

BREAKING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

A WORK GROUP OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORK GROUP ON DEATH, DYING AND BEREAVEMENT (IWG)

Violence begets violence and it is important to understand how cycles of violence are perpetuated if we are to find solutions to the global problems they present. A multi-disciplinary group of The International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement has developed a model of the cyclical events that perpetuate violence at all levels including the family, community, nation, and world. This includes the Violent Act(s), the Perception of the Violent Act(s), the Immediate Response, Legitimising Authority, Destructive Codes, and Inflammatory/Polarising Strategies. It is possible at each point to break the cycle, examples are given and recommendations made.

Preamble

There is a tendency for violence to beget violence. The discovery of ways to break the cycle of violence is important whether we are speaking of violence in the home, the community, or the world at large. We are inclined to assume that this problem is too big for us, that nothing can be done and that those who try to tackle the problem are naïve, unrealistic, idealists whose motives are dubious.

The International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG) is composed of clinicians, researchers, and educators from many countries who are dedicated to the development of research, knowledge and practice dealing with death, dying and bereavement. Our work brings us face to face with the consequences of cycles of violence. It is this involvement that motivates IWG to find ways to better understand and seek solutions to this problem.

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At an IWG meeting in Maastricht, Netherlands in June 2001, a work group gathered to consider how we might break the cycles of violence that have been responsible for so much death, bereavement, and suffering in the world. This work group continued at a meeting in Bergen, Norway in 2002 and concluded in Tucson, Arizona in 2004. This group also made use of a document from a previous work group on Violence and Grief (Chair R. G. Stevenson) whose work was approved for publication by the Board of the IWG and appeared in *Omega*, 36(3), pp. 259–272, 1997–1998. Issues surrounding violence and grief were covered in that article and will not be repeated here.

We are not concerned here with the causes or consequences of violence per se. We are also aware that not all violence leads to a cycle of violence. Our work group has developed a model that identifies many aspects and situations inherent in the cycle of violence. We make no claim that this model applies in all instances, however our goal is for this model to contribute meaningfully to the discussion on cycles of violence. This is a beginning. We hope that the model will provide a foundation for ongoing exploration of this important and complex topic.

Defining Terms for this Document

The problem of the cycle of violence will be considered at the level of each unit of society:

Individual: one person

Family: biologic unit or persons of choice that make up an individual's nuclear support group

Community: local area in which an individual lives and shares a common identity

Nation: sovereign state with recognised borders and governance

World: including all nations and peoples of the earth

Although there is a continuum between the “little violences” that happen every day and more extreme forms of violence, we have chosen to limit our use of the term *violence* to an act by an individual or group that deliberately inflicts severe damage and/or death on another individual or group.

Cycles of violence occur when individuals or groups become trapped in a circular or escalating process that perpetuates violence

or leads to repetition of violent acts. Any person or group who is perceived to be a persistent threat by another person or group is an *enemy*.

Factors Causing or Perpetuating Cycles of Violence

Figure 1 represents our model. Although the focal points often follow each other in the sequence given, each also influences all other focal points within the context of the cycle. It is important to understand what motivates or perpetuates behavior at each focal point in order to address ways of breaking or decreasing cycles of violence.

Violent Acts

Violent acts such as the following increase the likelihood of initiating a cycle of violence:

- Violence against many people is more likely to give rise to a cycle of violence than violence against a few.
- Violence against a person with whom we identify ourselves and our families, a person of high status or one who is prominent in the public eye, is more likely to give rise to a cycle of violence

