

## Phase 2 - COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

**Week 9 Unit 2.6.** US and THEM II: Defining and dealing with Violence; The medicalization of deviance; Naming and Taming: "The power to give names and enforce definitions."

**Themes: Violence. Is it "In Our Genes?" (Likewise Poverty, Racism and Crime?) The blind alleys of biological determinism. Is it just "Human Nature?" Or is "human nature" just a useful social excuse for the otherwise inexcusable?**

See Bob Herbert, "A Flood Tide of Murder," New York Times, January 10, 2011, accessed March 11, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/opinion/11herbert.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/opinion/11herbert.html?_r=0).

And the murders continue – see the Wikipedia article on the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy\\_Hook\\_Elementary\\_School\\_shooting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandy_Hook_Elementary_School_shooting).

**FACILITATION:** Study Group #6

### ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW:

READ by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.6-1 [SA] Chapter 6

2.6-2 "Media Violence"

VIEW (PLAY) by yourself or with others then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.6-3 "Grand Theft Auto" video game

READ by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.6-4 "Sociobiology: The New Synthesis" Chapter 27.

VIEW by yourself or with others then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.6-5 *Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally?* (video viewing time 21 mins)

READ by yourself before and during the viewing! Then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.6-6 *Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally?* Transcript of video.

2.6-7 "From genesis to genocide: The meaning of human nature and the power of behavior control" Chapter 1, 5, 6

2.6-8 "Biology as a social weapon"

**ASSIGNMENT DETAILS:** THINK OVER by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

What determines (causes, creates, conditions, constrains) human behavior in social situations?

Is it nature or nurture? Is it "in our genes"? Or is it the product of the particulars of our lives, our social experiences?

Think about how you have been influenced by the conceptual and material atmosphere created by the worldviews, value systems, and lifestyles prevailing within the parental subsystems of your families of origin and extended social groups we belong to.

What is "biological determinism"?

Why does it matter?

(Because the way a problem is defined determines what will and what will not be done about it.).

By way of illustration, we focus on the colossal human social problem of violence.

For starters, consider the following statistics: (need to confirm accuracy of data and identify credible sources!)

Please see the section on “**What about TV and aggressive or violent behavior?**” from the University of Michigan Health System *YourChild* page at <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/tv.htm>

## 2.6 – 1 [SA] Chapter 6

In Aronson’s view, how is aggression best defined?

How much aggression is due to frustration?

What role does social learning play?

Are we living in the midst of an epidemic of domestic and international violence?

What chances do we have of reducing violence?

Does engaging in violent play (e.g. in virtual reality or in face-to-face competition) serve as a relief valve through which people's violent instincts can be effectively released, (channeled; discharged) thereby decreasing the likelihood that other, more socially destructive and violent outlets will have to be sought?

Distinguish between hostile and instrumental aggression

Define and evaluate the "catharsis" hypothesis

Identify possible underlying causes of aggression: neurochemical, biological, hormonal

How do alcohol and other "recreational" drugs influence social propensities toward aggressiveness?

Do pain and discomfort promote aggression?

How are aggression and frustration related??

How influential is social learning?

Can education help in reducing violence (strengthening alternative behaviors, learning to adopt different perspectives, building empathy toward others, etc.)?

## 2.6 – 2 American academy of pediatrics, Committee on public education. 2001. “Media Violence” *Pediatrics*. 108(5):1222-1226. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/108/5/1222>

The classic study pointing to increased aggressiveness following exposure to TV violence in children (The Effects of Observing Violence by L. Berkowitz) was published in *Scientific American* in 1964. The effects reported were both Since then, numerous authoritative inquiries have confirmed his clinically and statistically unambiguous basic findings and drawn additional attention to the problem. A well-documented but not very recent example is the November 2001 report of the Committee on Public Education of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Read this document with constructively critical eye. Cherrypick ideas that strike you as true and important.

## 2.6 – 3 “Grand theft auto,” Rockstar Games, Inc., accessed March 4, 2014, video game. <http://www.rockstargames.com/gta/>.

As you prepare to play the video game, try to assume the perspective of the proverbial human-like extraterrestrial who happens to come from the far-off planet Pacifica where people otherwise not very different from us (neurobiologically, psychologically and socioculturally speaking) are accustomed to living sustainably in relatively violence-free societies.

Pretend, further, that you have only just arrived on a mission to learn about conditions of human life on earth and that, based on what you are about to do and what you see on TV, you must shortly transmit a preliminary report describing your observations and conclusions, thus far, relating to the behavior of earthlings and how they think and feel and act and why they behave the way they do.

