



Aggressiveness can be Psychobiologically Milded: How to Achieve Peace

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Abstract

The Seville Statement on Violence (SSV) was originated by an ISRA-(International Society for Research on Aggression)launched UN-Committee in the late seventies of the past century. Its final product was presented in Seville in 1986, at the VI Coloquio Internacional sobre Cerebro y Agresión (CICA). Three years later, it was endorsed by the 25th General Conference of UNESCO, in Paris. Its main message was that violence, and consequently war too, are avoidable and aggressiveness can be tamed. The present paper wants to offer its next step, showing how we can prevent the problems of violence and war and achieve a culture of peace: understanding aggression, violence and war, as well as the real meaning of peace, stressing the importance of peace education, schooling of emotions, and techniques for non-violent conflict resolution, and suggesting that the main goal for it will be the development of inner peace.

The main message of the Seville Statement on Violence (SSV), elaborated in the early 80s of the last century by scientists from all the world and from many different disciplines and endorsed by the 25th General Conference of UNESCO, was that peace is possible and that wars and violence can be ended, making clear that there is nothing in biology that stands in the way of making a world without war (Adams, 1991).

That first ‘scientific step’ towards peace concluded that, far from condemning humanity to violence and war, falling into the psychological trap of believing that people cannot change and that peace is therefore impossible (Tyler, 2012), psychobiology tells us that aggressiveness can be tamed and consequently it is possible to end violence and war and to achieve peace. On the occasion of an international conference in Dubrovnik on ‘Nuclear threats and Security’ in September 2012, the Academy’s President Ivo Šlaus said that “war is useless”. And the very same day (14 Sept 2012), during his visit in Lebanon, Pope Benedict XVI stated that, far from being peace which is the only thing that works, “violence destroys; it is not useful at all”. We can therefore happily join the Beatles (or more specifically John Lennon and Yoko Ono), and sing with them that “War is over, if you want it” (1969).

Once we are aware that violence, and consequently war too, are avoidable, that aggressiveness can be tamed (Ramirez, 1994, 2003, 2012), and that peace is the only thing that works (Benedict XVI, 2012), we scientists have to analyse how to achieve a culture of peace. Obviously achieving peace is not an easy task at all, even if the wish for peace expresses a

much-felt need in our days. But we should never forget that, if peace is possible, in order to influence our surroundings positively, we must learn to develop inner peace within our minds, because peace must begin in the mind of each person with the belief that it is possible... This is the main message of the SSV, quite in conjunction with the spirit of WAAS, expressed in the words of Albert Einstein: "The creations of our mind shall be a blessing and not a curse to mankind."

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Within this universal and transdisciplinary task for constructing peace, scientists have a specific role to play. The challenge is to find the peace we are looking for. Where does one start and how to do it in order to counteract the prevailing culture of violence which has pervaded so many societies and to transform it into a culture of peace? Let me offer a few precise suggestions, perhaps a little bit disjointed, and without the pretension of being comprehensive.

First, we have to understand the problem and its possible solutions: to know what is aggression, violence and war, and what peace really means in its deepest meaning, as well as what their interacting biological and cultural factors are.

And, second, we should emphasize the potential value of education which provides a major contribution to the control of aggression, in the prevention of violence and in the achievement of peace, stressing the importance of a comprehensive and global education with a transdisciplinary approach, which may allow us to school emotions and develop inner peace. This task is especially important during the early critical periods of development. We should convince the society about the benefits of investing adequate resources in such extensive educative efforts, instead of limiting its resorts to control aggression and to solve conflicts by means of threats or punishment.

While problems are relatively obvious, even if you are not in direct contact with aggression, you often can be indirectly affected; effective resolutions are not affected. They depend on understanding problems. A most effective means of understanding them is a **systematical study of aggression, violence and war**, utilizing scientific techniques. For example, in our case, with a greater knowledge of the many causes and kinds of aggression, we can develop an appreciation of the possibilities for controlling it, as well as an understanding of some of the reasons why we have failed to effectively control it in the past, such as lack of an appropriate definition and measurement (Ramirez, 1997).

Here, I will just state that biology and environment taken separately are never causes of anything in an organism's development. The human brain should no longer be considered as a generator of possible – or, even less, inevitably occurring – aggressive behaviour (with improper emphasis on some humoral factor or even a single gene thought to be specifically implicated), but rather as the mediator of a dialogue which may take on an aggressive form for reasons that can only be truly clarified through joint interdisciplinary efforts. Biology is the foundation of all behaviour only in the same way that bricks and paper are the founda-

tions of all (traditional) libraries, but the content of the library, whilst being printed on paper, is not otherwise dependant on the bricks and paper.