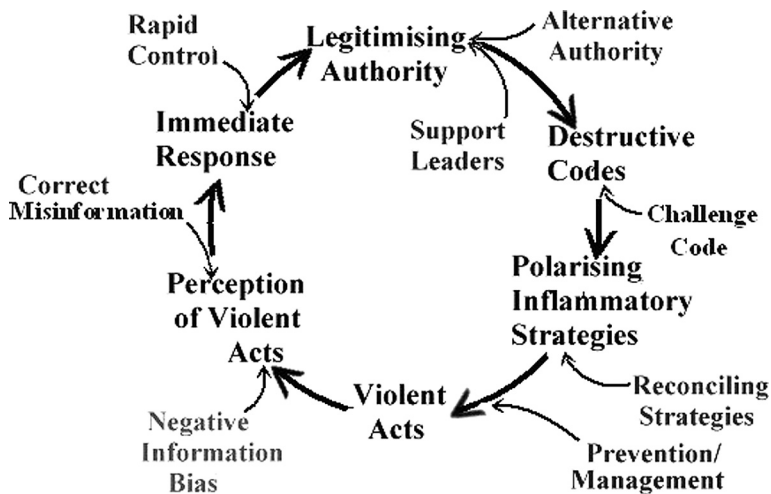


FIGURE 1 The cycle of violence.

than violence against people who are perceived as foreign, unimportant or peripheral.

- Violence involving torture or mutilation.
- Violence against children, elderly, infirm or other vulnerable groups.
- Violence that is excessive (disproportionate to the circumstance), uncontrolled, malicious, cruel, or gratuitous.
- Violence that is detached, dehumanizing, “collateral,” or indiscriminate.
- Violence that is the result of coercing others to commit violent acts.
- Violence that elicits retaliation such as violence against revered symbols, the homeland, or ones own family.

In most species, conflict between individuals of the same species are governed by instinctual behavioral mechanisms. As soon as it is clear that there is a likely winner, the loser exhibits submissive behavior, this switches off aggressive behavior by the winner. The conflict comes to an end without further bloodshed. A new hierarchy is then established that reduces the chance of further conflict.

Human beings are predisposed to respond to the same indicators of conflict resolution but often do not respond because they do not perceive the effects of their aggressive actions. With the advent of technology, it is possible to kill effectively from a distance, so the usual cues that should switch off aggression are not seen. Violence in this form is often excessive, cruel, and humiliating, rather than proportionate, measured, and minimal. This breeds resentment toward the victors and increases the likelihood of further conflict.

While it is usually elders who sanction violence, it is often immature youngsters who carry it out and may exceed the power that they have been granted to set aside social prohibitions against violence and killing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Outbreaks of violence can usually be anticipated, in which case the risk of inappropriate immediate responses can be minimized through communication of accurate information, education, and the ethical guidance of all individuals and populations at risk (e.g., in the Netherlands a Domestic Front Program enables police,

social work, and forensic psychiatric services to work together to minimize the risk of violence in the home and support families in conflict).

Those who are expected to handle conflict should be trained to avoid violence whenever possible and, when not possible, to keep violence to a minimum. This applies whether we are considering the actions of a father handling a violent child, a doctor handling a violent patient, or those of politicians, senior military staff or negotiators before, during or following military operations.

The immediate risk of violence can usually be reduced if we adopt the strategies used by members of other animal species when they wish to avoid a fight—keeping a low posture, speaking softly, and avoiding confrontation or any posture or other behavior likely to be perceived as threatening.

Whenever we anticipate possible violence we must be sure that we are properly supported in case we are attacked. If we are attacked, and it is impossible or inappropriate to withdraw, it becomes imperative that we exert the minimum force necessary to obtain control. Having achieved control we must do our best to show the other person that we understand their predicament and will not take advantage of their weakness. Generosity and mercy to the defeated restores their self-esteem and reduces the chance of acts of vengeance.

Perception of the Violent Behavior/Act

It is the perception of an act that determines the response. The beliefs, values, and fears of the individual or leaders will impact the perceptions of the individual or group and subsequently their responses. Hostile, exaggerated, or misinformed reporting, biased interpretation of evidence, rumor generation, and refusal to see the point of view of the combatant(s) all create an environment ripe for promoting more violence. In this context, partisan media greatly enhance the possibility of more violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Appropriate guidelines for the management of conflict lead to the development of mutual interdependence among families, communities, regions, and/or nations and reduce the risk of further conflict. Such guidelines will ensure that messages of commonality

and respect are communicated during conflict, messages of surrender are received and responded to, and measures to maintain the dignity of the defeated are instituted. Leaders should dispel rumours and reward accurate and impartial reporting by the media. Both leaders and the media should facilitate an understanding of the context in which the conflict has arisen and the various points of view of the combatants (e.g., President Lincoln's address at Gettysburg).

