# CHAPTER 12 OUTLINE

**I. What is Aggression?**

• **Aggressive action** is intentional behavior aimed at doing harm or causing pain to another person. It is distinct from "assertiveness." **Hostile aggression** is an act of aggression stemming from feelings of anger and aimed at inflicting pain or injury; **instrumental aggression** involves an intention to hurt another as a means to some goal other than causing pain.

**A. Is Aggression Inborn or Learned?**

• Scientists do not agree on whether aggression is innate or learned. The debate has been raging for centuries. For example, Hobbes postulated that humans in our natural states are brutes and only the rules of society tame us; Rousseau postulated that we are gentle "noble savages" who become aggressive in a restrictive society.

• Freud postulated that humans have innate instincts towards life: **Eros**, and towards death and aggression: **Thanatos**. Freud's theory was a **hydraulic theory**, making the analogy to water pressure; according to this idea, unexpected emotions build up pressure and must be expressed to relieve that pressure. Society performs the role of helping people express this instinct constructively.

**B. Is Aggression Instinctual? Situational? Optional?**

• Although elegant, Freud's theory has never been proven scientifically, in part because it is difficult or unethical to test using humans. Accordingly, much of the evidence on whether or not aggression is instinctive in humans is based on observations of other species.

**1. The Evolutionary Argument**

• Evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Buss, 2004) have recently argued that aggression is genetically programmed into men to enable them to perpetuate their genes: first to establish dominance over other males, and secondly to ensure that their mates do not copulate with others.

• This argument receives tangential support from evidence that males are most likely to engage in violence during peak reproductive years (Wilson & Daly, 1985; Geen, 1998).

• In most modern societies power and attraction come more from high status careers, wealth, and celebrity, rather than physical strength and intimidation.

**2. Aggression among the Lower Animals**

• Kuo (1961) showed that a kitten raised with a rat would not attack it, showing that aggressive behavior can be inhibited by early experience.

• Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1963) showed that rats raised in isolation attack fellow rats using the same patterns that experienced rats do, showing that aggression does not need to be learned.

• Research with primates with greater genetic similarity to humans reveals both aggressive (chimpanzees) and nonaggressive (bonobos) tendencies.

• The bonobos, however, are a rare exception. The near universality of aggression suggests that it has evolved and persisted because it has survival value.

• Most psychologists agree, however, that aggressiveness is an optional strategy.

**C. Aggression and Culture**

• Berkowitz (1993) suggests that humans seem to have an inborn tendency to respond to certain provocative stimuli by striking out against the perpetrator; whether or not this aggressive action is expressed depends on the interaction of these innate propensities with learned inhibitory responses and the nature of the social situation. In humans, innate patterns of behavior are infinitely malleable; thus, cultures vary widely in the degree of aggressiveness.

**1. Changes in Aggression across Time**

• Changing social conditions can lead to dramatic changes in aggressive behavior. For example, the Iroquois were a peaceful people until the Europeans brought them into direct competition with the Hurons over fur; then they became fierce warriors.

**2. Regionalism and Aggression**

• Nisbett (1993) showed that homicide rates for white Southern males are substantially higher than for Northern white males; however, this is true only for argument-related aggression and appears due to a "culture of honor." In a follow-up study, Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwarz (1996) showed that Southern white males bumped into and insulted by a confederate become more physiologically aroused and more likely to aggress than Northern white males.

## II. Neural and Chemical Influences on Aggression

• The **amygdala** is an area in the core of the brain associated with aggressive behaviors. But even when the amygdala is directly stimulated, whether or not the organism will aggress depends on situational factors.
• **Serotonin** is a chemical substance occurring naturally in the midbrain that seems to have an inhibiting effect on impulsive aggression. Too little serotonin can lead to increases in aggression, as demonstrated in correlational and experimental studies with humans.
• **Testosterone** is a male sex hormone associated with aggression; too much of this substance can also lead to increases in aggression. In several correlational studies with humans, men higher in testosterone showed higher levels of impulsive or aggressive behavior.

### A. Gender and Aggression

• The research on gender differences in aggression shows that, while men are far more physically aggressive than women under ordinary circumstances, the gender difference becomes much smaller when people are provoked (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996). Other gender differences show that girls engage in covert aggression while boys' aggression is more overt, and that women feel more guilty over overt aggression than men do.

