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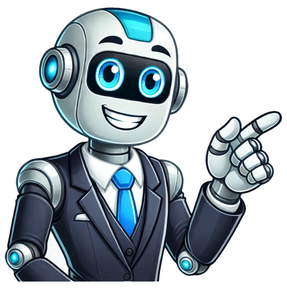

Think about a time when you got angry. I don’t mean a time when you just were ticked off at a coworker or annoyed with someone in traffic. Think about a time when you were really angry. If you can’t think of one, think of someone who got really angry at you. Anger is a common human emotion, but it can spiral out of control very quickly. Anger over a parking ticket could turn into a broken mirror. A simple dispute at the bar could turn into a brawl. Wearing the wrong jersey in the wrong place could actually become dangerous. Why does this happen? Why do we let ourselves get so aggressive? These moments of extreme anger may feel uncontrollable. People often “black out” due to anger and commit acts that they would have otherwise not committed in a calm state. There are certain states that allow “passion” to be a defense strategy in court. Is this just human nature, or something that can be controlled and done away with? There isn’t one answer. What Are Theories of Aggression? Psychologists have three main theories of aggression that attempt to explain why we become aggressive and whether that behavior can be changed. More theories have been proposed, but these three have stood the test of time so far and are key to understanding where aggression originates. These theories include: Instinct Theory of Aggression Frustration-Aggression Theory Social Learning Theory This video will briefly touch on all three of these Theories of Aggression, where they come from, and how they fit into our everyday behaviors and attitudes. Instinct Theory of Aggression (Thanatos Theory) The first theory of aggression goes back to the days of Sigmund Freud. Freud’s theories on behavior changed over time. At first, he believed that all behaviors stemmed from Eros, the life instinct. These were the instincts that kept us alive and wanting to reproduce. But in 1920, he wrote that the life instinct just couldn’t explain all of the urges or behaviors that humans display. Aggression doesn’t always fit into our desire to stay alive and keep others alive. So in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud wrote about Thanatos. This was the name he gave to the “death instinct.” The death instinct helped to explain why humans become aggressive, why they engage in harmful behaviors, or why they seek to recreate past traumas. Freud believed that these two instincts exist together in every human mind, and that all behaviors stem from the balance of these two instincts. This may explain why we take anger out on others. Even if this anger or aggression is initially directed inward, Eros overpowers Thanatos. In an effort to keep ourselves alive, the aggression is directed outward. What did Freud propose that we do about these instincts? Not too much. He believed that there wasn’t much use in trying to quell aggression when it comes from an innate instinct that is deeply embedded in the human mind. His proposal focused more on structuring society in a way that kept communities small. In order to protect the community, strategies would be devised so aggressive behaviors could be focused outside of the community, protecting all members. Konrad Lorenz on Freud's Theories of Aggression Theories on the source of human aggression can be helpful. But in the case of theories like Freud's, aggression seems inevitable. Is it? Can it be avoided? Those are the questions that psychologists like Konrad Lorenz asked. Lorenz is best known for his work in animal psychology, but he also studied humans. He wrote On Aggression. The book touches on Freud's theory of aggression, linking aggression to the preservation of the species. Lorenz also explores ways that we can redirect or inhibit aggression, which includes some of Freud's methods as well. First, Lorenz believed that self-knowledge could help reduce aggression. Psychoanalysis (Freud's specialty) could assist humans in this process. Second, Lorenz believed that social connections, especially across multiple groups, could reduce aggression. Think of how much calmer the world would be if all people were open to making friendships with people across political party lines, races, ages, and cultures. We would have a lot fewer people screaming at each other! Third, Lorenz believed our aggression could be channeled into less violent activities. Instead of yelling at the guy who cut you off in traffic, you could drive over to the gym and lift some weights. Frustration-Aggression Theory Even if you can’t remember the last time you were aggressive with someone, I can guarantee that you can remember a time in which you were frustrated with someone. Frustration is a common human emotion that comes up when someone or something is holding us back from reaching a goal. That goal could be as simple as finishing an essay or as complicated as answering life’s most profound questions. The frustration-aggression theory simply states that aggression stems from frustration. Frustration is likely to turn into aggression, but it doesn’t have to if a person has higher levels of self-awareness or self-control. Studies on Frustration-Aggression Theory Aggression doesn’t have to be directly used against the thing that a person is frustrated about. Once the goal is achieved and the frustration subsides, the aggression may still be present. In one of the earliest studies on frustration-aggression theory, children were placed in front of a wire screen. Toys were on the other side. While the children could see the toys, the toys were just out of reach. This was likely frustrating for the children who wanted to play with the toys. Once the wire barrier was removed and the children were able to play with the toys, researchers noted that their play was much more aggressive than when the barrier had not been in place initially. Examples of Frustration-Aggression Theory in Media and Real Life It’s not hard to link moments of aggression to moments of frustration. Think of all those viral videos of people yelling at retail workers