Immediate Responses to Violence

Fear and rage are normal responses to perceived threat and motivate us to turn to others who may themselves be awash with fear and/or rage. A common defence against the supposed threat may seem to be a reasonable line of behavior. Immediate responses to violence often contribute to the cycle of violence when they are based on revenge or misinterpreted motives. Such responses may include,

- Immediate retaliatory acts against the assumed enemy or perpetrator
- Attribution of martyrdom to victims that justifies anger and retaliation
- Vilification of assumed enemy or perpetrator
- Strong emotions, such as anger or fear, easily escalate within a group or crowd and increase the violence of the response
- Triumphant behavior by those who see themselves as victors.

RECOMMENDATION

Where possible parents, police, peacekeepers, or other authorities may need to act (e.g., by advertising their presence) to minimize or prevent violence and provide support to traumatised persons. To minimize the risk of counter-violence controlled outlets for anger/rage may need to be provided, thus, providing a safe setting in which verbal outbursts are tolerated but limits set. A rapid response is essential.

For example, Police *family liaison* teams in the United Kingdom are now trained to provide emotional support for families traumatized by violent crimes. *Victim support* volunteers are trained not to argue but to remain calm and tolerant in the face of verbal outbursts. Later

is it likely to become possible and appropriate to correct misdirected anger (see *Destructive Codes*).

Legitimizing Authority

Strategies promoting violence seldom persist without a legitimizing authority. There are several *types of legitimizing authorities* including:

- *Parental authority*, which is usually learned from the parents own parents;
- *Civil authority* based on legitimate political or cultural norms;
- *Religious authority* based upon legitimate, accepted dogma; and
- *Military authority* based upon legitimate norms.

Groups outside of established cultural norms are groups that are particularly at risk for using violence, including gangs, cults, and insurgents.

Alternative authorities with power to influence or limit the powers of the primary authority, include:

- *Peacekeepers*: A neutral force that separates the two sides and reduces the cycle of violence (UN Peacekeepers).
- *Judges*: All members of the conflict agree to abide by the decision of a recognized judge using accepted legal standards (International Court).
- *Arbitrators*: All participants of the conflict present their framing of the situation to an arbitrator and agree to abide by the solution arrived at by the arbitrator.
- *Mediators*: All participants of the conflict present their framing of the situation to a mediator. The mediator facilitates a negotiation process among the participants in an attempt to resolve the conflict.

No matter who is in control, sustained violent action is unlikely without the support or indeed the encouragement of the legitimising authority, be it a father, a political leader or another group authority. Such authorities may increase the risk of cycles of violence by attempting to obtain or maintain their power, and the power of their allies, by threats or violence. They may exhort their followers to retaliate by reminding them of humiliations

inflicted in the past, wrongs done to the follower's ancestors and families, and current threats and depredations. Authorities are themselves often under pressure from power groups and from the general electorate to find simple solutions to complex problems.

In addition, leaders' personal experiences or unique characteristics will influence their decisions regarding response to or use of violence. If the leaders themselves have suffered directly or indirectly and are currently suffering or grieving intensely, their judgement may be impaired.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Emotional support for bereaved and other traumatized persons must also include support for leaders.
- Development of a wider range of Alternative Authorities to limit and control use of violence, and to provide opportunities for redress and appeal. (For example, UN International Court for war crimes.)

