Aggression defined

- Intentional action aimed at doing harm or causing physical or psychological pain
- Aggression is not assertiveness
- May be either physical or verbal
- An act is aggressive even if it does not succeed in its goal
  - i.e. if a drunk driver unintentionally runs you down while you’re attempting to cross the street, that is not an act of aggression, even though the damage is far greater than that caused by the beer bottle that missed

Hostile vs. instrumental aggression

- **Hostile aggression**
  - An act of aggression stemming from a feeling of anger and intended to cause pain or injury
- **Instrumental aggression**
  - An act of aggression that intends to hurt someone, but as a means to a goal other than causing pain
  - i.e. in pro football, a defensive lineman will usually do whatever it takes to thwart his opponent (the blocker) and tackle the ball carrier. This often includes intentionally inflicting pain on his opponent if doing so is useful in helping him get the blocker out of the way so he can get the ball carrier. This is instrumental aggression.
  - i.e. if he believes his opponent has been playing dirty, he might become angry and go out of his way to hurt his opponent, even if doing so doesn’t increase his opportunity to tackle the ball carrier. This is hostile aggression.

Aggression is optional

- Latest thinking is that aggression has evolved and has been maintained because it has survival value
- However, nearly all organisms have inhibitory mechanisms
- Even in the most violence-prone species, aggression is an optional strategy
- Whether or not it is expressed is determined by the animal’s previous social experiences, as well as the specific social context in which the animal finds itself

Factors in human use of aggression

- Innate tendency to respond to certain provocative stimuli by being aggressive—striking out against perpetrator
- Whether or not aggressive tendency is actually expressed in overt action is a function of a complex interplay between these innate propensities, a variety of learned inhibitory responses AND the precise nature of the social situation
- The infinite variety of ways in which humans can modify their aggressive tendencies is highlighted by the fact that, within a given culture, changing social conditions can lead to dramatic changes in aggressive behavior
Is aggression useful?

- Some evidence that aggression serves to ensure “survival of the fittest”
  - i.e. monkeys, elephant seals and dominance hierarchy and mating behavior
- Equating high achievement and advancement with hostility and aggression is confusing the issue as a problem or skill can be mastered without harming others or conquering them
- In the U.S. success is equated with “victory”
  - i.e. striving for high grades and SAT scores vs. loving learning
- However, cooperative behavior has survival value also
- Was competitive and aggressive behavior really about survival as hunter gatherers or did it occur later with ownership and protection of possessions?

Catharsis—Does it work?

- Definition of psychoanalytic concept of catharsis
  - the release of energy
- Freud believed that humans had to release their natural aggressive tendencies to avoid a build-up and eventual explosion
  - i.e. water pressure building up in a container and needs to be drained to prevent an explosion
  - Society helps people to channel aggressive energy into useful behavior
    - Sublimate it
      - i.e. hit a pillow, punching bag, etc.

Catharsis—research evidence

- Many studies of the dynamics of catharsis conclude that the opportunity to express aggression leads to increasing, rather than diminishing, aggression
  - Bushman—insulted->angry->3 experimental conditions:
    - Punching bag and encouraged to think about what made angry
    - Punching bag and think of activity as exercise
    - Sit still without punching anything
      - Those who sat still were least angry
      - Also, chance to express aggression against person who insulted
    - Those who hit bag and thought about “enemy” blasted loudest and longest the unpleasant noise
    - Those who sat still were least aggressive
    - Therefore, physical activity (i.e. bag) neither dissipates nor reduces aggression
  - HS football—if catharsis is true, players would exhibit decline in hostility over course of season. Instead a significant increase over the season.

Catharsis and cognitive dissonance

- The notion of catharsis makes sense however, aggressive impulses are governed by feelings and by thinking
- Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that aggressive behavior must be rationalized, which justifies (or provokes) further aggression
  - Once you’ve shocked someone or made a nasty comment about your boss → easier to do again
  - Cognition “I have hurt Sam” is dissonant with cognition “I’m a decent person who doesn’t go around hurting people” → Focus on Sam’s faults to justify hurtful, aggressive actions toward him.
  - Reduces dissonance and increases likelihood of future hurtful behavior
Causes of aggression

- Neurological/Chemical
  - Amygdala associated with aggressive behaviors in humans and animals
    - When amygdala is electrically stimulated, docile organisms become violent and vice versa. When blocked, leads to docile.
    - Serotonin inhibits impulsive aggression
  1. Testosterone
  2. Alcohol
  3. Pain/Discomfort
  4. Frustration
- Social learning

1. Testosterone
- The physical expression of aggression is linked to testosterone levels
  - I.e. naturally occurring testosterone levels are higher among prisoners convicted of violent crimes than nonviolent
- Injecting animals with testosterone increases aggression
- Behaving aggressively increases levels of testosterone in the blood
- In general, men are more physically aggressive than women

