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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Causes and cures IV: The symbolism of violence[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The past two years have been a landmark moment for violence prevention, with the publication of *The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*; a historic resolution on violence by the 67th World Health Assembly; and the release of multiple documents on violence by international and United Nations entities, with a corresponding building of momentum in scholarship. Most notably, in September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, addressing the need for violence prevention at an unprecedented scale. In this context, more than ever, violence studies have become a field of its own right. Still, a systematic approach of the topic has been lacking, and no textbook yet synthesizes the knowledge of multiple disciplines toward a cogent understanding. This article is the fourth of a series of fifteen articles that will cover, as an example, an outline of the Global Health Studies course entitled, “Violence: Causes and Cures,” reviewing the major bio–psycho–social and structural–environmental perspectives on violence. It discusses the symbolic nature of human actions, as studied through semiotics among other fields, and the reasons why religion, art, and iconography can become potent arenas for violent expression. Violence points to the most poignant aspects of human existence, which center around love and its consequences: emotional vitality (“spirit”) and a cognitive sense of importance (“meaning”). These characteristics can, in turn, facilitate creativity, compassion, and resilience in the face of crisis, which are powerful mitigators of violence.

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Article

We are living through a landmark moment for violence prevention. The past two years, especially, have seen an outpouring of documents reflecting a growing focus on the problem of violence and multilateral collaborations to solve it. In December 2014, for example, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the United Nations Development Programme (WHO, UNODC, & UNDP, 2014) joined forces to launch *The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*, detailing the efforts of 133 countries to address

interpersonal violence. It is the first major report on violence since the *World Report on Violence and Health* (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), an influential document that consolidated all the existing science on violence for the first time. In the same year, the 67th World Health Assembly (WHA, 2014) adopted a historic resolution addressing violence, bringing particularly to focus women, children, and other vulnerable members of the populations subject to systematic structural and institutional violence. Furthermore, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (UNODC, 2014), *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children* (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014a), *Ending Violence against Children: Six Strategies for Action* (UNICEF, 2014b), *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (WHO, 2014), and *Preventing Youth Violence: Taking Action and*

[☆] N.B.: This is a continuation of “The Causes and Cures of Violence” series.
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Generating Evidence (WHO, 2015), all appeared within a two-year time span, highlighting some of the major forms of violence. Most notably, on September 25, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations [UN], 2015), addressing the need for violence prevention at an unprecedented scale and recognizing the interdependence between sustained peace and sustainable development. In this context, more than ever, it is time for violence studies to become a field of its own right, with university-level instruction capable of addressing the complexities and commonalities of the different forms of violence beyond the current “niche-based” study. Meanwhile, ongoing worldwide events point to the importance of this life-or-death issue and the need for a cogent understanding that is more than just the sum of its parts.

Over several issues, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* has graciously offered to publish a lecture series that has been implemented through the Global Health Studies Program at Yale College in a course entitled, “Violence: Causes and Cures.” While it does not purport to be the definitive sequence for reviewing all the major bio-psycho-social and structural–environmental perspectives on violence, it is a proposal for a systematic approach. This article consists of the fourth of this fifteen article series, in the following order:

1. Introduction: Toward a New Definition
2. The Biology of Violence
3. The Psychology of Violence
4. The Symbolism of Violence (in this issue)
5. The Sociology and Anthropology of Violence (in this issue)
6. The Political Science and Economics of Violence
7. Structural Violence
8. Environmental Violence
9. Consequences of Violence
10. Criminal Justice Approaches
11. International Law Approaches
12. Public Health Approaches
13. Global Medicine Approaches
14. Nonviolence Approaches
15. Synthesis and Integration

1. Introduction

No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe.

[Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (1944)]

To study the *symbolism* of violence, and to go further to address its *spiritual* aspects, will seem to lie outside the boundaries of the scientific study of violence. Nevertheless, as a complex human phenomenon, it is almost impossible to address the problem without it. Furthermore, if we asked the most basic questions about human violence, we will quickly discover that symbolism lies at its very heart. For instance: Why do humans commit violence? Given that it does not serve an apparent practical purpose much of the time—indeed, most of the time—what is its function? Why do human beings go to war to their mutual destruction? What is the drive toward nuclear warfare, at the threat of everyone’s extinction? What is held so importantly in human beings as to become suicide bombers? Why is the killing of another person sometimes not enough, that one must also mutilate? Even when the action serves an “instrumental” predatory purpose, what are the reasons for this purpose that is often self-defeating, if not defeating of the system of which one is part? Why do massacres hold such poignancy? Why are human beings far more likely to take their own lives than they are others’? An answer will be ever elusive for these basic questions without considering what violence *symbolizes*. Far from being random acts, human violence organizes around a principle that points to the most unique and basic quality in human nature: as German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1944) put it, human beings are “symbolic animals.”

Where the explanation since Aristotle’s time around humans being “rational animals,” fails, an alternative logic is necessary; coming from highly symbolic beings, the seemingly most irrational act finds its method in meaning-making (Frankl, 1962). This article, while an extension of the psychology of violence (Lee, 2015c), purports to complete conventional psychology by introducing—a full treatment will require an entire volume devoted to the issue because of its importance—what may arguably be the most relevant question in *how to think about violence*.

2. Meaning and moral development

The Oxford English Dictionary (Swartz, 2013) defines symbolism as: “the practice of representing things by symbols, or of giving a symbolic character to objects or acts.” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, 2011) further adds: “the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: as (a) artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states; or (b) the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits.” The field of study that concerns itself with symbols and signs is *semiotics*, which in turn is the plural of *semiotic*, which in the original Greek *semeiotikos* means “significant” or “observant of signs,” from *semeion* “a sign, a mark” (Liddell, Scott, Jones & MacKenzie, 2011). Its use in English began in the seventeenth century to denote the medical practice of interpreting symptoms or signs of diseases (Stubbe, 1670), and more recently, legal theorists have described law as a system of combative signs and language (Boshoff, 2013). However, in the nineteenth century, the importance of signs as a part of social life led American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to designate it as a science in its own right (Nöth, 1990). Roland Barthes (1957), Jacques Lacan (1966), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) subsequently applied these ideas in their own areas of study: literary studies and philosophy, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, respectively. As signs are used to signal something, or to make a mark, they have also been employed in human violence: they can be used to terrorize within their sociocultural contexts (Retsikas, 2006), just as words and myths can intensify violence through meaning (Ritscher, 2005). Semiotics has also investigated violence with respect to iconography (Ushie, 2012).

Indeed, violence is replete with symbols. Here, we will examine the ways in which our symbolic nature plays out in cognitive and emotional development. A major way in which the symbolic finds expression in human beings is in imbuing the tangible world with meaning, which gives rise to a moral compass of right or wrong, good or bad, or implicitly, healthful or illness-producing. Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1924) first articulated, and American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) elaborated, how moral stages progress. They showed that psychological health and maturity find expression in the emergence, evolution, and culmination of moral sensibilities across the human lifespan. Attitudes and understandings that arise from this development help to instill a sense of justice, respect for others’ rights, and finally caring. Piaget divided the stages of moral development into pre-moral (0–5 years), moral realism (5–9 years), and moral relativity (9+ years): before morality; absolute morality (authority figures such as parents, teachers, and God determine the rules); and morality whose rules can change according to circumstance (people make the rules and can break them). Kohlberg named these states “preconventional” (childhood), “conventional” (adolescence and adulthood), and “postconventional” (advanced adulthood), further distinguishable into:

- 1a) Obedience and punishment (*how can I avoid punishment?*).
- 1b) Self-interest (*what’s in it for me?—you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours*).

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