Theories of Aggression
Dennen, J.M.G. van der

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Scott’s polysystemic theory

Scott (1975) proposed a polysystemic theory of agonistic behavior to replace his older multifactorial approach (Scott, 1958). The polysystemic theory assumes that the entities composing any system or subsystem do not act independently of each other, and, furthermore, that systems and subsystems are organized into larger and larger inclusive systems with reciprocal causal connections between the different levels as well as between entities within levels.

Empirically, there appears to be an inverse hierarchy of stability among the systems, i.e. genotypic systems extremely difficult to disaggregate without destroying the system; physiological systems are the next most stable, and so on.

Scott’s principal thesis is that maladaptive agonistic behavior, particularly that resulting in destructive violence, can be attributed to the disaggregation of a system or systems on some level of organization.

So Scott sees aggression and violence as symptoms of systemic breakdown, disruption, or pathology.

Due to the inverse hierarchy of stability, the potential behavioral consequences of social or ecological disaggregation are much greater than those on the genetic and physiological levels. We must conclude that these are the most important levels where disaggregation can produce destructive violence.

Disaggregation on the level of an individual organism stands in an intermediate position on this scale. How much of this is independent of disaggregation factors on higher or lower levels is an empirical matter, but the amount of violence that results from disorganized personalities cannot be dismissed as inconsiderable.

The importance of organizational desintegration at the social level suggest that disturbances or disaggregation of social systems may have their counterpart on other levels of organization. Certainly such accidents as brain tumors and lesions have disorganizing effects upon the physiological systems of the body, and mutations and chromosomal aberrations can disturb genetic systems to the point where some individuals become more prone to violence than others.

In short, the general principle that destructive violence is the result of system disorganization at one or more levels of organization is generally upheld, and begins to make some sense out of the confusing facts of multiple causation (Scott, 1973).

The Deutsch & Senghaas (1971) typology

Deutsch & Senghaas (1971) have proposed a conceptual framework which covers the dimensions of individual and collective conflict behavior. They contend that, as the individual ego finds itself dependent upon and confronted with the ‘Id’ (the human drives), the ‘Super-Ego’ (his conscience), and outside reality, and can develop widely different cognitive and affective, rational and emotional responses ranging from acceptance to rejection, overt conflict or autistic inversion and seclusion, so the political community is faced with analogous communication and control agents (the outside reality = the global system; the ‘super-ego = ethical values and traditions; the ego itself = the political system of the
community; the ‘id’ = the interest and pressure groups) with which to interact. It must formulate its behavioral responses, such as international war, imperialistic domination and exploitation, hostility and suspicion, cooperation of integration, domestic unrest, social change, civil war, etc. More systematically, the ego or the community must be strong to meet the expectations and needs of the various forces impinging on its behavioral situation. If it fails – and failure is just as frequent and serious for the collective as for the individual, possibly even more so – certain defense mechanisms are used, among them suppression, projection (transfer of the own drive and desire upon another actor) denial, autism, etc. Without psychologizing unduly, Deutsch & Senghaas trace these defence mechanisms in the world of states.

On the basis of these psychological behavior characteristics, combined with the distinctions between energy-related and information-oriented processes and between autonomous and dependent systems, drawn from modern information and communication theory, the two authors propose a typology of approaches that are valid for individual and collective behavior. They list:

1. Elimination or destruction;
2. Exploitation and compellence;
3. Information acquisition;
4. Assistance to autonomy;
5. Demand for response; and
6. Information imposition.

While the first two types of behavior are self-explanatory and more than adequately represented in the accounts of international and internal politics, the remaining four are equally important. To seek information, knowledge, and expertise from another actor (information acquisition), to try to impose the own ideas and convictions on others (information imposition), and to demand recognition of the own status and importance from fellow actors and uninvolved spectators (demand for response) constitute real impairments of interactor harmony and may become the origin of deep hostility and even overt conflict. Assistance to autonomy, as exemplified in the ideal of unselfish development assistance, is a rare commodity in international behavior, but nobody would deny its crucial relevance for the present and future world peace (Dedring, 1976).

