

## Violence and Its Impact on Mental Health

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Judging from reports in the media, violence seems to have become an unavoidable part of our lives. Looking back in time, we see the dark and prominent stains of deliberate brutality throughout human history. Whether it is war, revolution, murder, domestic violence or any other kind of act which inflicts harm on another, violence has accompanied the human condition from the very beginning and throughout evolution to the present day. Right from the time man lived in caves and used stone-age tools, to this time when he lives in metropolitan cities and uses electronic gadgets, violence has never really left his side. Apart from irredeemable loss to the victim in many cases, this one act of violence may also affect the victim's family members, community members as well as onlookers and bystanders. Physical violence frequently leaves psychological scars which have far reaching impacts which in turn multiplies the chances of an unhealthy mental condition. In the era of the Anthropocene, when man has taken over the Earth as the ruling species, it is appropriate that the violence inflicted by humans and its impact on fellow humans as well as the other inhabitants of the planet be considered and studied. This will make it possible for us to freshly locate preventive measures as well as cures for this harmful behavior. This paper attempts to review and summarize information that research scholars have been able to sift through from their findings.

### Why are we violent ?

The cost of violence in today's era is enormous in terms of the devastation it impacts on the lives of victims, perpetrators as well as witnesses. The financial impact of violent crimes, even if we were to not include war, is no less. It becomes imperative to understand what makes people more likely to be violent and what measures can be taken to minimize this. It is widely believed that the most important factor leading to violence is biology. Violence in males seems to be a biological fact running through diverse cultures way back into our ancestral past. We may not be able to change the biology of our brain, but understanding and comprehending it will surely be as useful, if not more, than understanding and comprehension of the human heart.

Presenting some 430,000 years old human evidence, Victoria Gill has reported a study that "provides grisly evidence that violence is an intrinsic part of the earliest human culture." The fractures on a skull from a pre-historic site in northern Spain have revealed to researchers and scientists that the multiple blows inflicted could have been dealt out with the intention to kill. Lead researcher Dr. Nohemi Sala from the Salud Carlos III Institute in Madrid told BBC News that the victim was killed in an act of lethal interpersonal violence. Anthropologist Professor Debra Martin has also reported to BBC News that she expects to "find that violence is culturally mediated and has been with us as long as culture itself has been with us".

In the 1650s, Thomas Hobb declared that mankind is born violent. About a century later, Rousseau argued that man's behavior is influenced by his environment. Mariette Le Roux says that of late, scientists have concluded that violence within us has been inherited from an ancient ancestor and shared with other primates. According to Maria Gomez Reyes, there was also "an evolutionary component to human violence" which is not only genetic, but "most likely" influenced by environmental pressures on survival. Adding to this, Mark Pagel, from the University of Reading is of the opinion that there are "good grounds for believing that we are intrinsically more violent than the average mammal." But he adds that humans have also been seen to be able to control their urge to be violent, especially in modern societies that have "police forces, legal systems, prisons and strong cultural attitudes that reject violence..."

Josh Gabbatiss points out to scholars “such as Carrier who suggest that violence has molded our species – that it’s been etched into our bodies and minds.” Some sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists argue that behaviours can also be shaped by natural selection. This insight shakes our perception of ourselves as a species and moves in the direction of endangering prospects of world peace, since if we are born to be violent, we are born to wage war. Contradicting this, David Adams, neurophysiologist and psychologist at Wesleyan University, along with a group of 20 scientists, issued the Seville Statement on Violence, which declared that “it is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into human nature.” This statement was later adopted by the UNESCO to promote international collaboration and make peace a realistic goal. On the other hand, in 1996, the author of *Demonic Males*, Richard Wrangham commented that we are “the dazed survivors of a 5-million-year habit of lethal aggression.” This comment was based on his assumption that just like in chimpanzees, violence improved their access to food and female mates, violence confers advantages on human males who also go through the “experience of a victory thrill, an enjoyment of the chase, a tendency for easy dehumanization...” Steven Pinker, another Harvard researcher, explains in his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, written in 2011, that the human body and brain exhibits direct signs of “design for aggression” which, within men, testify to “an evolutionary history of violent male –to-male competition.”

