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# RETHINKING VIOLENCE

*Toward Understanding and Applying a More  
Practical Response to the Epidemic of Violence*

WHITE PAPER

Ari Cowan<sup>1</sup>

Revised: *Thursday, January 08, 2024*

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**Abstract** — Violence negatively impacts our quality of life by depleting valuable resources, time, and energy that could otherwise be directed toward addressing global issues and improving human well-being. Historically, the response to violence has been punitive, spanning over 10,000 years. However, recent insights into human behavior suggest that alternative approaches might be more effective in reducing the associated harm. One such alternative is the Violence Integrative Prevention and Restoration (PAR) Model, which advocates for an evidence-based and compassionate response to violence rooted in public health principles. This model represents a significant departure from the traditional punitive approach. This paper explores the impact of the PAR Model and compares it to the conventional punitive method.

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## Violence and the Need for Change

*“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.”*

— Abraham Lincoln

1809 — 1865

16th President of the United States

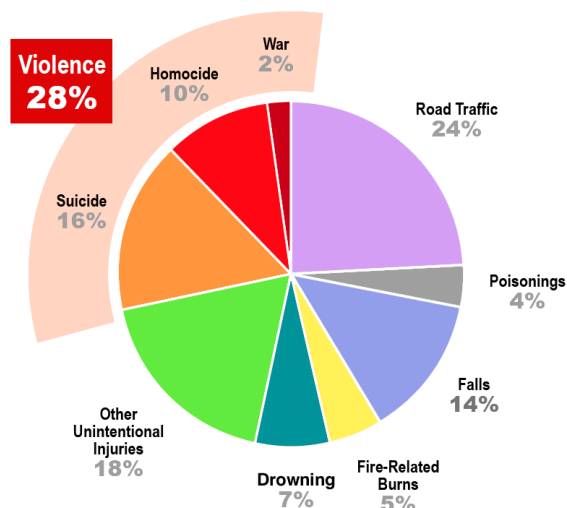
from his annual message to Congress, December 01, 1862

### Impact

Violence is pervasive, touching every nation, community, and individual life. It dominates headlines, serves as entertainment, depletes resources, diminishes our quality of life, and subjects us to sorrow and suffering. Each year, more than 1.6 million people lose their lives to violence.<sup>2</sup> *Figure 01* illustrates worldwide death from injury and the proportion attributed to violence.

*“No nation, community, or individual escapes violence.”*

Figure 01  
Worldwide Death from Injury, 2023<sup>3</sup>



\*NOTE: “Other” includes smothering, asphyxiation, choking, animal and venomous bites, hypothermia, and hyperthermia, as well as natural disasters.



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The Centers for Disease Control reports that:<sup>4</sup>

1. 2.5 million were hospitalized due to violent injuries in 2014.
2. For every person who dies because of violence, 135 are treated in an emergency room.
3. In the last year, one in 7 (14.3%) children in the United States experienced abuse or neglect.

Violence diminishes our quality of life by diverting valuable resources, time, and energy away from addressing global issues and improving the overall quality of human existence.

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*“Violence degrades the quality of our lives; consumes resources, time, and energy that could be applied to solving the world’s problems and increasing the quality of human life.”*

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## Cost

We can view the cost of violence in various ways, including in terms of the emotional, mental, economic, environmental, and quality of life frameworks. Because some costs are difficult to render in absolute terms, one should be cautious not to discount or dismiss them. For example, the emotional impact of violence takes a terrible toll, but the direct effects on the emotions of a population are difficult to measure.

## Internationally

The World Health Organization reports that interpersonal violence disproportionately impacts low- and middle-income countries.<sup>5</sup> The economic effects are also likely to be more devastating in poorer countries. However, the absence of economic data related to violence in low- and middle-income countries makes an accurate assessment difficult. Comparisons with high-income countries are complicated because economic losses related to productivity tend to be undervalued in low-income countries since these losses are typically based on lower wages and income. For example, a single homicide costs, on average, \$15,319 in South Africa, \$602,000 in Australia, and \$2,600,000 in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Oxfam International reported that the cost of conflict upon African development was \$284 billion between 1990 and 2005.<sup>7</sup> The research calculates the overall effects of conflict on African Nations’ Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It shows that, on average, a war, civil war, or insurgency reduces an African economy by 15%. As a result, the continent loses an average of \$18 billion annually — money better used to meet the populations’ challenging health, education, and economic needs.

Many wars currently being fought throughout the world have continued for years. These include wars in Somalia (27 years), Libya (7 years), the Democratic Republic of Congo (off and on for 21 years, with approximately 5 million killed in the period from 1997 to 2003), and Syria (8 years, with 600 civilians killed in Ghouta over several weeks in early 2018).<sup>8</sup> In Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, and Brazil (which ordered the military into Rio de Janeiro in response to the recurring waves of violent behavior — a move that critics believe did little to solve the problem), there are efforts to stamp out violence associated with criminality.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 02 illustrates the overall cost of violence in the United States.

Figure 02  
Annual Direct Cost of Violence in the United States

Department of Defense	\$752.9 billion
Department of Veterans Affairs	261.3 billion
Department of Homeland Security	52.2 billion
Sub-Total, international violence	1,066.7 billion
Violent crime, interpersonal violence	759.0 billion
<b>TOTAL, 2022</b>	<b>\$1,825.7 billion</b>

Sources – US Department of Defense (2022)  
US Department of Veterans Affairs (2022)  
US Department of Homeland Security (2022)  
US National Institutes of Health (2021 – formula: 3.3% of US GDP)

*“The emotional  
cost of violence  
can carry  
forward  
through  
generations.”*

These figures do not include medical and work loss costs due to violence.

### The Legacy of Violence

The emotional repercussions of violence can endure across generations. The mental toll encompasses negative beliefs about oneself and others, diminished learning capabilities, and adverse effects on decision-making. The effort required to regain emotional and mental well-being for individuals affected by violence can be substantial.

From an environmental perspective, the costs of violence manifest in physical, emotional, mental, and situational consequences. An illustration of this is evident 75 years after the conclusion of World War I, where France's Department du D minage estimated that 12 million unexploded shells remain from battles in the Verdun area. The United Nations further projects that over 105 million landmines are scattered across 62 countries, constituting a lasting legacy that continues to cause harm by injuring and killing innocent individuals.<sup>10</sup> Clearing these explosives continues to this day.

Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former President of South Africa, noted that the legacy of day-to-day individual suffering includes “... the pain of children who are abused by people who should protect them, women injured or humiliated by violent partners, elderly persons maltreated by their caregivers, youths who are bullied by other youths, and people of all ages who inflict violence on themselves.”

