



# Aggression and Violence

## Instructor Manual

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The purpose of this instructor resource module is to help students understand important components of aggression and violence. It focuses on both internal and external causes of aggression and includes a discussion of methods designed to reduce aggression. It provides the instructor with discussion questions and activities that will help execute a successful class.

## Learning Objectives

- **Relevant APA Learning Objectives (Version 2.0)**
  - Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology (1.1)
  - Develop a working knowledge of psychology's content domains (1.2)
  - Describe applications of psychology (1.3)
  - Engage in innovative and integrative thinking and problem solving (2.3)
  - Build and enhance interpersonal relationships (3.2)
  - Adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels (3.3)
  - Interact effectively with others (4.3)
  - Exhibit self-efficacy and self-regulation (5.2)
  - Enhance teamwork capacity (5.4)
- **Content Specific Learning Objectives**
  - Explain the important components of the definition of aggression, and explain how

aggression differs from violence.

- Explain whether people think the world is less violent now than in the past, and whether it actually is less violent. If there is a discrepancy between perception and reality, how can it be resolved?
- Identify the internal causes and external causes of aggression. Compare and contrast how the inner and external causes differ.
- Identify effective and ineffective approaches to reducing aggression.

## **Abstract**

This module discusses the causes and consequences of human aggression and violence. Both internal and external causes are considered. Effective and ineffective techniques for reducing aggression are also discussed.

## **Class Design Recommendations**

This module can be taught in less than a single class period (50-75 minutes). Please also refer to the Noba PowerPoint slides that complement this outline.

## **Overview**

- Introduction
  - Defining aggression
  - Differentiating aggression and violence
- Internal factors
  - Gender, age, personality, hostile cognitive biases
- External factors
  - Frustration and other unpleasant events, weapons, media, alcohol

- Reducing aggression
  - Catharsis, punishment, successful interventions

## Module Outline

Introduction: There are three features that characterize aggression: (1) aggression is a behavior, (2) it is intentional rather than accidental, (3) and the victim wants to avoid the harm.

- Aggression and violence are different. Violence is aggression intended to cause extreme physical harm (e.g., injury, death). Thus, all violent acts are aggressive, but not all aggressive acts are violent.
- Fortunately, the overall level of violence has decreased over time: there have been global declines in the number of armed conflicts and combat deaths, military coups, and deadly violence campaigns waged against civilians. However, because violent images are more available to us now than ever before, we incorrectly assume that violence levels are also higher. Our tendency to overestimate the amount of violence in the world is due to the **availability heuristic**, which is the tendency to judge the frequency or likelihood of an event by the ease with which relevant instances come to mind.

## Internal Factors

- *Age*: Surprisingly, toddlers are the most aggressive (though not the most violent) of us. Although most people become less aggressive over time, some individuals do get more aggressive around late adolescence and early adulthood.
- *Gender*: At all ages, males tend to be more physically aggressive than females. However, females are much more likely than males to engage in **relational aggression**.
- *Personality traits related to aggression*: Aggressiveness tends to be stable over time. In addition, the components of the “**Dark Triad of Personality**”—narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—are also related to aggression.
- *Hostile cognitive biases*: There are three hostile cognitive biases: **hostile attribution bias** (the tendency to perceive ambiguous actions as hostile actions), **hostile perception bias**

(the tendency to perceive social interactions in general as being aggressive), and **hostile expectation bias** (the tendency to expect others to react to with aggression).

## External Factors

- *Frustration and other unpleasant events:* Unpleasant events such as frustrations, provocations, social rejections, hot temperatures, loud noises, and crowding can all cause aggression.
- *Weapons:* Being exposed to the presence of **weapons** can lead to an increase in **violence** and aggression, especially if the person is already angry.
- *Violent media:* Previous research has demonstrated the impact of violent media on individuals' levels of aggression. Video games, in particular, tend to elicit more aggressive behavior than other types of media. This effect may be due to the active nature of video games, the increased likelihood that video game players identify with violent characters, and that games directly reward players for violent behavior by awarding points or by allowing them to advance in the game.
- *Alcohol:* One way that alcohol leads to aggression is by disrupting the cognitive executive functions that help us organize, plan, achieve goals, and inhibit inappropriate behaviors (a pharmacological theory). Another way that alcohol can lead to aggression is through our social expectations regarding alcohol and aggression (an expectancy theory).

