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## Aggression in sports

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### Research Paper - Physical Education

#### Introduction:

As a society, we appear to have a certain ambivalence about aggression in sports. On one hand, as Russell (1993) pointed out, sport is perhaps the only peacetime setting in which we not only tolerate but actively encourage and enjoy aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, there is public outrage regarding football hooliganism and in recent years there have been a string of examples of athletes pursuing court cases against others who have deliberately injured them. One reason for this apparent ambivalence is that we tend to see aggression very differently in different situations. Before we proceed any further it is perhaps useful to look more closely at how we should define aggression.

#### Defining aggression:

It is perhaps easiest to begin by saying what aggression is not. Aggression is not competitiveness, nor is it anger. Competitiveness is an attitude, anger is an emotion. While anger and competitiveness may both contribute to aggression, aggression itself is a behavior. Aggression by definition involves actively doing something unpleasant to someone. Aggressive behavior may come in many forms, ranging from verbal abuse—designed to cause psychological harm—to physical violence. It is generally agreed that all aggression involves the intent to cause harm in some form. Behavior which accidentally harms someone



is not Aggression.

### **Hostile aggression, instrumental aggression and assertiveness:**

While this simple definition may suffice when describing aggression in most situations, things are more complex in sports. Clearly, when we perform a rugby tackle or a karate kick, we do so in the knowledge that we are inflicting a certain discomfort on the other athlete and that there is some risk of causing injury. This raises the difficult question 'Are behaviors within the rules of the sport that involve hurting another person truly aggressive?' Baron (1977) addressed this issue in his influential distinction between hostile and instrumental aggression.

### **Hostile aggression :**

Takes place when the primary intention of the behaviour is to harm the other player. This type of aggression is accompanied by anger and the underlying wish is to see the victim suffer.

### **Instrumental aggression:**

Takes place when the behaviour is clearly likely to cause harm but its intention is to achieve a different aim, such as to score a point or prevent the opposition scoring a goal. Husman and Silva (1984) have made the further distinction between aggression and assertiveness.

**Assertiveness:** involves the type of behaviour that might appear aggressive, but which does not result in harming an opponent. In many sports, for example, we might choose at certain times to charge directly towards an opponent, perhaps with accompanying shouting, but without any intention of charging into them. The classic example of this is rushing the net in tennis. Thirer (1993) pointed out that physical contact can be assertive rather than aggressive provided the intention is to gain dominance over the opponent rather than to injure them. Thus footballers can shoulder-charge one another while tackling, but, provided the intention is to obtain the ball rather than to injure, this is assertive rather than aggressive behaviour.

### **Aggression and performance:**

It is commonly believed that the use of aggression wins games. The baseball coach Leo Durocher famously said 'Nice guys finish last.' In Tutko and Ogilvie's (1966)



athletic motivation inventory, aggression was one of the ten personality traits believed to be associated with athletic success. Of course, we need to bear in mind the distinction between hostile aggression, instrumental aggression and assertiveness. It may be that the conventional wisdom supporting the value of aggression is in fact supporting assertive behavior rather than aggression. Young (1993) has noted the increase in unsanctioned violence in contact sports in recent years, and proposed that this is a direct result of increased professionalisation and the resulting financial incentives to win. But is there any evidence that aggression is really associated with good performance or the probability of winning? Gill (1986) reviewed research on the consequences of aggression in sport. There has been relatively little research on this topic and almost all published research has involved ice hockey. Results regarding the link between aggression and success in ice hockey are equivocal. McCarthy and Kelly (1978) found a positive relationship between the time taken for penalties (a measure of a team's aggression) and number of goals scored.

### **Theories of aggression:**

There are a number of psychological theories which aim to explain the origins and triggers of human aggression. Within sport psychology, three broad approaches have been particularly influential: **instinct** theories, social learning theory and the **frustration-aggression hypothesis**.