Relational aggression

- “Social” form of aggression
- Activities aimed at hurting others by sabotaging their relationships with peers
- While boys are more physically aggressive, relational aggression is much more prevalent in girls
- This gender difference is biological and social—within a culture men more physically aggressive than women, but culture is also a factor
  - I.e. women from Australia and New Zealand more physically aggressive than men from Sweden and Korea
  - I.e. book/movie “Odd Girl Out”

2. Alcohol
- Virtually universally consumed
- Lowers inhibitions, including those against aggression
  - I.e. fistfights in bars and family violence with abuse of alcohol
  - Crime statistics show 75% of violent crime arrests involve alcohol
- Alcohol also disrupts information processing, leading to aggressive responses due to missed or misunderstood social cues
- Research shows that alcohol consumption + provoked → aggression
3. Pain and discomfort

• If an organism experiences pain and cannot flee, attack almost invariably results
  – I.e. stub your toe, may act irritable toward closest target
• Strong correlation between hot weather and riots and violent crime

4. Frustration-aggression theory

• The most likely instigator of aggression
  • Frustration arises from the gap between expectations and attainments
    • If thwarted on way to goal (i.e. flat tire and need to get to job interview or malfunctioning vending machine ate your last dollar when starved and on way to class/work), the resulting frustration will increase the probability of an aggressive response
      – I.e. Barker, Dembo, Lewin frustrated children with seeing toys, but unable to play with them and after waiting, damaged the toys. The control group played with toys directly without delay and didn't exhibit aggressive play.
    • The closer to the goal, the more frustration is experienced if progress is interrupted
      – I.e. stopped from eating a Big Mac just as you were about to bite into it vs. on the way to McDonald's
    • Frustration increases even more if the interruption is unexpected or perceived to be unjustified
      – I.e. Kulik and Brown—students earning money calling for donations and the expectations led to believe about the rate of contributions. Of the callers led to expect a high rate (successful 2/3 of the time), more aggressive behavior was exhibited when donor refused
    • Frustration doesn't always lead to aggression, but it produces anger/annoyance and a readiness to act aggressively if other things about the situation are conducive to aggressive behavior

Relative deprivation

• Deprivation is distinct from frustration
• Frustration results from “relative” deprivation
  – Perception that you are deprived relative to others
    – Thwarted expectations
      – I.e. LA and Detroit riots by African Americans not in geographical areas of greatest poverty, but in areas that things were bad for blacks relative to what whites had.
      – I.e. After graduation, I don’t pursue education and you pursue education. 10 years later, if I notice you have a better job that I do, I may be unhappy with my job, but won’t experience frustration because it’s an outcome of my choice. However, if we’ve both been educated and, and you have a white-collar job and I have a blue-collar job (because of my cultural background or gender), I will feel frustrated.

Rejection, exclusion, taunting

• I.e. Columbine HS
  – Tip of the iceberg of social environment of many high schools overcome with exclusion, rejection, taunting, and humiliation
    • Hierarchy of cliques with athletes, class officers, cheerleaders, and “preppies” at the top and those referred to by the top as nerds, goths, geeks, loners, homos at the bottom
    • Those at the top reject, taunt, and ridicule those at the bottom
Social learning

- Social learning plays an important role in whether or not a person will be aggressive in a given situation.
- SL can inhibit an aggressive response.
- SL impacts how intention is attributed to an agent of pain or frustration.
  - I.e. Mallick and McCandless frustrated 3rd graders by having another child’s clumsiness prevent them from achieving a goal that would’ve resulted in a cash prize. Some were given a reasonable and unspiteful explanation for the behavior (he was “sleepy and upset”) which resulted in less aggression directed at the interfering child.
  - I.e. Berkowitz—subjects paired with an accomplice introduced as either a “college boxer” or “speech major.” This accomplice provoked the subjects by shocking them. ½ viewed a violent prizefighting scene while others viewed an exciting but nonaggressive film clip. When given the chance to shock the confederate, those who’d seen the violent movie segment administered more and longer shocks. Of those who’d seen the prizefighting film and were introduced to the confederate as a “boxer,” delivered more shocks than those paired with “speech major.”
- The presence of an object associated with aggression can cue an aggressive response.
  - Aggressive stimulus (i.e. gun) vs. neutral stimulus (i.e. badminton racket).

Deindividuation

- Anonymity induces deindividuation, a state of lessened self-awareness, reduced concern over social evaluation, and weakened restraints against prohibited forms of behavior.
- One aspect of social learning that inhibits aggression is the tendency of most people to take responsibility for their actions.
- Research has shown that anonymity increases aggressive responses.
  - I.e. Mullen and Lynchings—powerful relationship between mob size and violence in that the larger the group, the more heinous the atrocities committed.
  - When people are part of a crowd, they are “faceless,” less self-aware, and less mindful of prohibitions against aggressive, destructive actions. Therefore, less likely to take responsibility for aggressive acts.

Learning to aggress

- Classic research by Bandura and colleagues on social learning—“Bobo doll”
  - Children watched an adult abuse a doll.
  - Children imitated adult and engaged in “innovative” aggression against the doll.

