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A contribution of ethno-psychoanalytic investigation to the theory of aggression

The widespread discontent with the psychoanalytic theory of aggression can be traced back to rational and irrational reasons. The rational ones can be derived from the fact that the theory of aggression does not parallel the libido theory.

Hartmann, Kris & Loewenstein have written:

Briefly stated, the difference [between the development of libido and aggression] may be characterized by saying that libidinal gratification is partly zone specific, while aggressive gratification is not zone specific (1949, p. 33).

The main irrational reason is, in my opinion, that the current theory presents no substantiated hope that we may one day control the horrible effects of destructive aggression in human society. This state of affairs suggests that we should seek new theories rather than try to extend and improve the present ones, which serve only to demonstrate our helplessness.

However, the metapsychological opinions on aggression outlined by Hartmann, Kris & Loewenstein (1949) have stood the test well when applied in the course of psychoanalytically orientated examination of members of two African cultures. Two hypotheses in particular proved to be basic: first, that the vicissitudes of aggressive drives are determined by the moulding, and most especially by the cultural moulding, of the ego. The second maintains that man's social behaviour is primarily the result of his aggressive energies. The first hypothesis refers to the development of aggression, most particularly the aim and object of aggressive strivings; the second to the function of aggression, both within and between the psychic structures and in relation to the outside world. Both parts of the theory were complemented to a certain extent upon confrontation with our findings and, on the other hand, were subjected to several modifications. In this paper, we must limit ourselves to a metapsychological discussion of some results of our investigation.

The research was made with the Dogon of Mali and the Agni of the Ivory Coast, both in West Africa. Psychoanalytic observations in both cultures were made and extensively published by a team composed of the present author, Dr Morgenthaler and Mrs G. Parin-Matthèy (1963, 1971).

Our opinions on aggression in the Dogon are discussed in a special paper (Parin & Morgenthaler, 1969); those of the Agni are summarized in a chapter.

In order to compare psychoanalytical observations made in one culture (e.g. Dogon or Agni) with those made in a different one (e.g. Western culture) we must first reduce the clinical data to their underlying meaning in terms of psychoanalytic theory. The highly abstract system of metapsychological thought offers a tool for comparison; as it were, common denominators. Any attempt to compare more complex phenomena (e.g. personality structures, behavioural patterns) would fail, given the dissimilarity of the many natural, social and individual factors.

With members of each of these two cultural groups it was possible to reconstruct the phases of libido development with their specific modalities, with the aims and objects of libidinal strivings. Though their patterns of childrearing differ greatly from ours, the course followed by the oral, anal and phallic phases was absolutely comparable to that encountered in Western civilization. A common denominator, strongly evident in all three cultures, irrespective of the cultural setting, is the libido's influence on psychic development. Aggressive impulses, however, appeared to obey laws different from those obtaining in our culture.

Through direct observation of the child, interpretation of the resulting data and reconstructions, we tried to ascertain expressions of aggression from birth on through the subsequent years (Spitz, 1965). For an understanding of

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later development, it makes no difference whether one assumes, as we do, an innate aggressive drive which develops step by step or must be first practised and released from inhibitions (Spock, 1965), or whether one prefers the hypothesis that aggression originates as a result of the experience of frustrations. In any case, a considerable time passes before organized aggression develops and puts itself at the service of the ego. Spitz infers from the symptomatology of anaclitic depression that the pressure of the aggressive drive is also the 'carrier' of the libidinal drive. Others emphasize the gradual development of aggression from the bite reflex or from the rage affect. Primary rage is an emotion whose only goal is assumed to be discharge and which must discover its more exact aim and object before becoming an instinctual desire.

The first steps in the development of aggression in the child can be summed up as follows. In contrast to the libido, which from the outset has an aim (the achievement of satisfaction) and an object (in primary narcissism, the primitive self), aggression is dependent on ego organization rudimentary though it may be, in order to find an aim and an object. To describe aggression correctly we have first to take into account the special structure of the ego. Then we may consider

it as psychic energy *per se* with which an object representative is cathected, which can be neutralized or discharged in a direct or aim-inhibited way.