Against the dominant assumption that strategic interaction in the threat system follows the action-reaction scheme, Senghaas (1972) has posited, on theoretical grounds as well as in recognition of a number of empirical observations, that governments and political elites base their armaments and deterrence policies to a large degree on autonomous inner-directed motives and goals that derive from and focus upon domestic groups and needs rather than the moves of the external opponents. This hypothesis is not too different from the viewpoint of the critics of the ‘military-industrial complex’. Moreover, it is related to the Marxist principle that behavior of states and societies is foremost the consequence of the respective social systems and of the processes of societal interaction (Dedring, 1976).

What sets Senghaas’ analysis apart from this approach is his attempt to introduce psychological theorems, in particular the notion of ‘autism’, into the analysis of arms race and deterrence problems. Autism may be defined as ‘absorption in need-satisfying or
wish-fulfilling fantasy as a mechanism of escape from reality’. This refers primarily to a pathological condition in individual psychology (Bleuler, 1927). But Senghaas shows that a few social psychologists have employed the concept in the social context of communication and interaction among groups or individuals. Newcomb (1947) and Lindemann (1966) were interested in the development of hostile attitudes of groups or individuals against others who are seen as actual or potential opponents. What is remarkable is that both these scholars posited that if the actors perceive the outside in an autistic manner, the hostility level will remain the same or increase, since the lack of communications will exacerbate the self-oriented quality of the perceptual process; and as Lindemann suggested, aside from a distorted view of the real world, the actors will begin to see the others as scapegoats who are held responsible for all the evils in their conflicting relationship. Three features emerge as significant elements of the pathology of social autism: a highly unreal map of the outside world; a severely disturbed communication pattern; finally the strong concomitant inclination to blame the outside world in general and specific opponents in particular for all shortcomings and dangers.

It is of crucial importance whether and to what extent Senghaas is able to demonstrate the effective presence of these autistic symptoms in the social and political systems of the units in threat or deterrence relationships. In a thorough analysis of deterrence and arms problems of the world after World War II, he has tried, with the help of Deutsch’s (1966) model of the self-closure of political systems and of pathological, i.e. dysfunctional, learning, to find evidence for his autism model of the politics of deterrence. The case that he makes for his model and the facts and interpretations that he submits are strong. Focusing on the two superpowers since 1945, he sees the following three factors at work. First, they have maintained minimal real exchange relations, e.g., in trade, tourism, etc., and have consistently barred the exchange of ‘strategically important’ goods. Second, the elites have transmitted and received a limited amount of threats which have been communicated to the respective populations. Together with these threats, information is exchanged that causes the increasing similarity of the antagonists in the military-technological competition, as well as in their economic rivalry, and in their behavior toward other actors in the international system. Third, the decisive component of deterrence relations are the quantitatively and qualitatively predominant inner-directed processes and, as a consequence of the deterrence policy, an autistic milieu develops in which this policy keeps reproducing itself. Senghaas proposes that this situation within the closed self-encapsulated systems of the adversaries makes for the fictitious imagery of the projected, yet unreal, external relations with the enemy, the appearance of which is taken for the reality. The reality, however, remains unknown either because the elites withhold it from the public or because they fail to perceive it amidst the noise that they make as they propagate their image of the enemy and of the outside world. Linking this conception of the interaction and communication patterns between and within the deterrence societies to the arms and strategic development since the Cold War, Senghaas points to the crisis-ridden history of the bilateral relationship, and to the steadily increasing capacity for mutual destruction through more and more sophisticated expensive nuclear weapons, over which neither the military nor the scientists nor the policy-makers exercise effective reliable control. In Senghaas’ judgment the introduction of the ABM and the MIRV systems, and the related provisions in SALT I, the current strategic debate about further improvements in the accuracy of the missiles and missile heads and the protection system for the missile sites, are the most recent examples of the lethal folly of nuclear politics and of the ‘logic’ of deterrence (Dedring, 1975).
There is general consensus that aggression implies ‘approach behavior’ (Annäherungsverhalten), as the original Latin word ‘agredere’, and later ‘aggredere’ – advancing against – denotes.