This suffering — and there are many more examples extant — is a legacy that reproduces itself as new generations learn from the violence of generations past, as victims learn from victimizers, and as the social conditions that nurture



violence are allowed to continue. No country, no city, no community is immune. But neither are we powerless against it.”<sup>11</sup>

## Violence and Human Development

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*What is past is prologue.*

— William Shakespeare  
1564 – 1616  
*English dramatist and poet*

*Homo Sapiens* (modern human beings) emerged about 200,000 years ago during a period of extraordinary climate change.<sup>12</sup> Our first job was to survive in a world with other beings also driven to:

1. Secure resources;
2. Assure the safety of ourselves, our families, and our tribes; and
3. Develop social structures.

Professor Paul Gilbert at the University of Derby, an evolutionary psychologist, founder of the Compassionate Mind Foundation and International Center for Compassionate Organizations Fellow notes:

Generally speaking, our human biosocial goals and strategies represent past solutions to problems posed by selective pressure. These focus on challenges such as:

1. Care of offspring, together with the capability to shape the experience of offspring such that they can acquire the knowledge base necessary to live as a viable representative of that species.
2. Selecting, attracting, and maintaining mates, including successful conception.
3. Selecting, attracting, and maintaining alliances, including discrimination between ingroup or outgroup, an ally or non-ally.
4. Successfully negotiating social hierarchies and social place.<sup>13</sup>

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*“These goals, along with environmental conditions, shaped our development.”*

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These goals, along with environmental conditions, shaped our development. How we organized ourselves, developed skills (such as hunting, foraging, making tools and clothing, building shelters), dealt with threats (from animals and other human beings, weather, shortages of resources, etc.), confronted our mortality, and focused our creativity were activities in the service of survival — physically, emotionally, mentally, situationally, and transpersonally.

Throughout our evolutionary journey, we acquired physiological traits that persist today, including some that may no longer serve their original purpose (e.g., toenails) or are deemed non-essential for survival (e.g., the appendix). Notably, the human brain stands out as one of our most distinctive and intriguing physical features.



## The Human Brain

The human brain is the starting place for understanding how we perceive and respond to threats (including applying violence as a strategy). It is the most complex organ in the body. The brain has become a “set of mixed social strategies and modular, evaluative systems that evolved to solve certain problems” rather than a unitary system.<sup>14</sup>



To unravel the origins and dynamics of violence, it's crucial to comprehend the human brain's intricate complexity, nature, and functioning. This knowledge forms the foundation for devising effective strategies to manage and prevent violence. Learning, characterized by developing and reinforcing neurological patterns, persists throughout life. The brain's plasticity, a significant survival attribute, allows us to learn from experience, discerning what works and what doesn't.

The development of human societies and the response to challenges such as food shortages, disease, and environmental threats (e.g., storms, floods, extreme variations in temperature) were mitigated by the powerful ability of the human brain to process new information, connect disparate but profitable pieces of complex puzzles, and organize knowledge to solve a broad range of problems. The result is that food shortages, death by lightning strikes, onset and death by many diseases, communication beyond a very short distance, and limits to the widespread transmission of knowledge have been minimized or overcome.

Humans and their brains have changed the quality and nature of human life.

Yet, the brain presents challenges, including dealing with confusing messages from dysfunctional aspects of the unconscious, the tendency to stereotype, perceptual challenges arising from generalizations in which old patterns override senses, and the tricks memory can play on us (thus conflicting reports on shared events). Professor Paul Gilbert at the Compassionate Mind Foundation refers to these incongruencies when he discusses the “tricky brain.”<sup>15</sup>

In many respects, the traditional punitive approach for responding to violence has proven effective over thousands of years. The same processes that led to improvements in other aspects of human life can be applied to preventing and responding to violence. Approaches such as the Violence Integrative Prevention and Restoration (PAR) Model result from processes similar to those applied to other challenges to human existence.

Many misconceptions persist despite continuing advancements in understanding the brain and its functions. One such misconception is the idea of the primacy of the will — the belief that conscious willpower alone is sufficient to overcome human challenges. Instances of this misconception include the “just say ‘no’ to drugs” approach for those already grappling with addiction, the oversimplified

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*“The notion of the primacy of the will — a belief that our conscious will is all that is needed to overcome human dilemmas — is a common misconception.”*

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belief that weight loss universally boils down to eating less (and any failure to do so is a moral lapse), and attempting to overcome phobias (such as fear of heights, social anxiety, or spiders) by merely deciding they will no longer be problematic.

The notion of the primacy of the will is debunked with a simple exercise. Humans can go without oxygen for three minutes without injury or losing consciousness. Yet, most people cannot hold their breath for three minutes. The brain has a survival pattern designed to compel breathing when breathing stops for a prolonged period. It is not a failure of will.

## The Origins of Violence

The recognition of the hidden power of the brain is essential to understanding violence. The brain's architecture helps us survive threats, and it combines the threat response strategies we are born with those we were taught. Among the techniques we learned was organizing ourselves into groups for mutual protection and the distribution of tasks. The result was tribalism — an influential social construct that served humans for many millennia.

Confronted by threats from predatory animals or other tribes competing for scant resources, individual and collective violence provided useful tools. For thousands of years, this has been a productive strategy. However, this structure became problematic once our social systems grew beyond tribal organization — to cities, economic exchange regions, states, and worldwide interconnectedness.

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As we have continued to develop over the centuries, we faced dealing with the challenges of worldwide relationships, instant communication, changes in diet and physical demands, weapons that are wildly more destructive than the clubs and stones we started with, and the social structures and ways of thinking that allow us to manage our new situation.

Yet, the process of change for human beings is accelerating rapidly — our situation is very different from conditions some 10,000 years ago.<sup>16</sup> During the 200,000-year history of our species,<sup>17</sup> the changes since the first cities were established 9,500 years ago were far more extensive than in the previous 190,500 years (the first 95% of human history).

Human physiology, including the structure and function of the brain, changes very slowly. Many of the strategies built into the human brain that had more than 190,000 years to develop are still with us today.

## Basic Questions

There are fundamental questions, the answers to which support understanding what it is to be human. Understanding who and what we are and how we function provides a foundation for understanding violence. These questions include:

- Are human beings “things” or “processes” or both?
- Is there such a thing as “now,” and if so, what is its duration?





