PSYC3017 Exam Notes

Lecture 2 (Antisocial behaviours: violence and aggression)

Violence and aggression

- Violence is declining over time, but is still costing economies a lot
- Every year, over 1.3 million people worldwide die as a result of violence
- For people aged between 15-44 years, violence is the fourth leading cause of death
- It is still a significant issue that needs our attention

Definitions

- Aggression is 'any behaviour intended to harm another person who does not want to be harmed'
- Three key features:
  - 1. It is a behaviour (an action, not an emotion)
  - 2. It is intentional, and the intent is to cause harm
  - 3. The victim must be motivated to avoid the harm
- Violence is 'aggression that has as its goal extreme physical harm, such as injury or death'
  - An extreme form of aggression
- By definition, all violent behaviours are aggressive, but not all aggressive behaviours are violent

Sub-types of aggression

- Direct (victim physically present) vs. indirect (victim absent) aggression
  - Direct physical aggression: hitting, kicking, punching
  - Direct verbal aggression: name calling, verbal taunts
  - Indirect or relational aggression: gossiping, social exclusion, ostracism
- Indirect aggression is as harmful as physical aggression
- Reactive vs. proactive aggression
  - Reactive aggression: 'hot', impulsive angry behaviour motivated with the desire to harm someone (e.g. someone starts a fight because they were pushed)
  - Proactive aggression: 'cold', premeditated, calculated, harmful behaviour that is motivated by some other goal (e.g. obtaining money or resorting justice)
- It can sometimes be difficult or impossible to identify between the two
  - Motives are often quite mixed and can't be differentiated
- There is much complexity behind aggression

Operationalising aggression

- There are two widely used tasks to measure aggression
- Competitive reaction time task
  - Participants believe they are competing against someone else in a reaction time game
  - Aim of the game is to press a button after hearing a sound the fastest
  - If you lose, you get punishment in the form of a noise blast
  - If you win, you get to set the duration and intensity of the noise blast for the loser
  - Aggression = delivery of a high intensity noise blast
- Hot sauce paradigm
  - Winner gets to allocate an amount of hot sauce to another participant
  - Aggression = quantity of extremely spicy hot sauce
- Both of these tasks involve a behaviour

- These tasks may not show harm intentionality
  - Participants may just be doing as they are told for the purpose of the experiment
- These tasks may not show harm avoidance
  - Likewise, participants may just take the noise blast or hot sauce because they were told to by the experimenter
- These tasks are on the less serious side of the aggression continuum
  - They are reactive forms of aggression rather than proactive forms
- These tasks don't predict real world violence outside the lab

Theories of aggression

- There are numerous theories which account for the emergence of aggression and violence
- This area of psychology has garnered a lot of interest

Biological theories of aggression: evolutionary approach

- This approach really gained prominence with Darwin's theory of evolution
- Aggressive behaviours are an evolutionary adaptation that has enabled animals (including humans) to survive
- Aggressive behaviours are represented in our genes
  - There is a biological underpinning that passes on from one generation to the next

Biological theories of aggression: genes and brain structures

- Moffitt (2005): 50% of the variance in antisocial behaviour is attributable to genetic influences
- Raine (2008): 'genes to brain to antisocial behaviour' model
- There are certain genetic variations that are associated with structural and functional neurological states, which in turn are associated with antisocial behaviours
- Which specific genes code for these behaviours?
- Raine focuses on the monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A) gene
  - The MAO-A gene codes for the enzyme that breaks down serotonin, a neurotransmitter that is low in antisocial individuals
  - Males with a common polymorphism (variant) in the MAO-A gene have an 8% reduction in the volume of the amygdala, anterior cingulate, and prefrontal cortex – brain structures involved in emotion and found to be compromised in antisocial individuals
  - These brain structures function very differently in antisocial individuals

Learning theories of aggression: Bandura's social cognitive theory

- Aggressive behaviours are modelled from others' behaviours via vicarious or observational learning
- Learning aggression can be an indirect process, occurring only through observation
- Bandura's bobo doll experiment
- We don't need to be aggressive to aggress, we can just watch others to learn about it