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Aggression and Inequity[1]

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I. INTRODUCTION

Equity theory claims to be a general theory—providing insights into all social encounters (Berkowitz & Walster, 1976). In this chapter, we will attempt to assess the theory's relevance, or irrelevance, for explaining what goes on in aggressive encounters. In Section II, we will briefly review equity theory. (Those who already know more about this theory than they wish to know, can proceed directly to Section III.) In reviewing the vast aggression literature, we found that equity considerations do seem to be critically important in determining how people respond in potentially aggressive settings. We will review these findings in Section III. But not everything fits. In Section IV, we will discuss the cases in which Equity theory and the data do not seem to mesh very well.

II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EQUITY THEORY

Equity theory consists of four propositions (see Hatfield, 1980).

Proposition I: Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes (where outcomes equals rewards minus punishments).

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Proposition II A: Groups (or, rather, the individuals comprising these groups) can maximize collective outcomes by evolving accepted systems for equitably apportioning rewards and punishments among members. Thus, groups will evolve such systems of equity and will attempt to induce members to accept and adhere to these systems.

Proposition II B: Groups will generally reward members who treat others equitably and generally punish members who treat others inequitably.

Proposition III: When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress they will feel.

Proposition IV: Individuals who discover they are in inequitable relationships will attempt to eliminate their distress by restoring equity. The greater the inequity that exists, the more distress they will feel, and the harder they will try to restore equity.

A. Who Decides Whether a Relationship Is Equitable

According to equity theory, equity is in the eye of the beholder. People's perceptions of how equitable a relationship is will depend on their assessment of what is "fair." Thus, in any aggressive encounter, people may well disagree about such basic things as "Who's the victim? . . . Who was victimized?", much less such subtle things as "Were the perpetrators justified in aggressing?" "Was their aggression too little, too late?" "Was it fair or excessive?" "Are the victims entitled to retaliate?" "How should outside observers respond?" "Should they try to set things right or do nothing?"

B. The Psychological Consequences of Inequity

According to equity theory (Proposition III), when people treat others unfairly, or are unfairly treated themselves, it is upsetting. When people take advantage of others, they tend to feel "guilt," "dissonance," "empathy," "fear of retaliation," or "conditioned anxiety" (Austin & Walster, 1974). When they are taken advantage of, they feel "shame," "dissonance," or "anger." Essentially, however, both aggressor and victim's feelings are similar—they both experience subjective distress accompanied by physiological arousal (see Austin & Walster, 1974; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

C. Techniques by Which Aggressors-Victims May Reduce Their Distress

Proposition IV proposes that individuals who are distressed by inequity will try to eliminate their distress by restoring either actual equity or psychological equity to their relationships.

1. ACTUAL EQUITY

People can try to "set things right" in a variety of ways. The child who has said cruel things to a friend, can recognize what he has done, repent, and try to set things right. The man who is jilted by a woman can spread mean rumors behind her back.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUITY

People can restore equity to a relationship in a second way—by changing their definition of the situation. The battered child can convince himself that, really, he "asked for it"—or that's how his father expresses his love ("He was doing it for my own good—It hurt him more than it hurts me.") or that God will get his father in the end.

3. ACTUAL VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUITY RESTORATION

At this point, equity theorists confront a crucial question: When will an aggressor-victim try to restore actual equity to a relationship?—When will he or she settle for restoring psychological equity? According to equity theory (Propositions I and IV), cost-benefit considerations should determine how men and women respond to injustice. Whether people respond by attempting to restore actual equity, by distorting reality, or by doing a little of both, has been found to depend on the costs and benefits associated with each strategy (see, e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1967; Berscheid, Walster, & Barclay, 1969; Weick & Nesset, 1968).

D. Summary

Equity theorists concur that people try to maximize their outcomes (Proposition I). Group members can maximize their collective outcomes by devising an equitable system for sharing resources. Thus, all groups try to hammer out acceptable systems for allocating outcomes and trying to induce members to adhere to these standards; that is, they try to ensure that all participants receive equal relative outcomes. Groups can do this in only one way: by making it profitable to be fair. They must reward members who behave equitably and punish those who do not

(Proposition II). When socialized individuals find themselves enmeshed in inequitable relationships, they experience distress (Proposition III). They can reduce their distress by restoring either actual equity or psychological equity to their relationships (Proposition IV).

III. THE APPLICATION OF EQUITY THEORY TO AGGRESSOR-VICTIM RELATIONSHIPS

When we review the aggression literature, we see that considerations of fairness and justice seem to be extremely important in determining: (1) whether or not people aggress against one another; and (2) how they feel about their aggressive versus passive reactions.

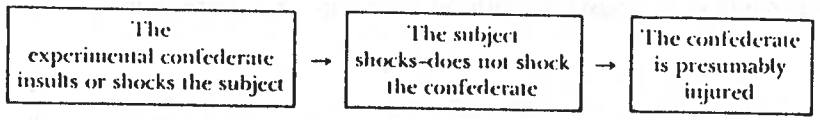
A. Definition of Terms

Baron (1977) 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 [p. 7]." We should keep in mind that in this definition we are referring to intentional aggression. That is, we do not mean acts of harm that might occur by accident.

