

## Inclusive and Exclusive Aggression: Some (Gestalt) Reflections

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### ABSTRACT

Aggression – the energetic, forceful, protective quality of a person in relation – is differentiated into inclusive aggression and exclusive aggression following Angyal's (1965) conception of universal ambiguity. This paper compares these differently-based aggressions with respect to initiative, assertion, criticism and self-criticism, anger and parenting. It also refers to experiences in being the object of these varying aggressions from others, and being affected by the self-directed aggressions of the other. The aim is to promote inclusive aggression more generally so that citizens are less prone to support wars and engage in violence.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Wars and violence are all too common in the modern world, and any ideas we can contribute to lessen their tolerance by citizens of the world may be

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<sup>1</sup>Many have contributed to this work, but three individuals have made concrete suggestions that are incorporated into the text – Catherine B. Gray, Susan Gregory, and Lisa Pozzi – for which I am grateful.



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worth attention. In 1951, Paul Goodman (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, pp. 339 ff.) suggested that because we do not live out aggression well in everyday life, we lay the psychological basis for acceptance without adequate countervailing struggle concerning the many wars about us, and the massacres of children in schools in the USA, Norway, Russia, etc. With the decline of capitalism as a basis for organizing society, a system based on aggression, the need for countervailing effort is even enhanced. If we can learn to deal with aggression in everyday life, to promote those ways of being aggressive that build community, and to manage well those ways that are destructive of common welfare, we can possibly change how the world works; and we can contribute to a more peaceful future.

Within the fields of Gestalt therapy, psychoanalysis, and social psychology, there are competing conceptions of aggression; the purpose of this essay is to note these alternatives and to attempt to support the provocative perspective introduced by the founding text of Gestalt therapy. One goal of this paper is to update the relational view of aggression implicit in the original text but inadequately explicated. Providing a sampling of topics in which I have been personally involved over the years carries this aim forward. It does not intend to encompass the multitude of other topics that can readily be related to aggression.

In recent years two seminal thinkers have taken up this subject: Frank-M. Staemmler (2009) in Gestalt therapy, and Jessica Benjamin (1999) in relational psychoanalysis. Their inclusion of the relevant literature can serve as background for this essay. Staemmler adopts the common sense, colloquial view of aggression as always describing efforts that harm another who is the object of that aggression. His scholarship is extensive and well worth examining, and it contains an extended critique of the founders of Gestalt therapy. Benjamin, who stays within the realm of psychoanalysis, presents the alternative view in "Recognition and Destruction: An Outline of Intersubjectivity," one that is coherent with the original statement of the founders of Gestalt therapy. Rather than recapitulate their arguments, I alert the reader to their function as background to this essay, and I shall reference some relevant points from them in my analysis. Both writers importantly go beyond the individualism that is the underpinning of capitalist society.

I believe that aggression is much misunderstood in our common sense usage, because it is used only in reference to wars between nations and between citizens within nations. Yet, in my view, there is no human relation without aggression since there is no relationship without persons energetically presenting themselves to others. To bond with another, to converse with another, to work alongside another, to love another, one must exert oneself in reference to that other, and such exertion is the essence of aggression.

Even the subduing of oneself in relation to another involves aggression; in this matter, self-aggression. As we regulate ourselves in relationship, we are also exerting ourselves in that relationship.

The various topics in this paper are not meant to be organized by any systematic orientation other than that they are matters I have personally attended to. A different author would choose a significantly different group. They all have pertinence to the everydayness of life, and they aim to promote a culture that is an alternative to what dominates at the present time.

After defining aggression and locating it within the conceptualization of Gestalt therapy, I take up initiative as aggression, a major part of a capitalist world; assertion as an alternative notion to aggression; criticism and self-criticism as aggression; anger as aggression in both its divisive and bonding forms; parenting as aggression, where each of us learns positive and negative forms of aggression; what happens when one is an object of aggression in both its bonding and destructive forms; and aggression against the self as an undergirding of oppression.