Decisions made by the legitimizing authority are critical to continuing or breaking the cycle of violence. There are several factors that can influence a legitimizing authority's decisions in a biased or imbalanced way:

- One factor is the pressure on the legitimizing authority.
- Group dynamics often complicate decision-making by:
 - a. Shifting to a more aggressive stance than the individual members would choose (*risky shift*);
 - b. Shifting to a more passive stance than the individual members would choose (*cautious shift*);
 - c. Distorting decision making in various ways (*group think*): overestimation of group authority/power, narrow mindedness, and pressure toward uniformity.
- Powerful groups committed to goals that are supported by continued violence. For example, political leaders who are also military leaders are likely to surround themselves with military colleagues and advisers and to seek only military solutions to problems (e.g., in the US involvement in the Vietnam War).
- Receiving information, from trusted sources, about dangers that are exaggerated, misinterpreted, inaccurate, unverifiable, or biased (e.g., about weapons of mass destruction).

- Leaders who are under threat and will not relinquish power are particularly likely to take advantage of conflict situations in order to restore their status as defenders of their people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging that decisions made by the legitimizing authority are critical to continuing or breaking the cycle of violence is a crucial first step. Decisions based on input from advisors who are able to present the widest array of perspectives on the conflict is likely to reduce the cycle. Advisers and others should not collude to conceal plans and actions.

Religious leaders, because of their traditional moral authority, have particular opportunity and responsibility to give impartial advice to political leaders and to warn the public against potentiating cycles of violence. They will be more likely to do this if they are trained to understand the causes and remedies and if they remain independent of political pressures and avoid sectarian proselytizing.

Another factor is the actions of leaders or groups who choose to work covertly, to hide their aims and motives from others, creating a dynamic where trust is undermined. In such circumstances all sides will tend to prepare for the worst. Once we are preparing mentally, emotionally and physically for the worst a cycle of violence is a likely outcome.

RECOMMENDATION

Freedom of information, tolerance of 'whistle blowing' and condemnation of covert abuse of power will tend to reduce fear and encourage rational planning.

DESTRUCTIVE CODES

Codes are concepts and beliefs that we use to understand the world in which we live. We define *destructive codes* as those that support a readiness to react violently to a person or group we perceive as different or threatening. We are often unconscious of these codes. They become axioms that form the basis of the assumptive worlds of the persons, families, communities, and nations in which we live. These axioms can be passed from generation to generation. To respond defensively to a person or group we perceive as different or threatening is a basic human trait. Young males often hold to a

tough code of 'honor,' which values bravery and pride above gentleness and humanity. All major world religious faiths have, at times, sanctioned the use of violence to protect their own sectarian interests. This allows religious terrorists to claim moral justification for their actions.

Destructive codes may give rise to 'structural violence' as a means of social control. For example, police brutality and the corporal punishment of children may become the 'norm' and may not even be seen as violence. The 'structural violence' of apartheid led into delinquency and domestic violence in the subordinate population.

Characteristics that support destructive codes include:

- Unquestioned or unquestionable assumptions and beliefs
- Unexamined but strongly held beliefs
- Assumptions and beliefs that dehumanize a person or group
- Assumptions and beliefs that diminish or marginalize a person or group
- Assumptions that create a dualistic view that leads to polarization ("You are either for us or against us")
- Assumptions that create a belief in the superiority of a person or group that leads to entitlement
- Adoption of double standards. When, for example, there is an official recognition of human rights but a de facto acceptance that these rights will not be observed, the risk of perpetuation of conflict increases (e.g., Abu Graib prison in Baghdad).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to create new codes one must consider the possibility of alternative responses and codes. To accomplish this one must be open to the possibility that there are alternative ways of understanding and responding to the perceived threat. Violence should not be seen as a value-neutral tool for obtaining individual or group goals.

CHANGING DESTRUCTIVE CODES/ESTABLISHING CONSTRUCTIVE CODES

It is an individual or group act of courage to offer new codes or to reframe codes as an alternative to prevailing, destructive codes. This is because the group has integrated the prevailing code as their group identity. Their group membership is likely to be a stronger emotional force than their individual beliefs and thoughts.

Offering new codes or reframing destructive codes as early as possible in a developing cycle of violence is more effective than attempting to change codes that have been firmly established.