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- How much of reality are we conscious of, and how much do we miss?
- What is the nature of “experience,” and how (and by whom) is it created?
- What role does language play in creating one’s experience and concept of reality?
- What are the fundamental (ontological) questions of existence human beings face, and why do the answers to these questions often change over time?
- What role does power play in sculpting human experience?
- What kinds of power do human beings traffic in, and which are healthy, unhealthy, or benign?
- What is violence?<sup>18</sup>
- What causes violence; under what conditions does violence appear?
- What is the relationship between power and violence?
- What is the process which leads to violent acts?
- What causes peace; under what conditions does peace manifest?
- Why are some people violent and others not?
- Is how we describe violence and structure our responses to it outdated and in need of rethinking?

## Our Approach to Violence

Our approach to preventing and responding to violence emerged from the above questions, resulting in observations, some of which are listed below:

1. Human beings do not have a conscious experience of “absolute reality.” Any reality that one mentally constructs consists of concepts and events that have passed. Our experience of reality is the experience of transactions and relationships. Recognizing this provides a foundation for restructuring “reality” — including the experience of violence — with enormous creative flexibility.
2. Human beings must have an experience of power to survive. Healthy forms include the power inherent in love, belonging, survival, freedom, choice, creativity, realization, and transcendence.
3. Violence is any human behavior resulting from an intention to do harm or any act to gain inappropriate or unjustified self-serving power and control that results in harm.
4. The traditional “punitive” model for dealing with violence — an approach that is more than 10,000 years old<sup>19</sup> — may be outdated, inefficient, and ineffective.
5. We use language to describe reality to ourselves and others: change the language, and the reality changes. Language has a role in describing violence as a concept and a process.
6. Violence is an unhealthy strategy to gain power by those who experience the absence or loss of power. These people experience power deficiency. Unless they have a pathological condition incorporating violence, those experiencing sufficient power are not violent.
7. Fear can drive power deficiency or deprivation. Perhaps the greatest fear human beings face is death.<sup>20</sup> Those who are fearless (meaning fear of deprivation or loss of any kind) and who have healthy brain function tend not to be violent.

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*“Human beings  
must have an  
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survive.”*

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8. Taking power away from violent people can aggravate their experience of power deprivation.
9. In one sense, ordinary people do not commit acts of violence against others — they commit these acts against objects.<sup>21</sup> Central to the human ability to commit acts of violence is an “objectification-action” process in which the recipient of violence must be converted conceptually from a human being to an object.
10. Violence can be seen as a strategy — a thought form that presents in malignant, addictive, infectious, and self-mutating forms.
11. Violence, like any disease, has its antecedents, risk factors, and vectors of transmission. Many of these have been identified through research and experimental verification.<sup>22</sup>
12. Once a functional language for describing the malignancy and responses created from that language is applied, individual and collective violence can be reduced or stopped through public health protocols.
13. Ineffective models and approaches, myths, beliefs, and assumptions inhibit progress in reducing and eliminating violence.

## Fundamental Questions

There are three basic (ontological) questions relating to human existence:

- Who am I?
- What is the nature of the world?
- What is my place in it?

These questions, asked in various ways throughout life, provide a basis for defining how we will be in the world. A central focus of childhood is to encounter and revisit these three critical questions. The answers change as a child develops into adulthood. Conclusions often become crystallized and difficult to change.

As their senses take in the landscape of their lives, young humans — extraordinarily intelligent beings but overly trusting, naïve, and inexperienced — draw conclusions about who they are, how the world works, and how they fit in that world. Their job is to grow into their place in human society. Like sponges, they soak up information at an astonishing rate. Not only do they acquire language and abstract concepts (such as the notion of time), they learn to identify the expectations put upon them. They often do this with little overt, formal instruction.

Fully committing themselves to growing and learning, they search to find their place so that they can fit in and, thus, survive. When children sing “ring around the rosie,” they do not repeat this rhyme because they are naturally predisposed to rings, rosies, posies, or ashes — they do it because they are taught it, and it’s fun. Its roots do not even have to have relevance to their lives: “Ring Around the Rosy” is a rhyme about the black plague. Few children even know what the black plague is. This example demonstrates how information — rituals, values, and beliefs — are transmitted through generations using examples and repetition. They learn the rhyme. It doesn’t even need to make sense.

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*“Young humans encounter the answers to life’s questions through experience and via the alchemy of the brain, brain structure, and the environment.”*

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Young humans encounter the answers to life's questions through experience and via the alchemy of the brain, brain structure, and the environment, all of which interact in a continuing dance of development. If the child's brain is healthy and their beginnings are marked by love, safety, warmth, caring touch, and reverence; if they are physically healthy; if the community is nourishing and safe; and if the culture is supportive, that child can grow true and strong. If a child's beginnings are filled with violence and its precursors — terror, exploitation, humiliation, injustice, and neglect — they can be crippled and filled with rage. Such children risk transmitting the savagery brought upon them to those around them. The experience of violence is a defining element in shaping a child into an adult.

In one form or another, everyone must answer the question: "I'm alive because..." If there is no answer, or if the answer is tragic, or if life makes no sense, then continuing with life can become difficult. Those who cannot establish meaning in their lives or have lost it may conclude that living is intolerable. Self-directed violence — suicide — is a continuing problem. The US Centers for Disease Control reports that: "From 1999 through 2014, the age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States increased 24%, from 10.5 to 13.0 per 100,000 population, with the pace of increase greater after 2006."<sup>23</sup>

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*"In one form or another, everyone must answer the question: 'I'm alive because...'"*

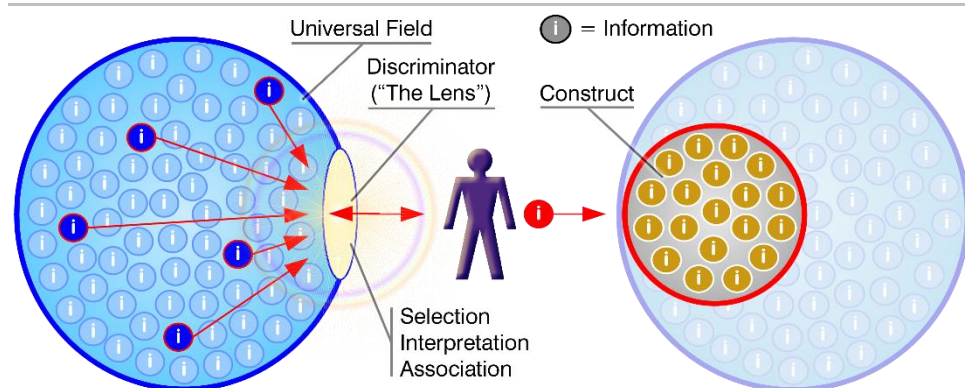
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## The Human Experience of "Reality"

### Living in the Construct

In their normal state of consciousness, human beings are not consciously aware of every piece of information coming from the reality they are in moment-to-moment. This reality is called the "universal field." We construct our experience of reality from this field. By reframing the violence construct through a cognitive approach, violence is seen in a new way — one that differs significantly from the "punitive" way we've seen violence historically and one in which we can more effectively deal with and prevent violence.