### **Defining Aggression**

I want to explore the matter of aggression in its inclusive and exclusive aspects. In distinguishing such positive and negative aggression, I rely heavily on Andras Angyal's (1965) conception of "universal ambiguity":

One outlook, while not indiscriminate optimism, reflects the confidence that the "supplies" for one's basic needs exist in the world and that one is both adequate and worthy of obtaining these supplies. The neurotic belief is that these conditions are not available or that they can be made available by extremely complicated and indirect methods. Thus, in one way of life, the two basic human properties [autonomy and homonomy] function in an atmosphere of hope, confidence, trust or faith. [...] In the other, the propelling forces [of autonomy and homonomy] are the same, but they function in an atmosphere of diffidence, mistrust, and lack of faith. (p. 100)

Autonomy refers here to the trend toward self-expansion. In the trend to homonomy, a person strives "to surrender himself [herself] and become an organic part of something that he conceives as greater than himself" (p. 15). In Gestalt therapy, homonomy is considered to be healthy confluence at final contact: a merging with the other, and a losing of self in this larger unit. Angyal labels these two orientations as a healthy Gestalt and a neurotic Gestalt, respectively, and the orientations give different meanings to the same

subject; thus, aggression means one thing within an inclusive orientation and something quite different in an exclusive orientation

In relation to Angyal's "orientations," I have developed a continuum of what I call "dispositions" (Lichtenberg, 1988). At the ideal positive extreme is a disposition labeled "confident expectation"; at the negative extreme of this continuum is an "essential ambivalent anticipation." No real person has a disposition at either extreme because these are central tendencies, and all persons are sometimes very confident, full of hope and faith, and sometimes quite ambivalent, full of diffidence and mistrust, believing every gain is accompanied by serious costs. Persons can be placed on this continuum according to their typical way of being. Those nearest to a confident expectation fit into Angyal's healthy Gestalt when they are functioning with confidence, whereas those nearer to the ambivalent anticipation fit into his neurotic Gestalt when manifesting their ambivalence. I have located these dispositions within a psychoanalytic tradition.

So, here are some definitions of aggression in the two orientations or dispositions: an *inclusive aggression* based on confidence that one's needs will be met; and an *exclusive aggression* based on the anticipation that every gain is burdened by costs. In either case, aggression is an energetic, forceful, affirming, asserting, or protecting self in human relationships. Aggression is the energy of action.

In its inclusive form, aggression appears in the process of engaging in a connecting way and keeping engaged with an other or others who are the object of one's attention, and who may partner in one's goal striving, or be a perceived obstacle to one's goals, or who are a felt challenge to one's integrity. Such aggression is attuned to the capacity of the other(s) to receive it and to keep engaging with the aggressive person. In its exclusive form, aggression appears as the energy in the processes that diminish or negate the other or others in the relationship, or alternatively diminish or negate self in the relationship. One may diminish others via domination, overpowering, or escalating forcefulness. One may diminish self by withdrawing emotionally or physically from the relationship, or by hiding or obscuring oneself from the other. The ambiguity of aggression, thus, is that it can be bonding or divisive, inclusive or exclusive, egalitarian or opposed to equality depending upon whether it is embedded in a healthy or neurotic Gestalt.

With respect to aggression, a person must be seen always as simultaneously dealing with self and other. In dominating an other, for example, a person is also controlling self as part of the process, obscuring vulnerability or felt weakness. In withdrawing, one is making one's absence known to the other. In meeting and bonding with an other one accounts to the other's needs and to one's own needs.

Aggression is an important component of the sequence of contacting and withdrawing. It most properly appears during the contact phase of that process. In its inclusive form, to be aggressive is energetically to promote a distinct "I" and a distinct "You" in the relationship (Lichtenberg, 2000). A person both defines self openly and clearly and urges the other to define self openly and clearly when being in the service of communion at final contact. In its exclusive form, aggression diminishes or negates both the "I" of the other and the "I" of the self in the relationship, and thus promotes faulty confluence. The excess energy used in dominating or negating others is related to the degree of vulnerability, anxiety, helplessness arising within the person that is more than usual for that person. It is best seen as an indication of the person's unaccepted feelings of vulnerability.

