

Human Nature and Aggressive Motivation: Why Do Cultural Animals Turn Violent?

*Nature humaine et motivation agressive :
pourquoi les animaux civilisés deviennent-ils violents ?*

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Abstract

A long-standing grand debate in aggression theory has been between views of aggression as innate versus as learned, thus as a product of nature or of culture. Instead, we treat human nature as evolved for the purpose of participating in culture. Aggression emerges as a social strategy (thus from a precultural evolutionary phase) that is moderately well suited to bring about short term gains in a cultural context but carries long term costs and cultural restrictions. Cultural beings are therefore generally in the process of attempting, with mixed success, to control and stop aggression.

Résumé

Un débat ancien au sein de la théorie de l'agression renvoie à la nature innée ou acquise des comportements agressifs, donc à leur expression comme une donnée de la nature versus de la culture. Au lieu d'entrer dans ce débat, nous traitons la nature humaine comme contrainte par l'évolution de participer à la culture. L'agression émerge alors comme une stratégie sociale (donc issue d'une phase préculturelle et évolutionniste) assez bien adaptée à l'obtention de bénéfices à court terme mais impliquant certains coûts et restrictions culturelles à plus long terme. D'une façon générale, les «êtres culturels» tentent par conséquent de contrôler voire d'arrêter l'agression, cela avec un succès relatif.

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Aggression shows both the continuity and the distinctive uniqueness of the human race. Most animals, and most of those who are biologically similar to us, behave aggressively, and many of the same circumstances that elicit aggression in animals (such as competition for resources, dominance, or threat) make humans behave aggressively too. In these respects, people are similar to our animal relatives. On the other hand, human aggression has many features that are essentially unknown among other species, such as ideological (even religious) motivation, use of advanced military technology, genocide, long delayed revenge and even multi-generation feuding, and many patterns of homicide.

In this paper, we are concerned with how theoretical context can shape views of aggression. We shall propose a new view of how nature and culture combine to shape human aggressive impulses. Specifically, our theoretical framework begins with the assumption that the human psyche has been designed through natural selection for the purpose of participation in culture. Innate aggressive tendencies are therefore not antisocial, as some have argued, but instead represent effective though flawed strategies for dealing with social life in a cultural context.

The Great Debate

Generations of social scientists have argued about whether aggression is learned or innate (instinctive). In some respects this debate has been the most enduring theoretical battleground in the topic of aggression. We think that there are flaws on both sides of this argument, and this ill-starred debate may arise from using a faulty theoretical context.

One side of the debate has held that aggression is something people learn. Some of the most famous arguments on this side have pointed to studies such as those by Bandura (1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961), who showed that children would behave more aggressively after observing a model perform aggressive acts, especially if they could copy the model's actions directly. Although those findings are compelling, they do not in any way undermine or disprove the hypothesis that aggression has an innate aspect. Most organisms are naturally predisposed

to learn some things more readily than others. The fact that people learn (indeed rather easily) how to be aggressive may support, rather than contradict, the idea that they have an innate tendency to be aggressive.

The opposing side of the debate asserts that aggressive tendencies are innate. Freud (e.g., 1930) is one of the most famous proponents of this view, and he contended that the aggressive drive or "Tödestrieb" is one of the two main foundations of all human motivation. In his view, the drive to aggress is deeply rooted in the psyche and hence independent of circumstances. As a result, people have an innate and recurring need to inflict harm or damage, and this desire needs to be satisfied periodically, one way or another. He regarded self-control (as embodied in his concept of superego) as a form of aggression, insofar as one deprives oneself of other satisfactions by restraining oneself. To Freud, this was an effective but costly way to satisfy the aggressive drive, which otherwise would manifest itself by harming or killing others or smashing property.

There are several problems with Freud's theory of innate aggression. First, of course, it does not disconfirm the importance of learning (just as the findings about learned aggression do not disconfirm the hypothesis of innate tendencies). Second, there is no evidence that aggression is a need, in the sense that people who fail to act aggressively will routinely suffer impairments of health or well-being. In that sense, it is possible to accept the view of aggression as having some innate basis without agreeing that the need to aggress arises independently of circumstances.

The argument over whether aggression has an innate basis was driven in part by goals of social engineering. If aggression were entirely learned, then it should be possible to construct a culture in which there would be no aggression at all. Perhaps if parents refused to buy gun toys for their sons, or if books and entertainments declined to glorify war, or if sexual frustration could be permanently ended, all violence would cease. That, at least, was the dream behind the hope that aggression was entirely learned.

