

The Violence Question: What Is It?

What is essential is invisible to the eye.¹ There are two invisibilities this work seeks to understand; the first is the context of embodied friendship, and the second is the context of desensitization that erodes this friendship. Taken to a cultural level, this desensitization can have devastating effects on the unity and integrity of social interactions. Hence, an interrogation of desensitization to violence in Western culture is explored within the context of a reevaluation of relationships.

The pattern of acceptability and sanction of violence expressed through the discourses of symbols, institutions, beliefs, attitudes, and social practices within Western culture is *the violence mythos*. Violence refers to injury or destruction of body or of relationship by one person or group toward another. This work addresses two primary assumptions about violence: one, that violence is innate, or inherent to humans, and two, that violence is acquired by behavior. The cultural transmission of the belief that violence is innate as natural, through tradition and authoritative beliefs, contributes directly to violence being sanctioned and accepted within Western culture and exported to the larger global community.

Culture and Interpretation

Culture may be defined in three different ways according to Northrop Frye.² First, there is culture as lifestyle, the ways in which a society carries out its everyday social rituals. This includes its protocols for eating, drinking, and clothing itself. One illustration is the Chinese mode of communal dining and use of chopsticks contrasted with the North American individuated serving style and use of utensils. Second, there is culture as a "shared heritage of historical memories and customs, carried out mainly through a common language."³ And third, there are the creative expressions of a society, which take shape through architecture, music, sciences, scholarship, and applied arts.

In the following text, the ways in which persons in a society relate, in the protocols of trusting and nontrusting behavior, are developed. The focal facet of culture examined here is that of the shared memories, customs, and language, or traditions, of a society. In this respect, what is under question is the serious cultural "story" of violence for a society. To this end, the language of scholarship presented expresses the thought of neurobiologists, sociologists, and psychologists, as well as psychoanalysts, theologians, linguists, philosophers, futurists, and technologists.

Consider for a moment that in most societies, there are two types of stories that crystallize. First, at the center of a culture is a nexus of "serious" stories that are claimed to have happened, but that is not as important as their status as stories that are "particularly urgent for the community to know,"⁴ such as the hero myth. Their structure is not different from other stories, but they serve a different social function. The second type of story is less serious and becomes a folk tale. The more serious stories "become the cultural possession of a specific society: they form the verbal nucleus of a shared tradition."⁵

Frye's analysis is close to José Miguez Bonino's appropriation of Paul Ricoeur's model of the three layers of human construction in a civilization.⁶ First is the level of "tools," "instruments," or technologies humans devise to fulfill their purposes. This information is cumulative and transmissible from one civilization to another. The second layer corresponds to the "ethos" of a civilization. The ethos includes the habits, attitudes, and relations that make up how the culture works. A change in ethos affects the institutions which support and embody the ethos. The third layer includes the "core" of a civilization, its self-understanding of its origin and destiny expressed in symbolic terms. Without this core, the civilization would have no unity or integrity.⁷

Thus, we are not looking for a causal relationship between the story of violence and violent behavior in society, but a prescriptive one. Rather, as a story that is urgent for a community to know at its core, the story of violence would inform the heritage and unity of the community and its language through a shared tradition of a common understanding, embodied in institutions and transmitted through knowledge and practice, of violence. Thus, the means to investigate the cultural understanding of violence becomes a form of the following question: What is the possible correlation between the symbolic interpretations or cultural expressions of violence and the acceptance of violent behavior in a society? Humans are educable creatures that negotiate their understanding and boundaries. They are inculcated with the beliefs of a culture that allow them to survive in that culture or alter that culture if

need be. What possible systems of signs, metanarrative, and paradigm would organize authoritative beliefs about violence that rationalize, legitimate, and give meaning to behavior as violent or not?

This investigation is significant for more than the two obvious reasons of (1) political legitimation of aggression and (2) abusive relationships between men and women. The former is ably characterized by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their description of the propaganda model of the mass media to align itself with state policy and censor dissent.⁸ The latter is an ongoing task in feminist scholarship.⁹ More fully, the story of violence, from a perspective of marginality, needs to be examined for what it excludes, rather than what it includes. In other words, what is not being said when the story of violence is told? What is the absent presence in the discourse of violence? It seems that the discourse of the embodied fullness of human attachment and emotional and creative life is silenced, through limiting anger to a one-dimensional equation with violent behavior that destroys relationships. Such cultural censorship restricts the meaning of being human by disallowing anger as a sign of a need for change, through devaluing and making dangerous this emotion and the attachment wherein this emotion is aroused. Hence, implicitly, change is labeled as an undesirable violent phenomenon, and so is attachment.

When the literature on anger is reviewed, it appears that anger signifies change as *difference*, not as *threat*, and that humans respond to difference in their environment, rather than to a *higher risk* in their environment. Our culture has chosen to interpret change as threat instead of difference. This is not the fault of emotion or anger, but of our traditional interpretation of change and new experiences. It may be the case that change and stability in Western culture have been characterized by a violent dynamic of exploitation modeled on mistrust and trauma.

