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# Book Review:

## *Aggression in the Sports World: A Social Psychological Perspective*

Gordon W. Russell (2008).

*Oxford University Press, New York*

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Reviewed by Lisa Fraser

*Sport Psychologist and Lecturer in Sport Psychology, School of Health and Sport Sciences University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia*

Are men who have a macho personality type, and who are high in testosterone, more likely to be aggressive individuals? Are the New Zealand All-Blacks considered more aggressive than other rugby teams as a result of the colour of their uniforms? Can finger length ratios predict those individuals who will display more physical aggression when competing in sport? This text provides some interesting, and at times surprising, research results that attempt to shed some light on questions such as these, and put the topic of aggression in sport, as well as in society, in perspective.

*Aggression in the Sports World* presents a well-constructed summary of the reams of academic literature in this domain, approaching the subject matter from multiple angles, and in a way that engages the reader's interest. Written in an informal, conversational style, this text is easy to follow and would suit both an informed and uninformed audience. The information is presented over seven chapters, most of which cover distinctly different topics.

The first chapter, titled 'Social Influences', sets the scene by first exploring a variety of definitions of human aggression, and outlining the distinction commonly made by researchers between hostile and instrumental aggression. Following this, a variety of external social influences are examined in relation to the impact that they have been found to have on human aggression. Such influences include our culture, role models, and parents. Some of the questions explored include whether culture influences a nation's sport preferences, and whether we learn aggression as a result of wanting to emulate our sporting heroes, or from being exposed to the attitudes of our significant others. The chapter goes on to discuss research associated with racism in sport, as well as that related to game officials and women, two groups that Russell deems to have been unduly targeted for aggression in sport.

In the second chapter, titled 'Personality', Russell acknowledges the large amount of literature available on the topic of personality and how it relates to interpersonal

aggression in sports. A useful summary of the psychometric properties of tests is then presented, which is designed to assist the inexperienced researcher to be more critical of the research measures used in this area. Valuable descriptions of personality types that highlight aggression as a central feature, such as the Macho, the Machiavellian and the Aggressive personality, are also given. The chapter presents an interesting literature review exploring the relationship between the strength of team identification and aggressive actions, that is, the expressed willingness of fans and others to influence competitive outcomes through violent and illegal means. The potential cognitive processes and biological influences, which have been researched in relation to why an individual may take such aggressive action, are then discussed. Throughout the chapter, Russell makes good use of hypothetical experimental and social situations to assist him to explain these different concepts, which is helpful to the reader.

The catchy third chapter, titled 'Environmental and Situational Influences', is definitely the social interest hub of the text, given the prevalence of media stories related to athletes who are afflicted with drug and alcohol problems in today's society. The evidence surrounding the impact of a range of external factors, including substance abuse, on mood states and levels of aggression both on and off the field are explored. It directs attention to investigating such questions as whether there is any truth behind the concept of 'Roid Rage' — what environmental conditions and drugs have the potential to change the aggression levels of both sports spectators and athletes, and whether encouraging competition among groups leads to aggression issues. While Russell concludes that high weather temperatures and extreme noise levels have been found to generally increase peoples' levels of aggression, those individuals who believe that the presence of a full moon may have an influence on mood states and performance may be a little disappointed with the conclusions drawn from the studies cited.

The fourth chapter, titled 'Witnessing Aggression: Media and Firsthand', focuses on exploring the impact that observing aggression in sport might have on the individual viewing it, whether this is from the stands or on the TV. Russell states that we seem to 'derive enjoyment from watching interpersonal aggression' (p. 107), and cites studies that explore the impact of the content of sports commentators' dialogue upon this enjoyment. The chapter also explores the media's ability to prime the audiences' hostility levels by influencing their perceptions of roughness of play and pregame relationships through aggressively toned pregame headlines. The repercussions this may have in relation to the incidences of violence in society are also explored.

The next two chapters, titled 'Violent Sports Crowds' and 'Panics' respectively, progress logically from chapter 4, with the focus switching from the impact of observing aggression in sport on the spectator, to a more detailed account of the actual social violence that may follow. These chapters attempt to dissect sports riots and panics, both of which are considered by Russell to be very complex social events. Information is offered on points deemed to be of interest to the reader, such as the distinguishing characteristics of both rioters and peacemakers, a review of recommendations to try to prevent the incidents of panics, including stadium design considerations, as well as potential interventions suggested by others to try to reduce incidents of large-scale crowd violence.

The final chapter, titled 'Methods, Measures and Views of Sports Aggression', begins with some foundational elements of research methodology designed to educate the novice, along with discussions centering on experimenter and participant biases for the more experienced researcher. These discussions cover topics such as experimenter–expectancy effects, demand characteristics, and volunteer effects, as well as the strategies that can be implemented to overcome these issues. This chapter is informative and useful, going on to provide an overview of the traditionally popular theories of aggression, such as the frustration–aggression hypothesis and social learning theory, as well as a review of the controversial concept of catharsis. Although it is felt that this chapter may have been better placed earlier in the text, due to some of the basic theoretical content it provides to the reader, it is still considered a valuable addition to the text.

In summation, *Aggression in the Sports World* offers a unique insight into issues that would commonly provoke interesting discussions among sports-minded individuals by providing research findings which, at times, both support and refute popular hypotheses. In the preface, Russell states that his aim was to provide 'colleagues and their students with a current and informative description of the dynamics underlying aggressive behaviors occurring in the sports world' (p. viii). This is a goal that Russell certainly achieves. The studies cited are both recent (e.g., 2007) and dated (e.g., 1974), and discussed in a way such that the results are cleverly integrated with existing theory. It would be a suitable and very valuable required reading for a Masters level sport and exercise psychology course taught both in the Pacific Rim and abroad. *Aggression in the Sports World* is not written to be a stand-alone text, as it is not presented in an easy-to-read format, complete with inset information boxes, illustrations and review questions, as the majority of such course texts are. With that caveat in mind, it would be an appropriate source of information that academics may want to direct Honours-level students to, if they are looking to complete their thesis in the area of aggression. Some of the studies outlined by Russell could certainly provide a platform for students to launch into further exploration of these subject areas. There are also some detailed summaries of additional suggested readings at the end of each chapter to help students to source further materials in the area.

To conclude this review, it is only fitting to satisfy the curiosity of those readers who pondered the answers to the questions posed at the start of this piece. Research findings cause us to conclude that measuring a man's finger length ratio, which is the difference in the length of his index finger relative to his ring finger, rather than his testosterone levels, would be a better way to predict the tendency for him to be physically aggressive. They also lead us to consider whether the All Blacks may actually be an even better rugby team than the world already knows them to be. Why, you ask? Because Russell cites research that suggests that referees may perceive players wearing black uniforms to be more aggressive, thereby potentially awarding them more penalties for aggressive play. Does this mean that we may see the All-Blacks running onto the field in the next World Cup dressed all in white?