### **Initiative as Aggression**

We do not ordinarily think of initiative as aggression, although it is so announced in Perls et al. (1951, p. 342). In various dictionary definitions of "initiative," we do not see reference to aggression: "an introductory act or step"; "readiness or ability in initiating action"; "the power or opportunity to act or take charge before others do." The term initiative derives from a Latin word meaning "beginning." When we think of aggression as the energy of action, therefore, we can see initiative as a force bringing something into an interaction in a social context that was not there before that act of beginning. It is an energetic arousal.

Yet, what brings me to focus attention on initiative in my concern to modify tolerance of violence and war? I do not think it is self-evident, though we intuitively know that an entrepreneurial spirit is characteristic of modern industrial societies, and that spirit relies on initiatives taken. So, too, wars of aggression turn on how initiative is taken while blaming the object of that war for requiring such action. I think of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and the United States of America in the 1990s and later in respect of Iraq and Afghanistan. Initiatives to go to war were taken after extensive projections upon others. Oddly enough, what has brought me to this focus has been an interest in responsibility, which I first studied in respect of applicants for public welfare (Lichtenberg and Pollock, 1967; Lichtenberg, 1988).

In our research, my colleague and I learned that these applicants for assistance were sometimes "irresponsible" and sometimes quite "responsible," depending upon how the authorities who worked with them handled the initiatives which their position afforded them. In our work with these caseworkers, we were able to transform disputatious and frustrating encounters into relationships that placed both applicants and authorities into

friendly, homonomous experiences. We saw that initiative could be inclusive or exclusive, bonding or divisive, rewarding and effective or frustrating and ineffective, depending upon how it was connected to answerability or accountability to those affected by the initiative. We considered responsibility to be two-pronged: *responsibility for* (bearing initiative, primacy) and *responsibility to* (bearing answerability or accountability).

Some of these caseworkers utilized their power to level demands on the applicants and required those applicants to be answerable for carrying out these demands. For example, an applicant was told she must go to the District Attorney and set in motion a process in which her absent husband would be required to support her and her children. The caseworker was regularly frustrated and angry when the applicant for her own reasons or excuses did not carry out that requirement. The applicant was then criticized or turned down for assistance and left frustrated and angry as well. The caseworker then recorded the applicant as "irresponsible." Or a mother was to take her child to a dentist but reported she did not have the bus fare or the time, or gave some other reason. She, too, was held blameworthy. The pattern was repeated many times, as we were able to record.

Others of these caseworkers had learned to share their power and leaned upon initiative developed by applicants. They balanced primacy (initiative) and accountability and found their work with applicants pleasant and productive. For example, one male caseworker dealt with a difficult male applicant who had previously been told he must actively seek employment or he would not receive assistance. The applicant provided many excuses for not doing so. This new caseworker took a different approach. He noted that he was required by law and by the agency to put the applicant in the way of employment, but he would rely upon the applicant's interest and creativity in how that effort would proceed. He offered to drive the applicant to places that the applicant chose, and to help in other ways he could. The applicant was visibly moved by the offer, and together they set out to look for appropriate jobs. Uniting primacy and answerability led to communion. The demand was still present, but it was embedded in a more egalitarian and inclusive social relation.

For many years now persons lower in hierarchies in modern society have been held accountable beyond the support given to them in doing the work they are assigned to do. Teachers are made to be answerable for the performance of their students on tests created by outsiders. Speed-up is common in factory work, and performance demands are put on workers in service jobs beyond their own decisions and creativity. These developments are seldom classified as aggression, but they are experienced as aggression by those being held to account. So, too, downsizing or closing of plants and organizations are aggressive actions not listed under the heading of aggression. It should

not be surprising that these actions promote rage, frustration, resignation, and sometimes counter-aggression. That this type of action is a new normal does not mean that such aggression of exclusion should be acceptable and tolerated in a humane society. This pattern becomes doubly negative when such social safety nets as unemployment insurance are cut back; or when it is made ridiculous to talk of a minimum guaranteed income.