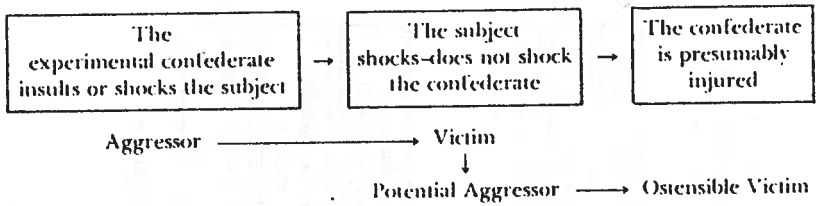
In many situations, who is defined as an "aggressor," who the "victim," depends on how one punctuates a chain of events. Consider a typical aggression paradigm:

A college student, enthusiastic about contributing to science, or at least earning some money, reports to the lab. The experimenter greets her and introduces another student (actually, an experimental confederate). Suddenly, in the experimental condition, without warning, the confederate attacks the student. He tells her she is stupid, subjects her to intense electric shock for no apparent reason. Then, the tables are turned. The student must now teach her "fellow student" the task. If she wishes, she can combine her teaching with a little aggressive punishment (all for the other's "own good," of course). In the control conditions, the student is not angered.

Traditionally, aggression researchers have labeled this interaction in the following way:



For purposes of an equity analysis (and in line with conventional wisdom) we would label this interaction in quite another way:



Initially, it is the *experimental confederate* who is the aggressor; the student, the victim. Then the tables are turned. The student is given an opportunity either to aggress or to refuse to do so. The confederate is put in the role of a potential victim.

B. Applying the Theory

It is obvious that equity theory *ought* to have a great deal to say about people's reactions in aggression encounters. We plan to organize our analysis and discussion as shown in Figure 9.1. We will examine the sequence of events from the viewpoint of the subject by looking at five different issues. First, is there any justification for the subject to act aggressively. Second, what are the feelings of those who are provoked or treated in a neutral manner. Third, how does the subject react? Does he or she aggress back, or is a nonaggressive response elicited from the subject. If the subject does aggress, how much aggression, in comparison to what was received, is administered? Fourth, how does the subject feel after acting aggressively or nonaggressively. And finally, what does the individual do at this time?

1. IS THE SUBJECT GIVEN ANY JUSTIFICATION FOR AGGRESSING?

Considerations of fairness seem to be critically important in determining how people respond to one another. Generally, aggression researchers must provide compelling reasons for subjects to behave aggressively before subjects will even *consider* doing so. Researchers have found a variety of techniques to be effective in enticing people to aggress.

Sometimes, for no apparent reason, subjects are physically attacked via electric shock (see Borden, Bowen, & Taylor, 1971; Dengerink & Bertilotti, 1974; Dengerink & Myers, 1977; Taylor, 1967). Sometimes,

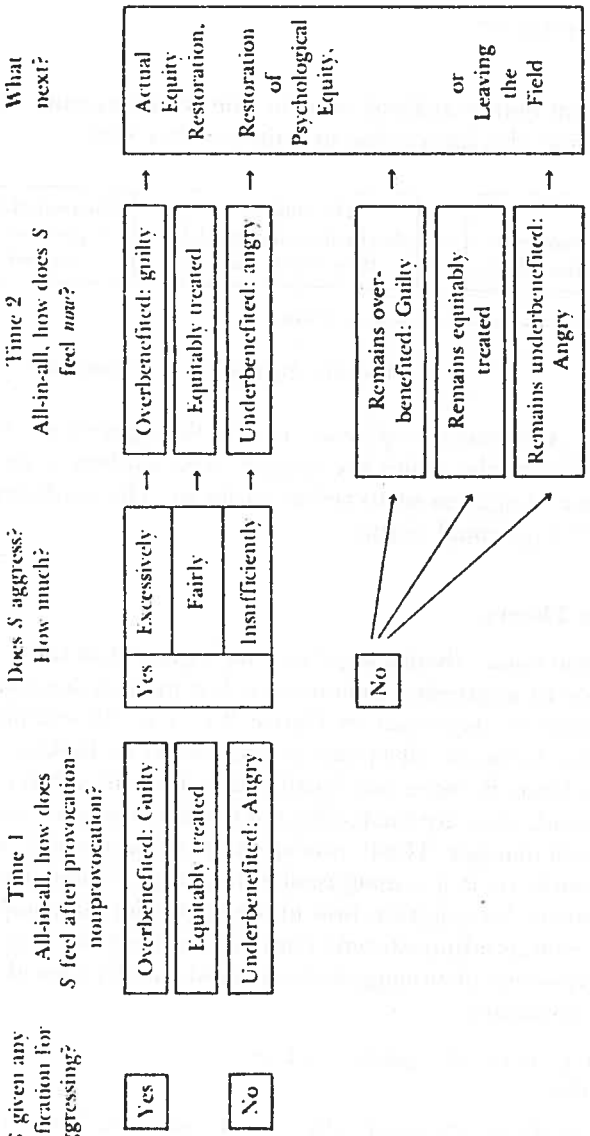


Figure 9.1. A flowchart of the aggression-equity sequence.

