

AGGRESSION AS A SECONDARY PHENOMENON

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The widespread delight in reading murder mysteries and watching fights, be they boxing or bullfights, is frequently cited as evidence for an innate aggression instinct as postulated by Freud in 1929 (5). Such stories or events would afford, it is held, a vicarious expression of aggression without the responsibility of either killing or fighting oneself. But actual fighting itself, which is found frequently enough in the world, is pointed to as perhaps the main line of evidence for an innate primary aggression instinct.

The purpose of the present paper is to offer alternate explanations for these phenomena, derived from Adlerian theory. While Adler had spoken of an aggression drive as early as 1908, he soon abandoned this concept, replacing it with the concept of a general upward striving which he called variously striving to be a real man, striving for power, superiority, success, and ultimately for perfection and completion—in the mentally healthy person in a socially useful, contributive direction (2, pp. 34-39).

VICARIOUS AGGRESSION

People, of course, differ and ultimately each individual is unique. Thus, although there are undoubtedly some who derive gratification from identification with the powerful, the cruel, or the killer, it is unlikely that too many people would really like to be in his place.

What apparently fascinates many, especially the highly intellectual people who read mystery stories, is the skill with which conclusions are formed from minimal clues. The mental processes involved in detective work bear striking resemblance to those engaged in by the therapist when unraveling the "mysteries" of his patients (3). Unfortunately, few writers of mystery stories possess sufficient imagination to create literary productions involving subjects other

¹This paper was in the discussion stage at the time of Dr. Sicher's death, April 2, 1962. The writers had communicated through tape recordings and, consequently the views of Dr. Sicher, who lived in Los Angeles, were preserved.

than murders to arouse the reader's interest. Poe's *The Gold Bug* is a notable exception.

The hunting dog, in flushing out his quarry, has more appeal than the sheepherding dog who is merely a technician. Likewise, gory movies and television plots are attractive to children and rather primitive grown-ups because they denote action. Yet those more sophisticated pictures in which the gore is merely an accessory to a legal procedure or is an avenue for expressing some ethical ideas, ultimately have a greater audience of mature people, viewers who want something to think about, some values that are at stake.

The excitation of the esthetic sensibilities may also be involved, in addition to the stimulation of the logical processes. In such instances a fight is not interesting because someone is rendered punch-drunk or a bull is killed. Rather the "dancing" skill of the boxer and certainly the "passes" of the matador are appreciated as beautiful, while the gore is an unpleasant, negligible accessory to the beauty of the pageant which the picadors and toreadors are presenting. In Portugal, for example, the bulls are not even killed but are led out of the arena after the fight. Shall we assume that the Portuguese are not hostile or aggressive, overtly or covertly?

There is also the mere desire that the side with whom one has identified may triumph. The yelling that goes on at all of these events—boxing, bullfights, automobile races—is generally not due to the fact (or the wish) that someone might be hurt. In many instances it represents the desire to see one on whom one has placed one's hope and confidence, and in many cases, one's money, emerge victorious. The triumph of the underdog unleashes the yelling for some. The thrill seeker finds his thrill, and he whose life style requires to be in control derives vicarious satisfaction in seeing how close one can get to danger and death (the ultimate controller) without losing control and falling victim to the enemy.

ACTUAL AGGRESSION

Where does all the fighting in our world start, and why is it so difficult to call a halt to it? What is this hostility and aggression that now threatens to assume primacy even over the sexual drives? Two factors, fear and greed, seem to lie behind it, both directed toward the same two goals—physical survival and psychological survival.

Out of fear for survival and out of the conviction that attack is the safest defense, methods of defense eventually are used in an aggressive manner. There are people who speak of preventive wars, not because they are hostile and aggressive but because their fear for survival calls for the aggressive defense of preventive war. A youngster, asked by his mother why he had hit another boy at the playgroup, explained, "Oh, Mommy, he had such a mean look in his eye. I knew he wanted to hit me, so I hit him back first!"

Although the child is normally protected against the forces of nature, at an early stage he learns to fear and fight the giants in his surroundings, dinosaurs in the form of grown-ups, whom the child for quite some time cannot understand. Yet they have the right to do with him as they see fit without his having a say in it, except for perhaps a cry or scream. Democracy does not intrude in the baby's world. He may legitimately soon come to feel afraid, since he is small, lacks competence, and is incapable of taking care of himself (1, pp. 48-70). Consequently, many children who are considered aggressive are probably so in the meaning of self-assertion.

If fear for physical survival is responsible for many acts of hostility among adults, the fear for one's value system, one's psychological survival, generates as many, if not more, antisocial attitudes in human interaction. Psychological survival concerns the status of the person, and its preservation is at least as important as the survival in life itself. At times it is even superordinate to physical survival as when a person chooses to die for his principles.

Both fears, for physical and psychological survival, are reinforced by greed. If possessions give one status and importance, then the child must be taught to believe in and practice the "have" position as the one which increases one's stature. The self-training in a child along these lines elicits the praise that he is smart and clever, boding well for his future. The misinterpretation takes hold that it might be smarter to get more while doing less. And nothing seems more despicable than to be made a sucker, to be taken advantage of. If one does not get, life is unfair; the individual feels entitled to express his hostility (6), and feels his greed legitimized.

Is one to believe that these acts of hostility can be attributed to a gene-bound trait? Or are they referable to an acquired conviction that nothing is enough? Children are trained to worship the false ideas of security, importance, status (4) with which society abounds because of the generally prevalent poorly developed social

interest. The associated hostility is the consequence of the acquired greed.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing, we would say that vicarious aggression is often the fascination for action and its excitement and beauty, or identification with the victor or underdog. Actual fighting and other forms of hostility are secondary to fear and greed, both directed toward physical and psychological survival and self-assertion. These points are further arguments against the Freudian notion of innate, universal aggression.

From this follows among other possible conclusions that the selling of guns and war toys for children can no longer be rationalized as affording them an opportunity to discharge their aggression. Rather, we must ask ourselves, toward what goals are we training our children?

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