This definition differs from the opinion of Karl Menninger, who describes the destruction of the object as the goal of aggression, and who, contrasts the plasticity of libido to the rigidity of aggression' (Menninger, cited by Hartmann *et al.*, 1949). Our formulation corresponds to that of Hartmann, Kris & Loewenstein (p. 18): the plasticity of aggression manifests itself in the control of the body, in the control of reality and in the formation of psychic structure. ..'. Here we recall the fact that the libido is more dependent on its sources, the erogenous zones, whereas the development and discharge of aggression are more dependent on their tools, particularly within the social organization.

The aggression at the disposal of the normal Dogon, Agni or Western man differs so markedly, both quantitatively and qualitatively, that one would be forced to ascribe to each people a different instinctual equipment-an assumption of utter improbability-if one wanted to persist in the theory that the sole aim of aggressive energy is the destruction of the object. (1) In view of our ethno-psychoanalytical observations, we must agree with the viewpoint supporting the duality of drives. The function of aggression, however, includes different modalities.

The libido, comparable to the Eros of antiquity, is the force that draws people to one another, that binds and holds together lovers, families, communities-all of mankind. But the force that makes coexistence possible and enduring, lends order to personal contacts, guarantees the preservation of life and self-assertion, and sustains social structures and changes them, is not the power of love. (2) Derivatives of aggression, shaped by the ego, in the service of the ego and the superego, are what guarantee survival in the work process and provide the energy for every effective social order. The hierarchical class society of capitalism and the technological activities associated with it use aggression mainly in its anal form, sadistically, aimed towards the exterior, or

(1) Ethno-psychoanalytical observations seem to contradict Lantos's theory, enlarged upon by Spock (1965) and Lincke (1969). This theory claims that, commensurate with the instinctual equipment of the higher mammals, it would also be appropriate to distinguish between 'objective' and 'subjective' aggression in man. Objective aggression, which appears as 'hunger' in Freud's first theory of drives, corresponds to Lorenz's description of the conflicts between predatory animals and their prey, which he differentiates from aggression 'of the fight drive against members of their own species'. (This corresponds to 'subjective' aggression in Lantos, 1958.) Lincke (1969, p. 48) speaks of the destructive effect 'of subjective, intraspecific aggression. It shows the destructive force of hate, envy and jealousy in relations between humans and the possible pathological results of aggression deriving from internalized frustration and rivalry. The

emotionless aggressive component, present in the activities serving self-preservation was, on the contrary, temporarily neglected by psychoanalysis '.

Were one disposed to allow the fixation by Anlage of two different kinds of aggression to hold true, one would have to accept the fact that the Agni are provided with only a very small amount of objective aggression, since they appear to perform all the tasks pertaining to the preservation of life with energy, which shows the characteristics of subjective aggression. On the other hand, one would have to concede to the Dogon a harmonious equipment with a preponderance of objective aggression. Once again, these would be-as compared to Europeans-provided with much less instinctive energy of both kinds. These dissimilarities can be better explained through typical characteristics of the intrapsychic and interpersonal instinctual development than through differences of instinctual equipment.

(2) In this paper we emphasize the role of aggression at the expense of libid; in particular, we do not discuss the importance of object-relations and libido development in the formation of the ego.

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retentive, adherent and systematizing, and as manifold reaction formations. In the Dogon culture, aggression manifests itself above all as oral incorporation and as a phallic activity in which one can share by identification. The Agni show two typical integrative levels of aggression invested in the social structure: the first oscillates between oral incorporation and destructive projection; the second, between anal submission and the attempt to act out phallic aggressive power demands under the domination of a phallic introject.

Hereby we impute to aggression a function similar to that of ego instincts in the service of self-preservation, mentioned in the first theory of instincts. This obtains especially when one considers that man must uphold his self preservation more against his own species than against other creatures or natural forces. Just because of this similarity, it is necessary to emphasize the difference between this view and the first theory of instincts: we look upon the id as the source of aggressive energy; the ego as the place where it is shaped.