Both sides of the argument gleaned some comfort from surveying different cultures. Cultures vary considerably in how aggressive they are, and as always, cultural variation is one sign that learning can play a role. On the other side, no cultures have

eliminated aggression, which is possibly a sign that aggressive tendencies are innately rooted in the human psyche.

Another sign of innate basis for aggression is that no culture has been able to eliminate the gender difference in aggression. Young men are always the most aggressive group, which points to biological factors. Some theorists, who believe most passionately in social constructionist and feminist views, suggest that all cultures somehow teach young men to be aggressive, but we are skeptical of this view. Our impression is that cultures expend much more effort toward curbing than promoting male aggression. Indeed, it is hard to see just why a culture would want to promote male aggression, because aggression is often disruptive to cultural life and can present serious problems. Does anyone really believe that the United States (or indeed any other culture) would be better off if its men were more violent? Does anyone dispute that it would be better off if its young men were actually somewhat less violent?

From our perspective, it seems doubtful that cultures in general teach or promote aggression. More likely, nature prepares violent impulses. Culture teaches and promotes restraints, such as guilt, religion, empathy, and self-control. Because cultures vary widely in how earnestly and how effectively they promote these virtues, they will vary in the degree to which the natural aggressiveness of the human being is subdued.

Thus, Freud's view of aggression as an innate drive may have some merit. It fits some empirical findings but is contradicted by others. It is necessary to refine his view, perhaps rather than abandoning it entirely. Yes, some aggression is innate. No, it is not innate in the way he proposed.

We find no evidence that people have an innate need to be aggressive periodically, in the sense that the need is independent of context. If (as Freud proposed) the aggressive instinct comes from within and demands to be satisfied in one way or another, then failing to satisfy this need should be harmful, in the way that failing to eat or breathe or form social bonds is harmful to the person. But there is no sign that people who fail to perform violent acts suffer adverse consequences.

Put another way, motivations can be sorted into three categories. The first category consists of needs. Needs require satisfaction, so

the person must find some way to satisfy them; the need is inside the person, and the context is only a means to an end. Hunger might fit this category: People need food, and that need is independent of circumstances. Second, wants or desires come from within but do not have to be satisfied, and people can live without adverse consequences even if they do not satisfy them, although they may continue to want satisfaction. Sexual desire probably fits this category, because people will continue to experience at least occasional sexual desire regardless of their circumstances, but there is no proof that celibacy causes physical or psychological harm. Third, response tendencies may be innately prepared dispositions to respond to certain kinds of situations with certain kinds of actions. These tendencies arise only when activated by the situational context.

Aggression fits the third category, in our view. Aggression is not a need (contrary to Freud), because a person could live a happy, healthy life without ever performing violent acts – provided, perhaps, that the person always got what he or she wanted. Aggression may likewise not even be a want. But it may be a response tendency. When one's desire are thwarted, and other people stand in the way of one's goal satisfactions, aggressive impulses arise as one way of trying to remove the thwarting and get what you want.

And this puts a curious twist on the debate about innate aggression and the related question of whether a culture could be designed in which violence would be utterly absent. We believe that aggressive tendencies do have an innate basis, because people are predisposed by nature to respond with aggression to certain kinds of situations. We also think that it would be possible in principle (though only in principle) to eliminate aggression entirely, not because aggression is learned, but because if the triggering circumstances never arose, people would never feel violent impulses. Unfortunately, the triggering circumstances (such as competition for scarce resources, strivings for dominance, perceived threat, intergroup conflict) are so deeply rooted in the human condition that in practice there is zero chance of eliminating them. They can however be reduced or increased, and moreover the restraints on aggression can also be strengthened or undermined, and so cultures will continue to vary widely in how violent they are.

Cultural Animals

Thus far we have proposed that the traditional debate about innate versus learned aggression was based on questionable assumptions. We turn now to examine aggression from the perspective of a new theoretical framework proposed by Baumeister (in press). In that view, the human psyche was shaped by nature for culture. The structure and contents of the human psyche are therefore designed and innately oriented to promote participation in culture.

For example, culture generally depends on language, because information can be communicated and elaborated most effectively with language. Human beings have a much greater capacity for language than any other known species. This capacity includes a vocal apparatus that can make a vast number of distinctive sounds, a memory that can store the meanings of hundreds of thousands of words, and a brain that is capable of mastering grammatical relationships so as to be able to combine multiple words into complex units of meaning (such as this sentence!). Baumeister (in press) contends, therefore, that evolution created the human psyche with its unparalleled capacity for language as one of several adaptations that would enable people to live in a culture.