To examine these issues, I will attempt a manageable exploration of the discourses concerning anger and violence, primarily through the discourses of innate violence and acquired violence. Thus, through the examination of some of the history and linguistic products of culture, it may be possible to come to a closer understanding of the shared memories and traditions of a cultural understanding of the story of violence.

Definitions of Violence

Robert McAfee Brown gives an expanded definition of violence as a violation of personhood, in the sense of an infringement, denial, abuse, or disregard of another physically or otherwise.¹⁰ To address

personhood is to give an inclusive description of violence as more than just the body or the soul. It recognizes acts that depersonalize as acts of violence.¹¹ Personal and institutional overt physical destructive behavior against another would be considered acts of violence. There is covert personal violence which does psychological damage to another, and institutional covert violence where social structures violate the personhood of groups of persons, for instance, substandard living conditions in a ghetto.¹² Thus, for McAfee Brown, the problem is structural violence,¹³ and its remedy is genuine reconciliation of antagonisms. McAfee Brown warns that being on the side of justice may make some people unhappy, especially those who benefit from existing structures, but that "the task of subversion, the task of engaging in deep-seated social challenge, is the only true route to genuine reconciliation, in which the true sources of conflict have been exposed and overcome."¹⁴

McAfee Brown seems to propose a shift in thinking about violence as originating in the individual (body or soul) to violence as a result of harmful relationship (injustice) between persons. This shift is helpful in articulating the social complexity of violent behavior and its remedy. However, it does not address the issue of why someone would commit injustice, a question which the binary dualism of body and soul attempted to address. It is not enough to sideline the discussion of violence as internal in the body/soul dualism and then shift to a discussion of violence as external and structural. Persons are part of and contribute to the production of the structure. Without a revised anthropology of intentionality which replaces the body/soul dualism, McAfee Brown's project is incomplete. Without an understanding of the motivation to commit injustice, one may be attempting simply to fix a wheel when it is the axle that requires replacement.

Such an anthropology of intentionality is part of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. An indirect route, or detour, to the story of violence is taken in a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval as a demythologization and delegitimation of symbolic discourses in culture. The meaning of symbolic discourse undergoes a type of archeology, or reflection upon the past as history or tradition, from which a type of teleology or retrieval of meaning from this past is appropriated in the form of new meaning. This methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Paul Ricoeur and elaborated in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, a work discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Ricoeur's methodology is part of the tradition of the work of the so-called masters of suspicion, namely Marxist critique of ideology, Nietzschean genealogy, and Freudian psychoanalysis which decenters

the ahistoricity of idealist concepts and locates and the self as social, historical, and linguistic.¹⁵ The task of the self for Ricoeur is to find meaning in the expression of experience in relation with another. The open-ended hermeneutic principle is a mediation where the self goes out of itself in expression and returns to itself in the appropriation of linguistic meaning.¹⁶ This is Ricoeur's hermeneutic of distanciation which describes mediation or the relation between self and other.¹⁷

Another concept of hermeneutical mediation is developed in regard to texts by Hans-Georg Gadamer. For Gadamer, understanding texts cannot be limited by the original intentions of the writer, nor by the assumptions and expectations of the reader. The meaning of the text goes beyond the limit of understanding both of author and of reader, detaches itself, and makes "itself free for new relationships."¹⁸ Gadamer's open-ended hermeneutic of associative understanding is teamed with Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval to interpret cultural texts and open them to possible new meanings in cultural understanding. Inclusive of an acknowledgment of Ricoeur's own assumptions about violence, the aim is to discern an interpretation of possible meanings of intersubjective assumptions of social discourse and practice regarding violence.

Human environments are partly symbolic structures that stretch from the remote world of the "once was" through the imperatives of the "now" to the imaginative possibilities of the "might be." "All of these times co-exist in the 'present,' which consists not only of buildings, roads, rules, values and institutions but also of nostalgia, hope, despair, memories, deprivation and desire."¹⁹ In this respect, a person who becomes "conscious," no matter on how rudimentary a level, "awakens" in a context of meanings. Persons thus discover themselves as active agents both of "the interpretation of meanings and of their practical organization in the everyday world."²⁰ "Even if 'interpreted' is to mean the wholesale acceptance by the person of someone else's interpretations, this too, is an interpretive act. In other words, meanings should be viewed not as introjected objects but as available patterns of values, norms and rules. These patterns provide fields of pressure and opportunity for the negotiation of motives, projects, constraints, and legitimations among persons and groups."²¹

The person becomes an agent in the attempt to make sense of oneself and one's actions in a human environment. The person "produces" and "consumes" interpretations, legitimations, and delegitimations, some of which are articulated in the form of deeds as indirect acceptance of intersubjective assumptions. This all occurs in a human symbolic environment.²²

The exploration of the question What is the association between the symbolic interpretations or cultural expressions of violence and the acceptance of violent behavior in society? includes both direct and indirect acceptance of assumptions about violence. On the one hand, there is an exploration of conscious cultural products in the form of scholarly texts. On the other hand, there is the exploration of symbolic interpretations of violence in myths and historical norms and values. This is the context of indirect intersubjective assumptions which persons enact in interpreting what is perceived as violence. Thus, the story of violence will be formulated in these two modes of cultural interpretation.

