

The Human Nature of Violence

By Robin Fox

(This paper was originally presented at an international conference on Drinking and Public Disorder, organised by MCM Research, to a largely non-academic audience.)

I have been asked to put violence into some sort of scientific perspective, so that we might have a background against which to ask more specific questions. I shall try to do that, but with the usual caveat, so annoying to non-academic audiences, that this is only one scientific perspective and that others would look quite different. However, that's how we do it with science. We push our modes of explanation (or paradigms, as it has become fashionable to call them) to the point where they won't go any further, and then a bit more. When they start not to work, we know to change the paradigm; or at least our successors know to do it for us.

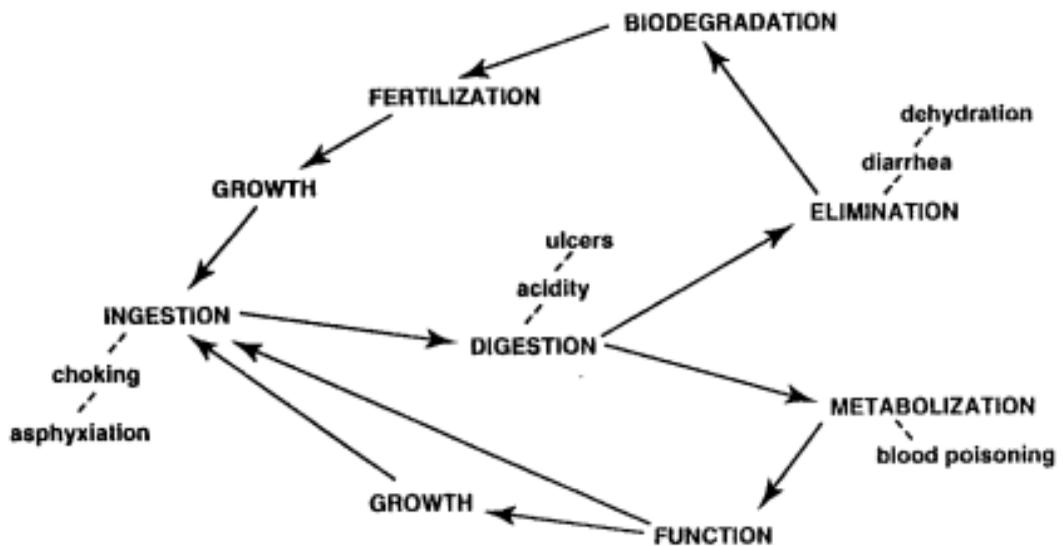
So please bear with me while I push this one as far as I can take it. You will yourselves be on the alert for the places it cannot take us, and that is how it should be. That's how we know we're doing science, not metaphysics. One of the most common ways for scientists to look at human violence is to ask, What causes violence? I am going to suggest that this is perhaps the wrong way to go about things and one of the reasons we don't seem to get to any very definite conclusions on the subject.

By and large, in the social and behavioral sciences as in life, we tend only to look for the "causes" of things we dislike. Thus, we look for the causes of divorce, but never for the causes of marriage; for the causes of war, but rarely for the causes of peace; for the causes of crime, but rarely for the causes of virtue; and for the causes of violence, but never for the causes of its opposite, however we phrase it – gentleness, perhaps. This is because we see things we dislike on analogy with diseases: they are by definition abnormal states. The normal state is marriage/peace/law/gentleness (or whatever), and this gets derailed in abnormal circumstances. Thus, one of the commonest and most popular versions of the causes of violence is the so-called "frustration-aggression hypothesis," which again assumes the "not-aggressive" state to be normal, but derailed by frustration.

We might call this the "disease" approach to violence: the normal or healthy state is assumed to be nonviolent, and we must therefore explain why violence occurs. (I am using violence and aggression synonymously here as a shorthand.) If we might use an analogy: no one looks for the "causes" of digestion. Digestion is simply there. Any organisms that ingest material and metabolize it have digestion; it is simply what they do: they digest. But when digestion goes wrong, as with, for example diarrhea, then we look for a cause of this in order to cure it. Diagram 1 shows a simple model (which was made for a different purpose but will serve ours) of a digestive system, showing how

at various points things can go wrong with the normal processes.