Business and politics in a capitalist society are built upon the separation of initiative and answerability to the detriment of all citizens. We have a paucity of warm and friendly encounters as a result, and I am not surprised by how much depression and alcoholism, as well as other addictions, characterize societies of today.

### **Assertion as Aggression**

To “assert” is to state with assurance, confidence or force; to state strongly or positively; to put oneself forward boldly and insistently. To be assertive is also to be aggressive. In the 1970s, women’s consciousness-raising groups encouraged women to be assertive and fostered assertiveness training groups.

More recently Frank-M. Staemmler (2009), in his critique of the approach to aggression by the founders of Gestalt therapy, considered their view of aggression as individualistic (pp. 27 ff.), centered on the side of the aggressor and avoiding the other as the object of that aggression (p. 31); and he adopted the colloquial view of aggression as always harming the other. He noted Laura Perls’s two conceptions of aggression (the positive and negative variants) as belonging to two different motivational systems, as specified by the psychoanalyst Joseph Lichtenberg (pp. 38-39). He quoted Lichtenberg as positing the “need for exploration and assertion” and “the need to react aversively through antagonism or withdrawal (or both).” If I apply Angyal’s (1965) idea of universal ambiguity in this context, the two motivational systems can be located within the healthy and neurotic Gestalts. Thus, Laura Perls’s view of aggression contains both aggression within a healthy Gestalt and aggression within a neurotic Gestalt; whereas Staemmler’s and Lichtenberg’s view of two motivational systems simply divides the issue into aggression (neurotic Gestalt) and exploration-assertiveness (healthy Gestalt).

I think there is something right and something wrong with collapsing aggression into assertion. On the recommended side, assertion does not have the connotation of diminishing or negating the other, as aggression is often (falsely) assumed to mean; that is, aggression is typically conceived as what I have called exclusive aggression. Against this recommendation, assertion refers only to the “I” of contacting and omits any attention to the other. When I specify inclusive aggression, I am pointing to its function in contacting

as leading toward a merging with the other in the relationship, as promoting homonomy. To be aggressive is to support the other becoming a distinct figure, as much as it suggests energetic presentation of self (Lichtenberg, 2000). Rather than diminishing the other, inclusive aggression promotes the individuation and clarity of the other. Assertiveness could do this too, but then it would have to be redefined as inclusive assertiveness and little would be gained over the use of "aggression."

### **Criticism and Self-Criticism as Aggression**

I believe the same themes of inclusive aggression and exclusive aggression clarify alternate meanings of criticism and self-criticism. When we ask a person to look at something critically, we want that person to assess or judge the strengths and limitations of that which is being scrutinized; we are not inviting blanket rejection or wholesale acceptance. So, criticism can be a means to connection, or a means to diminishing the other.

Historically, the down side of criticism and self-criticism was illustrated in China during the Cultural Revolution there. What began as an effort to unite academics and intellectuals with peasants and workers degenerated into the domination of those academics and intellectuals by the "Red Guards," youths who came from the peasants and workers. Criticism was a put down rather than becoming a move toward equality. People were coerced to be self-critical. What Mao intended, I believe, was that persons in groups would become direct and frank with one another inside the group and refrain from criticism and gossip outside of the group (Mao, 1966, pp. 258-67). Criticism and self-criticism were meant to contribute to group solidarity with members as equals. The process degenerated into aggression as domination, because the oppressed changed places with the oppressors and became the oppressors themselves – an all too common process in revolutions.

When liberal arts education promotes critical thinking, it is attempting to enable the ability to weigh the strong and weak components of complex phenomena and to have students arrive at sound conclusions. Film and drama critics are charged with a similar responsibility. We rely on their judgments for a wise appraisal of a motion picture or a dramatic play. So, too, we expect reviewers of books to provide a sound judgment about the book, though I have personally experienced an unsound and condescending review, and it rankles to this day.

We train participants in the training program of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia to observe therapeutic work of fellow trainees and to give commentary to the therapist that is insightful, geared to what the therapist can assimilate, and challenging. We have come to call such commentary a

"gift for growth." It is not useful if it is not aggressive commentary, but it is also not valuable if it diminishes or negates the therapist who is trying to grow as a Gestalt therapist.

