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## Aggression as Impression Management\*

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*This paper suggests six propositions from impression management theory to account for interpersonal aggression where there is no material gain, and reviews evidence supporting these propositions. This approach suggests that initial attacks are often inadvertent and that retaliation may be an attempt to reinstate a favorable situational identity when one has been attacked. The approach is particularly useful in: (1) explaining why perceived intentional attack elicits aggression; (2) recognizing the importance of role relationships for interpersonal aggression; (3) handling the processual nature of aggressive encounters; and (4) clarifying the relationship between interpersonal conflict and aggression.*

### Introduction

Students of interpersonal aggression have generally favored either the frustration-aggression hypothesis and its modifications (Dollard *et al.*, 1939; Berkowitz, 1962), or social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) in their explanations of aggressive behavior. Less widely accepted are interpretations of harm-doing as an attempt to seek or restore face, self-esteem, status, or power (Horwitz, 1956; Worchel, 1960; Becker, 1962; Feshbach, 1964; Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; Lofland, 1969; Toch, 1969; Hepburn, 1973; Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974; Luckenbill, 1977). To our knowledge, no previous effort has been made to formalize a theory of aggression along these lines. This paper takes some first steps in developing a general theory of aggression based on ideas from symbolic interactionism and impression management theory.<sup>1</sup> This theory generates a unique

set of propositions, many of which are supported by experimental research.

Impression management theory suggests that much of human behavior is designed to obtain favorable reactions from an audience. Persons are aware that they are being categorized or typified by others in a situation and they seek to make these categorizations or "situational identities" (Weinstein, 1969) favorable. While impression management theory focuses on external audiences and public behavior, symbolic interaction theory suggests that behavior performed in private may reflect concern for the reaction of an internalized audience (see Mead, 1934, on the "generalized other"). Some of the propositions and evidence presented below suggest that persons tend to behave in ways that are consistent with internalized values or identities. However, for the most part, the propositions and evidence stress the importance of the external audience that observes or finds out about one's behavior.

The following discussion suggests how interpersonal conflict tends to result in attacks on the situational identities of interactants, and proceeds to show why these attacks tend to produce retaliation. It is argued that impression management theory provides a better explanation of this behavior than the frustration-aggression hypothesis or reinforcement theories. Six propositions are derived from impression management theory, and their supporting evidence is reviewed.

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the goals of aggressive behaviors are assumed to be similar to the goals of other behaviors. The definition serves for the most part to limit the scope of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "aggression" refers to the intentional act of harming another person. The focus here will be on actions that cast another person into a negatively valued identity. Actions that incidentally or accidentally have this effect are discussed but not labeled aggressive. The definitional problem is not as serious for this theory as it is for instinct theories and for the frustration-aggression hypothesis, since no special antecedents for aggressive behavior are being proposed. Rather,

### *Interpersonal Conflict and the Initial Attack*

Harm and the threat of harm often provide an effective method for succeeding in the competition for scarce rewards (French and Raven, 1959). Though such "instrumental aggression" is widely recognized in the literature, it is not usually the main object of interest in analyses of interpersonal aggression. More concern is centered on aggression that appears to have no material benefit and may even be materially costly. While we do not focus on aggression for material gain either, we recognize its importance.

There is another source of conflict in everyday life that, to our knowledge, has not been discussed. Given that people may disapprove of others and their actions, and given that others expect to be treated with respect, an inherent source of conflict is produced. Disapproval, when expressed honestly to others, may be taken as an offense by those others, whether or not an offense is intended. If differences in opinion and disapproval are inherent in social life and if these attitudes are sometimes expressed openly then the important theoretical question is not why interpersonal attacks occur, but why do they not occur more often? A possible answer to this question is found in Goffman's (1959) notion of the "working consensus." According to this implicit agreement, participants in an encounter publicly accept and support each other's identity claims, whatever their private opinions are. This consensus protects sacred but vulnerable selves, prevents disruption, and, from our point of view, decreases the likelihood of an aggressive encounter. Furthermore, if politeness is required in interaction, then its absence may be interpreted as an offense. Therefore it becomes necessary for interactants to engage in a considerable amount of effort simply to avoid insulting others. The avoidance of attack becomes a problematic task that each participant must engage in when in the presence of others. Any theory of aggression, then, should examine the propensity and ability of individuals to be polite and thus support the working consensus. For example, persons who

are upset or intoxicated (see Hepburn, 1973) may be unwilling or unable to be sufficiently polite.