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Biology is the means by which information is accumulated and transmitted both in day-to-day interactions between people (in brain), the generation to generation transmission of adaptations right up to speciation information (the genome). But it is the interaction with the environment that steers these changes. It is just as true, then, to say that the environment is the foundation of the content of behaviour and that the interaction between the environment and the phenotype determines which behaviours will be selected i.e. reinforced. Behaviour, then, is the selection of what can be done (the phenotype) from what is available (the environment, including conspecifics) with the ultimate goal of maximum survival of current and future generations. In humans, survival of non-physical elements may be treated highly or higher than the physical: one's reputation, legacy, knowledge, religion, people, country, political belief and so on may be the object of behaviour over and above one's physical survival, inheritance and legacy (see: Robert Karl Stonjek, evolutionary-psychology.yahoogroups, 2012). In other words, organisms are open systems in more ways than one. Behavior is controlled not only by biological characteristics, mainly of the brain and nervous system, but also in large part by external events surrounding and impinging upon that brain and nervous system. Human beings possess biological structures conducive to use of language, true, but without a “linguistic environment” those structures would not function.

Delimitating this assertion to our topic, an adequate control of aggression is not an unrealistic goal for a society, but it is certainly a reality in innumerable discrete settings. Since there is no one factor that overwhelmingly produces aggression, what we need is a comprehensive approach integrating different perspectives on violence, with an appreciation for the various objectively supported contributions of biology, learning mechanisms, social experiences, and, what is more important, their dynamic integration.

Our purpose has to begin with the process of integrating the various domains of science that are studying the development of aggression and peace, in an attempt to use science to guide society in its efforts to prevent and control harmful aggression. Basic scientists, within their experimental settings, may have the luxury of separating the biology of aggression from its psychosocial and environmental context with questions arising within their isolated domains. But, if we want to reach the ultimate goal of application of scientific information in the real world, we can never separate them. There is a constant and circular interaction. As Craig Ferris likes to say, “development is 100% environment and 100% heredity”, in a dynamic interaction (Ferris & Grisso, 1996).

This brings me to the next major feature. If we want to achieve peace, we need to know **what peace really means** in its deepest meaning. According to Paul VI, the new name of peace is *development* because, if we understand as peace the harmonic whole of all what people need, personally and socially, for their happiness, development is a very good way for achieving it. Development embraces dimensions so distinct and integrated as culture, economy, education, politics, and promotion of the weakest, as well as a profound respect for human dignity and human life, and of the environment in which we live.

An optimal approach towards peace, therefore, would be to prevent the problems of violence and war with a political, cultural and economical intervention, alleviating poverty and other social conditions that breed these problems (Ramirez, 1996, 2009). A true peace thus has to be supported by development and social justice, with a more just distribution of the world's resources within and between societies. The only sure foundation on which to lay a better welfare state, a happier society and a more pleasant life is a real development of humanity subordinating all goods and technical resources to human dignity. Therefore, peace = development + justice.

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And, since we would like to live in a permanent state of peace and well being, we have to lay down solid foundations to make peace education available (Ramirez, 1994b). **How to achieve a culture of peace?**

One way to contribute towards the transformation of a culture of war into a **culture of peace** is to permanently shift attitudes, values and behaviour in order to promote peace and social justice, and the non-violent resolution of conflict and security through a transdisciplinary approach. This primary scope, which is the aim of the UNESCO's Culture of Peace Programme (1994), requires cooperation at all levels, everyone working together for peace and reconciliation.

Education becomes a preventative measure that creates a culture that recognises the **value of human life** and is less conducive to aggression, informing individuals and caregivers about how to deal with the causes of aggression and with its control (e.g. by reducing wealth differentials, emphasizing achievement rather than competitiveness, reducing the availability of weapons and removing other triggers for aggression) (Hinde, Nelson & Wrangham, 2010). Starting with pre- and postnatal healthcare, it would progress through the raising and **formal education** of children, and continue into adult social settings.

A very specific point which has to be raised is the in-group versus out-group issue: **us vs them**. It is well known that, whereas prosociality is directed primarily towards the group to which the individual belongs, selfishness is much less inhibited towards out-group members. This explains why acts of aggression are shown more readily to strangers and members of other groups than to members of the same group. And its most extreme act, killing, which

is morally forbidden in virtually all human societies, except where legitimized by societal consensus, in war is sanctioned and even praised for enemies, because they are portrayed as dangerous and even sub-human by propaganda.

