



6-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Mary E. (1998) "Aggressivity and Violence: An Alternative Theory of Human Nature," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/1998.1189

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol5/iss1/3>

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Aggressivity and Violence: An Alternative Theory of Human Nature

Abstract

Excerpt

I open by clarifying the term "aggression" which is used in many contexts besides the one I am discussing (e.g. "the aggressive treatment of disease," or "the aggression of a predatory hunter," etc.). I restrict it to "intentional acts of violence meant to hurt one another, physically or psychologically."

Keywords: *aggression, emotion, frustration-aggression theory, Konrad Lorenz, Sigmund Freud, stimuli, violence*

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AGGRESSIVITY AND VIOLENCE: AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

Mary E. Clark

I open by clarifying the term "aggression" which is used in many contexts besides the one I am discussing (e.g. "the aggressive treatment of disease," or "the aggression of a predatory hunter," etc.). I restrict it to "intentional acts of violence meant to hurt one another, physically or psychologically."

I see two problems with contemporary theories of aggression:

(1) aggression is treated as a *response*, a behavior triggered by some stimulus. Whether an instinctive reflex or a learned response, the perception is of an inner cause/effect circuitry.

(2) the aggressor is conceptualized as an independent actor (a "billiard ball") in a social universe that comprises other isolated billiard balls. Society lies outside of, and is divorced from, the individual.

Old Theories

Freud's notion of aggression as an instinct "fed by an ever-flowing fountain of energy, and not necessarily the result of reaction to outer stimuli" was so popularized by Konrad Lorenz in his *On Aggression*, that I suspect it is still the commonest understanding among the public today--a sort of inevitable "drive" that builds up and must have an outlet (Fromm, 1973: 17). (This is often justification for competitive sports, including the spectator variety.) It is assumed that people need "release" from a built up "pressure" that naturally accumulates over time.

Although this model of spontaneous internal build-up of aggression (the *hydraulic model*) is no longer accepted, the description of aggression as an instinctive behavior that is released by some environmental stimulus is still with us. The most popular theory has been the *frustration-aggression theory*: excessive frustration of one's goals triggers aggression. Either the causal agent leads to a build-up of an aggressive urge, or it releases an aggressive instinct.

Again, both models assume a biological circuitry, connected to the limbic system and hypothalamus, that is "switched on" by specific stimuli. The threshold for the "switch" can be adjusted by learning, and overridden by cortical messages. I have no quarrel with this framework, but the focus tends to be on the automatic release of an emotion which causes the behavior, and that if the emotion is not *controlled*, then aggression will ensue.

To my mind, this approach leaves us focused on the "control of emotion," rather than on the "communication of emotions." The supposition is that if only we can somehow get people not to feel something, they will behave. It is rather as if emotions, or a least "bad ones," were unfortunate evolutionary hangovers from an animal past. In fact, they are nothing of the kind; they are part of the equipment we needed in the past--and still need today--to survive.

New Theory

My theory focuses not on the fact of emotions, but upon what are the stimuli that arouse them, and how do we communicate our feeling to others? A quick sketch of the human psyche as I believe it has evolved over 200,000 years or more will lay the groundwork.⁽¹⁾ In addition to our bodily needs for food, water, and sex, humans developed three very open-ended psychic needs--propensities, as I prefer to call them--essential for survival in an "intelligent group." Like almost all other primates, we strive to bond with others. Group bonding is a natural (genetic) extension of mother/infant bonds, and greatly increases survival of helpless, but potentially smart, offspring. Like other primates, we have a strong desire for autonomy of action, a habit necessary for exploring and learning one's environment, which in turn is necessary to stimulate interneuronal synapses and thus maximize "intelligence" (See Diamond, 1988).

The third, purely human propensity is the need for meaning; a cultural narrative that makes sense of the universe of stimuli we are embedded in. Meaning is the basis of language, our most important form of communication. Without meaning, we have no social identity, no purpose to our existence: we are essentially without our self-aware consciousness. Thus meaning is every bit as critical for our survival as are bonding (acceptance in the group) and autonomy (freedom of action). In fact, meaning requires social embeddedness.

All three psychic propensities are heavily guarded by our emotional centers. This is where aggression comes in. It is but one means of communicating that these critical psychic needs are either being threatened or are not being met. Aggression, after all, is an infant's only means of communicating distress--crying, screaming, getting red in the fact. A young child not only cries and screams, she may kick, bite, hit or throw something to make her point.