Herewith we can forgo the assumption of manifold, highly differentiated partial instinctual drives; no endowment, no matter how rich, would be sufficient for man's enormous ability to adapt himself socially. Structures which develop ontogenetically in exchange with their environment allow of a far better explanation of the changeability of aggressive forms during life, from one individual to another and from one culture to another. Finally, it is easy to explain genetically and dynamically the multitudinous human expressions of aggression (whether we consider them pathological as in suicide, or normal as in the self-destruction of entire peoples in the event of

war) without being obliged to suspect degeneration or disintegration of the instincts or a primary self-destructive drive.

When we speak of oral, anal or phallic aggression, we mean neither that there exist different kinds of aggressive energy-according to the phase of libidinal development-nor that it is advisable to designate aggression according to the admixture of or crossing with libidinal strivings. On the contrary, such nomenclature refers to definite mouldings of the ego and of the superego which, in adults, show special characteristics arising from each developmental phase.

We were, in fact, forced to accept the premise that in different cultures, not only is the content of emotional conflicts different from that in our own culture, but also that the psychic structure is different from our own. (3)

When we study the vicissitudes of aggression, we must-as deduced above-concern ourselves primarily with the idiosyncrasies of the ego. A great deal of what is described as the 'normal' or natural vicissitudes of aggression is the effect of the culturally related portion of the ego. The discussion of the conditions under which aggressive energy is at times effective in a neutralized form carries us beyond the scope of this paper.

A first attempt to do justice to the dissimilarities in the most important psychic structures in the members of both these African cultures is the description of the group ego and of the clan conscience.

These are modifications of the Western concepts of ego and superego. On the other hand, if one demands of psychoanalytical theory that it be equally applicable to the members of all cultures, we would have to regard both the 'group egos' and the analogous 'clan consciences' as special forms of human possibilities, as well as the 'ego' and 'superego' structures attributed to members of Western society.

'Group ego' means that the ego is dependent upon clearly defined qualities and reaction patterns of the objects in the environment, in order to enjoy relative autonomy when confronted with the id, the superego and reality.

The male Dogon depend upon the fact that the people in their environment act according to the tendency to identify anchored in the ego, equivalent to the father-brother series pattern and/or to the pattern of the brother community whose members were simultaneously initiated. If they do so, the individual can function autonomously.

Rivalrous aggression and anal-sadistic impulses appear but briefly in conflict situations. Then the reciprocal identifying forms of relationship which are permanently anchored in the ego gain the upper hand and discharge of aggression of any kind becomes unnecessary. Reactions to narcissistic mortification easily entail immediate discharge of aggression, even where beloved and

respected people are concerned, because ambivalence tension is low, conforming to the 'oral' ego characteristics. They are incapable of storing up chronic aggressive

(3) According to a personal message, Dr E. Ludowyk-Gyomroi would, on the basis of her research in Ceylon, consider the same wording to be correct.

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tensions. In a neutralized form, aggression contributes to the formation of the highly differentiated social behaviour of the personality, as well as its potential for work and achievement.

A determining factor in the functioning of the Agni group ego is the willingness of their neighbours to arbitrate over quarrels, that they agree to act out the projected aggressive conflicts among themselves, replacing the conflict carrier, whereby the latter participates in the result and, finally, that collectively they go along with projected aggression (for example, belief in witchcraft) and set up the proper institutions for ritual processing. In contrast to the Dogon, exceptionally high aggressive urges give rise to the most violent anxieties. Despite this, the ambivalence tension remains low. Objects that are all too threatening are dropped; projection is followed by displacement and finally by a settlement that satisfies the group ego, for the most part without social damage or the appearance of chronic repression of aggression.

The term 'clan conscience' means that the superego can function properly only within a very clearly defined social structure. We shall compare, briefly, the formation of the superego resulting from the oedipal conflict. Introjection of the father's authority, the most important step towards the formation of the superego in the Western world, occurs in neither the Dogon nor Agni cultures.

Among the Dogon, internalization of aggression is hardly ever observed. The introjection of the frustrating parent is easily avoided. Although rivalry with the father develops-at the time when the mother leaves the child after a three year period of intensive unconditioned nursing the collective takes over the role of the frustrating parent. Castration anxiety continues in the form of a fear of being abandoned by the wife or of having no children by her. Instead of a guilt feeling, there appears a certain anxiety that one might render the elders unhappy, who have taken their place in the father-brother series as rewarding figures of identification. This would engender a depressive feeling.