Editors help authors by their criticism as well as by encouragement of self-criticism, as do teachers with their students.

In our time of exclusive aggressive talk radio shows, we see daily illustrations of negative criticism, which leads even to death threats against those criticized. Such programs have debased journalism, to the decline of our civilization.

### **Anger as Aggression**

Anger is commonly viewed only as a negative emotion aimed at limiting or diminishing the other. Staemmler (2009) devotes a lengthy part of his book to describing anger in its negative form. He has no space for anger as a means to reach communion in final contact. Yet, in Gestalt therapy we see anger also in its positive light as containing passion with respect to the other and, when well done, leading to union with the other: "[I]n general, anger is a sympathetic passion; it unites persons because it is admixed with desire" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 343).

Over the years I have had occasions in groups that I have facilitated when a member has become angry with me, and I have had positive resolutions such as Goodman suggests in the quotation above. In these encounters, I explore what I have done that was angry-making, what the offended person experienced internally, and what was going on inside me that brought me to do what I did. Every time each of us has explored all of these matters thoroughly, we have met in a friendly way. Indeed, some members of the group did not believe that anger was present at all, since there was no outburst in the scene. From these events, I wrote a little piece to share with colleagues which I called, "The Incomplete 'I': An Impediment to Reaching Mutual Understanding and Community." Here, with a slight modification, is what I wrote:

I am angry with Gabrielle. I have the feeling of anger. Gabrielle has done X, which arouses in me the feeling of anger.

There exists an I-Gabrielle, an I-You, in my experience, which seems to fulfill the requirement for awareness of the experience of the organism/environment field. In my awareness, I perceive in a complex way what Gabrielle did to arouse my feeling of anger. Her action is vivid for me as is my feeling of anger.

Yet, I now contend that beyond my feeling of anger is something in me, a memory, an association, a bodily process that has contributed to the arousal of my feeling with respect to Gabrielle. This is less vivid

in my awareness than my perceptions of Gabrielle and her action. This limit to my awareness is what I am calling an Incomplete "I."

*Example:* Gabrielle says I am stealthily planning to do something she does not like. She is accusing me of being underhanded. As a result, I am angry with her. But why am I angry? There are many possibilities, including my not being angry but interested in what she is about. One reason I might be angry is that I believe she has attacked my integrity. Anger is a common response when one's integrity is threatened, yet we have not established why there would be a threat. We have transferred anger to the feeling of being threatened. Perhaps Gabrielle has power over me, could hurt me, and I become anxious about that possibility. But I have not had that anxiety in my awareness vividly. So, my awareness is more distinct about Gabrielle and her action than about what has been stimulated in me by that action.

Perhaps Gabrielle has accused me in a public setting and I feel exposed and somewhat shamed. But the feeling of shame, like that of anxiety referred to above, is not vivid in my awareness.

Perhaps there is some truth in Gabrielle's criticism. I do not want to experience that truth, and the shame or other feeling connected to my conniving, however innocent I consider myself to be. So, that is dimmer in my awareness than my perception of Gabrielle.

There may be many other inner memories and associations stirred up by Gabrielle's action: for example, she reminds me of others who have criticized me as my father was ready to do. The significant element in the Incomplete "I" is how the perception of the other is balanced by the interoceptions, which are registrations in awareness of one's interior. The feeling of anger is composed of both perceptions and interoceptions, but the clarity of the interocepts is often lesser than the clarity of the percepts. This is what I am calling an Incomplete "I."

Put in a relational context, my expressing anger at Gabrielle is quite different if 1) I emphasize only the perceptual origins of my anger, her action; and 2) I give equal weight to my own contribution to my angry feeling and to her contribution to that feeling. In the first instance, when I emphasize her action and obscure my inner part, I come across as blaming Gabrielle – and she will have to defend herself, either by aggressing in response or withdrawing from me. My anger can be seen as aimed at dominating Gabrielle. In the second instance, when I give equal weight to what she has done to me and what I have contributed to my feeling, I come across as being open to her as well as to me – and she is more likely to want to meet me on

this plane of equality.

