



Aggression

Is It Really The Root
Of All Evil?



By Richard Kay

Current statistics seem to indicate that society is becoming more violent, with greater incidence of aggression and physical attacks represented through media data. The core aim of security operations is the protection of people and property, and the threat to these often involves conflict that is characterised by aggressive and violent behaviour.

This article aims to explore the link between aggression and violence and the causal factors involved in aggression, to provide officers with a greater awareness and understanding of this potentially challenging aspect of security operations.

Understanding Aggression

In the social and behavioural sciences, aggression refers to 'behaviour between members of the same species that is intended to cause pain or harm', and also includes 'predatory behaviour between members of one species towards another species'.

There are two broad categories of aggression: hostile, affective, or retaliatory aggression; and instrumental, predatory, or goal-oriented aggression. Research indicates that there is a critical difference between the two, both psychologically and physiologically. In biological terms, aggression assists with reproduction and survival, used to secure territories and other resources including food, water and mating opportunities. In humans, aggression takes a variety of forms and can be physical, mental, or verbal. Researchers have theorised that aggression and the capacity for violence are products of people's evolutionary past. Aggression should not be confused with assertiveness, although the terms are often used interchangeably among laypeople.

Violence is heterogeneous. Physical violence can be impulsive, reactive or defensive, or it can be predatory, remorseless aggression. Violent behaviours can be related to intoxication from alcohol or psychosis or other neuropsychiatric conditions. Violent acts may be the result of personal or cultural belief systems. Violence can be sexualised or directed at a specific victim or group.

Aggression is not violence. An aggressive person may not be violent. Aggression is a behaviour characterised by verbal or physical attack, yet it may be appropriate and self-

protective or destructive and violent. The complex set of behaviours recognised as aggression has been studied for many years. Many violent behaviours are the result of a defensive response to perceived aggression. The neurobiology of fear, therefore, holds as many clues to prevention and treatment interventions related to violence as the neurobiology of aggression.

The Neurobiology Of Aggression

The human brain mediates all human behaviour – aggression, violence, fear, ideology – indeed, all human emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social functioning. Certain principles of brain organisation and function can lead to insights regarding neurological factors involved in violence and aggression.

The brain has a hierarchical organisation, from the lower simple areas to the higher complex cortical areas. Simple, regulatory functions (such as respiration, heart rate) are mediated by the lower parts of the brain (brainstem, midbrain) and the most complex functions (such as language and abstract thinking) by cortical structures.

The brain's impulse-mediating capacity is related to the ratio between the excitatory activity of the lower, more-primitive portions of the brain and the modulating activity of higher, sub-cortical and cortical areas. Any factors which increase the activity or reactivity of the brainstem (for example, chronic traumatic stress, testosterone) or decrease the moderating capacity of the limbic or cortical areas (for example, neglect) will increase an individual's aggressivity, impulsivity and capacity to display violence.

The most dangerous people are created by a malignant combination of experiences. Developmental neglect and traumatic stress during childhood can create violent, remorseless people, characterised by sensitised brainstem systems. This experience-based imbalance predisposes to a host of neuropsychiatric problems and violent behaviour.

Causal Factors For Aggression

Violence rarely occurs without reason and, although a reason may not be apparent to onlookers, there are usually precipitating factors to any violent episode.

- Intoxication impairs judgment, making people much less cautious than they usually

are. It also disrupts the way information is processed. An intoxicated person is more likely to view an accidental event as a purposeful one, and therefore act more aggressively.

- Pain and discomfort can increase aggression. Extremes of temperature have been implicated as a factor in a number of studies, where students were found to be more aggressive and irritable after taking a test in a hot classroom, and drivers in cars without airconditioning were found to be more likely to honk their horns.
- Anxiety and worry lead to physiological arousal that can lower a person's threshold for violent or aggressive behaviour, and fear and shock can cause people to act in an uncharacteristic manner to try to protect themselves from a perceived threat.
- Frustration is another major cause of aggression, which may increase if people feel that they are being blocked from achieving a goal, directly or indirectly. One study found that the closeness to the goal makes a difference. Unexpected frustration may be another factor. People with high expectations often become more aggressive when their expectations are not met.
- The presence of violent objects has been evidenced to trigger aggression. It is possible that a violence-related stimulus increases the likelihood of aggressive cognitions by activating the semantic network (a related-concept process within the brain).
- Loss of personal power, real or perceived, may result in a person trying to take control in other people's lives by acting in a violent or intimidating manner to compensate. Similarly, displaced anger is common when people fail to take personal responsibility, display poor self-control over their anger and display violent behaviour.
- Aggression can be an attention seeking strategy, or used to maintain self-esteem. When people lack attention in their lives, they will try to gain attention through negative behaviours, such as violence. If a person believes that they appear weak to other people, violent behaviour will sometimes make them feel that they can 'save face' in the eyes of others. Additionally, peer pressure or modelling can cause people to behave with aggression, to follow and copy their peers, to deliberately confront authority, or for thrill seeking.