Growing up ideally--and I stress ideally--involves being taught less physical, hurtful, aggressive forms of communication. A healthy childhood compromises learning the verbal (and non-verbal) social skills of communicating one's own needs--and of being sensitive to those of others. Thus so-called "innate aggression," the use of physical outbursts to communicate, is replaced by more sophisticated forms of communication that depend upon the acquisition of both new neuromotor skills and language/symbolic skills, and which usually allow for some non-physical dialogue to take place.

If the dialogue fails, and the psychic need is not satisfied, then the threat is still present, and communication become psychologically or physically violent. This is especially likely if the other solution to unresolved conflict--of separating oneself from the intolerable situation--is not possible, as when the conflict is between a mother and her dependent offspring. (Other primate

societies regularly fission under times of stressful group conflict if space is available for them to do so. If space is limited, as with certain troops, violence is often observed (See Goodall, 1986; Power, 1991; de Waal, 1989).⁽²⁾

I say that the above is what happens when one is growing up under ideal conditions. In many families, indeed in whole cultures, the growing up process too often falls far short of this ideal. Tired or frustrated parents may use violence themselves in an effort to suppress a child's aggressive or other unwanted behaviors, rather than teaching them alternative ways of communicating or responding to their legitimate needs. Parents and other care givers may abuse their children psychologically, physically, or sexually. Or, a whole culture may become abusive in various ways. All forms of social discrimination are psychically abusive, denying equal social acceptance. Societies that are highly competitive have much the same effect on both children and adults. Without unconditional acceptance, feelings of rejection are always present. Cultures that mete out severe punishments as retribution for antisocial acts are equivalent to punitive parents. And societies that promote violence in entertainment, and glorify aggressive behavior are signaling to the growing child that aggression is, after all, a culturally acceptable form of communication!

Violent body-contact sports, such as boxing and football, although not a form of communication in themselves (i.e. the rivals are not communicating anger or disappointment or fear or resentment of one another as exists in true aggression), are modeling, in play, such aggressive acts. They, too, despite all the touting of sportsmanship, are teaching that violent aggression, if carried out by rules, is acceptable. It leads to a kind of moral absurdity embodied in the rules of war. This caveat about the symbolic meaning gleaned from certain violent sports can also be applied to those video games and fantasy television dramas that employ physical violence as solution to human conflict.⁽³⁾

There is yet one further piece to this model of violence and aggression and that is that the brains of highly stressed persons--particularly young children--may become physically altered, permanently. We tend to assume in Western society that brains simply develop regardless of the conditions experienced. But this is absolutely untrue. Children who are abused or neglected develop brains that are *changed at all levels*. The cortical system fails to fully develop, so these children are less capable of abstract thought and problem-solving. They are less able to learn, or to communicate verbally. They cannot maintain attention, and are often hyperactive. And the cortex is less capable of overriding emotional feelings. They never can develop mature, adult behavior (See Perry, et al., 1995, 1997.).

And the emotional feelings that do develop are lopsided. The ability to form attachments and feel empathy for others is greatly suppressed, such that some persons grow up quite unable to feel bonded at all. These are often senseless murderers, who truly cannot feel remorse. (Some have reported killing just to see if they could finally feel something) (Gilligan, 1996). On the other hand, their reflex emotions in the face of threat or perceived danger are over-developed, so that they live in a state of hyperarousal or hypervigilance. The least thing--"too long a stare" by a stranger--may result in a violent outburst. For girls and women, the dissociation from society resulting from severe stress is more likely to take the form of depression, withdrawal, and passivity. These gender differences are often exacerbated by cultural expectations: males are

supposed to be violent and females submissive. These people are essentially suffering from life-long post-traumatic stress disorders, which are often therapy resistant.

Finally, all these violent behavioral tendencies can be exacerbated by alcohol and other drugs that act "from-the-top-down" on the brain, throwing cortical control over the overdeveloped lower centers even further out of kilter. And of course, such substance abuse is often the only way the psychically abused persons can escape the pain of their fear, anger, and alienation.

We can sum up by pointing out that the capacity for aggression is adaptive when one's survival is threatened in one fashion or another. The brains of people, especially children, who are heavily stressed, are adapting to survival in dangerous situations: trust no one; be ready for danger at any moment; strike first. Such a person's brain "sees" the world as a battlefield in which one is constantly under fire.

It is impossible to overstress, I think, the role that cultural narratives play in certain aggressive behaviors in a society. And once the pattern spreads, it becomes doubly self-reinforcing. Aggression is seen as culturally acceptable, so children and youth grow up with brains triggered toward violent aggression. Aggression becomes the cultural language and may become the cultural pastime in formalized "games"--as occurred in ancient Rome and is occurring again today. We can begin to speak of pathological or sick societies. And even those that are less pathological than the extremes suggested here are likely to have large numbers of psychically damaged persons in their midst.

