

# Aggressiveness and Violence: between dispute and scientific consensus

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## Abstract

*Aggressiveness and violence have been and still are two topics of great interest in the scientific area among researchers who are in search of identifying comprehensive answers regarding the manifestations of human individuals that are considered aggressive and violent. Investigating the content of some of the reference works and studies found in the research literature, we can observe that aggressiveness and violence are frequently considered to be in a synonymous relationship (Jiménez-Ponce & Jiménez-Ramírez, 2024, p. 72). For this reason, their definition and use has created a number of ambiguities and confusions in the academic community (Balica, 2008). Moreover, in the research literature we can find some attractive conceptions and views according to which some analysts give these concepts distinct meanings. In this situation, it is necessary to recognise that we are confronted with a conceptual enigma that further deepens the identification of concise interpretations and definitions of these two fundamental notions. Starting from these considerations, from the multitude of perspectives and points of view advanced and developed over time in the pages of the reference literature, the present study has been developed with the aim of capturing, selecting and highlighting a series of notes (convergent and divergent) that tend to portray the enigmatic, volatile and perpetual nature of human aggressiveness and violence.*

**Keywords:** *aggressiveness, violence, bio-psycho-socio-cultural, similarities, differences.*

## Introduction

Aggressiveness and violence have been and still are two topics of great interest in the scientific area among researchers who are in search of comprehensive answers regarding the manifestations of human individuals that are considered aggressive and violent.<sup>1</sup> Investigating the content of some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Since they have been and continue to be the subjects of interest in my scientific endeavours, I would like to point out that in previous years I have undertaken a series of theoretical and conceptual investigations on aggression, violence and deviance. Without neglecting the general

reference works and studies found in the research literature, we can observe that aggressiveness and violence are frequently considered to be in a synonymous relationship (Jiménez-Ponce & Jiménez-Ramírez, 2024, p. 72). For this reason, their definition and use have created a number of ambiguities and confusions in the academic community (Balica, 2008). Moreover, in research literature we can find some attractive conceptions and views according to which some analysts give these concepts distinct meanings. In this situation, it is necessary to recognise that we are confronted with a conceptual enigma that further deepens the identification of concise interpretations and definitions of these two fundamental notions.

### *1. What is aggressiveness?*

From the outset, it should be stressed that aggressiveness is one of the many specific behaviors found in human society for which there is a wide variety of views and conceptions, being generally difficult to define (Popescu, Moise, Duvac, 2013, p. 163).

Aggressiveness is a prominent behavioral characteristic found in most animal species and also detected in human behavior (Bueno, 2010). It has evolved over time in the animal kingdom to serve functions of essential importance for the survival of the species. Seen from a general perspective, aggressiveness is a decisive tool that has as its main objective the securing of resources and territorial delimitation. In human beings characterized as social animals, aggression supports the preservation of group identity traits, the protection of offspring, and in the course of confrontations between individuals (rivals), it helps to select the winner as the prototype that ensures the reproduction of the species (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2009, p. 7) The written and unwritten history of human societies tends to validate the view that with regard to aggressiveness, we must bear in mind a paramount aspect of the preservation and evolution of human societies: human individuals exhibit a natural propensity for the use of instrumental aggression aimed at obtaining positions of dominance and power in the social structure (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2009, p. 11).

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representative perspectives of definition and interpretation that I will also set out in this study, these researches that I have mentioned have been mainly focused on the interpretation of aggressiveness and violence as forms of behavioral deviance manifested in the school environment. However, some of the ideas, considerations and visions presented in this study can also be identified within these works and studies. Having said that, the interested reader has the opportunity to go through these theoretical analyses in the work entitled *Forme actuale ale devianței școlare/Current forms of school deviance* (my doctoral thesis) published at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași in 2023, as well as in other representative studies/articles elaborated and published during the period of doctoral studies indicated in the bibliographical section of this material

In his paper entitled “Human Aggressiveness”, the ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, a leading collaborator of the great Austrian-born ethologist Konrad Lorenz, described aggressive behavior as very complex and comprehensive from multiple perspectives. The ethologist noted that individuals can display aggression against other individuals in direct forms, through hitting, name-calling and taunting. In addition to direct ways of expressing aggression, it can also take indirect forms, such as when a person is bad-mouthed, and in this way their social relations with others are destabilized. Aggressive behavior can be adapted and manifested through passive forms: refusal to communicate, refusal to engage in discussion, social isolation or inaction when a person needs help (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2009, p. 123).

