

# Examining the evidence from small-scale societies and early prehistory and implications for modern theories of aggression and violence

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to evaluate theoretical positions concerning the causes of violence among human societies using data from small-scale, radically non-Western societies and archaeological evidence from early hominids. The paper begins by observing that the almost exclusive focus on violence in industrial societies misses a wide range of variability presented by non-industrial groups, in the present as well as the past. It is argued that this narrow focus represents a significant bias within many of the social sciences. The paper also examines evidence of an evolutionary basis for violence and aggression by looking at the early hominid archaeological record. The paper finds significant evidence for some evolutionary basis for violence given its ubiquity in both the present as well as the deep archaeological past. The paper closes by proposing a synthetic model combining evolutionary theory and interactionist perspectives on the inputs leading to aggression and violence in human social groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Explaining the causes of interpersonal violence has been a problem at the forefront of research in many of the social sciences for more than a century (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Walker, 2001; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). Most attempts to examine interpersonal violence have focused on either ethnographic or experimental approaches to modern people in Western industrial societies (Walker, 2001). This paper argues that the exclusive focus on modern Western societies misses the substantial variability in the occurrence of interpersonal violence among human groups over space and time. We also feel strongly that understanding the full range of variation in the manifestations of interpersonal violence is the key to building theory concerning its origins and causes. In particular, there are two settings where research into the causes of interpersonal violence has been underdeveloped: (1) small-scale, non-Western societies, and (2) human groups in the past before the origins of modern industrial social and economic systems. While there is substantial theory concerning the causes of violence in Western societies at all scales and levels of intensity developed by all branches of the social sciences, the causes of violence outside of this rather limited context has been dramatically under-studied.

Another closely related question concerns the universality of interpersonal violence to all human groups. In other words, is interpersonal violence a universal condition of all people? We believe that this relates directly to the issues of the recognition of wider variation in the manifestations of interpersonal violence. We also argue that this is fundamentally an evolutionary question, because if interpersonal violence is a human universal, then it must have been shared by our last common evolutionary ancestors. For this reason, the recognition of evidence for interpersonal violence in fossil and archaeological records of our early hominid ancestry is extremely important to modern theoretical perspectives on the nature of interpersonal violence. In addition, studies of aggression in modern non-human primates have added an important point of comparison in terms of the causes interpersonal violence among our most closely related species. This paper discusses the evidence for interpersonal violence among both our early hominid ancestors and modern non-human primates.

## 2. Reviewing social psychological theories of aggression and violence

This paper rests on a fundamental definition concerning the distinction between violence and aggression. Anderson and Bushman (2002) see the difference between aggression and violence to be a matter of degree, with aggression defined as behavior intended to produce deliberate harm to another and violence having extreme harm as its intent (such as murder). We consider aggression as a state of arousal manifested by various emotional communicative strategies (e.g., shouting, gesturing, etc.). In contrast, we define violence as the physical attack of one person by another in the context of aggressive behavior. On this basis, one can be aggressive without being violent, but not the reverse. One important question addressed by Anderson and Bushman (2002) concerns the stimuli leading to aggressive behavior. A more important question for this paper concerns the transition from aggression to violent behavior, especially given the nature of archaeological and fossil evidence. Aggression without violence does not result in archaeologically investigable remains.

Existing theories about the causes of interpersonal violence can be divided into two categories: (1) Evolutionary, and (2) interactionist. Before proceeding to our evidence, we will briefly review these.

Evolutionary theories include the ideas of kin selection and inclusive fitness. In other words, sociobiologists have focused on explaining how various patterns of interpersonal violence might have increased the fitness of offspring over the long haul of evolutionary time (Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). From a sociobiological perspective, it is logical to predict relatively low incidences of violence between related individuals. In addition, sociobiology predicts higher rates of violence between males in the context of male/male competition. This evolutionary perspective also predicts lower frequencies of violent behavior between females and their offspring than males and their offspring, given the certainty of offspring belonging to females in comparison with greater uncertainty of males. These are robust ethological principles that have been documented on all manner of organisms from eusocial insects to higher order primates, and it would be foolish to think that they do not operate on human behavior, as well.

In fact, statistics from the U.S. Bureau of statistics (2006) support many of these predictions. In 2004, men were more than ten times more likely than women to commit homicide, and of all homicides, 65.2% were male on male violence. The next largest category was male on female violence, which accounted for only 22.6% of homicides. Furthermore, in 2004 only 11% of all homicides were between intimates, which would seem to support the kin

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