The Dogon are a people capable of digesting their aggression without internalization and without the appearance of the socially undesirable effects of aggression. The harmonious oral moulding of ego provides them with only a negligible tendency towards repression and the formation of ambivalence tension. The lack of forced training in the anal phase and the very slight object-

centring of the libido in the phallic phase-in the presence of a maintained aim-inhibited and identificatory relationship may well be why aggression born of rivalry never reaches high tension levels.

Nor with the Agni does introjection of the father's authority occur. Severe frustrations and anal violations by enemas on the part of the mother which begin to be operative within the second year of life cause destructive introjections which must be reprojected. Their ego becomes hardly capable of repressing aggressions or suppressing them by anal-retentive means. However, defence mechanisms of projective identification and participative projection permit the externalization of aggression, insofar as the immediate discharge-as is mostly the case-is prevented because of overwhelming fear. Introjection of the frustrating parent in the oedipal conflict is evaded or, even more frequently, there occurs a regressive repetition of the conflict with the frustrating pre-oedipal mother.

The clan conscience of the Agni functions in such a way that submission to anally violating authorities is sought whenever a conflict arises in the ego. In the outside world these authorities are embodied by powerful chiefs, healers and female sorcerers, who threaten deadly punishments. From such a renewed introject of a violating maternal phallus, the subject gains the strength to act in accordance with the morals and exigencies of society. Without such identification and ruling figures, which sometimes take the form of the father, but whose functions always derive from the mother of early childhood, orientation is lost.

The Agni do internalize aggression, but not permanently. Their ego has retained flexibility in the face of an unusual development in which regression to the phases of narcissistic impotence and omnipotence plays the largest role. This flexibility allows the processing of enormous quantities of aggression on the most varied levels of defence until, once again exteriorized, the aggressive wishes can be avoided, denied or fought with magic means, whereupon the ego, with admirable elasticity, can turn to other tasks. To be sure, a not inconsiderable part of aggression turns itself against the person himself in the form of masochism, depressive moods and fantasies. Anal-retentive tendencies are as little possible with the Agni as with the Dogon, if for other reasons. They can drop objects by decathecting them,

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copying the patterns of their mothers, who suddenly dropped them in their second year of life. However, we can hardly describe this procedure as aggressive in a personality that has successfully avoided object constancy.

Until now, the theory of aggression has, in the main, taken into consideration the vicissitudes and the function of aggression in our culture. Individual deviations were described as pathological. In

order to define the function of aggression in human society, frequent attempts were made to set up a moral or teleological classification, between 'able and failing' aggression (Mitscherlich, 1969), to differentiate between normal fighting and destructive war, etc.

Confrontation with the psychology of other cultures requires no change in the theory of aggression. However, it shifts some emphases.

Above all, it is advisable to see the vicissitudes of aggression as very closely linked with the formation of the ego. Aggression finds its aims and objects only in accordance with the stages of ego development. This does not mean that aggression is always dominated by the ego. Aggression may be compared to a troop of mercenaries called into the country by the ego (from the id), trained and armed by the ego and who bear its total stamp, even when they have wholly or partially slipped away from their commander-in-chief or even turned against him.

If one remembers to what a large extent pregenital sexuality participates in the formation of the secondary autonomous ego apparatus, the often very difficult question as to the differentiation between sexual and aggressive urges in the pregenital phases arise either in a different form or, often, no longer. Aim and object of both instinctual drives coincide with each other completely or partially.

Insofar as the vicissitudes of aggression are concerned, *our* ego undergoes its most important formation in the anal phase. In Western culture, oral and phallic desires hardly ever dispense with an anal-sadistic shaping. The oedipal formula of possessing the mother and killing the father must be considered as a culturally specific variant. One could imagine it to mean participation in the mother, being the sole person to enjoy her, allowing oneself to be loved by her alone, permitting oneself to be sexually satisfied by her or to satisfy her sexuality. It is not absolutely necessary that sadistic castration and death wishes arise in opposition to the father as well, or, to put it better, against the factor disturbing the mother-child dyad. In the Dogon culture, the fatherly rival is shared and disposed of through reciprocal identifications (not through an introjection of his frustrating attitudes). With the Agni, it is true that the oedipal father engenders very strong fears of castration; submission to him, in the sense of the negative Oedipus complex is, as with us, a frequent pathological result. Normally, it is disposed of by regressive submission to the anally-violating phallic mother, so that-if such an illustration is permitted-we can say the Agni boy does not want to kill his father, but to replace him by the far more powerful mother of the oral-anal transitional period. The forming of sexual identity is thus rendered more difficult; social arrangements-especially through different partial identification processes-must later help repair it. In our culture, ambivalence-the fact that libidinal and aggressive strivings fix upon the same object-regularly leads to conflict. Because of the anal formation of the ego this conflict of

