggressiveness, with hitting one?s horn when one is cut off on 495.

Aggression is also a relative construct. What might seem like a terribly aggressive act to one person, most often the victim, might seem like an induced response to the perpetrator.(3) Psychologist Arlene Stillwell performed an experiment where she assigned ordinary college students at random to play the role of a victim or a perpetrator in a small incident. Then she asked the students to describe the situation that had just transpired. What she found was that both victims and perpetrators deformed the truth equally to present their sides in a better light. Victims would dwell on their lasting traumas from the incident while the perpetrator might make the act seem like a one-time action provoked by insurmountable circumstances. The resulting implication is that aggression is in the eye of the beholder.(3) Due to its relative nature aggression is extremely hard to isolate and study. Some acts are very easy to categorize as aggressive, a first degree murder or first degree rape, but is negligent manslaughter aggressive? The mere act of not shoveling one?s sidewalk might have the same effect as a cold-blooded murder but is it an aggressive act? For the purposes of this paper aggression will be related to the four conditions presented by Gerda Siann. They are as follows; 1. The person carrying out that behavior, the aggressor, does so with intention. 2. The behavior is taking place within an interpersonal situation which is characterized by an accumulated distress or a opposition. 3. The aggressor intends by the behavior in question to gain a greater advantage than the person on the other side of the aggression. 4. The aggressor carrying out the behavior has either provoked the situation or moved the conflict unto a higher degree of strength.(11) Aggression has numerous reasons and consequences both must be analyzed in order to see from whence it arises. An explicit example of the strength of both nature and nurture concerning aggression is the life of Kody Scott, a young gang member of California. He was already a gang member in middle school, and would not have been had the gang not already been in place when he graduated from elementary school ? thus environment?s role in aggressive behavior, but one fateful day when he stole a car to get to the hospital for the birth of his first child, he intentionally detoured through the neighborhood of a rival gang and killed a rival gang member. The detour he deliberately took was a conscious decision and not provoked by the environment ? hence nature?s toll on his aggressive act.(3)

Aggression is usually associated with negative aspects of the world.(3) This is not necessarily true, though. Negativity is but half of the nature of aggression. Aggression can have very positive results. For example, a non-aggressive hockey player gets thrown around and will therefore not perform very well in an bellicose sport. On the other hand an aggressive player will not allow himself to be thrown around like the aforementioned player and will most likely win the small battles just based on the mentality of the player.(5) Another example of positive aspects of aggression might be a person?s sexual aggressiveness might allow them to obtain a date to prom without any problem, whereas anyone much less aggressive person would be passive and wait for the person to approach them. One good aspects of aggressiveness might be ambitiousness or assertiveness, an aggressive person is more likely to get what they need done as opposed to the inactive person. Outgoing, a socially positive trait is nothing more than aggressiveness personified. A female high school senior might be more successful and be rewarded (by being voted for Best Personality in the MOCK awards) for being socially aggressive ? outgoing.

Aggression can also be characterized by mentality. Where one hurts someone out of rage or whether one thinks of numerous ways of hurting someone, aggression still is present in both situations. The thoughts of a people, for example the Germans in World War Two can be just as aggressive as the act as the systematic murder of the Jewish community.(8) Aggression in this case was an extreme example of a spiraling staircase. The Nazi party did not begin a process of systematic murder at the beginning of their rule, first they instituted a hate as scapegoats toward the Jews, they then removed some luxuries that the Jews had, then they removed citizenship, followed by imprisonment, then to slave labor, and lastly the “Final Solution” was implemented. The thoughts of hatred at the beginning of the platform was just as dangerous and aggressive as the gas chambers of late WWII. These aggressive feelings allowed the Germans to desensitize each other to a point of genocide.(11) By solely disliking someone they looked the other way when the book burning began, then it was just a small step to the first pogrom, then they just accepted the de-humanization of Jews, and this was followed by an escalating progress which led eventually to the inhumane murder of close to six million human lives. Along with these pure feelings of anger and hatred ?aggression?the Germans also tried to scapegoat and thereby provide catharsis for themselves by blaming the downfall of their troubles on the Jewish community. This displacement somehow released pent up rage that had been present for numerous years of misery for the Germans.(3, Handler) Thus thoughts also cause aggression or are manifestations of the pure aggression.

