

Human Aggression (Part 5)

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2.6 Instinct Theory

It is also known as Freudian theory which is an innate tendency to seek a particular goal, such as food, water and sex. The leading proponent for this theory, Sigmund Freud argues that human motivational forces, such as sex and aggression, are based on instincts (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008). Through evolution, humans have inherited a fighting instinct similar to that found in many species of animals. One of the best known proponents of aggressive instinct in humans was Konrad Lorenz (Heleta, 2007). Konrad Lorenz says that we have a biological need for aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2002). It gets stronger as time passes since the last aggressive act (like hunger increases hours after a meal) which causes our energy level (drive level) to increase. This energy must somehow be released (“catharsis”). Because fighting is closely linked to mating, the aggressive instinct helped ensure that only the strongest individuals would pass on their genes to future generation (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008).

Instinct Theory says that humans learn their own individual ways of expressing aggressive motivation differ from the animal species which behave in ways that are genetically programmed and characteristic of all members of the species (Bushman & Anderson, 2002). Freud proposed the drive for sensory and sexual gratification as the primary human instinct (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008). Many people think of aggression as instinctual. This is the case even though the public-at-large has not read Freud on the subject and probably would not accept his notion of a death instinct, even if they were to become familiar with it.

On a popular level, aggression is not seen so much as an outward displacement of an innate internally-directed destructive drive, but rather as a universal externally directed drive, possibly connected to a survival instinct, which unites humankind with the animal world (Dugan, 2004). Many go farther in assuming that we can look to the non-human animal world to gain a clearer understanding of human aggression.

Aggression-as-instinct theorists tend to ascribe a cathartic effect to expressions of aggression (Dugan, 2004). Unfortunately, such predictions [of catharsis] turn out to be wrong.

Couples who argue the most are those who are the most likely to become violent. Husbands who push their wives are those most likely to move on to slapping and punching. The best predictor of an individual's likelihood of criminal violence this year is his criminal violence last year. Violence seems to beget violence rather than decrease it (Dugan, 2004).

Also, Freud's most important theory of aggression that came after his involvement with Einstein and under the influence of destructiveness of World War I is known as the "death instinct." The idea of Freud's death instinct is that, "the organism's wish to return to the state of nothingness whence it emerged... the stronger the death instinct in a person, the more necessary is it for that person to direct aggression outward against objects and people" (Heleta, 2007)

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