### **Instinct theories:**

In psychology the term instinct is used slightly more precisely than in ordinary conversation. An instinct is an innate tendency to behave in a certain way. By 'innate' we mean that the behaviour is in our genetic make-up and therefore present at birth. A number of psychological theories see aggression as instinctive and, at least to some extent, inevitable. In his early psychoanalytic work, Freud (1919) proposed that we are born with two opposing instincts: the life-instinct and the death-instinct. Our death-instinct leads us to be aggressive. Freud proposed that although the instinct to be aggressive is inevitable, we can still regulate it. Some contemporary writers, influenced by Freud, have viewed sport in general as a healthy way of expressing our death-instinct. For example, Richards (1994) looked at the importance we attach to kicking in expressing our aggressive



tendencies, e.g. in phrases such as 'putting the boot in' and 'a kick in the teeth'. Richards suggested that football is particularly important in sublimating our aggressive instincts (i.e. channelling them constructively). For this reason, Richards describes football as 'a civilising influence'. have evolved a 'fighting instinct'. Evolution takes place through **natural selection**, therefore aggression must (historically at least) have been a **survival trait**, i.e. a characteristic that increases the likelihood of survival. Like Freud, Lorenz saw human aggression as inevitable but manageable. Lorenz saw sport as serving the social function of channelling human destructive instincts constructively. We shall return to the issue of the effects of sport on aggression later in the chapter.

### **Social learning theory:**

In a radical alternative to instinct theory, Bandura (1973) proposed that all human aggression, like other social behaviour, is learned by imitation and reinforcement. Bandura (1965) famously demonstrated that children copy adults behaving aggressively in his 'bobo doll experiment'. Children observed an adult beating a large inflatable doll. Invariably the watching child imitated the behaviour and also beat the bobo doll. When the child was rewarded or witnessed the adult being rewarded for beating the doll, the level of aggression increased. Clearly, there are instances where children can witness aggression in sport and there are a number of ways in which aggression can be reinforced. An act of aggression might result directly in scoring or preventing the opposition from doing so. Watchers might cheer, the coach and parents might praise the aggressive child. Children may also witness highly assertive acts and incorrectly imitate them in an aggressive form. You can imagine that, to a child with little technical knowledge of football, it is difficult to distinguish between an assertive shoulder-charge and an aggressive push. Baron and Byrne (1994) suggest four aspects of aggression that can be explained by learning: how to be aggressive, who is an appropriate target for aggression, what actions require an aggressive response and in which situations aggression is appropriate.

### **Evaluation of social learning theory:**

There is no doubt that children imitate adult behaviour and that rewards will increase the probability of aggressive behaviour being repeated. However, what is much more controversial is the claim that social learning is a complete explanation of human



aggression. One question you might ask is 'If every generation copies aggression from the previous generation, how did it happen in the first place?' This is not an easy question to answer. Animal studies have shown that animals reared alone, without any opportunity to learn aggression from others, still display aggression. This shows that, in some species at least, aggression does not require social learning. Baron and Byrne's four aspects of learned aggression explain well the importance of learning in aggression. Nonetheless, we could see these as simply learning how and when to express our instinct for aggression. Social learning theory fails to account for findings (discussed later in this chapter) that, despite providing models of how to aggress, martial arts training reduces rather than increases aggressive behaviour.

#### **The frustration-aggression hypothesis:**

This approach, first suggested by Dollard et al. (1939), sees the most important factors in aggression as the characteristics of the situation. In some ways, this approach resembles the situationalist approach to explaining behaviour. Dollard et al. proposed that, although we have an innate aggressive drive, aggressive behaviour is elicited by frustration, i.e. when we get frustrated we respond with aggressive behaviour. In the original version of the frustration-aggression hypothesis, frustration was seen as always leading to aggression and all aggression was seen as due to frustration. Berkowitz (1993) has produced a more sophisticated version of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Berkowitz proposed that frustration leads to anger rather than directly to aggression. More anger is generated if the frustration is unexpected or seen as unfair. Anger may lead to aggression, but because we can apply our higher mental processes (i.e. thinking, reasoning etc.) we do not necessarily respond to anger with aggression. We may do so, however, if our anger is great enough or if, for some reason, we cannot think logically at that moment.