DIAGRAM 1. Digestive Feedback System

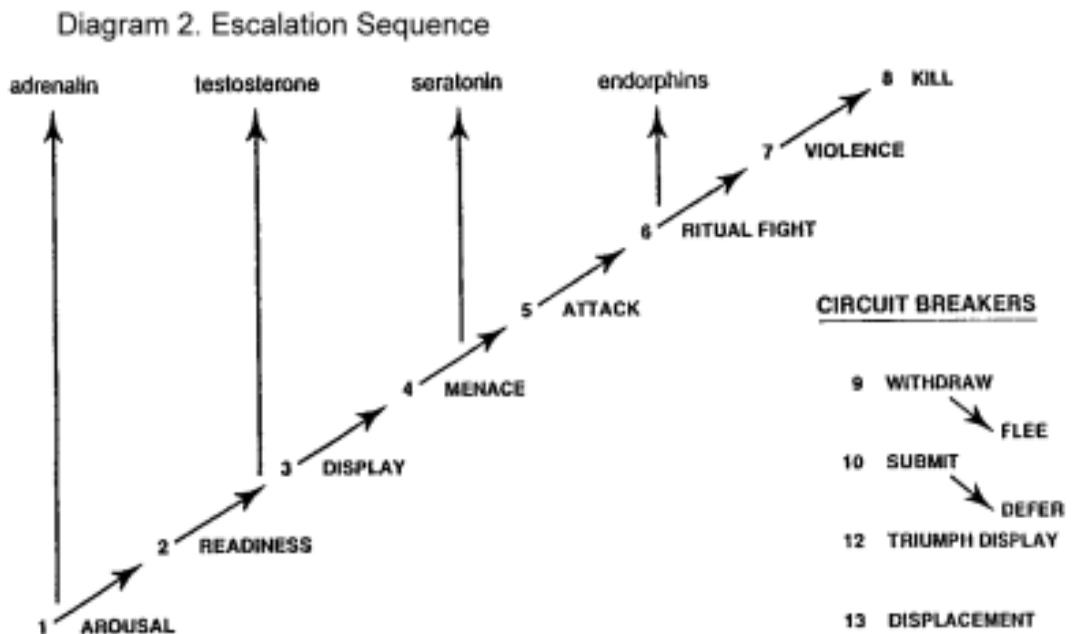


The assumption that violence is a disease is to make it the analog of diarrhea. But, what if it is in fact an analog of digestion, or of some subprocess like metabolization, ingestion, or excretion? There is no future, in this case, in looking for its “causes” since it doesn’t have any. It is just what the organism does as part of its routine of living. One can examine sequences within the routine and see where it fits (what its “functions” are); or, one can ask “ethological” questions about how it came to be there in the first place – evolutionary and adaptational questions. What is it for? What are its adaptational advantages? What survival value does it give the organism? – and so on. But “causal” questions are simply inapplicable.

If we make this analytical mistake when looking at sequences of behavior involving violence at some point, then we will ask, What caused this violence to occur? and expend a lot of mental energy trying to find an answer on the analogy of, Why did diarrhea occur? But if we look at the same sequence in the ethological framework – as we do in “agonistic encounters” between animals of the same species, for example – we can predict fairly accurately when, in the escalation process, violence will occur. It is a natural, expectable, predictable, inevitable part of the process. It is not diarrhea. It is metabolization, if you like.

Whether we like violence or not is not the question here. We are not concerned with evaluating it but with explaining or understanding it. And the causal explanation may simply not be the appropriate one, driven as we are by dislike to look for the cause to remedy the supposed disease.

Diagram 2 shows a typical escalation sequence of behaviors during an agonistic encounter (this was derived from observations on macaque monkeys, but is fairly generalizable across species).