about mask mandates or other rules. All of that aggression comes from frustration. Not all aggression has to be violence, though. Have you ever seen Footloose? The movie features an iconic scene in which Kevin Bacon's character dances quite aggressively throughout a warehouse. He does this because he's so frustrated! Before he begins the dancing scene, the movie shows scenes from the movie of moments that frustrated him. If you're frustrated, maybe you should try dancing instead of yelling! Think about this in your own life. Have you ever kicked something or slammed a door “out of frustration?” Maybe you've danced wildly through a warehouse to the song "Never," just like in Footloose. These are all aggressive behaviors. Linking frustration to aggression almost seems like a no-brainer, huh? Social Learning Theory The last aggression theory comes out of one of the most famous experiments of all time. The Social Learning Theory was proposed by Albert Bandura in the 1960s. Bandura is most known for his Bobo Doll experiment, which attempted to explain how children learn aggression from an early age. He proposed that aggression is a learned behavior. Children exert aggression simply because they are imitating what they have observed. Here’s how the experiment went down. Children were put in a room with an adult, some toys, and a large Bobo Doll. (A Bobo Doll is one of those inflatable clowns that bounces back up when you hit it.) Half of the children sat in the room with the adult as they gently played with the toys, displaying little aggression. The other half sat in the room with the adult as the adult aggressively hit or kicked the Bobo Doll. Some of these adults used explicit language or even hit the Bobo Doll over the head with a mallet. The children were then separated from the adult and placed in a room alone with more exciting toys. After a few minutes, the toys were taken away in order to upset the children. All of the children were then taken into a third room, where another Bobo Doll stood. The children who had observed the aggressive adults were more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior themselves. Children were simply imitating and modeling when they also kicked, hit, or were otherwise aggressive toward the Bobo doll. It’s from this experiment that Bandura proposed that aggression is learned not only through positive or negative reinforcement but also through indirect observational learning. Example of Social Learning Theory in Media Have you ever seen Big Little Lies? If you haven't, you might want to skip over this example - it's a spoiler! If you are okay with spoilers, read on. In the TV show, the sons of Nicole Kidman's character start displaying various signs of aggression at school. Why did they start doing that? It's later revealed they learned those behaviors from their father. After watching their father's aggression, they began to mimic his behavior. The social learning theory isn't just a plot point on TV - it's an effect of watching TV. A child who is watching violence on TV may also imitate violent acts. Hundreds of studies show that children who observe aggressive behaviors in the media may start to repeat those aggressive behaviors. This is why movies with violence typically have a more mature rating. Other Ways to Look at Aggression These are the three main theories of aggression, but other theories within psychology touch on aggression, too. Take the Big Five. Psychologists took a look at the Big Five traits and how they related to aggression. Here is what they found: Agreeableness is the biggest indicator of aggression. People who score very low in agreeableness are most likely to display aggressive behavior. Openness is an indicator of aggression, but not to the level of agreeableness. People who score low on openness are more likely to be frustrated, but it's not an indicator of violent behavior. Neuroticism is an indicator of aggression and frustration, but not necessarily violent behavior. People who score high on neuroticism are more likely to get frustrated easily. Extraversion doesn't really relate to aggression. Conscientiousness doesn't really relate to aggression. There are still more filters through which you can look at aggression. How might aggression relate to ideas like operant conditioning? Cognitive behavioral therapy? Gestalt theory? If these connections haven't been made, get in the lab and make them! Which Theory of Aggression Is “Right?” One of these theories of aggression may make more sense than the others. Or you may think that all of them make sense together. There is no right or wrong answer to the question of why we get aggressive. Frustration could have easily played a part in the Bobo Doll experiment, along with a child’s “death instincts.” But that is the fun of studying psychology - there is always more to learn and more questions to answer! The Edexcel specification requires students to understand Freud's theories as an alternative explanation to the biological perspective in two key areas. First, Freud's theories are presented as an alternative to the biological explanation of individual differences, focusing on how his psychodynamic approach provides a contrasting view of human behaviour and personality development. Second, the specification highlights Freud's theories as an alternative to the biological explanation of development, offering insights into the stages of psychosexual development and the role of unconscious processes in shaping behaviour. These elements are central to meeting the requirements of the specification.KEY TERMSPSYCHOANALYSIS AS A TREATMENT FOR AGGRESSIONFreud’s psychoanalytic therapy aims to uncover the unconscious roots of aggressive behaviour, helping individuals understand and manage their impulses. The key methods used in psychoanalysis include:DREAM ANALYSISDreams often symbolise repressed aggressive urges. For instance, recurring dreams of conflict or destruction may represent unresolved anger towards a parent, partner, or authority figure.By interpreting these dreams, a