

# **GROWING UP TO BE VIOLENT**

**A Longitudinal Study of  
the Development of Aggression**

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## *Preface*

The present work is the culmination of a research endeavor initiated 20 years ago at the Rip Van Winkle Foundation in Hudson, New York. Proceeding on the assumption that aggression was one aspect of mental illness that could be studied systematically, the research team gathered data pertaining to the psychosocial development of aggressive behavior from a countywide population of third-grade schoolchildren and their parents. The design of the research was longitudinal: the intent of the researchers was to obtain a second wave of data when the children reached the 12th grade. The findings of the field study conducted when the children were in the third grade have already appeared in various journal articles and in a book. Hypotheses developed from this first wave of field survey data were tested ten years later by reinterviewing the subjects of the study when they were approximately 19 years of age. Inasmuch as we obtained measurements of aggressive behavior during two time periods — childhood and young adulthood — we were uniquely able to isolate certain child-rearing practices and environmental conditions that appear to be predictors of aggressive behavior in young adulthood. Consequently, we believe that our work provides important information where none previously existed.

During the decade that elapsed between the two periods of data collection, 1960 and 1970, violence appears to have reached epidemic proportions in the United States. This period witnessed the Vietnam War and the phenomenon of nightly violence broadcast live



from the battlefield directly into our living rooms. Engendered by this war were the protests and counterprotests and the violence attending those events. Also related to the War and concomitant with it were the campus protests and the organized violence used to suppress them, eventuating in the student deaths at Kent State and Jackson State Colleges in 1970. This decade saw the assassination of major national figures: President John Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Urban riots ranged across the country from Washington to Watts. Airline hijackings made sensational news, and a new form of violence emerged, which, like a contagion, spread to other parts of the world. In a less salient manner, but with monotonous frequency, the Mafia would perform its real-life version of the Hollywood "gangland murder." Cities were inundated with daily and often multiple occurrences of murder, rape, robbery, arson, and abduction. Meanwhile, violence was fast becoming a quintessential component of television entertainment. The situation continues to worsen so that presently the threat posed by violent crime is so menacing and so ubiquitous that it has drastically altered the lifestyle of individuals and is beginning to paralyze services and institutions.

Whether this seventh decade contained more or less violence than any of the preceding six is a question for historians and sociologists to ponder. But germane to our research was the fact that the eight-year-old boys and girls, the subjects of the study, grew to young adulthood during this period. Although we cannot demonstrate that this violent milieu systematically affected the behavior of our subjects, we do have evidence indicating that exposure to violence or violent models increased their aggressive behavior.

In democratic societies, where free enterprise as a system is apotheosized, the notion of controls is viewed as inimical to that system. But, if the level and spread of violence in the United States are to be reduced, certain controls are necessary. The situation seems directly analogous to the imposition of controls by public health systems when infectious disease threatens to imperil a population. It is on this note concerning the prevention and control of violence that we conclude our work of some 20 years.

In any work involving these many subjects over this amount of time, many people will have incurred our indebtedness. Financially, the ability to complete our study was made possible by contract No. HSM 42-70-60 from the National Institute of Mental Health. We are grateful to Drs. Eli Rubinstein and John Robinson of the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and

Social Behavior for their aid in obtaining this contract. We are also indebted to the full and continuing support received from the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, which served as the sponsoring organization for the second wave of the study. Thanks are due to the Office of Child Development for their Grant, OCD CB 364, which permitted additional data analyses. Many individuals have earned our gratitude but above all we wish to thank the young men and women who cooperated with our research efforts ten years after their initial interview. In addition, we owe thanks to the school officials who cooperated with the second phase of our study. These were Mr. Hughes P. Dearlove, District Superintendent, Roeliff-Jansen High School, Hillsdale, New York; Mr. Walter E. Howard, District Principal, New Lebanon High School, Lebanon Springs, New York; Sister Margaret, St. Mary's Academy, Hudson, New York; Mr. John B. Vale, District Superintendent, Germantown High School, Germantown, New York; and Mr. Herbert J. Walsh, District Principal, Ichabod Crane High School, Niverville, New York. We are grateful to Mr. Victor Pompa for his diligent efforts as a research assistant and to Ms. Anne Karabin for her expert research and editorial assistance and for typing the preliminary draft of this manuscript. Thanks are also due to Dr. Paul Castellani for his skillful administration of our research funds and to Ms. Judy Holstein for her contribution as a research clerk. Finally, we wish to thank Ms. Ruth Nowell for her tireless efforts as research clerk, for her editorial assistance, and for typing the final draft of the manuscript.