We can illustrate this problem by suggesting how arguments emerge and develop. Because the line between disagreement and insult is a fine one, arguments may easily be perceived as attacks on self. Ego may pose a disagreement as a simple difference in opinion, or as being a function of alter's incorrect view of reality. The latter may imply that alter is incompetent and may be perceived by alter as an attack on self. Furthermore, as the pace quickens and arousal levels increase, the parties involved may have increasing difficulty inhibiting potentially insulting remarks. Conversational turn-taking violations tend to increase as participants attempt to take and hold their turns, resulting in interruptions and an increase in voice level. Either or both parties may then perceive the other's interruptions and shouting as an attack.

### *Retaliation*

The most widely accepted theory of aggression where there is no material benefit is the frustration-aggression hypothesis. However, this theory has come under frequent criticism lately (Bandura, 1973; Kaufman, 1970; Tedeschi *et al.*, 1974). Criticisms have been made of the ambiguity of the concept of "frustration." Most importantly, at least six experimental studies show that aggression results primarily from the perception of intentional attack rather than from simple frustration (Buss, 1963; Epstein and Taylor, 1967; Geen, 1968; Gentry, 1970; Taylor and Pisano, 1971; and Greenwell and Dengerink, 1973). These studies show, for example, that perceiving verbal and physical attacks as intentional, rather than experiencing failure at a task, leads subjects to harm others. Research with children in natural settings also suggests that it is hostile actions that elicit aggression (Rausch, 1965). Finally, studies of homicides and assaults indicate that such encounters are instigated by an insult from one of the participants (e.g., Berg and Fox, 1947; Toch, 1969; Luckenbill, 1977).

The question becomes, then, why does perceived intentional attack tend to result in aggression? An adequate answer to this question cannot be found in the aggression literature. Social learning theory perhaps has at least part of the answer: Counterattack or its threat reduces the probability that one will be attacked in the future, by demonstrating to others that such actions will be costly. There are at least four reasons why such an explanation is inadequate for explaining many instances of retaliation. First, in many cases persons retaliate even when the material costs are high (see Brown, 1968, discussed below). Second, if preventing future attack is the only reason for counterattack it would be unnecessary to retaliate against persons we never expect to meet again. However, the evidence cited below clearly demonstrates that subjects retaliate against experimenters and confederates whom they know they are unlikely to see again. Third, since insulting others is generally an unacceptable and infrequent event, it is often unlikely that a counterinsult is necessary to prevent a further occurrence. Finally, evidence to be cited later suggests that subjects in competitive games counterattack even when they know their opponents' choices are preprogrammed and thus unalterable.

According to the present perspective, there are at least two reasons why an insult is likely to result in a counterattack. First, an insult releases the target from the obligation to be polite toward the person who has attacked him. Second, an insult "altercasts" or places the target into an unfavorable situational identity (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963), by making the person appear weak, incompetent, and cowardly.<sup>2</sup> A successful counterattack is one effective way of nullifying the imputed negative identity by showing one's strength, competence, and courage. It

<sup>2</sup> This will tend to make the target angry of course. The relationship between anger and aggression may, in part, be spurious, in that both may result from a perception of intentional attack. Perhaps anger also facilitates aggression. If a person believes an antagonist has caused his anger, he may retaliate to save face or because he thinks it is appropriate (Berwitz *et al.*, 1969).

suggests that the person has "honor," i.e., that the person is someone whose self must be respected. In short, an attack on self initiates a conflict in which participants may attempt to harm their opponents in their competition for favorable situational identities.<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of this type of conflict are well illustrated in such activities as teasing, exchanging insults in jest (see Dollard, 1939, on "playing the dozens"), and (more seriously) in duels and feuds.

