

Human cruelty is rooted in the reinforcing effects of intraspecific aggression that subserves dominance motivation

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Abstract: Intraspecific aggression (IA), in service to dominance, has far deeper roots in animal behavior and human evolution than does predation. The reinforcing properties of such aggression are most likely to be a major source of human cruelty.

Throughout history and across cultures, cruelty occurs frequently and in many forms. Nell's many graphic, if not lurid, examples focus attention on this important but poorly understood phenomenon. Nell also alludes to or implies each of the points made in this commentary, but space limitations preclude specific acknowledgments.

Predation versus intraspecific aggression. Although evidence exists for predation in hominid evolution, primates are facultative predators at most. The number, nature, and sequence of ancestor species in the human lineage that were predatory is unknown. In contrast, intraspecific aggression (IA) is extremely common, found throughout animal taxa, in, for example, herbivores, carnivores, and omnivores of all sorts. It certainly predates the basal insectivore presumed to be at the root of the primate lineage. Common examples of intraspecific aggression include mating contests, residency disputes in territorial animals, conflicts over position in the social dominance hierarchy, and endless species and situational variations on these themes. Most of these conflicts are ritualized, ending with the loser's escape or submission. If victorious aggression elicits signs of submission, cruelty would produce still more. Machiavellianism and, in a more extreme form, "callous/unemotional" traits (in youth; Barry et al. 2000) and psychopathy (in adults) may represent dominance motivation hypertrophied. Cruelty, with its arbitrary infliction of humiliation, pain, and death, is the ultimate expression of dominance. A final argument against predation being cruelty's source is that most instances of cruelty do not result in the victim being eaten, which is, after all, a hallmark of predatory behavior.

Intraspecific aggression is both adaptive and reinforcing. IA is adaptive; it establishes and maintains dominance that, in turn, provides access to resources and increases inclusive fitness. In contradiction to proposals that social disorganization of some type is necessary for IA, unprovoked daily fighting occurs in well-established, undisturbed rat colonies (Blanchard et al. 1988). The routine, brief early morning attacks by the alpha rats presumably re-establish their dominance status. In primates, apparently random, unprovoked attacks by dominant animals increase their inclusive fitness by stressing the physiological function and reproductive capacity of the subordinates whom they attack (Silk 2002).

If IA serves distal, evolutionary ends by engendering dominance, than IA itself should be supported by proximal, psychological mechanisms. In fact, IA has reinforcing properties under appropriate circumstances, for example, if there have been prior victories (e.g., Potegal 1979; 1994). Animals sometimes appear to look for a fight, and winning encounters increases their subsequent attack rates. Although the reinforcing effects of IA may be weaker than, and/or different from, those for food, fish swim through apertures, birds peck at keys, and mice press bars or run in mazes to have a successful fight. Male rats even prefer access to a highly aggressive conspecific than to a submissive rat, where victory is easy (Taylor 1977).

Two routes to human aggression. Anger and social dominance are distinct motivations for human IA. Anger is involved in "road rage," spouse abuse, and so forth. Dominance motivation

is involved in individual and group behaviors from teasing through bullying in schoolyard, fraternity, and boardroom, and on through gang violence, torture, "ethnic cleansing," and genocide. The distinguishing feature of such behaviors is their implicit or explicit demonstration of power and dominance. Although accompanied by the emotion of contempt, perhaps, anger is neither experienced nor expressed. This same dichotomy distinguishes angry "reactive" aggression from more socially adept "proactive" aggression" in children and adolescents (e.g., Hubbard et al. 2002). This distinction also arises in "circumplex" models of personality and social interaction where anger and dominance are found to lie along orthogonal axes (e.g., Gifford & O'Connor, 1987).