Culture is defined here as an information-based system that allows people to live together and satisfy their basic needs. In an important sense, culture constitutes the “third world” of biology. The first world is the physical environment. All organisms that live must deal with the physical environment in order to satisfy their ineluctable drives toward survival and reproduction. Their bodies and minds contain whatever inner structures necessary to enable them to interact with the physical world.

Social interaction is the second world. Some (but not all) species use social interaction as a strategy for dealing with the physical environment. Thus, by cooperating and communicating, they may find it easier to survive and reproduce. Social life requires additional inner structures, however, such as the ability to cooperate and elicit cooperation, and possibly the ability to anticipate what others will do. These structures enable the organism to deal with relationships, interactions, and other aspects of the group.

Culture is the third environment, which is a large further step beyond mere social interaction. A few species, and primarily our own, use culture as a strategy for dealing with social interaction. Culture makes considerable additional demands on the psyche, requiring more elaborate inner structures, but if those do exist then culture can greatly improve social life and improve each organism's ability to survive and reproduce.

To illustrate: all animals must eat. Some eat mainly by dealing (alone) with their physical environment. Others use social interaction to improve their opportunities for eating, such as when a pack of wolves hunts and kills prey that no individual wolf could conquer by itself. And a few animals, mainly humans, use culture to manage food, enabling the modern citizen to purchase his food in restaurants and supermarkets. As a result of culture, most human beings eat far better and more regularly than most other animals.

The view that human nature is designed for culture rests in part on the assumption that the beginnings of culture can be observed in other species. De Waal (2002) and others have concluded that several dozen other species exhibit rudimentary cultural behavior, in the sense that innovations are shared through the group and passed on to future generations. These may have been sufficient to make the biological advantages of culture apparent and to enable culture to confer an advantage in natural selection. As a result, so the argument goes, the human race evolved to take advantage of the opportunities that culture offered. Human motivation, cognition, emotion, and action control are all presumably shaped to enable people to live together within a cultural system. For the most part these changes will bear some resemblance to what is found in other species, but they will also show some changes that are essentially adaptations for the sake of culture. (Note: This line of argument holds that culture per se, rather than cultural differences, are important. The crucial difference in the design of the human psyche is to enable us to live in any culture. For example, all humans have the ability to learn and use language, and the important difference is between having versus not having a language, rather than the differences between languages such as Spanish versus German.)

One implication of the cultural animal theory (and one highly relevant to aggression) is that human interdependence is far more extensive than that of most other animals. Culture organizes social interaction, and one principle of interaction is that division of labor improves efficiency and effectiveness. It is no accident that all cultures in the world employ some division of labor.

Indeed, all corporations in the world use division of labor because it enables them to produce more goods better, faster, and cheaper. Indeed, historians of commerce report that the first factories were merely places where highly skilled artisans worked side by side but independently in order to create goods — but gradually these were replaced by factories that relied on division of labor. That is, in these newer factories, the final product was created not by a single master craftsman but rather by the pooled efforts of several or even dozens of workers. The original system was undeniably inferior, because the value of the product was limited by the skills of the artisan, who had to be competent at every phase of the work, whereas division of labor enabled people to contribute even though each individual's skills were limited to one aspect of the process. With division of labor, more and better products can be produced by people with less training and less expertise (and therefore less expensively), as compared to having each individual perform every part of the task.

Modern society embodies the logical culmination of this process. The modern citizen eats and lives very well. He or she typically owns an immense assortment of goods, each of which was obtained from other people. A modern citizen who did not use the fruits of anyone else's labors would have very few of the comforts that are available. When a modern family eats dinner in its home, it is probably relying on the interdependent activities of several hundred other people who created the various foods, packed them, transported them to stores, and sold them, not to mention doing the same for the plates, silverware, and furniture, plus the people who managed and financed each step of the process.

Division of labor is one of the defining features of modern culture, and it has made life undeniably better. Its cost however is that cultural beings are highly interdependent. Very few modern citizens could be self-sufficient even if that were necessary.

Human beings are still animals and have the basic animal needs and wants, including for food, shelter, warmth, comfort, sex, and other pleasures. We do not obtain satisfaction directly from the physical environment, however. We obtain satisfaction from other people. Hence we must develop the ability to get what we want from other people, or else we will suffer and starve.

Innate Aggression Revisited

Why should aggression be innate? Freud's vision depicted aggression as fundamentally antisocial. Ultimately he began to think that each person had instinctual tendencies toward both life and death, with death being the aggression instinct. Yet this is not compatible with the bulk of biological, evolutionary thinking. People (and other animals) would not have any innate desire for death, because death is not adaptive. It does not contribute to survival or reproduction, which are the twin hallmarks of biological success.

