Violence Rewired

This thought-provoking book draws together research from genetics, anthropology, psychology and the social sciences to show that widespread assumptions about the inevitability of human violence are almost entirely a collection of myths. While violence has been a recurring feature of human life, there is no reason to suppose that it is inherent in 'human nature'. On the contrary, patterns of aggressive behaviour are largely learned through experience, and even those individuals who have often acted violently can learn to change. Rejecting the speculations of much contemporary writing about human aggression, *Violence Rewired* presents an evidence-based alternative: a multilevel model of action to reduce violence at both individual and collective levels, linked to public health initiatives developed by the World Health Organization. If humanity is to survive the challenges it faces, a more realistic appraisal of ourselves and our basic tendencies is an indispensable part of the solution.

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Evidence and Strategies for Public Health Action

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The raging stream they call violent
But the riverbed that contains it
No one calls that violent.

Bertolt Brecht, 'On Violence'*

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Foreword

Between Chimpanzees and Bonobos: The Challenge of Violence Prevention

Between 2001 and 2016, 839,593 people died due to interpersonal violence in my country, Brazil. In less than two decades into the twenty-first century, in a territory that is neither at war nor facing armed internal conflict, there were more than 800,000 homicide deaths. In just one year, more specifically in 2016, 61,143 people died of homicide in Brazil, according to official data from the Ministry of Health. That amounts to a homicide rate of 31.5 per 100,000 inhabitants. More than half of these deaths occurred in the age group between fifteen and twenty-nine years old: 35,995 adolescents and young people were victims of interpersonal violence and died as a result; 92% of the victims were males. Some 56,409 boys and men were murdered in a single year, in a single nation that, I repeat, is neither at war nor facing armed internal conflict. In Brazil, since the end of the 1990s, homicide is in the first position among the causes of potential years of life lost and is the first cause of death among the young population, overcoming all other causes, natural or external. According to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO), there were around 475,000 homicide deaths in the world in 2012. Brazil accounts for 12.9% of these deaths. It is in this place, this country, which deals with an uninterrupted rising trend in homicide rates since the 1980s, that I write this Foreword. I live in a country that represents an exception in the global trend of homicide decline. Latin America has the highest homicide rates in the world, and Brazil has one of the highest rates in the region.

Violence is a theme that mobilises the interests of a diverse audience. This audience includes practitioners from applied areas, such as health professionals who provide care to victims and perpetrators; law enforcement agents; educators and teachers from elementary and high schools; social workers, psychologists, researchers and academics from different areas such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, medicine, public health, law, and criminology, as well as students in all these fields; victims and their relatives; and the curious in general, ordinary people who live directly or indirectly with violence. Such interest is partly due to

the difficulty in understanding its occurrence, even when we can identify possible 'motives' for concrete and singular acts. Why, in a country like Brazil, for example, do so many homicides occur? What explains the use of violence as a form of conflict resolution? If we are rational beings, who live in civilised countries, endowed with systems of justice, in which the monopoly of the use of force is the prerogative of the state, why do so many people not use dialogue, reason and argument to resolve conflicts?

Richard Whittington and James McGuire go to the heart of this when they elect the following investigation as a trigger for their book: Is violence hard-wired? This question leads us directly to that of human nature. To what extent is violence a constituent part of our ethos, a feature rooted in our biology and therefore a feature of our humanity with which we will have to live for the rest of our days (as a human community, even if civilised and rational)? The view that violence is deeply programmed in our brain is frighteningly paralyzing. If we believe it is a trait that connects us to our chimpanzee ancestors – that it is inscribed in our biology, that it is there despite socialising and civilising efforts – what can we possibly do to effectively deal with this problem?

Violence Rewired: Evidence and Strategies for Public Health Action directly confronts and challenges this pessimistic view. First, it shows evidence that through centuries of a civilising process violence is actually declining. We face now less violence than did our prehistoric ancestors. Evidence shows that homicide is declining consistently in different areas across the globe. Following Norbert Elias and his classical theory of the civilising process, violence reduction can be understood as the result of social and psychological changes over the centuries, a social-psychological process that resulted in the creation of modern states, with strong institutions and the consolidation of the rule of law. But the problem is still persistent in some areas, such as Brazil and other Latin American countries, 'high-risk' countries characterised, among other things, by high levels of state corruption, low investment in public education and health, low state stability, and high inequality. To quote the authors: 'effective governance and low homicide rates are really two sides of the same coin'. This is a powerful message, bringing some light and hope for those struggling to build peaceful and violence-free societies.

