

Aggression Re-understood

What if aggression had nothing, very little, or only peripherally to do with violence?

I'd like to handle this topic aggressively. You might wish to read up on the topic aggressively, or perhaps disagree aggressively. Your research might reveal that "aggressive" can mean "assertive" or "spreading quickly", but you assert (aggressively) that it is more often used to mean "likely to attack". On that last note, I would have to (passively) concur. Study the synonyms and antonyms of the word. In common use, the opposite of aggression is non-hostile, non-antagonistic, or peaceful, leading us to believe that aggression must strongly relate to violence. But the inversions of "hostile" and "antagonistic" do not have to lead to violence. A business can orchestrate a "hostile" takeover without it being violent. Similarly, "antagonistic" literally means, "opposing the primary actor", i.e. an adversary. A person can be "antagonistic" with a rude salesperson without any intent of violence.

Why do we jump to the conclusion that aggression must be a precursor to physical violence? Is it because aggression is usually accompanied by strong emotion and it takes a strong emotion to fuel a violent act? Well, not really. State executions are violent acts, but are perpetrated in a cold, business-like, unimpassioned manner. Planned crimes having to do with killing are certainly violent, but are often (excuse the term) executed by the numbers, without extreme emotional involvement. Military snipers perform violent acts, but do so with a decided lack of emotion.

I do not want to deny that adversaries can become aggressive and that aggressiveness can be fueled by emotions that sometimes become anger and hostility, and that both can be released with violence. I do however want to offer an alternative view of both anger and aggression, a view some psychologists have offered in the past. I would like us to consider that **both anger and aggression are the results of frustration** and that **frustration is the result of feeling powerless**.

"I have never struck someone in anger," a fellow martial artist reported, "but I came close only once when my live-in girlfriend decided that she was going to escalate our disagreement to an argument and that argument to a no-win scenario for me. No matter what I said to focus her on the subject, she decided that she would twist my words into a negative implication. Thus, rather than *discussing* our differences, I was forced to defend myself against false charges *and* to leave behind a potentially fruitful discussion. In other words, she cared more about frustrating me than finding a solution. She wanted to 'win' in the short run, rather than face my view of the facts and compare them to hers. In her 'winning', we both lost. To be fair, she was probably intimidated (due to some negative past experiences with other guys) by the fact that I was male and larger than she, even though I hardly consider myself intimidating. Simultaneously, I was frustrated that she did not accept my articulate logic as a means to work on a problem."

As martial artists, we are not skilled in practicing social psychology either for our own problems or for the problems of those around us—those we might see becoming angry and "aggressive". We can't put on our

capes and rush to the rescue, creating sanity and harmony in the world around us. However, we *can* reconsider our gut reactions to those people around us who seem to be getting hostile. “What,” we can ask ourselves, “is frustrating them?” What makes them feel helpless or disempowered?

Sometimes just a modicum of restored power, just a little restoration of choice, options, and the recognition of personal sovereignty can assuage the rage, avoid adversity, and digress from aggression, so we never arrive at violence.