

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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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

Richard Whittington , James McGuire , Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres

Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

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Evidence and Strategies for Public Health Action

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107018075

DOI: 10.1017/9781139086486

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First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Whittington, Richard (Richard Charles), author. | McGuire, James, 1948– author.

Title: Violence rewired : evidence and strategies for public health action / Richard Whittington, James McGuire.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019038661 (print) | LCCN 2019038662 (ebook) | ISBN 9781107018075 (hardback) | ISBN 9781139086486 (epub)

Subjects: MESH: Violence–prevention & control | Violence–psychology | Public Health Practice | Behavior Therapy | Models, Theoretical

Classification: LCC HM1116 (print) | LCC HM1116 (ebook) | NLM HM 1116 | DDC 303.6–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038661>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038662>

ISBN 978-1-107-01807-5 Hardback

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Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

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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978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

Richard Whittington , James McGuire , Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>List of Boxes</i>	xii
<i>Foreword: Between Chimpanzees and Bonobos: The Challenge of Violence Prevention, by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
 Introduction and Overview	 1
 Part I Origins	 13
1 The Prospect of Human Violence: Pessimism or Realism?	15
1.1 Human Violence: The Tendency to Pessimism	15
1.2 The Decline in Rates of Interpersonal Violence	18
1.3 Violence as a Health Issue	23
1.4 Violence, Death, and Physical Injury	26
1.5 Violence and Mental Health	27
1.6 Violence as a Clinical Issue	30
1.7 Violence as a Public Health Issue	32
1.8 Conclusion	36
2 The Roots of Human Violence: In Search of the ‘Hard Wired’	37
2.1 Introduction: The Standard Narrative of ‘Hard Wiring’	37
2.2 Evolutionary Connections	42
2.3 Violence in Early Human Societies	46
2.4 Violence in Small-Scale Societies Today	51
2.5 Evolutionary Forensic Psychology	57
2.6 Conclusion	61
3 The Biology of Violence: Possibilities and Limitations	63
3.1 Introduction	63
3.2 Neurobiology of Violence	65
3.3 Genes and Behaviour	68
	 vii

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

Richard Whittington, James McGuire, Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

viii	Contents	
3.4	Quantitative Genetics: Studies of ‘Heritability’	70
3.5	Molecular Genetics	81
3.6	Gene–Environment Interactions and Epigenetics	93
3.7	Conclusion	97
4	Developmental Factors in Violence Propensity: The Learning of Violence	100
4.1	Introduction	100
4.2	Becoming Violent	102
4.3	The Influence of Temperament	102
4.4	Socialisation	107
4.5	Cultural Context	115
4.6	Situational Factors	118
4.7	Cognitive Processes	121
4.8	Conclusion	123
5	Structural Violence: Social and Political Factors in Understanding Violence	124
5.1	Introduction	124
5.2	Beyond Direct Violence	126
5.3	The Concept of Structural Violence	129
5.4	Inequality as the Engine of Violence	132
5.5	Developments in the Idea of Structural Violence	134
5.6	Violence, Structure and Public Health	137
5.7	Conclusion	138
	Part II Solutions	139
6	Advancing a Global Public Health Response to Violence	141
6.1	The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention	141
6.2	National Action Plans for Violence around the World: Coordinating Law, Policy, and Interventions	146
6.3	Laws to Deter and Prevent Violence	153
6.4	Social, Educational, and Therapeutic Prevention Programmes	156
6.5	Victim Services	159
6.6	Monitoring Violence: National Prevalence Surveys	160
6.7	The Logic and Procedures of Evaluation Research	161
6.8	Conclusion	164
7	Risk Assessment: Can Violence Be Predicted?	165
7.1	Introduction	165
7.2	The Development of Risk Assessment	167
7.3	The Continuum of Risk Assessment Approaches	171
7.4	Elements of Risk Assessment Research	174
7.5	Reviews of Risk Assessment Research	176
7.6	Ethical Questions Raised by Risk Assessment	183
7.7	Conclusion	184