Innate and Acquired Violence

The discourses of violence follow primarily two paths, that of innate violence and that of acquired violence. An argument over whether what is perceived as aggression is innate or acquired is succinctly encapsulated in the 1968 article "'Innate Depravity,' or Original Sin Revisited" by Ashley Montagu.²³ Montagu mounts a feisty reply to Robert Ardrey's claim that human beings are "killers" by nature because australopithecines used tools as weapons to bash the skulls of baboons. He responds that the myth of humans as ferocious "wild animals" is "one of Western man's supreme rationalizations" that serves to explain the origins of human aggressiveness and deny responsibility for it because it is supposedly "innate."²⁴

According to Montagu, early hominization was characterized by nonviolence in the development of cooperative activities. This included the social process of hunting itself, the invention of speech, and the development of food-getting tools. Primitive humans hunted not for pleasure, to satisfy "predatory instincts," but for food, to satisfy the hunters' hunger and the hunger of their dependents. Hunting served bodily and social survival needs.

For Montagu, the appeal of Ardrey's argument is the spurious psychological gratification in finding "father confessors" to relieve some of the "burdensome load of guilt" humans bear by shifting responsibility for violent behavior to "natural inheritance" and "innate aggressiveness." The triteness of the argument is reflected in the nineteenth-century proposition that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (since proven erroneous),²⁵ in Herbert Spencer's doctrine of "social Darwinism," as the survival of the fittest and struggle for existence. Phylogeny, or the developmental history of the species, was thought to provide the initial biological repertoire for natural selection in the developmental

history of the individual, or ontogeny. As innate or a natural given, aggression as a species trait would necessarily be an unavoidable part of each individual's genetic makeup. The implications of this position were expressed by General von Bernhardt in 1912 when he used the concept of 'biologically necessary aggression' to justify war. "War is a biological necessity... it is as necessary as the struggle of the elements of Nature... it gives a biologically just decision, since its decisions rest on the very nature of things."²⁶

However, the understanding of violence as natural and biologically necessary is an interpretation of emotionally charged symbols, such as war (the close association between anger, fear, and violent behavior) that may have as their cognitive evaluation, or reason for the violent behavior, the belief that violence is innate. War may be legitimated or sanctioned by social authority as acceptable when waged against an "aggressor" who is expressing "uncontrollable violent behavior" that can be stopped only in kind. Or war may be waged on grounds that it is irrepressible not to aggress against another, in that it is within the biological makeup of humans to want to wage war against another. There is a circle of violence that is legitimated and reinforced by the belief, or cognitive evaluation, that violence is a necessary expression of anger construed as aggression, or an impulse to dominate or destroy that is innate as an undauntable "will to power."

The belief that anger is violent involves a category mistake between anger the emotion and violence the behavior. How anger is expressed depends upon the social values and beliefs through which the meaning of the emotion and the behavior that expresses it are interpreted. The expression of anger is dependent upon social expectations for behavior, and the permissibility of that behavior. The interpretation and the expression of emotion is socialized. On this view, there is no direct line of causality from impulse to behavior which would constitute reactional motivation. Rather, motivation is a complex of prioritizing emotional arousal, reflective evaluations, symbolic significance, authoritative beliefs, and socially mediated behavior.

In developing a working vocabulary for the discourse of violence, a general definition of aggressive acts is behavior that results in personal injury and physical destruction.²⁷ Social violence has been defined as assault upon an individual or his/her property solely or primarily because of that person's membership in a social category.²⁸ These definitions portray violence as acts that cause physical damage, are intentional, and have direct effects. Other kinds of destructive or coercive acts may be considered the use of types of force that prevent the normal free action of or inhibit persons through the

threat of violence. Verbal threats have been considered nonviolent yet aggressive as attempts to destroy a person's reputation or undermine their relationships with other people. Violence committed against women and children includes verbal and physical abuse.²⁹

There are three components to ascertain an act as aggressive. First, some action which may or may not be coercive is observed. Second, an intent to do harm is inferred. Third, the action is judged to be antinormative. The actor in this situation probably will be blamed, disapproved of, or possibly punished.³⁰ In this setting, a behavior is observed, a motive is inferred, and a moral judgment is made. In order to make a more specific distinction between violence and aggression, we may distinguish between the *behavior* of "violence" and "socially destructive acts," and the *motive* of "aggression."³¹ As well, the distinction needs to be made between the intent of aggression and the emotion of anger, where the perceived willful intent of an act of aggression may be a conditioned defense mechanism to aversive events activated by anger to prevent or cease injury or pain, as in the case of posttraumatic stress disorder.

Social Prohibition

The argument for "innate aggression" seeks to justify violent behavior and suggests social prohibition as a means to control aggressive individuals. The argument for phylogenetic and hence ontogenetic aggression is reflected in Freud's theory of instincts and the need to control them by social means. This argument is developed more fully in chapter 4.

