

AGGRESSION IN SPORTS. PARADIGMS. CAUSES

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Abstract: Rise in antisocial behaviour – which can take various forms, including aggression – represents a real danger for the individual, the community and even the humanity as a species. Failure to tackle this topic in a responsible manner, ignoring it or addressing it as a metaphysical, unchangeable fact leads to dehumanisation, reduced social cohesion and negative models. Unfortunately, this epidemic occurs also in sports.

Purpose: This paper aims at presenting the representative theories of different paradigms on aggression – one of the manifestations of antisocial behaviour, identifying and addressing the underlying causes of such behaviour, which is the starting point of initiating prevention and control programmes.

Problem statement is obvious: the more root causes of aggression we identify, the more aggressive behaviour prevention measures we can initiate.

Research methods: We conducted qualitative research based on analysis of social documents.

Conclusion: Addressing aggressive behaviour should be a constant concern among researchers, irrespective of their area of expertise, until they've discovered and initiated efficient prevention and control programmes.

Keywords: *aggression, biological-ethological paradigm, psychosocial, sociocultural, causes.*

Introduction

Newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasts, social media abound with information on antisocial behaviour which can range from insults and obscene gestures to actions resulting in material damage or even murder. Such information influence the individuals' thinking and actions and sometimes promote anti-social behaviour.

Describing such behaviour, the forms it takes, identifying the actors, understanding the underlying causes, measuring the frequency of occurrence of this disruptive phenomenon are some of the research topics for specialists from various areas: sociology, psychology, ethology and the like.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon has been recording high occurrence rates in sports as well, both on the playing field and in the grandstand and outside the competition field. It can result in aggressive and / or violent actions, whether spontaneous or premeditated.

The authors and the victims of aggressive behaviour may be the coaches, referees / umpires, athletes, their supporters, security staff members, mass media representatives, on the one hand, and individuals outside the sports world, on the other.

Regrettably, the existence of this antisocial behaviour causes the impact of institutionalised sports on our culture and society to be called into question, entitling J. Gerdy to suggest a potential complicity between athletes and the public in tolerating rule violation. [1]

Purpose: This paper aims at presenting the representative theories on aggression, identifying and addressing some of the underlying causes of such behaviour, which is the starting point of initiating prevention and control programmes.

Problem statement is obvious: the more root causes of aggression we identify, the more aggressive behaviour prevention measures we can initiate.

Research methods: In order to meet the purpose of the paper, we conducted qualitative research based on analysis of social documents. More specifically, we referred to several theories on aggressive behaviour and its underlying causes from various fields as sociology, psychology, social psychology, etiology, sports.

Aggression. Semantics, theories

Although aggression is no emergent topic, it invites scrutiny, for such behaviour occurs in all societies and may take various shapes: from extreme actions (acts of destruction, arson, robbery, physical and verbal aggression, rape, mutilation, murder), to symbolic actions.

When the individual wants to impose their will on others at all costs, refusing to provide arguments and turning to anything that results in material, moral and psychological or mixed damage, we can speak about aggressive behaviour.

Understanding and defining *aggression* concept raises numerous issues generated by the possibility of approaching it from the perspective of the various fields, of the different forms it may take, of the at least partial equivalence of meaning between aggression and violence.

Without elaborating a list of definitions, we can assert that the majority of authors share the view that aggression translates in purposeful actions and physical or / and emotional trauma caused to a person.

This semantics rests on the characteristics of aggression: '1) it is an intentional behaviour expressed by facts or by words; 2) it is an offensive

behaviour... 3) it aims at causing physical, emotional, mental and moral distress or material damage to a person or to another living being.' [1] Analysis of the causes and triggers of aggressive behaviour enables us to approach this topic from various perspectives, namely biological and ethological; psychosocial; and sociocultural.

The *biological and ethological* paradigm, promoted by W. McDougall, K. Lorenz, I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt and the like refers to biological, ethological and psychoanalytical arguments.

Pursuant to the biological and ethological view, aggression is an innate trait [2], generated by the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, the brain and the endocrine system. Therefore, the underlying triggering factors of aggression are the internal impulses as well as the nervous, hormonal and biochemical components specific to the human being.