But again, many anthropologists remain unimpressed by the evolutionary-advantage-in violence theory. Polly Wiessner, an anthropologist from the Arizona State University, says that people in traditional societies are more likely to use weapons in hostile circumstances and fist-fighting, as asserted by Carrier, cannot be assumed to be a key factor in human evolution. Douglas Fry, an anthropologist from the University of Alabama, has documented over seventy traditional societies, like the Martu of Australia, whose vocabulary does not contain any word for “feud” or “warfare” and the Semai of Malasia who prefer to flee into the forest rather than face conflict bodily. To add to this side of the debate, Agustín Fuentes, Chair of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, says that it is wrong to assume that our evolutionary success is based largely on our ability to be violent. Despite the arguments, a large number of scholars agree that humans have the capacity of great kindness and compassion as well as brutal violence.

The disturbing amount of violence prevailing in human societies has urged researchers to look for and find genetic markers, predictors etc. which influence human behavior to be destructive. Complex brain functions have been found to be influenced by specific genes which affect neurotransmitter levels. At the same time, environmental influences including stress, lack of or disturbed sleep patterns, bad health etc. also push individuals towards violence. Interestingly, the MAOA gene in the X chromosome has been named as the *warrior gene* since abnormal versions often lead to aggressiveness. Low levels of MAO-A have been linked to antisocial behavior, more so when there has been a history of being treated badly during childhood. MAOA variants have been seen to demonstrate a genetic basis for severe aggressive behavior in American boys (grades 7 to 12). Another specific variant of the MAOA gene (VNTR 2R MAOA) was seen as a risk factor of violent delinquency when boys suffered from stress factors such as family disturbances, low popularity and failing in school. Such studies indicate that when individuals with low MAO-A expression are victims of unhappy childhood, they are likely to develop Anti-Social Personality Disorder which may in turn, leads to violent behavior.

In Finland, a genetic analysis of almost 900 criminal offenders revealed two genes associated with violent crime. But Jari Tiihonen, the lead author of the study from the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden says that even if an individual has “high- risk combination” of these genes, it is not likely that most people having this condition will commit a crime. “There are many things which can contribute to a person’s mental capacity. The only thing that matters is the mental capacity of the individual to understand the consequences of what he or she is doing and whether or not the individual can control his or her own behaviour.” Christopher Ferguson from Stetson University, Florida is of similar opinion. He says “To some extent we’re all products of genetics and the environment but I don’t think that robs us of free will or understanding right and wrong.”

Another factor that seems to be crucial in creating tendencies of violence within humans is intoxication. It is proposed that “intoxicants interact with MAOA-L to affect brain neurotransmitters and produce aggression.” The remedy suggested by these researchers is that drugs like disulfiram or naltrexone which block the effects of intoxicants should be made mandatory in such cases. Other researchers also indicate towards the “male” hormone testosterone, which, when combined with either “negative or positive early life events” may produce either “chronic antisocial lifestyles” or “socially adaptive traits such as a strong achievement motivation, leadership, fair bargaining behaviours and social assertiveness” on the other hand. It is suggested that just as we have laws that punish bad behavior associated with drugs, there should be laws and social pressure to prevent chemically induced bad behavior.

Next comes the vexing question --- can violence itself be addictive? Do people take to aggression and violence because it makes them feel good? According to David Chester, from the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences, aggressive behavior can be reinforced by positive feelings of power and dominance. So it becomes something about how it feels good to hit back. And this positive sensation, Chester says, can be as addictive as cocaine, gambling and risky sexual behavior. Thus violence and aggression may be used as an instrument to uplift a depressed or low state of mood condition. Chester confirms that drugs like naltrexone might curb the addiction to violence just as it suppresses the thrill of other addictions.

### **Violence and Extremism**

In today’s scenario, it is urgently important that we find and understand the reason why so many are drawn towards violent extremism. “In radical movements and extremist groups, many prospective terrorists find not only a sense of meaning,” writes Randy Borum, “but also a sense of belonging, connectedness and affiliation.” Contrary to general assumption, the average terrorist is not mentally ill. Most are usually inducted into the path of extreme violence through contacts within small groups closely knit together. They may be inspired by a desire of revenge or grievance for some humiliation felt individually or by their group. A feeling of being neglected by mainstream authorities combined with the belief that only extreme and unconventional methods can bring about desired change may also fuel the extremist mindset. Very often, religious scriptures are interpreted as calling for violent aggression towards a particular group. Such reasons have been seen to influence elite educated persons also.