motivated, or have unappealing personalities (e.g., Baron & Bell, 1975; Geen, 1968). Baron (1977) points out that these insults hurt as much as, and perhaps even more, than would a physical attack. Greenwell and Dengerink (1973) note: "While attack is an important instigator of aggressive behavior, it appears that the physical discomfort experienced by a person may be subordinate to the symbolic elements that are incorporated in that attack [p. 70]." Sometimes, students are arbitrarily cheated out of rewards they have earned (Worchel, 1974). Essentially, all these procedures are designed to provide the subject with ample justification for aggressing in return. As equity theory would predict, such justifications are critically important in sparking distress and aggressive counterattack. Baron (1977) observes that unless researchers provide adequate justification, subjects will often fail to become upset or fail to retaliate: "Indeed, there is some indication in this research that fully justified and expected frustrations often fail to induce either physiological arousal (Zillman & Cantor, 1976) or subsequent attack against the source of the thwarting [p. 90]." When researchers provide adequate justifications, subjects do both (see Baron & Bell, 1976; Donnerstein, Donnerstein, & Evans, 1975; Geen, 1968).

2. TIME 1: ALL-IN-ALL, HOW DOES THE SUBJECT FEEL AFTER PROVOCATION-NONPROVOCATION?

In real-life confrontations people often have a history. They may feel that in *previous* encounters with their partners they were treated far better than they had a right to expect (they were overbenefited), they got just what they had coming (they were equitably treated), or less (they were underbenefited). Such past history should have a profound effect on how any *specific* provocation affects a person. The older brother who has been teasing his sister unmercifully for days, may well feel he "has it coming," when she turns the tables. The couple who have shared a lifetime of equitable exchange, will probably see a single provocation as merely a momentary imbalance in the marital give-and-take. The battered wife may respond in quite a volatile way to yet another provocation; for her, it may be "the last straw." In real life, it is often impossible to disentangle who did what, to whom, and when. That information is lost in the mists of time. It is difficult to know *how* to rate a relationship's fairness.

In a laboratory setting, however, people start afresh. Participants enter the laboratory with no past history in that situation and with those specific people. It is relatively easy to classify things. In the typical aggression experiment in the last section, experimental subjects are assaulted mentally or physically without warning. As a consequence, they

are likely to feel underbenefited—and angry. The control subjects have every reason to feel equitably treated.

3. HOW DOES THE SUBJECT RESPOND TO PROVOCATION? DOES HE OR SHE AGGRESS? HOW MUCH?

> Anybody can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.
>
> —Aristotle; in Paynton & Blackey, 1971, p. 11

According to equity theory, the provoked feel most comfortable when they retaliate *appropriately.* If they go overboard—destroying a fly with a sledgehammer—when they cool off, and think back on what they have done, they feel ashamed. If they respond to provocation with too little, too late, when they think back on their ineffectual reaction, they feel equally ashamed.

Theoretically, then, it is critically important to know how the provoked, who choose to aggress or avoid aggression, later come to view their actions. In existing studies, however, it is very difficult for us to classify subjects' responses as excessive, appropriate, or inadequate. The researchers shock the hapless subjects. Their action is insulting *and* painful. How do you weigh that? How much electric shock does it take in retaliation to balance things out?

Luckily a few researchers have investigated this issue and find that people do try to retaliate, both in kind and amount. For example, O'Leary and Dengerink (1973) attempted to determine whether aggressors and victim-aggressors generally behave in a highly reciprocal manner. To investigate this question, they paired subjects with opponents who adopted one of four strategies during the session. In the *low attack group,* the aggressors gave the subjects very mild shocks, time after time. In the *decreasing attack group,* the aggressors *started* by giving the subjects very painful shocks, but over time, they began to set gentler and gentler shock levels. In the *increasing attack group,* the aggressors followed the opposite strategy; they started out administering mild shocks, but trial by trial, their shocks became increasingly painful. Finally, in the *high attack group,* the aggressors gave the subjects intensely painful shocks every time they got a chance.

The authors found that subjects did behave in a highly reciprocal fashion. They "gave as good as they got." Subjects in the *low attack group* gave mild shocks, those in the *increasing* and *decreasing attack groups* matched their partner's level of ferocity, and those in the *high attack group* gave consistently painful shocks of their own.

The notion that things should be "set right" via *exact* punishment is a deeply engrained one. *The Code of Hammurabi* (about 2250 B.C.) was based on just that philosophy. "If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone [Harper, 1904, p. 73]." Today, philosophers are more sophisticated. After thinking about the question for 4000 years, they now have absolutely no one idea why society punishes wrongdoers. Does society punish people to restore equity? To protect society by isolating wrongdoers? To set a harsh example for other potential harm doers? To rehabilitate them? Philosophers cannot agree. Despite philosophers' disagreements, however, almost everyone else feels that, at least in part, wrongdoers should expiate their crimes by suffering, and that the punishment should fit the crime (Fry, 1956; Rose & Prell, 1955; Sharp & Otto, 1910).

4. TIME 2: ALL-IN-ALL, HOW DOES THE SUBJECT FEEL NOW? WHAT NEXT?

In the studies we have focused on thus far, the experimenters either provoked or did not provoke the subjects, and then they observed whether these victims-potential aggressors did or did not retaliate. Most aggression studies end at this point. But our curiosity does not. What happens next? What happens when potential aggressors get angry and go too far? Do they try to make amends? Justify their behavior? Escape? What about subjects who refuse to retaliate, or are afraid to? Theorists generally assume that it is good for people to control their aggressive responses. But is it? What happens to the provoked when they decide not to retaliate? Do they end up trying to get back at others in a multitude of *little* ways? Do they end up justifying the provoker's cruel behavior?—convincing themselves that they had it coming? Do they displace their aggression?