The most obvious example of aggression is killing, for that reason the example for this paper will be the untimely death of people as caused by others. From very young ages death permeates into all of our lives. From having a loved grandparents passing away to the learning how to read the newspaper and reading about terrible deaths daily, if not more often. One strong argument supports that people have built-in aggression. Much like the theories of Freud, that people have instinctual aggression, whether sexual or violent, a multitude of scientists and psychologists believe that biology is crucial in the development of aggression.(9) For example aggression has been correlated numerous times in a significant way with testosterone.(1) One psychologist, Jack Hokanson, has tracked catharsis theories for a number of years. One experiment performed by this man seemed to point that in order to reduce violence or aggression men would react angrily, whereas women would react in a friendly manner when presented with aggressive behaviors.(2) The variable that was tested here were the differences in the genders which proved to be quite polar, for the men were belligerent and the women were almost uniformly kind.(12) Differences in physical strength also have provided for differences in aggression levels

between the two sexes. Since men are physically built stronger than women they are more likely to become aggressive than are women who are not, in general, as physically strong.

Neurotransmitters seem to play a very important part in the aggressive nature of mammals. As tested in monkeys, who have matching 99 percent of their genes with humans, it has been found that hyper-aggressive or antisocial monkeys have a deficit of the neurotransmitter serotonin. As an interesting side note the leaders, who have a different type of aggression ?assertion?have higher levels of this same chemical.(1) In this same study the monkeys seemed to have very predictable heredity patterns, In which the monkeys were found to easily exhibit the same behavior as the father. This was also found to be true “in men who have been discharged from the Marines for excessive violence, as well as in criminals in Finland who committed acts of wanton violence.”(8) Seratonin has also found to be an inhibiting factor concerning aggression. A situation or condition that reduces seratonin levels is among drugs, hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia is a condition of lowered blood sugar, certain diets can cause or inhibit the onset of this condition, thus directly affecting genetically the aggressive behavior of a person.(12) On the topic of diets an correlation has been found with the corn (a food that decreases the levels of seratonin in the brain) intake of a country and the homicide rates, an obviously aggressive marker.(10) Another chemical in the human machine that causes or has been related to has been the “anger hormone” ?adrenaline and its counterpart noradrenaline. This is inherent in the flight or fight reflex, in which fighting is usually prepared by a flush of adrenaline into the system, and anger/aggression are integral parts of it.(12) Stanley Hall found that anger has numerous different effects on the human body, depending on the person. Aggression can cause either an increase or a decrease in heart rate depending on the anger causing stimulus.(12) For example, a psychologist named Albert F. Ax found that his test subjects were experiencing the slowing of their hearts because they were concentrating too hard on the event supposed to turn them aggressive, in the case of his experiment a mugger.(12) Another study done by a man named Eron in 1987, showed that most children, who when described by their peers as having high levels of aggression, are three times as likely to have a criminal conviction by the age of 30 than those children who were rated as having high levels of pro-social behavior.(10) That study shows the apparent stability, or lack of change, in the behavior of people thereby fueling the genetic, or nature, side of the nature versus nurture war that is currently being fought.