#### 1. Does Culture Make a Difference?

• Archer and McDaniel (1995) found consistent gender differences in an 11-country study where people had to complete stories about conflict situations, with men being consistently more likely to suggest violent completions than women. However, culture too played a major role.

#### 2. Violence Among Intimate Partners

• Women are far more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than are men (32% vs. 4% of women's vs. men's murders, in 1998).

### B. Alcohol and Aggression

• Alcohol serves as a disinhibitor and leads people to be more likely to commit actions frowned upon by society; thus alcohol can foster aggression when people are provoked and even among those who have not been provoked and who do not behave aggressively when sober.
• The mechanism for this disinhibition appears to be a disruption in information processing, such that individuals under the effects of alcohol respond only to the earliest and most obvious aspects of a situation (e.g., having one's foot stepped on) and miss the subtleties (e.g., lack of intent). Thus, most individuals arrested for violent crimes have been found to be legally drunk at the time of their arrest (Henneberg, 2001).

### C. Pain, Discomfort, and Aggression

• Both animal and human studies show that pain will increase the probability that an organism will aggress. For example, Berkowitz (1983, 1988) showed that students who had their arms immersed in ice water until they felt pain showed a sharp increase in their likelihood of aggressing.
• Other forms of bodily discomfort (heat, humidity, air pollution, offensive odors) may also act to lower the threshold for aggressive behaviors. For example, Carlsmith and Anderson (1979) found that between 1967 and 1971, riots were far more likely to occur on hot than on cool days (Figure 12.1). Several other correlational studies find similar results.
•An experiment to test the hypothesis that heat lowers the aggression threshold was conducted by Griffitt and Veitch (1971). They manipulated the temperature of a room while students were taking a test; dependent variables were self-ratings of aggression and hostility towards a stranger they were asked to rate; both were higher in the hot (90°) room.

## III. Social Situations and Aggression

### A. Frustration and Aggression

• Frustration is a major cause of aggression. Frustration occurs when a person is thwarted on the way to an expected goal or gratification. **Frustration-aggression theory** says that people's perception that they are being prevented from obtaining a goal will increase the probability of an aggressive response. Barker, Dembo, and Lewin (1941), for example, frustrated a group of children by keeping a room of very attractive toys out of their reach for a long wait; when they finally got to play with them, they played much more destructively than did the control group.
• The greater the closeness to the goal, the greater the frustration when it is thwarted and the higher the probability of aggression. Harris (1974), for example, had confederates cut into lines of people waiting; the further into line they cut, the more aggressive the reactions.

• Aggression also increases when frustration is unexpected. For example, Kulik and Brown (1979) rigged the situation so that volunteer charity solicitors failed to elicit donations; when this led to expect high rates of contribution, subjects displayed more aggression (e.g., harsh voice tone).
• Frustration does not always produce aggression; rather, it produces anger or annoyance and a readiness to aggress if other things about the situation are conducive to aggressive behavior (e.g., the size and nearness of the frustrating person, and that person's ability to retaliate).
• If frustration is understandable, legitimate, and unintentional, the tendency to aggress will be reduced [e.g., someone whose hearing aid has stopped working may frustrate us but we are unlikely to aggress (Burnstein & Worchel, 1962)].
• Frustration is not the same as deprivation; deprivation is a lack of a resource, whereas frustration occurs when one expects to get an outcome and doesn't; thus what causes aggression is not deprivation but **relative deprivation**, the perception that you or your group have less than you deserve, less than you have been led to expect, or less than people similar to you have. Ironically, aggression is more likely to occur when social circumstances are looking up, for example, in the race riots of the 1960s or the rebellions in Eastern Europe as communism tumbled.

**B. Being Provoked and Reciprocating**

• People usually feel the need to reciprocate after they are provoked by aggressive behavior from another person. For example, Baron (1988) had a confederate insult another subject; when given an opportunity to aggress against the confederate, those who had been insulted were more aggressive than those who hadn't.
• We do not always reciprocate when provoked. If we think the provocation was unintentional, we are unlikely to reciprocate. If there are mitigating circumstances, we will not aggress—so long as the circumstances are known at the time of the aggression.

