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Module 11.6: Aggression

Throughout this lesson we have discussed how people interact and influence one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in both positive and negative ways. People can work together to achieve great things, such as helping each other in emergencies: recall the heroism displayed during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. People also can do great harm to one another, such as conforming to group norms that are immoral and obeying authority to the point of murder: consider the mass conformity of Nazis during WWII. In this section we will discuss a negative side of human behavior—aggression.

Aggression

Humans engage in **aggression** when they seek to cause harm or pain to another person. Aggression takes two forms depending on one's motives: hostile or instrumental.

- **Hostile aggression** is motivated by feelings of anger with intent to cause pain; a fight in a bar with a stranger is an example of hostile aggression.
- **Instrumental aggression** is motivated by achieving a goal and does not necessarily involve intent to cause pain; a contract killer who murders for hire displays instrumental aggression.

Figure 11.23 Human males and nonhuman male primates

There are many different theories as to why aggression exists. Some researchers argue that aggression serves an evolutionary function. Men are more likely than women to show aggression. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, human male aggression, like that in nonhuman primates, likely serves to display dominance over other males, both to protect a mate and to perpetuate the male's genes (**Figure 11.23**). Sexual jealousy is part of male aggression; males endeavor to make sure their mates are not copulating with other males, thus ensuring their own paternity of the female's offspring.

Although aggression provides an obvious evolutionary advantage for men, women also engage in aggression. Women typically display instrumental forms of aggression, with their aggression serving as a means to an end. For example, women may express their aggression covertly, for example, by communication that impairs the social standing of another person. Another theory that explains one of the functions of human aggression is

endeavor to gain and display dominance over other males, as demonstrated in the behavior of these monkeys. (credit: "Arcadiuš"/Flickr)

frustration aggression theory. This theory states that when humans are prevented from achieving an important goal, they become frustrated and aggressive.

Bullying

A modern form of aggression is bullying. As you learn in your study of child development, socializing and playing with other children is beneficial for children's psychological development. However, as you may have experienced as a child, not all play behavior has positive outcomes. One form of negative social interactions among children that has become a national concern is bullying. **Bullying** is repeated negative treatment of another person, often an adolescent, over time. A one-time incident in which one child hits another child on the playground would not be considered bullying; bullying is repeated behavior. The negative treatment typical in bullying is the attempt to inflict harm, injury, or humiliation, and bullying can include physical or verbal attacks. However, bullying doesn't have to be physical or verbal, it can be psychological. Research finds gender differences in how girls and boys bully others. Boys tend to engage in direct, physical aggression such as physically harming others. Girls tend to engage in indirect, social forms of aggression such as spreading rumors about, ignoring, or socially isolating others. Based on what you have learned about child development and social roles, why do you think boys and girls display different types of bullying behavior?

Bullying involves three parties: the bully, the victim, and witnesses or bystanders. The act of bullying involves an imbalance of power with the bully holding more power physically, emotionally, and/or socially over the victim. The experience of bullying can be positive for the bully, who may enjoy a boost to self-esteem. However, there are several negative consequences of bullying for the victim, and also for the bystanders. Being the victim of bullying is associated with decreased mental health, including experiencing anxiety and depression. Victims of bullying may underperform in schoolwork. Bullying also can result in the victim committing suicide.

Although there is not one single personality profile for who becomes a bully and who becomes a victim of bullying, researchers have identified some patterns in children who are at a greater risk of being bullied:

- Children who are emotionally reactive are at a greater risk for being bullied. Bullies may be attracted to children who get upset easily because the bully can quickly get an emotional reaction from them.
- Children who are different from others are likely to be targeted for bullying. Children who are overweight, cognitively impaired, or racially or ethnically different from their peer group may be at higher risk.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens are at very high risk of being bullied and hurt due to their sexual orientation.

Cyberbullying

With the rapid growth of technology, and widely available mobile technology and social networking media, a new form of bullying has emerged: cyberbullying. **Cyberbullying**, like bullying, is repeated behavior that is intended to cause psychological or emotional harm to another person. What is unique about cyberbullying is that it is typically covert, concealed, done in private, and the bully can remain anonymous. This anonymity gives the bully power, and the victim may feel helpless, unable to escape the harassment, and unable to retaliate.

Cyberbullying can take many forms, including harassing a victim by spreading rumors, creating a website defaming the victim, and ignoring, insulting, laughing at, or teasing the victim. In cyberbullying, it is more common for girls to be the bullies and victims because cyberbullying is nonphysical and is a less direct form of bullying (**Figure 11.24**). Interestingly, girls who become cyberbullies often have been the victims of cyberbullying at one time.

The effects of cyberbullying are just as harmful as traditional bullying and include the victim feeling frustration, anger, sadness, helplessness, powerlessness, and fear. Victims will also experience lower self-esteem. Furthermore, recent research suggests that both cyberbullying victims and perpetrators are more likely to experience suicidal ideation, and they are more likely to attempt suicide than individuals who have no experience with cyberbullying.

What features of technology make cyberbullying easier and perhaps more accessible to young adults? What can parents, teachers, and social networking websites, like Facebook, do to prevent cyberbullying?

Figure 11.24 Because cyberbullying is not physical in nature, cyberbullies and their victims are most often female; however, there is much evidence that male homosexuals are frequently victims of cyberbullying as well (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). (credit: Steven Depolo)

The Bystander Effect

The discussion of bullying highlights the problem of witnesses not intervening to help a victim. This is a common occurrence, as the following well-publicized event demonstrates. In 1964, in Queens, New York, a 19-year-old woman named Kitty Genovese was attacked by a person with a knife near the back entrance to her apartment building and again in the hallway inside her apartment building. When the attack occurred, she screamed for help numerous times and eventually died from her stab wounds. This story became famous because reportedly numerous residents in the apartment building heard her cries for help and did nothing—neither helping her nor summoning the police—though these have facts been disputed.

Based on this case, researchers Latané and Darley (1968) described the bystander effect. The **bystander effect** is a phenomenon in which a bystander does not volunteer to help a person in distress. Instead, they just watch what is happening. Social psychologists hold that we make these decisions based on the social situation, not our own personality variables.

It is very likely you listed more costs than benefits to helping. In this situation, bystanders likely feared for their own lives—if they went to her aid, the attacker might harm them. However, how difficult would it have been to make a phone call to the police from the safety of their apartments? Why do you think no one helped in any way?

Social psychologists claim that diffusion of responsibility is the likely explanation. **Diffusion of responsibility** is the tendency for no one in a group to help because the responsibility to help is spread throughout the group. Because there were many witnesses to the attack on
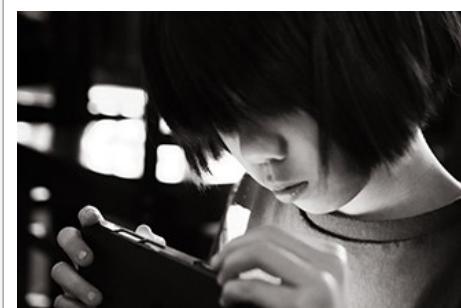
Genovese, as evidenced by the number of lit apartment windows in the building, individuals assumed someone else must have already called the police. The responsibility to call the police was diffused across the number of witnesses to the crime. In general, the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that any one person will help.

Check Your Knowledge

As you read your assignment for this lesson, pay close attention to the key terms and phrases 🗎 listed throughout the chapter. These terms and concepts are important to your understanding of the information provided in the lesson.

Module 11.6 Flashcards   Click on the notecard to reveal the definition.

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Aggression

◄ Previous Card   Term 1 of 7   Next Card ►

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