therapist can help the individual become aware of the unconscious sources of their aggression, reducing its influence over their behaviour.FREE ASSOCIATIONDuring therapy, clients are encouraged to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings. This unstructured dialogue can reveal patterns of hostility or resentment that stem from suppressed aggression.For example, a client who consistently mentions feelings of frustration in their work environment may uncover a deeper, unconscious anger linked to earlier experiences of feeling undervalued or controlled.TRANSFERENCE OF AGGRESSIONClients may project their aggressive feelings onto the therapist, re-enacting unresolved conflicts from childhood (e.g., hostility towards a parent). Analysing this transference can provide insight into the origins of their aggression and help them process these emotions in a healthier way.EXPLORATION OF CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCESAggression is often rooted in early life experiences, such as harsh discipline or unmet needs. Freud’s emphasis on childhood relationships highlights how unresolved feelings of anger or frustration towards caregivers can persist into adulthood, manifesting as aggressive behaviour.FREUDIAN CONCEPTS APPLIED TO AGGRESSIONSeveral key Freudian concepts provide frameworks for understanding and managing aggression:CATHARSISFreud’s hydraulic aggression model likens aggression to steam building in a pressure cooker. Repressed aggressive energy can build to a breaking point, resulting in violent outbursts if not released.Psychoanalysis encourages "letting off steam" in controlled ways, such as through talking therapy or sublimation (redirecting aggression into creative or socially acceptable activities like art or sport).This application suggests that failing to address aggression directly can lead to long-term psychological harm or interpersonal conflict.DEFENCE MECHANISMSFreud’s defence mechanisms explain how aggression may be redirected or disguised in behaviour:Displacement: Aggression is redirected towards a safer target, such as a subordinate at work or a physical object (e.g., punching a wall).Projection: Unconscious hostility is attributed to others, leading to scapegoating or excessive blame. For instance, someone with aggressive urges might accuse others of being hostile or antagonistic.Repression: Aggressive impulses are suppressed into the unconscious, only to resurface later in explosive or uncontrollable ways.Sublimation: Aggression is transformed into constructive outlets, such as competitive sports or artistic expression, making it socially acceptable.LIFE AND DEATH INSTINCTSFreud attributed aggression to the interplay of two instincts:Eros (life instinct): Focused on creativity, growth, and self-preservation. Aggression may arise when eros is frustrated, such as when someone’s goals or desires are thwarted.Thanatos (death instinct): Drives self-destructive and outwardly aggressive behaviours. Thanatos can result in violence, sabotage, or hostility but can also be sublimated into less harmful outlets.In therapy, understanding the balance between these instincts can help individuals redirect destructive aggression into productive or creative endeavours.OEDIPUS COMPLEXAggression can stem from unresolved feelings tied to Freud’s Oedipus Complex, where a child experiences jealousy and hostility towards the same-sex parent. These repressed feelings may manifest as displaced aggression towards others later in life.For instance, a person with unresolved hostility towards their father may show disproportionate aggression towards male authority figures.FREUD’S PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY OF AGGRESSIONFreud’s psychodynamic theory provides an alternative perspective, suggesting that aggression arises from internal conflicts between innate drives and societal expectations. Unlike purely biological or survival-based explanations, Freud viewed aggression as a complex psychological phenomenon, often self-destructive and rooted in deeper mental tensions.THE ICEBERG MODELFreud conceptualised the mind as an iceberg, with three levels representing different degrees of consciousness:THE CONSCIOUS MIND: EgoThe thoughts and feelings we are immediately aware of.Aggressive impulses rarely reside here directly but may influence behaviour indirectly.THE PRE CONSCIOUS MIND: Super EgoMemories and urges that can be accessed with effort or prompting.Aggression may appear symbolically, such as in dreams or slips of the tongue, requiring interpretation to uncover its true meaning.THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND: idThe largest and most influential part of the mind, housing repressed aggressive drives and unresolved conflicts.These unconscious drives shape behaviour in disguised forms, such as subtle hostility or irrational anger.FREUD'S TRIPARTITE PERSONALITY STRUCTUREFreud's tripartite model of the psyche explains personality as the interaction of three key components:ID: The primitive and instinctual part of the psyche, driven by the pleasure principle. It seeks immediate gratification of basic needs and desires, such as hunger, sex, and aggression, without considering reality or consequences.EGO: The rational and pragmatic part of the psyche, governed by the reality principle. It mediates between the id’s demands and the external world's constraints, finding realistic ways to satisfy desires.SUPEREGO: The moral and ethical part of the psyche, embodying societal norms and ideals. It acts as the conscience, striving for perfection and often in conflict with the id’s impulses.These components constantly interact, creating tension and shaping behaviour. For example, the ego works to balance the id's instinctual drives with the superego's moral standards, resulting in compromises that define an individual's actions and personality.Once this interplay is established, it can be applied to understand how aggression fits within these dynamics, such as the id's role in driving aggressive impulses or the ego's role in controlling