

**EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN AGGRESSION:  
FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYTICAL ANALYSIS, FROMM'S NEO-  
FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE AND BANDURA'S SOCIAL LEARNING  
THEORY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Freud has always used his growing psychoanalytic understanding to address world events such as World War I as well as human psychology. The unbelievable death toll between 1914 to 1918 led Freud to attempt for the explanation and understanding of violence, conflict and destruction. He has placed greater importance to human aggression. Freud has revised many key aspects of his theory about aggression. He has dropped the idea of self-preservation drive and instead focuses on his new dual classification of two instinctual theories in both of which aggression played a significant part. He continued to develop his theory toward a more sophisticated picture of psychoanalytic view of human aggression. This paper aims to investigate the causes of aggression by probing into two different perspectives: Psychoanalysis and neo-Freudian analysis as well as social learning theory. This article specifically focuses on postulating psychoanalytic spectrum of aggression from Freudian and neo-Freudian point of views. It also attempts to examine the differences and similarities between and within these perspectives in search for answer to the main question "what are the causes of the human aggression?" In the first part of the paper, after the definition of aggression, it entails a close look to psychoanalytic approach and compare and contrast the psychoanalytic ideas within the paradigm. The second part focuses on neo-Freudian psycho-analysis of the aggression. The third section emphasizes Bandura's social learning theory. The last section gives a summary of all perspectives.

**Keywords:** Aggression, Psycho-analytical theories, Neo-Freudian analysis, Eric Fromm, social learning theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

Aggression is undoubtedly a major topic and an important subject of our time. With the increase on intra and interstate war and destruction as well as interpersonal violence and conflict, different conceptions of aggression must be taken into account to understand this multi-dimensional phenomenon. In psychoanalysis literature, there are five basic approaches to explain human behavior and motivation: sexuality, aggression, narcissism, attachment/lost, and adaptation. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic approach, first emphasized on sexuality that is routinely used for identification of classical psycho-analysis. However, Anna Freud, daughter of Freud, later claimed that “aggressive materials abound in child analysis...it is undeniable that, against previous expectations, aggression looms larger than sex in child analysis.” (Weinstein, 2001: 15). One of the oldest, most-used and best-known theoretical approaches concerning aggression, psycho-analysis, is largely instinctive in nature. In essence, psycho-analytical approach is viewed aggression as instinctive behavior. Freud generally conceptualizes the nature and origins of aggression from extremely pessimistic point of view that stems from innate, instinctive forces (Baron and Richardson, 1994: 14-15).

But what is aggression? Does it originate from nature or nurture? In other words, is it a nature of behavior, an instinct that is inherited, or is it the intention behind the behavior? In fact, aggression, which is one of the dimensions of the human nature, is a multifaceted phenomenon that has many determinants. Baron and Richardson defines aggression as “any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment.” (1994: 7) Most social psychologist define aggression as “behavior that is designed to deliver negative outcomes (such as pain, sorrow, or death) to another person or persons.” (Gergen and Gergen, 1986: 225). .” Another definition focuses on “act that is intended to injure the person or persons toward whom it is directed.” (Worchel, et.al., 1998: 423). There are in fact, several schools of thoughts that explain the causes of aggression from different points of views. Instinct theorists who hold a biologically deterministic view, explain aggression from within and claim that aggression is an universal innate drive that is inherited by our ancestors. Sociobiologists also convey a biologically deterministic view. Psychoanalysts differ in their approach to aggression, but especially Freud can also be thought of as one of the well-known defenders of the Instinct theory. Then, there are proponents of the frustration-aggression hypothesis, who derived their theory from Freud’s theories of externalization and displacement, but added an environmental flavor in it, and finally the behaviorists and the social learning theorists, who place a greater emphasis on the external stimuli, or environmental causes of aggression and claim that it is a learned behavior.