Counterattack is not the only response to an attack. Another response, if the target perceives the insult as legitimate or justified, is to accept the imputed identity and perhaps apologize. Or, if the target perceives the material costs as too high, he may "back down" and perhaps achieve some satisfaction with a fantasy about retaliation. Finally, for certain audiences, and under certain contexts, retaliation may be viewed as vindictive or vengeful and thus elicit a negative reaction,<sup>4</sup> in which case "playing it cool" or "turning the other cheek" may be effective. However, these actions may also have an aggressive component if they are designed to make the other appear uncontrolled or aggressive.

<sup>3</sup> Revenge is a counterattack delivered well after the original attack. Revenge may involve the same process, except that the favorable identity that one seeks to reestablish is transsituational. Most aggression may be retaliatory, at least from the actor's point of view. Thus, persons who believe that others are hostile or aggressive may "retaliate" by behaving in a hostile way themselves and, as a result, elicit the hostile behavior they expect. This mechanism may explain the behavior of some persons who appear aggressive without provocation. These persons may believe that they are only responding to a hostile world. They are partly correct in this perception but they are responding to a hostile world that they have created for themselves (see Merton, 1957, on self-fulfilling prophecies). For example, in the prisoner's dilemma game (Kelley and Stahelski, 1970), competitive subjects believed that opponents were also uniformly competitive, and behaved in ways that induced their opponents to fulfill these expectations.

<sup>4</sup> Persons may also alter their aggressive behavior to avoid moral condemnation. For evidence that participants in aggressive encounters are judged in moral terms as well as in terms of their power, see Kane *et al.* (unpublished) and Stapleton *et al.* (unpublished). For a general review of research on judgments of participants in aggressive encounters, see Rule and Nesdale (1976).

PROPOSITIONS AND SUPPORTING  
EVIDENCE

*Method*

In the following sections impression management theory is used to generate six propositions. Experimental research from the aggression literature and the literature on face-saving in bargaining and experimental games is cited.<sup>5</sup> Since some of this research was not designed to test impression management theory, and since none of it was designed to test the propositions as stated, the evidence must be viewed as tentative.

In all of these studies the subject harms another person, and since no other goal for this behavior is apparent it is reasonable to assume that harm was intended. While subjects may not define their own actions as aggressive (Tedeschi *et al.*, 1974), this is probably also true in "real-life" situations, where people tend to view their own actions as justified. It seems that the crucial issue is whether the studies accurately depict the identity negotiation process described above rather than whether behavior in these experiments is "really" aggressive, whatever that means.

*Variation in the Audience and Aggression*

Impression management theory suggests that a person's behavior is a function of the behavior and values of an audience. A participant in an aggressive encounter has two relevant (external) audiences: the antagonist(s) and third-party onlookers. The audience may altercast ego into a situational identity or, by revealing its values, may indicate how a favorable situational identity might be achieved. Propositions 1 and 2 focus on altercasting, while Proposition 3 focuses on variation in the values of onlookers.

<sup>5</sup> Demand characteristics are predictable and theoretically interesting from this perspective and thus are less troublesome here than they are for other theories. In citing experimental research, however, it must be recognized that identity concerns are probably high (due to the experimenter-subject role relationship) while material costs are low, and that the interaction involves strangers. The implications of these factors should be the subject of research, not a cause for rejection of the experimental method.