In Freud's injunction against the individual, clarification between "particular ideal demands" of the individual and what is "civilized in general" for the collective reveals the need to regulate social relationships.

Without such regulation, relationships would be subject to the arbitrary will of the individual: that is to say, the physically stronger man would decide them in the sense of his own interests and instinctual impulses . . . Human life is commonly only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as 'right' in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as 'brute force' . . . The final outcome should be a rule of law to which all . . . have contributed by a sacrifice of their instincts, and which leaves no one *Copyrighted Material* brute force.³²

Freud claims the "truth behind all this" is that "men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved."³³ Rather, they have a "powerful share of aggressiveness" in which their neighbor becomes for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but someone who tries to "satisfy their aggressiveness on him," in terms of sexual exploitation, economic exploitation, seizing his or her possessions, humiliation, pain, torture and intent "to kill him." For Freud, civilization and its means of prohibition through socialization and institutions are the necessary regulation of otherwise uncontrollable natural individual aggression.

Anatol Rapoport suggests that it was the trauma of World War I that inspired Freud's idea of aggression. "The faith in 'progress,' in steady maturation of civilization with its commitment to civility and its abhorrence of savagery, was shattered by four years of senseless carnage. The outbreak was consistent with the idea of a dormant destruction drive suddenly released."³⁴ Thus, Freud articulates a phylogeny of violence, of innate aggression, and hostility in humans, particularly in men. As we shall see, it is Western culture's fundamental lack of understanding of trauma for the self, other, and collective that has given rise to interpretations of violence as innate and a vacuity of resources to heal from and prevent trauma.

Humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow tempered the aggressive drive from injurious to assertive aggression as "righteous indignation," "passion for justice," or "healthy self-affirmation."³⁵ Thus, a different name was given for the same drive to aggress. Even traits deemed life affirming were reduced to a more fundamental violence. Indeed, the giving of a different name to what appears as the same violent aggression is thus arguably the inhibition or transformation of an urge to aggress into an acceptable form, a disguise for the primal urge itself.³⁶

Konrad Lorenz's work, *On Aggression*, follows Freudian instinct theory. For Lorenz, what compels reasonable humans to behave unreasonably are the laws that prevail in "phylogenetically adapted instinctive behavior" derived from the study of the instincts of animals.³⁷ Montagu counters Lorenz's ambiguous anthropomorphism by saying that with the exception of "instinctoid reactions in infants due to sudden withdrawals of support and to sudden loud noises, the human being is entirely instinctless."³⁸ If all instincts are characterized by "spontaneity" and humans are genetically programmed for aggression then "the aggression drive" becomes very dangerous.

According to Montagu, Lorenz claims that "hostile neighboring hordes" were the target of "phylogenetically programmed aggression"

that needed to be controlled by "responsible morality." Montagu insists there is no evidence of hostility between neighboring hordes of early humans. Montagu repudiates Lorenz by declaring that evidence shows that learning and experience influence the development of aggression in the history *both* of the individual and of the group. Modifications in the development of the individual influence modifications in the species group. For instance, by not rewarding and showing aggression to be unrewarded behavior, with the Hopi and Zuni Indians, aggression is minimal or nonexistent.³⁹

Trophic Theory

To take the discussion about a biological basis for aggression even further, the perspective of neurobiology may be include here. The influence of learning and experience, or appropriate adaptive responsiveness to uncertain circumstances, on individual and group development is reflected in trophic theory. Changes in the circumstances of the external environment are coordinated with changes in internal neural development. The neural and somatic development of the individual is interdependent with the environment or context in which development occurs.

Within the body, the connections between neurons and the cells they enervate (target cells), or more simply, the nervous system of the body, are interdependent, not determinate. Patterns of neural connections are sustained in maturity by *ongoing* interactions with target cells. The fact that experimental perturbation can alter patterns of connections in maturity demonstrates a persistent potential for change. The primary purpose of neural adjustment is thought to be to encode experience. However, change in the neural system is necessary for another reason: the body, as well as the external environment, changes continually. In order to monitor a body that is changing both in size and in form, the nervous system must also change.⁴⁰

Changes in the neural system are not identical for members of the same species. Studies performed to assess normal variability in the human brain show substantial differences in the arrangement of the same functions between individuals. Thus, the size and arrangement of the nervous system is not identical among different individuals of the same species.⁴¹

Conventionally, studies concerned with understanding how behavior is modified by experience and learning have focused on how neural activity affects *autonomically* *Malbecia* circuits. This is the "hard-

wired" view of neural connections. Here, the neural connections in the nervous system are fixed, and "tell" the body how to respond to stimuli. On this view, the mind rules the body. However, it may be plausible that for certain kinds of learning, that is, changes in behavior that develop slowly and last a long time, experience may be encoded by altering the arrangement of neural connections themselves.⁴² The mind itself becomes formed through information from the body and hence is part of the body.