Figure 03  
The Universal Field, Discriminator, and Construct



The construct is the experience of reality one creates by selecting information (almost always unconsciously) from the "universal field" (the totality of reality), filtering it through the "discriminator" (also called the "the lens") and projecting



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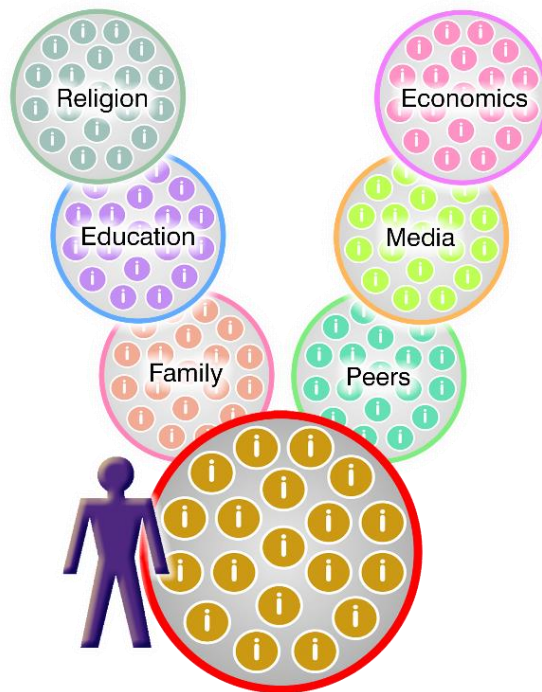
the interpreted and associated information selection as “reality.” This construct is commonly mistaken for absolute reality when, in fact, it is a partial representation of total reality (the universal field).

How we view, prevent, and respond to violence is based upon the way in which we describe “the reality” of violence (e.g., a construct). The test for the validity of any construct is the congruency of that construct with the outcomes we want — most often peace, reduced crime, fewer injuries, and so forth.

One’s construct is overlaid with influences such as social tradition, religion, the level of one’s education (as well as the quality of that education), the economic environment (including the availability of secure individual and economic conditions), the nature and impact of media (news, entertainment, social, etc.), one’s family (including family values and traditions), and the relationship to those with whom we are most commonly associated.

*“Our  
‘construction’  
of reality is  
informed and  
influenced by  
other social  
constructs.”*

Figure 04  
Construct Overlays



The notion that violence is an unhealthy strategy to get power and control is generally accepted. While the strategy is often effective over the short term, it is rarely sustainable (ask anyone incarcerated for a violent crime how it worked for them). Since acts of violence have the desire for power and control as an antecedent, there is value in achieving the power goal, but in a healthy, long-term way. This requires interrupting that part of the construct of a person with violence so that the power sought in the violent act is nullified and a healthy alternative is substituted (referred to in the PAR Model as a “power swap”).



#### APPLICATION

Recognizing how others view reality supports a more informed and compassionate understanding. When another person's construct is dysfunctional (as evidenced by bigotry, political polarization, and isolation from others), understanding their construct offers an effective and threat-reducing interaction conducive to positive change. This approach is a healthy counterpoint to the demonizing and emotionally charged attacks on those who operate within differing constructs.

### Disrupting the Process

Disruption is achieved by introducing “disrupter memes” into the construct. The PAR Model draws upon many of the principles of memetic theory (originally described by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in *The Selfish Gene*). The model assumes that existence must “make sense,” i.e., be congruent. Without congruency, one has the experience of insanity. Thus, all constructs have a congruent structure. This is true of constructs incorporating violence as normative behavior. The disrupter meme is a widely accepted and comprehensible concept. It causes the unhealthy part of the construct to lose its congruency — that is, the malignant part of the construct collapses.

#### APPLICATION

An example of this process involves disrupting a hostile encounter in which violence is threatened. By invalidating the threat with a disrupter meme (e.g., “Take my head off? Dude, I’m old — a four-year-old girl could take my head off.”), the power of the threat is disrupted and invalidated. The introduction and a healthy power frame (for example, via a “hero” meme) are then immediately introduced (the “power swap” discussed in the “Living in the Construct” section of this paper). The “hero” meme is the disrupter and initiates a new — and nonviolent — alternative.

### The Illusion of “Time”

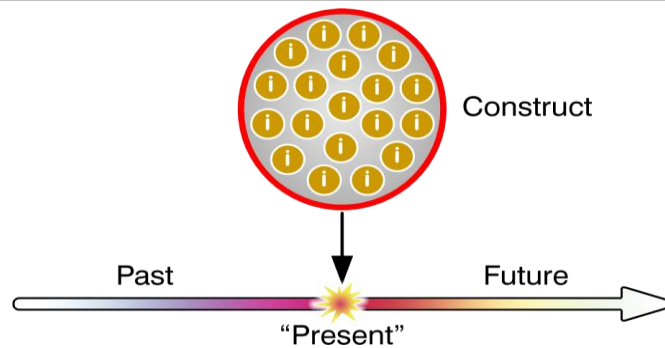
What we call “now” or “the present” has no duration: it refers to an immediate point along the time continuum. This fact runs counter to our experience. Yet, with minimal thought, one can easily see that any present we perceive can always be reduced, *ad infinitum*. We take the concept of “present” as fact. However, it is a continuous transaction along the thread of time, like a continuous spark moving down a wire (refer to *Figure 05*). Any real “now” we experience is in what we call the past by the time we become aware of it. The further that point retreats into the past, the less “real” it becomes.

While this is abstract (and admittedly esoteric), it does have important implications with respect to how we deal with individual and collective constructs and human experience of reality in the world — particularly as it relates to threat, powerlessness, and violence. The past is a memory retained within the brain. This realization reveals enormous possibilities for understanding, preventing, and responding to violence.





Figure 05  
Constructed Reality and the Illusion of Time



This raises significant questions. What is our experience of that memory? How accurate is it? What parts of the experience are retained? What is the impact on the brain? What is the brain's impact on the memory/experience? What are the opportunities for improving health and well-being — particularly as it relates to violence — by understanding how we “construct” reality and how the brain both responds to and influences memory.

**APPLICATION**

By understanding that memory is incorporated into individual or collective construct and that the retained information is powerfully influenced by elements of the construct (fears, judgments, experience, values, etc.), we can help disarm those interpretations of memory that have been supportive of violence. This can be accomplished through various strategies, including listening (acknowledging the memory and interpretation, often resulting in a release of anger and resentment), reframing, and setting a more realistic context.