and expressing them appropriately.FREUD'S THEORY OF AGGRESSIONATAVISTIC BEHAVIOURFreud viewed aggression as an atavistic behaviour—a relic of our evolutionary past. In the animal kingdom, aggression is ritualistic and typically ends when one animal concedes dominance. Human aggression, however, is far deadlier due to the development of weapons, which amplify the capacity for harm. This view also suggests that while aggression may have served humans in primitive contexts, modern societies no longer benefit from such instincts.Thus, Freud saw aggression as something deeply rooted in human nature. He believed it came from what he called the death instinct (Thanatos)—a drive that pushes people towards destruction, either of themselves or others.Freud suggested that Thanatos exists because all living things have an unconscious desire to return to a state of non-existence or in animacy—a "peaceful" state before life began. He believed this destructive drive was an inevitable part of life, balancing the creative and life-preserving forces of the life instinct (Eros). While Eros strives for growth and survival, Thanatos pulls in the opposite direction, seeking to undo and destroy.To Freud, aggression was the outward expression of Thanatos. Instead of turning destructive energy inward, where it might lead to self-harm or depression, the psyche redirects it toward others, resulting in hostile or violent behaviour. Aggression is the externalisation of this destructive instinct, shaped by both unconscious drives and external triggers, such as frustration or provocation. Freud saw aggression as an inevitable part of human life, often creating conflict between our instincts and the rules of society designed to suppress them.HOW AGGRESSION DEVELOPS IN THE PSYCH SEXUAL STAGESFreud’s psychosexual theory links unresolved conflicts during the stages of development—oral, anal, and phallic—to aggression. These conflicts disrupt the balance between the id, ego, and superego, which are the key components of the psyche. Aggression arises when the id’s primal impulses dominate, the ego fails to defer gratification according to the reality principle, or the superego lacks sufficient strength to impose moral restraint. Below is a detailed explanation of each stage and how unresolved conflicts may result in aggression, with consideration of Freud’s gender-specific views.ORAL STAGE (0–1 YEAR) THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ID AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE The erogenous zone during the oral stage is the mouth, with pleasure derived from activities like sucking, chewing, and swallowing. Conflicts during this stage stem from either denied gratification or overindulgence, leading to oral fixation:Orally Passive Fixation: Overindulgence, such as excessive nursing or constant pacifier use, fosters dependency on external sources of pleasure. These individuals may fail to internalise the ego's ability to delay gratification and react with frustration and aggression when their needs are unmet.Orally Aggressive Fixation: Deprivation, such as abrupt weaning or neglect, can intensify the id’s aggressive impulses, resulting in verbal or physical hostility later in life. The ego struggles to regulate these impulses, and unchecked aggression often emerges in response to stress or frustration.ANAL STAGE (1–3 YEARS) THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EGO AND THE REALITY PRINCIPLE The erogenous zone during the anal stage is the anus, and pleasure is derived from controlling and releasing bowel movements. Parenting approaches to toilet training are pivotal in shaping personality. Aggression arises from fixation caused by extreme approaches to discipline:Anal Retentive Fixation: Overly strict or punitive toilet training leads to the repression of anger. The ego becomes rigid in its control, but this suppressed anger may manifest as passive-aggressive behaviour or calculated, explosive violence when the ego is overwhelmed.Anal Expulsive Fixation: Overly permissive or lenient parenting fosters impulsivity. The id dominates, leading to unchecked aggressive behaviours and disregard for boundaries, as the child learns that actions lack consequences.The anal stage is crucial for developing the ego’s capacity to balance immediate desires with societal expectations. Failures here may result in aggression as individuals struggle to regulate their impulses or react explosively to control by others.PHALLIC STAGE (3–6 YEARS)The erogenous zone during the phallic stage is the genitals, and this stage involves navigating the Oedipus complex (in boys) or the Electra complex (in girls). Aggression arises when these conflicts remain unresolved and affect the formation of the superego:Gender Differences in Superego Formation: Freud believed that boys resolve the Oedipus complex through identification with their fathers, resulting in a stronger superego due to fear of castration. In contrast, he argued that girls’ resolution of the Electra complex was less complete, leading to a weaker superego. Consequently, Freud controversially suggested that women might exhibit less moral restraint and potentially greater emotional instability.Weak Superego Formation: Failure to resolve these complexes, regardless of gender, weakens the superego, which serves as the internal moral authority. A weak superego allows the id’s aggressive impulses to dominate, leading to violent behaviours carried out without guilt or remorse.Phallic Fixation: Excessive guilt or lingering rivalry during this stage can result in resentment toward authority figures or peers, often expressed through hostile actions.The phallic stage is integral to moral development, with unresolved conflicts leaving individuals unable to internalise societal norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of aggression.SUMMING UPFreud’s theory demonstrates how unresolved conflicts at the psychosexual stages can lead to aggression by disrupting the balance between the id, ego, and superego. Examples include:ID DOMINANCE: Oral