## Reducing Aggression

- *Catharsis:* According to **catharsis** theory, acting aggressively or viewing aggression purges angry feelings and aggressive impulses into harmless channels. Unfortunately, research does not support this approach. Instead, it is better to address the physiological and cognitive components of anger.
- *Punishment:* Punishment is most effective when it is: (a) intense, (b) prompt, (c) applied consistently and with certainty, (d) perceived as justified, and (e) possible to replace the undesirable punished behavior with a desirable alternative behavior. However, research has shown that punishment, even when done correctly, is not necessarily effective.
- *Successful Interventions:* First, successful interventions target as many causes of aggression as possible and attempt to tackle them collectively. Second, aggression problems are best treated in early development.

## Difficult Terms

Availability heuristic  
Catharsis  
Hostile attribution bias  
Hostile expectation bias  
Hostile perception bias  
Punishment  
Relational aggression  
The Dark Triad  
Violence  
Weapons effect

## Lecture Frameworks

Overview: This is likely to be an interesting, if not touchy, subject for students (some students may have had unpleasant experiences with aggression and violence). Your goal for this module is to explain aggression and violence from a psychologist's perspective—understanding exactly what the terms mean, what predicts aggression/violence, and how to cope with it. Along the way, provide students with interesting examples and research studies. The likelihood that students have strong opinions can make the class both interesting and challenging; there are usually students who disagree with the research findings (e.g., the media-violence relationship: "But I play video games and I've never killed anyone!"). Thus, you might want to anticipate and think about how to handle these (inevitable) pieces of anecdotal data.

- **Warmup Activity:** Get the students thinking about how they deal with aggression by starting with a "Dear Abby" dilemma (in which the writer wants to know how to deal with anger; see slides for exact scenario). You can do this as a class discussion or have them respond individually. At the end of the class, you can go back and revisit their answers (see below and the PowerPoint slides for further details and instructions).
- **Direct Instruction—Introduction:** As with most topics in psychology, the best way to begin the discussion is by clearly defining what aggression means (and how it differs from violence). As you know, psychologists tend to be more specific than laypeople in how we talk about concepts. As such, it's important that students understand exactly what we mean when we use the term "aggressive."
- **Activity—Aggression vs. Violence:** Time permitting, you can do a mini-writing activity that helps students differentiate between aggression and violence (see the detailed description

below).

- **Direct Instruction: Internal & External Factors**
  - Now that the students understand what it means to be aggressive, you can start talking about individual differences in aggression based on age, gender, personality, and hostile cognitive biases. You can start with a mini-activity, wherein you give the students a hypothetical scenario of a stranger purposely bumping into them in the street. Ask them how they would react and why (see the PowerPoint slides for more details). You can use this a platform to begin talking about hostile cognitive biases and how they influence our interpretation of interpersonal interactions.
  - Once you've introduced the internal factors, you can begin to talk about external factors, such as frustration with unpleasant events, weapons, violent media, and alcohol.
  - The information about external events presents a great opportunity for you to get creative; there is a plethora of examples of external events. For example, students typically find the connection between popular media (music, TV, video games, etc.) and aggression/violence to be quite interesting. You might talk about studies that reflect such findings (see the PowerPoint slides for more details).
- **Direct Instruction—Reducing Aggression:** To conclude the lecture portion of this class, you can transition away from talking about what predicts aggression to how to deal/cope with it. Here, you might begin by talking about mostly ineffective approaches (catharsis and punishment) and move to more effective approaches.
- **Activity—Creating an Intervention:** This can be done as a class discussion or as a small group activity (so each student has more input). Students are to design an intervention for middle school to address the problem of peer bullying. Have them brainstorm ideas/policies that might help middle schools prevent and deal with bullying. See below for a full description of the activity.
- **Wrap-Up Discussion:** Finally, you can end your class with an in-depth discussion about aggression and violence. Here are some potential discussion questions to get you started:
  1. What is the essential difference between aggression and violence?
  2. How might you deal with someone who has hostile cognitive biases?
  3. Why do you think there are gender differences in how aggression is expressed?
- **Classroom Assessment Technique (CAT)—One-Minute Paper**
  - The One-Minute Paper assesses whether and how students are gaining knowledge.

