



SILHOUETTE

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AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi was a great and compassionate leader who possessed a grand vision of non violence. His story of nobility, heroism, and courageous opposition to violence ended up in 1948 with a violent act that was diametrically opposed to what he preached and practiced. There are numerous stories of random violence and aggression that plague media such as students shocking nations by killing fellow students and teachers, mothers killing infants, fathers killing sons, youngsters killing elders and taking their own lives after such crime, etc. In whatever form it manifests, the aggressive behaviour adversely affects the general well being of society.

Both violence and non-violence are human characteristics present in all human beings. People experience anger very frequently but it seldom leads to violent acts. Numerous attempts by psychologists since a scientific approach to understanding human behavior emerged in the 19th century have produced conflicting results and many theories have evolved. Two such theories addressing aggressive behavior are Instinct Theory and Social Learning Theory. Sigmund Freud's Instinct Theory states that releasing aggressive feelings in a non harmful way, like games/sports, reduces the chance of violent behavior. Social Learning theorists like Albert Bandura believe that watching or practicing aggressive behaviour, even in non harmful ways can actually increase the chances of violence.

This paper is an attempt to analyze both these theories. First, a comparison is made of the two theories and then an assessment is made of the theory that best explains aggressive behavior.

INSTINCT THEORY

Sigmund Freud, making very strong assumptions about basic human nature believed that the sexual drive and the aggressive drive which emerge respectively from the life and death instincts urge humans toward selfish satisfactions. He looked at life quite pessimistically and was uncertain about the future of human existence. As he expounded, with the unconscious forces of sex and aggression pushing for gratification humans can survive only if society inhibits or redirects these energies into more useful acts like games, art, sports, etc. According to him socialization was an essential tool that prevented human species from havoc, where every one attempting to use others for personal sexual and aggressive pleasure. He argued that humans are basically "savage beasts," and only the processes of civilization can bring instincts of sexuality and destructiveness under control. He stressed that this tendency is inherent in human nature as an outgrowth of the death instinct.¹

¹Nye Robert D., Three Psychologies: Perspectives from Freud, Skinner, and Roggers - 2nd ed., Wadsworth Inc., Belmont, California, 1981, pp. 9-32



This theory could be related with data available on a survey of convicted rapists carried out in USA in year 1991. According to this survey most men who sexually attack women have a history of hostility and violence against both men and women. Many rapists were abused children feeling anger toward women and a need to dominate or control them.² This finding could be related with the "Oedipus complex" introduced by Freud in his theory. During this stage a boy develops an attraction to his mother and wants to possess her, displacing the father. However if he is subjected to mother's violent behavior he could develop a lasting impression of hate towards women which could be the best explanation for the findings of above survey. However, there can also be so many other factors that cannot be related or explained through Freud's theory of instincts.

Another survey carried out in 1998 has revealed that the probability of rape is also elevated when man becomes so intoxicated from alcohol or other drugs with the help of which he sheds the inhibitions that would ordinarily prevent such an attack.³ This evidence supports the argument that it is the processes of civilization and socialization that prevent havoc among human beings. Alcohol and drugs break the barriers of civilization or at least make them invisible to the offender, thus allowing him to behave in the natural, instinctual way as suggested by Freud.

The fact that displacement of instinctual energy into alternative activities results in socially desirable behavior is evident at places like Sri Lanka Military Academy (SLMA) where about 500 youth in the age group of 18-24 undergo military training. An environment of discipline and social harmony prevail there largely owing to displacement of energy for constructive activities. The trainees have to follow a very busy program of training which has a balanced mix of outdoor and class room activities. They remain busy throughout the day and during the free time in the evening, in the Officer Cadet's mess, a socially acceptable environment which is free from aggressive behavior prevail. In fact the busy schedule and group activities carried out at SLMA contribute towards developing group cohesion rather than promoting aggression or division.

Though the above examples are used in relation to the theory of instincts, proving instinct theory as the only cause for these behavioral patterns is not possible. The underlining observation made throughout this analysis was that there are numerous other factors that influence these behaviors. However, some important evidence necessary to relate them to instinct theory are clearly visible in all above cases and hence they are cited in this paper.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Albert Bandura's major premise is that we can learn by observing others. He considers vicarious experience to be the typical way that human beings change. He uses the term modeling to describe the processes of response acquisition (observation of another's response and modeling), and he claims that modeling can have as much impact as direct

²Kalat James W., Introduction to Psychology - 5th ed., Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1999, p. 457.