Starting from the views of American psychologist, W. McDougall and professor O. Heinroth, the founder of modern ethology, K. Lorenz (1966) deems aggression as a primary instinct like any other (hunger, thirst, sexuality) specific to both animals and humans, essential for the adaptation and survival of individuals and even animal species. [3]

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, S. Freud presented several theories, linking aggressive behaviour to libido (in order to explain obsessional neurosis and aggression towards people of opposite sex), to surrounding objects (to explain the relationship between the self and the environment), to the two instincts specific to the human being: death instinct and life instinct. The former generates tension which can lead to self-destruction or to committing acts of aggression against others.

Although the importance of the biological and genetic factors in the occurrence and evolution of aggressive behaviour is acknowledged, there are, however, people who deny the theory of the instinctive nature of aggression.

The *psychosociological* paradigm consists in several theories, of which the most referred to ones are *frustration – aggression* hypothesis [4] according to which aggressive behaviour is a consequence of frustration, a response to the negative experiences; the *theory of avoiding negative affects* [5], which connects aggression to the existence of negative, external stimuli (heat, coldness and the like); the *neoassociation theory of aggressive behaviour* [6], which states that the acts of aggression occur on a negative affectivity background (for instance, the individual experiences fear), hence such behaviour is

influenced and activated by emotional stimuli; and *dispositional attribution theory* [7], an enhanced version of *frustration – aggression* hypothesis, which identifies a new process, namely conditioning. In other words, the occurrence of aggressive behaviour becomes dependent on the existence of an intermediate stimulus, that is a weapon, for instance, therefore such behaviour would represent a form of self-defence.

The *sociocultural* paradigm rests on *learning theory*: through observation and copying, the individuals acquire certain behaviours. The defender of this theory, A. Bandura [8], along with his fellow workers, conducted a series of experiments that led to the conclusion that the most important factor generating aggression is social learning resulting in copying, absorbing, reward and punishment. Although he did not leave out the biological factors, A. Bandura overestimated the role of social learning.

Aggression in sports

For some individuals, sports is one of the activities capable to give rise to boundless enthusiasm in people, to make supporters experience intense joy but also hopelessness, to bring together people from all social and professional backgrounds, to build social cohesion. For others, sports is the concrete manifestation of aggressive behaviour, of grossness, a world of intolerance.

Irrespective of different voices who may state otherwise, sports being a social phenomenon that goes beyond the playing field is an obvious truth. It is a global phenomenon. But, unfortunately, acts of aggression, rejected by modern society, occur also in sports, a world in which fair-play should be a fundamental rule, a natural behaviour. Although aggression in sports dates back to ancient times, the year 1985, which marks the tragedy from Heysel stadium in Brussels resulting in over 340 casualties (38 dead people and over 300 injured people), became a reference point in studying antisocial behaviour in sports, including acts of aggression.

Despite the fact that specialist literature presents aggression as taking various forms – *hostile* aggression, intended to cause injury to the opponent, to hurt them; *instrumental* aggression, aimed at a reward, at achieving victory in a competition; and *emotional* aggression, serving the purpose of reducing stress and emotional strain – we must emphasise the fact that regardless the shape it may take, aggression results in causing pain to another individual.

Winning an Olympic gold medal is the objective set by any athlete, any team, a form of social and professional recognition of their effort and commitment, of the resistance to restrictions of any

kind. Behind a medal, there are countless hours of training, of physical and mental effort, years of hard work for learning and assimilating some elements, techniques, strategies to approach the game, strategies to approach the competition, numerous injuries – some life-threatening – and thousands of withdrawal situations and sacrifices. Effort, pain, tears, all these to wear the shining medal, to hear the national anthem for a few moments, to get applause. Soon the moment of recognition is gone and again, as in a rollercoaster, the athlete is back in the training hall, becoming the slave of the same tiring training sessions, of the same painful restrictions. And most of the times such restrictions give rise to frustration that materialises in aggressive behaviours including during competitions.