fixation: Impulsivity or hostility due to unmet needs or overdependence.WEAK EGO: Anal fixation: Repressed anger or unchecked impulsivity resulting from strict or lenient parenting.WEAK SUPEREGO: Phallic fixation: Weak moral development or unresolved rivalries leading to guilt-free aggression.CATHARSIS AND AGGRESSION IN FREUDIAN THEORYFreud believed that unresolved aggression, if repressed, creates a reservoir of psychic tension that can lead to psychological distress. Defence mechanisms like sublimation provide an ideal form of catharsis by transforming aggression into productive outlets that align with societal values and reduce internal conflict.In contrast, displacement, while offering temporary relief, can perpetuate aggression in harmful or socially unacceptable ways. Freud acknowledged that it does not resolve the root cause of aggression, leaving the individual at risk of continued frustration or guilt. Repression, though initially protective, often causes long-term psychological harm as the individual remains unaware of the source of their aggression.Ultimately, Freud’s theory underscores the importance of catharsis for maintaining psychological stability but highlights that the effectiveness of catharsis depends on the mechanism employed. Sublimation stands out as the most constructive option, providing a means to resolve aggression that benefits both the individual and society.REPRESSION AS A DEFENCE MECHANISMRepression is one of the ego's primary strategies for handling aggression. By relegating aggressive impulses to the unconscious, repression prevents them from entering conscious awareness, thereby avoiding immediate conflict with the superego or external social norms. However, Freud argued that repression is not a permanent solution. The repressed energy remains in the unconscious and continues to influence behaviour indirectly. Over time, this unresolved aggression may resurface in distorted forms, such as neurotic symptoms, anxiety, or displaced aggression.For instance, an individual who represses anger toward a parent might unconsciously redirect these emotions onto a safer substitute, such as a co-worker or partner. While repression temporarily shields the individual from the discomfort of aggressive impulses, it creates long-term psychological tension, as the person often lacks awareness of the original source of their aggression.CATHARSIS THROUGH EGO DEFENCE MECHANISMSTo prevent the damaging effects of repression, the ego employs other defence mechanisms to achieve catharsis—a release of aggressive energy in a way that reduces psychological tension. However, not all defence mechanisms are equally effective, and some carry significant risks.DISPLACEMENTHow It Works: Aggression is redirected from its original target, which may be inaccessible or too threatening, to a substitute that is perceived as safer or less likely to retaliate.Why It Helps: Displacement provides temporary relief by allowing the release of pent-up aggression. For example, an individual frustrated with their employer might vent their anger by shouting at a family member or slamming a door.Why It’s Problematic: Freud acknowledged that displacement often leads to harmful or socially unacceptable outcomes. While it prevents direct confrontation with the original source of aggression, it risks damaging relationships, perpetuating cycles of aggression, or violating moral and social norms. Displacement is a stopgap measure rather than a constructive resolution, making it inferior to other mechanisms like sublimation.SUBLIMATIONHow It Works: Aggression is redirected into productive and socially acceptable activities, such as sports, art, or creative pursuits.Why It Helps: Sublimation transforms the id’s aggressive impulses into culturally valued behaviours, satisfying the need for emotional release while adhering to both societal norms and the superego’s moral standards. For instance, a person experiencing frustration might channel their energy into crafting a powerful poem, excelling in competitive sports, or constructing a detailed sculpture.Freud’s View: Freud regarded sublimation as the healthiest and most constructive defence mechanism. It resolves aggressive tension in a way that benefits the individual and society, avoiding the negative consequences of repression or displacement.THE DUAL ROLE OF REPRESSION AND CATHARSISFreud believed that unresolved aggression, if repressed, creates a reservoir of psychic tension that can lead to psychological distress. Defence mechanisms like sublimation provide an ideal form of catharsis by transforming aggression into productive outlets that align with societal values and reduce internal conflict.In contrast, displacement, while offering temporary relief, can perpetuate aggression in harmful or socially unacceptable ways. Freud acknowledged that it does not resolve the root cause of aggression, leaving the individual at risk of continued frustration or guilt. 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Sublimation stands out as the most constructive option, providing a means to resolve aggression that benefits both the individual and society.RISKS OF UNRESOLVED AGGRESSIONFreud emphasised the dangers of repressing aggression, as unaddressed tension in the unconscious can lead to:Sudden Violent Outbursts: The accumulated pressure may overwhelm the ego, resulting in impulsive and destructive behaviour.Psychological Harm: Chronic repression contributes to anxiety, depression, or other emotional disturbances.Interpersonal Conflict: Repressed aggression often strains relationships, creating patterns of hostility or passive-aggressive behaviours.These risks highlight the importance of catharsis—whether achieved through sublimation, displacement, or therapeutic exploration—to maintain psychological and emotional balanceWHY THESE REACTIONS OCCURFreud believed that such behaviours arise when the psyche struggles to manage aggression due to imbalances between the id, ego, and superego.These risks highlight the importance of catharsis—whether achieved through