*“It’s about ending the 10,000 year-old-way we see and deal with violence.”*

## Violence Revisited

The position taken in this paper is that successfully ending violence is not about hatred, getting even, what anyone deserves, settling scores, making an example, punishing some and comforting others, making anyone pay, exclusion or wiping anyone out. It’s about restoration: healing, making everyone whole, wiping out the malignancy, not those afflicted with it, and restoring those lost to their place in the world. It’s about ending the 10,000 year-old-way we see and deal with violence.

Violence mimics disease in that it relies on having its true nature hidden — one cannot manage what one cannot see. In the absence of sight, we often retreat into superstition and moralizing. Those afflicted with violence are commonly seen as either poor, helpless, innocent victims; savage, terrifying, and repulsive perpetrators; or heroic, courageous, and attractive rescuers. We must ask ourselves, “How did things get this way?”

Walk through any hospital nursery. Look into the faces of the newborn children. Where are the serial killers, murderers, and abusers? Where are the bigots, liars,



creeps, scoundrels, deviants, and perpetrators? Where are the swaggering, power-hungry, macho, obnoxious, and exploitive brutes? They are not there because they have not yet been created.<sup>24</sup> They are grown from the physical, emotional, mental, situational, and transpersonal soil of fields tended by their caretakers and society at large; fields for which we are responsible. Why are we surprised that, when we neglect or poison these fields, we reap a harvest of sorrow?

Applying the PAR Model puts violence under a new type of light, allowing it to be revealed for what it is, clearly and completely, free of the often-associated fear, hatred, and despair.

## The Problem with “Business as Usual”

Despite humanity’s best efforts, violence continues as a troubling, pervasive, and seemingly insurmountable problem. The way in which violence is traditionally characterized and the most commonplace strategies to reduce it are largely ineffective. Violence has been described as a failure of character, a “natural” component of human existence, evidence of human evil, and/or an insurmountable human attribute.

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*“In short, conventional approaches are largely ineffective. Perhaps we should try something different.”*

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The nature of human violence has commonly been viewed in the same way over centuries. The application of remedies — most based on punitive responses, none of which has resulted in a significant and lasting reduction. The results are, at best, mixed. Despite our best efforts, violence remains, and we pay dearly for it in terms of the quality of our lives, harm to ourselves, our families, and others, loss of our financial treasure, and doubts about our ability to remedy this age-old nightmare.

In short, conventional approaches are largely ineffective. Perhaps we should try something different.

## The Punitive Approach and the PAR Model

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### Failure of the Punitive Approach

The punitive approach to dealing with violence is at least 13,000 years old.<sup>25</sup> As hunter/gatherer populations began the metamorphosis into agricultural societies, social structures became more complex, governance expanded, and social order became more critical. The punitive approach emerged from this seismic change in human development.

In the punitive approach:

4. The responsibility for violence is solely the perpetrator’s.
5. Violence creates social positioning, with the rescuer and victim holding the high ground. The persecutor is ostracized, condemned, and punished.
6. “Acceptable” (sacred) violence is often used as a method to respond to “unacceptable” (profane) violence.<sup>26</sup>
7. The focus is protection, not solution.





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*“Since violence is about power and control, a new approach must counter the cycle of disempowerment (even well-intended) found in the punitive approach.”*

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The punitive approach is characterized by:

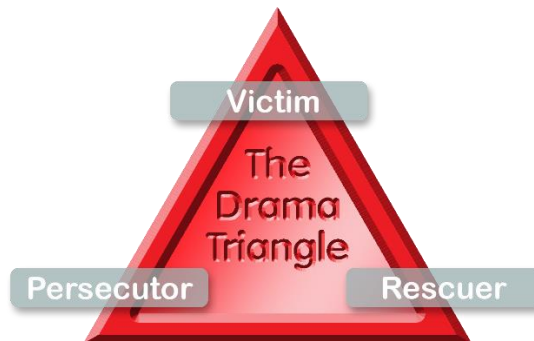
1. Establishing superior power.
2. Diminishing power for the “offender.”
3. Punishment.
4. Moralizing.
5. Righteousness, scapegoating, revenge, and more violence.
6. Compartmentalizing events (treating the violent episode as a single instance rather than as part of a continuum).

Since violence is about power and control, a new approach must counter the cycle of disempowerment (even well-intended) found in the punitive approach. The punitive approach is so ingrained into our life experience that it is nearly completely transparent. For many people, it is a given — a “no-brainer.” It permeates our moral, legal, and political thinking.

The punitive approach is built on the Karpman drama triangle.<sup>27</sup> The drama triangle (Figure 06) is a psychological and social model describing human interaction. It is a crucial concept in transactional analysis. The three “positions” on the triangle are 1) the victim, 2) the persecutor, and 3) the rescuer.

Figure 06  
The Karpman Drama Triangle

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These positions or “stances” are used to secure power — almost always at the expense of the other players on the triangle. The punitive approach identifies “victims” (innocent and exploited good people) as those on the receiving end of violence, the “persecutors” (criminal, predatory, and evil people) as those perpetuating the violence, and rescuers (heroic and noble people) who save the victim (when possible) and bring the persecutor to justice.

The drama triangle is a “game” in which the players benefit by continuing to play. The unhealthy power that emerges from this game is seductive and addictive. It drives much mainstream news and the “righteous” positions people often take. It preempts listening, understanding, exploring shared interests, compassion, and workable solutions.



## Comparing Approaches

A comparison of the punitive approach to violence and the PAR Model (*Figure 07*) illustrates the differences regarding critical concepts and components of violence and how two different strategies for describing and responding to violence deal with each of these elements.