Officers should remain alert to the possibility of increasing aggression when dealing with people



- Certain psychological disorders manifest violent behaviour that appears irrational to observers but to the perpetrator, it can be quite rational and consistent with the delusions or hallucinations they are experiencing at the time. Some people have an enduring personality style of hostile, antisocial, or revenge-seeking behaviour. This can result in manipulative, intimidatory and violent behaviour.
- Aggression can be learned by watching and imitating the behaviour of others. Considerable evidence suggests that exposure to media violence increases the likelihood of aggression in children. Individuals may differ in how they respond to violence, with the greatest impact on those who are already prone to violent behaviour. Adults may also be influenced by media violence. A long-term study found a significant association between the amount of time spent watching violent television as a teenager and the likelihood of committing acts of aggression later in life. The results remained consistent regardless of factors such as family income, parental education and neighbourhood violence. With the amount of graphic violence in movies, TV and video games, and the relative ease of access, the statistics start to make sense.

Potential For Aggression

Everyone has the potential for aggression. Who then is likely to progress to violent behaviour?

- Normal people in abnormal situations, such as people put under extreme pressure or threat, such as fearing for their lives
- Mental illness and personality disorders, such as people with enduring patterns of antisocial or manipulative behaviour and a lack of empathy for others, for example, people with delusions of persecution or criminals
- Intoxication and altered states, where people affected by drugs or alcohol are not able to evaluate a situation in a rational way and may misunderstand the intentions of those around them, leading to violent behaviour that they believe will protect them, such as venue patrons, medicinal/recreational/habitual drug users

- Medical conditions that can lead to violent behaviour by altering the functioning of the brain and cognitive processes, such as head injury, epilepsy, high blood pressure, low blood sugar

Indicators Of Aggression

Officers should remain alert to the possibility of increasing aggression when dealing with people, related to the causal factors and expressed through behaviours outlined below:

- Increased physical activity, pacing, agitation, restlessness
- Raised voice and threats of aggression directed to persons/property
- Changes in body language, such as a threatening stance, clenched fists or eye contact
- Abuse, loss of control, rapid mood swings
- Autonomic hyperactivity related to physiological arousal of the stress response
- Refusal to negotiate or discuss an issue and resistance to suggested options
- History of threatening or aggressive behaviour, or drug/alcohol misuse
- Medical conditions, including confusion, disorientation, delirium, acute hallucinations or delusions where the person may misinterpret his or her environment or officer activities

There are two common 'active' emotions involved in conflict situations, each with unique characteristics:

- Fear is caused by the unknown, and results in paralysis of thought and action, hesitation and extreme behaviour. Indicators include small, weak body language; low voice volume, tone and pitch; broken speech; and retreating from the source of the fear.
- Anger is caused by unsatisfied expectations, and results in reckless and irrational behaviour. Indicators include large, exaggerated body language; high voice volume, tone and pitch; fast speech; and advancing towards the source of the anger.

A useful tool in managing aggressive situations is the step back process. The ability to both physically and emotionally 'step back' from an escalating conflict is a valuable skill. Physically

or tactically withdrawing can provide space, time and an opportunity to reassess. It also sends a conciliatory, non-threatening message to the other party. Mentally stepping back is a process of reviewing, assessing and rethinking strategy in the situation.

Public safety operations can be stressful. With each additional stressor, officers' anxiety increases and they become susceptible to errors in judgement. It is important to make a deliberate effort to diminish the impact of stressors by developing an awareness of personal style, as self-control is required in order to achieve situation control.

Aggression does not generally occur as an isolated act, but as part of a process, and from a progression of relative calm to increasing agitation to peak escalation. Awareness of this cycle can assist in assessing the person's immediate potential and choose an appropriate method for dealing with a situation before it escalates to physical violence. Early intervention is the key to preventing physical conflict and begins with detecting the person's emotive state, which involves questioning (establishing cause and needs), listening (allowing expression and identifying solutions) and validation (acknowledging feelings).

Aggression certainly plays a role in the progression to violence, established in people's genetic makeup, and impacted by environmental influences throughout their development. Often, though, violence is a personal choice, through learned behaviour or poor self-control. Officers should remain aware of the escalation levels of conflict situations and always attempt to defuse the situation for a peaceful solution. ■

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