*Proposition 1. Altercasting a person into a negative situational identity tends to result in retaliation, when the target perceives the behavior as illegitimate and intentional.*

Evidence that it is primarily perceived intentional attack and not frustration that results in aggression was presented earlier. The experimental evidence that a threat sometimes leads to a combative bargaining stance also supports this proposition (e.g., Deutsch and Kraus, 1960). There are two studies that suggest, at least indirectly, that it is concern for situational identity that accounts for the relationship between perceived intentional attack and aggression. First, Shuck and Pisor (1974) found that subjects retaliate for the intended shock of a confederate whether they actually receive the shock or not. This suggests that it is the meaning of an attack to which subjects are responding. Second, in an experiment by Sermat (1967), subjects who played the game of "chicken" with an aggressive opponent were more aggressive (i.e., made more competitive choices) when they were playing against a person than when they were playing against a machine, even though they knew they could not affect their opponents' behavior in either case.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the identity implications are greater when one is confronting a person.

One implication of this proposition is that a person is more likely to retaliate if someone insults him "to his face" than if the negative comment is indirectly communicated. The insult delivered directly is more clearly an attack on one's situational identity. Furthermore, a direct insult implies that the person is not a competent interactant and can be treated with disregard. Indirect evidence comes from a study by Sermat (1967), who found that subjects were more likely to harm uncooperative opponents in a competitive game when these opponents were present than when they were absent, even when

<sup>6</sup> While equity theory (Walster *et al.*, 1973) can account for at least some of these results also, it cannot account for the evidence on audience effects presented below. In general, it seems safe to argue that persons attempt to win aggressive encounters, not break even, although the norm of equity may be relevant for determining what is a "fair fight."

they could not affect their opponents' strategy.

*Proposition 2. Conditions or events that negate the situational identity imputed by an unanswered attack make retaliation less likely.*

The relationship between an insult and retaliation is not automatic. If an attacker's situational identity becomes less favorable as a result of some other event, ego's task is, in part, already accomplished, and he may be less likely to retaliate. At least four types of conditions or events may make retaliation less likely: (1) The attack lacks credibility due to the situational identity of the aggressor. (For example, if an aggressor stumbles over his words, or if the aggressor is a small child, retaliation is less likely.) (2) The aggressor apologizes for the slight, even if the target questions the aggressor's sincerity. (3) A third party intervenes and retaliates on one's behalf. (4) A third party intervenes in the role of mediator. Mediators may constrain the antagonists and allow the conflict to de-escalate without either side appearing to back down. Thus, Pruitt and Johnson (1970) found that bargainers made substantially greater concessions when a mediator was present. Concessions resulted in self-reported feelings of weakness only when there was no mediator. For a review of the literature on mediators and bargaining and more supporting evidence, see Rubin and Brown (1975).

*Proposition 3. Persons will alter their aggressive behavior in order to be consistent with the perceived values of the third-party audience.*

There is a considerable amount of evidence that persons alter their aggressive behavior in order to make it acceptable to onlookers. Brown (1968), for example, found that adolescent male subjects who received peer feedback informing them that they had looked foolish and weak were more likely to retaliate than subjects who did not receive this feedback, even though retaliation was financially costly. These subjects also reported more concern with appearing strong. Concern for situational identities is also demonstrated

by the attention persons give to subtle cues in interpreting an audience's attitude toward their behavior. Borden (1975) found that male subjects behaved more aggressively when they were observed by males than when they were observed by females, presumably because they thought males would view this behavior more favorably. Other studies indicate that subjects interpret the presence of weapons in an experimenter's office as information about his values, and that this increases subjects' aggression when they are concerned with being evaluated (Page and Scheidt, 1971; Turner and Simmons, 1974).

#### *Secret and Disclosed Behavior*

According to impression management theory, public behavior and information revealed to audiences tend to reflect more favorably on self than do private behavior and information concealed. Proposition 4 focuses on the effect of the presence of third parties on behavior, while Proposition 5 focuses on ego's choice of information to reveal to others.

