

An integrative theoretical understanding of aggression: a brief exposition

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Like other social behaviors, aggressive behavior is always a product of predisposing personal factors and precipitating situational factors. The predisposing factors exert their influence by creating encoded social cognitions including schemas about the world, scripts for social behavior, and normative beliefs about what is appropriate. These social cognitions interact with situational primes to determine behavior. These social cognitions are acquired primarily through observational learning; so youth who are repeatedly exposed to violence will acquire social cognitions promoting aggression that last into adulthood. Thus, violence can be viewed as a contagious disease which can be caught simply through its observation.

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An aggressive behavior is a social behavior intended to injure or irritate another person [1,2] There are four important principles about aggressive behavior that underlie a modern understanding of its occurrence.

First, aggressive behavior, like other social behaviors, is always the product of personal predispositions and precipitating situational determinants.

Second, habitual aggressive behavior usually emerges early in life, and early aggressive behavior is very predictive of later aggressive behavior and even of aggressive behavior of offspring [3,4,5]. The more aggressive child tends to become the more aggressive adult.

Third, predispositions to severe aggression are most often a product of multiple interacting environmental and

biological factors [6] including genetic predispositions, brain trauma and neurophysiological abnormalities, early temperament or attention difficulties, abnormal arousal levels, harsh social environments including family violence, poor parenting, inappropriate punishment, poverty and stress, violent peer-groups and other factors. No one causal factor by itself explains more than a small portion of individual differences in aggressiveness.

Fourth, early learning plays a key role in the development of a predisposition to behave habitually in an aggressive or nonaggressive manner. Most children need to be socialized out of the aggressive inclinations stimulated by the normal or abnormal personal factors mentioned above and taught self-control. The most important learning process for socialization of a youth out of or into aggression is undoubtedly observational learning.

Social information processing

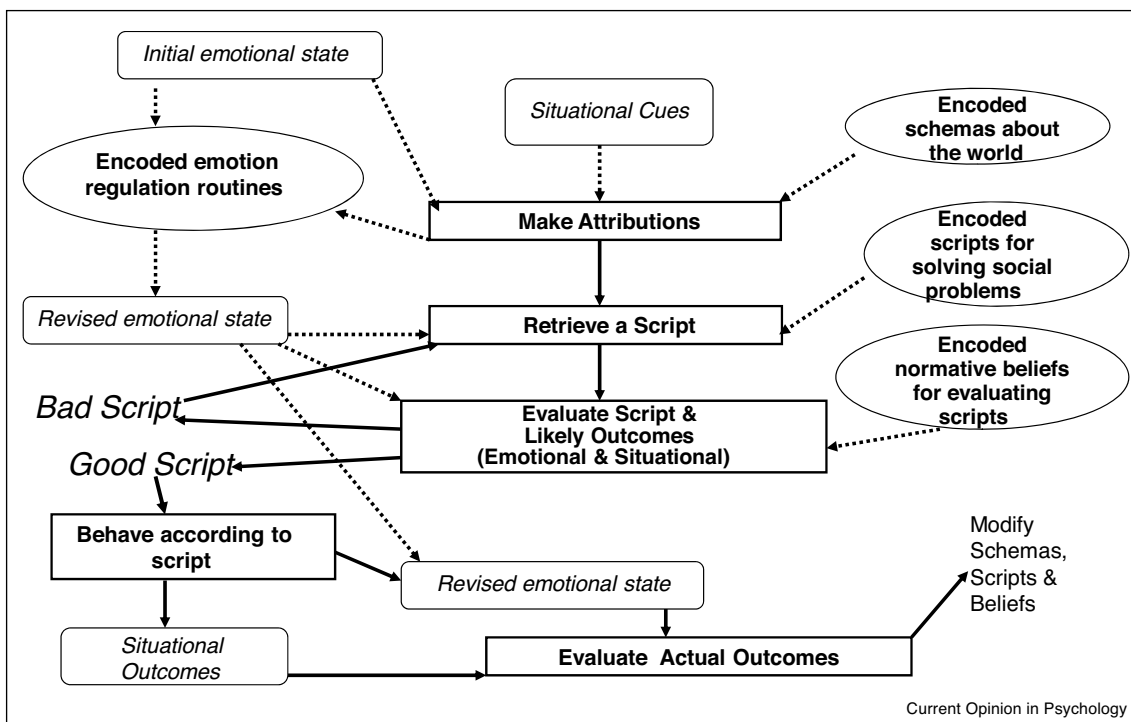
Building on the earlier theoretical formulations [7,8,9], aggression researchers have established a number of principles of social information processing that explain much better than ever before how predispositions to aggression develop and how situations interact with these predispositions to cause aggression [10–12,13,14,15,16].

The principles are best understood by viewing social interactions as a series of social problem solving situations. Individuals – whether children or adults – go about solving social problem rather systematically. The process is summarized in [Figure 1](#).

The process begins with evaluation of the social situation. This is followed by the retrieval of social scripts. Aggressive people have a larger repertoire of aggressive scripts; so they are more likely to be retrieved first. However, the likelihood of a particular script being retrieved is affected by one's interpretation of the social situation as well as one's mood state. If either of these prime a script, the script is more likely to be retrieved. For example, perceiving a situation as hostile will prime aggressive scripts [17]. Similarly, the presence of a weapon in a situation will make using aggressive scripts more likely [18–20].

A retrieved social script must pass through several filters before it is followed. These filters include evaluations of the likely outcome of using the script – both objective outcomes and emotional outcomes – and whether the script is congruent with the person's normative beliefs. Peoples' normative beliefs tell them what is 'OK' or

Figure 1



Information processing steps for social problem solving.

appropriate to do in a social situation [21]. For example, if a man suddenly discovers that his wife has been unfaithful and retrieves a script for hitting her, he probably will not hit her if he has a normative belief against hitting females. He is showing 'self-control' by rejecting the impulse to hit her, and it is due to his having strong normative beliefs against hitting females. More aggressive people generally have normative beliefs more accepting of aggression.

The process ends with the decision to behave in a certain way, followed by a post-hoc self-evaluation of the consequences (objective and emotional) of behaving that way, which can lead to modification of social cognitions.

Three particularly important knowledge structures used in this process are stored within a person's associative memory: (1) their schemas about the world used to evaluate social situations, (2) their repertoire of social 'scripts' [22] and (3) their normative beliefs about what are appropriate behaviors for them [21]. Any of these knowledge structures can be modified by the person as the result of the outcomes of a particular social problem solving situation. However, these knowledge structures are most often initially acquired and encoded in memory through observational learning as described later in this chapter.

The role of emotions

It would be a mistake to interpret the above social-cognitive processes as independent of emotional processes. Emotional states affect these processes, and these processes affect emotional states. First, some of the most serious aggressive acts are driven by angry emotions derived from attributions people make about the situation. Second, a person's current emotional state is always one factor that primes the scripts used to solve a social problem. Thus, experiencing an aversive situation instigates anger and aggressive inclinations in many individuals. Third, emotions play a role in the filtering of retrieved scripts to decide whether the script is appropriate to use. If one retrieves a potential script that 'feels bad' when one thinks about it, one is less likely to use it. Consequently, 'desensitization to violence' [23,24] becomes important in affecting risk of aggression. Blood and gore is aversive for most young children, which makes aggressive scripts undesirable. However, the more youths are exposed to violence, the less negative emotions they will experience when thinking about violent scripts, and the more positively they will evaluate violent scripts.

Biological influences on aggression

As mentioned at the start of this article, a variety of biological factors predispose individuals to behave aggressively. However, these biological factors exert their influence on social behavior by affecting social

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