

In studying aggression, researchers must decide whether they are investigating learning or performance effects and choose their experimental procedures accordingly. Learning effects of aggressive modeling are best assessed under test conditions in which subjects are able and willing to reveal all they have learned. To use human targets for this purpose would be as nonsensical as to require bombardiers to bomb San Francisco, New York, or some other inhabited area in testing whether they have acquired bombing skills.

On the other hand, studies designed to identify conditions that lead people to use behavior they have learned for injurious purposes do require human targets. In such investigations, which receive detailed consideration in Chapters 3 and 4, people are provided with opportunities to hurt others. These experiments help explain what causes people to behave punitively, but they throw no light on learning determinants because the aggressive actions are already part of the subjects' repertoires. A complete understanding of aggression therefore requires both types of experimentation.

Although research using nonhuman targets is principally designed to advance understanding of learning processes, the question is sometimes raised whether such influences do affect interpersonal aggression. Considering that in everyday life the actions used to hurt others are usually developed under simulated conditions, one might expect some transfer to occur. There is evidence to indicate that this is indeed so. Walters and Brown (1963) found that boys who had been intermittently rewarded for punching an automated Bobo doll—a training situation devoid of pernicious intent and social injury—later exhibited more physically aggressive behavior toward other children in a competitive situation than boys who received no prior training in punching responses. Conversely, elimination of aggressive styles of behavior toward nonhuman targets can produce corresponding decreases in interpersonal assaultiveness. Hyperaggressive children who were taught through reinforced modeling to favor cooperative over aggressive solutions to problems in doll-play situations were much less prone to respond aggressively to interpersonal thwarting, both in structured situations and in their regular social interactions (Chittenden, 1942).

For those who attach special significance to observational learning exhibited toward human targets, the modeling paradigm has been applied in this manner too. After children have seen filmed models assault a person in novel ways, the imitative and nonimitative aggression they direct at a similar human target is recorded. Viewing interpersonal assaults fosters imitative aggressive acts toward people, whereas the unusual conduct rarely occurs when the example is not provided (Harratty, O'Neal, and Sulzer, 1972; Savitsky, Rogers, Izard, and Liebert, 1972). For reasons given earlier, children reveal more observational learning of aggression in relation to inanimate than to human targets (Harratty, Liebert, Morris, and Fernandez, 1969). Learning is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for performance. In later chapters we shall specify the conditions under which learned behavior is expressed in action.