*Proposition 4. Ego is more likely to retaliate against alter if a third party observes alter's attack on him.*

In general, unprovoked aggression is viewed negatively while (at least a limited degree of) retaliation is viewed more positively (for a review of supporting evidence, see Tedeschi *et al.*, 1974). Therefore, in general, the presence of onlookers should make retaliation more likely (and unprovoked attacks less likely). Of course, one expects variation depending on the audience. Thus, juvenile gangs may admire unprovoked attacks against an out-group (Short and Strodbeck, 1965; Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974). And Taylor and Weinstein (1974) find that the effect of an audience on responses to criticism depends on opportunities for coalition formation and the subjects' concern for being seen in a socially desirable way. It may also be that the cultural attitude toward retaliation is one of ambivalence: While one is expected to "stand up" to others, one should not be vengeful. Thus, Baron (1971) found that college-student

subjects inhibited their retaliation somewhat in order not to appear vengeful to a psychologist observer and his assistant. Propositions 6 and 7 assume that (at least some form of) retaliation elicits a more favorable situational identity and should not apply to populations where this is not the case.

*Proposition 5. Ego will tend to conceal evidence of having lost an aggressive encounter and will tend to reveal evidence of having participated or won.*

The aggressive encounter is similar to other types of contests in that participants attempt to win and let others know they have won, even when there is no material benefit. In particular, ego may want the antagonist to recognize him as having won. For this reason ego may attempt to hide his injuries from his antagonist. If it is safe, he may prefer that his target be aware that he has gotten his vengeance, and he may be more likely to retaliate if this is possible. Thus, Sermat (1964) found that subjects made more uncooperative, harmful choices in a competitive game when they thought their uncooperative opponents were being informed of their choices.

#### *Variation in the Salience of Identity and Aggression*

The importance of identity varies across persons and situations. Persons who are more concerned with the audience's reaction because, for example, they are unsure of themselves or are dependent on the audience for rewards (see Jones, 1964, on ingratiation), are more likely to alter their behavior to make it more acceptable to an audience.

*Proposition 6. The greater a person's concern for identity, the more likely he is to alter his aggressive behavior in order to attain a favorable situational identity or avoid a negative situational identity.*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer has suggested that avoiding or eliminating unfavorable situational identities may not be the simple opposite of seeking favorable ones. Persons may differ in the extent to which they are willing to risk negative responses in order to obtain positive ones.

This proposition has at least two implications. First, for some persons, performance in aggressive encounters may assume particular significance for self. Aggression may be more likely to occur and escalate because these persons have more at stake in these encounters. This may partly explain the greater propensity of persons of lower socioeconomic status to engage in violence. Achievement in aggressive encounters may be more important for them since they have fewer activities upon which a positive identity can be based. Second, self-consciousness in a situation should make the implications of one's behavior for self more salient, and thereby increase the extent to which behavior is consistent with these identities. Studies of the effect of objective self-awareness on aggression shows that the presence of a mirror inhibits the delivery of shock to females (presumably an inappropriate behavior) but increases shock delivery to males when it is emphasized that shock is helpful to learning (Scheier *et al.*, 1974; Carver, 1974). These studies suggest that aggression may also reflect concern for an internalized audience.

#### CONCLUSION

Interpersonal conflict is inherent in social life. Open expressions of disagreement and animosity are often interpreted as attacks on self that call forth a similar response from the person attacked and thereby produce an aggressive encounter. These encounters have implications for the situational identities of participants as well as for their material well-being.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the former, it has been suggested that persons may retaliate in order to maintain a favorable situational identity when they perceive they are being attacked.

Impression-management theory generates a unique set of propositions and is able to account for a wide range of literature in a parsimonious fashion. We know of no other theory that can explain the

<sup>8</sup> The present approach can be viewed as complementary to social learning theory in that the importance of material rewards and costs for aggression are recognized.

effects of variation in third parties, disclosure to third parties or antagonists, human as opposed to nonhuman attack, face-to-face attacks, or most importantly, why an insult elicits counteraggression in the first place.