Considerable evidence—collected in very different contexts—suggests that aggressors-nonaggressors, may do exactly these things. Before considering this evidence, a caution is in order. From Figure 9.1, it is obvious that, at this point, we could offer a laborious enumeration of myriad possibilities. Subjects who are provoked or not provoked could feel overbenefited, equitably treated, or underbenefited. Afterwards they may do nothing, or retaliate—excessively, adequately, inadequately, and as a consequence, feel guilty, just fine, or angry. To avoid having to run through all the possibilities to make our point, let us make a simplifying assumption: For this equity analysis, we need not worry about "who hit who first and what happened next." For our purposes, we need

only calculate whether or not, by Time 2, the subject feels overbenefited, equitably treated, or underbenefited. We will label as *aggressors* those who, at Time 2, have hurt the other more than the other has hurt them. (This includes experimenters and confederates who provoke subjects, subjects who get angry and go overboard in paying them back.) Let us label as *victims,* those who have been hurt more than they have hurt others. (This includes subjects who have been victimized but have had no chance to retaliate—or who do not dare to retaliate—or who retaliate too little too late.) Our discussion, in equity theory terms, of how the aggressor and victims might be expected to set out, at Time 2, to remedy the *status quo* can now proceed from here.

According to equity theory (Proposition III), people who feel they have treated others unfairly and those who have been treated unfairly themselves, should feel acutely uncomfortable. Walster *et al.* (1978) review the considerable evidence that they do.

Both aggressors and their victims can attempt to set things right in two very different ways: They can attempt to restore actual equity or psychological equity to their relationships. Or if all else fails, they can leave the field.

a. Restoring Actual Equity. Aggressors often voluntarily compensate their victims or acquiesce when they retaliate. Evidence in support of this contention comes from Berscheid and Walster (1967), Walster and Prestholdt (1966), and Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966).

Not surprisingly, it is often the victims who insist that things be set right. Victims are quick to seek restitution (see Leventhal & Bergman, 1969; Marwell, Schmitt, & Shotola, 1971). If that is not possible, victims are not hesitant to "get even" by retaliation. Much of the evidence in support of this contention was reported earlier in this chapter (see also Brown, 1968; Thibaut, 1950; Ross, Thibaut, & Evenbeck, 1971).

Often, then, both aggressor and victim follow Aristotle's dictum. They try to make sure justice is done to the right person, at the right time, in the right amount.

But what happens when it is not? What about angry people who go too far? Or do not go far enough? The existing evidence suggests that when aggressor–victims think back on things, they will feel uneasy and will try to make themselves feel better by rationalizing the status quo.

b. Restoring Psychological Equity. As we noted earlier, both aggressors, victims, and outside observers can restore psychological equity to a relationship by distorting reality. Aggressors convince themselves that their victims deserved to be hurt (see Berkowitz, 1962; Davidson, 1964; Davis & Jones, 1960; Glass, 1964; Katz, Glass, & Cohen, 1973; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Walster & Prestholdt, 1966), that they did not *really* suffer or at least did not suffer very much (Brock & Buss, 1962; Sykes & Matza, 1957), or that *they* are not responsible for their suffering ("It's not me folks, I was only following orders") (Brock & Buss, 1962, 1964; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

That we often justify our cruelties to others was apparent even to the ancients. Let us consider a typical experiment. Davis and Jones (1960) reasoned that, because most of us think of ourselves as kind and fair persons, anytime we hurt another deeply, we feel uncomfortable. Ironically, it is the kindest and fairest of us who feel worst when we hurt others, and thus are most likely to try to make ourselves feel a little better, by deciding that our hapless victims deserved what they got. Davis and Jones also argued that the more responsible we feel for our decisions to hurt others, the more uncomfortable we will feel, and thus the more eager we will be to denigrate our victim.

Finally, these investigators were also interested in the fact that, in some situations we can withdraw, or take back cruel behavior. When we have hurt others by insulting them, we can say "I didn't mean it," or "I was playing a joke," and thereby partially eliminate the harm we have done. Davis and Jones hypothesized that when such "taking back" is possible, we will not denigrate the victim, but will choose to make amends.

To test these hypotheses, Davis and Jones (1960) cajoled half of their subjects (those in the choice condition) into *volunteering* to read an extremely harsh evaluation to a fellow student. He essentially *forced* the remaining students (those in the no-choice condition) to read it. (He simply told them they *must* read the negative evaluation.) In addition, some of the subjects were led to believe they would be able to meet the other person later (and thus they could explain they had not really meant their harsh criticism). The experimenter led the remaining students to believe that a subsequent meeting was impossible (and thus there was no way the injury could be undone). After the subjects read the negative evaluation to the other, the experimenter asked them to rate the other's likability, warmth, conceit, intelligence, and adjustment.

How did students feel about the other *after* insulting him or her? Davis and Jones (1960) found that men and women were most likely to derogate the victim when they: (1) believed that they had some freedom not to behave in the harmful manner; and (2) realized that they could not easily take back their behavior in a subsequent meeting. Davis and Jones, then, confirmed the notion that people who insult others may end up by convincing themselves that their hapless targets deserved to suffer.