Violence on TV

- Lots of research in this area.
- High correlation between amount of violence watched on TV and viewer’s aggressiveness.
- Accumulates over time - strength of correlation increases with age.
- “Overwhelming” evidence demonstrates that watching violence increases aggression in children.
- Especially true of children prone to aggressive responses.
  - I.e. Josephson—film of police violence or nonviolent bike racing and then played floor hockey. Watching the violent film had the effect of increasing the number of aggressive acts during the game—primarily by those previously rated as highly aggressive by their teachers.
### Violence on TV

- Average 12-year old has witnessed 100,000 acts of violence on TV.
- One aspect of watching so much violence is “priming” — seeing violence increases the probability of an aggressive response to pain or frustration.
  - I.e. Phillips and homicide rates in the US increased during the week following a heavyweight boxing match. The more publicity surrounding the fight, the greater the subsequent increase in homicides.
- Repeated exposure to unpleasant events has a numbing effect on our sensitivity to those events.
- Several research studies have shown that heavy TV watchers show less reaction to “real life” violent events.
  - I.e. Thomas — viewing a violent police drama or an exciting, but nonviolent volleyball game. Then observe a verbally and physically aggressive interaction between two preschoolers. Those who watched the police show responded less emotionally than those who watched the volleyball game.

### Why does media violence affect viewers’ aggression?

1. “If they can do it, so can I.”
   - Weakens previously learned inhibition against violent behavior.
2. “Oh, so that’s how you do it.”
   - Watching characters on TV express violence might trigger imitation by providing ideas about how one might go about it.
3. “I think it must be aggressive feelings that I’m experiencing.”
   - Watching violence makes the feeling of anger more easily available and makes an aggressive response more likely simply through priming. So, an individual might erroneously construe their own feeling of mild irritation as anger and might be more likely to lash out.
4. “Ho hum, another brutal beating; what’s on the other channel?”
   - Watching a lot of mayhem seems to reduce both our sense of horror about violence and our sympathy for the victims, making it easier for us to live with violence and maybe easier to act aggressively.
5. “I had better get him before he gets me!”
   - If watching a lot of TV makes me think the world is a dangerous place, I might be more apt to be hostile to a stranger who approaches me on the street.

### Reducing violence

1. Punishment
2. Punishing aggressive role models
3. Rewarding alternative behavior

### Why does media violence affect viewers’ aggression?

1. “If they can do it, so can I.”
   - Weakens previously learned inhibition against violent behavior.
2. “Oh, so that’s how you do it.”
   - Watching characters on TV express violence might trigger imitation by providing ideas about how one might go about it.
3. “I think it must be aggressive feelings that I’m experiencing.”
   - Watching violence makes the feeling of anger more easily available and makes an aggressive response more likely simply through priming. So, an individual might erroneously construe their own feeling of mild irritation as anger and might be more likely to lash out.
4. “Ho hum, another brutal beating; what’s on the other channel?”
   - Watching a lot of mayhem seems to reduce both our sense of horror about violence and our sympathy for the victims, making it easier for us to live with violence and maybe easier to act aggressively.
5. “I had better get him before he gets me!”
   - If watching a lot of TV makes me think the world is a dangerous place, I might be more apt to be hostile to a stranger who approaches me on the street.

### 1. Punishment

- Severe punishment of aggression has been shown to be temporarily effective.
- However, in the long run, it may actually increase aggressive responses (usually outside of the home and away from the punishing parent).
- With children, mild punishments and the opportunity to internalize the value of nonviolent behavior is more effective.
- If children are physically punished by an adult who has previously treated them in a warm and nurturant manner, they tend to comply with the adult's wishes when the adult is absent from the scene.
- A severe or restrictive punishment can be extremely frustrating and because frustration is one of the primary causes of aggression, it may be useful to avoid using frustrating tactics to curb aggression.
  - I.e. Hamblin — hyperactive boys punished by teacher by having privileges taken away (tokens previously earned) when they aggressed. During and after the application of this technique, the frequency of aggressive actions among these boys practically doubled — increase in frustration.
  - I.e. FL prison inmates released early and served full sentence. Those who served complete term were twice as likely to return to prison as those released early.
2. Punishment of aggressive role models

- Aggressive people are frequently portrayed in the media as very attractive
- Showing children an aggressive role model being punished is not effective in reducing their aggressive behavior

3. Reward alternative behavior

- Research studies have shown that children rewarded for demonstrating behaviors other than aggression showed a noticeable decline in aggressive behavior
  - I.e. ignoring aggressive behavior and rewarding nonaggressive behavior

Building empathy

- Aggressive behavior virtually requires that we dehumanize the target
  - I.e. Feshbach—most people find it difficult to inflict pain purposely on another human unless they can find some way of dehumanizing their victim.
- Research has shown that mechanisms that develop empathy also diminish aggressive responses
  - I.e. Feshbach and Feshbach—negative correlation between empathy and aggression in children. The more empathy, the less they resort to aggressive actions. “Empathy training activities” led to significant decreases in aggressive behavior.