

On Human Stupidity and Violence

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD
Police Psychologist

Albert Einstein once said “Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe.” Seems he was sure about human stupidity.

In light of recent events, it has become increasingly difficult to argue against Einstein's position. The human capacity for stupidity, especially when assessed through the observations of nearly incomprehensible human cruelty, certainly seems unlimited.

As a species, humans are an interesting lot. Collectively, we have developed sciences and created technologies that would have appeared magical just a century ago. Modern medicine, space exploration, computer science, electronic communication, social media, and numerous other disciplines are reflective of advances that are unprecedented in the previous totality of human history. Our knowledge and accomplishments increase exponentially with every passing year. Maybe we are not so stupid after all.

But there is another side to the human equation. This side has less to do with science, technology, and achievement. This side has to do with our inherent or perhaps inherited view of ourselves and the world. This side has to do with how we conceptualize ourselves and everything around us, including other people. This side has to do with what we are taught and what we have come to believe is true. Interestingly, once we “decide” what is “true” we often lose the capacity to consider, appreciate, or even just tolerate, beliefs outside our own.

It sometimes feels that the world is in dire straits. This is nothing new. Previous generations have reported feeling similarly. If our technology permitted time travel, it would be interesting to see how the current state-of-the-world evolves (if at all) over the next century. Perhaps greater human harmony. Perhaps not. One thing seems certain, in spite of all our positive science and technological accomplishments, we have yet to learn how to respectfully live with one another.

Violence continues to plague our species. Why? Why has violence comprised so much of human history? Why is violence so much a part of modern life? There are many thoughts and theories about the causes of human violence. Most acknowledge the influence of human biology and our “animal nature.” Some theories emphasize early development, cognitive structures and conceptualizations, learning, emotional maturity, and social environments. Others cite the struggle for survival, personal and social competition, a desire for power, and the need to control territory or resources. Regardless of the basis of any theoretical perspective, it seems reasonable to conclude that there are likely a myriad of causes for violent human behavior. It is also reasonable to conclude that such causes are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Several of the causes of violent human behavior are more readily understood than others. Some violence is generated from a sick and malfunctioning brain. Persons suffering from a sick brain are frequently considered mentally ill. Those that become violent due to mental illness are often psychotic. They experience delusions (irrational false beliefs) and hallucinations (disorder of perceptions). The most common type of hallucination in psychotic disorders is auditory. Auditory hallucinations primarily involve hearing voices. At times, the voices will tell a person to do things. Such auditory hallucinations are known as “command hallucinations.” Command hallucinations can be remarkably influential and, in conjunction with a delusional belief system, can produce very violent behavior. How influential are some command hallucinations? So influential that some persons will (1) kill themselves (or attempt to kill themselves and survive - this is how we know about suicidal command hallucinations) or (2) kill others if commanded to do so. Some delusional systems are sufficiently influential to produce violence in the absence of command hallucination.

Some violence has its origin in human thought and emotion. Violence that is driven primarily by emotion can be impulsive (losing one’s temper), planned (getting even for a perceived transgression), or generated out of fear and anxiety (seen most often when escape options are unavailable). Police officers are quite familiar with emotionally-driven violence. It is a factor in many police calls and it is sometimes directed at police officers. It can also be the cause of police officer violence.

Related to emotionally-driven violence is violence driven primarily by thought. Thought-driven violence occurs in the relative absence of emotion. It is often the result of (1) “cold and calculating” cognitive forethought or (2) situational decision-making. Completing a “contract” for murder, when the “contractor” has no emotional connection to the victim, is an example of the first type of thought-driven violence. Thought-driven violence in situational decision-making is illustrated in the case of a bank robber who wishes only to obtain bank money and quietly depart. However, when the bank alarm is triggered and police officers surround the bank, the robber decides to shoot it out with officers instead of going or returning to prison.

Perhaps the greatest cause of human violence is opposing belief systems. Beliefs are incredibly powerful and frequently drive behavior. Humans will die for their beliefs, at least for some of them. Humans will kill in the name of their beliefs, at least some of them. When belief systems clash, very violent behavior becomes possible. Persons engaging in this type of violence are not mentally ill by any professional definition. Instead, they act out violently because it serves some internalized purpose such as compliance with doctrine, advancing a cause, righting a perceived wrong, attacking a conceptualized enemy, and so on. History is replete with belief-clash violence. The modern world is inundated with it. Belief-clash violence is an age-old story that has involved countless individuals and groups over thousands of years.

Given human history and the current state of human affairs, is it possible for people with opposing beliefs to live together peacefully? Perhaps, but it would require a monumental alteration in the collective human consciousness - including a moderation

of extremely disparate views and a universal commitment to mutual coexistence. What is needed is nothing less than an evolution in human thinking. Such evolution would represent an unprecedented redefinition of whom and what we are as a species.

Clearly, unless the differences between and among human beings can be better understood, respected, and moderated, not much is likely to change. After millennia of recorded history, there has been remarkably little sustained advancement in how human beings treat one another. Maybe Einstein was right.