

## All aggression is learned; A critical Evaluation

Critically evaluating the statement "all aggression is learned" involves examining it from various perspectives, including psychological, biological, and social viewpoints. This statement aligns with the social learning (*Social Learning Theory*, n.d.) theory but may be conflicting with biological and innate perspectives on aggression.

We will be defining aggression and examining the foremost theories of aggression and exploring the interplay between genetics and environmental factors in its evolution.

Additionally, this examination will leverage insights into the development of aggression to enhance current methodologies in assessing and treating young individuals. Finally, a critical evaluation will be conducted on the contribution of research in enriching our understanding of aggression's development within the realm of child and adolescent mental health.

Aggression is essentially a behavioural manifestation of emotions, commonly anger, and can present itself in physical, relational, or verbal forms (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.) it is a behavioural response to an emotion. The inclination towards aggression, however, varies considerably between individuals (Odintsova et al., 2019).

Several theories and methodologies have emerged to explain the origins of aggression.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory modelling (Bandura et al., 1961) suggests that much of human behaviour, including aggression, is learned observationally. Children learn to be aggressive by observing and imitating others, such as family members, peers, or media characters.

The variation in aggressive behaviour across different societies supports the idea that aggression is learned (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Cultures that glorify violence tend to

have higher rates of aggressive behaviour, indicating that social norms and values play a significant role (Katsantonis, 2021).

Supporting Bandura's social learning theory, research by Hausmann et al (Huesmann, 2007) has shown that since the early 1960s exposure to violent content in television, movies, video games, cell phones, and the internet can raise the likelihood of violent behaviour in viewers. This parallels how real-life violence exposure during upbringing can lead to similar outcomes. They conclude there is a greater chance of short-term and long-term aggressive behaviour in children and people who are exposed to violent electronic media. It raises the risk considerably and to the same extent as many other elements that are deemed dangerous to the public's health.

Furthermore, modern research (Iacoboni, 2008) shows that mirror neurons and other neural processes facilitate learning through observation. This provides biological evidence confirming Bandura's proposals (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).

There is however a significant amount criticism to the social learning theory. Firstly, aggression is known to have biological and genetic roots in certain cases (Axelrod, n.d.) such as the aggression arising from high testosterone levels or low serotonin. Aggression also surfaces in cases of illnesses, brain injuries, or neurological conditions, suggesting a biological basis that is not just learned. Many species demonstrate territorial aggression, aggression during mating competition, aggression in protection of offspring or aggression when resources are scarce (Animal Behaviour: An Evolutionary Approach, 9th Ed., n.d.). This indicates forms of instinctive aggression rooted in evolutionary survival value rather than social learning alone.

Furthermore, studies show (Tuvblad & Baker, 2011) including those on twins, indicate that genetics may play a role in predisposing individuals to aggressive behaviour. While not deterministic, these genetic factors challenge the notion that all aggression is learned.

Further research by Wang et al (Wang et al., 2013) demonstrate that certain brain structures and hormonal imbalances can contribute to aggressive behaviour. For example, individuals with reduced activity in the frontal lobes or high levels of testosterone may exhibit increased aggression.

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, initially proposed by Dollard et al. in 1939 (Dollard et al., 2004), posits that aggression is a direct result of frustration that individuals experience when they are hindered from reaching their goals. Dollard and his colleagues further elaborated that the accumulation of multiple minor frustrations could lead to a more intense aggressive response than any single frustration could elicit. The model highlights three key elements that influence this process: the reinforcement value or significance of the goal that is being frustrated, the extent to which the goal-directed response is frustrated and the cumulative number of frustrated response sequences.

Buss's study in 1963 (Buss, 1963) expanded on this theory by comparing aggression levels in students subjected to non-frustrating situations with those experiencing various forms of frustration, such as the inability to win money, failure to achieve a certain grade, or failure in a task. This study provided further empirical support for the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, demonstrating the link between frustration and subsequent aggressive behaviours.