sublimation, displacement, or therapeutic exploration—to maintain psychological and emotional balance.However, when the ego fails to perform this mediating role effectively, the individual’s ability to regulate their emotions and behaviours diminishes. This failure can occur due to several factors:Dominant Id Impulses: If the id’s desires are too overpowering, the ego may struggle to suppress or channel them appropriately. The result is impulsive and unchecked aggressive behaviours, as the individual acts out their frustrations without considering consequences.Weak Superego: When the superego lacks sufficient strength or moral authority, the ego may not feel compelled to enforce restraint on the id. This can lead to aggression being expressed freely, with little regard for ethical or social norms.Overburdened Ego: In cases of chronic stress or unresolved psychological conflict, the ego can become overwhelmed. This may result in the individual “snapping,” where aggression surfaces as a response to the ego’s inability to cope with internal or external pressures.Ultimately, the ego’s effectiveness in managing aggression depends on its capacity to balance the competing demands of the id and superego while navigating societal expectations. Failures in this balance—whether through a dominant id, weak superego, or overstressed ego—highlight the critical role of ego development in mitigating aggressive tendencies.THERAPY AS A CATHARTIC PROCESSCATHARSIS IN PSYCHOANALYSISFreud saw psychoanalysis as a structured form of catharsis, providing patients with the opportunity to access and release repressed aggressive impulses safely. By bringing unconscious material into conscious awareness through methods such as free association and dream interpretation, patients could resolve inner conflicts and alleviate psychological tension. This process allowed individuals to achieve emotional relief while fostering greater insight into their behaviour, reducing the reliance on maladaptive defence mechanisms.In this therapeutic setting, the ego is strengthened, enabling it to mediate more effectively between the id’s aggressive impulses and the superego’s moral demands. Psychoanalysis thus serves as a controlled framework for catharsis, helping individuals transform their repressed aggression into healthier, more constructive forms of expressionPSYCHOANALYSIS AS A TREATMENT FOR AGGRESSIONFreud’s psychoanalytic therapy aims to uncover the unconscious roots of aggressive behaviour, enabling individuals to understand and manage their impulses. The key methods employed in psychoanalysis include:DREAM ANALYSISDreams are often symbolic representations of repressed aggressive urges. For example, recurring dreams involving conflict, destruction, or violent scenarios may signify unresolved anger toward a parent, partner, or authority figure.By interpreting these dreams, therapists help individuals identify the unconscious sources of their aggression, bringing these feelings into conscious awareness. This process reduces the influence of unconscious aggression on behaviour and fosters healthier emotional regulation.FREE ASSOCIATIONClients are encouraged to verbalise their thoughts and feelings without censorship during therapy sessions. This unstructured dialogue often reveals patterns of hostility or resentment stemming from suppressed aggression.For instance, a client who frequently expresses frustration with colleagues may uncover deeper, unconscious anger tied to earlier experiences of feeling undervalued or controlled. Free association helps connect current aggression with its roots, allowing for better self-awareness and resolution.TRANSFERENCE OF AGGRESSIONClients may unconsciously project their aggressive feelings onto the therapist, re-enacting unresolved conflicts from childhood. For example, hostility toward the therapist may reflect unresolved anger towards a parental figure.By analysing this transference, the therapist helps the client understand the origins of their aggression. This process facilitates emotional processing and encourages healthier ways of managing these emotions in real-life relationships.EXPLORATION OF CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCESFreud emphasised the importance of childhood relationships in shaping adult behaviour. Aggression often originates in early life experiences, such as harsh discipline, neglect, or unmet emotional needs.Unresolved feelings of anger or frustration toward caregivers can persist into adulthood, influencing behaviour in relationships, work, and social contexts. Psychoanalysis explores these formative experiences to uncover the roots of aggression, helping clients process and integrate these emotions more constructively.FREUDIAN INSIGHTS INTO SPECIFIC TYPES OF AGGRESSIONSOCIAL AGGRESSIONFreud’s theory explains social aggression (e.g., bullying, gossiping) as a manifestation of defence mechanisms like displacement or projection.For example, a school bully may project their own feelings of inadequacy onto a victim, using aggression to alleviate inner conflict. Recognising this dynamic can help educators and counsellors develop effective intervention strategies.SEXUAL JEALOUSYFreud’s Oedipus Complex offers an intricate explanation for jealousy-related aggression. Repressed feelings of competition or inadequacy from childhood may resurface in adult relationships, leading to behaviours such as possessiveness or hostility towards perceived romantic rivals.For instance, an individual may react aggressively to a partner’s interactions with others, driven by unresolved childhood conflicts with a same-sex parent.DOMESTIC VIOLENCEFreud’s theory sheds light on unconscious factors contributing to domestic violence. Aggressive behaviours in intimate relationships may stem from repressed emotions, such as guilt, inadequacy, or frustration, which are redirected toward a partner.For example, a perpetrator may unconsciously displace feelings of powerlessness or failure into aggression within the home. Therapy that explores these unconscious triggers can facilitate