**C. Aggressive Objects as Cues**

• The mere presence of an **aggressive stimulus**, an object that is associated with aggressive responses (e.g., a gun), can increase the probability of aggression.
• Berkowitz and LePage (1967) angered subjects in a room in which either a gun or a badminton racket was visible; those individuals who had been made angry in the presence of the gun administered more intense shocks to another student than those made angry in the presence of the racket (Figure 12.2).
• Correlational evidence supports the idea that guns foster aggressive behavior. For example, Seattle and Vancouver are virtually identical cities, with the exception of Vancouver's strict gun control laws; the murder rate in Seattle is more than double that of Vancouver. Archer and his colleagues found in cross-cultural research that (1) the homicide rate is highly correlated with the availability of handguns, and (2) that American teens are far more likely to write conclusions to stories about conflicts that are "lethal, gun-laden, and merciless" than are teens in any of the other ten countries surveyed.

**D. Imitation and Aggression**

• A major cause of aggression is social learning. Children learn to solve conflicts aggressively by watching adults and their peers, especially when they see that aggression is rewarded, as it is in many sports.
• A large percentage of physically abusive parents were abused by their own parents when they were children. In support of the idea that this aggression is learned rather than inherited, Bandura postulated social learning theory (the idea that we learn social behavior by observing others and imitating them). In support of this theory, the famous Bobo doll experiments showed that children imitated novel aggressive behaviors modeled by adults.

**E. Violence in the Media: TV, Movies, and Video Games**

**1. Effects on Children**

• Eron (2001) testified that the average American child would have seen 8,000 murderers and more than 100,000 acts of violence on television by the time they finish elementary school.
• A recent study (Seppa, 1997) shows that 58% of TV programs contain violence, and of those, 78% showed no remorse, criticism, or penalty for the violence. Additionally, characters portrayed as heroes or desirable role models initiated 40% of the violent incidents (Cantor et al., 2001).
• A number of long-term studies indicate that the more violence individuals watch on TV as children, the more violence they exhibit years later as teens and adults. This is correlational research and not conclusive about causality; however, reviews of the experimental research generally (but not always) suggest that watching violence does indeed cause aggressive behavior in children.
•Experimental research demonstrates that watching violence does increase the frequency of aggressive behavior in children.

•For example, Liebert and Baron (1972) exposed a group of children to a violent cops-and-robbers show, while another group was exposed to a nonviolent sporting event show. After watching TV, each child was allowed to play in another room with a group of other children; those who had watched the violent program showed far more aggression (Figure 12.3).
•A later experiment (Josephson, 1987) showed that watching TV violence had the greatest effect on those children who were somewhat prone to violence to begin with. Thus, watching one episode of violent TV may not increase the aggression of those who are not violent to begin with. However, a steady diet of violent TV over a long period may increase aggression in those who were not previously prone to it. A series of field studies by Leyens et al. supports this conclusion: in his studies, the great majority of children, even those without strong aggressive tendencies, who were exposed to a high degree of media violence over a long period were more aggressive than those who watched more benign shows.
• The pervasive exposure of violence on television may prime children to make aggressive responses.
• Playing violent video games seems to have the same kind of impact on children that watching TV violence does, as demonstrated in recent correlational and experimental research (Anderson & Dill, 2000).

**2. What about Adults?**
• Johnson (2002) found a significant association between the amount of time spent watching television during adolescence and early adulthood and the likelihood of subsequent violent acts against others—even when accounting for parental education, family income, and neighborhood violence.
• Phillips (1983, 1986) analyzed the homicide rate in the U.S. as it compared to the showing of heavyweight boxing on TV; he found a substantial pattern of correlations. Not everyone is influenced by violent TV, but some people are, with tragic results.

**3. The Numbing Effect of TV Violence**
• Repeated exposure to horrifying events has a numbing effect on our sensitivity to those events. Studies show that those who watch a good deal of TV did not react physiologically to a bloody boxing match, while those who did not watch TV did (Cline, Croft, & Courier, 1973); and that those who were previously exposed to a violent police drama failed to become upset by an aggressive interaction that upset those who previously watched a volleyball game (Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, & Drabman, 1977). In a follow-up experiment, Thomas (1982) showed that college students exposed to TV violence not only were more physiologically aroused but also administered more powerful electric shocks to a fellow student, compared to the control group.