Today many authors, especially in the USA, label virtually every vehement approach as ‘aggressive’, and the corresponding attitude is often positively valued in many social roles. Also many psychologists, including Freud, have emphasized the positive aspect of such aggressive behavior and the allegedly underlying attitudes and drives. Only in certain contexts or beyond a certain level of intensity aggression is labeled as bad, or is aggressiveness negatively valued. Just like a weed is only a plant on the wrong spot, aggression, in this conception, is viewed as bad only when performed in the wrong context. Such a conception sounds attractive, but it is difficult to apply in research because it is not sufficiently differentiated.

What context is really the wrong one for aggressive behavior? Are there essential subcategories of approach behavior, the consequences of which may be destructive or self-destructive in a great many contexts, while other subcategories of approach behavior seldom or never have such damaging properties? And is there a kind of approach behavior without a single element of aggressiveness? According to Freud there is indeed none.

**Self-consistency theory of aggression**

The self-consistency theory, which involves the inner core of the way in which a person perceives himself or what he really understands himself to be, holds that people will go to any extent to maintain their self-concept including violence. It identifies concepts like self-esteem and (moral) indignation as crucial factors in human aggression.

In 1970 Kardiner pointed out that intimacy can be perceived by some people as a threat. Intimacy can threaten the self-concept in stimulating a fear of later rejection or provoking a fear of being possessed. It can thus become a source of aggression. He also emphasized that for some people violent body contact can be preferable to no contact at all.

**The ‘need for stimulation’ hypothesis of aggression**

Reykowski (1979) has proposed that in humans one major source of the intrinsic motivation of aggressive behavior is the need for stimulation. The intrinsic satisfaction that some individuals find in acts of aggression and destruction is seen to be a consequence of the heightened stimulation associated with such acts.

Reykowski’s model of aggression is consistent with one of the major explanations of psychopathic behavior. The ‘need for stimulation’ hypothesis has had considerable heuristic value in the study of psychopaths (Hare, 1970), many of whom have been engaged in antisocial aggressive acts (Feshbach, 1979).