Whereas anger is largely aversive, dominance motivated IA can be satisfying or pleasant (Potegal 1979). Ingle (2004) documents many historical examples of "recreational fighting" for "fun" or "honor" rather than for material gain. Nobles, monks, and priests in Renaissance Venice engaged in ritualized battles; some fought with sharp sticks and wore armor. After sticks were abandoned in 1570, the fist fighting became affordable to sailors, fishermen, gondoliers, and artisans who joined neighborhood brigades. Ritualized but violent "faction fights" in nineteenth-century rural Ireland were viewed as a blood sport. "Fighting for fun" is frequently mentioned in social histories of American loggers and cowboys. Buford (1992) remarks on English football hooliganism, noting "I had not expected the violence to be so pleasurable." Examples from non-Western cultures include chest-pounding and side-slapping duels of the "fierce" *Yamomani* of the Amazon. The ritualized battles of young Australian aborigines often involve fist fighting. Older men use sticks and boomerangs; their skill with weapons allows them to "pull" their blows and avoid injuries. Losers can end a fight by dropping weapons. Like the boxers on Venetian bridges, however, prestige is obtained by accepting blows without retreating (Ingle 2004). Even in more lethal combat, Viking "berserkers" experienced a culturally sanctioned "battle joy." Although fear is the emotion most commonly experienced in combat, the berserkers were neither the first nor the last warriors to feel pleasure in battle (Potegal 1979).

Why is IA reinforcing? Space limitations preclude discussion of IA's reinforcement mechanisms, but they might include: intrinsic reward (possibly dopaminergically mediated) in activating the neural circuitry for aggression, pleasure in winning a competition against peers, pride in fighting prowess, increase in self-esteem and/or sense of control, and relief of general "tension" or specific anxiety/ or fear of harm. IA may become more pleasurable with arousal and practice; for at least some individuals aggression may be reinforcing only or particularly when aggressive arousal is high (Potegal 1979). Finally, social facilitation can exacerbate any of the above: for example, in the "contagion of aggression" among boxing fans or rioters (e.g., Bohstedt 1994).

Aggression, dominance, and cruelty in development. IA appears early in mammalian ontogeny, usually in the form of playfighting (which is more common than play predation, Pellis & Pellis 1998). In canids, for example, playfighting becomes progressively rougher, eventually leading to serious fighting (Bekoff 1974); children's playfighting, in the form of rough-and-tumble play, is important in establishing dominance (Humphreys & Smith 1987). More lethal forms of early IA include the killing of younger siblings. Siblicide is routine in various bird species and, notably, in hyena twin litters (Mock & Parker 1998).

Children's aggression is of especial interest because it may be less influenced by social learning and convention than that of adults; it can also predict future antisocial behavior (e.g., Tremblay & Nagin 2005). Attili and Hinde (1986) suggest that teasing is a route to dominance in children. "Gleeful taunting" by 4- to 5-year-old boys was judged as being more objectionable and antisocial than their angry reactions (Miller & Olson 2000). Cole and Zahn-Waxler (1992) suggest that enjoying one's antisocial behavior represents some sort of developmental

psychopathology. Sroufe (1983) noted that hurting others appears especially pleasurable for children with insecure/avoidant attachment. In contrast to these views, children's enjoyment of non-angry IA may be more the normal rule than the abnormal exception.

Why not all cruelty, all the time? This commentary could have as easily begun with the statement that, throughout history and across cultures, empathy (or kindness, or reciprocity) exists in many forms. In the well-regulated individual, tendencies to aggression, dominance, and cruelty are balanced by prosocial feelings, judgments, and impulses. It is reductions in empathy, either intrinsic (e.g., in psychopathy) or learned (e.g., dehumanizing others through propaganda), that allow the unfettered exercise of dominance motivation.

Shame, violence, and perpetrators' voices

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Abstract: Fostering shame in societies may not curb violence, because shame is alienating. The person experiencing shame may not care enough about others to curb violent instincts. Furthermore, men may be less shame-prone than are women. Finally, if shame is too prevalent in a society, perpetrators may be reluctant to talk about their actions and motives, if indeed they know their own motives. We may be unable accurately to discover how perpetrators think about their own violence.

Nell's argument that cruelty has its origins in evolutionary rewards is fascinating and deeply disturbing. He is correct that, if societies want to curb violence, they must understand what reinforces it (sect. 1.1.1). But having read this theory, I am less optimistic than ever that violence can be diminished.

Nell argues that "effective prevention must begin with perpetrators (sect. 6, para 1.)" and that "violence-prevention workers will need to gather affectively rich descriptions of the inner experience of police and military torturers and interrogators" (sect. 6.1). He also argues that "the challenge for violence prevention is to anchor [shame] them more deeply in the life of the instincts" (sect. 5.3). I begin with a discussion of shame and then turn to the suggestion that we listen to perpetrators.

