

# Social psychological explanations of aggression

**Aggression:** Behaviours (physical or verbal) intended to cause harm to another person, animal or object.

**Social psychological explanations:** Explanations which suggest that behaviour is the result of the relationship between social contexts and people's mental processes (for example, their thoughts and feelings).

### De-individuation

Gustav Le Bon (1895)

The theory argues that:

In certain situations, an individual loses their personal identity and takes on the identity of the social group.

If the social group is behaving aggressively, then anonymity leads to increased aggressiveness.

People feel a sense of anonymity:

- in a crowd
- wearing a uniform
- when intoxicated (for example, drugs or alcohol reducing a person's inhibitions)

Philip Zimbardo (1969) argued that anonymous situations create a reduced fear of negative consequences and a reduced sense of guilt. In this sense, it is as if the moral responsibility shifts from the individual to the group, making aggression more likely.

### Frustration-aggression hypothesis

John Dollard et al. (1939)

The theory argues that:

- Frustration always leads to aggression.
- Aggression is always the result of frustration.

Frustration occurs when our attempt to achieve a goal is blocked by an external factor (for example, waiting for a bus which then doesn't stop). This creates an aggressive drive which leads to aggressive behaviour.

The theory is based on the idea of *catharsis*. This is the process of releasing repressed emotions to produce relief. Aggressive behaviour is cathartic because it helps satisfy the aggressive drive created by the frustration.

Aggression is not always expressed directly against the source of frustration and may be displaced (or deflected) onto an alternative target that is weaker and available.

### REFERENCES

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### Social learning theory

Albert Bandura (1977)

The theory argues that:

Aggression is learned through observing and imitating aggressive role models.

If a child observes aggressive behaviour being reinforced (for example, being praised), they are likely to imitate this behaviour as they expect to experience similar consequences if they do so.

Bandura argued that mental processes were involved in learning aggression called *mediational processes*. These were attention, retention, reproduction and motivation.

In imitating aggression, children develop confidence in their ability to carry out aggressive acts. If a child's aggression is successful, they have more confidence in their aggressive ability, called *self-efficacy*.