³Ibid.



experience. Social learning theory is a general theory of human behavior, but Bandura and people concerned with mass communication have used it specifically to explain media effects. Bandura warned that "children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling."⁴

Social learning theory postulates three necessary stages in the causal link between observed violence and actual physical harm to another. They are attention, retention, and motivation. Bandura says we can learn novel behavior without any practice or direct reinforcement for its consequences. The action will lie dormant, available for future use, as long as we remember it. Examples that support the theory of social learning are widely available in our society. Take any newspaper; it would contain stories of violence and crime. Many among them are spectacular ones carried out in manners similar to what is seen on the television in everyday viewing. The innovative methods artistically portrayed by the movie/television directors are imitated by the members of the underworld to the precision. Police activities revealed by television are now known to many and criminals use this knowledge to counter investigations.

The impact of social learning is clearly evident among children. Some children, for example, imitate Jimmy Neutron (a cartoon character with a brilliant innovative ability). Once, my own son justified some of his actions saying that Jimmy Neutron would have done the same thing. On the other hand, an average child would not feel guilty of killing an insect perceived to be harmful. I have seen children resorting to killing insects quite easily. These attitudes are common among most children. Seeing hundreds of "bad guys" and some times "good guys" routinely are being killed on TV may have some effect on this change of attitude.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INSTINCT AND SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES

In his early theory, Freud asserts that human behaviors are motivated by sexual and instinctive drives known as the libido, which is energy derived from the Eros, or life instinct. Thus, the repression of such libidinal urges is displayed as aggression. As an example of the expression of aggression as explained by Freud, let us consider his work on childhood aggression, and the Oedipus complex. A boy around age five begins to develop an intense sexual desire for his mother. He has come to regard her as the provider of food and love and thus wants to pursue an intimate, close relationship.⁵

The desire for his mother causes the boy to reject and display aggression toward his father. The father is viewed as a competitive rival and the goal they both try to attain is the mother's affection. Thus, an internal conflict arises in the young boy. On one hand, he loves his father, but on the other, he wants him to essentially "disappear", so that he can form an intimate relationship with his mother. A boy will develop an immense feeling of guilt over this tumultuous conflict and come to recognize the superiority of his father because of his size. This evokes fear in the boy and he will believe that by pursuing his mother's

⁴Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1977, p. 39

⁵Nye Robert D., pp. 9-32



affection his father will want to hurt him, essentially castrate him. To resolve the conflict, the boy learns to reject his mother as a love object and will eventually identify with his father. Thus, he has come to understand that an intimate relationship with his mother is essentially inappropriate.⁶

Freud also developed the female Oedipal Complex, later named the Electra Complex, which is a similar theory for the childhood aggression of girls. In this theory, a girl around the age of five develops penis envy in attempts to relate to her father and rejects her mother. A similar internal conflict arises in the young girl, which is resolved after regarding her father as an inappropriate love object and ultimately identifying with her mother.

These examples of Freud's psychoanalytic theory demonstrate the idea that aggression is an innate personality characteristic common to all humans and that behavior is motivated by sexual drives. According to Freud and as demonstrated by the male and female Oedipal Complexes, aggression in children is instinctual and should be resolved by adulthood. Therefore, over the course of development, after the child has rejected the opposite sex parent, he or she will enter a period of latency in which they commonly reject all boys or all girls. Once puberty is reached, attention shifts to the genital region as an area of pleasure. Freud asserted that once this stage is reached, both men and women would search for an appropriate member of the opposite sex to fulfill sexual urges. Thus, Freud states that in individuals where the childhood conflicts have been successfully resolved, all aggression has been removed by adulthood in the pattern of development.⁷

Later, Freud added the concept of Thanatos, or death force, to his Eros theory of human behavior. Contrary to the libido energy emitted from the Eros, Thanatos energy encourages destruction and death. In this conflict between Eros and Thanatos, some of the negative energy of the Thanatos is directed toward others, to prevent the self-destruction of the individual. Thus, Freud claimed that the displacement of negative energy of the Thanatos onto others is the basis of aggression. However, there are inherent problems in these arguments. Some of the problems typically raised in response to Freudian theory are that (a) Freud's hypotheses are neither verifiable nor falsifiable. It is not clear what would count as evidence sufficient to confirm or refute theoretical claims. (b) The theory is based on an inadequate conceptualization of the experience of women. (c) The theory overemphasizes the role of sexuality in human psychological development and experience.⁸

