

Why Can't People Just Live Peacefully With Each Other?

With Bob Wentworth

"It's human nature, so it's inevitable" is NOT the answer. Human beings have a wide range of behaviors, which nature prepares us to be able to engage in. Humans can be loving, collaborative, and mutually supportive and can also be aggressive, combative, and treat people as if they are subhuman "others." What type of behavior people actually engage in is strongly affected by culture and context.

It's Not Just Nature

Primatologist Robert Sapolsky has reported a striking example of how, even among baboons, violence is not simply a function of "nature." Most baboon troops are strongly hierarchical, with hierarchy determining who gets to torture whom and who has to put up with it. The behavior is typically quite nasty with high levels of violence, to a point where Sapolsky, who studied baboons for decades, confessed to not liking most baboons very much. However, in the early 1980s, an incident in one baboon troop killed off the most aggressive males. The behavior in the troop shifted towards kinder, gentler, more nurturing patterns of behavior, with far lower levels of violence. The really striking development was that this change in patterns of behavior was still present twenty years later, after the troop had incorporated many new males born and raised in other troops. The evidence indicated that the added males were genetically identical to typical baboons, with the same high initial rates of aggression characteristic of most male baboons -- but as the adolescent baboons integrated into this particular troop, they were taught how things worked in this troop. They adapted to the peaceful culture, despite being born into troops with more aggressive cultures. Although nature clearly gave baboons a capacity for aggression, this troop proved that nature also gave baboons the capacity to act peacefully. The right culture led to a group of baboons sustainably expressing their capacities for peace and nurture rather than their capacities for aggression.

(For Sapolsky's story, read *Peace Among Primates* or see the YouTube video "Why hierarchy creates a destructive force within the human psyche.")

If culture can make the difference between peace and aggression among baboons, surely it can also do so among humans, who are strongly affected by culture.

Why Do Many Human Cultures Contribute to Violence?

If we accept that culture plays a significant role in human violent behavior, this raises the question, "Why do cultures that lead to notable levels of human violence predominate in this world?"

Andrew Bard Schmookler offered an insightful perspective on this in his book *The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution*. Schmookler observes that we can think about the evolution of cultures in much the same way that we think about biological evolution. In biology, there is a certain amount of random variation that occurs within a given species of animal or plant. Then there is a selection process that leads to some variants surviving more often, while others are more likely to die off. Similarly, human cultures naturally vary. The question is, what processes determine which variations in culture are likely to continue, versus which variations are likely to die out?

To answer this, Schmookler considers a parable in which there is a land where there are a number of tribes, most of which are peaceful, but one of which is aggressive and sets out to conquer the other tribes. He observes that there is an asymmetry between peaceful and aggressive behavior. A given peaceful tribe cannot force an aggressive tribe to change its behavior. But an aggressive tribe can force all of the peaceful tribes to change: They might avoid aggression, in which case they will be conquered and will be forced to adopt the culture of their conquerors; or they might arm to defend themselves, in which case they will no longer be peaceful in the same way that they were; or they can run away, giving up some of the resources that helped them to survive and handing those resources over to the aggressor. This results in all the remaining tribes having more aggressive behavior than was initially the case. The selective pressures favor aggression, and whatever culture is the most effective in pursuing a course of aggression will tend to spread.

Schmookler argues that selective pressures have caused us to evolve cultures such that groups that embody these cultures are more likely to have sufficient power to impose their will on other groups. (He notes that the evolution of cultures does not seem to be about improving the well-being of individuals.)

So, to the extent that group-level domination has been a driving force in the evolution of existing cultures, it makes sense that these cultures would tend to encourage a certain amount of aggression and violence.

Is There Any Hope?

Schmookler's arguments help explain some features of why the dominant cultures in the world are the way they are, but reality is complicated enough that it's certainly possible for other types of culture to emerge, just as it did for one baboon troop.