Freud indicated that “men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved. They are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is a powerful share of aggressiveness.” (1989: 58-9). The element of aggression is one of important concepts in our lives command as much attention as possible. From childhood playground fights to interstate warfare, aggression is the most widely researched human behaviors in our time. It is not surprising that Freud’s early writings has much to say about this topic. Because Freud has experienced the mass destruction of human life in World War I, he attempted to explain aggression with frustrated *libido*, the life or sexual instinct and later with a death or aggressive instinct, *Thanatos* (Burger, 2011: 131). We should not forget that Freud’s two sons served and survived World War I. Researchers have applied many psychoanalytical concepts to explain and understand the causes and consequences of human aggression. There are three important points about Freud’s contribution on aggression: (1) aggression is a primary impulse; (2) aggression is an extraversion of the death drive; and (3) aggression is mostly a reaction to frustration (Caprara, 1984, 88).

This paper aims to investigate the causes of aggression by probing into two different perspectives: Psychoanalysis and neo-Freudian perspective as well as social learning theory. It also attempts to examine the differences and similarities between and within these perspectives in search for answer to the main question “what are the causes of the human aggression?” In the first part of the paper, after the definition of aggression above, it entails a close look to psychoanalytic approach and compare and contrast the psychoanalytic ideas within the paradigm. The second part focuses on neo-Freudian psycho-analysis of the aggression, specifically Eric Fromm. The third section emphasizes Bandura’s social learning theory. The last section gives a comparative summary of all perspectives. We should not forget that today it seems more possible than ever to reconcile the different points of view and to integrate different levels of analysis on aggression with the biological, social and psychological aspects.

## **FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYSIS**

The founder father of the psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, argues that aggression is an innate drive and its contributing factor is the result of subjective forces in conjecture with innate frustrations based on the childhood experiences of the individuals. Freud, as other Instinctivists, believe in the hydraulic (or reservoir) model, where the drive is triggered by internal rather than external stimuli. In reservoir model, the internal pressure rather than the external stimuli plays a major role, and it determines the strength of the drive (Shaver, 2015: 377). If the need is not fulfilled, drive straight continuously increases without any outlet similar to the pressure in the tank increases as the reservoir slowly fills with water. Without any fulfillment, if the pressure increases

to a certain level, humans would feel an ever increasing drive toward being aggressive and is forced to carry an aggressive act based on that pressure sooner or later.

Freud explains the nature of human beings based on five different developmental stages of childhood. He claims that one explanation of aggression is the occurrence of frustrations and malfunctions when a child makes a passage from one stage to other (or gets stuck in one for life). Freud maps the human personality into three major sections, with a specific function for each. He calls these sections id, ego, and superego (Tan, 2011: 38). But Freud's key concept in the explanation of aggression is his postulation of a dichotomy of human drive(s) (trieb in German): that of death (thanatos) instinct and life (eros) instinct. Among them, life instinct (eros) comprises the concept of libido and part of the self preservation drive. The death instinct (thanatos), however, is an innate destructiveness and aggression directed primarily against the self. While the life instinct is creative, the death instinct is a force which is constantly working towards a return to the original tensionless, inorganic state of complete freedom from pressure and anxiety (Davies and Bhugra, 2004: 34). The death wish, when directed outward as aggression onto enemy other (which then becomes the object of displacement) through externalization/projection, tends to destroy others rather than oneself. On the basis of this theory, Freud presumed that war might be understood as "a nations attempt at psychological self-preservation, since if it did not direct its aggression outwards it would finally destroy itself with internal feuds." (Brown, 1964: 27-28). Moreover, Freud claimed that that this outward aggression can be seen as self-protection of individuals from suicide, self-inflicted diseases, addictions, different forms of anxiety (hysteria, neurosis, obsessions) and other forms of unconsciously motivated harm that are derived from inwardly-directed death wish.