We tend to obscure our own contribution because it makes us vulnerable. We forget in such circumstances that we can be both vulnerable and substantial in the same interaction. And, after all, at bottom this is what life is: we are both vulnerable and will be controlled by others, and we will ultimately die; and we are substantial as we nonetheless go about living. A more complete "I" is thus life affirming.

### **Parenting as Aggression**

Parenting children can be an egalitarian endeavor or an authoritarian enterprise, and whether it is egalitarian or authoritarian depends heavily upon whether the aggression is of an inclusive or an exclusive nature. The interplay of vulnerability and aggression assumes significance in parenting activities because infants and children represent the fullness of vulnerability in their innocence and receptivity; parents and other caretakers wield the most obvious aggression in the negotiations that ensue between the smaller and larger one.

In a psychoanalytic study that my colleagues and I carried out in a child psychiatry clinic in the 1950s, we did an analysis of parent-child relationships over many domains, ranging from feeding patterns, weaning and toilet training to friendships, schooling, household chores, religious indoctrinations to independence strivings (Lichtenberg, Kohrman, and Macgregor, 1960). We were interested in how parents and children came to mutually inclusive divisions of satisfactions; we were studying how they "met" each other in daily life. We believed that infants and children were moved by their own needs; they were originally oriented to cooperating with others and were sensitive to others, such that they monitored when others were available to them or too anxious to meet them, and so forth. We also believed that caretakers had to find and deal positively with the needs of the infant and child as the child expressed these needs, but that in doing so they had also to attend to and take care of their own desires. This was a central lesson we derived from psychoanalysis and from progressive education. We defined permissiveness such that parents attended to their own desires, while encouraging their children to find and express their needs and preferences.

Central to our assessment was how early in the child's acting upon his or her needs the parent saw conflict with their own desires and acted to curtail the child. Conversely, as would be expected in mutual adaptation, we analyzed how parents imposed their desires upon their children, or accommodated themselves to their children. For example, we looked at whether the parents

allowed the children to participate and regulate their own weaning from the breast or the bottle; how children leaned upon developments within their bodies to toilet train themselves while watching their parents use the bathroom; how children were free to deal with playmates; how the little ones expressed interest in morals; how they chose to nurture themselves as well as others; how they dealt with cleanliness; and how they became independent. We developed a scale that would rate early and late interventions, took a central tendency to record how mutually inclusive children and their parents were in their ongoing daily lives, and correlated that tendency with family motivation for treatment in our clinic.

The scale we used was called "Stage of Earliest Application of Power." We rated the place at which parents *first* conceived that a child's need conflicted with their own need. It ranged from parents inducing needs in children (as in over-protecting parents) to seeing conflict only after the child had explored alternative ways of meeting his or her needs and settled upon one behavior that challenged the parent's needs. We were able from these ratings to see the constellations of problems shown by the children, not only by the central tendency of inclusiveness or exclusiveness over many areas, but also by which domain showed early intrusions by the parents and which were more mutual and led to meetings of parent and child.

For us, child-rearing was aimed at promoting a general confidence in the child, such that the child would have the faith that Goodman suggested (Perls et al., 1951, p. 415); the healthy Gestalt that Angyal (1965) referred to; and the confident expectation that I derived (Lichtenberg, 1988). To promote a child's growth was less to foster particular behaviors than to support the child's creativity and sense of self. Where behaviorists suggested that parents reward some behaviors to promote them, we focused on mutual adaptation of parents and child and the meetings that were created.

Parents use their influence in relation to their children, and this can be inclusive aggression or exclusive aggression. Parenting when viewed in the light of aggression is not only dominating a child, using anger as a control, spanking a wayward boy, or reacting to the temper tantrum of a frustrated little girl. It is using influence to find an infant's need when the infant is mysteriously crying; it is providing situations in which the child uses creativity; it is dealing with one's own needs in ways that a child can understand and come to terms with. Because aggression has long been narrowed to mean exclusive aggression, we have handicapped ourselves from seeing the relevance and significance of aggression in child-rearing. When we see inclusive aggression as the energetic part of actions that lead to moments of communion between parents and children, we have a better view of democratic, progressive child-rearing. We can then normalize the anger that every parent and every child

experience in relationships, since anger indicates influence gone astray and helplessness beginning to appear.