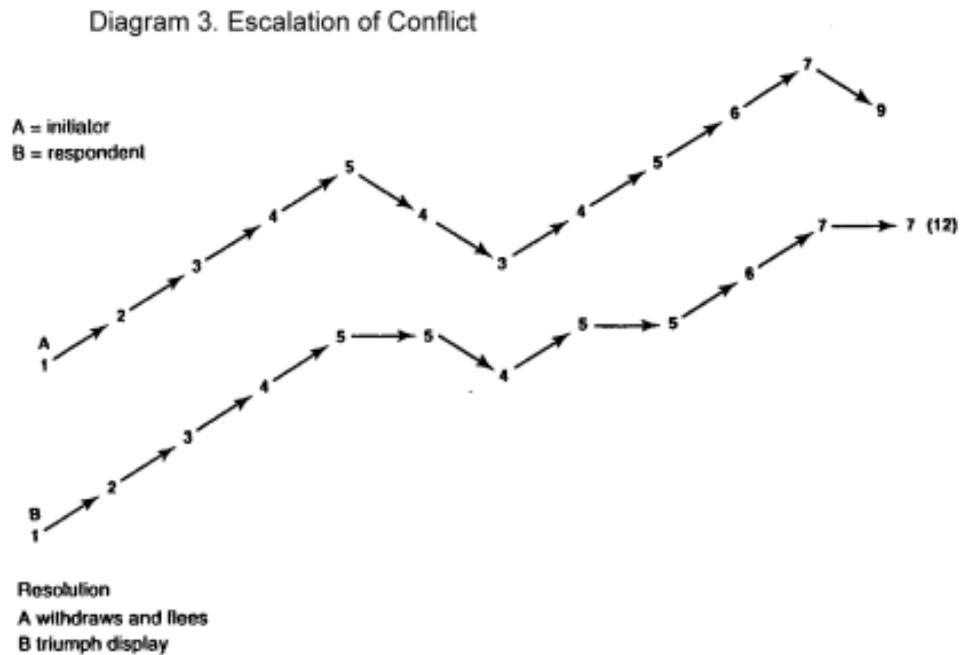


The lowest level (1) is arousal: a rival is sighted. This puts the animal into a state of readiness. It will then move on to a display of some kind: baring teeth, pilo-erection, etc. It will then move menacingly toward its rival.

This may be followed by an attack, which then will develop into a ritualized fight of some kind. This in turn may spill over into real violence and could end in wounding or killing. There are various “circuit breakers,” as I have called them: ways out of the sequence if it gets too hot. An animal can withdraw and flee; it can submit and show deference to the rival; it can indulge in seemingly inappropriate “displacement” behavior (grooming, for example); or it can indulge in a triumph display. This latter is only usual when it has won, but it can be used as a bluff: declare victory and go home, as it were.

Also included on this diagram are some of the hormones involved in propelling the sequence, starting with adrenaline, getting a boost from testosterone and serotonin, and ending with a flood of endorphins if successful. (The trick with serotonin is that very *low* levels seem to be precursors of aggression, but that very *high* levels are associated with success. High levels of serotonin seem to promote calmness and confidence, which is why many antidepressant drugs deliberately seek to increase serotonin levels in humans.) Of course, there are two animals involved and diagram 3 shows the synchronized escalation sequence for such a two-animal encounter.

A initiates the interaction here, and B responds step by step until phase 5: Attack. At this point, B holds his ground, and A falls back one step to mere