Here are some examples you can use:

- What was the most important thing you learned during this class?
- What important question remains unanswered?
- Collect their responses, and you'll quickly find out which concepts are giving your students the most trouble.

## Activities & Demonstrations

Activity—Dear Abby: This activity can be completed by students before they review the content in class. You can then use it to gauge where students are with the material, and as a talking point throughout the rest of the lecture (especially at the end, when you bring the lecture full circle).

- Time: 5-10 minutes
- Materials: Letter to Abby and response (provided)
- Directions:
  1. Read the following excerpt to the class, then have students answer the questions (via class discussion, Think à Pair à Share, or individual responses)
    - Dear Ann: I was shocked at your advice to the mother whose three-year-old had temper tantrums. You suggested that the child be taught to kick the furniture and “get the anger out of his system.” I always thought you were a little cuckoo. Now I’m sure. My younger brother used to kick the furniture when he got mad. Mother called it, “Letting off steam.” Well, he’s 32 years old now and still kicking the furniture—what’s left of it, that is. He is also kicking his wife, the cat, the kids, and anything else that gets in his way. Last October he threw the TV set out the window when his favorite team failed to score and lost the game. (The window was closed at the time.) Why don’t you tell mothers that children must be taught to control their anger? This is what separates civilized human beings from savages. — Dummy Star Witness
    - Dear Star: You, like some others who wrote to criticize, ignored the most important part

of my answer. I did not condone destroying furniture. I suggested that a punching bag or an old chair, specifically set aside for the purpose, be the object of the child's hostility. And p.s.—the most important part of my answer went like this: "Youngsters should be taught to vent their anger against things—not people."

2. Ask the following questions of your students:

- Who is right, Ann Landers or Dummy Star Witness?
- WHY?
- What approach would YOU take?

Activity—Mastering Psychology: Aggression vs. Violence: This mini-writing activity can be completed before, during, or after your class discussion. For this activity, students look at real-world examples of violence and aggression and learn to identify them.

- Time: 5-15 minutes, depending on how many examples and depth of explanation
- Materials: pen and paper for students; possibly a handout with examples (or can be posted online or in your PowerPoint presentation)
- Directions:
  1. Provide students with a list of examples (see below for ideas).
  2. For each example, have students state whether the example illustrates aggression, violence, or neither (can be done individually or in groups; can be assigned as homework or during class).
  3. After you have given them time to answer each question, go over the answers as a class.
- Potential examples:
  - Bart hits his sister Lisa after she refuses to share her toys.
  - Bob calls his friend Patrick a "stupid idiot."
  - A surgeon has to cut open a patient's chest to remove a cancerous tumor.
  - Elmer goes on a hunt. He shoots and kills a rabbit for dinner.
  - Jamila is playing with her sister Nadia. While they are jumping around and playing, Jamila accidentally gives her sister a concussion.



- When a new employee arrives and gets lots of attention, Woody becomes jealous and plans to sabotage his new colleague.
  - Harry hates his chemistry teacher. During class, he imagines ways to torture his professor, but knows he will never actually do any of the things he thinks about.
  - Jim plays pranks on his coworker, Dwight. Jim steals Dwight's belongings, mocks Dwight, and glues his desk drawers shut.
  - Robin breaks up with Ted, reassuring him that they can still be friends.
  - An individual engages in self-harm behavior (e.g., cutting).
  - Cady spreads mean rumors about Regina to the entire school.
  - Sometimes Ron isn't very nice to Leslie, but she doesn't really notice. She just laughs it off and assumes he is kidding.
  - When his computer stops working, Larry throws it out the window.
- An alternative to this activity would be to have students watch a video clip of a TV show and identify what aggressive/violent behaviors or class concepts they observe. If you want to do this in class, you could show a clip of a popular TV show. If you want to assign it as homework, you could let them rate a show they already watch and write up a small report about what they observe.