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, proposed by Dollard et al. and expanded by Buss, suggests a direct link between frustration and aggression. However, this hypothesis has

faced criticism for its oversimplification of aggression, focusing solely on frustration as its cause and neglecting other contributing factors such as psychological traits, environmental contexts, and biological predispositions (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003). Critics also question the universality of this theory, pointing out that not all frustration leads to aggression, and not all aggression stems from frustration. Additionally, ethical concerns have been raised regarding the research methods used to test this hypothesis. The ethical concerns with the study of the Frustration-Aggression Theory primarily revolve around the manipulation of participants' emotions, the potential negative impact on subjects (especially children), and the broader societal implications of the theory's applications (Tedeschi & Quigley, 1996). The emergence of alternative theories, like the Social Learning Theory, challenges its view by suggesting that aggression is also learned through observation and imitation, indicating the need for a more comprehensive understanding of aggression's causes and nature.

Another approach to aggression is the functionalist approach. Aggression, according to the functionalist perspective, is natural and intentional (Cashdan & Downes, 2012). The functionalist perspective argues that aggression served an adaptive purpose in our ancestral past. By harming threats, securing resources, and establishing dominance, it increased an individual's chances of survival and passing on their genes (Lindenfors & S.Tullberg, 2011). Aggression serves a clear evolutionary purpose, namely it increases the likelihood of survival by locating and harming a source of threat. Male-to-male fighting in animals can be understood as intentional (*On Aggression - Konrad Lorenz - Google Books*, n.d.) By encouraging the strongest of the species to mate, dominance structures improve natural selection. If aggression is indeed innate, neurofunctional substrates and its suppression, along with other biologically learnt characteristics, should reflect this.

The so called "warrior gene" refers to a variant of the gene encoding monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A), an enzyme that breaks down key neurotransmitters like noradrenaline, adrenaline, serotonin, and dopamine (McDermott et al., 2009). Individuals with a variant associated with lower MAO-A activity (MAOA-L) are thought to be more prone to violence than those with a variant linked to higher activity (MAOA-H). Studies (Ficks & Waldman, 2014) have shown that those with MAOA-L exhibit different brain activities, including reduced activity in the anterior cingulate and increased activity in the amygdala, potentially leading to more aggression. However, aggressive behaviour in individuals with MAOA-L is similar to those with MAOA-H in the absence of environmental stressors. Structural differences in these brain regions have also been observed, which might influence this behaviour.

The criticism on the functionalist perspective is that it can overemphasize biological underpinnings while neglecting the significant influence of cultural norms, social learning, and individual experiences on aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, by solely focusing on evolutionary advantages, the approach can simplify complex human behaviour and risk reducing individuals to instinct-driven agents, ignoring the nuances of decision-making and moral considerations (Berkowitz, 1993)

There are also ethical concerns with this approach (Stephen Jay Gould & York, n.d.) misapplied functionalist interpretations can be used to justify or normalize aggression, potentially overlooking individual responsibility and fostering harmful societal narratives and attributing aggression solely to biological predispositions can lead to stigmatization and victim blaming, ignoring the complex interplay of factors that contribute to such behaviours.

In conclusion, while the social learning theory provides substantial evidence that much of aggression is learned, the statement "all aggression is learned" overlooks the complex

interplay of biological, genetic, and environmental factors that collectively influence aggressive behaviour. It is more accurate to view aggression as a result of both innate predispositions and learned experiences.

Attributing all aggression solely to learned behaviour is an oversimplification. While social learning undoubtedly plays a significant role, a nuanced understanding should consider the interplay of biological predispositions, environmental factors, and potential mental health influences.

Aggression clearly also has biological underpinnings and instincts innate to humans that precede any learning. The aetiology of aggression involves multiple interacting variables. Asserting it is solely learned oversimplifies this complexity. More moderate positions recognizing aggression's multiple determinants are more defensible.

Therefore, a more accurate statement might be: most, but not all, aggression is influenced by learning and environmental factors, with the potential for biological and mental health influences to also play a role.

Further research is needed to fully understand the complex causes of aggression, and a one-dimensional explanation like "all aggression is learned" falls short of capturing the multifaceted reality.

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*APA Dictionary of Psychology*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 23, 2024, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/aggression>

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