Aggression Essay, Research Paper

Aggression is difficult to define, it is a complex phenomenon, and depending upon the context the term can be made to carry either positive or negative connotations, it can be attacking behavior that may be either self-protective and self-assertive or to the infliction of injury toward oneself or toward others, to the total destruction of others. Is aggression biological determined or the product of learning and environmental influences.? This essay, will consider instinctive theory, the frustration – aggression hypothesis, and social learning theory. It should then be possible to draw a conclusion to see if any or all of the theories discussed are the cause of aggression. Brain disorders, hormonal and chemical imbalances, environmental factors, such as heat, noise, air pollution and overcrowding, although contribute to the causes of aggression will not be discussed during the course of this essay. No universally adopted definition of aggression exists, for the purpose of this discussion, the definition of Gross will be used.

Gross defines aggression as :-

“The intentional infliction of some form of harm on others” (Gross page 444)

Freud proposed that aggression is an instinctive biological urge. According to Freud this instinct, is made up of the libido (pleasure) and “Thanatos” (the death wish) (pain). This basic instinct is present in the Id from birth, at first the aggression is relatively uncontrolled, but with the development of the Ego and superego it becomes channeled into socially acceptable behavior If these impulses are not released periodically in safe ways, they soon reach dangerous levels capable of producing acts of violence. Sometimes it is released in the form of physical or verbal abuse against another, (where the anger is displaced onto another). Sometimes the aggressive impulse is turned inward and produces self – punishment action, even suicide. The best that can be hoped for, according to Freud, is that aggressive impulses will be “channeled into socially acceptable forms.” such as football, sport etc. (Bernstein et al page 715). However, this theory does not explain why some people are aggressive and others are not, and if aggression is dissipated into sport, why is there football violence and violence at other sporting events?

Lorenz, like Freud believed that aggressive energy builds up in the individual, and eventually has to be discharged in some way. Lorenz’s states that aggression is the “fighting instinct” in man, and that man is naturally aggressive. This instinct developed during the course of evolution because it yielded many benefits, for example, fighting serves to disperse populations over a wide area, ensuring maximum use of resources. “Such behavior often helps to strengthen genetic make-up of a species by assuring that only the strongest individuals manage to reproduce”, ( Baron/Byrne page 328) This fighting instinct is both present in man and animals, and that aggression in animals is do with ‘Ritualization and appeasement’ and through these rituals and series of appeasement’s animals avoid destroying each other, but aggression in humans, is ‘no longer under the control of rituals, and it has become distorted in man” (Gross page 445). However nearly all the evidence of Lorenz’s theory comes from research with animals, and many psychologist “doubt whether the results apply to humans, because in the animal world instinct plays a more significant role than with humans”. ( Berstein et al page 716). Further It is generally agreed by looking at present day Eskimos, Pygmies, and Aborigines, that man is a ‘hunter – gatherer’. and that there is a powerful human tendency to cooperate which is a legacy from our ancient hunting past, when we had to co-operate or starve. People then lived in small tribal groups, were warfare did not exists, there were no armies, and if conflict did occur, from time to time, casualties would be avoided or limited. Mead argues that man is “not naturally aggressive” and points out many societies, such as the Apraesh of New Guinea where ‘aggression is rare, and “peaceful coexistence and cooperation is the norm” (Bernstein page 715) Megargee (1966) , supported the theories of Freud and Lorenz, Megargee reported that studies of “people who commit brutal aggressive crimes, are often over-controlled individuals, who repress the anger and over a period of time the pressure to be aggressive builds up”. (Gross page 450). Support for instinct theory has also come from Psychologist who study serial killers, they believe that there is genetic pre-disposition to be aggressive, and combined together with other factors, can aggravate a pre-disposition to violent aggressive behavior. The psychologist also pointed out, that more evidence for this theory comes from studies of twins reared together or apart, which suggest that there may be a genetic link to aggression in humans. (Channel 4 Television ).

Other psychologist emphasized frustration as a potent cause of why individuals are aggressive. Dollard and Miller developed a “frustration – aggressive hypothesis” they put forward the view that aggression was an inevitable consequence of frustration. The ‘occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression’ If an individual is prevented from reaching a goal, they are frustrated by not getting something they want, or suffers “deprivation” where something they want is taken away from them, they will experience an increase in aggression. (Hardy/Heyes page 171) This view has been criticized, psychologist point out that it does not explain aggressive behavior in all circumstances. Frustrated individuals do not always respond with aggressive action, they may show “resignation and despair” (Baron/Byrne page 329), and there are many occasions when aggressive behavior can be explained more by a breakdown in social norms.