Thus, much depends on where the boundaries between in-group and out-group are perceived to lie. Given the genetic uniformity of the human species, there is no biological justification for feelings of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, based on an in-existent in-group superiority. It is possible and praiseworthy to love one's own culture (patriotism), but we can do it without denigrating others (nationalism). In this way, we can expand the scope of the in-group, providing better education which gives greater emphasis to our common humanity than to cultural differences, thereby continuing to extend the perceived boundaries of the in-group (Hinde, et al, 2010).

This increased connectedness of peoples around the world inspires a vision of a future in which the common humanity of all peoples will be globally recognised. This attitude matches quite well with the already mentioned spirit of WAAS, which is seen in its 1960 founding Manifesto: Fellows share the ambition "to rediscover the language of mutual understanding," surmounting differences in tradition, language, and social structure which, unless fused by creative imagination and continuous effort, dissolve the latent human commonwealth in contention and conflict. It was also said within the Middle East conflict by Pope Benedict during his above mentioned visit to Lebanon: "If we want peace, we have to see in the other a person to be respected and loved" (14 Sept 2012). Expanding the scope of the in-group can be expected to continue to promote increased prosociality. "Instead of Us Versus Them, Us Plus Them" (Pittinsky, 2012).

The importance of family in education should always be stressed. Rearing by a parent-figure sensitive to the child's needs and exercising firm but reasoned control is especially potent in promoting prosociality. Consequently, a positive task would be to foster **parenting programs**, helping parents to improve their skills, and ensuring that parentless children are supported by others. A flagship program is known as the Triple P -positive parenting program, created by Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues at the University of Queensland in Australia. It evolved from a small "home-based, individually administered training programme for parents of disruptive preschool children" into a comprehensive preventive whole-population intervention programme invested in heavily by public bodies in the UK and beyond. Although it has been hailed as a success around the world, a new study led by Philip Wilson, at the University of Aberdeen in collaboration with researchers from the Universities of Glasgow and Gothenburg, assessing the outcomes of Triple P programmes of 33 English language studies, has called into question its effectiveness, recommending a more rigorous methodological report. For instance, they pointed out that only mothers reported an improvement in their children's behaviour, but no significant difference was noted by fathers or independent observers of the children's behaviour (Wilson et al., 2012). This may be another data point in the ongoing argument about whether you can 're-make' people, even if I don't doubt at all that some people can be helped to get along better in society. But it seems to me just another example of people seeing what they HOPE to see in the analysis of these behavioral intervention programs.

Besides formal education, one needs to learn how to deal with emotion, how to transform anger and fear into love and compassion, how to develop forgiveness, how to communicate positively with others... In one word, how to become happy, assuming we really can 're-make' people.

An important aspect of this global education is the **schooling of emotions**, given the influenciability and malleability of the feelings, especially during the early years. The affective education movement of the 1960s – psychological and motivational lessons were more deeply learned if they involved an immediate experience of what was being taught conceptually – has rather become the emotional-literacy movement of the turning of the century: instead of using affect to educate, it educates affect itself. Prevention programs are far more effective when emotional and social competences are taught: such as impulse control, managing anger and finding creative solutions to social predicaments. Emotional skills have to be also stressed: self-awareness, identifying, expressing and managing feelings; impulse control and delaying gratification; and handling stress and anxiety... (Goleman, 1995)

Chronic anger is a habit that can also change through education: for instance, teaching basic elements of emotional intelligence, particularly mindfulness of anger as it begins to stir, ability to regulate it once it has begun (substituting reasonable thoughts for cynical, mistrustful ones), and empathy (for frustrating encounters, you learn the ability to see things from the other person's perspective). As Redford Williams said, "the antidote to hostility is to develop a more trusting heart. All it takes is the right motivation. When people see that their hostility can lead to an early grave, they are ready to try" (1989; see also: Ramirez et al., 2002).

Forgiveness of offenses is another of the ideas people have to fill their heads with, if one really wants to achieve peace in the world, because it can be a powerful means to healing. Although you still see the wound, you forget its pain. And consequently it helps you to keep going ahead.

In its broadest sense, forgiveness encompasses a multitude of virtues. Michael Henderson (2009) analyzes five critical components: 1) dialogue, addressing the root causes of conflicts, instead of searching for revenge; 2) reaching out to 'the other', because without forgiving and trust many good initiatives will be fated to fail; 3) moving beyond victimhood (Henderson refers to a very illustrative story: an Orthodox Jew, Yitzak Frankelthal, after Hamas kidnapped and killed his son Arik, founded an organization, Parent Circle, to bring together parents from both sides for personal support and for meeting with governmental representatives and decision makers); 4) taking responsibility; and 5) creating safe space.