Originally, Freud suggested that there existed only one basic drive in humans which was the life instinct (libido from eros), but after experiencing the atrocities of the First World War, he concluded that there also must be a destructive drive in humans. In fact, he pointed out that the repetition compulsion that showed itself in the battle dream of soldiers was one of the evidences of this self-destructive urge. In summary, Freud who held a pessimistic and deterministic view of the human nature believed that humans indeed had an innate drive of aggression and therefore, warfare cannot be avoided (Howe. 1992: 58). Freud also claimed that *Thanatos* is highlighted during the superego formation where moral dictates of the parents as well as their opinions, and judgments and other external influences are internalized by the child through identification. The superego is only part conscious and part unconscious, and due to its malformations, the object of desire could be externalized as an internalized ego-ideal. Later in life, in conjecture with the Oedipus complex it may lead to the *totem and taboo* phenomenon of leader-follower hypothesis presenting a danger in terms of total surrender of self to external authority, such as the Hitler's

Youth (children who grew up fatherless due to the casualties of the World War I). (Adorno, et.al., 1950). Because a leader (pole), especially if he is charismatic, regardless of his irrational ideologies (such as Hitler and Stalin) could provide the person with self-esteem and power through identification. (Czander, 1993: 20-24; Capriles, 2012: 71).

In his book *Civilization and its Discontents* (1989), Freud also blamed the civilization and progress for suppressing individual liberties. He claimed that "the internalization of norms into an intrapsychic superego is the result of the clash between the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle," (Björkqvist, 2009: 26) and claims that progressing civilization and modernity in actuality, limits the individual liberties by the construction of norms and rules causing the individual into man-made boxes that they can not escape. Freud's theory (in conjecture with the totem and taboo and the origins of exogamy, prohibition of incest) therefore assumes that civilization has arisen out of the need to curb individual's unruly sexual and aggressive drives and its function is primarily suppressive. (Freud, 1950). Norms and laws curbs the sexual and aggressive drives, "religion, myth, and ritual commemorate the crime and assuage guilt, and society is the overall mechanism of control." (Brown, 1964: 117) Thus, according to Freud, neurosis is associated with suppression (sublimation) and civilization, and forces the unhappy individuals to seek relief in substitute gratifications such as drugs or alcohol, religion, or hero worshipping that in fact, exerts more oppression on the individual (Iversen, 2007: 3). In fact, if Freud knew the concept, it can be assumed that he would have also claimed that structural violence is a byproduct of civilizations.

## **NEO-FREUDIANS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Struggling with Freud's idea of an innately aggressive, self-destructive drive, some psychoanalysts after Freud it was (such as Hartman, Kris, and Loewenstein) suggested that, although there is a drive toward destruction within humans, the direction of it is not inward self-destruction, but outward aggression (Hartman, et.al., 1949). As a response to Freud's biological deterministic assumptions, two main movements in the psychoanalytic school emerged. One was the right-wing (as in the Kleinian school), and the other was the left-wing, the former being more on the side of the nature and the latter being more on the side of nurture (Klein, 1995: 244). Melanie Klein (British School of psychoanalysis-object relations), although differed from the orthodox school to a certain extent, even deeper delved into the infantile experiences, and claimed that the important drives are the aggressive ones and that the environmental factors are much less important in child's development. However, finding Freud's views on human personality too biologically deterministic (nature) and philosophically arguable, the left-wing raised the issue about the importance of the external influences (nurture) on the individual. Anna Freud, was one of them

and although she accepted the orthodox Freudian theory while attaching more significance to the ego and its defenses, she also emphasized the role of the environmental factors. She suggested that if the parents' attitude toward the child change, to considerable extent the child's problems also changes with changing environment (Klein, 1995: 27-29). From her views on external forces, one can infer that she thought of aggression as a learned behavior rather than an innate drive. Similarly, Neo-Freudians, such as Karen Horney, and Erik Fromm also emphasized the significance of individual's social and cultural background and the modifiability of human nature. Horney, although accepted Freud's basic assumptions, rejected Freud's static notion of basically hereditary, generic and universal human nature theory that accentuates the libido as the ultimate source of all trends, including aggression. She points out that individuals can be hostile, destructive and cruel, but "the extent and frequency of destructiveness are not proof that...[they are]...instinctual." (Brown, 1964: 139). Such as Horney, Fromm was also more on the nurture side of psychoanalysis, and he accepted the external influences on individuals in addition to subjective forces, when he defined the socially/culturally influenced "social character."

