

Why are people violent?

1. *They are Evil*

See Myra Hindley and other high profile cases. A (quasi-) religious explanation and historically dominant idea in the media.

A circular explanation (Why did he do it? Because he is evil? How do you know he is evil? Because he did what he did.)

2. *They are Ill*

Faulty genes, brains, brain bio-chemicals, etc. A dominant idea amongst drug companies, conservatives and racists.

There is poor research support for any of these theories (e.g. XYY man).

A circular explanation.

3. *Evolutionary explanations*

Nature-nurture debate.

Rousseau's noble savage vs. Freud's death instinct (Thanatos).

Relates male violence to testosterone/hormones.

Argued that there are evolutionary advantages to being violent so it has become a heritable trait.

Pack animals such as chimpanzees have hierarchies and individuals exert dominance over others, sometimes violently.

But bonobos do not. Does not seem a comprehensive explanation of all violence.

4. *Catharsis*

Popular idea, and people do sometimes report 'feeling better' after expressing anger aggressively or violently, but research does not support this. Instead the research indicates that people are more likely to be aggressive/violent after recently being violent than if they have not recently been involved in aggression/violence.

5. *Frustration-Aggression*

e.g. car journeys where people are delayed.

Some experimental support in social psychology literature, in childhood and adulthood.

6. *Effects of violent/abusive childhood*

e.g. by a person modelling on their violent parent; learning strategies for dominance and control; transference (expecting others to be violent like their parent and hitting out first); unconscious attempts to draw attention to their own suffering, self-loathing projected onto others; a wish to give others a taste of own experiences.

Good research support. Challenges the splitting of people into victims or perpetrators. Most victims of abuse do not abuse others, but most abusers have been abused.

7. *Violence rewarded*

e.g. Detoxifies the feelings of pent up aggression; achieves benefits (people get what they want/their own way, thus making them more likely to be violent in similar circumstances in the future).

8. *Revenge*

Violence induces shame and anger in victims that lead them to exact revenge and cycles of violence.

9. Ideologies

Certain ideologies legitimate violence, and make it more likely to occur: “It’s ok to smack children, it’s the only way they will learn.” “A beaten wife makes the soup taste better.”

10. Obedience

Hannah Arendt: ‘The banality of evil’. Good research support (e.g. Milgram experiment).

11. Group membership

Group effects e.g. scapegoating (of individuals or other groups). Gang cultures e.g. to fit in with group norms and be accepted a person becomes as violent as violent other members or to model themselves on a high status, violent member of the group).

12. Only form of power

It has been argued that some people have virtually all means of exerting power/influence over others stripped away and can only exert power physically.

13. Social roles

See Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment: certain roles lead people to be more likely to act violently.

14. Historical and wider cultural effects

Until recently, Britain needed large numbers of people it could conscript into an army and who would kill people, therefore there has not been an incentive to reduce violence (only stop people being violent to the people in power).

Economic cycle, rates of poverty and high inequality in wealth and income have been shown to be correlated with crime and violence.

Effects of T.V., music, etc – less research support but often referred to in the media after high profile cases.

Why do you think people are violent?

Why are men more likely to be violent than women?

What increases the likelihood of someone being violent and what might reduce it?

What societal changes would you like to see happen to reduce violence?

What can you do in your local community?