Benjamin (1999) has suggested that intersubjectivity develops in the child through mutual influence of mother and child. Drawing on the work of Winnicott, Stern and Beebe, and her own thinking about the need of both child and mother for recognition, Benjamin posed that conflict between mother and child as well as support is vital to healthy development:

How she responds to her child's and her own aggression depends on her ability to mitigate such fantasies [of omnipotence] with a sense of real agency and separate selfhood, on her confidence in her child's ability to survive conflict, loss, imperfection. The mother has to be able to both set clear boundaries for her child and recognize the child's will, to both insist on her own independence and respect that of the child – in short to balance assertion and recognition. If she cannot do this, the omnipotence continues. (p. 191)

Benjamin stated further:

As Beebe and Lachmann [...] have proposed, one of the main principles of the early dyad is that relatedness is characterized not by continuous harmony but by continuous disruption and repair. [...] A relational psychoanalysis should leave room for the messy intrapsychic side of creativity and aggression; it is the contribution of the intersubjective view that may give these elements a more hopeful cast, showing destruction to be the "other" of recognition. (p. 199)

Parent-child relations are the training ground for learning to be aggressive; too often in the past only exclusive aggression has been brought to the fore, which is another reason why war and violence are so readily accepted.

### **On Being the Object of Aggression**

When a person is the recipient of aggression coming from another, that person experiences the aggression quite differently if the aggression is of the inclusive or exclusive character; and the recipient manages the aggression differently if that person brings a healthy or a neurotic Gestalt to the relationship. In all instances of aggression, the recipient takes in what is happening to herself or to himself; the person introjects the aggression. What happens inside the person after this internalizing, and how the person acts subsequently in the relationship, depends upon how the recipient processes

what has been taken in from the aggressive other.

The simplest case exists when the aggression is an inclusive one on the part of the aggressor, and the object of that aggression responds from a healthy Gestalt. Both parties to the relationship are promoting the autonomy of the other as well as their own agency, and the meeting or homonomy is made most probable. That is the ideal situation, and everyone comes away from the encounter feeling enhanced as part of a unit larger than self, as a member of a new community.

Matters become more complicated if the recipient brings a neurotic Gestalt to what is intended as an inclusive aggression. In this situation, the recipient tends to act as if the aggression is of an exclusive rather than an inclusive nature. The aggressor must now increase efforts at reassuring the other that a meeting of equals is intended rather than any domination in the relationship. In effect, the aggressor needs to assist the recipient in processing the aggression.

When the aggression is exclusive, the best that the recipient can do is to bring his or her healthy Gestalt into the relationship; that is, the person who is an object of an exclusive aggression will internalize the intensity of the aggression meant for dominating that person, and also the unacknowledged and unaccepted vulnerability on the part of the aggressor that is projected to avoid the direct experience of that felt weakness by the aggressor. Exclusive aggression tends to produce vulnerability in the object of the aggression, which must be managed as well as the aggression itself. I have described this process in a chapter detailing how a therapist best meets a client who is being oppressive in the therapy (Lichtenberg, 2004). The challenge is to experience fully the impact of the aggressor's actions; to discriminate what is one's own contribution to the felt aggression and helplessness, and what is being projected by the aggressor. Then the therapist introduces vulnerability and assertion into the relation without ceding power to the client. The therapist is being vulnerable and aggressive in the context of a search for a meeting with the client.

The most complex and disruptive transaction unfolds when the recipient of exclusive aggressive actions processes the aggression and acts in the relation from a neurotic Gestalt. This may entail identification with the aggressor (self-conquest) as the recipient submits to the aggressor; or it may involve a counter-aggression that is ineffective because it contains the recipient's own unaccepted but active vulnerability. Herein is the basis for collusion of oppressor and oppressed (Lichtenberg, 1990/1994/2002). Managing one's felt vulnerability as well as the internalized aggression is the challenge for a person who is the object of an exclusive aggression.

