

# Violence in the International System: Biological Necessity or Social Construct?

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SCOTT ADAM, JUN 8 2011

Violence in the international system can manifest itself in several ways. Principal among these are interstate war, civil war and military interventions. Though in the case of interstate war its frequency is in decline (Levy and Morgan cited in Jacoby 2008: 75), together they are arguably the most destructive and expensive phenomena known to humankind (Mitchell 1980: 65); and yet, in terms of human behaviour, conflict is relatively infrequent (Jacoby 2008: 75). This essay will examine this paradox. This will be done by examining the sources of aggression, the precursor to violence.

For the purpose of this essay, aggression will be defined as 'a response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism' (Buss cited in Bushman and Anderson 1998: 24). In doing this, it will be briefly demonstrated that aggression is not natural, and that there is no biological basis of aggression. Rather, it will be shown that aggression is behaviour that is learned either socially or culturally – as aggression is a reaction to social stimuli, so is violence. This point will be further reinforced by demonstrating that violence can actually be beneficial to societies, thus showing that since violence is functional, societies use it to achieve their aims. Simply put, societies see benefits in resorting to violence. This will lead us to the essay's final point – that since violence is socially constructed it can also be misappropriated and abused. These arguments will all serve to conclude that violence is, in fact, a social construct.

Aggression is frequent and widespread in the animal kingdom, and is a natural occurrence (Shaw and Wong 1989: 6). If a biological approach is taken, then humans are also animals, making it natural for humans to have aggressive tendencies. Yet, this point is countered with the fact that humans are more complex than other animals, especially in regard to morality and creativity (Webb 1992: 81). From this perspective, this discredits the biological argument that aggression is natural. Humans are animals, but in terms of development we are greatly different from the rest of the animal kingdom. Indeed, it is human's capacity to determine their own behaviour that makes them unique (Zimbardo cited in van der Dennen 2005). Violence is not a given in humans, unlike other animals critically, humans can *choose* not to resort to violence.

Another aspect of the biological approach to aggression relates to hormones. Several studies have established a link between hormone levels and aggression (Geen 1998: 4). It has also been suggested, conversely, that testosterone levels may be a result of, as opposed to a cause of, aggression (Churchman 2005: 32). This makes the argument, at best, inconclusive, and does not allow for variances among people and as such, it is not useful as an explanation of the sources of aggression.

The final argument relating to the biological sources of violence is genetics. Genetic researchers participating in the Human Genome Project were unable to find the gene that determines aggression (Churchman 2005: 38). Nonetheless, chromosomes – genetic elements not genes – have been linked to aggression (Manning 1989: 51). Males with the XYY chromosome composition were shown to be more aggressive, suggesting a genetic link to aggressiveness; conversely, later studies linked this to social causes (Manning 1989: 55). As such, these factors all demonstrate that aggression, or conflict, is not 'pathological' (Deutsch 1969: 19). People do not have 'preformed repertoires' of aggressiveness (van der Dennen 2005). Experience is more effective in determining behaviour, than

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genes or biology (Manning 1989: 55). People learn from experience, meaning aggression is learned.

Berkowitz states that aggression is not the product of a 'spontaneously generated drive', but is a reaction to external conditions (1990: 33). This view is now widely accepted among social psychologists (Geen 1998: 2). Aggression, itself, is learned by reinforcement (van der Dennen 2005). Actions have consequences, and in terms of aggression, it is either rewarded or punished (Geen 1998: 4-5). Geen further states that aggression that is rewarded 'produces an expectancy that future similar behaviour will be useful' (1998: 5). This supports Bandura's view that aggression is learnt from direct experience (cited in van der Dennen 2005). People, in choosing how to react to external stimuli, make a cost/benefit analysis based on 'habits and values acquired in the past' (Berkowitz 1990: 34) – in other words, acquisition equates learning. Furthermore, aggression varies depending on a person's socialisation, meaning the learning process of aggression is regulated by social and cultural factors (Geen 1998: 15).

In using aggression, Zillman argues that an individual considers the probability of social approval or disapproval. Social approval or encouragement serves as reinforcement of the behaviour, which can promote the future use of aggression (cited in van der Dennen 2005). Furthermore, Geen states that if aggression is an acceptable behaviour, it can become 'embedded in social norms' (1998: 16). This allows for variations in aggressiveness between societies. That aggression is not uniform among societies suggests that it is constructed according to individual society's standards. Aggression is being constructed according to what a society deems is acceptable or unacceptable. Aggression is a social construct. Without aggression, there can be no violence, making violence a social construct too. This point is further highlighted by the fact that violence has a function for societies. Societies construct violence as they can benefit from it.

Deutsch suggests that conflict has many positive functions (1969: 19). He suggests that conflict can have a creative function, as it provides motivation to solve problems that may have been ignored (Deutsch 1969: 21-22). Mitchell takes this argument further, and argues that simply by being in a conflict, a society benefits (1980: 63). Deutsch also argues that external conflict can be beneficial to society as it 'fosters internal cohesiveness' (1969: 19). This leads to the essay's final argument by demonstrating that violence is a social construct. The use of violence can enforce, protect or extend power (Shaw and Wong 1989: 10-11). As such, political elites can use conflict, and violence, to pursue their own social agendas, which affects the international system.

The conflict behaviour of states is influenced by domestic political factors (Morgan and Anderson 1999: 799). Political elites, when faced with falling domestic support may construct an international conflict in a bid to relieve domestic political pressure, as was argued in the case of the United Kingdom during the Falklands conflict (Morgan and Anderson 1999: 809-811). Interstate war, the epitome of violence, was constructed for social purposes. This opportunism is also sometimes evident with ethnocentrism (Rosenblatt 1964: 133). Elites encourage antagonism to help reinforce ethnic identity (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 865). Fearon and Laitin further state that there is no evidence for an incompatibility of culture or ethnicity as a source of violence (2000: 858), meaning the motives are domestic, or within the group. Mueller supports this by asserting that violence that followed the break-up of the former Yugoslavia was a result of 'common criminality' (2000: 58), and ethnicity was merely a convenient means to organise people (2000: 62). These factors all demonstrate that violence is a social construct. Political elites create a situation and resort to violence to distract domestic voters, to strengthen external barriers, or to somehow otherwise gain. Violence is being socially constructed.

Violence cannot exist without aggression. Aggression is not natural for humans, nor is it inevitable. Biological arguments for violence do not properly take into account that humans are far more complex than other animals, and have the volition to choose their behaviour. Other animals cannot do this, and this is what makes humans unique. It is also justifiable to argue that violence is also not a result of genetics, nor is it a result of hormones. In this regard therefore, there are no grounds to argue that violence is a result of biology. Violence is learned from the environment we are in. This involves learning from social stimuli or cultural stimuli. A major part of this learning is the positive reinforcement of aggressive behaviour. This can vary between societies, depending on the approval that individual societies place on aggressive behaviour. This also means that aggressive behaviour is not uniform among societies. Societies can also see function in conflict, and they hope to benefit from it. However, conflict and violence can be abused, as elites within a society may use conflict and violence to pursue their own goals. All these factors in

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sum all indicate that violence is in fact a social construct, rather than an ingrained genetic trait.

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