**4. How Does Media Violence Affect Our View of the World?**
• Gerbner et al. (2002) find that people who are heavy TV viewers (four or more hours a day) view the world as a much more dangerous and hostile place than those who watch less.

**5. Why Does Media Affect Viewers' Aggression?**
• Five reasons have been suggested: (1) Watching TV violence may simply weaken previously learned inhibitions against aggression; (2) Watching TV violence might teach people new ways to aggress and inspire imitation; (3) TV violence may make feelings of anger more available and thus prime an aggressive response; (4) Watching violence reduces sensitivity and sympathy for victims, making it easier to live with violence and possibly to aggress; and (5) Since watching TV violence makes the world seem a more dangerous place, I'm more likely to interpret strangers' behavior or ambiguous situations as having hostile intent.

**F. Does Violence Sell?**
• A study by Bushman & Bonacci (2002) found that violence and sex impair the memory of viewers for advertising between the violent segments. In terms of sales, advertisers might be well advised to sponsor nonviolent shows.

**G. Violent Pornography and Violence against Women**
• During the past 25 years, nearly half of all rapes or attempts have been date rapes. Many occur because of adolescents' confused sexual **scripts**, or ways of behaving socially that we implicitly learn from the culture, which suggest that the man's role is to be persistent and the woman's role is to resist the man's sexual advances. Thus students tend to believe that when a woman says "no," she doesn't mean it. This led several colleges to suggest that dating couples negotiate explicit contracts about sexual conduct at the beginning of dates, leading to criticism by social pundits.
• Coincident with this increase in date rape has been the increase in the availability of magazines, films, and videos depicting vivid, explicit sexual behavior.
•Scientific research on whether pornography increases rape is thus far inconclusive.

• Two presidential commissions have examined whether pornography contributes to violence against women. The 1970 commission concluded that sexually explicit material "in and of itself" does not increase violence; the 1985 commission concluded that it did. The 1985 conclusions may have been politically motivated, however.
• The authors suggest that an important distinction should be made between simple pornography and violent pornography. Studies by Donnerstein and Malamuth and their colleagues found that viewing violent pornography promotes greater acceptance of sexual violence towards women and almost certainly is associated with actual aggressive behavior. For example, Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981) showed male subjects a violent pornographic film, a nonviolent pornographic film, or a violent nonpornographic film. After viewing the film, the subjects took part in an ostensibly unrelated experiment that gave them the opportunity to "shock" a female confederate. Those who watched the violent pornography gave the highest level of shocks, while those who watched the nonviolent pornography gave the lowest. Another study showed that a female confederate was shocked more than a male. Similarly, Malamuth (1981) showed men either a violent pornographic or a nonviolent erotic film and asked them to report their subsequent fantasies; those who watched the violent pornographic film created more violent sexual fantasies than those who watched the mutually consenting sex. Thus, viewing pornographic violence against women does tend to focus aggressive feelings on women as targets and make people more accepting of this kind of violence.
• Data on the effects of nonviolent pornography are mixed. Meta-analysis shows a small but measurable effect of nonviolent pornography on violence towards women. However, men exposed to pictures of nude women engaged in nonsexual activities were actually less prone to commit violence than men in control conditions (Allen, D'Alessio, & Brezgel 1995). Thus, only with respect to violent pornography are the problems clear.

## IV. How to Reduce Aggression

### A. Does Punishing Aggression Reduce Aggressive Behavior?

• For children, harsh punishment provides a model of aggression and does not provide a disincentive for transgressing the sanctions when the child is unsupervised. However, the threat of mild punishment, swiftly administered, does seem to reduce aggression.

#### 1. Using Punishment on Violent Adults

• For adults, the research evidence on the effects of punishment on aggression is mixed. Laboratory experiments suggest that under ideal conditions—when the punishment is swift and certain—punishment can reduce aggression. But in real life, punishment occurs under anything but ideal conditions. Thus the societal data seem to indicate that severe punishment does not seem to deter violent crimes.

### B. Catharsis and Aggression

• The common belief that one can "blow off steam" and "get it (anger) out of your system" is an oversimplification of Freud's psychoanalytic notion of **catharsis**. According to this idea, performing an aggressive act, watching others engage in aggressive behavior, or engaging in fantasy aggression relieves built-up aggressive energies and hence reduces the likelihood of further aggressive behavior.
• While there is some evidence that stifled feelings can produce illness, this does not mean that indiscriminate venting of feelings is healthy or useful.