In a particularly interesting study, Sykes and Matza (1957) found that juvenile delinquents often defend their victimization of others by arguing that their victims are homosexuals, or bums, or possess other traits that make them deserving of punishment. In tormenting others, then, the delinquents can claim to be restorers of justice rather than harm doers. A number of subsequent researchers have confirmed the fact that aggressors do often denigrate their victims (see Berkowitz, 1962; Davidson, 1964; Davis & Jones, 1960; Glass, 1964; Katz, Glass, & Cohen, 1973; Walster & Prestholdt, 1966).

Of course, their victims can restore psychological equity in exactly the same ways. Often victimized individuals find it less upsetting to distort reality and justify their victimization, than to acknowledge that the world is unjust and that they are too impotent to elicit fair treatment (see Lerner & Matthews, 1967). Victimized individuals have been found to restore equity in several ways. Sometimes they console themselves by imagining that they were not really victimized (see Jecker & Landy, 1969; Walster & Prestholdt, 1966) or that their victimization will bring compensary benefits (Solomon, 1957; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Sometimes victims console themselves by concluding that, in the long run, their tormentors will be punished as they deserve.

c. Escape. Of course, if all else fails, the guilty aggressor or the humiliated victim can reduce the discomfort by fleeing. Baron and Bell (1975, 1976) found that many subjects find aggressive settings so threatening that all they think about is escape. As one subject observed, "The only thing I thought about was getting the hell out of here!"

d. What Determines whether Participants Respond to Injustice by Restoring Actual or Psychological Equity? Thus far, we have reviewed evidence that demonstrates that aggressors and their victims sometimes restore actual equity, sometimes psychological equity, to their relationships. But this is not enough. What determines which of these two techniques aggressors or victims will use? According to equity theory, people's responses are shaped by cost–benefit considerations. According to Walster *et al.* (1978):

> Proposition IV; Corollary 1: Other things being equal, the more adequate an exploiter perceives an available equity-restoring technique to be, the more likely he is to use this technique to restore equity.
>
> Proposition I: Corollary 2: Other things being equal, the less costly an exploiter perceives an available equity-restoring technique to be, the more likely he is to use this technique to restore equity [p. 36].

There is some evidence that cost–benefit considerations *are* vitally important in determining how both th

sive person (and his or her actual or *potential* victim) will respond.[2] According to equity theory, when people contemplate unjustly hurting others or actually *do* hurt others, they feel distressed. Basically, this distress is presumed to arise from two sources: threatened self-esteem and fear of retaliation.

According to equity theory, anything that (a) makes potential aggressors aware that they will experience self-concept-distress if they injure others; or (b) makes them aware that the victim, the victim's sympathizers, or God may retaliate—should cause them to think twice before aggressing. The evidence suggests that it does.

1. Self-Concept and Aggression–Nonaggression

Researchers have collected considerable evidence that people are likely to hesitate before aggressing, if they know that they will suffer pangs of conscience if they act out. Some examples:

a. Researchers have found that people who *anticipate* pangs of remorse or stings of self-censure for engaging in assaults against others, are especially likely to refrain from such actions (see Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1973, 1976; Gambaro & Rabin, 1969; Knot, Lasater, & Shuman, 1974; Meyer, 1967).
b. People who are eager for social approval, or who are unusually anxious, are less aggressive (Conn & Crowne, 1964; Dengerink, 1971; Dorsky & Taylor, 1972; Fishman, 1965; Taylor, 1970). (Of course, with enough provocation, even the meekest, most mild-mannered individuals might—like the proverbial worm—turn on their tormentors.)
c. When people realize they are responsible for their own actions, they are most likely to think through what they are doing. Tilker (1970) found that when potential aggressors had been told that the responsibility for the victim's health and welfare rested entirely with them, they were less willing to injure other subjects.
d. Finally, researchers have found that, once aggressors begin to assault others, whether or not they *continue* seems to be influenced by cost–benefit considerations. Whether or not they continue to behave aggressively is influenced by the victims' reactions.

Sometimes aggressors are so angry at a victim, and so uninhibited about aggressing that, when they observe an enemy's suffering, they are encouraged. When individuals are "highly" angry, signs of victims' pain

[2]Here, *because of its relevance,* we are primarily in

will increase aggression. For example, Baron (1974a, 1977), Feshbach, Stiles, and Bitter (1967), Hartmann (1969), and Swart and Berkowitz (1976) found that, if people were strongly provoked, the victim's pain and suffering served as a form of reinforcement.

However, some aggressors' anger is so tempered, or they are so opposed to aggression, that when they observe their victim in pain, they are horrified. They immediately cease their aggressive activity (see Baron, 1971b, 1974a; Geen, 1970; Rule & Leger, 1976). Under conditions of no anger or mild anger, victim pain generally tends to reduce aggression.