Neural connections in the mature nervous system are actively *maintained*.⁴³ In the course of development and mature maintenance, new neural branches and synapses are constructed apparently concurrent with the removal of some pre-existing ones. Target cells compete by elaborating trophic signals, to which neurons are "selectively sensitive" and elicit the alteration of neural connectivity through adapting to the changing needs of the target cell.

This fluctuating rearrangement of neural connection does not reflect an "abstract Darwinian principle," but rather reflects adjustments of neuronal branches and their connections required by changes in somatic development and maintenance.⁴⁴ The evidence of neural development and the continual plasticity of neural connections for individual responses and adaptation to internal and external changes show that the view that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny is erroneous.⁴⁵ The space is opened for a discourse of aggressive behavior as a biologically *acquired* characteristic of human functioning as a result of learned or adaptive behavior that is maintained as socially appropriate behavior in the face of uncertain or changing circumstances.

To return to Montagu, because of the highly developed capacity for learning in human beings, the human must learn to be human through culture. The "*acquired* deplorabilities" of innate depravity, programmed aggressiveness, "the beast" and wild animal as ferocious killers are human-made constructs to make aggression easier to understand and to accept. For Montagu, these are merely diversions from the real sources of aggression, namely false contradictory values by which humans in a disorderly world attempt to live.⁴⁶ As we shall see, one such value contradiction is the demand for vulnerable humans to be invulnerable heroes.

In order to investigate what might be false and contradictory values about violence, we need to shift from discourse about phylogenetic innate violent impulses to discourse about acquired aggressive behavior. What is involved in the acquisition of aggression? How do we learn to be aggressive?

Symbol and Belief

The human as neurobiological organism continually adapts to changes in the environment. The interpretation of adaptation or experience also involves cognitive and affective systems that are interrelated with an organism's neurochemical system. The selective inclusion and exclusion of certain information from processing differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable information for cognition according to the developmental needs of the person within a specific environmental situation.

Experience is stored cognitively by representations of experience or symbols. Symbols are the codification, naming, and labeling of experience (thoughts, emotions, desires, cognitively mediated responses) in memory representations which serve as models for potential behavior. We preserve our interpretations of experiences in symbolic associations. "It is difficult to explain the overwhelming hold symbols possess over us unless they were learnt in association with powerful emotional experiences."⁴⁷

Symbolic representation that defines experience is central to the formation of estimations of reality, or beliefs, through awareness and judgment. Beliefs and evaluations about violence vary according to time, place, and setting. Beliefs and evaluations are included in cognitive schemas or patterns of thought by which a person organizes and interprets experience.⁴⁸

Beliefs as estimations of reality are formulated by symbolic representation and the selective principle of judgement, or authority, and the neurochemical and affective systems of awareness. Beliefs are tied to evaluations, or appraisals of desirable consequences that potentially direct behavior. The capacity to discern between acceptable and unacceptable information for integration into a cognitive schema is the decision of authority that labels or names information.

The process of naming or languaging includes a history of selecting and creating words to interpret changed circumstances to allow for adjustment and adaptability to internal/external events. This is the individual's history of development or linguistic ontogenesis. Thus, naming, or the metaphoric nature of language, is a dual process of openness to the unlimited aspect of changing reality and the establishment of a delimited selection or valuation of information that is incorporated into a cognitive schema of beliefs (which may be integrated into conscious beliefs or given "selective inattention" and stored on an unconscious level).

Language is already social, as it embodies agreed upon signs by which participants understand each other. Thus, the question of

who or *what* it is that signifies, or *what* is signified, is of less import than the acknowledgment *that* a sign signifies. Thus, naming or signification as metaphor and symbol is intrinsically relational or social as communication.

Symbols are loci of the historical selection of names, or imaginative representations between experience and reality that may derive from direct experience or vicarious learning. Vicarious or observational learning can occur by viewing the behavior of others and its consequences for them. The information acquisition process is foreshortened through observational learning. This acquired knowledge is the acquisition of external authority, as having acceptably obtained what is sought, as implied in observing another's cognitive schema and conduct, or its symbolic representation, and choosing it as appropriate behavior.

Behavior is conditioned by cognitive appraisal, the modes of response learned from direct or vicarious experience for coping with the world. It is also conditioned by their relative effectiveness in a matrix of social relations and expectations of social acceptability, tolerance, or social cost. The self as relational is situated in a symbolic linguistic context of social motives for interpersonal conduct rather than motivated by intrapsychic factors, such as instincts, brain centers, or so-called aggressive energy that influence what we label aggressive motivation and violent behavior.

The cognitive schemas of belief—including value judgments, personal history, and expectations of anticipated consequences—situate the self as socially motivated within a cultural context of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Social motivation is directed by the acceptance of the authority implied within the models and symbols that prevail in a culture, through cultural discourse with the power to give names to behavior and the power to delimit the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable behavioral diversity in a society. Now that the self has been contextualized as a socially motivated self, the topic of aggression will be discussed within this model.