Forgiveness can be considered at the personal and the public levels. Offenses are easier to forgive to the extent that they seem small and understandable and when we see ourselves as capable of committing a similar action to the offender. In this context, having been taught from an early age to be more empathetic, we lean toward relationship building and do not emphasize the vengeful side of justice (Exline et al., 2012). And, in the public realm, a pivotal piece of forgiveness is related to historic grievances, leading to apologies and reparations. Are we condemned to follow a wrong past, or can we make a break with it, if new situations allow us to adopt new truths?

Conflict resolution in a non-violent way is another interesting point that can be meliorated via education, fostering a deeper understanding of conflict and violence prevention, learning the many choices for dealing with conflict besides passivity or aggression. Given the futility of violence, it has to be replaced with concrete skills. When tension erupts, you can seek out a mediator to help settle arguments that otherwise can escalate. You have to learn to think differently about disagreements, and to recognize an expanded range of feelings.

Given the diplomatic load of this parliament, I would like to stress the importance of an adequate training in preventive diplomacy for conflict resolutions. We need outstanding peacemakers, helping resolve disputes in the world: arms control, nuclear matters, hostage-taking, conflicts between Arabs and Israelis, wars in Africa, Middle East or wherever..., and remembering that, as Anthony Zacharzewski of the British think-tank Demsoc, says, “successful politics is not about finding people who agree with you. It is about making difficult decisions without killing each other.” (2013)

A good agreement is one which is wise and efficient, and which improves both parties’ relationship. Wise agreements satisfy both parties’ interests and are fair and lasting, most notably where there is a major imbalance of power. This is the approach of a technique called “principled negotiation”, taught by Roger Fisher through his **Harvard Negotiation Project** (he was 40 years on the faculty of Harvard Law School). It allows parties to decide questions on their merits rather than on the haggling skill — or willpower — of the people involved. “In any negotiation — even with terrorists — it is vital to separate the people from the problem; to focus on the underlying interests of both sides, fine-tuning their demands, rather than stake out unwavering positions; and to explore all possible options before making a decision. The parties should try to build a rapport, check each other out, even just by shaking hands or eating together. Each should “listen actively” to what the other is saying. They should recognise the emotions on either side, from a longing for security to a craving for status. And they should try to get inside each other’s heads.” (Fisher, Ury, 1981).

Among many situations where Fisher put his theory into practice, I will mention only one, closer to me because of family connections: **his** success in ending apartheid in South Africa: the Afrikaner cabinet and ANC officials, trained separately by him in negotiation workshops, agreed to end apartheid without resorting to violence.

These considerations are valid not only in a public context, but also at a personal level. Negotiation is a fact of our daily life. Whether we want or not and whether we know it or not, we all are negotiators. We negotiate something nearly every day: what to do today, what to have for supper, how or where to spend the weekend. We try to agree on a price for a house or bargain for a souvenir in a market. Who has not tried some haggling tricks in a souk: pretending not to be interested, refusing to react to pressure, being prepared to walk away. All are examples of questions that are decided among people with different interests. Even if at first look we may think they are competing, maybe they overlap, or they complement one another and only the positions of the parties are actually at odds. Maybe by focusing on the interests, rather than the positions, parties can invent options for mutual gain and resolve issues to everyone’s satisfaction.

Finally, I have to remark that this important task of achieving a culture of peace, which has been suggested to get through a series of steps, such as peace education, schooling of emotions, and conflict resolution, is not an exclusive domain of government, police and other security forces, or any other public institutions or authorities. On the contrary, it demands the participation of the entire society: educational institutions, religious movements, mass media, families and, last but not least, everybody. Each of us has a specific part of responsibility in this achievement because, although these tasks may be mainly institutional and collective, they also rest upon the consciousness of individual participants for whom pessimism and optimism are crucial factors. Finishing with the same words of the *Seville Statement of Violence* (1986), just as “wars begin in the minds of men, peace also begins in our minds. The same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace.” The responsibility lies with each of us!

“The time has come to take on the commitment to heal our society, the world, and ourselves by the power of truth, life and justice, especially through science.”

On the occasion of his 1987 visit to Gdańsk, cradle of Solidarity, John Paul II told the youth that “before there is a revolution in the world, it has to be a revolution in our hearts, minds and characters, out of which will come truth, life and justice” (Luxmoore, Babiuch, 1999, p. 214). Even if until now we have not had time for peace, the time has come to take on the commitment to heal our society, the world, and ourselves by the power of truth, life and justice, especially through science. I am aware that this is really difficult to apply into our mind and hearts, and that patience must become a habit that will help us deal with life more ‘peacefully’. But with the confidence of knowing that peace is possible, we will be able to influence our surroundings positively and making the world better, even it is indeed a hard task. And, in order to achieve it, we should never forget that we must learn to **develop inner peace** within our minds.

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