One of the most radical and well-documented approaches to aggression is the social learning theory, which, unlike the other models, does not attribute aggression to an internal mechanism. There are two important principles underlying this theory. In this hypothesis, aggression is initially learned from social behavior and it is maintained by other conditions. There is a variety of proposed methods through which aggression is learned and maintained. One method of learning aggressive behavior is through simple operant conditioning. If after performing an aggressive act an animal or human receives a positive reinforcement (such

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.



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as food or a toy), they are likely to repeat the behavior in order to gain more rewards. In this way, the aggressive act becomes positively associated with the reward, which encourages the further display of aggression. Aggressive responses can also be acquired through social modeling or social referencing. Small children are likely to look to a familiar face to see how to react to a particular person or situation.⁹

By demonstrating aggression, one can unknowingly encourage aggression in suggestible children. One of the most popular current debates which centers on the idea that TV violence contributes to increased aggression in viewers exemplifies the idea that people are easily influenced by others' behavior. By modeling the behaviors of TV, movie or video game characters, acts of aggression become increasingly more frequent and violent. Researchers suggest that after aggressive behaviors are acquired, other factors serve to maintain their presence including self-reinforcement, in which the aggressive individual is proud of his or her harmful action. Other maintaining conditions are tangible and intangible rewards. Whether a person receives money or a medal for injuring or harming another, that person is more likely to commit aggressive acts in the future due to the reinforcement received. Studies have shown that many aspects of the social learning theory of aggression are highly demonstrable in and out of the laboratory and by both humans and animals. Currently one of the most popular theories of aggression, it seems as though the social learning theory competently describes the acquisition and maintenance of aggression and violence in a variety of subjects.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

To formulate a conclusion about the theories of aggression we can analyze the existing empirical evidence in support of each, and examine their strengths and weaknesses. Freud's instinct theory of aggression is characteristic of most of his work, with psychic energy focused on the libido and motivation of sexual desires. While I give Freud credit for having developed such a profound theory very early in the history of social psychology, I cannot support his theory of aggression for two reasons.

- a. First, despite Freud's interest in childhood development and anxiety, he failed to observe children in his studies. His theories are substantially based on hypotheses.
- b. Second, there is no existing unchallenged evidence to support Freud's instinct theory of aggression.

Thus, in my opinion, Freud's theory can be virtually discounted as a scientific theory of aggression as there is no credible, tangible support that helps prove his theory beyond questioning.

⁹Kalat James W., pp. 457-459.

¹⁰Ibid, p. 220-221.



Hence, the social learning theory is the most well supported and documented theory of aggression. Not only is it widely applicable to men and women, girls and boys and members of all different age levels, but it also has been continually modified and developed over the years so as to incorporate new findings.

However, history of psychology has taught us that one cannot examine a problem from just one angle. Doing so leads to narrow conclusions that are only applicable to particulars. In order to obtain a general, well-rounded view, one must study the problem from different perspectives. Aggression cannot and should not be explained by just one of these two theories (or other theories that have been expounded by scientists) in particular. Rather, by combining the strengths of these aggression theories, one can obtain a general and dependable view on the phenomena of aggressive behavior. Aggression is an output that can be caused by many things. In today's violent world which is filled to capacity with murders and violence, we must regard aggression as a summated response to many factors. Individually, these factors may seem harmless but when combined they would have sufficient force to unleash aggression which may catalyze terrible crimes taking lives of so many innocent people.¹¹

Freud's Instinct theory of aggression which claims that releasing aggressive feelings in a non harmful way like games, sports, art, etc. reduces the chances of violent behavior appears to be explaining the violent nature of human being fully. But a close scrutiny of it and further studies revealed that it lacks a firm foundation to stand on. There are many areas of human behavior that are unexplained in his theory. Social Learning Theory, which is based on the premise that watching or practicing aggressive behavior even in non harmful ways can actually increase the chances of violence, on the other hand, is more modern and is effective in explaining the aggressive behavior of human beings. Hence, I propose that the Social learning theory offers the best explanation for aggressive behavior.

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¹¹Kalat James W., pp. 457-459.