Figure 07  
Comparison of the  
Traditional Punitive Approach and the PAR Model

Concept/Component	Punitive Approach	PAR Model
Historic application	Common forms of the model used for thousands of years	In use for more than a decade
Foundation	Fear-based (removal of perpetrator's power and control)	Power-based (reestablishing healthy power and control for all stakeholders)
Nature of violence	A moral and legal issue.	A motivational issue modeled in health terms
Definition of violence	Vague, varied	Precise — differentiated from injurious (which may not be violent). Established criteria for qualifying as violence
Orientation/focus	Protection-oriented	Solution-oriented
Response objective	Punishment	Prevention and restoration
Moral valuation	Violence is seen as "bad."	Violence is seen as unhealthy.
Acts of violence are...	Single events	The extreme manifestation of a continuum of events
Responsibility for violent acts	Perpetrator only	Perpetrator, contributors, supportive systems, and environmental conditions
Perpetrator seen as...	The villain	A key stakeholder in diagnosis, treatment, and restoration process
Violence occurs in...	Physical body, occasionally the emotional body	Physical, emotional, mental, situational, and transpersonal bodies
Preventive approach	Fear, aversion-based (threat of sanctions — economic to incarceration to death). May require temporary or permanent time in prison	Identification and reduction of risk factors, preemptive intervention, and redirection of power and control. May require temporary or permanent quarantine



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Concept/Component	Punitive Approach	PAR Model
Response approach	Punitive — characterized by punishment, righteousness, scapegoating, revenge, retribution	Public health approach — characterized by restoration (making whole) of all involved in the violence continuum
Intervention methods	Interpersonal — identification, apprehension, adjudication, incarceration. International — economic sanctions, war	Diagnosis and application of response protocols (interpersonal and international)
Language used	Personal negative descriptors — derogatory, demeaning, humiliating, condemning, depreciatory, critical, etc.	Behavior descriptors — vectors of transmission, infection rates, toxicity, trauma, addictive qualities, risk factors, etc.
Structural approach	“Drama triangle” — victim (to protect), persecutor (to apprehend), rescuer (to suppress and punish persecutor)	Public health approach — assessment, treatment protocol design, application of protocols, evaluation. Focus on accountability, restoration
Acceptance of violence	Depends upon context — criminal violence not accepted, sanctioned violence approved	All acts of violence require a response and treatment
The role sanctioned violence plays.	Considered a legitimate strategy for preventing and responding to violence	Not considered a legitimate response — sanctioned violence most commonly aggravates the condition and can drive the growth and continuation of the malignancy
Application areas	Law enforcement, corrections, international relations	Education, healthcare, mental health, law enforcement, corrections, international relations
Effect upon resiliency	Erodes resiliency	Builds resiliency
Impact on management	Reduces management to punitive action	Makes violence understandable; provides a context and structure for increasing effectiveness in preventing and responding to violence



## Comparing Results

Figure 08 illustrates and ranks how the traditional “punitive” model and the PAR Model” compare.

Figure 08  
Comparison of Results  
Traditional Punitive Approach and the PAR Model

Positive attributes are marked with a ▲

Precursor/Outcome	Punitive Model	PAR Model
Fear	Increases	▲ Decreases
Hatred	Increases	▲ Decreases
Rage	Is more likely	▲ Is less likely
Resentment	Increases	▲ Decreases
Scapegoating	Increases	▲ Decreases
Retaliation	Is more likely	▲ Is less likely
Demonization	Increases	▲ Decreases
Polarization	Increases	▲ Decreases
Confusion	Increases	▲ Decreases
Creative solutions	Are thwarted	▲ Are encouraged
Power-sharing	Decreases	▲ Increases
Compassion	Decreases	▲ Increases
Reconciliation	Is less likely	▲ Is more likely
Openness	Decreases	▲ Increases
Offender accountability	▲ Increases	▲ Increases
Adjunct participant accountability	Is not considered	▲ Increases
Societal accountability	Is not considered	▲ Increases
Victims	▲ Are empowered	▲ Are empowered
Offenders	Are disempowered	▲ Are empowered
Society	▲ Is empowered	▲ Is empowered
Hope	Decreases	▲ Increases
Effective management	Decreases	▲ Increases
Short-term safety	▲ Increases	▲ Increases
Long-term safety	Decreases	▲ Increases
Results are...	“I win, ‘they’ lose.”	▲ “We heal.”
<b>RANKING</b>	<b>4</b> out of 25	<b>25</b> out of 25
	Punitive Model	PAR Model



## Effectiveness of Punitive Model Alternatives

The following are examples of alternatives to the punitive approach that were successfully applied.

### The Marshall Plan



The Marshall Plan provided relief to the European countries devastated by World War II.<sup>28</sup> Cities, industrial capacity, and transportation infrastructure in Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, and elsewhere in Europe lay in ruins.

George C. Marshall, the architect of the Allied victory in World War II and later the US Secretary of State from January 1947, drew valuable lessons from the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles. Unlike the Treaty of Versailles, which aimed to humiliate and punish the Germans, Marshall approached post-World War II diplomacy with a different

perspective. Consequently, Germany experienced territorial losses and was burdened with onerous reparations. Marshall acknowledged that the resentment among the German population, stemming from the punitive measures imposed by the victors of World War I, played a significant role in the rise of the Nazi party. This resentment fueled the desire to regain power, with the Nazis propagating the notion of German racial superiority.

The PAR Model encompasses elements such as compassion, the alleviation of threats (such as starvation and a grim future), the transition from objectification to recognizing the fundamental humanity of all European peoples, the cultivation of resilience, and the transformation of the collective European narrative from despair to hope. The recovery of Europe and the sustained absence of war stand as testament to the efficacy of this nonpunitive approach.

### Clallam Bay Corrections Center

The Clallam Bay Corrections Center (CBCC) is a Level 5 (maximum security) facility. It is part of the Washington State Department of Corrections and is considered a “lab” for evaluating the efficacy of programs for offenders and staff. The CBCC houses Washington State’s most violent offenders.

The CBCC demonstrated the Violence Integrative Prevention and Restoration (PAR) Model in 2005. Earlier, the CBCC staff received rudimentary training in the model that did not include the PAR Model’s in-depth components, including a practicum, risk-resiliency mapping, sustainability elements or other diagnostic tools, and advanced PAR Model components.



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*“CBCC has concluded that the [PAR Model] program offers a significant opportunity to contribute to our continuing efforts to increase public safety and reduce the financial burden of the citizens of Washington State.”*

*— Karen Brunson  
Superintendent  
The Clallam Bay  
Corrections  
Center*

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At the time of the demonstration, there were 900 adult males incarcerated at the CBCC, 63.6% of whom were convicted of violent crimes. The institution logged 200 violent incidents (e.g., forcible rapes and severe assaults) per month. In addition, the institution experienced increases in fights and assaults, increased staff injuries due to use-of-force procedures (such as removing violent prisoners from their cells), an increase in assaults on staff, and an escalation in threat group (gang) activities.<sup>29</sup>

Under the direction of Associate Superintendent John J. Aldana, Sr., the CBCC initiated the “Violence Education Moratorium Initiative” —a program demonstrating the PAR Model. Aldana and his colleagues set an unprecedented objective of creating a “Week Without Violence” in December 2005.