Fromm definitely was influenced by Freud, but also criticized his framework of tension reduction, stating that Freud based his "hydraulic model" of human nature on German mechanistic materialism that "looked upon [an individual] as a machine." (Fromm, 1973: 477). Fromm claimed that human behavior can not be purely understood by biological explanations, but in terms of society and culture into which an individual is born. Since he was primarily interested in the problem of the relationship between individual and the society, Fromm brought in a Marxist flavor into the psychoanalysis by focusing on humanistic, cultural and historical areas. He disagreed with the implications of hereditary biological determinism of Freud's assumptions, and claimed that "the fundamental problem of psychology has nothing to do with the satisfaction or frustration of any instinct per se, but is rather that of specific kind of relatedness of the individual towards his world, and the relationship between [individual] and society is constantly changing, and not as static" (Fromm, 1969: 27) as static as Freud assumed.

Fromm stated;

"Freud's theoretical explanation for character structure was the notion that the libido (oral, anal, genital) was the source that gave energy to the various character traits....but I attempted to demonstrate that the character syndromes are rooted and nourished in the particular forms of relatedness of the individual to the outside world and himself: furthermore, that inasmuch as the social group shares a common character structure ("social character") the socioeconomic conditions shared by all members of the group mold the social character." (Fromm, 1973: 80-81).

Fromm suggested that society has not only has a suppressing function, but also has a creative function, and creates human nature, and that human nature was created by individual. Pointing out the definite changes that have taken place in human personality during different epochs in history, Fromm suggested that the social and economic systems in which the individuals live have a greater impact on the personality traits than biological inheritance of instincts. According to Fromm, those systems that individuals are born in, are unalterable by them regardless of how much they want to try to effect certain economic and political changes, because primarily their personalities are molded by the "particular mode of life that he or she has already been confronted with as a child through the medium of the family, which represents all the features that are typical of a particular society or class." (Fromm, 2001: 32-33). Fromm asserted that all differences in individual's character , "like love and hatred, the lust for power and the yearning for submission,...fear and [aggression]...[are] ...not a fixed and biologically given human nature, but result from the social process which creates the [individual], [and]...[individual's] nature, his passions, and anxieties are a cultural product." (Fromm, 1969: 27-28).

In summary, Fromm differed from Freud's assumptions of biological determinism and his interpretation of history that he portrayed in his *Civilization and its Discontents* (1989) as the result of the "psychological forces that in themselves are not socially conditioned" (Fromm,1969: 28-29). In that sense, he also disagrees with behaviorist psychology that assumes that human nature has no dynamism of its own and that psychological changes are to be understood in terms of new habits based on stimuli and response. Fromm also criticized the environmentalist framework within the psychoanalytic school, and claimed that they are "reconciled with instinctivism by the assumption that the modifying influence of the environment occurs via the influence of the libidinous structure." (Fromm, 1973: 77-78). Fromm also implied that, even if the individuals changed their geographical locations through movements such as emigration, one's already socially molded character stayed with the individual to the end, even under certain circumstances, making the individual who is used to sublimation to authority "escape from freedom" into his/her own enclave where he/she can be in isolation but not threatened by change of the new society he/she is presently in. For Fromm, aggression is then, a socially imposed character trait from above on individuals by the constructions of the social norms, family structures, and of the society he/she was born in, i.e. his/her social character. From this point of view, his beliefs are closer to the social learning theorists, since they also viewed aggression as a learned behavior through socialization.