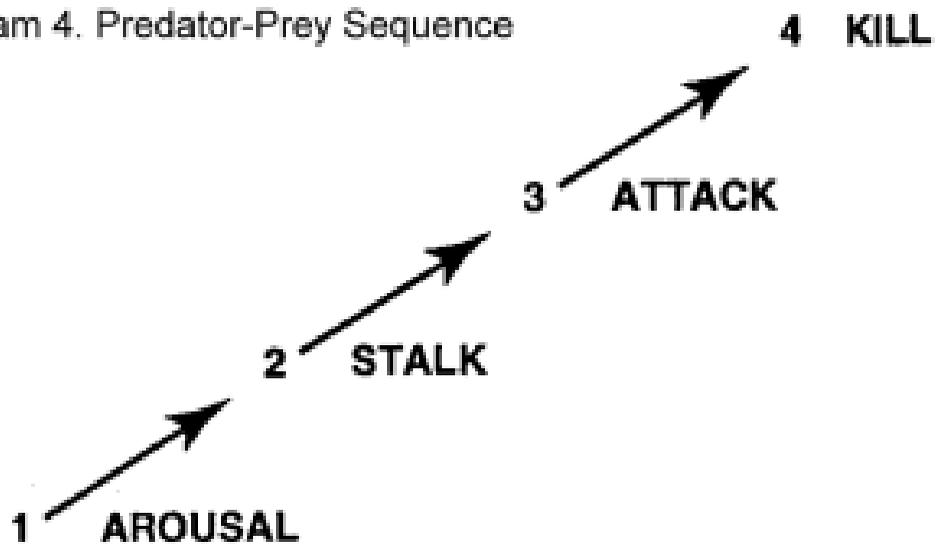


Menace and then to Display. He proceeds up again to Menace and Attack, but we already see that he has been the one to back down first, and when the Ritual Fighting spills over into real Violence at 7, it is B again who holds his ground and A who short circuits by withdrawal and fleeing while B goes into a Triumph Display. This is a fairly short sequence and could be over in a couple of minutes. In some species, such escalations and de-escalations can go on for hours.

It is important to note that we are talking here of a fight sequence between conspecifics of the same group – these animals know each other and know the rules, as it were. Between conspecifics of different groups this might be a much shorter and more bloody sequence. As Schaller said of a male lion who strayed into the territory of another lion pride, the only ritualization open to him is to run like hell. Also, this kind of “violence” has to be clearly distinguished from predatory violence between predator and prey species, where the sequence is as in diagram 4: the “stalk-attack-kill” sequence. Here the purpose of the encounter is the killing for food, and it is not drawn out. The predator gets on with the job. But that is why the elaborate sequences of escalation and de-escalation among familiar conspecifics are so interesting: there is ample opportunity to break off or de-escalate before getting to the killing or wounding point. And as the ethologists have demonstrated in species after species, the vast majority of fighting stops at the ritual level.

It has been my contention for many years that the vast majority of human violence is of this kind also. It goes on all the time but usually rumbles away at the lower levels of escalation. We waste our time asking what “causes” it: it is as much a part of the human life process as digesting or reproducing. Flirting goes on all the time also, and sometimes escalates to a higher level of sexual activity, and no one asks what causes that. We are a sexually

Diagram 4. Predator-Prey Sequence



reproducing, sexually competitive, slow-growing, large land mammal. At puberty, our males, for example, increase their testosterone levels as much as ten to thirty times. Given sexual competition, the dominance of older males, and the rise in testosterone, it is entirely predictable that violence will occur. Thus, we find in all cultures young, postpubescent males acting aggressively, and older males acting to restrain and divert them. The females, in their wisdom, pick off the winners. This is what Darwin called sexual selection.

The real “causal” question here then is not why so many young males act so violently. This is digestion; it just happens as long as the appropriate stimuli (the analogs of food) are fed in (females, other males, resources). The real causal question is how so many cultures manage through initiation, intimidation, sublimation, bribery, education, work, and superstition to stop them and divert their energy elsewhere. Sending them off to war is a popular solution, as are dangerous sports and genital mutilations. This is the diarrhea. Lager louts and football hooligans are not a theoretical problem, however much of a social problem they may be. They are expectable and not in need of explanation. Quiescent conformists and career-oriented yuppies are the anomaly. They need explaining. What causes them?

But we could approach them through the escalation model too. Yuppies are known for their competitiveness, but they manage to keep this to the level of display and menace, never taking it to physical attack (verbal attack I count as menace). The question here becomes then, how are they kept to this level? The answer lies in the expanded human capacity for inhibition of aggression – one of the main functions of the evolution of the amygdala and the huge neocortex. This allows humans to indulge in fantastically elaborated sequences that are unavailable to animals. But the structure of escalation is similar.