In contrast, according to the perspective of cultural animal theory, it is seriously implausible that the innate structure of the human psyche contains drives that are fundamentally antisocial. Social life is part of the human strategy to achieve survival and reproduction. Culture is an improvement on sociality. Therefore, most of the human psyche is designed to serve cultural participation. Aggression may be a holdover from our evolutionary past, but it remains because it is effective in some ways for cultural participation.

Thus, according to cultural animal theory, aggression would only be an innate human tendency if it is in some way helpful for cultural participation. That is, aggression must ultimately contribute to facilitating survival and reproduction, within the context of the human project, which is to use culture as a means of facilitating survival and reproduction.

Aggression as Social Strategy

Assume that interdependence is a basic fact of cultural life. Hence the human being can mainly only get what it wants by way of social interaction. Put another way, its success at getting what it wants depends on influencing other people.

There are many strategies for influencing people, and these vary widely in how acceptable and how effective they are. Aggression is one strategy that does sometimes succeed (e.g., Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Violent activity, or even the credible threat of violence, is one way to get other people to do what you want. Ultimately, people can use aggression to further their innate goals of survival and reproduction, along with a host of other goals such as maintaining a sense of superiority over others, getting money, and intimidating others who might interfere with your desires.

Aggression may be a last or near-last resort for most. Culture allows people many pathways to get what they want from other people. In today's United States, the most favored way of getting what you want from other people is to pay them money. (But of course, you must have the money in order to give it, and some people turn to violence as a way of getting money.) Cooperation, reciprocation, persuasion, even simple charm are often effective, and the culture approves of them much more than it approves of aggression. Still, when those fail and the person is faced with the prospect of not being able to satisfy his or her desires, aggression may present itself as a way of influencing others and obtaining satisfaction. Aggression thus helps the organism satisfy its biological needs, by way of operating on others.

For example, many men desire sex from various women, and they may employ a host of means to persuade the woman to give them sexual satisfaction, including charm, gifts, flattery, display of wealth, promises of commitment, and love. Sometimes these all fail, and the woman refuses to accede to the man's wishes. Most men accept the woman's decision, but a few do not and may resort to force or violence in order to obtain what they want (e.g., Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002; Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, in press; Kanin, 1985; Malamuch, 1996).

Aggression may be somewhat costly, even counterproductive, as a social strategy. Hurting others damages one's relationships to them and may make them less willing to benefit the aggressor in the long run, except insofar as the person is coerced by the threat of violence. Moreover, most cultures disapprove of using aggression and violence to obtain what one wants, and so the aggressor runs the risk of social sanctions (including prison). However, in

the short run aggression is highly effective, and its short-term benefits may often outweigh its long-term costs, especially for people who are oriented toward the immediate present rather than the distant future.

If anything, aggression is probably most effective and most appealing to merely social (as opposed to cultural) animals. Solitary animals, who get what they want from the physical environment, have little need to influence each other. Aggression among them is chiefly a matter of killing their food, and as such it is not likely to be directed against their own species. Social animals may negotiate their status hierarchies and resolve disputes by aggressive activity. Cultural animals, in contrast, live in a world with meanings (many of which condemn aggression) and an elongated time perspective (in which the long-term costs of aggression become more apparent). Most cultures do restrain and condemn aggression. But because of the greater interdependence of cultural animals, the temptations to resort to aggression are legion.

Is aggression social or antisocial? In most cases, aggression is intended as social, even though its unintended consequences are often antisocial. It constructs or shapes relationships, and it influences people to do what the aggressor wants. Admittedly, it can backfire, and the benefits may be short-term while the costs are long-term, but that is one of the core problems of human social adaptation. The creatures from whom human beings evolved have almost no capacity to sacrifice immediate benefits for the sake of possibly greater but delayed ones. Ultimately this lack leaves them less able to make life better for themselves. Humans have developed some capacity for this, but it is limited — which is not surprising given that nature evolves only incrementally, and so people are only somewhat more capable than animals. Often people do what offers the most rewards in the short run, at considerable long-term cost (for example, they enjoy the immediate pleasures of smoking cigarettes but then suffer the delayed consequences of lung cancer).

If one focuses on the intended consequences of aggression, aggression is a highly social strategy. These intended consequences can briefly be listed as follows. First, people try to intimidate others so these others will defer to their wishes:

Husbands beat wives, parents beat children, and repressive governments imprison and torture their citizens, all in order to secure obedience and compliance. Second, people use aggression to resolve disputes in their favor, whether this involves two countries fighting over disputed territory or two shoppers fighting over the last item they both want. Third, people resort to aggression to construct or maintain the identity they want, especially when they attack someone who has insulted them or impugned their honor. Fourth, people resort to aggression to gain revenge on someone who has hurt them.