Correctional officers, staff, and 300 inmates received basic PAR Model training. The results for the week following the training were:

1. A 100% reduction in violent incidents for the target week plus nearly two additional weeks free of violent incidents.
2. A 100% reduction in infractions/logged confrontations for the target week plus two additional weeks.
3. A 100% reduction in segregation (Intensive Management Units, also referred to as isolation) placements for the week plus nearly two additional weeks.

The following statements were made in March 2008 as plans were being developed for a full roll-out of the PAR Model at the Washington State Department of Corrections.

Clallam Bay Corrections Center Superintendent Karen Brunson wrote:

“After a detailed review of [the] “Offender Violence Prevention and Intervention (OVPI) [an implementation program for the PAR Model], CBCC has concluded that the program offers a significant opportunity to contribute to our continuing efforts to increase public safety and reduce the financial burden of the citizens of Washington State.”

Following the demonstration at the CBCC, Washington State Senator Rodney Tom wrote:

“I want to express my support for bringing your programs into our correctional system and schools in the State of Washington. I was particularly pleased to learn of the outstanding results of the demonstration of [the] program at the Clallam Bay Corrections Facility.”

Washington State Representative Roger Goodman wrote:

“I heartily support and endorse your continuing efforts to improve the safety and well-being of the people of the State of Washington.”

The program was stopped by the 2008 economic crisis, which necessitated the elimination of funding for the Washington State Department of Corrections program.





## Scotland

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*“McCluskey is challenging, as we do with the PAR Model, that the assumptions about violence — rooted in the centuries-old notion that violence is a moral failure — are misguided, cruel, and ineffective.”*

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In an article from the Economic World Forum,<sup>30</sup> author Samira Shackle observed that “when it comes to violence, the discussion is often underpinned by an assumption that this is an innate and immutable behaviour and that people engaging in it are beyond redemption. More often than not, solutions have been sought in the criminal justice system – through tougher sentencing or increasing stop-and-search (despite substantial evidence that it is ineffective in reducing crime). Is enforcement the wrong tactic altogether?”

In 2005, a United Nations report designated Scotland as the most violent country in the developed world. Shackle elaborates on how, specifically in the city of Glasgow, Karyn McCluskey, the principal analyst for Strathclyde Police, identified the key drivers of violence as “poverty, inequality, things like toxic masculinity, [and] alcohol use.” Successfully addressing these drivers resulted in a notable 60% reduction in the murder rate in Glasgow.

McCluskey challenges, as we do with the PAR Model, the assumptions about violence — rooted in the centuries-old idea that it is a moral failure — are misguided, cruel, and ineffective. The PAR Model integrates insights from neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and social science, adopting a symbolic approach based on the “virus” analogy, akin to how technology uses the same metaphor to describe malicious codes, known as computer viruses. As antivirus company Norton explains, “A computer virus, much like a flu virus, is designed to spread from host to host and has the ability to replicate itself. Similarly, in the same way that flu viruses cannot reproduce without a host cell, computer viruses cannot reproduce and spread without programming such as a file or document.”<sup>31</sup>

## Norwegian Correctional Service

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*“Do you want people who are angry — or people who are rehabilitated?” — Are Hoidel  
Director  
Halden Prison  
Norway*

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Many of the principles used in the PAR Model are employed in the Norwegian correctional system. These include embracing less punitive approaches, restorative justice, and cultivating positive power dynamics.

As Bastøy Prison governor Arne Wilson, who is also a clinical psychologist, commented:<sup>32</sup>

“In the law, being sent to prison has nothing to do with putting you in a terrible prison to make you suffer. The punishment is that you lose your freedom. If we treat people like animals when they are in prison, they are likely to behave like animals. Here, we pay attention to you as human beings.”

Are Hoidel, director of the maximum-security Halden Prison, notes:

“Every inmate in Norwegian prison [sic] are going back to the society. Do you want people who are angry — or people who are rehabilitated?”

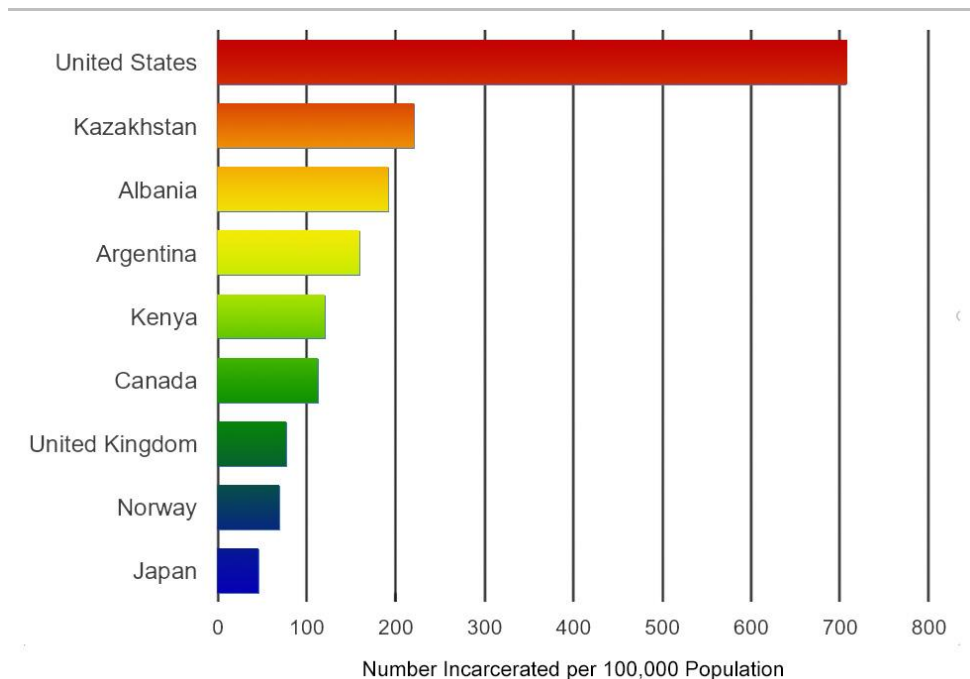
Norway’s incarceration rate is 77 per 100,000 compared to the US incarceration rate of 707 per 100,000. Additionally, Norway’s recidivism rate is 20%





compared to 76.6% for the United States.<sup>33</sup> Refer to *Figure 09* for a broader comparison.

Figure 09  
Select International Incarceration Rates



## Dutch Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system in the Netherlands has closed 19 prisons in the last few years.<sup>34</sup> The key has been to apply principles found in the PAR Model — respect, threat reduction, and resiliency development. The focus is on treatment and rehabilitation rather than punishment.