Besides such personal causes as overexertion, frustration, stress, aggression may also be generated by social and cultural factors. After analysing aggressive behaviour in sports, sociologists Cristina and Nicu Gavriluta [9] agreed on the fact that one of its underlying causes is the gap between the *educational dimension and the civilisational dimension of modern man*. In other words, the level of education of modern man does not match the development level of the material, civilizational area. John R. Gerdy shares this view and expresses his concern about the fate of sports, particularly organised sports, believing that it is not governed by *civilisation rules*. [10]

The lack of such rules or, more specifically, noncompliance with existing ones may explain also the unwillingness to tolerate people belonging to other ethnic groups, religions, races, teams, other sports and the like.

Competing against a better team may generate mental pressure in athletes which may express in acts of aggression. Therefore, this tension accumulated long before the start of the competition, based on a hierarchical classification of athletes, teams, sports clubs, may be deemed another cause of aggressive behaviour.

Social pressure is another important factor underlying aggressive behaviour – the pressure exerted by the supporters, on the one hand, and by the employers and sponsors, on the other. Both the supporters and the employers aim at victory at any cost, sometimes pretending they don't see certain acts of aggression; in the case of some sports as boxing, wrestling, judo, and the like, they try to find justification of aggression in the very violent nature of the respective sports, or worse they make aggression a point of honour. In such case, the athletes and the supporters become co-authors of the acts of aggression, breaking both sports

regulations and the fundamental rule in any sports – fair-play. Moreover, if the athlete is successful, the public is willing to overlook any aggressive behaviour. This observation determined J. Gerdy to assert that 'There are no standards of accepted behaviour, or if any, they can be easily broken, removed or amended if the athlete is good enough... there is no other order but *win at any expense*.' [10]

Another potential cause pertains to legislation, namely laws, regulations failing to cover all possible situations, ambiguous provisions leading to misconstruction or simply legal stipulations nonchalantly ignored by both athletes and referees / umpires and coaches.

The professionalization of sports is a real cause of aggressive behaviour during competitions and even training sessions. The athletes being financially dependent on increasingly better results, the desire to be successful for a longer period of time are natural consequences of sports professionalization. We must also mention the permanent rise of standards in all sports along with increased risk of suffering more severe injuries more often. Moreover, meeting such new standards determine some athletes to resort to different substances which, unfortunately not only affect their health but also cause them to become more aggressive. Therefore, the athletes finding themselves in the position of not being able to keep on making a living from sports after years of sacrifices and hard work leads to aggressive actions.

Modern man lives in a society of communication, a multimedia society in which mass media imposes values, changes attitudes, shapes behaviours. On their hunt for scoring higher ratings, newspapers and television stations tackle avidly and in great detail the acts of aggression occurring also in sports. Unfortunately coverage of his topic in articles, news programmes, features and even prime time talk shows has become common practice. Excessive media coverage of such aggressive behaviour may influence the perception and way of action of some athletes.

Having in view the abovementioned, it becomes clear that acts of aggression, including those performed by athletes, may be of various nature: biological, ethological, psychosocial and / or sociocultural, that such behaviour is determined by both psycho-individual and sociocultural factors, therefore it is the product of genetics and of the axiological system in which individuals develop.

Conclusions

Some of the underlying causes of aggressive behaviour in athletes confirm the (biological, psychological, social and / or educational) theories

which attempt to explain them. Therefore, in order to prevent, reduce or eliminate acts of aggression, we must refer to psychological, social and educational mechanisms.

Of the psychological mechanisms, we mention exposure to nonaggressive models, strengthening self-control, reducing stress, discouraging the use of hallucinogens, steroids, amphetamines and the like.

Social mechanisms involve the initiation of programmes open for both athletes, the public, the supporters and public institutions (law enforcement agencies, mass media).

Educational mechanisms, covering both formal and informal education, must focus on raising awareness on the importance of education among individuals by promoting and rewarding nonviolent models, expressing strong disapproval of any form of aggression, encouraging public debates that promote nonviolence and condemn acts of aggression and organising a great number of information and education campaigns. Also, the legal framework must undergo changes in that any act of aggression should be regulated by law and punished accordingly.

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