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# Violence, attachment styles and Kierkegaard

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**The purpose of this paper is to consider potential causes of violence behaviour by bringing together a disparate array of theorists. Violence is considered, specifically, in light of psychological literature dealing with attachment styles. In a nutshell, how our relations with early caregivers shapes our personality. Some well-known developmental theorists, namely, Piaget and Vygotsky are touched upon; as well as Maslow's hierarchy of needs; followed by an existential approach of Kierkegaard. General comments on both the negative and positive role of violence in human development are drawn out.**

**Key words:** Kierkegaard, violence, moral development.

## INTRODUCTION

*War and peace are threads that run through all of life, from the cradle to the grave' from the seed to the compost heap. Everything we do reflects tensions between conflict and cooperation –C. Tudge, The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees are, How They Live and Why They Matter (2005, p. 319)*

The English word *violence* comes from the Latin word *violare,* meaning force. We experience violence from a variety of sources: from others, nature and even ourselves (example, when we harm ourselves)—usually the idea involves harm. In what follows, idea is used interchangeably with aggression (also from a Latin word, *aggredi*, meaning to attack) and consistent with its commonplace taxonomy of its varieties (instrumental, hostile, overt, or relational aggression (Woolfolk et al., 2010). So aggression often leads to harm. This work aims is to develop an account of the role our entanglements with violence play within the framework of a Kierkegaardian theory of human development.

In the first section, attachment theorists' possible explanations of the roots of violence are discussed. Second and third, some well-known developmental theorists, namely, Piaget (1965, 1970, 1972, 1985) and

Vygotsky (1978), are touched upon; followed by an existential approach of Kierkegaard. Finally, the role of violence in human development is discussed more broadly.

## ATTACHMENT THEORISTS: THE EARLY YEARS OF LIFE

Attachment theorists provide an account of how our early relationships, namely with a primary caregiver shape our self-perception and behaviour towards others for years to come. Finney (2004) remarked on three personality types: *The anxious* have had no adequate attachment figures leading to ambivalence; or *the avoidant*, who because of experiences like neglect attempt to survive without love and support altogether.

The anxious and avoidant have learned to be weary of trusting others. Conversely, *the secure* have had an attachment figure that provided a safe, secure, and stable environment—providing a base to take chances negotiating relationships, and to explore the world.

Feeney identified four infant attachment dimensions, which she used to further analyze relationship dynamics:

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the ability to provide a distressed partner with physical and psychological accessibility (proximity); notice and interpret partner's feelings (sensitivity); support partner's own efforts (cooperative); and over involvement in partner's problems (compulsive). As Feeney (2006) noted, when a female partner is distressed, a secure man will be more supportive. The avoidant, though compulsive in his support, will not be so as the partner's distress increases. Also, we interpret our partner's behaviour based on our attachment style. The less secure are more likely to interpret their behaviour in a negative way, that is, as an ego threat.

Parks et al. (2006) noted that poor childhood experiences with caregivers leads to high sensitivity, insecure attachment styles and low self-esteem. Experiencing abandonment leads us to become rejection sensitive. According to Parks et al. (2006), people with high rejection sensitivity further, attempt to found relationships based on appearances and to increase their concept of self-worth, which leads to the opposite of secure bonds.

They catalogued, in relationship to childhood experiences, different types of attachment styles. A *preoccupied/ anxious attachment style* is characterized by a conditional acceptance and rejection dynamic, whereby we are rendered highly dependent, display excessive closeness, compulsive, inconsistent and controlling; a *fearful attachment style* is discussed in terms of a childhood characterized by a punitive upbringing, where we perceive ourselves as unlovable; finally a *dismissive attachment style* is typified by neglect, whereby we feel we must rely upon ourselves alone. According to Parks et al. (2006), low self-esteem leads to distrust of partners and perceiving fewer good qualities in them. Being self-focused, the emotionally needy miss the relationship. Parks et al. (2006) assumed a view of human nature, whereby without love, we develop copying mechanisms, namely, become self-focused, which interferes with interpersonal relations, perhaps leading to violence.

Fitzsimons (2006) elaborated the notion of instrumentality; that is, we view objects and people in relation to our goals. According to Fitzsomons, there are two types of people: (1) the independent, who evaluates others as a means to our ends, and (2), the relational, where there is a stronger effect in both directions—that is, goals and interpersonal relations shape each other. Part of what we desire involves the needs of others. For Rawn and Vohs (2006), self-control is essential for successful interpersonal relationships. The moral is that when certain attachment needs are not met, early on, we have a harder time maintaining interpersonal relationships—the key barometer of mental health.

