

Mental Aggression

Jennifer D. Stoll

University of Liverpool

May 3, 2015

Introduction

Aggression is a phenomenon perceived *as pain*. Violence thus becomes an expression of behavior that is targeted at producing emotions in other people. These emotions subsequently are aimed at changing other people's behavior to submit to the aggressor's will, even though the aggressor's threat is no longer immediately present. This kind of conditioning is sometimes referred to as *bad conscience*.

Nonphysical Parenting

Parents, in modern ages, may decide for themselves never to beat their children, that is, not to inflict physical pain in their offspring. By that decision, their own dissonance with regard to violence is satisfied: they never revert to physically violent behavior, and thus exculpate themselves from violence. Their omnidirectional fear of not satisfying their needs to educate their children, which they experience as an ought discrepancy, may thus be relieved (Higgins, 1987). At the same time, they exhibit other aggressive behavioral tendencies towards their children that may be considered just as violent by inflicting mental states upon their children that are experienced painfully. However, there is hardly any legal sanctioning. As a response to a child's "B" upon a test score they may reply, "Didn't you put in enough effort, again?" ever aiming for

better results of their child prodigy. The problematic side of this kind of aggressive behavior is that it is never forgiven. Where physically aggressive behavior is over with after the direct contention (as punishment relieves from guilt), non-physical aggression endlessly stacks up, never relieving any guilt. Even years after, parents may verbally express, “*Every time I ask you once, you never ...*”

Discussion

A phrase as contradictory as this, from the child’s perspective, is multidirectional and thus inadequate to guide behavior. However, it may be considered as an act of non-directional psychological aggression. It is important to investigate what is experienced *as pain*, in contrary to what is medically defined to *be pain*. It has been shown that failure and bullying stimulate the same brain circuits as pain does (people would not bully if there was no mechanism behind that makes it work; Fogel, 2012). Pain of this kind is difficult to frame in evolutionary terms (Thanatos), or if it is, it may be a maladaptation that arises from “incoherence between proprioceptive and motor outputs as an indication of [...] trauma” (Ashton, 2013, p. 641). By definition, mental aggression appears to be aimed towards an experience of pain without corresponding motor involvement (and thus possibility of relief; Sansone, Watts, & Wiederman, 2013, pp. 449-453).

However, a dissonance in the parent appears to be relieved. People grow up with their own expectations and a good remembrance of those that they were not able to meet. If they aren’t capable of relieving that dissonance themselves, they may hope for their offspring to do the job for them (Festinger, 1975). Their frustration may produce aggressive behavior. The mental violence imposed upon their children via unattainable expectations leaves them in a lose/lose situation: (a) there is no serious complaint for not being beaten, (b) expectations may be placed

arbitrarily, and (c) there are no valid counter-measures. Emotional reprimands are traumatically internalized as events of intense emotionality. The absence of parental emotion socialization has been related to depressive symptoms and anger dysregulations in children (Sanders, Zeman, Poon, & Miller, 2013, pp. 449-453).

Conclusion

Mental aggression remains underrepresented in psychological research. An initial search on the keywords “mental” and “violence” produces over 66,000 hits, focusing on either violence or its mental effects, but none that specifically address the problem of “mental violence” (the same applies to searches for “mental pain” or “psychological pain”). Therefore, I strongly argue to expand on “mental violence” as a field of psychological studies.

References

- Ahston, J. C. (2012). Neuropathic pain: An evolutionary hypothesis. *Medical Hypotheses*, 78(5), 641-643.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fogel, A. (2012). Emotional and physical pain activate similar brain regions: Where does emotion hurt in the body. *Psychology Today*, 5(2015). Retrieved May 12, 2015, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/body-sense/201204/emotional-and-physical-pain-activate-similar-brain-regions>
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319-340.

Sanders, W., Zeman, J., Poon, J., & Miller, R. (2013): Child regulation of negative emotions and depressive symptoms: The moderating role of parental emotion socialization. *J Child Fam Stud*, 24(2015), 402-415.

Sansone, R. A., Watts, D. A., & Wiederman, M. W. (2013). Being bullied in childhood, and pain and pain perception in adulthood. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 60(5), 449-453.