greater self-awareness and a reduction in violent behaviours.OEDIPUS COMPLEXAggression can stem from unresolved feelings tied to Freud’s Oedipus Complex, in which a child experiences jealousy and hostility toward their same-sex parent. These repressed emotions may later manifest as displaced aggression toward others.For instance, unresolved hostility toward a father figure may lead an individual to exhibit disproportionate aggression toward male authority figures in adulthoodFREUDIAN EXPLANATIONS FOR REAL-LIFE EXAMPLESFreudian theory offers insight into how unresolved aggression manifests in everyday scenarios:A Toddler Throws a Tantrum in a Supermarket When Denied SweetsExplanation: This is an example of the ego struggling to mediate between the id’s demand for gratification and external constraints. The toddler’s id desires the sweets immediately, but the ego, still developing, cannot fully manage the frustration caused by parental or situational limits. The tantrum reflects the ego’s inability to regulate the id’s impulses in the face of environmental constraints.John Didn’t Get the Pay Rise He Was Hoping For at Work. When He Got Home, He Kicked the Cat.Explanation: This is an example of displacement. John’s id is frustrated and angry at his boss but cannot express this aggression directly due to societal and professional constraints enforced by his superego. To relieve the tension, his ego redirects the aggression to a safer target—the cat.Sandra’s Boyfriend Dumped Her, So She Played Call of Duty for Four Hours Straight.Explanation: This illustrates sublimation. Sandra’s ego channels her aggressive impulses into a socially acceptable outlet—a video game. By playing a violent game, she symbolically acts out her aggression in a way that satisfies her id without violating the constraints of her superego.A Teenager Slams Their Bedroom Door After Being Told They Can’t Go to a Party.Explanation: This demonstrates displacement. The teenager’s id is angry at their parent for enforcing the rule, but their superego discourages direct confrontation. Instead, the aggression is redirected toward a physical object (the door), providing temporary relief for their frustration.After Remaining Calm All Lesson While His Class Played Up, Mr Sloane Suddenly Punched a Pupil Who Talked.Explanation: This reflects repressed aggression followed by an uncontrolled outburst. Throughout the lesson, Mr Sloane’s superego suppressed his aggressive impulses, creating tension in the unconscious. When the ego could no longer contain the pressure, the aggression erupted disproportionately at the pupil.James, Feeling Humiliated by His Friend’s Public Criticism, Made Sarcastic Remarks All Evening.Explanation: This is an example of reaction formation. James unconsciously represses his anger and humiliation to avoid open confrontation. Instead, he adopts the opposite behaviour by masking his aggression as sarcasm, which provides a subtle release while adhering to social norms.After Years of Bottling Up His Anger Toward His Father, Andrew Suddenly Had a Breakdown and Quit His Job.Explanation: This is a case of long-term repressed aggression leading to psychological collapse. Andrew’s superego suppressed his feelings of resentment toward his father, but the unresolved tension accumulated over time. When his ego became overburdened, the aggression manifested as a breakdown, disrupting his ability to functionEVALUATION OF FREUD’S THEORY IN RELATION TO AGGRESSIONFreud’s theory provides a unique perspective on aggression by focusing on unconscious drives, defence mechanisms, and childhood conflicts. However, it is not without significant limitations. This evaluation examines its strengths and weaknesses in relation to aggression, focusing on research evidence, scientific validity, social implications, and practical considerations.RESEARCH EVIDENCE: IS THERE ANY?Freud’s theories are based primarily on subjective case studies, such as "Little Hans" or "Dora," which provide detailed qualitative data but lack scientific rigour.LIMITED EMPIRICAL SUPPORTConcepts like repression, Thanatos, and the unconscious are difficult to operationalise and test scientifically. For example, it is impossible to measure unconscious aggression or confirm repressed memories as direct causes of violent behaviour.In contrast, biological approaches to aggression offer measurable evidence. Brain imaging studies (e.g., Gorka et al., 2013) have demonstrated the role of the amygdala in regulating emotional responses, providing robust scientific data to support aggression theories.PSYCHOANALYTIC RESEARCHFreud relied on therapist-led interpretations, such as dream analysis or free association, which are subjective and prone to bias. For instance, aggression identified through dream symbols (e.g., destruction or conflict) relies heavily on the therapist's perspective.Bandura’s research (1961) challenges Freud’s catharsis hypothesis, showing that exposure to aggression, such as in the Bobo doll experiment, increases aggression rather than reduces it.SCIENTIFIC BASIS: CRITICISMSFreud’s theories do not meet modern scientific standards.UNFALSIFIABILITYFreud’s ideas, such as the unconscious mind or Thanatos, are unfalsifiable. This means they cannot be disproven, as evidence against them can always be interpreted as further support. For example, denial of repressed aggression might itself be considered evidence of repression.This unfalsifiability limits Freud’s theory’s credibility as a scientific explanation for aggression.SUBJECTIVE CASE STUDIESFreud’s reliance on anecdotal data (e.g., case studies) lacks generalisability and objectivity. For instance, his conclusions from a single patient cannot reliably explain aggression across diverse populations.CONTRADICTORY EVIDENCEFreud’s catharsis model, which suggests that releasing aggression reduces its intensity, is contradicted by studies like Bushman (2002), which found that venting aggression often increases hostility rather than diminishing it.SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS: CONTROVERSIES