In my opinion, although, Fromm's interpretation of human nature was more progressive than Freud's biological deterministic school of thought, his concept of the "social character," that highlighted the social and economic (class) factors as primary determinants of individual character traits, was socially deterministic. It placed individuals into socially constructed boxes that created boundaries by the mere fact that they were constructed differently based on the difference in social and economic structures. Although, he did not mention anything about the ethnic groups and nationalities, from his "social character" concept, one can infer that, it creates invisible boundaries between individuals and creates conflict that may end up in aggression for the destruction of one another. From philosophical point of view, while Freud can be viewed as positivist, Fromm then can be seen as social constructivist. Finding the Freudian assumption of the innate nature of aggression and the nature of the society least satisfactory and even irrelevant, some later psychologists took a position that suggested aggression drives from frustration. An early attempt to develop a unified theory of aggression was introduced specifically by John Dollard and his colleagues who began their assumption that "aggression is always a consequence of frustration, and that frustration always leads to some form of aggression." (Breckler, Olson and Wiggins, 2006: 446). They characterized frustration as "an interference with the occurrence of an instigated-goal response at its proper time." (Dollard, et.al., 1939: 7).

"When a barrier is interposed between persons and their desired goals, extra energy is mobilized, which flows 'over into generalized destructive behavior'....[however]...aggression does not occur if the deprivation is unperceived. Not every frustration situation produces overt aggression. Acts of aggression may be inhibited if they are expected to lead to punishment. {If} the frustrating barrier-target [is] physically, psychologically, or socially immune to attack....[then] direct aggression may give way to indirect aggression, which may be displaced toward a target not responsible for the original frustration, converted into imagining or wishing injury o the target, or turned inward aggressively, in self castigation, self-injury, or in the most extreme cases, suicide. Any act of aggression is supposed to produce catharsis - that is a release of aggressive energy and a reduction in the instigation to aggression." (Dollard, et.al., 1939: 53)

In fact, this definition of frustration-aggression hypothesis that was derived by Freud's theory of object displacement, and Fromm's theory of social character that places the emphasis on external stimuli, i.e. the social environment, also had its roots in "in learning and motivation based on the then-dominant behavioral theory of Clark Hull." This integrative hypothesis is important, because it asserts that, "the inner state of aggressive drive [is] elicited by frustration always leads to aggression unless it is inhibited by fear, moral revulsion, or some other counter-aggressive motive.



This drive state therefore has the same functional status as an instinct but it is considered to be a response to situational conditions,” (Tesser, 1995: 385) thus also laying the foundations for a later framework for Bandura and his associates who epitomized the situational approach in their social learning theory, which will be included in the paper in later chapters.

Presently, another integrative framework of aggression between Freud’s hydraulic model with Fromm’s theory of social character, is introduced by psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan, when he interposed the concept of “ethnic tents” into the vocabulary of psychoanalysis (Ogretir and Ozcelik, 2008; Ozcelik, 2013: 1-11; Ozcelik, 2010, 1-9). In his re- interpretation of Freud’s concepts of externalization, displacement and projection of bad elements onto the contaminated others (in Frommian terms, onto other social characters), creating self-cleansed individual and group identity (through identification by the authority, or sublimation to the imposers of the social character) that subsequently cause aggression toward them (Freud, 1977). Although differ in their concepts and definitions, virtually all the psychologists virtually agree that aggression exist and it is a response to specific conditions in the environment.

## **BANDURA AND SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY**

Many behaviorists do not follow the deterministic path employed both by the Freudian school of psychoanalysts and Instinctivists, nor follow the path Skinner guided with his concept of operant conditioning. They argue that the causes of human behavior result from social and cultural factors rather than innate drives, and they emphasize social learning.

