

The Dynamic-Psychiatric Concept of Aggression

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Aggression is a carrier of group ability and identity development. If interpersonal communication fails, there is a reactive, i.e. environmentally induced „crippling“ of constructive aggression, which then finds expression in destructive aggression directed against the self or outwards. Deficient aggression is destructive aggression that is not responded to by the surrounding group and is directed inwards – against oneself and one’s own body. In this case, there is no longer any communication with the environment. Without the original group-dynamic formulation of aggression as a carrier of psychic development, a formulation of the social-energetic principle would never have been possible.

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Since Sigmund Freud’s formulation of the death drive, aggression has been the focus of psychoanalytic debate. The psychoanalytic concept of aggression has given rise to different scientific viewpoints on understanding the significance and problems of aggression.

Long before Freud’s work “Beyond the Pleasure Principle“ (1920), in which he dealt with the death instinct, antipodally opposed to Eros, as the ultimate goal of all life, Sabina Spielrein already addressed the “death instinct“, Freud’s later death instinct, in her work “Destruction as the Cause of Becoming“ in 1912. And she developed a theory of the boundary and the boundary experience that was only taken up again much later in the history of psychoanalysis.

The Freudian understanding of aggression as an expression of a self-destructive and other-destructive death instinct, which strives to return all living things to the “state of inorganic stability“ (Freud 1940), was by no means only positively received in the psychoanalytic camp. According to Anna Freud (1972), the dualistic drive theory, and in particular the death drive theory, divided the psychoanalytic movement into two large camps: On the one hand, into the group of proponents of the death drive, including, for example, Melanie Klein (1972) and her followers, and on the other, into a group of staunch opponents from the camp of object relations theorists of the middle English school, such as Fairbairn (1952) and Guntrip (1968), as well as from the camp of psychoanalytic ego psychology.

Alongside analysts such as Kohut (1973, 1979) and Fromm (1977), who broke away from the drive model, Winnicott (1950), Spitz (1965) and Parens (1979, 1989) still formulate an aggression drive, which this time, however, is endowed with a constructive and a destructive quality, “which co-exist with each other“ (Rauchfleisch 2002).

In his therapeutic work with severely ill archaic or early disturbed patients, Günter Ammon was repeatedly able to establish that destructive aggression can be traced back to negative and hostile communication within the primary group. Conversely, in the Berlin psychoanalytic kindergarten at the time, it was observed that destructive aggression could be resolved through intensive parent group work.

These experiences were so significant that, as early as 1968, Günter Ammon moved away from a primarily destructive aggression drive and saw aggression in the sense of “Adgredi“ as a primarily constructive human developmental force that only develops through specific destructive group dynamics into what is commonly understood as aggression in the sense of a destructive force.

Aggression is therefore the carrier of all constructive expressions of life that relate people to other people and things. In other words, aggression is a carrier of group ability and identity development. It is interesting to note here that attachment theory also speaks of a “biological endowment of the infant for orientation and readiness to interact“, but whose “behavioural organisation requires external social regulation“ (Grossmann 1994).

However, the constructive aggression of the creative adgredi also means “separating oneself from the early childhood symbiosis of the mother-child or primary group without guilt or fear in an effort to realise one’s own identity“ (Ammon 1973). In this respect, constructive aggression must always be seen in connection with the development of a person’s identity.

To summarise once again: Aggression is understood as an expression of interpersonal communication. If this fails, there is a reactive, i.e. environmentally induced “crippling“ of constructive aggression, which then finds its expression in destructive aggression directed against the self or outwards.

Personality is understood here as a multidimensional, holistic structure. Its elements, namely the ego functions, are in a synergistic, mutually regulating and dynamic relationship with each other and can be assigned to three different substructures of the personality. The primary substructure encompasses the entire physical-biological area of the human being. The

central, predominantly unconscious substructures of the personality include, for example, aggression as well as the functions of fear, demarcation, narcissism, creativity, the body ego, sexuality and group ability. The secondary substructure is assigned abilities and skills that establish contact with reality.

With the formulation of the dynamic-psychiatric personality model in 1974, which Ammon called the human structure model, the concept of deficit increasingly came to the fore in theoretical and therapeutic treatment.

Deficit areas of human identity are unstructured personality areas, parts of children's life expressions, especially in the pregenital developmental period, which did not find a constructive human relationship, but rather met with hostility or indifference.