Berkowitz suggested “external conditions, serve to arouse a strong motive to engage in harm producing behavior,” (Baron/Byrne page 329) and that frustration produces not aggression, but a “readiness to respond aggressively”. Once this readiness exists, cues in the environment, that are associated with aggression, will often lead a frustrated person to behave aggressively. “Cues such as guns, knives, violent television scenes. Neither the frustration alone or the cues alone are sufficient to set off aggression, but when combined however, they do.” Berkowitz went on to say that “unexpected failure at some task tends to create a more intense negative reaction then a failure that is expected”. Support for Berkowitz theory is very strong. Studies have found that “frustration may facilitate aggression. and experiments have supported this”. (Berstein et al page 718) On the other hand, several experiments have reported that frustration sometimes may actually tend to reduce the level of aggression shown by the individual. Existing evidence points to the conclusion that whether frustration increases or fails to enhance aggression, depends on whether the frustration is intense and whether the aggression is seen as ‘just’ or ‘illegitimate’. However, few researchers currently hold the view that “frustration always leads to aggression”, frustration is simply one of many different causes of aggression (Baron/Byrne page 329)

When you look at the frustration hypothesis, it seems that practically any incident of aggression can be ascribed to frustration of acquisitiveness or “assertiveness. Gentry 1970 said that “frustration does not always produce aggression, sometimes it produces depression and withdrawal, and not all aggression is preceded by frustration” ( Berstein et al page 718) According to Leaky and Lewis (1977), “cultural influences are far more important determinants of human aggression than biological factors.” Any potential for aggression that man has, is “culturally overridden and re-packaged into behavior which fits current circumstances. In most cases, cultural forces teach or support non-aggression, but when pro-social aggression is necessary (disciplining children, and wrong doers,) cultural process teach and sustain it”. (Gross page 446)

Bandura, Baron, and Zillmann argue that aggressive behavior is a “learned form of social behavior, acquired and maintained” in much the same manner as other forms of social activity. (Baron/Byrne page 362) Elicitors of aggression such as personal insults, status threats, and the presence of weapons are all learned sources of aggressive behavior. Many responses are learned by watching others, further, aggressive actions are often followed by rewards and are therefore likely to be repeated. Bandura said that children were capable of learning aggressive behavior as a result of being exposed to it, because children tend to imitate what they see. Bandura exposed school children to a film of an adult behaving aggressively toward an inflated doll, ( “Bobo Doll “) Following exposure the children tended to imitate the aggressive behavior. These finding, Bandura believed, showed that young children learn to be aggressive against others, and that aggressive acts would be imitated. In contrast, critics pointed out, Bandura’s experiments were too artificial, that the Bobo Doll was designed specifically to be hit and that the children were aware of this, so maybe they were just expressing the behavior that was expected of them. Although Bandura was has been criticized, his findings has led to considerable research into the influence of violence in the mass media, especially television, on promoting aggressive behavior, and there is a growing body of research evidence which indicates that watching violent television is linked to increased tendencies towards subsequent aggression.

Support for the modeling and imitation theory comes from Patterson (1976) who found that “aggressive behavior is frequently reinforced in the home”. (Biechker/Hudson page 415) A young child who finds that anger and aggression are more effective in gaining what they want and which can enable them to control resources such as toys and parental attention, is having his aggression reinforced. Further, “aggressive parents who discipline with physical force act as models for their children and are likely to encourage aggression in their children towards other people” (Hardy/Heyes page 163). Children learn aggression by observing others behave aggressively, and this is supported by a recent national survey by the N.C.H. Action For Children which found that in families where there has been domestic violence, children imitate the aggression they witness between their parents, and “33 per cent of children in homes where the father was violent, became aggressive towards their mothers themselves”. (The Guardian Newspaper).

To summarize, ethnologists treat aggression as an evolutionary determined instinct, which was necessary for survival. The frustration-aggression model looks beyond the individual, seeing the tension as being triggered by factors in the environment which prevent the individuals attempts to reach a goal. Both the instinctive and the frustration -aggression models suggest that it is something about the individuals psychological make-up which causes aggression, and individual aggressive impulses are triggered by personality dynamics, such as ego, need or frustration, and in which the aggressive drives/impulses build up, and must be dissipated in some way. On the other hand, Social learning theorist view aggressive acts as responses learned through observations and imitation of others and by positive reinforcement for the behavior. Also, mans cultural heritage and his experience of socialization, and the many traits or characteristics posed by the individual is an important factor in determining his aggressive behavior.

In conclusion,, the reason as to why the individual is aggressive, has many possible sources. It has been suggested that aggression springs from basic drives. However, there is little evidence that supports the catharsis view, that aggression depends on a build up of energy which must be released in some way. On the other hand, there is a large body of research evidence that supports the view that exposure to aggressive models can stimulate similar behavior among observers. People who behave aggressively act as aggressive models, and through such action can influence others to act in a similar manner. So it can be seen, that there are views that point towards a pre-disposition towards aggression, while others would indicate either frustration, or a learned form of behavior as to the cause of aggression. It is proposed, that it is more likely that an individual will be aggressive if all of these criteria are met to some degree or other, however, the greater emphasis should be placed upon learnt behavior. It would seem strange if we, unlike all other mammals, were not genetically equipped to defend ourselves or our children when under attack, and it would be surprising if we lacked the urge to assert ourselves to some degree in competitive social situations. However, the claim that for man all is learned and nothing is genetically inherited, gives the impression that society can be molded into any shape and a human being is merely a blank canvas in which anything could be written upon.. In answer to the question, why are individuals aggressive? It is clear that there is no single cause as to why an individual is aggressive, many factors contribute to the occurrence of aggression. and that aggressive behavior has multiple, inter-linked causes.

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