### **Aggression Against the Self**

In Gestalt therapy we have tended to call aggression directed inwardly against the self "Self-Conquest" (Perls et al., 1951, pp. 353 ff.) This approach limits such aggression to being only exclusive aggression and omits the possibility of inclusive aggression, that self-directed aggression which has been delineated earlier as productive self-criticism. We must remember that all energetic effort is relational as well as self-organizing, which guides us to look at how the other in the relationship experiences this self-directed aggression. Unless we do this, we fall into an individualistic rather than a relational psychology.

With recent attention to mirror neurons, we have access to the impact on others when one is directing aggression against the self. On the one hand, being self-critical socially, while communicating personal acceptance of oneself and confidence in the presence of that criticism, promotes contacting on the way to communion. It represents bringing one's fullness and complexity into the relationship. It presumes equality in the relationship. With the openness of self-criticism, others are not led to projecting upon the person when they see more of him or of her. One can be self-critical while fostering increased contact with another in the relationship.

On the other hand, self-conquest as internally-directed exclusive aggression may support inequality in a social relation, and it may do so importantly if the inequality already exists in that relationship; that is, if one party is superior and the other subordinate. In the most well-known version seen in identification with the aggressor (Lichtenberg, 1990, pp. 9 ff.), the self-directed exclusive aggression aims to separate and protect the subordinate from the aggressive superior. This self-conquest causes the person to hide his or her reactive aggression from the superior and to manage it privately. This strategy of hidden triumph over the self by the subordinate allows the aggressor to project upon the subordinate according to his or her own predisposition, and colors the relationship in accord with the tendencies of the superior. In this way, the subordinate contributes to his or her inferiority in the relationship. Sooner or later, the subordinate can no longer contain the projection, and his or her own aggression surfaces.

Alternately, the superior in the relationship may develop or increase superiority by self-control of his or her exclusive aggression. When my father clenched his teeth to contain his anger with me, I became frightened and I shrank. When the president of our college displayed her displeasure by self-control, we faculty members felt intimidated. Some were later outspokenly exclusively aggressive when they were leaving the college or were retiring.

In short, aggression against the self has complex ramifications when seen

in a relational frame; it is not innocent in respect of how others are affected in its presence.

### **Conclusion**

This study in aggression is, at the same time, an exploration of vulnerability in the presence of aggression. As we change the common sense view of aggression so that we see it in its inclusive as well as its exclusive form, we must also change the everyday meaning of being open about one's vulnerability. Here, again, Angyal's (1965) notion of universal ambiguity is relevant. To be vulnerable when acting within a neurotic Gestalt is to be indirect, self-abasing, manipulative, and essentially pathetic – hoping to be taken care of – or to dominate the other in reaction as we often see in fighting couples. Alternatively, to be vulnerable within a healthy Gestalt is to acknowledge one's weakness while also accepting one's strength and influence in the situation of dealing with an aggressive other. Being vulnerable when acting within a healthy Gestalt means a person retains his or her sense of being an agent in the relationship.

War and violence are obvious instances of exclusive aggression. They are efforts to dominate an enemy, to make the enemy vulnerable. Wars in the last one hundred years have shown us that such efforts at domination invariably fail in the long run. Sooner or later, the enemy recovers its sense of being an influence in the relationship and gives up absorbing projections. Nazi Germany learned this lesson, and the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have been teaching the same lesson to the United States of America, as Afghanistan taught the Russians and the British before them. There is no end to the "war on terror."

We must reframe war so that in our moments of vulnerability – political, economic, and social – we can find inclusive aggression rather than the urge to dominate assigned others. The failures of the "war on drugs," being tough on crime, putting the mentally ill in prisons rather than in therapeutic communities, should have taught us the inadequacies of exclusive aggression. As capitalism continues its historical decline, leaving masses of people poor and uncared for, we will need to learn the lessons of productive and unproductive aggression if humankind is to survive.

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