Activity—Psychology Applied: Creating an Intervention: This group activity is best completed after your class discussion. For this activity, students get together in small groups and brainstorm an intervention aimed at middle school bullies. They should directly apply the material from class.

- Time: 10-35 minutes, depending on the number of suggestions and the depth of explanations. A quick brainstorming session to apply the ideas should only take about 5-10 minutes. If you want in-depth and very specific recommendations for reducing bullying, 30 minutes is more appropriate.
- Materials: pen and paper for students
- Directions:
  1. Have the students break into small groups (3-4 people).
  2. Post the following question on the board: How can we reduce bullying (aggression and violence) in middle schools?
  3. Direct students to create an intervention aimed reducing bullying (at least 3-5 concrete

suggestions based on class material).

4. If you want more structure, you can point out some issues for their consideration, such as:
  - How will you PREVENT bullying?
  - If bullying occurs, how will you deal with it?
  - Does the type (e.g., physical, verbal, gossip) of aggression matter?
  - What about online bullying or bullying outside of school? How will that be handled?

## Additional Activities

Davidson, W. B. (1990). The dirty dozen: Classroom demonstration of twelve instigators of aggression. *Teaching of Psychology*, 17, 252-253. doi:10.1207/s15328023top1704\_13

- This activity is designed to help students understand the circumstances that precede aggression (e.g., insults, aggressive models, etc.). In this activity, the class watches movie/TV clips and observes and records the different instigators of aggression based on their observations. That is, they judge each scene/clip for the presence or absence of the 12 different indicators of aggression.

Rainey, D. W. (1986). A gender difference in acceptance of sport aggression: A classroom activity. *Teaching of psychology*, 13, 138-140. doi:10.1207/s15328023top1303\_9

- The goal of this activity is to illustrate gender differences in aggression and violence. In this case, sports are used as the domain of interest. Students are given six sports situations with varying levels of aggression and are asked to rate how acceptable those behaviors are. Results are tallied and differences in gender are highlighted. On average, males tend to find the aggressive sports behaviors more acceptable than females.

Dunn, D. S. (1992). Perspectives on human aggression: Writing to Einstein and Freud on "Why War?" *Teaching of Psychology*, 19, 112-114. doi:10.1207/s15328023top1902\_15

- This exercise has students thinking critically about aggression and violence through a letter writing exercise on the nature of human aggression. Students read the 1932 "Why War?"

correspondence between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. They then compose letters responding to the correspondence based on what they learned in class. The article also presents variations of this assignment.

## Discussion Points

- Using what you know about violence and aggression, how can school systems prevent and deal with bullying?
  - The purpose of this discussion question is to get students to apply the information they have learned. You want them to be able to not only remember the factual information presented in class, but also to think critically about how this information is applied. Further, it reinforces the importance of using scientific findings to positively impact their environment (as opposed to relying on their gut feelings regarding bullying).
- Why do you think gender differences in aggression exist?
  - This should make for an interesting discussion! The goal of this discussion question is to not only reiterate points made in the chapter, but also to give students the opportunity to make connections across modules/units. In a best-case scenario, students can bring up information from a previous discussion about nature/nurture in the course.
- Are there any times where aggression or violence is necessary (e.g., war)?
  - This, of course, is going to be a value-laden discussion question. One of the goals of asking a question like this is to have students support their opinion based on psychological research and theory.
- The chapter from the Noba textbook provides evidence that, on the whole, violence is on the decline. Why do you think this is? Further, if violence is on the decline, why are there so many news stories about it? What is it about aggression and violence that captivates people?
  - This question has so much potential for an interesting discussion! One goal would be to have students make connections to other areas of class (e.g., the spread of negative vs. positive emotions, confirmation bias, anecdotal vs. science-based data, etc.).