Monroe M. Lefkowitz

Albany, New York

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# 1

## *Theories of Aggression*

What are the roots of aggression and violence in young adulthood? How do children develop so that they are viewed as popular and as leaders by their peers? How does early maladaptive behavior (like aggression) develop into psychopathology in young adulthood? What are the roles of family, culture, peers, and the media in shaping these behaviors? An attempt to formulate answers to these questions was begun through the design of a longitudinal study of aggressive behavior in 1955.

Although the psychosocial development of aggression was a major focus of the research plan, the import for society of studying human aggression was hardly as clear in 1955 as it is today. Omnipresent in American society — from the implacable hostility between whites and Indians in the Colonial period to the present-day barbarism of the My Lai massacre — violence, as Stokely Carmichael so aphoristically noted, is as American as cherry pie. The history of violence in this country has been adequately portrayed elsewhere (Brown, 1969). Suffice it to say that hardly a day elapses without significant acts of violence occurring throughout the land. To recite this litany of violence would in itself require more than one volume. Assassination of national figures or multiple deaths and injuries produced by one individual (such as Charles Whitman who, in 1966, indiscriminately shot and killed 13 people and wounded 31 from the top of the University of Texas tower; or Richard F. Speck who, in 1968, senselessly murdered eight nurses in Chicago; or Lieutenant Calley

who, in 1968, directed the massacre of civilians in My Lai) are the kinds of aggressive acts that occupy the limelight. Although internationally prominent, these few acts of aggression pale when juxtaposed with the daily but unheralded statistics of violence produced by wars, arson, rape, assault, murder, riot, police violence, child battering, and automobile deaths and maiming. The domestic scene is far from tranquil as evinced, particularly in urban areas, by the demand for new and sophisticated door locks, the advent of private neighborhood guards and vigilante groups, and the reluctance of individuals to venture out of their homes not only after dark but even during daylight.

This chapter is designed, among other reasons, to provide a broad and carefully examined theoretical context into which our study can be placed. It takes the reader on a wide excursion through a number of ideas about aggression in human and infrahuman organisms. While our longitudinal study will explore the relevance of situational factors in aggression, it was not designed to provide conclusive data on the contribution of biological variables to aggression.

## SEMANTICS OF AGGRESSION

In the conversational sense, the connotative aspects of the term "aggression" are usually implicit in the context or are assumed. However, a problem arises when rigorous definition and operationalization of the concept of aggression are required. It becomes clear in any discussion of the topic that the term also contains a positive and negative valence, so that aggression can connote "good" as well as "bad" in the characterization of behavior. It is instructive in this respect to learn that the noun and adjectival forms of the term contribute to these connotative differences. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1966) defined the noun form first as "an offensive action or procedure: a culpable unprovoked overt hostile attack." The fifth definition, however, is "healthy self-assertiveness or a drive to accomplishment or to mastery esp. of skills." One of the adjectival forms, the second, indicates that to be aggressive is to be "marked by driving forceful energy, ambition, or initiative: enterprising."

Whenever the topic of aggression is discussed, one of the first questions to arise is how it differs from self-assertiveness. "Aggressive" sales programs, "aggressive" investment policies, and "aggressiveness" in a male's pursuit of the female and other goals connote