Having cited the psychophysiological and genetic evidence, Reykowski (1979) states that it is obvious that aggressive behavior can be a source of strong stimulation. “This stimulation is generated by one’s own actions (when aggression consists of a physical attack) and by the facts that aggression carries danger with it, that it very often brings about a violation of norms, and that the effect of an aggressive behavior sometimes manifests itself in a sudden change in the physical state of an object (a shattering or breaking). To this one should add the expression of pain and fear, the sight of blood and wounds, and so on. It seems that even imagined acts of aggression and their imagined effects, such as physical and mental sufferings of a victim, can have a strong stimulating value. People who are stimulation-hungry are likely
to regard aggression favorably. When one takes this possibility into account, an alternative, 
integrating interpretation of a good deal of existing data becomes possible. For instance, the 
statement made by Schachter & Latane (1964) that habitual criminals (sociopaths) show a 
very low level of anxiety could be interpreted as a consequence of a great demand for 
stimulation in this category of persons (See data concerning a negative correlation between 
the level of psychological reactivity and the level of anxiety: Strelau, 1975). One can interpret 
similarly the results of Hutchings (1973) who, studying criminality of adopted children and 
their adoptive and biological parents in Denmark, concluded that ‘Hereditary effect is in the 
direction of being more important than the environmental’. If hereditary factors determine in 
some measure the level of psychological reactivity, then it is quite possible that a very low 
level of this reactivity (strong demand for stimulation) in fathers and sons is propitious to the 
learning of antisocial behaviors (as particularly gratifying). Thus, the analysis presented 
above suggests that aggressive behaviors can be a learned technique to compensate for a 
stimulation deficiency. Such a deficiency may be an incidental phenomenon. For instance, the 
provocative factors may at times heighten the adaptation level, and this may facilitate 
aggressive actions. It is highly probable that such a role can be played by frustration and 
stress. A similar influence can be exerted by factors that create sexual arousal (Bandura, 
1971) and by participating in a competition, both for those who lose and for those who win 
(Bandura, 1971).
Furthermore “Aggressive behaviors may prove to be a good means of gaining a confirmation 
or an increase of control. This is an experience known to babies who find that their temper 
tantrums can be an effective means of controlling their parents. Aggression can prove to be a 
particularly easy way of coping with problems of control because an aggressive activity, 
should it prove to be effective, supplies quick and clear signals confirming one’s power and 
competence. The simplest act of destruction is a confirmation of one’s strength and prowess. 
The ability to vanquish an adversary, to humiliate that person, to make the opponent do things 
the aggressor wants done and that are obviously against the will of the loser constitute direct 
and unquestionable information confirming one’s control. Aggressive behaviors are also a 
convenient means of protecting, strengthening, and enhancing self-esteem. In view of the fact 
that the evaluation of one’s worth depends on the comparison between one’s own position 
and the positions occupied by other people, one’s self-esteem may increase either when one’s 
own position is heightened or when the position of others is lowered. The achievement of the 
latter objective is served very well by aggressive behavior. Even symbolic aggression, 
consisting in the utterance of contemptuous opinions to a person who has gained some 
success, may diminish a distress caused by the relative lowering of one’s own status. Still 
more satisfaction could be derived from actions that cause the lucky adversary actually to be 
degraded. Manifestations of humiliation and pain are signals confirming one’s own 
supremacy that can also strengthen one’s feelings of worth (Feshbach, 1964; who also points 
out that in many, if not most, cultures appropriate revenge is necessary for maintaining one’s 
self-esteem).
The ease with which aggression can be used to solve the problems of control and self-esteem, 
and the direct effects it produces, may facilitate its learning in the early stages of the 
formation of the self-structure. This fact can explain some of the manifestations of 
unprovoked aggressiveness among children. But there are other means of solving problems 
connected with the sphere of ‘self’. In what kinds of situations does an individual prefer 
aggressive solutions? It seems that there are circumstances that favor the consolidation of 
aggressive coping techniques.
First of all, one should expect an important part to be played by the magnitude of the demand 
for confirmatory information (with respect to control or self-esteem) This magnitude will be a 
function of the level of uncertainty of one’s own power and competence, and of self-esteem.
This uncertainty may have its source in either unfavorable circumstances during socialization – the degree of one’s certainty about one’s own worth seems to depend in a large measure on the way in which one was valued by parents (Rogers, 1959) – or in various physical or psychological defects of the subject. Likewise, a low social position, being at a disadvantage, and belonging to a group of uncertain status are factors conducive to a feeling of uncertainty with respect to self-esteem (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1950; Greenblum & Pearlin, 1953). Uncertainty concerning one’s control of events and anxiety connected with this uncertainty may pertain to a small or large scope of phenomena. It may apply to some particular area. In such a case the acts directed at confirming control will be focused on that particular area; for instance, one could try to overcome a fear of pain by inflicting pain on oneself or on others; the fear of wounds and blood, by inflicting wounds or observation of mutilated people; the fear of death, by causing death. I should add, however, that the examples mentioned above are manifestations of very primitive, magic forms of gaining control, based on a simple reversal of fear-generating situations (I am afraid, and therefore, contrary to what I feel, I act as if I am not afraid).

In the second place, the choice of aggressive reactions as a technique of coping with the problems of control and self-esteem depends also on resources that are available to the subject, such as physical strength, the subject’s social position, and social and intellectual competence. In addition, the subject has to have an occasion for learning aggressive forms of behavior. If no such possibility is available, aggressive intentions may stop at the symbolic level and remain in the sphere of fantasy.

