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Frustration Aggression Theory

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Frustration is defined as a state that sets in if a goal-oriented act is delayed or thwarted. The instigation remains even though the chances of realization are constrained by interfering influences. Under these frustrating conditions aggressive behavior is stimulated to an extent that corresponds with the intensity of the instigation and the degree of blockage of goal attainment. Aggression is defined as the deliberate violation of an organism or an organism substitute. It is primarily directed toward the cause of frustration, but may be redirected toward any other people or objects. The inhibition of aggressive behavior represents in itself a factor of frustration and can reinforce aggressive tendencies.

In its first general definition the frustration aggression theory (or hypothesis, hence "FA-H") proposes that aggression is always the result of frustration (Dollard et al. 1939). This corresponds with the following two postulates: (1) aggressive behavior requires the existence of frustration, and (2) the existence of frustration leads to some kind of aggressive behavior. Manifest aggression reduces aggressive tendencies and results in "catharsis." However, this only applies to that part of aggression caused by inhibition of aggression, not to aggression caused by the original instigation. The latter lasts as long as the frustrating conditions continue. A "catharsis" in its comprehensive meaning will only be achieved if aggression eliminates exactly those obstacles in the way of the original goal (→ Catharsis Theory).

FA-H is based on Freud's and Hull's drive theories. In contrast to mere drive theories, FA-H presupposes a frustration-inducing external incident that can be interfered with. It thereby transcends the defeatism and the implicit justification of violence contained in biological approaches, explaining aggression via law of nature as a condition of self-reproducing physical privation. For decades, FA-H was seen as the ultimate aggression theory and has become part of commonsense knowledge. Its *scientific and socio-political attraction* results from the combination of an empirically tested universal causal explanation of aggression and a correspondingly high socio-technological importance: whoever wants to avoid aggression and violence has to change or abolish frustrating social circumstances. FA-H therefore offers good reasons for the development of social programs expected to prevent criminal behavior and political violence. In the 1960s, FA-H was used as an argument when criticizing repressive moral values, more recently it was used as an explanation for certain aspects of terrorism (Mirdal 2003; → Mediated Terrorism).

Criticism of FA-H concentrated mainly on the general → validity of the assumed relation between frustration and aggression. Baron (1977) shows that the blockage of goal attainment leads to aggressive behavior only if the blockage occurs unexpectedly (→ Goals, Cognitive Aspects of). Moreover, it seems to depend on mediating factors, such as proximity of the goal, whether frustration actually leads to aggressive behavior. Berkowitz (1989) therefore suggested a *reduced version of the hypothesis*: frustration increases the likelihood of emotional aggression. The absence of aggression after frustration can always

be traced back to thwarting conditions or to inhibition of aggression. However, better compatibility with empirical findings also provided critical arguments against a reformulation. Berkowitz's variant of the hypothesis was said to have been made irrefutable, thereby losing in explanatory value. There are types of aggression that are not linked to the condition of induced frustration: goal-oriented aggression in order to gain an advantage, martial acts, and so on. Today, therefore, frustration is seen as a possible condition for certain forms of aggression (primarily impulsive anger) with personality traits (general fear, locus of control, and others) determining if the reaction to frustration is aggressive or, alternatively, depressed.

In *communication research* FA-H became primarily relevant in the area of research on media violence. Berkowitz & Geen (1966) assume in their "eliciting-cue" hypothesis that every aggression has two roots: (1) the existence of frustration, and (2) the presence of aggressive cues (e.g., a violent movie). It is telling that Berkowitz does not rely on frustration alone or on media violence alone to trigger aggressive effects (→ Violence as Media Content, Effects of). The eliciting-cue hypothesis therefore reacts to empirical findings that reject a law-of-nature occurrence of aggression after frustration. At the same time, potential learning effects of the recipients of media violence are linked to the condition that there is already an aggression-inducing emotional disposition to frustration present. In order to measure the influence of filmic depictions of violence, test arrangements were chosen in which the subjects were first deliberately provoked by verbal abuse or electric shocks and then shown films with violent content (→ Test Theory; Experiment, Laboratory).

This test arrangement was also used by Feshbach to verify the catharsis thesis. Feshbach (1955; 1956) is still very much linked with drive theories insofar as he claims that pressure can be alleviated by aggressive acts. A third variant of this combination – this time with arousal – is offered by Tannenbaum (1972) and Zillmann (1982). The authors show that frustrated media recipients can be reinforced in their aggressive attitude by arousing film stimuli independent of the content (→ Emotional Arousal Theory).

The uncritical acceptance of FA-H as a universal aggression theory in media violence research led for a long time to the use of two-factor-test concepts, where the isolation of media influences and the separation of personal and situational influences are difficult. At the same time, pre-receptive measuring did not take place, and formal aspects as well as evaluation in context were largely neglected. This caused a situation where the effect quality of media violence could not be clarified despite extensive research (Kunczik & Zipfel 2006).

In *research on aesthetic and dramatic means*, different effects on the viewer led to new evidence regarding the topicality of FA-H. It was particularly in dramatic films where the recipients were not offered a satisfying solution after stressful victim scenes, such as punishment of the villain, that aggression was provoked. In such cases, media-induced frustration concerning the end of the film led to an increase in violent attitude. What causes the violent reaction of the recipients is the shift from empathy with the victim to an aversive attitude toward the villain ("Robespierre affect," Grimm 1998). In contrast to the postulates of the eliciting-cue hypothesis, these results indicate that it is not aggressive film cues such as successful perpetrator models and the availability of weapons that are relevant for the effects of media violence, but the aesthetic and dramatic contextualization of the depiction of the victim. The aggressive shift occurs as a result of emotionally

stressful victim images that, together with the lack of a satisfying filmic solution, induce frustration plus moral outrage. Both together then provoke aggressive behavior.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Catharsis Theory   ▶ Emotional Arousal Theory   ▶ Experiment, Laboratory ▶ Goals, Cognitive Aspects of   ▶ Mediated Terrorism   ▶ Test Theory   ▶ Validity   ▶ Violence as Media Content, Effects of   ▶ Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of

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