Tackling the frustration-aggression theory that has basically came about to test Freud’s original hypothesis, one of the most famous social learning theorist, Albert Bandura, sees frustration as one of the components of aggression. In Bandura’s social learning theory

“rather than frustration generating an aggressive drive that is reducible only by injurious behavior, aversive stimulation produces a general state of emotional arousal that can facilitate any number of responses...[one of which is aggression]. The type of behavior elicited will depend on how the source of arousal is cognitively appraised, the modes of response learned coping with stress, and their relative effectiveness.” (Toch, 1979: 209).

Bandura also argued;

most acts of hostile aggression serve ends other than the mere production of injury, and hence are instrumental.”(Bandura, 1973, p. 3). He also claims that

aggression ``as behavior that results in personal injury (either psychological or physical) or in destruction of property, but he insists on the importance of the social labeling process, that is, on social judgments that determine which injurious or destructive acts are to be called aggressive. (Lucea, Glass and Laughon, 2011: 14-15).

For Bandura, aggression or aggressive behavior is based on social learning, and he calls this phenomena ``learned aggression,’’ which is in his opinion, is reinforced through such phenomena as the military training and boot camps that prepare individuals for organized warfare that justifies killing during wars (Smith and Donnerstein, 1998: 177). Although, he does not use the term ``conditioning’’, by implication he suggests that the drills condition the soldiers during the military training to ``help them escape self-condemnation consequent on taking human life in the battle.’’ (Bandura, 1973: 99). Bandura’s concept of learned aggression is an important concept for child development and early childhood education, in terms of any organized conflict, whether it is based on ethnic divisions or economic scarcities (Bandura and Emilio, 1976). It is in a sense, similar to Fromm’s social character concept, where the individual is shaped by (or learned from) the environment. In fact, one can give some explanation to a question why some cultures that condemn violence have a more peaceful, accommodating approach to conflict, while the others who value machismo, authority, and even violence for the so-called shame crimes, approach conflict with justified violence, and aggression. Both approaches are based on individual cultures and their observations, and can be thought of as learned behaviors in Bandura’s terms. Bandura, in his criticism of media, blames the violence on television and films for the increasing violence and aggression among kids and adults in modern societies. Freud would have looked at the aggression and violence in modern societies similarly, but would have explained it through the discontent caused by modernity that suppresses inner desires, making people neurotic and anxious on top of their inborn death wish that was inherited by humanity universally from their ancestors.

## **CONCLUSION**

When psycho-analysts discuss the instinct theory, they are usually referring to aggression and libido. It is interesting to note that Freud originally concluded that aggression is one of the components of the sexual instincts in the form of sadism. He has done some clinical observations and forced to change his view about aggression in 1923. He designed aggression as a separate instinct that has an objective of destruction (Sadock and Sadock, 2007: 195). We should not forget that it is hard to find a uniform agreed definition of aggression even within psychoanalysis. One reason is that there are too many words about aggression (aggressive behavior, aggressive drive, aggressivity, etc.). Second, aggression may indicate many phenomena, classified from drive

to behavior. Third, there is a view that aggression can be active-assertive and hostile-destructive. Last, if we categorize aggressive behavior as non-destructive and assertive, it means that not all aggressive behaviors have destructive in aim (Akhtar, 2009: 9). We can witness this nonaffective nondestructive aggression discharges during the childhood. Such as sucking and chewing are the aggressive drives that aim to control and master both self and environment. Our children's behavior is an affective state that strives for "destruction of structure for the purpose of self-preservation (Parens, 2008: 5).

Freud would have suggested that learned behavior is important, because it is the mere concept that causes malfunctions in superego during the child's development that would cause an aggressive personality during their adulthood. Lorenz would have said that aggression is due to damned up energy that needs to be dissipated, that might help the survival of the species by reducing overpopulation on earth, Skinner would have suggest "aggression is all in conditioning," and sociobiologist would have said " we, as human animals are born with aggression" (Glassop, 2001: 62).

If they all traveled through time and had a chance to have a roundtable discussion on aggression, I don't think they would have find a common answer. Neither can we. However, we can appreciate and value all their contributions to the explanation of human behavior, while keeping in mind that there is no absolute truth!

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