AND SENSITIVITIESFreud’s theories have been criticised for their social implications, particularly in the context of parenting, gender, and accessibility.BLAMING PARENTS (PARTICULARLY MOTHERS)Freud’s emphasis on childhood experiences often shifts responsibility for aggression onto parents, especially mothers. For example, unresolved Oedipal conflicts or oral fixation are frequently linked to maternal behaviours, perpetuating guilt and blame within families.MISOGYNY AND ALPHA BIASFreud’s theories are criticised as misogynistic, particularly in his views on the Electra complex and the supposed weaker development of the superego in women. This bias undermines the application of his theories to understanding aggression in women and reinforces gender stereotypes.A THEORY FOR THE ELITEPsychoanalysis is time-consuming and expensive, making it a luxury treatment accessible primarily to the wealthy. This limits its practical use for managing aggression across broader socio-economic groups.PRACTICAL LIMITATIONSFreud’s theories face practical challenges in addressing aggression:TIME AND COSTPsychoanalysis is a long-term process, requiring years of therapy and significant financial investment. For instance, compared to shorter interventions like CBT or anger management programmes, Freud’s approach is impractical in cases where quick results are needed.EFFECTIVENESSWhile Freud’s methods provide insight into the origins of aggression, their impact on reducing violent behaviour is inconsistent. Cognitive-behavioural approaches are preferred for their measurable outcomes and faster results.SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORSFreud’s theory focuses primarily on internal drives and neglects external influences on aggression, such as:TRAUMA OR ABUSE: External stressors like abuse, poverty, or neglect are major contributors to aggressive behaviour but are not adequately addressed in Freud’s framework.CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: Aggression varies across cultures, which Freud’s universal theories fail to account for.COMPARISON WITH BIOLOGICAL APPROACHESFreud’s psychodynamic theory contrasts with biological explanations of aggression in several key ways:FOCUS ON DRIVES: Freud attributes aggression to unconscious drives and childhood conflicts, while biological theories emphasise brain structures (e.g., the amygdala), neurotransmitters (e.g., serotonin), and genetic predispositions.EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: Biological studies, such as those using fMRI scans, provide measurable data, while Freud’s theories rely on subjective interpretation.NATURE VS NURTURE: Freud’s approach incorporates both innate drives and environmental factors, while biological approaches often prioritise genetic and physiological explanations.CONCLUSIONFreud’s theory provides a profound psychological perspective on aggression, focusing on unconscious drives, defence mechanisms, and childhood conflicts. However, its limitations include a lack of empirical support, unfalsifiability, and practical accessibility. While Freud’s insights remain valuable for understanding the deeper roots of aggression, modern approaches, such as biological explanations and social learning theory, offer more scientifically robust and practical solutions. Integrating Freud’s ideas with contemporary evidence-based methods allows for a more comprehensive understanding of aggression.DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE BIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATIONS OF AGGRESSIONThe Edexcel Specification requires students to compare and contrast the biological/evolutionary explanation of aggression with the psychodynamic explanation.NATURE VS NURTUREThe biological/evolutionary explanation of aggression predominantly supports the nativist (nature) perspective. It suggests that aggression is an innate characteristic, driven by genetics and evolutionary processes. For example, traits like aggression are considered to enhance survival and reproductive success, ensuring they are passed down through natural selection.In contrast, Freud’s psychodynamic approach incorporates both nature and nurture. While Freud acknowledges the innate aspects of aggression through the presence of eros (life instinct) and thanatos (death instinct), he also emphasises the role of early childhood experiences and environmental factors. According to Freud, our upbringing, particularly our relationships with caregivers, influences the development of our defence mechanisms, which in turn shape how we express aggression. For instance, a child exposed to harsh discipline may repress aggressive impulses, leading to maladaptive behaviours later in life.DEVELOPMENTAL FOCUSBoth approaches share an emphasis on child development, but they conceptualise it differently. Freud’s psychodynamic theory proposes that children develop the id first, followed by the ego, with the superego emerging around age 5 as a result of socialisation. The superego regulates aggressive impulses generated by the id, with the ego mediating between the two.Similarly, biological psychology highlights developmental stages of brain maturation. Early in life, the right hemisphere, associated with emotional processing, dominates brain activity. By the age of 5, the left hemisphere, which governs language and logical faculties, becomes more active. This shift coincides with a decline in physical aggression and an increase in social aggression, as observed in Mara Brendgen’s study of twins.FUNCTIONAL SIMILARITIESThe two approaches align in their explanation of the mechanisms underlying aggression. The limbic system, particularly the amygdala, plays a central role in generating emotional responses like aggression and fear. This system operates much like Freud’s id, as it is responsible for basic instincts and desires. Meanwhile, the pre-frontal cortex acts similarly to Freud’s ego, regulating and deciding how to respond to impulses from the limbic system. For example, the pre-frontal cortex can override an immediate aggressive re