Integration of the following themes into new codes or reframing destructive codes is likely to decrease the cycle of violence:

- Acknowledging vulnerability (nobody can be completely safe, we need to accept an unavoidable level of risk)
- Acknowledging grief and loss
- Acknowledging interdependence
- Acknowledging cooperation
- Acknowledging integration
- Acknowledging reconciliation
 - a. Promoting inclusion
 - b. Identifying changes in a culture that allow for a decrease in violence
 - c. Giving honours for peacekeeping should be preferred to battle awards
 - d. Since all people may have to deal with conflict in their lives, conflict management/diffusion should be part of our basic education system
 - e. Encouraging tolerance of the wide diversity of religious faiths and the creation of mutual respect for pluralistic, multi-cultural, and multi-faith societies
 - f. Double standards must be acknowledged as deplorable and should be identified and counteracted (e.g., by appealing to an alternative authority)

Examples of change to constructive codes include:

- US civil rights movement
- Rejection of tribalism in Rwanda.
- Jesus Christ's alternative code 'Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you' (*Luke vi, 25*)

Strategies

The strategies developed to respond to an act of violence can increase or decrease the risk of further acts of violence. When

strategies include the following common assumptions and responses, violence is likely to be perpetuated:

- Perception of a lack of alternatives to continuing violence (e.g., Arab/Israeli conflict)
- Myopic narrowing of focus onto a single assumed cause (e.g., Satan, Jews, Americans, religious extremists)
- The identification of a person or group as ‘enemy’ may be a strategy to break out of a perceived trap
- The inability to defeat or exclude the enemy is likely to lead to an escalating cycle of violence: lines are drawn and people become preoccupied with strategies of retaliation and revenge against the identified enemy. Threats of counter-violence may be made, which will exceed the initial violence inflicted.

While the defeat or exclusion of the defined enemy has the potential to break the cycle of violence, if the underlying causes of violence are not addressed cessation may only be temporary.

- Families or groups who identify a ‘scapegoat’ or ‘monster’ member may similarly perpetuate a cycle of violence.
- Framing responses to violence in a particular way may have a powerful impact on promoting the cycle of violence:
- Framing responses that do not allow one or both parties to live an acceptable existence promotes the cycle of violence.
- Framings that do not allow the enemy to live an acceptable existence are often fed by peripheral people including the media who obtain secondary gains from keeping the news alive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive thinking and communication that widens the awareness of those affected to the broader context of the conflict.

- Framing responses to allow all parties to live an acceptable existence
- Including the worldview, and the norms and values of the presumed enemy
- Open consideration of the likely negative consequences of retaliatory action

- Correction of misperceptions (e.g., The Marshall Plan, after World War 2, recognized the danger that retaliatory action would perpetuate a cycle of violence, as it had after WW1, and acknowledged the needs and viewpoint of the defeated German nation).

Polarization drives increasing proportions of a population to take extreme positions. It is usually a gradual process arising from destructive codes that are sometimes unconscious. In most conflicts the number of combatants is small in proportion to the size of the population in which the conflict is taking place. Most individuals occupy a middle ground. But as the middle-ground participants witness the conflicts, their perceptions will determine whether or not polarization takes place.

Political opponents may compete for influence with leaders, pushing them and their followers to more extreme positions. The disempowered may be drawn to violence if this is perceived as their only means of empowerment. Social injustice, unemployment, and illiteracy help to create a fertile breeding ground for 'terrorists'. Extremists may succeed in recruiting greater numbers to their side. This applies at all levels—familial, communal, regional, and national.

Framing members of one's group who advocate peaceful alternatives as less committed to the group's welfare, as unauthorized, disloyal, naïve, or cowardly, pushes people to polarize their position and may make it more difficult to break a cycle of violence. So too do codes or injunctions that "All who are not with us are against us."

Examples of polarizing/inflammatory strategies include:

- Exemplary executions such as the assassination of Sheikh Yassin
- The United States's 9/11 response to Iraq
- Suicide bombings in the Middle East conflict.