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired
 Richard Whittington , James McGuire , Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Contents	ix
8 Pharmaceutical Interventions: Medication, Violence, and the Public Health	186
8.1 Introduction	186
8.2 The Problem of Unintended Side Effects	188
8.3 Big Pharma, Disease-Mongering, and Violence	189
8.4 Enforced Medication	193
8.5 Methodological Challenges in Testing Drugs for Violence	195
8.6 Which Drugs Are Effective for Treating Violence?	198
8.7 Conclusion	201
9 Psychosocial Interventions: The Unlearning of Violence	203
9.1 Introduction	203
9.2 Reducing Violent Behaviour by Children and Young People	205
9.3 Reducing Violence by Adult Offenders	211
9.4 Reducing Violence by Offenders with Mental Disorders	217
9.5 Methodological Challenges in Researching Psychosocial Interventions	219
9.6 Psychopathy, Treatment Resistance, and Responsiveness	220
9.7 Conclusion	222
10 Changing Structures: Integrated Interventions for Violence	225
10.1 Introduction	225
10.2 Direct and Structural Violence Revisited	225
10.3 Challenges in Changing Structures	228
10.4 Undoing Structural Violence: Theoretical Perspectives	230
10.5 Types of Structural Intervention	233
10.6 Integrated Interventions for Preventing Intimate Partner Violence	236
10.7 Conclusion	241
Rewiring Our Expectations: Lessons and Prospects	242
<i>Appendix: Major UN Initiatives to Address Violence, 1986–2018</i>	247
<i>References</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	295

Figures

1.1 Global homicide rates by country income group, 2000–2012	<i>page</i> 20
1.2 Ecological public health model of interpersonal violence	34
2.1 Simplified evolutionary lineage of surviving hominids (great apes)	43

Tables

1.1 Characteristics of high- and low-rate homicide countries	<i>page 23</i>
3.1 Heritability estimates in twin studies and genome-wide studies	92
6.1 Key components of recommended national best practice for supporting victims of violence against women	152
6.2 Percentage of countries with specific types of anti-violence legislation	155
6.3 Percentage of countries implementing specific types of violence prevention programmes	159
6.4 Percentage of countries implementing specific types of victim services programmes	160
6.5 Percentage of countries implementing specific types of national prevalence surveys for non-fatal violence	161
10.1 Types of structural intervention for HIV/AIDS and violence	233

Boxes

6.1	Selected UN initiatives to address interpersonal violence, 1986–2018	<i>page</i> 143
6.2	Recommendations from the World Report on Violence and Health	144
6.3	Recommendations from the Global Status Report on Violence Prevention	145
6.4	Strategies to sensitise the media to social and cultural norms underpinning violence against women in Spain	149
10.1	Illustrative multilevel components of an integrated intervention approach for intimate partner violence	226
10.2	Some elements of the TRANSCEND method	232
10.3	Core SHARE violence prevention strategies	239
10.4	Some key sessions in the Creating Futures livelihood intervention	240

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

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978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

Richard Whittington, James McGuire, Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

xiv Foreword

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01807-5 — Violence Rewired

Richard Whittington, James McGuire, Foreword by Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

xvi Foreword

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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Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to thank a number of colleagues who have contributed in different ways to the background work and to the thinking that was the origin of this book. Several were members of a research team that carried out systematic reviews of risk assessment methods and of interventions to reduce violence that we have cited in what follows. We are especially indebted in this respect to Maria Leitner for her substantial contribution to the ideas underpinning this book as it developed. Wally Barr and Juliet Hounsborne also played a key role in discussions about the nature and quality of evidence in this area. Other colleagues contributed in numerous ways to the review work which prompted this book. We thank in particular Andrew Brown, Ashley Bruen, Gemma Cherry, Rumona Dickson, Yenal Dundar, Rachel Flentje, Alina Haines, Kathryn Harney, Sarah Jones, Beverley Quinn and Abbie Wall. We are grateful to everyone both for engaging in the various research reviews and other activities and for being part of what was a very lively, congenial and supportive environment running through a succession of projects. We thank Maria Fernanda Tourinho Peres for contributing the Foreword and for advising on various specific aspects of the text; and we are grateful to Alex Butchart and an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier version of the book. We are indebted to Liz Perkins and Roger Almvik, who were generous in providing time and energy for stimulating discussions during the period spent preparing the manuscript. We are grateful too to the editors and production team at Cambridge University Press who have been supportive and helpful throughout this time. Finally, we thank our wives, Donna and Meredith, for their love and support and for many valuable conversations in the course of our writing.

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.

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Frontmatter

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