

## Can Anthropologists Understand Violence?

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Anthropology has been examining cultures at a distance since the nineteenth century when missionary accounts and the memoirs of explorers and travelers were collected by colonial officials. Violence, however, has existed since before anthropology as a discipline. Many believe that violence is inherent in humans. Alok Chantia writes about violence:

The concept that humanity has a violent and evil core is widespread; it is one of the oldest and most resilient myths about human nature. From historical and philosophical beliefs to current popular and scientific beliefs, the view that a savage and aggressive beast is a central part of our nature permeates public and academic perceptions.

One of the first generation of German sociologists Georg Simmel published *Sociology: Investigations on the Forms of Sociation* over one hundred years ago. His work was the first to question the conventional thinking about violence. Conventional thinking looked at violence as being a result of evolutionary selection. As a result, most anthropologists looked at violence this way, believing that violence was as a result of evolution.

Schmidt and Schroeder give us further insight into the way anthropologists looked at violence, writing in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, "From the evolutionist perspective, war was something that had developed along with the rest of the cultural inventory from unregulated primordial aggressiveness 'in the depths of mankind' to modern, mechanized warfare as described by Clausewitz." Schmidt and Schroeder state that, Georg Simmel looks at violence as a synchronous event that is a relationship between individuals and groups that serves a specific end. With this new approach Simmel basically created the modern study of violence by the anthropological community.

Simmel's approach views violence as social actions relative to the interests and determination of the participants. Anthropologists are not usually able to observe violence as it happens and generally obtain their information from records that maybe decades or centuries old. This can present a problem for the anthropologist as the information may not be accurate. Phillip Walker asks, "What have anthropologists contributed to our understanding of the causes and cultural correlates of violence?" According to Ferguson, few anthropologists have focused on violence in spite of its economic and social importance. As Keeley points out:

The contribution of anthropologists to our understanding of the causes of violent conflict in earlier, nonindustrialized societies (an area of great theoretical significance that we are ideally positioned to explore) is miniscule in comparison to the vast literature historians and sociologists have generated in their explorations of warfare and violence in modern industrialized societies.

Walker and others believe that this lack of attention by anthropologists is unfortunate as the anthropologist's perspective could provide insight into the complicated and related factors that shape the propensities toward violence. Given the lack of attention violence has received by the anthropology community, an obvious question arises: Can anthropologists understand

violence? The aim of this paper is to answer that question. First, the definition of violence is reviewed and then some tools available to the anthropologists are examined.

The anthropology community struggles with the question of whether the discipline can or should be categorized as a science. Even those who are very scientific realize that the qualitative and interpretive study of ethnographic information is an important part of research into violence. Part of understanding people involves looking for the meaning in what is done and what is said. The difference between simple observation and understanding the subtle meaning of the action is what Robben calls "thin description versus thick description." Ethnography, he concludes, is thick description. This is also what is needed for any broader, more abstract comparative study of violence in anthropology.

Some in anthropology have resisted analyzing violence committed in our own society. Krohn-Hansen writes:

Without informed perspectives, anthropology will never effectively counter media and popular commentary that stresses only the 'primitive' or tribal nature of many of these conflicts. Such pseudo-anthropological attempts at explanation recapitulate colonial ideas about the inherent savagery of the non-Western world and thus offer no hope for better understanding.

Anthropology has largely looked at the beginning of war, the political and economic factors of small conflicts and the encounters between tribal and colonial militaries. Violence has been studied and theories have been formulated as it pertains to ritual or political power. Anthropological analysis of state violence, death squads and post-colonial conflicts offers the field new and more comprehensive opportunities for investigation. For example, Christopher R. Browning offers a look at state violence conducted by death squads in Poland during World War II. He describes how some of the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could not bring themselves to shoot Jews while others performed the task with pleasure.

Anthropological questioning about violence can be guided by some basic themes. One such theme is *cultural relativism*. Dictionary.com defines *cultural relativism* as:

The concept that the importance of a particular cultural idea varies from one society or societal subgroup to another, the view that ethical and moral standards are relative to what a particular society or culture believes to be good/bad, right/wrong.