In the third place, the choice of aggressive reactions will be more probable if the individual has no possibility of mastering other techniques of coping with the problems of self-esteem and of control – for instance, the individual never came into contact with nonaggressive models or never learned the ego shields necessary for delaying gratification (Barron, 1953). This pattern is illustrated by the results of studies by Toch (1969) of people who readily resort to violence (criminals as well as policemen): “High sensitivity to embarrassing treatment is usually combined with deficient skill for resolving disputes and restoring self-esteem by verbal means” (Bandura, 1971).

All three kinds of factors mentioned above may be observed in children who bully their peers. Olweus (1973), in his studies of bullying behavior, found that the following were true of a typical bully:

1. He had a negative attitude toward his father and felt less liked by his parents than other children. Considering the role that acceptance by parents has on the child’s self-esteem, such a feeling strongly suggests that the bully has a problem in this area.

2. He was physically stronger than other boys (thus, gaining supremacy over them was very easy). It is worth adding that the victims were recruited, as a rule, among boys who were weaker than others.

3. His school achievements were average or lower than average; therefore, the possibilities of raising his self-esteem through success in school were limited.

The analysis presented above indicates that under certain conditions aggression may become a convenient means of solving personal problems involving one’s ego (In the present considerations I concentrated on the problems of control and self-esteem, but aggressive behavior is also possible for confirming one’s identity, if the self-image comprises convictions concerning aggressive behavior (for instance, as part of a masculine role). Attention to this aspect of aggressive motivation is drawn in the analysis presented by
Feshbach (1973). Frequent and effective performance of this role can lead to the behavior’s becoming an important factor in the individual’s psychological balance. Aggression may occur as a permanent means of solving these problems, or it can appear from time to time, whenever anxiety concerning self-esteem or control is aroused – or whenever ‘suitable objects’ emerge – that is, persons who can be attacked with impunity. Thus, when we ask why aggression arouses so much interest among human beings and why they are so fascinated by violence and brute force, we should not forget that we deal here with a form of behavior that is strongly linked to very important problems of the individual: the means of maintaining an optimal ‘stimulation’ (of the same importance to the ‘mental apparatus’ as optimal temperature is to the organism) and maintaining balance in the self-structure, which is the central mechanism for the integration of human actions” (Reykowski, 1979).

**Horn’s (1973) political psychology approach**

Measured against the potential at the disposal of the field of psychology, the discussion of aggressiveness and violence, this ‘nervus rerum’ of psychological peace research has enjoyed few relevant contributions from this area (Horn, 1973). Nomothetic psychology still in part supports the thesis that the alternatives innate or acquired cannot be transcended, and that one has to take a decision for one of the existing theories (e.g. Jakobi, Selg & Belschner, 1971). In view of the already popular alternative consequences of the theoretical assumptions – phylogenetically inherited aggression could only be manipulated or channeled, whereas if aggressive behavior is learned, it had to be influenced to take a peaceful direction – this controversy is not without political relevance. The frequent imputation that the champions of an instinct of aggression are reactionaries, while the theorists of learning are progressive, places the latter ones methodologically on a plane with other monocausalists, who swear by societal factors alone – e.g. those for whom a theory of imperialism suffices and who regard the psychological approach as a repression of the hypothesis of class struggle (e.g. Hollitscher, 1970), seeing in it the danger of an excessively anthropological interpretation.

Explicit or implicit criticism of this sterile etiological ‘either/or’ approach has been advanced from various corners. Criticism of monocausal thinking which distorts perspectives and is hopelessly particularistic – regarding questions of political psychology – is formulated above all, on a different methodological basis in the sense of a materialistic theory of the subject grounded in psychoanalytic interaction theory; the attempt potentially to comprehend aggressive behavior in all etiological and functional aspects of human self-realization can only be made given this foundation (Horn 1973).