I would like to draw attention here to the very differentiated analysis of Ammon's concept of deficit by A. Thome and G. Sandermann, who specifically dealt with Ammon's concept of deficit in their discussion of other psychoanalytical conflict models and deficit models. The authors consider it "sensible and necessary to deal with the psychological deficit, because it is less obvious to so-called common sense to consider the possibility of undeveloped functions than their dysfunctional deformations" (Thome, Sandermann 1997, p. 193). In the specialist literature on aggression, for example, a differentiation is made between constructive and destructive manifestations, but the deficient developments of aggression are rarely discussed from this perspective.

Ammon understands deficient aggression as destructive aggression that is not answered by the surrounding group and is directed inwards – against oneself and one's own body. In this case, there is no longer any communication with the environment. The person remains passive, withdrawn, apathetic and avoids all rivalry and confrontation. This form of functional development is therefore the sicker, more subtle manifestation of a pathological relationship dynamic.

The integration of aggression into the overall structure of all personality functions as a result of the human structure concept gives aggression a special position as a creative, subordinate function, a regulatory variable that dynamises the other personality functions and makes actions more coherent and goal-oriented (Ammon 1979).

The development of the human structure concept also laid the foundations for empirical research in dynamic psychiatry. The first instrument to be developed was Ammon's Ego Structure Test (ISTA) for measuring ag-

gression (cf. Beck, Bott, Wiehl-Volbehr 1978; Burbiel, Vogelbusch 1980), and later also for measuring the central functions of anxiety, dissociation, narcissism and sexuality. This questionnaire was used to test key aspects of the theory of aggression. It was shown that in psychotherapy it is possible to transform deficient aggression into constructive aggression through destructive aggression processing. In addition, the significance of destructive aggression for creativity processes and the different quality of aggression development in various clinical pictures could be recorded. Significant correlations between aggression and various human functions were also discovered using the ego structure test of aggression. Of central importance was also the empirical confirmation of Ammon's clinical observation that deficient aggression is the one with the highest disease value.

This created the possibilities for a structural description and measurability of the most important personality functions in their constructive, destructive and deficient qualities. The work on destructive and deficient aggression is a prerequisite for removing the patient's developmental arrest.

With the formulation of the human structure model, there is a move away from ego and object psychology towards identity psychology. Identity makes statements about the wholeness, multidimensionality, group-relatedness and processuality of the human being. "Identity is the permanent aspect of a personality and at the same time it is not permanent. Identity is a process, an ongoing search, an ongoing development" (Ammon 1986).

Since the formulation of the human structure model, not only aggression but all central human functions have been understood as "initial potentiality in child development" (Ammon 1979), as potentialities that are primarily given to the child from birth. However, the question of the "energetic nourishment" of the human structure ultimately remains open. In 1977, Ammon conceptualised a "non-specific energy reservoir". This was the first step in moving away from the libido theory. In 1982, the social-energetic development principle was expanded and is still valid today.

Constructive social energy is understood as an energy that touches people as a whole person in their unconscious and thus also changes it. Through interest in the other person, through demands on his identity, through calls to action, activity and deep emotional encounters. Destructive, i.e. contact-destroying and therefore development-retarding, are prohibitions, life restrictions, punishments, constraints, open destruction in the form of violence, mistreatment, abuse and much more. Deficient social

energy is the refusal of contact, ignoring people and indifference to formal care. Deficient social energy is often expressed in relationships of pampering and failure (Ammon et al. 1982).

Social energy serves as a transmitter between identity and group, identity is manifested social energy. These statements postulate the indivisibility of person and relationship in the sense of a synergistic-dialectical principle: "The person develops his identity in the group. The group relationship integrates him, the identity differentiates him from the group" (Ammon et al 1982). Social energy is thus now the force „that supports the structure, dynamics and process of identity and group“ (Ammon 1982).

Constructive aggression, narcissistic supply and social energy form three sources of psychic energy – in my opinion based on various basic human needs. On a metatheoretical level, they form three closely linked motivational systems.

In terms of developmental history, the various energetic dimensions have different significance for identity growth: the constructive aggression of the child and the narcissistic supply of the surrounding group are probably the most important developmental energies in the first year of life. As the child's boundaries and identity develop, aggression and narcissistic attention are increasingly integrated into the social energy system as special energetic qualities.

We can therefore state and summarise at the same time: Without the original group-dynamic formulation of aggression as a carrier of psychic development, a formulation of the social-energetic principle would never have been possible.