There are two other advantages of the theory that have not been discussed. First, an interactionist approach accommodates the processual nature of aggressive encounters better than other approaches. The development of such an encounter is a problematic process in that its outcome is not predetermined by either the characteristics or the initial goals of participants. Rather, the outcome is the end-product of sequential definitions of the situation. For example, negotiations over whether a comment is to be defined as an insult, perceptions of success in the encounter, and evolving commitments to various lines of action may affect the outcome of an aggressive encounter. Given the sacredness and vulnerability of the self, the ambiguous line between disagreement and disparagement, and the tendency for perceived attack to result in counterattack, small arguments readily escalate through a reciprocal process into aggressive encounters.

Second, an interactionist approach recognizes the importance of the role relationship of participants in an aggressive encounter. There is evidence that aggression is more acceptable between certain categories of persons. The following relationships between participants appear to be important: sex roles (Taylor and Epstein, 1967); age categories (Shantz and Pentz, 1972; Hicks and Lanthrop, 1968); in-group and out-group roles (aggression may be disapproved within a group but legitimized against outsiders); and social-control agents and deviant targets. Aggression may be legitimated for those who either formally or informally assume roles of social control against deviant targets (e.g., Homans, 1950; Rule *et al.*, 1974).

Few would argue that impression management plays no role in aggression (or other behavior, for that matter). The question is whether the theory provides a complete or only a partial account of aggression where there is no material gain. If research shows that aggression is affected

by the presence and behavior of the audience, and the salience of identity, then the approach is supported. However, if the approach cannot account for other findings in the literature, then it must be viewed as more limited. For example, if it can be demonstrated that overtly aggressive behavior (and not merely impoliteness) follows a frustrating event, and there has been no insult, then the approach will have been shown to be limited.

Since none of the research was originally designed to test the propositions as stated, the propositions must be viewed as tentative and in need of further research. A list of particular problems that might be investigated would include the following:

(1) Research on the presence of antagonists and onlookers: What difference does it make whether third parties observe the initial attack, the retaliation, both actions, or neither action? The theory would predict, for example, that retaliation is most likely when both the attack and the retaliation are observed by onlookers, since the former justifies the latter, and since the presence of an audience increases the identity costs of backing down. The theory also predicts that persons are more likely to retaliate when their antagonists are present. Finally, do persons retaliate when they think that neither the antagonist nor onlookers will be aware of it? Retaliation under these conditions would suggest the impact of an internalized audience.<sup>9</sup>

(2) Research on situational identities attributed for various performances in aggressive encounters: In this type of research, subjects are given descriptions of conflicts and are asked to judge the participants along various dimensions (see Rule and Nesdale, 1976). This type of research may be able to discover, for example, when retaliation is likely to be viewed as legitimate and when it is likely to be viewed as vengeful.

(3) Research on tactics in aggressive encounters: Do persons prefer strong (but safe) targets in order to appear even

<sup>9</sup> There would be other possible explanations for this finding. In general, examining the effect on an internalized audience requires techniques different from those suggested in this paper.

stronger? Do persons hide injuries and let their attackers know they have retaliated when it is safe to do so? Finally, are persons likely to become physically aggressive when they do not have an effective verbal retort?

(4) Research on aggression in natural settings: In what situations and with what types of persons are these encounters likely to occur? What comment instigates the aggression and how is the comment defined by the participants? Does a person in a bad mood (as a result of some frustration) tend to be impolite, and does this elicit a hostile reaction from others that the person then retaliates against? It may be necessary to elicit reports from respondents about aggressive encounters they have participated in since it may be difficult to actually observe these incidents in progress.

In sum, an attempt has been made to account for instances of interpersonal aggression where there is no material benefit. It has been suggested that aggression, like other human behavior, is the result of interaction processes rather than frustration or instinct. Specifically, it has been suggested that attacks on situational identities are predictable, given divergent interests and opinions and the sacredness and vulnerability of the self in interaction, and that these attacks, inadvertent or otherwise, tend to result in retaliatory actions designed to reinstate a favorable situational identity.

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