Acquired Aggression

Research conducted with animals has revealed subcortical structures (nerve centers below the cerebral cortex of the brain), primarily the hypothalamus and limbic system, that act as neurophysiological mechanisms to mediate aggressive behavior *and* that are selectively activated and controlled by the central processing of environmental stimulation.⁴⁹ Social learning factors affect the kinds of responses that are likely to be activated by stimulating the same neural structure.

Hypothalamic stimulation of a dominant monkey in a colony prompted him to attack subordinate males but not the females with whom he was on friendly terms. In contrast, hypothalamic stimulation elicited submissiveness in a monkey when she occupied a low hierarchical position, but increased aggressiveness toward subordinates as her social rank was elevated by changing the membership of the colony. Thus, electrical stimulation of the same anatomical site produced markedly different behavior under different social conditions.⁵⁰

Aggression for most animals is ritualized into displays of threat, submission, and appeasement, from which human beings are exempt.⁵¹ However, humans do not solve conflict through ritual display. The apparent lack of innate inhibitions in humans leaves the regulation of conflict to the sanction of authority and social custom.⁵² The social environment of humans, not extrapolations from animal behavior, needs to be the focus of inquiries into human aggression.

The debate between innate and acquired aggression was brought to a focus in the early 1970s in *Violence and the Brain*, which advocated mandatory social testing for "thresholds of violence." Those who did not pass the test would be identified and prevented from causing "harm" to society. One of the prevention techniques was psychosurgery, or what was more commonly known as "lobotomy," as characterized in Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

In *Violence and the Brain*, an organic view of mental dysfunction was expressed clearly in terms of the "hardwired" brain as an organ of behavior. "Any act or state of being (i.e., behavior or thought) is a reflection of some particular mode of organization of the complex circuits of the brain."⁵³ Individual violence was a symptom of a disturbance in the brain mechanisms that control violent behavior. A disturbance could be due to brain disease, both genetic and acquired (a blow to the head).

Those persons showing symptoms of disturbances or dyscontrol could be prone to violent acts or have a "low threshold for violence."⁵⁴ In view of such possibilities, the authors claimed it was "necessary" to identify those persons with malfunctioning brains so that they could be treated and thus their violence could be "prevented."⁵⁵ The identification and regulation of the violent individual echoes the claim that "the prerequisite of all civilized communal life is that people learn to properly control their impulses."⁵⁶

The proposal to prevent violence by way of regulation of individual behavior brought a rash of rebuttals. Some critics claimed psy-

chiatry had become a political force by disguising social conflict as "illness" and justified coercion as "treatment."

Others argued that the claim that violence issues from an individual's brain is dubious because of "the essentially social [or anti-social] nature of violent assaultive actions."⁵⁷ Violence refers to a "behavioral transaction in which one person exerts upon another person [or thing] an action considered [by the recipient or others] to be injurious and unwarranted."⁵⁸ Violent action occurs in a social context of interaction and naming where the "violent" actor is one participant. Therefore, the context, including the person or thing to which the act is directed, is "also an expression of the functioning brain of the person who commits the action . . . [therefore], the action in question . . . involves more than the 'expression' of a particular brain."⁵⁹ Violence cannot be reduced to a property or a process located solely in a particular individual. There is no *a priori* basis to localize a cause of the violent behavior within the brain of someone "who is identified [by someone else] as expressing 'abnormal aggressive behavior.'"⁶⁰

A disorder described as an entity (impulse) "located" in the individual is rather a relation with something which "locates" and evaluates the behavior/body of the person in a social context. It is clear that the "power to diagnose—to give names to—problematic behavior" is one facet of the power to delimit, or to "define the limits of allowable behavioral diversity in a society."⁶¹ Such power to label and enforce definitions is a "touchstone of social control." In this sense, the "violent individual" is not a discrete biological entity, but a historical social construction of definitions of violence that delimit behavior.⁶²

If we consider that there is socially mediated violent behavior, then a different slant is given to how we perceive the phenomenon of violence as war and those who participate in it. To develop this thought further, from the perspective of learned aggression, fighting is a learned behavior based on the principle of reinforcement.⁶³ Defensive fighting can be stimulated from pain of attack, but "aggression in the strict sense of an unprovoked attack can only be produced by training."⁶⁴

S. L. A. Marshall, appointed chief historian for World War II and later a general in the Korean War, interviewed hundreds of infantry companies in the central Pacific and European theatres. The results showed that no more than 15 percent of the soldiers had fired at the enemy. Only one-quarter of an infantry could be expected to strike a blow in an engagement with the enemy unless compelled by overwhelming circumstance. This one-quarter included well-trained and campaign-seasoned troops: "I mean that 75 percent will not fire or will not persist in firing against the enemy and his works. These men may

face the danger but they will not fight."⁶⁵ Marshall describes an unwillingness to kill, not a fear of being killed, during a war to which nearly everyone was ideologically committed. He includes psychiatric studies of combat fatigue that found that

fear of killing, rather than fear of being killed, was the most common cause of battle failure in the individual . . . It is therefore reasonable to believe that the average and normally healthy individual—the man who can endure the mental and physical stresses of combat—still has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance toward killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from that responsibility.⁶⁶