John Rawls defines shame as a feeling one has when one suffers a blow to one's self-respect as a result of failing to live up to one's values (Rawls 1971, p. 442). Shame is a painful feeling, so we want to avoid it, and the desire to avoid shame motivates us to remain true to our principles. This idea is part of a long tradition of thinkers who see value in shame. Aristotle, for example, held that shame restrained youth, who are more prone to live by feelings rather than reason and, hence, are apt to go astray (Aristotle 1985, 1129b20).

But contemporary understandings of shame view it as potentially debilitating. Gershen Kaufman, for example, explains shame as the breaking of the interpersonal bridge. Our trust in intimate others is founded upon the expectation of mutual responses, and "shame is likely whenever our most basic expectations of a significant other are suddenly exposed as wrong. To have someone valued unexpectedly betray our trust opens the self inside of us and exposes it to view" (Kaufman 1985, p. 13). Kaufman's view suggests that shame is undesirable. Martha Nussbaum, too, argues that shame is an undesirable emotion because it suggests a desire to deflect ourselves from our humanness (Nussbaum 2004).

Nell implies that by inducing shame in humans who behave cruelly, societies will reduce violence. But if Kaufman is right that shame is a feeling of betrayal by and alienation from others, it doesn't seem to provide the motivational source that

Nell believes it does. Perpetrators who violate expected norms against engaging in shameful acts might feel less a part of society and, therefore, less concerned with how their acts affect others. This consequence could undermine any attempt to utilize shame as a curb to cruelty and violence.

Evidence does not suggest that inducing shame in perpetrators brings about positive results. Psychiatrist James Gilligan (1996) works with extremely violent perpetrators such as serial killers. His theory is that violence is the ultimate means of communicating the lack of being loved by someone who commits the violence; he calls the absence of love "shame." By working intimately with violent men, he identifies a "logic of shame" that he calls a kind of magical thinking: "If I kill this person in this way, I will kill shame—I will be able to protect myself from being exposed and vulnerable to and potentially overwhelmed by the feeling of shame" (Gilligan 1996, pp. 65–66). In fact, Gilligan says that, throughout his career of working in maximum security prisons, "I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo this 'loss of face'" (Gilligan 1996, p. 110).

Gender differences further complicate the suggestion that shame can serve to dampen instincts toward violence. Eroticized violence is almost always enacted by males in the dominant role. And this may present a problem, because susceptibility to shame, too, may be gendered. Jennifer Manion argues that women may be more prone to shame (Manion 2003), and empirical studies suggest that women are more shame-prone than men (Ferguson et al. 2000; Lutwak et al. 2001). If susceptibility to shame is gendered, then attempts to attenuate violence in those more likely to perpetrate it will be a difficult task.

I now turn to the idea of listening to perpetrators. Attending to the voices of those who do violence seems correct. Yet Nell's suggestion may present more difficulty than one might expect. As John Conroy points out, interviews with torturers are likely to be flawed for two reasons. One reason is that torturers usually do not consent to be interviewed when they are actively torturing; the other is that torturers who are willing to talk about their cruel behavior are most often dissenters, not sadists (Conroy 2000, p. 121). This raises the question of whether we can obtain an accurate understanding of why people engage in cruel and violent acts. Our motives often elude us; many of us are well defended against seeing ourselves in a bad light. People who commit wrongful acts that are blatantly against norms of a society are even more likely to deflect their own motives. Elaine Scarry argues that torturers routinely supply themselves with a false motive so as to block any feelings of sympathy toward the actual sufferer (Scarry 1985, p. 59).

People who are violent may also dissemble. Nell discusses ways in which hunters retell stories of hunting successes, thus reinforcing details and accompanying emotions. But social responses to the retelling of an event will vary depending on the group to which one is storytelling. Norms for acceptable and deviant behavior are culturally bound. For example, a gang member may boast to the others in his gang of a successful retaliation against a rival gang and expect praise and congratulations, but he would probably consider boasting to others outside his gang as an act of foolishness. Furthermore, most of us are keenly aware of which actions are considered outside the pale of acceptable deviance, and perpetrators of cruelty and violence are no exception. They may try to infer what their audience is likely to tolerate and tailor their descriptions and explanations to suit the civility of a researcher or therapist.

A paradox may be at play here. If we want to create spaces where perpetrators can freely talk about their actions and the motives behind them, we must have a climate free of shame. But if Nell is correct, more social shame needs to circulate in order to erect barriers to violence. Can societies accomplish both these things? I would like to think so, but I fear not.