If polarization increases the risk of cycles of violence, de-escalation usually reduces that risk. Programs in which traumatized people are encouraged to work through their grief and rage in a secure and understanding environment can foster this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Efforts to avoid polarisation of non-combatants
- Encouraging non-violent strategies

- Establishing civil rights and gradual empowerment of the disempowered
- Provision, to traumatised individuals or groups, of opportunities for ‘downloading’, reviewing, and reconciling in a secure setting.

Some examples of reconciling, non-inflammatory strategies include:

- South Africa’s transition to majority rule under the leadership of Nelson Mandela
- The International Court in the Hague for Serbian war crimes
- Use of United Nations ‘Peace Keepers’
- The Peace Process in Northern Ireland in which people formerly seen as ‘terrorists’ by one side and ‘freedom fighters’ by the other, were elected, accepted, and redefined as political leaders
- Victim-offender mediation programs
- Rwanda UNICEF’s *Trauma Recovery Program* encouraged traumatized children to express thoughts and feelings by paint and other means in safe, secure group settings.

Similarities and Differences Between Levels of Social Units

By and large the similarities between the family level and the larger units of society are greater than the differences. Although the majority of the examples above come from the societal level, most of the generalizations apply across the board. Thus violence in a family may be misperceived and lead to an immediate hostile response that may be confirmed by the legitimizing authority of the family leader and destructive codes may keep the conflict alive and lead to further violent behavior. Therapists or others may be able to break the cycle by responding rapidly to violent events, handling violence skilfully, changing misperceptions, providing emotional support to all traumatized persons including the family leader, challenging destructive codes, and fostering reconciliation.

There are, however, differences between levels. The power of a group increases with its size. It is much more difficult to resist or challenge the codes and destructive behavior of a group larger than a family. This discourages many people from trying (e.g., in Hitler’s Germany there were many who deplored the cycle of violence but few who attempted to break it). Legitimizing authorities of

large groups are more difficult to support emotionally and more difficult to control than family leaders. This explains why, although we have laws to protect individuals and smaller units of society, national leaders are often able to act outside the law: Human rights 'go out of the window' in the face of societal violence and state-sponsored torture is widespread, even in countries that pretend to have outlawed it. It is rare at a family level and, when it does occur, it usually gives rise to immediate condemnation.

Face-to-face communication is easier within families than it is in larger units. The importance of radio and television increases in proportion to the size of the social unit involved. They can show leaders and populace the consequences of their actions. If the media are to break cycles of communal violence it is important that they be independent of the legitimizing authority. The same applies to the judiciary who, in many societies, are a valid legitimizing authority over the political leaders. Another legitimizing authority is God, and officials representing churches, congregations, movements, and other religious organizations. In most societies they have moral authority and can act as a check on other legitimizing authorities. Their codes may be constructive, destructive, or both.

Special to the family level of the cycle is the relationship between children and parents. This is instinctually determined as well as being profoundly influenced by learning during early infancy and, to a lesser extent, throughout childhood. Perhaps because the child's survival depends on this relationship, core assumptions about authority figures, which become built into the attachment relationship in infancy, are difficult to change later in life. These include core assumptions about trust in self and others and about the appropriate use of violence as a means of controlling others or being controlled. These considerations have special importance in the management of cycles of violence within families. They are also relevant to the management of individuals in positions of power, whose own childhood histories may have given rise to similar core assumptions.

Traditions of childrearing vary from one society to another and these may help to perpetuate or minimize cycles of violence at a societal as well as a family level. For example, 'warrior races' inculcate assumptions about the world, from an early age, which determine the codes and core beliefs that may perpetuate violence.

Likewise, societies that value obedience and social conformity over individualism may be more vulnerable to unscrupulous leadership. Further exploration of these differences would take us beyond the scope of this document.

Conclusion

We have outlined a field of study of great importance to our survival and the survival of our successors. We hope that, by making this model universally available, it will spur others to develop more effective ways of breaking the cycles of violence that have always beset our world.

When we think of the amount of time, energy, and expertise that has gone into the development of safe medicines, motor cars, trains, and aircraft and the laws and regulations that govern their manufacture and operation, it is remarkable that similar efforts have not yet been invested in the prevention and mitigation of cycles of violence.