As it happens, you come upon a group of boys playing a popular video game predicated on the human/ecologically unsustainable idea that winners succeed in stealing, killing and otherwise destroying persons and property without getting caught or killed.

You join them in playing the game (Grand Theft Auto) and then file your report on the experience. (How many kids are playing this and other comparably violent video games? With what observable effects (if any) on their mental life and behavior; their social (including familial, recreational, educational, professional, vocational) relations?

Alternatively, imagine yourself at the scene of the shootings at the elementary school in Newtown CT late last year. What is going on? How can you explain it?

And here we come to a consideration of "biological determinism" the notion being put forth currently (e.g. by various "sociobiologists" and "evolutionary psychologists") according to which the root causes of human violence are "in our genes"?

**2.6 – 4 Wilson, Edward O. "Sociobiology: The new synthesis." (1975). Chapter 27.**

**2.6 – 5 "Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally," published by Document Associates Inc., New York, NY 1976, videorecording.**

**2.6 – 6 Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally transcript of the soundtrack.**

Sociobiology – READ The chapter about "human nature" from E. O Wilson's "Sociobiology"

VIEW the video and READ the transcript of the VIDEO (two channels of communication are better than one, and there is a lot happening to which you need to pay close attention.)

This film was made in the aftermath of the publication of Wilson's book. It presents a particularly garish and generally "hyped-up" one-sided version of the genetic/biological determinist argument. Bottom line and key take-home message: aggression and violence (among other behaviors are "in our genes".

Yet, if this be the case; and if we have no choice but to accept it, what are the social implications? (This seems a good place to remind you to take a critical approach to this and all of the other material you are encountering in this class.

What, then, does it make sense to believe about the root causes of social violence?

What evidence is there that we are genetically pre-programmed to transgenerationally pursue the survival of our "selfish genes" From a social policy perspective, what differences does it make how we choose to answer such questions? Where does the truth lie? By one contemporary formulation, truth is a relationship of correspondence between persons and statements and states of affairs. Thus when the state of affairs described by a particular statement or set of statements demonstrably corresponds to the state of affairs actually observed or observable by persons comparably situated in the pertinent context, we may say of the relevant statement(s) that it is (they are) true.

**2.6 – 7 Chorover, Stephan L. "From genesis to genocide: The meaning of human nature and the power of behavior control." (1979). Chapters 1, 5, and 7.**

**2.6 – 8 Lewontin, Richard C., Arthur J. Schwartz, Val Woodward, Robin Miller Jacoby, and Pauline B. Bart. "Biology as a Social Weapon." Minneapolis: Burgess (1977).**

By a hypothesis easily confirmed by direct observation, human mental life (thinking/feeling) is systematically related to behavior (doing; responding; speaking/not speaking; etc).

In attempting to account for our actions, we need to distinguish between (1) questions about the truth/falsity (correspondence/noncorrespondence) of propositions pertaining to persons, situations, states-of-affairs, etc. and (2) questions about the beliefs and values (right or wrong) that determine our actions. Alas, we sometimes assert what we do not know and sometimes do not know what we assert. In any case, what we think and feel influences how we act and what we say.

For example, suppose we see people all around us behaving in greedy, aggressive, competitive, violent and narrowly short-sighted, self-seeking ways. Some would say that "it only goes to show" that people are greedy, aggressive, competitive, violent and self-seeking "by nature". The latter is, of course, just one example of a more general "human nature" type of argument. (Recall "Aronson's first law".)

Again we ask: What is "human nature"? In the course of living and learning, each of us develops our own "theory of human nature" – our own way of thinking about "what people are basically like", independent of the particulars of their lives and experiences.

What is your own "theory of human nature"? Describe your view of what people are "really like" and why. To what extent do notable "genetically determined" differences of biological origin (sex, skin color, eye color, etc.) define "human nature"?

What is usually meant by the phrase "you can't change human nature"?

If the meaning of "human nature" is inferable from observing instances of human behavior in social contexts, and if the biological determinants of human mental life and behavior are immutably fixed and unchangeable, from one generation to the next, what conclusions follow? And what about the prospects for acceptance of proposals to enact regulations to control the prevalence of so much selfish and self-seeking, self-promoting greedy, aggressive, competitive, and violent behavior.

What is "biological determinism"? Consider this week's readings and videos: can you find in them a clear example of the use of a biological determinist ("that's human nature") argument as a "social excuse"?

What are "self-fulfilling prophecies"? How do they work in the case of biological determinist arguments? Give some examples.

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