I have presented explanations for the more obvious forms of violence. It should be easy to understand family abuse, street gangs, and other violent behaviors in these terms. Understanding other antisocial behaviors is, perhaps, less obvious, especially those that suggest dissociation or withdrawal from social engagement, as is evermore prevalent among America's youth. Here I would suggest that the stress is less of an immediate physical danger (although the fraction of children who experience or witness such abuse in the United States is substantial--around five million a year), but of psychic uncertainty about their personal identity in a culture where community and personal bonds are continuing to weaken identity (owing to the commoditization of more and more relationships); where their autonomy is increasingly constrained by the needs of a national economy and global market over which they have absolutely no control, yet from which they see no escape; and especially where human meaning (at least at the national level) has been reduced to dollars and cents. There really is no other value being discussed in the national dialogue (aside from issues surrounding birth and death, but little in between). It is hard to find a meaningful "personal identity" in such a culture. People are only employees or employers, ciphers in a national accounting system. There is no other widely-shared, community meaning.

Finally, there is another category of violence that includes ethnic conflict, the Holocaust, and Japanese militarism earlier this century, to give but a few examples. How can whole groups enter into cold-blooded violence? My theory, I believe contributes to our understanding of these acts, too. When we realize that an individual person's identity and psychic well-being emerges from his or her relationship to the community-of-meaning, the cultural milieu in which each person exists, then it is but a small step to extending our understanding of psychic security to the larger

milieu. If a society feels threatened by, or is not accepted by, the global community of societies, that society and its people (whose personal identities are invested in it) experience the same feelings of rejection and fear that an abandoned child or an unaccepted adolescent might feel. They all too often take on the protective behaviors of the aggressive bully, justifying their acts through delusions of superiority or "absolute right." In the global arena of nation states, they parallel the aggressive bully of the play-ground. When the identity of a whole group (religious community, nation-state, or ethnic tribe) appears threatened or cast outside the larger "community of global peoples," it acts as a single psychic unit to protect and strengthen its own standing (See Burton, 1997). In the twentieth century we have experienced many examples of this: Hitler's Germany excessively denigrated by the Treaty of Versailles; Libya, Iran and Iraq, all responding to denial into the global community by Western powers; the Serbs of the former Yugoslavia, who have long--as have all Slavs--seen themselves as "second-class" Europeans.

Then, on the other side, are the powerful cultures that create these "bullies" and "pariahs" using the argument that only they are morally right. Examples of these in the past century have been the Japanese, whose cultural history insisted they were not only right, but absolutely right; the former Soviet Union, with its belief in the absolute truth of Marx's historical necessity of communism; and today, the United States, with its absolute insistence that the entire planet adopt its brand of capitalist free-market economics (See Galtung, 1990).

All these are example of cultural fantasies of being "the Chosen People"--which I regard as yet one more form of mass psychic insecurity. They are dangerous on two counts: because by believing themselves as the answers to all human needs, they employ military, political , economic and cultural power to impose their world views on others; and because by eliminating alternative cultural narratives, they are depriving the entire species of the cultural diversity that has always been present in the past. On the first count, they invite continuous inter-cultural strife by depriving other peoples of their deep-seated need to identify with and evolve on their own through gradual modification of their own historical and psychologically grounded meanings. On the second count, it is abundantly clear that the ideas and institutions of Western culture are not well-adapted either to the planet's capacities as an environmental support system for humankind or to the needs of either the individual or the collective human psyche, as I have argues in detail elsewhere. I thus conclude that human nature is not well-adapted to thrive in the dominant Western culture now striving to replace all others around the planet. It is time that the members of that culture begin to see the gravity of their own pathology and of the pathological conditions that their culture also inflicts on others. Violence against Nature, and against the meaning-systems of other cultures is but the latest form of aggressive behavior exhibited by our species--and to me denotes a grave psychic defect of our own belief-system: we are not as secure as we suppose we are! Self-criticism of one's own belief system is, for very good reasons, one of the more psychologically difficult things we ever do, yet it is the way our species adapts.

Notes

1. These ideas are developed fully Mary Clark, *Human Nature-Revised!*, forthcoming.

2. See Goodall and Power for violence in the wild; de Waal for violence in captive primates.

3. See Michael Nagler. 1992. *America without Violence*. Covelo, CA: Island Press, for a discussion of a whole host of cultural sources of violent behavior in America.

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