Epilepsy has also been affiliated with aggressive behavior or at least with outbursts of it. A very strong correlation has been made between the focus of epileptic discharges being in the temporal lobe of the brain and discharges of violent and aggressive behavior. (1) That condition can be helped by psychosurgery but is not used as common as possible because the biological age group who most is affected by this circumstance are juveniles or violent offenders who are not capable of giving unbiased, informed consent to irreversible procedures. Furthermore, evidence liking antisocial conduct?aggression?with abnormal electrical activity in the temporal lobes. Using a electroencephalogram (EEG) to study these waves of electricity in the temporal lobe of sufferers of a sociopath complex, psychologists have surmised that the aggressive personality disorders are related to a delay of maturation in these areas of the brain, this could be cause by a innumerable amount of factors like fetal infection, brain trauma, or lack of proper nutrients in diet.(1) In 1969 a psychologist by the name of Williams used an EEG on 333 men convicted of crimes and found that out of the 206 men who had a history of crimes has a disruption, or dysrhythmias, in the temporal lobes. Following the genetic track of aggression is the undeniable fact that aggressive behavior also declines sharply with age.(10) Another physiological factor that might affect the aggressiveness and even violence level of a person is that of cerebral trauma, especially diseases. These people who exhibit an “impairment of the control systems of the brain” also have been known to occasionally suffer from persistent brain immaturity, brain damage, or toxic impairment of the brain. There has also been presented the single-gene notion about psychopath or sociopath behavior. Researchers have found that significant number of prisoners have an extra sex chromosomes, for example an “XXY” or “XYY”.(12) Their being in jail does not seem to be the root of their problem but rather it seems to stem from “their low level of intelligence,” which is inherently a genetically influence aspect, according to Robert A. Baron.(10)

In post-war studies, studies of the most aggressive of all activities, there have been similarities found with soldier. For example several senior U.S. Air Force officers have stated that when the Air Force tried to pre-select fighter pilots after world war two the only common denominator between their WWII aces was that they had all been involved in numerous altercations as children. Not as bullies but rather as fighters, the type of person who would not back down once attacked or hurt. This seemed like a strange connection between the type of job and a similarity in childhood activities, because significantly less than a third of school populations engage in fights on a regular basis. This seems to point at a genetic capacity for violence and aggression. More informally, Gwynne Dyer has felt, through his experiences as a soldier, his genes at work as he says;

Aggression is certainly part of our genetic makeup, and necessarily so, but the normal human being?s quota of aggression will not cause him to kill acquaintances, let alone wage war against strangers from a different country?.The overwhelming majority of those who have killed?have done so as soldiers in war, and we recognize that that has practically nothing to do with the kind of personal aggression that would endanger us as their fellow citizens. (8)

Here a regular serving soldier spoke with experience of seeing the numerous soldiers that “[derived] their greatest satisfaction from male companionship, from excitement, and from the conquering of physical obstacles.” Those men were most likely part of the 2 percent of combat soldiers (as noted by Swank and Marchand?s WWII study) are predisposed to be “aggressive psychopaths.”(8) Men can be compared to animals concerning this apparent predisposition to aggression. For example, in most species it is the best hunter, the best fighter, the most aggressive male who ends up passing on his genetic data unto a female and thereby an offspring. An offshoot of this aggressive psychopath, is another genetic predisposition, the presence or apathy of empathy for others. Life magazine printed in their latest magazine that, “the heritability of most personality traits is about 50 percent.”(4) Thus showing the strong predisposition to certain behaviors, namely aggression. Furthermore, “aggression?[is a trait] with high heritability.”(4) As a result of this there has been recent debate in some states, like Minnesota, who have been trying to obtain a sort of genetic cleansing by not allowing the “riff-raff” of society to breed. This ethical question shoots back to days of 19th century anthropologist Francis Galton who also recommended breeding quotas to weed out the “unfit.”(4) It also sounds much like the callings of another well-known historical figure from the 1940?s, the leader of the Third Reich, Adolph Hitler.(Handler)