#### **Evaluation of the frustration-aggression hypothesis:**

Frustration is just one of several causes of aggression. Like instinct theory and social learning theory, it is an incomplete explanation of human aggression. Although the frustration-aggression hypothesis is not particularly influential in social psychology (Baron and Byrne 1994), it is useful to sport psychologists because sport can involve so much



frustration that, even if frustration is a relatively minor cause of aggression in general, it is probably one of the major contributors to sporting aggression. Bakker et al. (1990) found that aggression increases when a team is losing, particularly when the game is of great importance, presumably in response to the frustration of the situation. Reducing the aggression associated with frustration will be examined later in the chapter.

### **Situational factors affecting aggression in sport:**

So far, in examining instinct theory and social learning theory, we have explained some of the major factors that underlie aggression in general. It is, however, also worth looking at some situational factors which have been shown to affect the probability of aggression occurring in sporting events. Of course some of these factors may cause frustration, fitting neatly into the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Some of the major situational factors are shown below;.

Situational factors affecting probability of aggression

Factor	Relationship to aggression
Temperature	+ive
Probability of retaliation	+ive
Point difference (if losing)	+ive
Position in league	+ive
Successful outcome in game	+ive
Crowd hostility	+ive
Aggression of opponent(s)	+ive

### **Effects on spectators:**

While research cautiously supports the view that at least some sports help reduce aggression in participants, the reverse seems to be true for spectators—perhaps unsurprisingly given the problem of football violence. Arms et al. (1979) measured the hostility of spectators following aggressive sports (wrestling and ice hockey) and non-aggressive sport (swimming). They found increased hostility in those who had watched the aggressive sports but not in those watching the non-aggressive sports. Phillips (1986) tracked the rates of murder in the USA and found that, in the weeks following heavyweight title fights, rates of murder increased. The characteristics of murder victims appeared to be related to the losing fighter: when a white boxer lost, more white men were murdered, and when a black boxer lost, more black men were murdered. All the main theories of aggression could explain these effects. Instinct theorists would say that watching the aggressive sport aroused the aggressive instincts of the spectators but did not permit them a means of expressing their aggression. Frustration aggression theorists could point to the frustration of having to watch the game.



### **The reduction of aggression:**

There are a number of strategies that can be used to help reduce aggression in athletes. These approaches can be variously applied to preventing young athletes developing aggressive behaviour in the first place and curtailing aggressive behaviour in those prone to it.

### **Role modeling:**

If children can learn aggressive behaviour from watching aggressive adults, it follows that if we expose children exclusively to appropriate, non-aggressive role models, we can, to some extent at least, prevent them developing an aggressive repertoire of behaviour. This approach underlines the importance of the teacher or coach as a role model. Unfortunately it is almost inevitable that children will observe other athletes acting aggressively. Tenenbaum et al. (1997) suggested that the media are irresponsible in giving excessive coverage to, and sensationalising violent incidents in sport. Certainly, unless we prevent children spectating altogether—something that would probably kill their love of sport—it is impossible to prevent children encountering aggressive role models.

### **psychological contracts:**

Athletes signing a contract are committing themselves to eliminate certain behaviours. The terms of each contract are negotiated between the individual athlete and the coach or psychologist, but the contract will always specify which behaviours are to be eliminated under which circumstances. Leith (1991) suggests that a simple contract should include specification of the behaviour to be eliminated, punishment for breaching the contract, rewards for sticking to the contract, the names and signatures of both parties, and the date. Think of your own sport and think of someone you know, or know of, who might benefit from a psychological contract. Draw up an imaginary contract for them, including all the details specified by Leith.

### **Anger-management groups:**

We all experience anger and anger per se is not a bad thing, but it can lead to hostile aggression. If athletes are often becoming angry and that anger is consistently manifested in aggressive behavior, they may benefit from anger management groups. An anger-management group is a type of therapy group, in which anger is explored and

mental strategies for better coping with anger are taught. Some groups—from the psychoanalytic tradition—emphasise exploration of the individual's anger, while more cognitive-behaviourally oriented groups emphasise the learning of strategies to control anger.

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