

Why is cruelty enjoyable, and what are the implications for violence prevention?

A recent article in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, published by Cambridge University Press, discusses how and why cruelty is both enjoyable and rewarding – for humans as well as other animals.

Cruelty is the deliberate infliction of physical or psychological pain on other living creatures, sometimes indifferently, but often with delight. Although we often turn a blind eye to this feature of our motivational makeup, author Victor Nell's review of entertainments and cultural practices from early history to present cinema leave little doubt that cruelty, in fact enjoyment of cruelty, is an overwhelming presence in the world.

Nell suggests several causes, and presents much empirical evidence, for cruelty's rewarding nature – the most arresting is the description of the motivational and physiological state required for the dangerous and gory business of large-animal predation that carnivores and primates have separately evolved.

Chase, battle, and the death of prey must be intrinsically exciting and rewarding to overcome the high probability of exhaustion and injury large animal capture requires. He follows on with the implications of this analysis for violence prevention.

In the Open Peer Commentary tradition of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, twenty-five scholars, including anthropologists, developmental psychologists and sociologists, respond to this challenging and controversial proposal.

Nell's multidisciplinary, multinational commentators respond strongly, both positively and negatively, about multiple aspects of Nell's thesis, including the possibility of cruelty in animals, towards animals, in children, in men versus women, and most strongly about the inevitability of cruelty as an evolutionary legacy in humans. Highlights include:

Al Bandura, from the Department of Psychology at Stanford University: "Nell greatly exaggerates the prevalence of human cruelty. There exist...even rapid transformations of warring societies into peaceful ones."

Sebastian Kraemer, from the Child and Family Psychiatric Service in the UK: "This is a brilliant paper, crossing many learned boundaries...Though we cannot know what babies think, they clearly experience extremes of emotion from rage to bliss."

Jaak Panksepp, from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Washington State University: "As William James (1890) reflected 'we, the lineal representatives of the successful enactors of one scene of slaughter after another, whatever more pacific virtues we may also possess, still carry about with us...smoldering and sinister traits of character by which they lived through those many massacres.' Nell's gripping analysis may provide scientific insight into such troublesome, value-laden conceptual complexities."

Richard Schuster, from the Department of Psychology at the University of Haifa in Israel: “(is it likely) that any given individual is fully capable of the kinds of extreme cruelty described in the target article(?). Some people are clearly cruel, even to their own kin. But the article implies that the human potential for cruelty lies dormant in all of us, and has not changed much over the millennia. Thus, the Caligulas, Saddam Hussein and the Abu Ghraib prison guards would be the rule, and not the exception. But is this a valid claim?”

Nell’s article, complete with related commentaries, is now available to all at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?jid=BBS&volumeId=29&issueId=03>

Behavioral and Brain Sciences is the internationally renowned journal with the innovative format known as Open Peer Commentary. Particularly significant and controversial pieces of work are published from researchers in any area of psychology, neuroscience, behavioral biology, or cognitive science, together with 10-25 commentaries on each article from specialists within and across these disciplines. The result is a unique forum for the critical discussion of the theoretical and empirical basis of research in behavioral and brain sciences.

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