In another fundamental work that seeks to explain and clarify aggressive behavior, socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson argues that aggressive behavior cannot be explained solely in terms of an evil abnormality or a symptom of a brutal instinct. According to the author, aggression should not be attributed to pathological traits that have developed in the human personality as a result of growing up and developing in a hostile environment. In the course of development, the human being acquired the predisposition and propensity to react with irrational behavior to cope with dangers coming from outside. An interesting thing to analyze in this circumstance is that the human individual has gone beyond neutralizing the threatening source by reinforcing and satisfying various goals by using aggression (Wilson, 2013).

As we can notice, “definitions of aggressiveness are very different, an aspect inherent to the complexity of the manifestation of human aggressiveness. Most often, however, the definitions reflect not only the complexity of the phenomenon but also the theoretical position of the author” (Nastas, 2002, p. 37), “the more comprehensive the studies, the more concrete and clearly delimited the forms of aggression investigated” (Lungu, 2022, p. 159). In general, it can be concluded that aggressiveness projected by human individuals is manifested with the intention of causing harm and discomfort to others (Archer & Coyne, 2005, p. 212) Finally, we can define aggressiveness as a natural disposition, more specifically a predisposition to attack that can be translated into behavior through aggression (action), being both a generic trait of the individual subject to disruptive bi- psycho- psycho-affective states, and a potential that provides human beings with the necessary tools to satisfy their existential needs (Dragomirescu, 1976, p. 77).

## *2. How can we define violence?*

The concept of violence is one of the most ambivalent concepts that the social sciences have been trying to analyze and define for decades. Since the end of the 1960s, there has been a substantial increase in violent behavior in the social area of Western industrialized countries. As a result, the issue of violence has been a subject of great interest, reflected in public discussions, policy-makers' programs and, last but not least, in academic debates. Despite these attempts to arrive at a truthful interpretation of violence, a number of controversial questions which remain unresolved, relating to the proper definition, substantive differentiation, socio-political and moral evaluation of violence can be observed (Imbusch, 2003).

Violence is commonly described as a psychosocial problem influenced by the interaction of hereditary and environmental factors. From the multitude of meanings that can be found in the pages of research literature, we can note the following directions of analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon of human violence:

1. *According to the psychosociological view:* violence is found in a synonymous relationship with aggressiveness;
2. *According to the sociological orientation:* violence is found in a close relationship with transgression and violation of socio-cultural norms, being categorized by sociologists in the spectrum of acts that fall into the category of social deviance;
3. *According to the criminological view:* violence is a main element in the commission of criminal offences or with a justified criminal appearance (Telipan, 2016, p. 125).

Being concerned with the study of social structures, the sociological perspective of interpreting violence starts from the assumption that violent behavior is not only considered as a resource of power of privileged classes or groups, but also as a compensatory means used by disadvantaged or marginalized social classes and groups (when the promotion of their interests cannot be achieved through normal channels) made up of individuals who lack resources, are socially unintegrated or poorly socialized (as a compensatory reaction to the stigmatizing, and therefore deviant, situation in which they find themselves). The lack of access to institutionalized means of achieving socially desirable goals is the reason why these persons resort to illicit, illegitimate, often violent means, through which they can gain access to social opportunities (Zamfir, Vlăsceanu, 1998, *apud* Stănilă, 2017, p. 209)

The violence manifested by man possesses a plurality of forms through which it is encountered and manifested in various locations and areas circumscribed by social space. We often observe how through the manifestation of violent behaviors, depending on the place and context (domestic space, common spaces, school environment, workplace, sports events), man attacks the security and personal safety of others (Liiceanu et al., 2004). According to classifications, violence has several dimensions of manifestation: physical, emotional, material, social identity (Stuart, 2000, *apud*, Bujorean, 2017, p. 13)

Researcher Cristina Neamțu (2003, pp. 220-221) also points out the terminology that is used in the French-speaking specialised literature and makes the following terminological clarifications regarding violence:

- *Violence*: characterized by the context of interaction in which an individual, or several individuals, act directly or indirectly, causing physical, psychological, moral and material harm to other individuals at varying levels (*apud* Pain, 1992, p. 88)
- *Violence ressentie*: translated into Romanian, it designates felt or subjective violence, which can be observed from the outside as it is consequently experienced only by the victim (*apud* Debarbieux, 1991, p. 28).
- *Les brimades*: expresses behavior that falls within the area of psychological violence, such as insults, jokes, pranks, etc.
- *Bullying*, a concept taken from the English language which has the same meaning as above.

Summarizing some of the views found in the research literature, we can conclude that violence is defined by researchers as a set of actions and behaviors involving the use of force against another/others that ultimately cause harm and damage of a certain nature. It can also be noted that definitions that encompass human violence tend to exclude a number of aspects that are particularly essential in understanding the phenomenon. In the first instance, definitions of violence tend not to refer to the pain and emotional damage caused by the domination of some by others. In the second instance, some interpretations and classifications possess the inclination to focus intensely on studying the pathological, harmful and visible aspects of inter-human interactions and relationships, but neglect the damage caused by institutional and organizational structures (Bujorean, 2017, p. 13).