As I have tried to show in analyses of Irish ritual fighting – a subspecies of pub fighting generally – virtually the same sequence is gone through as with the animal example, and again, serious physical injury is the exception rather than the rule. Major escalation points are the “Taking Off Of The Coat” and what I have called the “Hold Me Back Or I’ll Kill Him” phenomenon, in which the spectators are invited to intervene to prevent further escalation. Firmly held, the antagonists can continue the ritualized fight without much fear of damage. Circuit breakers include parading the weeping mother who begs the boy to come home – so he can withdraw with honor. Both sides usually then indulge in a triumph display. (See *The Search for Society*, chap. 7.)

This works, as we have seen, among familiars – among those who, however subconsciously, know the rules and tacitly agree to them. Among strangers there are no rules, and as the ethologists have pointed out, a great deal of human violence looks more predatory than ritualized. The young attackers of the jogger in Central Park – out on their self-described “wilding” – were into the stalk-attack-(rape)-kill mode. The jogger was more like a prey animal, not a conspecific in a more or less evenly matched fight. But here again the question is not what “causes” such violence – predators are violent by definition – but what causes the context to be rendered “predator/prey” rather than “conspecific/familiar.” Whether we like it or not, phenotypical racial differences make it very easy to define another human being as a prey animal rather than a conspecific. That this is very deep rooted can be seen from the fighting behavior of chimpanzees. Within the group, fighting is ritualized, but “foreign” groups are attacked like prey, and individuals are often killed and eaten. But given this perception – of the other as prey – the violence follows. Predators attack prey. It is what they are supposed to do. Territory holders attack trespassers. The only ritualization, as George Schaller said of lions, is to run like hell.

(It might be objected that these are not, with humans, predator/prey relationships because humans do not kill other humans for food. But [a] they often do and have done throughout history, and [b] one might use the analogy with rape [which indeed is often involved], where the behavior is gone through with no intention of investing in any relationship or offspring. It is the proximal mechanisms that are operating. Once the “pseudospeciation” of the other is achieved, it is predator motives that operate, not those of – essentially – sexual competition.)

If we are to apply this approach to, for example, pub violence, there is some hope. First, we can assume it to be inevitable; it is going to happen. Pubs are arenas where inhibitions are lowered and conflicts easily provoked. But we do not need to be appalled or disgusted. This is not diarrhea; this is digestion. What we need to figure out, therefore, is not how to “cure” (i.e., eradicate) this, but how to de-escalate in the proper sequence once it occurs. If people are too drunk, this is difficult because alcohol does seem to interfere with the capacity for inhibition so necessary to ritualization, and people can act unpredictably in consequence. They become like the experimental monkeys

whose amygdalas have been removed, and who therefore can't get the sequence right.

But usually people are not that drunk, and a good publican, for example, knows when to use humorous diversion, when to appeal to the crowd for support, and when to become suitably intimidating. He knows this because he is going through a process deeply wired into the human animal: he is in a conflict situation in a crowded arena with familiar conspecifics (even if they are not regulars, they are regular pub goers and the setting and rules are known to them). When the whole thing goes wrong it is usually because the sequence has not been respected and gets out of hand – a publican becomes aggressive much too early and triggers a wild response, for example. Or drunken spectators interfere at the wrong moments. Of course, if a motorcycle gang comes in, bent on violent mischief, then we are in a predator/prey situation and we either fight or run like hell. Ethology is not a lot of help; a gun would be more useful.

My only final words of advice – not probably very helpful to this audience – are to treat violent episodes as natural events: not to seek their elimination, but to observe carefully the escalation sequences that seem natural to them, and learn to control these by effective de-escalation through the sequence, or the circuit breakers. Whether we are talking about pub fights, so-called soccer hooligans, or international conflict, much the same rules seem to apply. (The actual players – politicians, military, and diplomats – in international conflicts are in fact usually well known to each other, and they know the rules. The Cuban missile crisis – and a great deal else of the “cold war” – for example, could very easily be mapped out according to the escalation sequence described here. One of the problems with Saddam Hussein is that he is not a “familiar” in the international club, but a local predator running loose.) Thus treating violence as normal, and not as a disease, might in fact help us, paradoxically, to control it better in the end. The temptation is to think in terms of eradication of the pestilence. But if I am right, then this could be the totally wrong analogy, and pursuing it will probably only make things worse.