The account of Lee Childress, a sergeant of the 206th Assault Helicopter Company at Phu Loi, Vietnam, from June 1967 to May 1968, offers a similar perspective and questions the moral validity of authoritatively sanctioned war in the discourse of profanity that accompanies conflict and combat: "The first time you were under fire, you thought, 'How the fuck can they do this to me? If only I could talk to the cocksuckers firing at me, we'd get along, everything would be all right.' I just had the overwhelming feeling that if I could talk to these people, that they really are the same as I am, that it's not us that are doing it, it's some other system and we're just pawns in this fucking thing, throwing the shit at each other."⁶⁷

That "there is no such thing as an instinct for fighting" supports the claim that aggressive behavior is learned behavior. On this view, aggression produced by training implies that the "motivation for fighting is increased by success; frustration leads to aggression, and all so-called physiological causes can be traced to external stimulation."⁶⁸

The role of learning in aggression contains a distinction between two concepts, acquisition and habit. The *acquisition* of fighting behavior depends upon biochemical factors. The *habit* of fighting depends upon previous learning, or a history of fighting. Inherited aggressive motor patterns may be a part of an organism's behavioral constitution, but whether or not and how they are expressed depends upon learning. This is supported by evidence that "attack behavior in humans occurs no earlier than talking and walking."⁶⁹

Instinct theorists accept the idea that the urge or instinct to aggress arises spontaneously, resulting in hostile behavior. However, an in-born drive of this kind has yet to be found.⁷⁰ Yet, drive theorists accept the idea that aroused aggressive drive presumably remains active until

discharged by some form of aggression.⁷¹ Here, aggression is a result of frustration, which replaces instinct as the activating source. The two theories are very similar. The commonness of frustration would be explained as persons having excess aggressive energy needing to be discharged.

Knud Larsen includes Lorenz among the drive theorists who support such "hydraulic myths." The logic is as follows: technological achievements have progressed faster than innate inhibitions, and persons thus have less opportunity to work off excess energy. Humans must have an outlet, or an opportunity for the "discharge of aggressive energy" or catharsis, by means of sports and other competitive activities. The assumption is that after the discharge, lower levels of aggression will occur because lower levels of aggressive energy will remain. Larsen notes that this assumption overlooks the possibility that instead of decreasing aggressive behavior, competitive activities may actually strengthen a habit of aggression.⁷²

Indeed, studies of violent television viewing found that violent television encourages aggression and that aggressive persons are more attracted to violent programs.⁷³ This runs counter to the "catharsis theory of media violence." Research designed to test the catharsis theory shows an opposite effect: "Ventilation and vicarious participation, rather than serving to work off aggression, tends to increase it."⁷⁴ Further, for persons with a tendency to behave aggressively, different sources of emotional arousal can heighten their aggression.⁷⁵ Thus, if violent behavior is learned, then exposure to violent events, activities, or symbolic models would serve to teach violent behavior and reinforce such behavior as well.

Frustration-aggression, or drive theory, has lost its explanatory value in light of evidence that frustration has varied effects on behavior; "aggression does not require frustration."⁷⁶ Frustration or anger arousal is a "facilitative, rather than a necessary, condition for aggression." Frustration subsumes too wide a variety of conditions—physical assault, deprivation, defeat, harassment to insults.

The apparent build-up of "aggressive energy" is due to a lowered response threshold. A low level of stimulation will produce a response because of a person's lack of stimulation tolerance. The lowering of the response threshold may change as a function of alterations in a person's physiological status. There may be a pain threshold below which level stimuli may not elicit attack, whereas pain exceeding this minimum intensity may elicit hostile behavior.⁷⁷ A hypoglycemic patient may experience mounting feelings of irritability and hostility that will be eliminated with the intake of a glass of orange juice without

the hostile feelings being expressed. "There is no aggressive energy which continues to accumulate, and there is no *necessity* for the expression of hostility."⁷⁸

The attempt to equate biological aggression with a lack of serotonin is another example of this lowering of the response threshold. It is a convenient explanation of violence proposed in a time of widespread social violence and disruptive global multicultural migration, similar to the "violence threshold" theory put forward by Mark and Ervin in 1970, in the context of conflict and social upheaval caused by the civil rights movement, anti-establishment protests against the Vietnam war, and the cold war.