instinctual drives finds expression in ambivalence tension. Another characteristic of aggression in an anally formed ego is that the object of the aggression is hurt or destroyed. Therefore aggression against love objects must be repressed in order to preserve the object. We rightfully demand that a mature person either see his ambivalence conflict through or overcome it. This is unnecessary if no ambivalence tension has arisen due to the oral formation of the ego. In our culture, this is exemplified in the case of undisturbed children who are undergoing the process of individuation (Mahler) before they enter into the anal struggle leading to separation from the mother. Such children are able to love and hate their mothers and siblings simultaneously or alternately, with no resulting conflicts. Freud has attributed a higher ambivalence to the 'savages' in general, but he did not discuss in this term whether they have to repress aggression. The orally formed ego of the Dogon allows a large ambivalence, with no need to repress aggression. The ego of the Agni also permits high ambivalence; tension is usually not overcome or temporarily disposed of by means of repression of one of its components, but is avoided through paranoid projection. In both cases the love object is not endangered by the effect of aggression.

Repression and internalization have been described as the typical vicissitudes of aggressive drives. On the contrary, we feel we have shown

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that repression does not necessarily result if the anal phase of the ego formation takes place under other conditions or without forced toilet training. We have described the Dogon society as just such an example: that humans can organize a life together without internalizing aggression. Recently, Lincke (1970) has made the identification of the ego with aggressively cathected exigencies of the superego responsible for socially extremely harmful formations of aggression in Western culture.

The first and surest result of comparative research is that every aggression discharged by an adult already bears the stamp of the culturally specific development of the ego and its apparatus.

Only very pathological expressions of aggression, as they appear in some psychoses and in toxic conditions, resemble each other, independent of the cultural affiliation of the patient. Here one may assume that the ego has to a large extent been rendered incapable of functioning. At this point, we perceive a path towards the understanding of the phenomenon known in transcultural psychiatry: that psychiatric syndromes from different 'cultures' are more diverse the nearer they are to the health norm and resemble each other more and more, the severer the pathology.

Regarding the vicissitudes of aggression, our observations show that the decisive role falls to the formation of the ego and the superego. This can also be said of the libido. However, we need hardly change the libido theory, whereas the theory of aggression contains elements that must be

modified: the meaning of ambivalence, internalization, the role of aggression in the oedipal conflict and in the formation of the superego and so on. This necessity has arisen because the culturally specific differences in the final formation of the ego have been underestimated and phenomena of the instinctual vicissitudes erroneously described as genuine instinctual qualities. The second result of our observations emphasizes the forming of the human environment as an important function of aggression. The social sphere must serve not only to render individual and group aggression harmless. Its organization stands to some extent upon the aggressive impulses of their bearers.

It is a characteristic of our Western ego that, above all, repression and internalization of aggressive strivings are necessary to social functioning. This is neither the only nor even a necessary normal destiny of aggression. Its social effects cannot be assessed without a sound study of the culture concerned. They differ widely in different culture settings.

It may encourage the social psychologist to know that the Dogon, among themselves, show-in their social structure and against outside enemies-very little harmful discharge of aggression and that even the Agni, who have to deal with violent destructive aggression, particularly of a paranoid nature, develop no collective projection in the sense of an 'outgroup scapegoat'. Nor do they have at their disposal anal-retentive aggression that leads to economic exploitation of underpropertied persons. Unfortunately, we cannot conceive how the formation of ego qualities would be possible, as required by our Western civilization-I refer especially to a sense of order, organizational talent, technical and economic skills-without the ego being obliged previously to undergo that anal formation which determines the way we handle our aggression.

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