

phase 2

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

unit **2.6**

April 7

Themes:

"In our Genes?":

Biological Determinism as a Social Excuse

Aggression: What's "human nature" got to do with it?

(Likewise poverty, racism crime and violence?)

FACILITATION:

Study Group # 6

PREPARATION OVERVIEW:

READ by **yourself**

then

DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.6 – **1** Aronson, SA: Chapter 6: Human Aggression (pp. 200-239)

2.6 – **2** American Academy Of Pediatrics, Committee on Public Education,
(2001), "Media Violence", Pediatrics Vol. 108 No. 5 November 2001,
pp. 1222-1226

on line at:

<http://www.aap.org/policy/re0109.html>

VIEW by **yourself** or with others

then

DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.6 – **3** Your (study group's) choice of a contemporary tv show that has a well-
established reputation for extreme violence (e.g. action movies,
wrestling, etc.). **Prepare comments.**

2.6 – 4 Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally?

(videotape – viewing time 21 mins.)

READ by **yourself** then DISCUSS in your **study group**:

2.6 – 5 Sociobiology: Doing what comes naturally?

transcript of soundtrack

2.6 – 6 Chorover, S.L. (1979) From Genesis to Genocide: The Meaning of

Human Nature and the Power of Behavior Control. MIT Press.

Chapter 1 (pp. 1-10); Chapter 5 (pp. 77-109); Chapter 7 (pp.135-174)

2.6 – 7 Sociobiology Study Group, Biology as a Social Weapon

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

Introductory Notes:

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? Each of us is influenced by the conceptual and material atmosphere created by the worldviews, valuesystems and lifestyles prevailing within the parental subsystems of our families and by the other social groups we belong to.

Why does it matter? In an effort to answer this question, we focus on the colossal human social problem of violence.

By way of context, consider the following statistics:

- the average young American sees 200,000 acts of violence (16,000 murders) on TV by age 18;
- 26% of girls in grades 9-12 report having experienced physical or sexual abuse or date-rape.
- 60% of reported rapes involve children under 18 years old;
- 21% of high-school males took a weapon to school in the last 12 months.

2.6 – 1 SA: Human Aggression

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

Much aggression is due to frustration? What role does social learning play? Are we living in the midst of an epidemic of "domestic violence?" What chances do we have of reducing violence?

- Distinguish between hostile and instrumental aggression
- Define and evaluate the "catharsis" hypothesis
- Identify possible causes of aggression: neurochemical, biological, hormonal
- What's wrong with testosterone?
- How do alcohol and other "recreational" drugs influence social propensities toward aggressiveness?
- What about the role of pain and discomfort?
- Of frustration and aggression?
- 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 Media Violence

The classic study of the influential effects of TV violence on the aggressive behavior of children, The Effects of Observing Violence by L. Berkowitz, was published in *Scientific American* in 1964. Since then, numerous authoritative inquiries have confirmed his basic findings and drawn additional attention to the problem. A well-documented recent example is the November 2001 report of the Committee on Public Education of the American Academy of Pediatrics

2.6 – 3 Your (study group's) choice of a contemporary tv show with extreme violence

As you prepare to watch the program, try to assume the identity of a human-like alien from the far-off planet Pacifica where people are accustomed to living in relatively violence-free societies. Pretend that you have just arrived on earth on a mission to learn about conditions of human life here and that, based on what you are about to see on tv, you must shortly transmit a preliminary report describing your observations and conclusions thus far relating to the behavior and "human nature" of earthlings and how they think and feel and act and why they behave the way they do. After watching the program, prepare some notes for your report.

But what about the often-heard argument being put forth currently (e.g. by various "sociobiologists" and "evolutionary psychologists") that the root causes of human violence are "in our genes"?

2.6 – 4, 5 Sociobiology – videotape and transcript

is a somewhat garish and extreme version of the argument.

2.6 – 6 From Genesis to Genocide

2.6 – 7 Biology as a Social Weapon

These two texts present a contrasting view.

What are we to believe about the root causes of social violence? What evidence is there that we are genetically pre-programmed to pursue the transgenerational survival of

our "selfish genes?"

From a social policy perspective, what differences does it make how we choose to answer such questions?

And 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 that it is true.

It is easily confirmed by direct observation that human mental life is systematically related to behavior. Distinctions need to be made between (1) questions about the truth/falsity (correspondence/noncorrespondence) of propositions pertaining to persons, situations, states-of-affairs, etc., and (2) questions about our beliefs and values (right or wrong) being principal determinants of 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 and say has consequences (exerts social influences).

For example, suppose we see people all around us behaving in greedy, aggressive, competitive, violent and self-seeking ways. Some would say that "it only goes to show" that we 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".)

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 "theory of human nature"? (Describe your view of what "people are really like" and why.)

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

If the true nature of "human nature" is inferable from human behavior, and is inherently fixed and unchangeable, what conclusions follow about (e.g.) the prospects for reducing the deleterious social effects of so much greedy, aggressive, competitive, violent and self-seeking 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.