## Additional Information

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The International Center for Compassionate Organizations has resources that provide additional information on the PAR Model, including White Papers, In Brief (single-page) materials, and reference materials. For more information, please contact the International Center at:

[mail@compassionate.center](mailto:mail@compassionate.center)

## About the Author

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Ari Cowan is the Director-General of the International Center for Compassionate Organizations. For his work to end violence, he was awarded the 1998 National Public Health Award from the United States affiliate of the international



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physician organization that received the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize. In addition, he has made presentations on violence and compassion at various national and international venues, including the United Nations.

Mr. Cowan was cited — along with Nobel Prize recipient and former President Jimmy Carter and 1980 Nobel Prize recipient Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (among others) — for his assistance in bringing the first public edition of [\*The International Bill of Human Rights\*](#) to publication.

More information about Mr. Cowan can be found [online](#).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The narrative and illustrations for this paper are from the theoretical work, writings, and graphic conceptualizations of Ari Cowan. They are Copyright © 2019 by the author and are reproduced with permission.
- <sup>2</sup> “WHO | Injuries and Violence: The Facts.” International Health. WHO. Accessed March 30, 2023. [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/149798/9789241508018\\_eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/149798/9789241508018_eng.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> “Key Data and Statistics|WISQARS|Injury Center CDC.” Public Health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 19, 2016. [https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/overview/key\\_data.html](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/overview/key_data.html).
- <sup>5</sup> WHO | *The Economic Dimensions of Interpersonal Violence*. World Health Organization, 2004. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/publications/violence/economic\\_dimensions/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/economic_dimensions/en/).
- <sup>6</sup> The disparity in international figures are due to broad range of methodological differences and extensive gaps in the existing literature on the economics of violence
- <sup>7</sup> *Africa’s Missing Billions: International arms flows and the cost of conflict*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Oxfam International, 2007. The research was conducted by Oxfam International, IANSA, and Saferworld. Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 organization focused on solutions to poverty and injustice.
- <sup>8</sup> Burke, Jason. “Why Is the World at War?” *the Guardian*, March 4, 2018. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/04/why-is-world-at-war-syria-democratic-republic-congo-yemen-afghanistan-ukraine>.
- <sup>9</sup> Woody, Christopher. “Violence in Rio de Janeiro Has Gotten so Bad a Newspaper Is Covering It in the ‘war’ Section.” *Business Insider*. Accessed March 4, 2018. <http://www.businessinsider.com/violence-in-rio-de-janeiro-military-police-deployed-2017-8>.
- <sup>10</sup> United States Congress, Office of Technology Assessment (1995): *Improving the Prospects for Future Peace Operations — Workshop Proceedings*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, page 108. France’s Department du Deminage searches for, uncovers, removes, and stores (and in some cases destroys) unexploded artillery and mortar shells.
- <sup>11</sup> Krug, Etienne G., Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano (editors) (2002): *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization, Foreword.
- <sup>12</sup> “Homo Sapiens | The Smithsonian Institution’s Human Origins Program.” Science. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, June 29, 2017. <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/homo-sapiens>.
- <sup>13</sup> Gilbert, Paul. “Male Violence: Towards an Integration.” Original article manuscript for *Male Violence* (Routledge). Pg. 2
- <sup>14</sup> Gilbert, Paul. “Male Violence: Towards and Integration.” Original article manuscript for *Male Violence* (Routledge). Pg. 1



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- 15 For an excellent discussion about the challenges presented to us by our “tricky brains,” see Gilbert, Paul. *Living Like Crazy*. York, UK: Annwyn House, 2018.
- 16 Wenar, Leif. “Is Humanity Getting Better?” Opinionator Section. *New York Times*, February 15, 2016. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/15/is-humanity-getting-better/>.
- 17 “Homo Sapiens | The Smithsonian Institution’s Human Origins Program.” Science. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, June 29, 2017. <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/homo-sapiens>.
- 18 “Violence” is something of a muddy term — one that confuses many people (based upon the head-scratching in my classes and lectures). There is a remarkable absence of discussion about what the term really means. It’s frequently confused with “injurious” and related terms.
- 19 The growth of agricultural societies, beginning approximately 13,000 years ago, provides a starting point from which violence, according to the definition used in the PAR Model, is clearly evident. For example, the Indo-European tribes living on the steppes are believed to have routinely descended upon and devastated their neighbors in surrounding regions.
- 20 Refer to the work of Ernest Becker, PhD and his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Denial of Death*, and other works, including *The Birth and Death of Meaning* and *Escape from Evil*. Becker discusses immortality schemes such as religion, heroism, and notoriety.
- 21 This conclusion does not apply to those individuals who are physiological basis for violence (such as those suffering from Huntington’s disease), severe mental disorders, or psycho/sociopathology.
- 22 For example, the experimental work of Sheldon Solomon, PhD (Skidmore College, New York), Jeff Greenberg, PhD (University of Arizona), and Tom Pyszczynski (Colorado University at Colorado Springs).
- 23 “Products - Data Briefs - Number 241 - April 2016.” Public Health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db241.htm>.
- 24 Exceptions include the small number of those who will suffer from brain injury, brain processing difficulties, and psychopathology
- 25 Diamond, Jared. in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton. 2005. Diamond’s fascinating and revolutionary examination of the evolution of societies provides a rich foundation for understanding power dynamics.
- 26 The concept of “sacred” and “profane” violence comes from René Girard, the French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science who retired from Stanford University in 1995.
- 27 A widely accepted concept developed by Stephen Karpman, MD. The drama triangle is a key notion in transactional analysis.
- 28 “The Marshall Plan - George C. Marshall.” The George C. Marshall Foundation (blog). Accessed March 5, 2018. <http://marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/>.
- 29 Aldana, John. “After Action Report.” Olympia, Washington: The Washington State Department of Corrections, 2006.
- 30 Shackle, Samira. 2018. “Could Treating Violent Crime like a Disease Stop It from Spreading?” Economics. *World Economic Forum*. July 25, 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/violent-crime-is-like-infectious-disease-and-we-know-how-to-stop-it-spreading/>.
- 31 “What Is A Computer Virus?” n.d. Technology. Norton. Accessed December 5, 2018. <https://us.norton.com/internetsecurity-malware-what-is-a-computer-virus.html>.
- 32 Sterbenz, Christina. “Why Norway’s Prison System Is so Successful.” News. *Business Insider*, December 11, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-norways-prison-system-is-so-successful-2014-12>.
- 33 *Ibid*.
- 34 Ash, Lucy. “The Dutch Prison Crisis: A Shortage of Prisoners.” *BBC News*, November 10, 2016, sec. Magazine. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37904263>.