## Outside Resources

**Book:** Bushman, B. J., & Huesmann, L. R. (2010). Aggression. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (5th ed.) (pp. 833-863). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

**TED Talk:** Zak Ebrahim

[https://www.ted.com/talks/zak\\_ebrahim\\_i\\_am\\_the\\_son\\_of\\_a\\_terrorist\\_here\\_s\\_how\\_i\\_chose\\_peace?language=en#t-528075](https://www.ted.com/talks/zak_ebrahim_i_am_the_son_of_a_terrorist_here_s_how_i_chose_peace?language=en#t-528075)

## Evidence-Based Teaching

O'Halloran, M. S., & O'Halloran, T. (2001). Secondary traumatic stress in the classroom: Ameliorating stress in graduate students. *Teaching of Psychology*, 28, 92-97. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top2802\\_03](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top2802_03)

- This article discusses the importance of anticipating and addressing the emotional difficulties students experience in graduate-level courses on trauma and violence. Though you are teaching an undergraduate course, the discussion of violence and aggression may be upsetting to some students. This article draws on a variety of sources to suggest self-care strategies that students can use outside of the classroom. The article also addresses the importance of self-care for instructors.

Deffenbacher, J. L., & Deffenbacher, D. M. (2003). Where is the anger in introductory and abnormal psychology texts? *Teaching of Psychology*, 30, 65-67.

- The authors explore coverage of anger in introductory and abnormal psychology texts. Overall, the topic of anger receives little absolute or relative attention in introductory and abnormal psychology texts. Given the relationships between anger, aggression, and violence, the authors outline ways instructors can include the topic of anger in both courses.

Vandendorpe, M. (1987). *Television as teacher: Studying the media's message*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- This activity lends itself to discussions of several social psychological topics, including stereotypes, modeling, gender roles, and aggression. A videotaped segment for practicing observational techniques is highly desirable, no prior knowledge of psychology is necessary, and it is appropriate for classes of any size.

## **Links to ToPIX Materials**

### **Activities, Demonstrations, or Handouts**

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19981041/Social%20in%20the%20Classroom>

### **Current Events/News**

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/23142325/Social%20in%20the%20News>

### **Video/Audio**

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19981040/Social%20Video>

## **Teaching Topics**

Teaching The Most Important Course

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/1\\_Teaching\\_The\\_Most\\_Important\\_Course.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/1_Teaching_The_Most_Important_Course.pdf)

Content Coverage

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/2\\_Content\\_Coverage.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/2_Content_Coverage.pdf)

Motivating Students

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/3\\_Motivating\\_Students\\_Tips.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/3_Motivating_Students_Tips.pdf)

Engaging Large Classes

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/4\\_Engaging\\_Large\\_Classes.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/4_Engaging_Large_Classes.pdf)

Assessment Learning

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/5\\_Assessment\\_Learning.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/5_Assessment_Learning.pdf)

Teaching Biological Psychology

[http://nobaproject.com/documents/6\\_Teaching\\_Bio\\_Psych.pdf](http://nobaproject.com/documents/6_Teaching_Bio_Psych.pdf)

## **PowerPoint Presentation**

This module has an associated PowerPoint presentation. Download it at [http://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement\\_editions/000/000/173/Aggression%20and%20Violence.ppt?1447278320](http://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement_editions/000/000/173/Aggression%20and%20Violence.ppt?1447278320).

## About Noba

The Diener Education Fund (DEF) is a non-profit organization founded with the mission of re-inventing higher education to serve the changing needs of students and professors. The initial focus of the DEF is on making information, especially of the type found in textbooks, widely available to people of all backgrounds. This mission is embodied in the Noba project.

Noba is an open and free online platform that provides high-quality, flexibly structured textbooks and educational materials. The goals of Noba are three-fold:

- To reduce financial burden on students by providing access to free educational content
- To provide instructors with a platform to customize educational content to better suit their curriculum
- To present material written by a collection of experts and authorities in the field

The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award- winning university teachers.

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