2. Fear of Retaliation and Aggression–Nonaggression

Similarly, according to equity theory's cost–benefit analysis, anything that makes potential aggressors aware that the victim, the victim's sympathizers, or God, may retaliate against them, should make them think twice before aggressing. Again, there is some evidence that this is so.

a. In their now classic monograph, Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears (1939) observed that "It is evident, of course, that all frustrating situations do not produce overt aggression. Few arrested motorists jeer at policemen; guests at formal dinners do not complain when the meat is tough; German Jews do not strike Nazi stormtroopers [p. 32]." Their conclusion? "The strength of inhibition of any act of aggression varies positively with the amount of punishment anticipated to be a consequence of that act [p. 33.]" A quarter of a century later Berkowitz (1962) noted that "the strength of an individual's aggressive tendencies is directly associated with the extent that he anticipates punishment or disapproval for aggression [p. 93]."

b. Borden (1975) found that an audience can facilitate or inhibit aggression—depending on its assumed values. A variety of authors have found that people are far less likely to aggress if they anticipate social disapproval for doing so (Brown & Elliot, 1965; Brown & Tyler, 1968; Deur & Parke, 1970; Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1978; Hollenberg & Sperry, 1951; Tyler & Brown, 1967).

c. Donnerstein *et al.* (1972), Donnerstein and Donnerstein (1975, 1976), and Wilson and Rogers (1975) found that people are less likely to aggress when they know their potential victims have the power to retaliate than when they know they do not. For example, in a series of investigations (see Donnerstein *et al.,* 1972) in which college men had to teach "fellow students" a task, half of the time the fellow student was white; half of the time he or she was black. As is usual, the student was required to deliver electric shock to the fellow student every time he or she made a mistake. Half of the time, in the *anonymous condition,* the students were led to believe that the victims would never know their (the aggressor's) identity. The remainder of the time, in the *nonanonymous condition,* they were informed that they could both see and identify the aggressors over closed circuit TV. Furthermore, within each of *these* groups, half of the students—those in the *prior role-switching instructions condition*—were informed before the shock trials even began that their victims would have the opportunity to retaliate when they finished. The remaining students—those in the *subsequent role-switching instructions condition*—were not told about this supposed reversal of roles until after they had finished shocking the victim. As might be expected, students' aggression was strongly affected by cost–benefit considerations. They were more aggressive when they felt anonymous than when they did not, and more aggressive when the victims could not retaliate than when they could.

Interestingly enough, Donnerstein *et al.* (1972) found that the victim's race interacted strongly with both of the preceding factors influencing subjects behavior. White men were actually more aggressive toward a black than a white when they believed they could attack with total impunity. They were less aggressive toward a black than a white target when they believed that retaliation was probable.

d. Cohen (1955), and Graham, Charwat, Honig, and Weltz (1951) found that provoked people are more willing to aggress against low status and low social power people than their more powerful peers. Of course, a potential victim's threats must be more than "empty" threats if they are to be effective. As one might expect, such threats are most likely to be effective when they are creditable and potent (see Baron, 1971c, 1973, 1974b).

In summarizing the data on the link between anticipation of retaliation and aggression, Baron (1977) observes: "the threat of punishment from the victim seemed to produce a shift from direct, easily recognized forms of aggression to less direct, readily concealable forms [p. 253]."

It is evident, then, that equity theory notions *do* seem to have some validity. Cost–benefit considerations do seem to have a critical impact on whether provoked people respond with aggression or with passive withdrawal.

5. WHAT NEXT: WHERE DOES IT ALL END?

Of course, real life is an endless stream. In real life, the sequence would not end there. Aggression breeds anger and retaliation or inhibition of aggression. Retaliation–nonretaliation then stirs up new feelings. Did the retaliatory–nonretaliatory act set things right? If so fine. But

what if—on thinking it through—the subjects realize that they have acted too hastily or too excessively, or did not go far enough? When that is the case, they may be left with guilt and anger. And those feelings will, in turn, spur new activity designed to "set things right."

IV. BEYOND EQUITY THEORY

In Section III, we attempted to demonstrate that the equity paradigm is a useful framework for organizing much of the aggression data. In fact, from what we have written so far, it sounds as if equity theory can account for every step in an aggressive encounter. It cannot. Under some conditions, equity considerations seem surprisingly unimportant in determining how people behave. On occasion, people aggress against the wrong people, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons, and out of all proportion to the provocation. Let us discuss some of these exceptions.

A. Who Do We Aggress Against?

Currently, aggression theorists are engaged in a debate as to whether or not people are equally *satisfied* when they can aggress directly against their tormentors, as opposed to being forced to displace their aggression onto someone else. For example, Berkowitz (1965) argues that equity considerations are critically important in determining whether or not people's "aggressive drive" is reduced by direct–indirect aggression.

Others, such as Feshbach (1964, 1970), and Zillmann (1979), reject the notion that the aggressive drive can be reduced only through injury to the source of frustration. For example, they point out that when prejudiced people are provoked, they often choose to attack those they dislike—whether or not those people deserve it (Buss, 1961; Donnerstein *et al.*, 1972; Kaufmann, 1970).