Nurturing also presents a strong argument for the development of violence and or aggression. Going back to the situation with Kody Scott, how could he have killed his rival gang member had he not been there, the environment and the years of spending in a violent gang helped him make the choice to cold-bloodedly execute the young man.(3) One of the most heated debates going on today is the conditioning value of movies and the rest of the media. Do movies really affect us in aggressive ways? The United States Navy seems to think so, for one of their psychiatrists developed a “formula” to psychologically enable certain soldiers to become assassins and this process consists of using violent movies. They do perform this process in order to desensitize the government paid assassin to murders, executions, and unfeeling deaths. There appear to be three major types of conditioning occurring with the media concerning violence. First, there is a classical conditioning when people sit at home and see detailed, horrible suffering of people and they are associating this killing and suffering with their enjoyment, with a big container of pop-corn, with their favorite soft-drink, and with their friends and company, all things that the person sees as positive. B.F. Skinner?s operant conditioning comes into play through interactive video games where there is a reward for killing or destroying numerous things with no concern for their well-being. Lastly, social learning as described by Bandura seems to take in mind the numerous role models who people see nowadays in the movies.(8) For example, in the movie Pulp Fiction, the hero Butch (Bruce Willis) ends up killing two people and he is glorified at the end of the movie. He makes up with the person who was chasing him, makes a large amount of money, survives the two homosexual rapists, and goes off to a paradise with his girlfriend. There is not much more of a perfect example of someone who could potentially be seen as a good guy who actually smokes, cheats, kills, lies, and steals. Children also develop attachments to the type of behavior exhibited by Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or Robert Deniro from either Goodfellas or Heat.(9) Both of these turn into obvious role models for children and adolescents. Media such as cartoons presents the evil villain as someone who always has a sadistic desire for destruction of ransom impersonal someone. More often than not, thought, they are not like “you.” For example, in the movie Die Hard III Bruce Wilis is the protagonist and Jeremy Irons is the antagonist. Bruce Wilis, being the good guy, is an all-American type of guy, who speaks almost perfect New York English. On the other hand the villain, Jeremy Irons has an accent which sounds as if it were from Germanic Europe (Germany is a very good stereotypical evil because of its activities in the early 20th century). This promotes aggression between people of differing descents because the media presents a view that blatantly states foreign people are enemies.(3) Movies also tend to give the feeling that the victim will be dehumanized, much like how in Vietnam soldiers referred to “the enemy” as VC or Charlie, thus removing any individualistic characteristics from the enemy, it turned to be just one single, foreign foe.(3,8) This social phenomenon especially holds true since most criminals and aggressors generally have a below-average intelligence, thus are more mentally malleable.

Leonard Berkowitz found that;

There is a remarkable consistency to these findings. The studies reviewed here agree in noting that punitive parental disciplinary methods (such as physical punishment and depriving children of privileges) ten to be associated with a high level of aggression and other forms of antisocial behavior by the children. Love-oriented disciplinary methods on the other hand, evidently facilitate the development of conscience and internalized restraints against socially disapproved behavior.(12)

This is very important in the development of children for most sexual offenders, whether rapists or child abusers, were often time abused themselves as a child or adolescent. Punishment inherently increases resentment and hostility, thus creating an environment where the child does not care for the parents and all of the associations that can be made with the parent, like their morals, rules, and respects. Isolation also tends to have a very strong effect on the mentality of aggression. Usually with a lack of interpersonal relationships people cannot fully appreciate the human existence and most often do not learn how to handle destructive urges because they do not care about society, which innately is an interpersonal relationship.(6) The aforementioned monkeys with the lower seratonin levels also, when normal, became hyper-aggressive social misfits when reared by a mechanized surrogate mother, who did not give the monkeys affection. This brings up Freud?s theory of repressed memories, in which the person puts traumatic experiences from their past into their subconscious.(1) Freud believed that these repressed memories will surface in the form of disorders and problems, mostly exhibited through either sexual dysfunction or violence.(9) Therefore our early surroundings affect us for most of our lives, at least according to Sigmund Freud. Environment and exposure compounds any genetic factors, for instance, the inner parts of Washington D.C. have considerably higher aggressive crime rates (murder, rape, aggravated assault) than a Maryland suburb like the Derwood/Olney/Flower Hill area does. Reasons for such rates are that the city houses more people closer to the poverty line.(3) These people have constant stresses that people do not need to deal with in the suburbs. Drugs and alcohol are also a considerably stronger force in the city. Those two intoxicants allow people to perform acts that they would regularly not have the mind to do. For example, alcohol is consumed, a person looses their inhibitory brain functions and are more likely to “forget” the consequences of an aggravated assault or a murder.(3,9) For that reason it is likely that there was a rash of psychopathic killers in the Russo-Asiatic area in the past decades. In cities, because of the higher level drug business there is a greater need for guns and weapons. Due to the higher level of guns intrinsically there will be more murder and violence. The environment thus fuels the violent nature of the city-dwellers.

