

social psychology

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chapter 13: interpersonal aggression

what triggers aggression?

Aggression depends on the individual's perceptions and interpretations of other people, their behavior, and the situation in which the behavior occurs.

instrumental aggression: counting material costs and rewards

Instrumental aggression often involves more systematic thinking about the situation, as opposed to an immediate emotional reaction. When aggression pays, it becomes more likely, but when rewards are withdrawn, aggression usually subsides. If aggression depends on mastery motivation (people's perceptions of potential rewards and costs), the factors that influence those perceptions are personal abilities, gender differences, and possible losses.

hostile aggression: emotional responses to provocations

Threats to self-esteem may lead people to act aggressively without thinking about the consequences. Hostile aggression can involve immediate reactions in blind fury. A blow to self-esteem is worse in public, and thus the presence of an audience may make aggressive responses more likely.

personality differences in responses to provocations

People who react aggressively to threats to self-esteem typically have low self-esteem, because they might not have the inner resources to cope with frustrations. Furthermore, narcissists have a higher than average likelihood of committing aggression, because they have very high, but insecure and fluctuating, self-esteem. Some children have a perceptual bias that leads them to interpret ambiguous acts as intentional disrespect. These children are prone to become chronically aggressive. Although this bias has a strong role in hostile aggression, it has no impact on instrumental aggression.

Most aggression involves multiple motives, feelings of anger, and some concern about rewards and costs.

hostile aggression: the role of negative feelings

Hostile aggression is not limited to striking back at the provoker. The *frustration-aggression theory* says that any frustration (the blocking of an important goal) inevitably triggers aggression, but there are more and more critiques of this theory. [Berkowitz's \(1989\)](#) model is broader, and states that any negative feelings can set off aggression, including not only feelings of frustration and anger, but also pain, fear, and irritation.

norms promoting and restraining aggression

Social norms can either promote or restrain aggression. Because aggression is a potentially destructive force, almost all societies and groups have norms that regulate it. Group norms often promote aggressive behavior rather than restraining it.

norms promoting aggression

The United States has the most assaults among developed countries, so could it be that there is something about U.S. culture that makes aggression easier or more acceptable than in other North American and European countries? There are several norms unique to the U.S. that seem to provide an answer: (1) *The right to bear firearms and to use them*, (2) *the norm of family privacy*, and (3) *the "culture of honor."*

cultural cues to aggression

The *weapons effect* is the process in which seeing a weapon cues thoughts of aggression, and in turn makes aggressive behavior more likely. The presence of a gun may not only make aggression more deadly, it may also make it more likely in the first place. Also, perceiving a weapon can make aggression more likely. Common stereotypes can make observers more ready to see a gun in the hands of members of some groups than of others.

models of aggression

Unfortunately, aggressive models not only show people ways to act aggressively, but also send the message that an aggressive response is right, correct, and acceptable. Exposure to aggressive models makes violent behavior seem more appropriate because it stimulates aggressive thoughts and feelings.

aggressive models in the media

Evidence consistently disconfirms the catharsis idea that expressing an emotion can keep it from "building up." Aggressing or witnessing aggression not only doesn't make people feel calmer, it makes them more angry.

norms restraining aggression

Some groups have developed norms that effectively counteract aggression, but norms are usually most effective in limiting aggression against other in-group members. Similarity reduces aggression, and it does so for two reasons. First, shared group membership breeds liking, and positive feelings for another person are incompatible with aggression. Second, the norms of most groups proscribe or strictly control aggression within the group so that cohesion can be maintained, and group goals achieved.

to hurt or not to hurt: putting it all together

Situations that favor superficial thinking often favor aggression. Thinking carefully can reduce aggression, but many factors interfere with people's motivation and ability to process information carefully. Whatever grabs our attention most easily has the greatest impact on

our behavior. In anger-inducing situations, the self-esteem threat or other provocation that produced the anger is usually foremost in our attention.

Several factors may limit our ability to process deeply:

- *Emotional arousal.* Threat, trauma, and intense emotions can reduce people's capacity to process information carefully. The presence of weapons increases aggression even more when people are already aroused and angry. The physical and emotional trauma of child abuse diminishes a child's ability to interpret social cues correctly, and to generate imaginative responses to conflict situations. These deficits increase the child's own tendency to turn to aggression.
- *Alcohol use.* Alcohol can diminish people's ability to think systematically. Alcohol plus anger or threat is a recipe for aggression. A second influence of alcohol is that it lessens people's concern for factors that normally restrain aggression.
- *Time pressure.* When a decision has to be made quickly, an initial tendency to aggress may win more often.
- *Individual differences.* Some people are better at avoiding aggression than others. Interpersonal aggression is guided by fundamental cognitive and social processes. It is motivated by desires for mastery, connectedness, and esteem. It can be directed by firmly established or situationally accessible attitudes and norms, depending on whether or not we have the ability and motivation to think things through.

so what does this mean?

There are generally two distinct categories of aggression: *instrumental aggression* and *hostile aggression*.

Instrumental aggression often involves more systematic thinking about the situation. When aggression pays, it becomes more likely, but when rewards are withdrawn, aggression usually subsides. Factors that influence instrumental aggression are personal abilities, gender differences, and "having nothing to lose."

Hostile aggression involves immediate reactions in blind fury. Two theories of hostile aggression are the *frustration-aggression theory* and Berkowitz's model. Group norms often promote aggressive behavior rather than restraining it. Models can reduce aggression, but also send the message that an aggressive response is acceptable. Factors that increase the chances of aggression are emotional arousal, alcohol, and time pressure, but similarity reduces aggression.