Social Learning Theory

In contrast to frustration-aggression theory, in social learning theory, "aversive stimulation produces a general state of emotional arousal that can facilitate any number of responses."⁷⁹ Stimulation by something a person does not like will create an emotional arousal that may have a variety of responses. The resulting behavior depends upon "how the source of arousal is cognitively appraised, the modes of response learned for coping with stress, and their relative effectiveness."⁸⁰

The source of the aversion is sifted through value judgments, personal history, and expectations of anticipated consequences. Some people may respond to aversive situations by seeking help and support, others by withdrawal, others by increased achievement efforts, others by self-anesthetization with drugs and alcohol, and still others by constructive problem solving. The comparative strengths of the emotional arousal of anger and fear in circumstances of distress and their associated action tendencies, or responses, depends upon situational conditions and prior learning.⁸¹

To elaborate upon the context of emotional arousal, sensations, including painful ones, logically must be felt. The "object" of distress is the overall threatening situation and the expectation of pain: "If a person insists that they felt pain, we cannot contradict them. Ultimately only [the person] can tell us whether [he/she] was in pain or not."⁸²

Alice Miller makes a distinction between emotion that is *experienced* and emotion that is warded off as unacceptable and denied its proper identification and integration into a person's repertoire of feeling. For instance, "hatred is a normal human *feeling*, and feeling has never killed anyone."⁸³ For Miller, an appropriate emotional response

to the abuse of children, rape of women, and torture of the innocent is anger and hatred. "It is not *experienced* hatred that leads to acts of violence."⁸⁴ Rather, for Miller it is hatred that is denied and placed under the name of ideology that leads to violence where it can be legitimated as acceptable. Miller argues for the validation and expression of these very real yet conventionally unacceptable feelings of anger and hatred instead of more insidious consequences resulting from their denial. The connection between violence and legitimation is important and will be discussed in the next chapter.

One theory describes emotion as a physiological reaction that includes the cognitive activity of labeling, or identifying an emotion as a certain sort according to appropriate knowledge of the circumstances.⁸⁵ Emotion entails physiological sensation and its assessment in a particular situation. "Dispositional" emotions may not require a detectable feeling at the moment, as when we say, "I've loved her for years" or "I've been afraid he'd do that." It is important to keep in mind that the theory requires a causal analysis. Emotions here are "feels" that are unanalyzable and cannot be made up of desires, behaviors, the awareness of objects, and so on.

John Dewey has argued for a behavioral interpretation of emotion.⁸⁶ Emotional behavior is not caused by a pre-existent emotion. The behavior is determined by the situation and can be explained by referring to actions that were formerly and continue to be useful in coping with the situation. Emotions have three components: (1) intellectual, or the idea of the object of emotion, (2) a "feel," and (3) a disposition for behavior. Emotion thus is interwoven with a person's individual history and behavioral tendencies.

Emotions are not simply an "inner" feeling, like a headache. They also have an "outer" reference, to some situation, person, object, or state of affairs.⁸⁷ In evaluative theories of emotion, emotions are "intentional" in that they are directed toward objects in the world. They are more than mere "feels" about the world; they are ways of being aware of things in the world.

In cognitive theories of emotion, emotions logically presuppose both evaluative and factual beliefs, and each type of emotion has a typical set of beliefs.⁸⁸ The words that describe emotion form part of the vocabulary of evaluation for appraisal and criticism. To say one is angry at one's sister is to make a negative evaluation of one's sister. It is an indirect value judgement that presupposes factual beliefs about the emotional context.

The advantage of cognitive theory is that an analysis of the rationality of emotions is possible. Certain emotions may be "irrational" or

inappropriate to the actual situation. It is "reason" and not emotion that should be charged with irrationality. Emotions are in part "cognitive" and "evaluative" phenomena that presuppose rationality in a psychological sense—the ability to use concepts and have reasons for what one does or feels. Whether those reasons are good reasons is another matter.⁸⁹ Hence, emotions have physiological and cognitive components which are situation dependent for their expression. Let us now turn to emotional arousal and behavioral response in the context of social learning theory.

There are two broad classes of motivators to behavior in social learning theory.⁹⁰ First, there are the biologically based motivators, where behavior is mainly a result of the experience of painful effects of internal and external sources of aversive stimulation. Second, there are cognitively based motivators. The capacity to represent future consequences in thought allows individuals to generate current motivators of behavior. The outcome expectations may be material (physically painful or consummatory), sensory (enjoyable, novel, or unpleasant) or social (positive and negative evaluative reactions). Cognitive motivation may also take the form of self-motivation that operates through goal setting and self-evaluations.

Some aggressive acts are motivated by painful stimulation. Most situations that lead people to aggress—such as insults, verbal challenges or unjust treatment—"gain this activating capacity through learning experiences."⁹¹ People learn to dislike or to attack certain people either through direct unpleasant encounters with them, or "on the basis of symbolic and vicarious experiences that conjure up hatreds."⁹² Because of the regularities in events in the environment, "antecedent cues come to signify future events and the outcomes particular actions are likely to produce. Such uniformities create expectations about what leads to what."⁹³ Thus, these uniformities in the environment have parallels in the patterning of behavior and expectations in the individual.

In the example of the monkey colony, stimulation of the hypothalamus (the neural locus for mediation of aggressive behavior) brought about distinctly different behavior under different social conditions. How neurophysiological systems operate internally is conditioned by external stimuli such that they can be socially activated for different types of action. "Biological systems are roused in humans by provocative external events and by ideational activation."⁹⁴ According to the social learning view, persons are biologically endowed with neurophysiological mechanisms (hypothalamus and limbic system) that enable them to behave aggressively, but the arousal of these mecha-