Immediate environment also tends to influence aggression. For example, a person could be inadvertently aggressive toward another in the following way; One person sits down at the only open stool in a bar, he orders a bowl of pretzels and a cold beer. The bartender brings him his beer, and he begins to read his newspaper. Suddenly the person next to him eats a pretzel, without saying a word. At this the person is shocked, and thinks, “how can this cruel person be eating my pretzels?” Out of fear for starting an argument he says nothing but eats one of the pretzels and both men take turns eating pretzels from the bowl until they are gone. The other man then puts money for his beer down and walks away. The first man then thinks, “Wow! I am glad that evil person is gone, who would steal a complete strangers pretzels, Honestly?” The bartender then arrives and says, “here is your pretzel bowl enjoy.”(3, Adams? Hitchhiker?s Guide to the Galaxy) The victim immediately turned into the aggressor by taking the other man?s pretzels. Thus inadvertently being extremely aggressive towards another human.

Immediate distance also generally affects the aggressiveness level of a person, especially when killing is involved. The tendency is as follows; the further away one is from the intended victim the least resistance there will be towards committing the act of aggression. The bomber pilots who firebombed the city of Dresden, Hamburg, or Tokyo caused the deaths of about 400,000 people but not once did they hear the screaming or see the faces of the untold number of children, women, and elderly that they killed. (3,8,Handler) On the other hand, a person within knife range of person will have a more traumatic repercussions of killing someone. Whereas the artillery sergeant will never see the face of his victims, the infantry man will see the terrible contortions of their victims? faces and hear their pitiful screams as a bullet rips through the inner lining of their stomach and all intestinal acid seeps onto the rest of their organs.(8) It is a much more traumatic experience and will thereby lower the aggressive level and might even make the aggressor penitent. For example one WWII soldiers, William Manchester, states how;

There was a door which meant there was another room and the sniper was in that ? and I just broke that down. I was just absolutely gropped by the fear that this man would expect me and would shoot me. But as it turned out he was in a sniper harness and he couldn?t turn around fast enough. He was entangled in the harness so I shot him with a .45 and I felt remorse and shame. I just remember whispering foolishly, “I?m sorry” and then just throwing up.(8)

This point of view contrasts sharply with the prerogative of J. Douglas Harvey a World War II bomber pilot who upon visiting rebuilt Berlin said, “I could not visualize the horrible deaths my bombs?had caused here. I had no feeling of guilt.”(8)

Another important factor involving the aggression of people are other people. Very few times does an aggressive act stand alone, there is almost always mutual fault and/or shared blame. David Luckenbill found, in one of his studies, that the major part of criminal homicide revolved around some sort of reciprocal provocations in which collective hostility escalated until one person murdered the other.(3) Murray Straus found the same circumstance appeared in marital violence. In half of the reported cases of domestic violence it was found that both spouses were violent, it just tended to be that one person was considerably stronger than the other.(3)

Aggressive behavior has been a huge part of humankind since people first starting walking somewhat erect. From our predecessor the “killer ape” to the intricacies of nuclear warfare. Whether it is a “caveman” clubbing his enemy for stealing his food, or a highly paid sniper sitting atop a roof waiting for a South American dictator to walk out of his house, aggression follows us wherever we might go. Aggression is a force that is hard to imagine and even harder to harness. Should people ever learn to control and thereby use their aggression towards greater good, the walls we now know would crumble easily under the forcing of such a force.

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