All these are social strategies. Nonsocial or antisocial motives for aggression, such as the quest for sadistic enjoyment, are much rarer (Baumeister, 1997).

To be sure, aggression does have its antisocial side, but this is often found in its unintended or indirect consequences and side effects. Aggression can damage or even destroy relationships. This is most obvious in the case of homicide: All the victim's relationships are ended, though this was probably not the goal or intent of the killer. The aggressor's relationships may also be damaged: Fanon (1963) described how the family lives of professional torturers deteriorated, and some writings suggest that some (though perhaps not all) the people who took part in the Nazi German genocide suffered interpersonal difficulties on the side as a result of their violent occupational activities (Bar-On, 1989; Lifton, 1986; Sichrovsky, 1988). Within marriage, violent husbands may win specific arguments but in general they do not get the relationship that they want (e.g., Gondolf, 1985).

To summarize: Aggression is social in its intended consequences, but antisocial in its indirect or unintended consequences. That may help explain why individual people often resort to aggression although their cultures typically condemn violence. Cultures seek to curb violence because over time they come to recognize the harm that aggression does to society and its network of relationships. But the individual contemplating violence may focus instead on how aggression may help him or her to influence others effectively to bring about outcomes that the person desires.

A further point is that the benefits of aggression tend to be apparent and immediate, whereas the costs to the aggressor may be delayed or concealed. Striking someone may enable the per-

son to win the argument, and so the immediate outcome is a successful resolution of the dispute. The cost in terms of having the other person less willing to trust you or associate with you is far less obvious and comes much later. Most views of instrumental aggression suggest short-term success but long-term failure (see Baumeister, 1997, for review). For example, stealing money is often effective in the short run, but in the long run few more robbers end up in prison or poor than are able to retire as rich men. Viewed in that way, aggression is a somewhat effective though ultimately imperfect strategy for living in human culture. Aggression appeals to people because it can succeed at obtaining what one wants, especially in the short run. In the long run, there are better ways to get what you want than via aggression, but the powerful appeal of short-term success will ensure that some people will resort to violence.

The view of aggression as effective in the short but not the long term fits the view linking crime to poor self-control (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Self-control is a quintessential or supreme example of adaptation for culture. The more self-control, the better suited one is for life in culture. Aggression can work within a culture, but it is not optimal, and so relying on aggression to get through life is a second-class strategy. With better self-control, one can use alternative strategies rather than aggression, and indeed a wise, culturally sophisticated individual would use other strategies rather than aggression. To refrain from the palpable, easy, appealing benefits of aggression requires self-control, however. Persons with weaker self-control might succumb more to the short-term benefits of aggression rather than holding out for the greater but less immediate benefits of the alternative strategies.

Conclusion

Aggression has long been the focus of bitter debates about whether it is rooted in nature or culture. We have said why we regard the arguments in that debate, and indeed that debate itself, as inevitably inconclusive and based on misleading assumptions. In its place, we have proposed that human nature is specifically designed for culture. That view furnishes a fertile alternative basis for theorizing about aggression.

Human beings are animals and therefore have many needs, wants, and problems that are rooted in nature. Human beings however use culture to solve many of those problems and satisfy those needs. Culture is our species' most important adaptation and is therefore the defining fact of human life and human nature.

Aggression in that view is more social than antisocial, at least in its functions and intended consequences. Human beings, like other animals, sometimes use aggression as a way to influence others so as to obtain what they want. Like other animals, we are predisposed by nature to respond to some social problems with aggression. Unlike them, culture has taught us many ways and means to restrain our aggressive impulses, and the rise of culture has produced many legal, moral, and practical inhibitions against aggression. Cultural human beings are able to recognize that aggression will not be the best strategy in the long run. Aggressive impulses have not been eliminated, however, and sometimes they will still lead to violence, especially when people focus on the short term rather than the long term, or when cultural restraints have been weakened or set aside.

Human beings are not only social but also cultural. One result is that they are highly interdependent on each other, and their large (macro) social systems are complex and flexible. Survival and satisfaction therefore require dealing with individual other people and with groups or systems of people. This extensive dependency requires people to have effective strategies for dealing with these others, and aggression is one such strategy. Aggression persists mainly because it is often quite effective in the short run, even though it is generally less effective in the long run and even though most cultures do their best to reduce or eliminate it. But as long as people sometimes lack more effective alternative strategies, and as long as some of them focus more on the immediate benefits than the long-term ones, society will continue to be plagued by aggression.

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