This theme is often confused with the idea that all customs are equally practical and moral. The anthropologist tries to understand why certain customs and practices are important to certain people and why those customs and practices work within those cultures. Such practices, for example, cannibalism in Borneo or female circumcision among Africans, are not always acceptable in western society but the understanding of them can be helpful in understanding violence. In Africa, for example, female genital cutting is a practice that symbolizes a girl's transition from childhood to adulthood. In Borneo, cannibalism was a display of manhood. The discussion among anthropologists about human rites versus cultural rights has a long history. The understanding of these rites and rituals gives the anthropologist more perspective in the study of violence.

Perhaps anthropology's greatest contribution to the understanding of human nature comes from the analysis of and the explanation of the concept of culture. In his *Primitive Culture*, Edward Burnett Tylor introduced the term *culture* into his new science of humanity, which he called *anthropology*. According to Robben, Tylor's definition is still accepted: "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Many anthropologists do not want to include individual behavior, seeing culture as the pattern for behavior. This position does not explain the disparity among people within a culture and account for their actions. The analysis of culture as a contributing factor in violence is an important part of explaining actions. Robben writes:

Anthropologists do not necessarily defend freedom of the will; a more typical argument is that while humans may be deeply constrained, culture, which is highly symbolic and essentially arbitrary, is as strong a determining influence on the individual as biology. Nevertheless, interest in biological influences has grown among anthropologists who are exploring a range of approaches from gene-culture co-evolution and dual inheritance to [the study of memes and their social and cultural effects].

Another basic theme available to the anthropologist is *holism*. This is the effort to understand all aspects of what it is to be human and how those aspects fit together. With this theme, the anthropologist is concerned with, for example, not just the fact that Jews were murdered by the Reserve Police Battalion 101, but why and how the murders relate to political and societal considerations. Unlike specialized fields such as economics, anthropology can explore the full range of what a human is all about. Using *holism*, an understanding of political leadership and the types of states can help understand differences and their impact on the propensity for violence. For example, when the attacks on women by Indian men produce death and injury, the anthropologist needs to look at the men as not the only abusers. There are different forms of violence: physical violence, psychological violence and emotional violence. Rather than looking at just the men who committed the acts, the anthropologist should look at the cultural customs, police attitudes and family attitudes. By evaluating all these and more factors, a clearer picture of the causes of violence can emerge.

Ferguson explains, "...knowing as much as possible about the full range of human customs can be helpful in answering questions such as "What is economy?" "What is religion?" and "What is art?" as well as corollary questions such as "In what sense is religion a part of what it means to be human?" This can also be applied to the understanding of violence.

There is an opposing theme of study that has been used by some anthropologist. This perspective has been called *particularistic*. Dictionary.com defines *particularistic* as, "exclusive attention or devotion to one's own particular interests, party, etc." This theme states that culture is not integrated and comparing cultures is more misleading than helpful. Krohn-Hansen proposes, "There is also value in balancing holism and high-level comparisons with an emphasis on that which is unique about each known people." From the time of Georg Simmel to today, the notion of violence for the anthropologist has come from the biological concept of competition. "In its basic form," Ferguson explains, "Competition occurs when two or more

individuals, populations, or species simultaneously use a resource that is actually or potentially limiting. Violence results from competition neither automatically nor inevitably." There exists ample evidence from biological anthropology that many non-violent approaches to conflict resolution exist. Violence is seldom culturally bound that it cannot be examined and compared. According to Ferguson, there exists a long tradition of linking collective violence types with societal types and placing them on an evolutionary scale.

When the anthropologist looks at violence by groups, it is clear that groups do not act at random but follow a model of action appropriate to their culture. War, for example, is justified and legitimized to be morally imperative. Violence is a means of solving disagreements over material things and claims of groups to truth, with all of the economic and social impacts that follow. Violence is conducted by humans for specific and concrete reason. The anthropologist must provide a clear description of the large and small factors that explain the action. According to Walker, the anthropologist should pay attention to the characteristics of violence. Robben describes three factors that must be considered:

Conflict – the socio-economic contradictions at the base of intergroup competition.

Confrontation – the perception of these causes by the parties involved as relevant, creating an antagonistic relationship.

Legitimation – the official sanctioning of violence as the legitimate course of action through the imagining of violent scenarios from the past and their social representation.