### *3. Aggressiveness versus violence*

In the research literature, we can observe that the term aggressiveness is used in particular to encompass a wide range of manifestations and behaviors. Theoretical analyses highlight the fact that aggressiveness and violence are

concepts that are often used synonymously. In reality, however, it should be emphasized that they are concepts with different nuances. Broadly speaking, violence refers to the physical component of aggression (Tenenbaum, ch.c, 1997, *apud* Crăciun, 2007, p. 5).

In the conceptual “dispute” between aggressiveness and violence, researcher Ecaterina Balica notes that the relationship between aggressive and violent behavior is shaped based on the effects and risks that each of them manifests in the psycho-medico-social field. While violent behavior involves the use of force, causing physical, psychological and economic harm to victim/victims, aggression only starts to cause harm when it exceeds certain social, moral and legal limits (Balica, 2008, p. 51).

Another variant in delimiting violence from aggressiveness revolves around the idea that violent behavior takes the form of manifestations that are sanctioned by legal normativity. On the other hand, only a part of aggressive behavior is categorized as delinquent as a result of a deviation from social norms and values (Balica, 2008, p. 51). Another fundamental difference between violence and aggressiveness is that the latter is an innate and instinctual behavior of the human being, based on responses in the genetic construction of the human being. Aggressiveness can be influenced through processes (learning) or external factors from the environment in which the individual is living at a point in life (Balica, 2008, p. 51). In turn, violence has been distinctly defined as interfering with a number of shifts and changes in relation to social attitudes, perceptions and representations towards tolerance of certain forms of violence. For example, violence is categorized differently in relation to the characteristics of the cultural model of the society concerned. On the one hand, there are forms of violence that are not accepted in certain world cultures, while in other socio-cultural spaces these forms of violence are still tolerated and accepted by the societies concerned (Balica, 2008, p. 51).

In the context of capturing the distinctiveness between aggressiveness and violence, researcher Michel Floro (*apud* Căprioară & Căprioară, 2013, p. 482) emphasizes a differentiation of the two terms by referring to a number of three operational indicators:

- 1) *The first criterion*: is a functional/applied one, according to which aggressiveness is a potential source that is based on the direction of actions. It is predominantly integrated in the spectrum of cognitive thinking and analysis. Violence, on the other hand, is characterized by concrete activity, goal-directed action

- 2) *The second criterion:* it is topological, according to which aggression originates from the internal side of the individual, while violence originates from the predominantly external dimension of the human being;
- 3) *The third criterion:* it is attributed to the ethical dimension according to which aggressiveness is a potential state which gives the individual the power to face the difficulties he experiences and which, in this explanatory hypostasis, can be judged as acceptable and desirable under certain conditions. On the other hand, violence is interpreted as an intolerable action that causes suffering to those who experience it.

Violence can be defined as any action characteristic of human beings which may cause individuals to lose their physical, mental or material integrity and which affects, in a brutal or continuous form, the daily activities (violence may also take the form of self-destructiveness) or an individual, a collective, a community or the whole of society. Violence always has elements of destructiveness and extremity. In contrast, aggressive behavior has its origin in the innate nature of the human being, it can manifest itself both with elements of violence and through socially desirable behavior. The scope of aggressiveness is much wider and more comprehensive, including, in addition to violent behaviors, those that fall within the area of excitability, impulsivity, propulsiveness and aberrant-type manifestations (Căprioară & Căprioară, 2013, p. 483) From the facts highlighted, it can be assumed that violence is a concept that possesses the following specific notes: manifest form of aggressiveness, destructive intent, frustration of general human needs (Căprioară & Căprioară, 2013, pp. 485-486).

As we can observe from the specialized studies related to the basic field of socio-human sciences, violence is a specific term mainly oriented towards the conceptual package of sociological science. The concept of aggressiveness is frequently used in the whole terminology of psychology. Seen from a similarity perspective, both violence and aggression can, in certain circumstances, be correlated with criminal offences, but also with behavior that falls within the scope of criminally punishable crime (Clerget, 2008, p. 108).

### *Conclusions*

Regarding the myriad attempts to define, analyze and interpret aggressiveness, it can be pointed out that there is no consensus in the scientific community on an exhaustive definition and interpretation of this concept. At the same time, it can be noted that the way in which certain points of view have been propagated is more prominent than in terms of the definition of other psycho-social phenomena and processes. There is an extremely high level of resistance

among researchers in the socio-human sciences to the creation and use of a grid for analyzing, interpreting and explaining aggressiveness. This can be explained by the versatility of descriptive-explanatory ideas and models that have penetrated the scientific space over time (Mitrofan, 1996, p. 433).