## PIAGET, VYGOTSKY AND LEARNING TO GET ALONG

Looking at self-regulation through the lens of educational theorists adds detail to attachment theorists account by giving us a glimpse of the mechanisms involved in child development. Piaget (1965) has dedicated a book to human relationships, *The Moral Development of the Child* (1965), which is considered next.

Piaget has articulated how we acquire physical laws in terms of regularity of experiences, which he extended to morality. He said, "Duty is nothing more than acceptance of commands received from without" (1965). We follow rules, which we internalize as our own. Yet, he also thought mutual respect is the basis of intellectual and moral autonomy. He distinguished coercion (unilateral respect) from cooperation (mutual respect). As he put it, "For moral autonomy appears when the mind regards as necessary an idea that is independent of all external pressures" (1965). He went on, "Now, apart from our relations to other people, there can be no moral necessity" (1965).

Autonomy therefore appears only with reciprocity, when mutual respect is strong enough the individual feels from within the desire to treat others as he himself would wish to be treated (Piaget, 1965).

Both anthropologically and psychologically, according to Piaget, we move from an ethics of duty, to one of the good. He distinguished primitive (collective) from advanced (individualistic) societies, too. In psychological development he observed three great phases:

1. Justice is subordinate to adult authority, 7 to 8 years of age
2. Progressive equalitarianism; 8 to 11 years of age
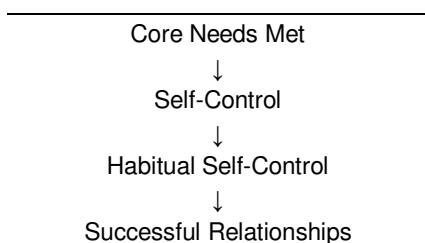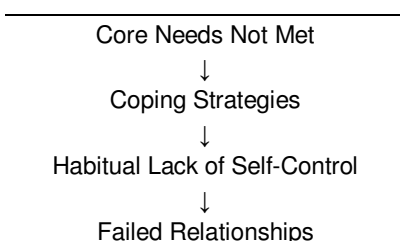3. Purely equalitarian justice is tampered with considerations for equality; 11 to 12 years of age.

For him, true justice depends on free consent. Commenting on the primitive mode, where coercion figured highly, Piaget wrote:

The kernel of these beliefs [that hold society together] is the feeling of the sacred, the source of all morality and religion. Whatever offends against these powerful feelings is crime, and all crime is 'sacrilege' (1965).

The child respects authority, but the adult, and modern dweller, according to Piaget, is able to relate to the other with mutual respect, which "provokes a spontaneous longing". Further, according to Piaget, cooperation, as the basis of mature morals, is consistent with the freedom required to search for the truth. So we thus enter into a social contract that restricts intra-species violence.

Also, Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis upon the social dimension of learning, where interpersonal engagements provide the scaffolding for learning also helps us understand the development of moral behaviour.

A core concept of Vygotsky is the idea of the zone of proximal development, the place we can master as task with guidance. Further, Lave and Wenger (1991), writing about how we learn mathematics, coined the term

**Table 1.** The optimistic scenario.

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Core Needs Met
↓
Self-Control
↓
Habitual Self-Control
↓
Successful Relationships
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**Table 2.** The pessimistic scenario.

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Core Needs Not Met
↓
Coping Strategies
↓
Habitual Lack of Self-Control
↓
Failed Relationships
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"legitimate peripheral participation", which is the idea that mastery involves full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. The idea of peripheral partici-pation allows us to elaborate Vygotsky's ZPD, which Lave and Wenger (1991) noted has been discussed along a continuum from conservative to radical:

1. Mastery (Woolfolk et al., 2010)
2. Entry into a society (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1993)
3. Historical change of bodies of knowledge via Luria (1976) (del Río and Alvarez, 1995; Cole, 1993; Cole and Engeström, 1997)

Lave's and Wenger's aim is to emphasize the interdepen-dence of: agents, the world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowledge-hence, being more radical than simply thinking about learning as mastery.

Legitimacy invokes "belonging," which is apparent when we consider the alternative: illegitimate action is to be frowned upon by the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Thus, legitimate periphery concerns the social structures involving power relations. We imitate, role play, and in the end, take on the position of an ethical human being. For Vygotsky, morality is a matter of conforming ourselves to the mores of a society; also, like Piaget, indexed to a concept of human nature. We internalize morals, and it is reasonable to think, Vygotsky, and his progeny, would agree with Piaget that cooperation allows for development of empathy and respect. The avoidance of violence to achieve our own ends is, according to Piaget and Vygotsky, then, first stipulated from without and then internalized. To avoid violence, we have to restrain our needs.

## MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Maslow (1970) identified four higher-order needs, name-ly, knowing, understanding, aesthetic appreciation and self-actualization; and five lower-order needs, namely, survival, safety, belongingness, love and esteem, which are also called deficiency needs because when they are satisfied, the motivation to fulfill them decreases. The fulfillment of higher-order needs, like aesthetic appre-ciation, we can infer, could lead to a greater need of satiation of this type.

As we might expect, higher-order needs rest on the foundation of lower-order ones. Maslow encapsulated the basic idea of the hierarchy of needs in the slogan, "without bread we cannot have ideas." We cannot easily worry about our identity if we are starving. Conversely, once our core needs have been met, we could jettison even our desire to survive out of say patriotism, making our higher-order need for self-actualization a priority over our very lives.

According to Maslow, when basic needs are frustrated, we engage in coping mechanisms, of which neurosis is one outcome. It is at least reasonable to think that when core needs are met, we are more likely able to exercise self-control, and hence have successful relationships. To get a sense of the big picture, consider two simplistic scenarios of how the fulfillment of core needs could interact with our ability to control ourselves (Tables 1 and 2).

On this model, when core needs are not met, engaging in coping strategies, cognitive resources are depleted. That is, stress makes it more difficult to exercise self-control. Of course, our behaviour is also governed by threats of external punishment, that is, control from with-out, which may force us to self-regulate.

In Maslow's model, if core needs are not met, we have fewer cognitive resources to engage in self-control, hence, these types of stressors can act as triggers of behaviour that does not take into account other's needs (Winkielman et al., 2008). That is, when core needs are not met, we seek out coping strategies, no matter how dangerous, and finally unsuccessful they may be. In a different context, as Berthoz et al. (2005), in *NeuoImage,* suggested welfare is a core need.

Maslow's (1970) and Bandura's (1997) ideas about the motivation for aggression have been explored by Mason's and Blankenship's (1987) research, of the Department of Psychology, Oakland University, who considered the effects of stress on intimate relationships.

Their research has been rich in attempting to consider the role of the social context, which has been discussed by Kagan (1984), a Harvard child psychologist. In *The Nature of the Child* he argued that it is not what happens to us, but how we perceive it that counts. How love and support is configured is partly shaped by the socio-

cultural context, in addition to biology. That is to say, the same events may lead us to become anxious and avoidant in one society, and secure in another; violent in one, and not another.  So, propensity towards aggression, when stressed, is likely dependent upon our attachment styles, frustration of core needs, our self-concept and the socio-cultural context.

## KIERKEGAARD AND THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN BECOMING A PERSON

Kierkegaard was concerned with the teleological suspension of the ethical—when we have to do God's will, no matter how violent—event if aggression was not his primary focus as it is commonly understood—someone hurting other persons. Kierkegaard explicitly discussed aggression when he dwelt on the stories of Abraham (who is asked by God to kill his son) and Job (who experience extreme loss as a test of faith) from the Old Testament.

Kierkegaard's entire philosophy is driven by a psychological insight that we find in many thinkers expressed in a variety of ways: a pleasure principle of sorts. We have desires that we seek to fulfill, like the desire to belong. So far, we have already seen that for Maslow, the frustration of needs can lead to the lack of self-control, and this finds its own unique expression in Kierkegaard's thinking.

For Kierkegaard, the first way to meet our needs is that of the seducer. The seducer, we can say, is engaged in a type of violence, at least deception and egoism. He cares for himself above all else, and perhaps to the exclusion of the well-being of others. The type and level of his violence, of course, may vary from the banal to the more extreme, like homicide. Yet, according to Kierkegaard, the problem is that the pleasures the seducer tastes are transient.

In order to escape the misery that is foisted upon us by change (often a negative stressor, in psychological terms), we ought to decide, according to the Kierkegaardian model, to commit to something that takes ups beyond the here and now. At the second stage of development we have the ethical ideal typified, for Kierkegaard, by the institution of marriage. Here, we commit to an idea, and we stick to it even when it seems inconvenient to do so. Using our neo-cortex, we are still linking means to ends, but now stretched out over a longer period of time, that of our entire lives.