Regardless of their assumptions about how the provoked *feel* after directly aggressing or displacing their aggression, researchers are in agreement about what people *do*. Sometimes the provoked injure those who "have it coming." But if they are unwilling to attack those who have injured them, they may well displace their aggression onto a totally innocent victim (Berkowitz, 1969; Dollard *et al.*, 1939; Fenigstein & Buss, 1974; Ferson, 1959; Miller, 1948; Murray & Berkun, 1955; Thibaut & Coules, 1952). An interesting example of this process is provided in a

were given an opportunity to retaliate against this same person. A second group of subjects were given an opportunity to attack another individual. When subjects were given a final opportunity to aggress, it was found that those subjects who had an opportunity to attack the confederate the first time, did in fact show a reduction in aggressive behavior compared to those subjects who were not given any such cathartic experience. In addition, those who were given an opportunity to attack another individual also showed a reduction in subsequent aggressive behavior.

Although these types of results would not seem to fit well with equity theory, one could look at the situation quite differently. For instance, the subject has incurred the cost of being shocked (angered) while another individual in the experiment has not (the displaced target). It is possible that the subject could restore equity to the entire situation by acting aggressively toward this "other" individual (see Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976).

B. Why Do People Aggress?

Researchers have found that they can stimulate aggression *via* a variety of techniques. And, some of the things that seem to facilitate or inhibit aggression have nothing to do with "fairness."

They have catalogued a potpourri of factors—none of which has anything to do with fairness—that (a) determine whether or not people are *ready* for aggression in the first place; which (b) intensify or moderate their *emotional response;* and which (c) determine whether or not they will *express* their aggression overtly.

1. FRUSTRATION: A FACTOR THAT DETERMINES WHETHER OR NOT PEOPLE ARE PREDISPOSED TO AGGRESS

Currently, theorists are engaged in a heated debate as to whether or not frustration, in and of itself, breeds aggression. Traditional theorists (e.g., Miller *et al.*, 1941) assumed that frustration was a necessary and sufficient cause of aggression. Recently, however, researchers have begun to argue that, generally, simple frustration is *not* enough to stimulate aggression (see Gentry, 1970; Kuhn, Madsen, & Becker, 1967; Rule & Hewitt, 1971; Taylor & Pisano, 1971). Buss (1966) concludes, "It is clear that . . . pure frustration is a relatively unimportant antecedent of physical aggression [p. 161]." Baron (1977) argues that only *high levels* of

frustration have employed relatively mild levels of thwarting, while those which have reported positive findings have involved stronger levels of this factor [p. 88; see also, Harris, 1974]."

In fact, once an individual has been frustrated, it seems unlikely that aggression can be "halted" even if information that might restore equity to the situation is provided. A good example is the research of Zillmann (e.g., Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann, Bryant, Cantor, & Day, 1975), which has shown that when a frustrating source gives reasons for behaving in a certain manner (e.g., emotionally upset), the frustrated individual will still aggress against the source even if this information is provided after the frustration. It would seem that, once anger is aroused, the question of what is "fair" is not as important as the act of aggression itself.

Therefore, at least in some cases, people may be predisposed to aggress against others simply because they have been severely frustrated, not because it is fair that they do so.

2. FACTORS HAVING NOTHING TO DO WITH FAIRNESS THAT INTENSIFY OR MODERATE PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

According to Bandura (1973), if people are already feeling angry, anything that intensifies their angry feelings should increase the likelihood that they will aggress—and aggress harshly. Experiments have shown that provoked people can be "pushed over the brink" by a startling array of arousing events such as: *crowding* (Freedman, 1975), *noise* (Donnerstein & Wilson, 1976; Geen & O'Neal, 1969; Konecni, 1975b), *heat* (Baron, 1972a; Baron & Bell, 1975; Baron & Lawton, 1972; Griffitt, 1970; Griffitt & Veitch, 1971), *vigorous exercise* (Zillmann, 1979), *competitive activities* (Christy, Gelfand, & Hartmann, 1971), *general emotional arousal* (Zillmann, 1979), and *sexual arousal* (Baron & Bell, 1977; Donnerstein & Barrett, 1978; Donnerstein *et al.*, 1975; Donnerstein & Hallam, 1978; Jaffee, Malmuth, Feingold, & Feshbach, 1975; Meyer, 1972; Zillmann, 1971).

In reviewing all the evidence, it seems clear that if people are provoked, their anger can be intensified by a variety of arousing experiences, and these intensified feelings can easily "spill over" into aggression (Donnerstein & Wilson, 1976; Konecni, 1975b; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann, Johnson, & Day, 1974).

3. FACTORS HAVING NOTHING TO DO WITH FAIRNESS THAT DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT PEOPLE BEHAVE AGGRESSIVELY

a. Instrumental Conditioning. According to learning theory, a person can *learn* to behave aggressively or nonaggressively. One learns to do what is necessary to attain reward and to avoid punishment (Bandura, 1973; Zillmann, 1979).

There seem to be a variety of offers one "can't refuse." Children and adults have been found to act aggressively or nonaggressively to secure any number of rewards. Among these are (1) self-reinforcement: (sometimes, people "pat themselves on the back" for aggressing or turning the other cheek; see Bandura, 1973; Feshbach, 1970; Toch, 1959): (2) various material incentives such as money, desired objects, toys, and candy (Buss, 1971; Gaebelein, 1973; Walters & Brown, 1963); (3) social approval (Geen & Stonner, 1971; Gentry, 1970); or (4) the alleviation of aversive treatments (Patterson, Littman, & Bricker, 1967).

b. Modeling. In addition, people often acquire new forms of behavior—including patterns of aggression or passivity—simply by observing the actions of others (see Bandura, 1973; Goranson, 1970).