Analyzing the main element of differentiation between the concepts of aggressiveness and violence, it can be pointed out that the fundamental difference that can be indicated in this situation is one regarding the degree and the way in which the individual doses the state of attack on the other(s). In contrast to aggressiveness, the register of violent behavior includes aggressive actions and acts that are extreme and excessive. Violence refers to the idea of imposing power, domination and making use of physical as well as psychological superiority over other individuals and social groups (Vozian, 2012, p. 189). Starting from the same explanatory logic, we can also specify that aggressiveness represents an internal disposition of the individual towards attack, a potential one according to some authors. Violence arises when the individual's actions go beyond the state of potentiality /probability of committing a harm/suffering and turns into a categorical state, but in a way that emphasizes brutality, cruelty and imposition.

Most theoretical perspectives describe violence as a behavior that refers to an illegitimate and illegal use of force and can be defined as a force that is directed against socio-legal norms and social order. In the field of criminological science, violence means a form of behavior that stray from, deviates from and infringes a set of rules and laws established and known to social actors. In research literature, there is no general consensus among researchers on the universality of this definition, and there are situations in which violence appears in the social register disguised as armed conflicts, situations of self-defence when the use of force is no longer illegitimate but authorized and legal (Dragomirescu, 1976, p. 76).

Analyzing and examining the totality of scientific perspectives presented in the course of this study, we believe that it is time to commit ourselves to a series of conclusive ideas and issues regarding aggression and violence:

- According to the researchers who follow the biological orientation, aggressiveness is a natural instinct that every human individual acquires from birth (Potâng, Botnari, 2018 *apud* Pârju, 2023, p. 147), being determined in an overwhelming manner by bio-chemical and genetic conditioning and adaptations. The great physicist Stephen W. Hawking also started from the same vision, stating that “aggression is the result of natural selection during cave-dwelling or before that, the aggressive instinct seems to be transmitted through DNA” (Tănăsescu, 2003, *apud* Sandu, 2017, p. 30);



- According to specialists and authors belonging to the sociological perspective, aggression is a specific behavior of social actors determined by the particularities of the environment and socio-cultural groups to which they belong. According to sociological science, by institutionalizing and legislating certain socio-cultural norms, practices and conventions, social groups can control, tolerate or even encourage the proliferation of violence in the society. A particularly important aspect to highlight (as indicated in the previous pages) is the fact that in sociological works the term “violence” is more frequently used rather than “aggressiveness” (Clerget, 2008). This conceptual position adopted by sociology can be attributed to the reasoning that sociologists interpret violence as a deviant type of behavior that transgresses the social, moral, legal and cultural norms that regulate the social order specific to a given social environment;
- In relation to the exponents and researchers affiliated to psychological orientation, aggressive behavior is interpreted by portraying and delimiting the intrinsic cognitive, emotional and affective psychological elements that shape both the inner (unconscious) and outer (conscious) dynamics of the individual. As a consequence, studies in the field tend to create the image that psychology has shown a definite inclination towards analysing and researching aggression which, once activated internally and positively correlated with certain personality traits, character dimension and hereditary inheritance, can metamorphose into violence (external level) and cause severe psycho-emotional, physical and material damage to those who experience and generate it (Căprioară & Căprioară, 2013);
- When the aggressive impulse is dosed by the human individual in an improper way, lacking control and moderation, it generates violence, which can be categorised as the climax of the state of aggressiveness. According to all the norms and values that underpin human societies, “every human being has the right to live in safety and peace, to behave naturally, to speak his or her mind without the fear of being punished or abused, without feeling fear in relation to another person. There is no justification for any aggression, and the blame belongs entirely to the aggressor” (Stanciu et al., 2023, p. 148).

Although the members of the academic community have so far not agreed on an exhaustive definition, interpretation and delimitation of aggressiveness and violence, there is explicit evidence to be found in historical records and sources that aggressive and violent behavior “not only affects the individual, the victim, but also society and especially future generations, setting a negative example to follow” (Bonea, 2020, p. 18). This is why we can only validate the perspective

according to which “violence is a free aggressiveness, subject to human will and having a particular mimetic power, an aspect by which it imposes itself as a cultural phenomenon, original and constructed, therefore marked by intention, then aggressiveness expresses a bioeffective disposition, reactive to environmental situations, and thus shows a defense reaction to the environment” (Baciu, 2011, p. 35). The demarcation line between aggressiveness and violence is very sensitive and elusive in some situations and psycho-social relationships. This fact can mislead even the most well-informed researchers and exegetes of socio-human and natural sciences.

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