The concept of social energy was developed precisely from work with severely mentally ill "early disturbed" patients and has therefore significantly influenced therapeutic work in both individual and group treatment. The central issue, especially in group psychotherapy, is the creation of a therapeutically favourable social energy field in which the exchange of narcissistic energy and constructive-aggressive energy are related to and regulated by each other. A developmentally favourable composition of patients into a group is important here.

The destructive aggression is released in the therapeutic process when the group fulfils its emancipatory task, namely the dissociation from the adaptation to the illness. The therapist and group as allies are then often experienced as hostile, as they unconsciously remind us of the painful and distressing early childhood experiences that we had buried within our-

selves for a long time. The group as a place of unconscious re-enactment of the pathological primary group dynamics is particularly important for the often vehement archaic abandonment aggressions, also for the splitting of various friendly and hostile transference relationships between the different group members and the therapist.

The group-dynamic understanding of aggression and the group-dynamic work with it is of particular importance to me personally, as the polarisation of perpetrator and victim, guilt and innocence, good and evil is eliminated in the group process and the symptom bearer is relieved. It makes the entire group responsible for the expressions of aggression of individual members; the entire group is responsible for its style of aggression, including the adapted, non-aggressive members.

Eugen Kiem speaks about Günter Ammon's model of aggression in the light of neurobiological research and, with reference to Naomi Eisenberger (2006) and others, comes to the conclusion that "the constructs of the aggression model can be scientifically verified" (Kiem 2024).

The American neuropsychologist Naomi Eisenberger (2006) found that social exclusion, insult and humiliation are perceived in the brain like physical pain and can reactively trigger aggression. The neurobiologist and psychotherapist Joachim Bauer describes this finding as "a breakthrough in the understanding of human aggression" (Bauer 2011, 59). He writes, among other things: "The neurobiological redefinition of the 'pain threshold' is in line with everything that recent studies from the field of psychology and social research show: Lack of belonging to a group and rejection by other people are the strongest and most important triggers of aggression" (Bauer 2011, 60).

When Günter Ammon defines constructive aggression as „a purposeful and contact-establishing activity towards oneself, other people, things and mental content“, from today's neurobiological point of view he is encompassing both the attachment and the exploration system. Although these two systems are closely linked and work together, they are two different neurobiological systems. With constructive attachment, e.g. through good group bonding, people can explore well.

The inclusion of aggression in interpersonal relationships paved the way for an understanding of the psychotherapeutic changeability of people in and through groups from the very beginning of the development of dynamic psychiatric theory. For Ammon, aggression and the "redevelopment" or uncovering of constructive aggression is the linchpin of any therapy.

The verbalisation of destructive aggression is often the turning point in psychotherapy.

In both individual and group psychotherapy, working with the arrested symbiosis complex, i.e. with the unsuccessful detachment from the early childhood symbiosis with the mother and thus also the family group, is of particular importance, as this is what makes it possible to find one's own needs and identity in the first place. By working on the symbiotic transference and countertransference and the resistance, the therapeutic relationship is ultimately about enabling emotionally corrective experiences.

In conclusion, I would like to remind you once again that Günter Ammon has repeatedly warned of the danger of tabooing human aggression since the beginning of his therapeutic work. A danger that still seems to persist today when contemporary authors refer to it in their publications. Mention should therefore be made, for example, of Jesper Juul (2013), who in his book *Aggression. Why it is necessary for us and our children* points out that aggressive and frustrated reactions from children are quickly blocked in institutions and stigmatised as behavioural problems. He refers to Joachim Bauer (2011): "Without aggression, we would not be able to set goals and pursue them. (...) Successfully communicated aggression is constructive. Aggression that has lost its communicative function is destructive."

Mention should also be made of the psychoanalyst Ann Kathrin Scheerer, who writes on the tabooing of passionate aggression in early childhood: "Under stress, young children also express their feelings, desires and conflicts through aggression, which is often educationally and morally disqualified. This taboo not only leads to a loss of the message, but also negates the fact that children have an ethical right to their own will and expression" (Scheerer 2017, 38).

Or the psychoanalyst and affect researcher Rainer Krause (2003), who distinguishes between primary affects and structural affects, a topic that we unfortunately cannot go into any further here.

Mention should also be made of Reinhard Krüger (2007), who, like Ammon, sees aggression positively as an expression of vital energy and also places the processing of aggression at the centre of treatment. The aim is to increase and strengthen the complexity of living systems. The more complex and greater its free creativity, the more constructive the aggression.

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