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Aggressive Interactions in a Kindergarten Group

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Videotape recordings of single interactions between children in a kindergarten group of 17 children were made over a six-month period. We tried to classify the highly variable encounters into different groups with aggressive components. As classification criteria we chose the presumed motivation, the releasing factors, and the development of the conflicts.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aims of our research are both practical and theoretical. Theoretically, we attempted an advanced understanding of the functional systems producing agonistic behavior by a gradual development of abstract system-theoretical models. Practically, current theories of behavior pathology were investigated. These theories often predict "enhanced aggressiveness" or "repressed aggressiveness" of children in connection with symptoms like enuresis or psychogenic asthma. We question whether this relationship holds. If there are observable differences, can we relate different aggressive behaviors to non-asthmatic children?

As a research method, we chose intensive observation of relatively few children rather than extensive screening of many children, the more typical method. We hoped that this classical ethological approach, combined with a formulation of the results in abstract functional terms, was more appropriate to the problem of children's "aggressive behavior" than largely statistical methods based on correlation evaluation.

THE CONCEPT OF AGGRESSION IN MAN FROM THE ETHOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

In the study of agonistic behavior of children, a working terminology, and even a reliable description of the various behavior patterns, are still little known. It has become obvious over the last few years, however, that there is no single behaviour, or a single motivation, that can be labelled "aggressive." The term "aggression" concerns a multiplicity of behavior patterns that have only one trait in common: A conflict, arising between individuals or groups because of incompatible behavior aims, is not terminated by respective adjustment of behavioral tendencies, but by agonistic measures. For example, the aggressive individual or social entity tries to prevent the opponent or the opponent group from hindering their own behavior tendencies by intimidation, expulsion, submission, outwitting, or even killing.

The agonistic element in the total behavior pattern, however, may be of a different importance from a functional point of view. It may even be superfluous or dysfunctional, with respect to its functional context. In man, the large functional category "attack and flight" (hunting behavior will be excluded here) contains an almost unlimited abundance of possible behavioral patterns. This is true even at kindergarten age. The releasing and modifying factors in the situation, as well as the functional elements of behavior regulation, are manifold and extremely variable. In a socially structured group, where individuals know each other intimately, the agonistic behavior may even be formalized, and may reflect established reaction patterns rather than developing conflict strategies. These patterns, also may be of an immense diversity. It is, therefore, a rather difficult task to classify aggressive behavior in children according to some consistent terminology.

1. Classification by the Releasing Situation

Fear, and the feeling of being cornered without the possibility of retreat, may be a motivation for aggressive behavior (defensive, reactive aggression).

Aggression as a reaction to *frustration* is well known; in general, it may be understood as an attack against anything that frustrates one's own intentions.

The *rank order* aggression (called aggressive social exploration by Hassenstein) is a spontaneous aggression against a social partner in order to consolidate, or to change favorably, the social rank of the aggressor. Domination tendencies are the motivation for rank order conflicts.

Playful tendencies may also become a motivation for aggressive behavior. Although attacking and defensive behavioral elements are observable, playful aggression differs in detail from actions with true aggressive intent. For example the releasing factors and mimic elements are notably different.

In man, at least three forms of aggression are possible: aggressive behavior acquired by *imitation*, aggressive behavior stemming from *obedience* to an authority, and calculated *aggression according to a plan* (perhaps carried out without a primary aggressive motivation at all).

2. Observance of Aggressive Behavior on Different System Levels

Level of simple, functional elements: Innate reactions (fixed action pattern) are found in mimic, gesture, and motor patterns. Already on this level, however, a remarkable signal complexity can be observed.

Level of the motivational or preparedness component: Most behavioral patterns are regulated both by external factors, such as sensory stimuli, and by internal conditions, such as preparedness and motivation. It is possible that identical or similar-appearing behavioral patterns are related to different internal states. For example, the direct facing behavior, sometimes a signal of sympathy and contacting, may also indicate a threatening character, depending on situation and motivation. This threatening signal may have different aims: threatening in order to intimidate or impress, and as a prevention against attack.

Level of learned action: Of course, a great variety of simple and complex behavioral elements in aggression are learned in various ways. In man, learning modifies almost all levels of behavior control, at signal, motivational, motor and of course, cognitive levels. This reshaping process is so extensive that simple components of behavior almost disappear. It may therefore be possible to describe children's aggressive behavior mainly (but not totally) as the result of learned strategies of social conflict solution.

Level of cognitive planning: An especially high level of behavior control is reached when aggression is carried out after cognitive calculations and plans. Fixed action patterns play a subordinate role in this typically human form of aggression.

Until now, the levels of aggressive behavior recognized were related to the individual. There are, however, important phenomena beyond the individual level.

Level of social relations and structures: Group context and social settings play an important role in the behavioral sequence, and they influence the development of the aggressive conflict. The inclusion of other group members in the fight often influences the issue and the outcome in unpredictable ways.

RESULTS

The videotape behavioral analysis indicates that the variety of aggressive behavior may well be classified, respectively, by the releasing situation, or by modifying factors. Releasing situations include; fear, frustration, rank order conflict, playful tendencies, imitation, obedience, and planning. For valid interpretation of an agonistic behavior, it seems necessary to consider elements on different system levels. For example, this includes the level of simple sensomotoric elements, motivation, learned action, cognitive functions, and social relations.