

PATTERNS OF AGGRESSION IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

by
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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Psychology
and the Graduate School of the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

July 1975



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The M.A. degree which I am about to receive has not been my accomplishment alone. The diploma should carry the names of all those persons who made it possible, but since it cannot, I wish to publically acknowledge my continuing appreciation and gratitude:

To Victor and Claire Pearce for their constant support and encouragement, and for their willingness to postpone their own plans for my education.

To Seymour Opoichinsky, who taught me through apprenticeship, but made me feel like a colleague.

To John Naaykens, Heather Smart, and Peter and Vango Smith, for generous and essential measures of friendship and wisdom.

To the teachers and children of Children's House, Winnipeg, who graciously allowed me to intrude upon their lives.

To the members of my thesis committee, Stuart Johnson, Fred Marcuse, and Shirin Schludermann, who counseled, questioned, and made the final ritual a pleasant experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Aggression has always been an important concern of mankind. The pervasive question of why human beings are aggressive is reflected in contemporary concern with criminal and delinquent behavior, classroom behavioral management, and aggressive behavior in defense of self and national interest.

The involvement of psychologists interested in problems of aggression has focused on the assessment of conditions leading to the instigation, learning and performance of aggressive behavior. This search for the roots of aggression has naturally led to the study of the development of aggression in childhood. Much of the psychological theory and research in this area has focused on the interpersonal and social factors affecting the child's tendency to behave aggressively.

Scientists have yet to agree on a cause or a set of causes for human aggression. Observation of animals in their natural habitats has led some ethologists to postulate that aggressive behavior has an innate, biological basis (Ardrey, 1966; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1961; Lorenz, 1966). But aggression is also a social act; consequently it is subject to the influence of different experiences and culture (Feshbach, 1971). Learning theories have always provided some of the most popular explanations for aggression. Society's emphasis upon early education and training is additional evidence that people have long believed that many behaviors are acquired through particular experience with the environment. Exper-

iences such as frustration, the modeling of aggressive figures in the environment and the reinforcement contingencies surrounding aggressive action have all been postulated as significant factors which contribute to the maintenance of aggressive behavior (Cohen, 1971). Individuals who are subjected to particular patterns of these experiences supposedly differ in their aggressive behavior. A descriptive category such as socio-economic status is useful in that it leads the researcher to investigate the common experiences which people occupying such a category share. For instance, it has been reported in the literature that lower-class children are subjected to more rejection and physical punishment from their parents than middle-class children (Maccoby & Gibbs, 1954; McCord, McCord, & Howard, 1961).

It is a common assumption that children from low-income neighbourhoods behave more aggressively than children from middle and upper economic neighbourhoods. A basic question concerns the etiological causes of a social-class difference in the aggressive behavior of children. An even more basic question is whether such a difference actually exists. This latter problem has not received nearly as much attention as the former and much of the research that has been directed toward it contains many methodological limitations. Measures of aggression taken by experimenters who knew the social class of the children and the use of a broad and general definition of aggression are some of these shortcomings (Goldstein, 1955; McKee & Leader, 1955). The research study to be proposed here is essentially concerned with determining

whether children from a low-income group behave more aggressively than a middle-class group of children.

Before the extant literature on this specific question is reviewed, some of the factors which have been hypothesized as contributing to aggressive behavior will be discussed, with particular attention to their relevance to theoretical social-class differences in aggressive behavior. The first factor is the popular frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). According to this hypothesis, aggression is the inevitable, or dominant response to the frustration of an ongoing response sequence. Subsequent research has diminished the credibility of the original hypothesis. Barker, Dembo, and Lewin (1941) found that frustration, defined in terms of the blocking of attractive goals, led to a variety of behaviors including regression, withdrawal, and apathy - aggression was not the only consequence of frustration. A study by Fawl (1963) demonstrated that even though preschool children encountered many situations that seemed to be frustrating to an observer, most of these were "neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for producing states of disturbance in the child" (Fawl, 1963, p. 100). Some researchers have used the original paradigm proposed by Dollard and his associates as an explanation for the supposed difference in the frequency of aggressive behaviors of lower-class and middle-class children. Goldstein (1955) proposed that in low socio-economic areas it is likely that many of a child's needs will be thwarted, thus leading to frustration. This continual experience of frus-