Yet as we know, Kierkegaard held that ethical behaviour could not find its foundation in noble commitment alone. Because all of life, after all, is transient—and a great deal of it is driven by the desire to seek pleasure; one problem is solved, overcoming the desire to satisfy immediate fancies, only to be replaced by another, the need to fulfill long-term pleasures.  So, according to him, we needed to have a relationship with Divinity to become what we are intended to be. Through an act of submission, giving of ourselves to God, Kierkegaard thought we truly become ourselves and are equipped for ethical behaviour. We become secure, attached to that one thing, Divinity that anchors us on a sea of change—allowing us to be good to other people (and perhaps other sentient beings or things).

The author's purpose is not to agree or disagree with Kierkegaard's solution to the human predicament, which it is worthwhile to make plain: we are self-aware and need to find meaning in our actions. And though we can justify why we ate dinner, how do we explain the reason of all our strivings, involving us as they sometimes do, in violence, either as perpetrators or victims? We are prompted to ask (as Arjuna and Job asked): what is the point of it all? Why should we participate? Or as Camus famously put matters, the fundamental philosophical question is suicide.

Obviously, a great many forces, biological and social, are intertwined together those keep us keeping on. That is why the question of suicide seems so out-of-touch with everyday life. Some of what we learn from the neurosciences confirm (or at least is consistent with) and can be used to elaborate the Kiergaardian picture drawn elsewhere (Gupta, 2005). In a nutshell, the author contends that how we interact with others is shaped by our feelings of belonging—it is a core human pleasure.

## FINAL REMARKS: VIOLENCE AND BECOMING

In Chapter 1 of the *Bhagavad Gita,* an important book from Hindus culled from the much longer *Mahabharata,* Arjuna is on the battlefield and laments the prospect of having to kill his enemies, many of whom are relatives (1.28, 1.32, 1.34-35). Krishna advises Arjuna to fight, to do his duty (2.18, 2.37). Coming to terms with our own acts of violence, on the battlefield of life, is one of the hardest things we have to do, because we are endowed, through biology and circumstance, with what Gazzaniga (2009) has called "ethical brains."

Of course, devotees will often contend that the tales of violence are metaphoric. Arjuna is on the "battlefield of life" (not a real battlefield, which has been contested by Doniger (2010); similarly, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we can expect some to argue that the story of Abraham is not about killing as such, but faith.

How self-regulation relates to violence is not straightforward; as pointed out earlier, forethought could be used to both refrain from and exercise violence. Yet to act appropriately, we have reason to believe from the work of attachment theorists and Kierkegaard among others depends on being secure. After all, we need to both be able to restrain ourselves from violence, and have the courage to engage in it at other times. Notice, if we have an anxious and avoidant personality, it stands to reason, we are more likely to lack self-regulatory abilities required not to be prone to pent up outbursts of aggression, or, conversely, flee from difficult situations.

And it is edifying to note that Kierkegaard's own experiences with loss predisposed him to be an anxious and avoidant personality, who consequently struggled to find security and lasting human bonds, the most famous being with Regina Olsen. In fact, he has known to have said, "If I had faith, I would have married Regina." Of course, we are better off for his failing in that we have the benefit of his massive literary production, though it is questionable if he understands that marriage (not taking that leap of faith) is essentially about pleasure, its regulation and satiation.

Yet if we are to learn from him (after all, as Ray Monk said in a different context, "Biographies are studies in human nature"), we need to revaluate the importance of human relations in our lives—and indeed, what sort of person do we want to be? What sort of lives do we want to live?—all of which should prompt us to think about the role of being optimistic, caring—and violent—in the good life. We are already inclined, if not psychopathic, to think about how much violence we should accept and when.

If Pinker's (2011) is right, violence has been going down in human history. As counter intuitive as his thesis sounds, there are some broad contours that buoy his argument up. We have set up social mechanisms to resolve conflict between ourselves, and between states. We have set limitations on violence in both cases, and even extended our concerns to the environment and animals. And simply statistically he is probably right—that violence has been decreasing in human history—since one death out of a hundred is ten percent; whereas ten thousand deaths, from a population of a ten million is only one percent.  With a bigger human population than in years gone by, we can conclude that the prevalence of violence has shrunk. Also, we have done a much better job of meeting people's basic needs, making it less likely for people to go out either individually or collectively and go mad—though that does happen, too.

None of Pinker's argument, regardless if we agree with them or not, likely allow us to jettison altogether existential violence any time soon, namely, harm we do by virtue of being alive. But we have reason to think we can reduce violence when our core needs are met, even though we do have social desires, among others, that also pull us into fratricidal frays.  What counts as our duty is not fixed as are the stars, but changing like our perceptions of the moon. But it is hard not to think we are not headed somewhere. There must be a North Star. The path to peace, both in ontogenetic and phylogenic time, has been bloody, but hopefully we will find our own Garden of Eden.

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