

THE SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF AGGRESSION

(Brief Notes for AHP event.)

Someone is seen as aggressive when he or she is using coercive power offensively, intentionally and antinormatively.

By *coercive power* is meant one of four things: Noxious stimulation (direct physical punishment with or without a weapon); Resource deprivation (imposing costs of some kind); Deprivation of expected gain (denying some anticipated and valued thing or event); or Social injury (making the person lose face or reputation in some way). Threats of these forms of punishment may be used instead of using them immediately. This is usually to produce some end, which may be more specific or less.

By *offensively* is meant that the person initiates the action, not merely reacting to an act coming from the other person(s) in the situation. There can be varying degrees of clarity about this.

By *intentionally* is meant that the person must have had it in mind to injure the other party. An action will be seen as aggressive by an observer if the observer believes that action to have been intended.

By *antinormatively* is meant that the action must be seen as forbidden, incorrect, inappropriate, illegitimate or unjust in the light of the group or community norms which are felt to be relevant to the situation.

In an experiment carried out by Brown & Tedeschi, the subjects had to watch a live dramatization of a bar scene. Each of four groups watched a separate scenario and were asked to rate the characters on several attitudes scales, including aggressiveness. The scene concerned an argument which developed over a seat that was being saved by man A for his woman friend. Man B came up and wanted the seat. These were the four experimental conditions:

1. Man B says - 'Are you looking for a shot in the mouth or something?' - Man A does not reply.
2. Man B makes the same threat and takes a swing at man A, but misses completely - man A does not reply.
3. Man B makes the same threat. Man A responds with a counter-threat.
4. Man B makes the same threat, and takes a swing which misses. Man A responds with a hard punch in the stomach, which does connect with man B.

The results showed that man B was rated as quite aggressive in all four conditions. However, the defensive use of threats by man A was not seen as very aggressive, and the defensive use of force by man A, where the only real damage occurred, was not perceived as aggressive at all. In fact, the character in the latter condition was not perceived as being any more aggressive than he was in a control condition in which he was not involved in any argument at all.

It seems very clear from this experiment that it is the context of the action, rather than the specific action as such, which determines how aggressive a person will seem to observers.

Now all this is to with how aggression is seen from the outside - but how does it seem from the inside? Rollo May says that self-affirmation is the basic human right - everyone from babies upwards affirms their own existence, and get either confirmed or denied. If the individual is denied in his or her self-affirmation, he or she turns to self-assertion in an effort to regain a sense of significance. This sense of significance is essential to healthy existence. May says - 'When the sense of significance is lost, the individual shifts his attention to different, and often perverted or neurotic forms of power to get some substitute for significance.'

When self-assertion is blocked over a period of time - as quite often can happen regularly to people in disadvantaged groups - aggression tends to develop:

In contrast to self-assertion, which is drawing a line at a certain point and insisting 'this is me; this is mine', aggression is a moving into the positions of power or prestige or the territory of another and taking possession of some of it for one's self.

And if aggression is blocked, in its turn, the spiral takes one more twist. If all efforts to get a sense of significance are blocked, even after some aggression has been shown, violence erupts. Violence is largely physical because the other phases, which can involve reasoning or persuasion, have been, systematically and step by step, blocked off.

And May goes on to say that once violence has opened up, even as a real possibility, the feeling of solidarity with others engaged in a common struggle actually delivers a new kind of sense of significance, which can become highly intense; 'For many, the goal of the rebellion now becomes the ecstasy itself rather than the original conditions. The rebellion has become the high point in the lives of many of the rebels, and they seem dimly aware that they'll never have that much sense of significance again.' Or as someone put it long ago - 'Revolution is the festival of the oppressed.'

If this is the process as seen from the inside, than something strange has appeared. Self-affirmation and self-assertion are normally regarded as being good things, while aggression and violence are usually seen as bad things. Yet if they are stages in what seems like a continuous process, they may not be psychologically very different; perhaps it is the outside observer who sees them as different, rather than the

participant. To the participant, it may seem like a continuous search for significance, which has to take different forms in different situations, with different kinds of obstacles to self-esteem.

In discussions of aggression and violence in the mass media, none of these thoughts are taken into consideration. A typical investigation counted all the 'violent incidents' shown on television. But these were defined as 'the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed.' Now this certainly includes coercive power, but it says nothing about the other three requirements - was this power used offensively, intentionally and antinormatively? Unless it was, the incidents may not have been seen as aggressive or violent by the viewers at all. They may well have been seen as exemplifying justice or some other moral lesson. This objection applies to many many of the studies in this field. In their urgency to be quantitative, psychologists seem often to have counted the wrong things, and this is a particularly bad case of this failing.

There is an important point here about values, and concealed values at that. In counting all acts of physical coercion as aggressive or violent, irrespective of their meaning, these observers are in effect urging a new moral norm - it is wrong to hurt people even if they have done wrong. Now this may well be a defensible position, but it does not actually correspond to the values of the vast majority of the population, or even of the vast majority of the educated and cultivated population. Nor is it in fact clearly stated by any of the investigators responsible for quantitative studies of this kind.

At the present point in history, quite a number of disadvantaged groups are beginning to say that they do not want to be disadvantaged any longer. Blacks, women, gays, students, children, old people, fat people, mental patients and others are beginning to affirm themselves and assert themselves. Several of these groups have found it necessary to move further, because of persistent ignoring of demands, into aggression and violence.

If we were able to respond to self-affirmation immediately, instead of ignoring it until it builds up into self-assertion, the need for aggression would largely evaporate.

But if we have to move into the realm of aggression, there are still a whole range of different options open - forms of direct action which are imaginative, creative, playful, colourful, stimulating, provocative, disturbing, effective and non-violent. One of the ways in which the ideology of patriarchy gets through even to people who think they are fighting against it is the assumption that power always has to be power *over* someone else, to force them to do one's will. Humanistic psychology has shown that power can also be conceived as power *with* other people - this is the concept of social synergy, which Maslow has talked about at some length. In therapy, we see how the person grows through conflict and synergy; it is now time to see how society, too, grows through conflict and synergy.

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