What becomes clear is that, through this approach, not only monocausalism but with it the compulsion to take ‘either/or’ decisions are systematically overcome. Contrary to Freud’s own methodological assertion about the need to reduce psychology to neurology – an assertion which in general has often been misunderstood – in psychoanalysis talk has always been of the ‘vicissitudes of instincts evolving through a life-history’ rather than just of instincts. (c.f. Horn, 1972; Mitscherlich 1969; Mitscherlich’s occasional insistence upon naturalism becomes intelligible in the light of the polemic against the delusion of vulgar Marxism that man is good.) Since linguistic theory has entered into the psychoanalytic debate (Lorenzer, 1970) we have broken away from the pattern of formulating psychic deformations solely in terms of instinct theory and can now formulate the integral relation between emotional and cognitive disturbances. Yet another important step must still be taken. The concept of instinctual drive,
initially conceived only in terms of specific life-histories, must be expanded etiologically as well as functionally to include the concept of the vicissitudes of instincts at the societal level (Horn, 1973)
The types of psychic disturbances cannot be understood exclusively as products of tensions within the family, nor can the forms of externalization of these disturbances, i.e. conflicts and deficiencies, be determined by political psychology without reference to their respective topical interaction with the outlets which society offers for their externalization.
This trend in psychoanalysis towards interactional social psychology, which surpasses even Freud’s concept of sociology as applied psychoanalysis, brings with it a number of advantages. It leads us away not only from the practice of reducing everything to instinct (which already rendered it impossible for ethology to explain the vast range of aggressive phenomena), but also from the pattern of reducing everything to life-histories. This pattern, falsely generalizing the specific character of the psychoanalytic treatment situation, implies that the argumentation in theoretical social psychology must also reduce all human manifestations in everyday situations to merely the externalization of constellations of inner conflict. But proceeding from a social psychological viewpoint, one must assume that constellations of inner conflict may manifest themselves only in modes of expression dictated by society, or at least refer to them (Horn 1973).
The fact that man is a natural being, stressed by ethology and psychoanalysis in the debate with sociologistic role theorists, is integrated in social psychological theorizing as something entered into a second inner nature by way of socialization, which finds expression in resistance against its functionalization.
The previous mentioned trend in psychoanalytic theorizing, which conceives of psychoanalysis expressly as a social science, overcomes both abstract naturalism and abstract overemphasis of sociological aspects of the debate of aggressive behavior and with them the compulsion to take ‘either/or’ decisions.
By overcoming exaggerated biological, psychological, and unhistorical anthropological aspects, psychology becomes an integral component of the social sciences: ‘the non-subjectivist theory of the subject’.
The conscious mediatory capacity of the ego (ego-strength) and the scope and shape of its defenses (ego-weakness) – and behavior apostrophized as aggressive fits into both categories, too – will then not be hypostatized as individual capacity. Rather, it becomes determinable as a function of a given constellation of societal forces within which, on the basis of their individual nature (strata-specifically etc.), readiness to think and to act comes into being. Presumably, one may assume that the interactionalist expansion of psychoanalysis towards a critical theory leads to the abolition of the important substantial intentions of the frustration-aggression hypothesis which meanwhile, as Berkowitz (1969) points out, can no longer be maintained in its operationalistic form (Horn, 1973). Materialistic hermeneutics can contribute to the definition of collective acts of violence and their development in terms of consequences of collective life-processes leading to individual deformations of language and behavior, which can be used to influence society as a whole. Yet this interplay varies in the course of history.
While psychoanalytical literature has given a form of projected aggression central importance for the genesis of German Fascism in particular – an aggression stemming from the conflicts of a late, the Oedipal biogenetic phase of development – today another genesis of aggressive behavior acquires social relevance which, seen ontogenetically, is of earlier origin: narcissistic aggression, by means of which the ego seeks to fend off further restrictions and functionalization in a technocratically organized society (Horn, 1973).