#### 1. The Effects of Aggressive Acts on Subsequent Aggression

• Despite the fact that some prominent psychologists believe in the catharsis hypothesis, controlled studies suggest that acting aggressively or viewing aggression increases, rather than decreases, subsequent aggression and hostility.
• Even direct aggression against the source of anger increases, rather than decreases, subsequent aggression. For example, Geen et al. (1975) had students angered by a confederate. Half of the subjects had the opportunity to give shocks to the confederate on a first task, and then all subjects had the opportunity in a second task. The catharsis hypothesis predicts that those subjects who had already shocked the confederate would give fewer, less intense shocks the second time; in fact, they expressed even greater aggression the second time around.
• Overall, results of studies do not support the catharsis hypothesis.

#### 2. Blaming the Victim of Our Aggression

• The belief in catharsis may arise from the fact that venting aggression makes us feel better; however, feeling better does not reduce hostility.
• Committing aggression not only reduces the barriers against further aggression, but it leads to attempts to justify the aggression by blaming the victim of our aggression and believing that they deserved it. This dissonance reduction in turn increases the likelihood of further aggression.

• Blaming and derogating the victim is especially likely if the target was an innocent victim of your aggression (Glass, 1964; Davis & Jones, 1960). When the target is not totally innocent, the opportunity to aggress against the person leads to even greater hostility than when one is prevented from aggressing (Kahn, 1966).

**C. The Effect of War on General Aggression**

• Thus, expressing anger frequently leads to overkill in retaliations. This spiral of aggression characterizes what happens with nations at war—the more they aggress, the more they derogate their opponent, and the more they want to continue to aggress. Wars even seem to make the noncombatant population of the involved countries more likely to aggress against each other (Archer & Gartner, 1976, 1984; Figure 12.4).

**D. What Are We Supposed to Do with Our Anger?**

• One way to control anger is by actively enabling it to dissipate, e.g., by counting to 10 or otherwise distracting oneself.

**1. Venting versus Self-Awareness**

• There is an important difference between being angry and expressing that anger in a violent and destructive manner. Expressing feelings of anger nonviolently and in a nonjudgmental manner is an assertive response that avoids the dangers of either violent expression or of repression of the feelings (Aronson, 2003).

• While expressing angry feelings to the person who caused them is probably best, expressing them to a third party may also be helpful. Work by Pennebaker (1990) indicates that repressing emotional stresses has negative effects on health, and that revealing the emotions to another person has beneficial effects. Further, these beneficial effects are due not simply to venting of feeling but also to the self-awareness that usually accompanies self-disclosure. Berkowitz and Troccoli (1990) found that those subjects experiencing discomfort and mild pain while listening to a target who were not given an opportunity to rate their feelings rated the target most negatively. Those participants in pain who were given the opportunity for expression were able to avoid being overly harsh.

**2. Defusing Anger through Apology**

• One way to reduce aggression in another person is for the person who caused the frustration to take responsibility, apologize, and indicate it won't happen again.

**3. The Modeling of Nonaggressive Behavior**

• Children exposed to models who behave nonaggressively when provoked show a much lower frequency of aggression than children who were not exposed.

**4. Training in Communication and Problem-Solving Skills**

• In most societies, it is the people who lack proper social skills who are most prone to violent solutions to interpersonal problems. Thus, one way to reduce violence is to teach people how to communicate anger and criticism constructively and how to negotiate and compromise. There is some evidence that such formal training can be an effective means of reducing aggression, and many schools are now training students in non-aggressive strategies for conflict reduction.

**5. Building Empathy**

• Baron (1976) had cars hesitate at a green light; just previous to the hesitation, a pedestrian had passed by between the car that was stopped at the light and the one behind it. Half of the pedestrians were on crutches. Baron found that the drivers of the second car were significantly less likely to honk in this condition, presumably because the crutches evoked empathy.

• In contrast, in situations where aggression is high, we tend to dehumanize our victims; this lowers inhibitions against aggression and makes continuing it more likely.

• If it is the case that most people must dehumanize their victims in order to commit extreme acts of aggression against them, then increasing empathy will make aggression more difficult. Research suggests that training students to take the perspective of the other or providing personal information about the victim leads to lower levels of aggression.