The powerful impact of aggressive models has been illustrated in studies of media violence (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a, 1963b), in laboratory studies (Baron, 1971c; Baron & Bell, 1975; Baron & Kepner, 1970; Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973; Buvinic & Berkowitz, 1976; Donnerstein & Donnerstein 1976; Geen & Stonner, 1972; Grusec, 1972; Hanratty, O'Neal & Sulzer, 1972; Liebert & Baron, 1972; Rice & Grusec, 1975; Wheeler & Caggiula, 1966), and in long-term field studies (Leyens, Camino, Parke, & Berkowitz, 1975; Parke, Berkowitz, Leyens, & Sebastian, 1975).

There are comparable data showing that nonaggressive models, who refuse to be provoked, powerfully *inhibit* aggressive behavior (Baron, 1971c, 1972b; Baron & Kepner, 1970; Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1977).

c. Conformity. People will aggress if they are ordered to (see Borden & Taylor, 1973; Milgram, 1963, 1965a, 1965b, 1974).

d. Aggressive Cues. According to Berkowitz (1965a, 1969, 1971, 1973), anger induces the *readiness* for overt aggression. But it is the presence or absence of aggressive cues—stimuli associated with the previous or present anger instigation or with aggression generally—that determines whether or not an aggressive *response* will occur. For example, Berkowitz and his colleagues (see Berkowitz, 1965b, 1974; Berkowitz & Geen, 1966; Berkowitz & LePage, 1967; Geen & Berkowitz, 1966) found that people were more likely to aggress against others if they found themselves in a room that had guns, rather than sports equipment, strewn about. Berkowitz (1968) concludes: "Guns not only permit violence, they can stimulate it as well. The finger pulls the trigger, but the trigger may also be pulling the finger [p. 22]."

In the same view, Baron (1977) has argued that the presence or absence of cues associated with responses that are *incompatible* with aggression—empathy, laughter, or lust—may *inhibit* aggression. There is some evidence that Baron may be correct: When people find themselves in pleasant settings—where they are surrounded by good-natured humor, pleasant sexual arousal—they find it very hard to get angry, much less to express their anger (see Baron, 1976; Baron & Bell, 1974; Baron & Byrne, 1977; Landy & Mettee, 1969; Leak, 1974; Mueller & Donnerstein, 1977; Zillmann & Sapolsky, 1977).

e. Drugs: Alcohol and Marijuana. From the existing evidence, it appears that alochol tends to release aggression; marijuana tends to inhibit it (Taylor & Gammon, 1975; Taylor, Vardaris, Rawitch, Gammon, Cranston, & Lubetkin, 1976).

f. Conclusion. There are a variety of factors having nothing to do with fairness that can influence people to behave aggressively or nonaggressively.

By now, then, we have come full circle. We see that Aristotle was right: Ideally, we would always be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—but that is *not* within everyone's power and is *not* easy. As we have seen in Section III, we sometimes get angry, not at the people who most deserve our anger, but at people we hate, people too weak, too downtrodden to fight back. We are sometimes at such a good place in our lives, so amused, sexually aroused, high that we do not fight back when we should. We sometimes are in such pain, so angry, that we respond when we should not, and out of all proportion.

V. A CONCLUDING NOTE

In looking over the preceding chapter, a consistent pattern seems to emerge. This pattern can be summarized in two observations.

First, at every point in the aggressive sequence, the attributions people make in explaining what is happening to them, why they are responding as they are, and so on, seem to be critically important.

Sometimes people know perfectly well what is happening to them and why (a fellow student attacks them, because he does not like Presbyterians, etc.). Then it is easy to decide what is fair and what is not. But often, in experiments, it is hard for people to know what has hit them. Who would ever even consider the possibility that perhaps they assaulted

could admit that they hurt another, because they were afraid to attack the real source of their frustration and were displacing their aggression? In such cases, the attributions people make, "I am bad," "He is irritating," may be critically important.

Second, people seem to behave most in accord with Aristotle's ideal—and most equitably—when they are calm, cool, and collected. When people are intensely angry, or intensely aroused, considerations of equity seem to go by the wayside. There is evidence in support of this contention: Several authors have found that anything that makes people self-conscious about their behavior, increases the chance that they will behave fairly. For example, researchers have found that anything that increases people's "objective self-awareness," looking in a mirror, and so on, causes them to behave more in accord with their values and standards (Carver, 1974, 1975; Scheier, Fenigstein, & Buss, 1974; Wicklund, 1975). For example, under conditions of objective self-awareness, traditional men are less likely to aggress against women than under other conditions (Carver, 1974; Scheier *et al.*, 1974); those who disapprove of physical punishment are especially likely to act in accord with their beliefs (Carver, 1975).

Berscheid *et al.* (1969) found that, when people had time to think, they were more likely to treat others fairly than when their decisions had to be hurried. Conversely, when people are angry, considerations of logic go out the window (Baron, 1973). Of course, as Ovid observed: "Like fragile ice, anger in time passes away (*Ut fragilis glacies, interit ira mora*) [Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, Bk. 1, l. 374]." And when people cool down, they may well realize that they have behaved badly and feel the need to "set things right." At this cooling down point, considerations of justice may well sweep back into a position of prominence.

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