The anthropologist must also question the timing and framing of the violent act and what end means what expected.

According to Schmidt and Schroeder, there are three main approaches used by anthropologists today. The first is the "operational approach." It focuses on the etics of aggression, in particular on the quantifiable substance and political reason of conflict. This approach links violence to human nature and to the concepts of social adaptation to material conditions. This approach aims to clarify violence by comparing structural situations as things that cause historical conditions. The second approach is the "cognitive approach." This approach focuses on the emics of the cultural structure of war in society. This approach is the most widely used by the anthropologist to explain violence. This approach presents violence as a representation of cultural values and constructed by culture. It views violence as dependent on its cultural connotation and its form. The third main approach used by anthropologists today is the "experiential approach." This approach looks at violence as not being confined to group conflicts but based on the individual choice, not necessarily in war. Violence, in this approach, is dependent on individual subjectivity and evolves based on a person's perception of a given situation.

In the early days of anthropology, the search for human universals has become more acceptable since Donald Brown published *Human Universals* in 1991. Brown writes about many human traits that are universal. Even the notion that cultures can be very different but share some universal ideas can now be examined. The issue has become important to the field the anthropologist looks at individualism, gender, economic status and individual and group philosophies. All of these factors help in the understanding of violence.

One lesson learned by anthropologists is one of human equality. As our history is examined, we see evidence of similar patterns of behavior. Humans are capable of kindness and of extreme cruelty. Walker writes:

The search for an earlier, less-violent way to organize our social affairs has been fruitless. All the evidence suggests that peaceful periods have always been punctuated by episodes of warfare and violence. As far as we know, there are no forms of social organization, modes of production, or environmental settings that remain free from interpersonal violence for long.

Understanding the many differences of behavior and the propensity for violence by humans presents the challenge for the anthropologist.

## CONCLUSION

Violence and war seem to be routine today. We are often oblivious to the repetition and the numbers of deaths associated with violence. Scholars have tried to understand human being's propensity for violence. Anthropologists and others have analyzed wars, pogroms and mass murder for years trying to make correlations between cultural differences and individual actions.

It would seem that our understanding of violence has increased. Yet as our understanding of the factors contributing to violence grew, the intensity of violence also grew. In order to fully understand the complexity of violence, the fundamental questions about human nature must be answered.

The discipline of anthropology studies humans in the past and in the present. The anthropologist strives to understand the complexity of cultures throughout human history, drawing from other sciences. A major concern of anthropologists is use of knowledge to solve human problems. Today, the anthropologist has many tools available to assist with the analysis of human problems.

Simmel gave anthropologists a new way to think about the causes of violence. Even with this new approach, many in the field were slow changing from the views of the evolutionists. Many now see the understanding of the concept of culture as important as an understanding on the individual's propensity for violence. As the characteristics of violence are analyzed and the expected result of the violence determined, a better understanding of the act will be determined. Perhaps the anthropologist is in the best position to understand violence.

Anthropologists have a great deal to contribute to the understanding of violence. People around the world are demanding freedom from violence and the anthropologist's familiarity with the small communities gives them the ability to help bring a sharper understanding of the root causes of violence. They understand cultural meanings, forms of political organizations and the kind of methods that exist at the local level. Anthropologists can bring to the study of violence a better understanding of how changes occur in society and how those changes affect violent actions.

For the anthropologist, what is involved is not just the study of humanity but the reasons humans commit violent acts. The modern anthropologist has the tools to understand violence, whether the operational approach, cognitive approach or experiential approach. Whether the anthropologist is guided by trying to understand why certain customs and practices are important to certain people or by understanding the analysis of political leadership and the types of states and their impact on the propensity for violence, the search for the reasons of violence is well suited for anthropology.

The anthropologist possesses the basic skills and training to expand beyond cultural understanding to significantly contribute to society's understanding of the reasons for violence and, perhaps, long-term solutions that will minimize violence in the future. It is a widely-held belief that as Chantia puts it, "If you strip away the veneer of civilization, the restraints of society and culture, you reveal the primeval state of humanity characterized by aggression and violence." Not only can the anthropologist understand violence but, the understanding of violence maybe the most important task facing anthropologists today.

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