### **Impulsive and Instrumental Aggression**

#### **Group and Individual Violence**

Clark McCauley makes two crucial distinctions in the psychology of violence and aggression. Firstly, he says that impulsive aggression differs from instrumental aggression and secondly, group violence is different from individual violence. Impulsive aggression is marked by strong emotion, mostly anger and is aimed at hurting another. Instrumental aggression is cooler and the intention of hurting is not an end in itself but only the means to another end. Of the two, impulsive aggression is seen as the lesser evil since the perpetrator is less likely to repeat the act of violence as compared to the perpetrator of instrumental violence. Individual violence involves murder, assault, rape, robbery etc. committed usually by less socialized individuals of lower literacy as well as socioeconomic status than average. On the other hand, intergroup violence depends on the leadership of well socialized persons. Success “in modern war depends on soldiers with middle-class levels of intelligence and education” and this is apparent from the fact that a number of good people are involved in perpetrating violence in war. Similarly, police and military torturers are individuals whose sense of duty and respect for authority is more than average.

### **Impact of Violence on Mental Health**

The impact of violence doesn’t stop with the act itself. Apart from physical trauma, the mental health of the victim as well as the witness loses its equilibrium. War, specially, leaves its inevitable mark on the human mind. The impact of war on mental health in different areas of conflict such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine and other war-torn places has been studied and reported by research scholars. It was found that in Afghanistan, symptoms of depression were common in 67.7% of the respondents, anxiety in 72.2% of the respondents PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in 42%. The disabled and

women had poorer mental health status and coping strategies were limited to religious and spiritual practices. In a study conducted in Iraq, 87% of the children and 60% of their caregivers were found to be suffering from PTSD. Similar studies in Israel indicate that 76.7% of subjects exposed to war-related trauma had at least one traumatic stress-related symptom, while 9.4% had acute stress disorder. In Lebanon, the quantum of major depression varied across communities exposed to war from 16.3% to 41.9%. A study conducted by the Gaza Community Mental Health Program among children in Palestine showed 32.7% to be suffering from acute PTSD symptoms, 49.2% from moderate PTSD symptoms and 15.6% from mild PTSD symptoms and only 2.5% had no symptoms.

Domestic violence, which is a global problem of enormous proportions, has also been very commonly known to cause mental health effects including depression, low self-esteem, fear and anxiety. Eating disorders and PTSD are also widely prevalent. "At least one in every three women globally has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way – most often by someone she knows, including her husband or another male family member. One woman in four has been abused during her pregnancy." The number of children exposed to violence in the home is estimated to be 275 million worldwide, keeping in mind that many countries have no data at all. Such children are at the risk of becoming victims of abuse themselves. There is also significant risk of ever increasing harm to the child's emotional and social development. There is also a strong likelihood of these children continuing the cycle of violence into the coming generation.

### Violence on Animals

The link between violence committed against other people and animal cruelty has so far received insufficient attention. The abuse of animals is now being seen as an indicator to other forms of violence, many times inter-personal. Studies in this direction are mainly confined to academia, making widespread public understanding rare and problematic. But statistics cannot be denied. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that about one in twelve women who had been emotionally abused by their partners reported that their pets had been harmed. An estimated 88% of animals living in households with domestic violence are abused or killed. In the U.S. 57% of women in domestic violence shelters have had their companion animal killed by their abuser. Studies show that animal abuse calls for prolonged and scientific attention. Increasing studies are ever pointing to the fact that animals and birds have intelligence and feelings, similar to humans. As such harm meted out towards them is equal to harming fellow humans. With mankind having emerged as the supreme leading species on planet earth in this age of Anthropocene, it is also our ever increasing responsibility to mete out care and compassion towards the other residents of our mother planet. The impact of violence on the mental health of animals and birds will take some time yet to formulate, but the positive impact that animals like dogs, horses and dolphins have on human mental health is well known and can easily be tabulated and made public for the good of all.

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