

Trends in Violence and Aggression A Cross-Cultural Analysis*

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1. Introduction

AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE, always a popular topic for behavioral research, have become the object of increasing interest in recent years. This increased interest is undoubtedly related to a widespread feeling in many countries that the threat to life and safety have reached unprecedented proportions. Every day we are presented with news about brutal murders and rapes, violence in sporting events (e.g. football hooliganism), family violence (battered wives, battered children), violence against the elderly, gang warfare, school vandalism, politically motivated killing and kidnapping, killings in the course of robberies, etc.

Our subjective feelings and impressions give rise to several questions:

1. Are the above impressions based merely on the disproportionate and exaggerated presentation of "violent news" by the media, or do they reflect a real increase in crimes of violence in recent years?
2. Is the above assumed increase common to all societies or are there cross-cultural variations in this respect?
3. What are the possible explanations of changes in the prevalence of violence and aggression in the various societies? In other words, can they be seen within a wider social context, and can they be related to other changes in society?

In the following pages an attempt will be made to answer the questions posed above.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a previous work (Landau and Beit-Hallahmi, 1983) which analyzed aggression in Israel from a psycho-historical perspective.

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The general starting point of our proposed model is the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939), which was extended in our above work from the level of the individual to the level of populations. Such an extension was originally proposed in the early work of Hovland and Sears (1940), who showed that social "instigators" such as economic conditions are correlated with aggression in populations. In the fifties, Henry and Short (1954), based their analysis of homicide and suicide in populations on the frustration-aggression hypothesis. More recently, studies dealing with race riots (Liebersohn and Silverman, 1965; Ransford, 1968) were also analyzed within this theoretical framework (Megargee and Hokanson, 1970, pp. 144-146). In another study (Feierabend and Feierabend, 1966), this theory was extended to the cross-national analysis of national political stability.

Following the above-mentioned (as well as other) works we propose a model on the social level, which contains three elements:

1. *Social Stressors*: We use the terminology of stress (instead of frustration), originally coined by Selye (1956) in medical research, as it seems more appropriate for the social level of analysis. Stress has been related to aggressive behavior by Halleck (1967), who argues that aggression may be considered as an adaptive response to stress, which in turn may arise from a variety of sources (both external and internal to the individual). The effect of social stress factors, over time, on various aspects of social pathology on the macro level was demonstrated in the studies of Brenner (1977, 1979).

In these studies, conducted in the United States, Brenner found that social stressors such as unemployment, inflation and per capita income, have a substantial bearing on physical health, mental health and criminal aggression. Amongst other things, he found that unemployment and inflation were both significantly associated with increased homicide and suicide mortality (Brenner, 1977). Dooley and Catalano (1980), analyzing the relationship between economic change and behavioral disorder, present a number of studies which show an "overarching relationship between economic change and mental disorder" (p. 453). Huppel (1976), focussing on a single social stressor, inflation, found in both the Netherlands and the U.S.A. high correlations between inflation and several "anomie indicators": aggressive (violent) crime, property crime, suicide, homicide and divorce. In a more recent crosscultural study, Messner (1980) reports a positive relationship between income inequality and murder rates.

In our previous study, (Landau and Beit Hallahmi, 1983), wars, inflation rates, gap between the rich and the poor and unemployment rates, were amongst the social stressors analyzed.

2. *Measures of violence and aggression*: Here, besides the conventional measures provided by criminal statistics, i.e., homicide, rape, robbery rates, etc., we included also data on police brutality, suicide rates, rates of legal acquisition of firearms, as well as data on strikes and work stoppages.

3. *Measures of social support*: Social support systems are an essential part of our model as they are conceived of as mediators between the social stressors