Among other things, there are benefits to cooperation that aren't fully accounted for in Schmookler's parable. While mainstream culture tends to focus on competition as a powerful force in the world, recent research in ecology reveals that the level of cooperation that occurs in nature is far higher than anyone previously believed; e.g., unrelated plants in a forest help transport water to one help another. And contrary to some predictions, when circumstances get more dire, cooperation in the studied natural systems increases rather than decreases. So, cooperation has high survival value.

A culture that takes full advantage of the benefits of cooperation, and leverages innate human longings to collaborate with and support one another, could potentially thrive.

I think our hope lies in part in looking more closely at the elements of cultures that contribute to violence and creating new cultures that support peace, and which, when they encounter more violent/aggressive cultures, can nonetheless thrive.

Cultural Contributions to Violence

What patterns or assumptions in the dominant cultures contribute to violence?

This is a complex topic, and there is a lot that could be said about it.

However, one of the deepest analyses I know of points to a factor that is so widespread you'll likely think it is crazy for anyone to question it. There is an assumption that:

- It makes sense to structure our institutions and our use of language, and take collective and individual action, to try to control people, routinely trying to force them to do things that we're

afraid they wouldn't otherwise want to do.

Within the ways that we are used to thinking about things, it seems like this is necessary and unavoidable. But, suppose, just for a moment, that there are alternatives we might not be aware of. What are the costs of routinely trying to force people to do things?

- How do you react when someone forces you to do something? Common responses include resentment, rebellion, or simply not putting your heart into the task -- even if it's a task you might have been willing to do otherwise. In families, when we routinely try to force people to do things, this contributes to alienation, not feeling close, and the breakdown of relationships. In general, in many contexts, controlling and forcing are likely to lead to reduced aliveness and engagement and negative feelings.
- Forcing, especially when overt or subtle threats of punishment are involved, can lead to people's nervous systems becoming chronically in fight, flight, or freeze states. In these states, our biological capacity for rich social interactions and for feeling loving and connected to other human beings tends to shut down. (You might check out recent neurological research on "polyvagal theory.")
- Once we experience it as normal to force people to do things, it becomes easy to believe that under extreme circumstances, it makes sense to use extreme measures, i.e., violence, to apply force. Strategies that don't involve force are unlikely to enter our imagination as possibilities.

I think these make a case for forcing and controlling being factors that likely contribute to violence. But can we really manage the world, and our individual lives, without forcing people to do things?

I don't know if all forcing can be eliminated. But there is substantial evidence that, much of the time, things can work—and work far better than they do when things are done conventionally—with vastly less controlling and forcing than most of us would imagine are "needed."

In the business realm, Daniel Pink's book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, reports research showing that, except for certain types of simple tasks, using rewards and punishments to try to control and "motivate" people tends to degrade performance. Even more strikingly, Frederick Laloux, in his book *Reinventing Organizations*, reports on how a variety of businesses that deliberately avoid most of the mechanisms that are conventionally believed to be necessary to "control" and "direct" and "manage" employees have been highly, even spectacularly, successful.

In the personal and interpersonal realms, the practice of Nonviolent Communication (originally developed by Marshall Rosenberg) offers ideas and strategies for navigating life with far less forcing, and potentially more closeness, joy, and empowerment, than what tends to result if we adhere to the advice of mainstream culture. (Author Miki Kashtan writes about the application of the same principles in broader social contexts.)

So, there are ways of navigating life with far less forcing, and there is some experience that these can work really well. They are so counter-cultural that quite a bit of learning may be needed before we "get" the logic of these ways of doing things. To get really different results may require a really different approach.

Conclusions

At this point in history, it may be that the main reason that human violence persists is that we believe that violence is inevitable and there's nothing we can do about it—even though there is notable evidence that this is likely not true.

Our ability to develop deep understandings of how things work has given us unprecedented powers to change the physical world. Maybe the time is ripe for us to do the same with our social world.

If we thoughtfully study root causes, try new ways of doing things, and are willing to change our cultures, who knows what might be possible?