Many may consider the proposal that humanity is moving toward pacification to be somewhat fragile. In fact, 'pacification' could be a mere effect of external control mechanisms, of the limits imposed by socialisation; but the fragility is shown precisely through the persistence of violence in social relations. We are pacified, but the violence is there, inexorable, as a constant and present threat. *Violence Rewired* then takes us on a beautiful and thought-provoking journey through evolutionary

biology, archaeology and anthropology. Throughout this journey, the authors offer us a set of evidences, theories and arguments that allows an alternative reading.

It departs from the reconstruction of our lineage, as members of the great ape family (*hominidae*): we are together with orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos. We are quite close, genetically, to chimpanzees, and this could explain, at least partially, our dispositional aggressiveness. On the other hand, humans are also quite similar genetically to bonobos, and bonobos behave quite differently from chimpanzees: they act prosocially; they do not exhibit violent behaviour; males are subordinate to females; and they share food. Although our history makes it difficult to support the idea of a peaceful human nature, such as that of bonobos, the mere sharing of more than 90% of our DNA with chimpanzees is insufficient to support the thesis of a human nature prone to violence. Maybe we are in the middle.

The questioning of a hard-wired violence, of a violent human nature, does not mean denial of the importance of biology to understanding violence and its causation. Biology is seriously taken into concern here: neurobiology, genetics and epigenetics are deeply discussed; the existing evidence is systematised and scrutinised; and gaps in present knowledge are discussed, as are inconsistencies and advances.

Violence Rewired proposes an ambitious and necessary task: the construction of an integrative theoretical framework, consistent with what the authors call a *biopsychosocial* orientation. As a fundamental part of our puzzle, the aspects related to the processes of socialisation need to come into play. Now, a different question must be posed (not by the authors, but by me!): If violence is not hard-wired, how – and why – is violence wired after all? Violence is not in our nature, but we, human beings, commit violent acts and behave aggressively in many different situations.

To answer, we need to refer to theories that consider the importance of socialisation processes and social learning. We must also understand how the contextual characteristics influence our behaviour. The idea that violence is learned (and not innate) opens a very important door for us to think of ways to tackle the problem that go beyond punishment. We abandon that frighteningly paralysing view and open up to an understanding that it is possible to interfere in a preventive way. We are not born prone to rage: we learn it throughout our lives, through the relationships into which we are inserted. Parental practices and styles, peer groups and school are some of these socialising spaces where violence is learned and reproduced. The macro-social context with shared cultural norms that support gender, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic

inequalities and the most diverse stigmas, prejudices and violence are also part of the puzzle and need to be framed in a broad biopsychosocial framework to help us understand violence.

Violence Rewired is integrative from a theoretical point of view, but this is not the main strength of the book. The authors are able to present this discussion and different theoretical currents and scientific evidences using a language that is easy to understand by diverse public audiences. But that too is not the book's main strength.

The main strength of *Violence Rewired* is that it takes us from that frighteningly paralysing view and shows us that there are innumerable ways to face, respond to and prevent violence. There are risk and protective factors that can be the target of preventive actions and programs. To support this optimistic view, Richard Whittington and James McGuire lead us on another journey, now through the actions of the World Health Organization since the Global Campaign for the Prevention of Violence in the 1990s to the current days with the launch of INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children. Yes, preventing violence is possible: let's rewire it.

The reading of *Violence Rewired: Evidence and Strategies for Public Health Action* had a renewing and incentivising effect on me. I really hope it does the same for you.

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Alongside various other commitments, this book has been some time in the making, and as time has gone by the shape of it has changed from what we first envisaged. However, the fundamental aim has stayed the same throughout while being enriched by all of these collaborations. Ultimately though, of course, the perspective taken, the conclusions drawn, and any errors that remain here are solely the responsibility of us as the authors.