



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume VI: Biology and History of Ethnic Violence and Sexual Oppression

Introduction

Violence permeates our lives. Wars, racial and ethnic violence and male-female violence are perpetual aspects of human existence. Adolescent violence, and the ubiquitous possibility of its eruption, is the background for many of the problems of teaching in and running our schools.

Much has been written about violence, much of it nonsense. One of the teachers in this seminar brought in a poster, circulated to schools, that states that the 'roots of violence' are "Poor Coping and Communication Skills, Poor Value System and Poor Self-Esteem." There is not the slightest indication from the source of the poster what the evidence is upon which the claims are based. The teachers immediately recognized that Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Mohammed Ali (Cassius Clay) and many of the most violent characters in History, as well as today's gang leaders, were very capable individuals who excelled at just those factors. Other examples of the baseless theories fed to teachers abound.

Recently, Biologists studying animal behavior have started to make sense out of the confused field of violence. The key observation is that our closest animal relatives, the Chimpanzees, exhibit the same kinds of violence that humans do. Chimpanzee communities slaughter each other in what might be called wars, males compete physically with each other for dominance, males batter females and adolescence marks the onset of violent behavior.

Archaeologists and anthropologists find that these types of violence are almost universal in all human cultures and as far back in history as we can trace. Our seminar discussed the biological and cultural roots of violence through history and across cultures, reading material from as diverse regions as India, New Guinea and China as well as the US.

The various units written in the course of the seminar explore and apply this information in ways that are appropriate for different school settings.

Kimberly Workinger's unit, "Basic Animal Behavior in Domesticated Animals," takes animals for its topic. This unit explains the interplay of instincts and learning in the behavior of small animals usually kept as pets. The audience is agricultural track students at the 'Sound School,' but, since almost everyone has or knows pets, the unit should be widely applicable to most any school setting.

Carolyn Kinder's unit, "The Roots of Violence in Society," applies the same biology-culture analysis to human violence. Anyone who has ever observed the uncontrollable rage and fear at play in an adolescent fight knows that a lot of biology is involved. Behavior which follows the same pattern from Chimps to primitive humans to modern humans is likely to have a large instinctual component. By explicitly comparing violent behavior in

humans with violent behavior in the two species of Chimp (common Chimps and Bonobos) the similarities and differences are made clear.

Jessica Zelenski's unit, "Motherhood: Biological Asset or Social Liability?" uses the "biological aspects and social constructions of motherhood" to discuss the terrible choices and situations which downtrodden women face. The approach is cross cultural; the students will read three novels centering on Chinese women, an Indian (South Asian) woman and an American slave woman. All three discuss women fleeing an intolerable life to a new culture. The slave woman is forced into committing infanticide, the Indian woman survives an attempted infanticide on herself and the Chinese women find themselves involved in symbolic infanticide/matricide in which mothers and daughters reject each other's cultural identities.

Diana Otto's unit, "Sexual Oppression and Religious Extremism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* ," deals with a literary exploration of violence. One cannot help but notice how many of the wars and ethnic conflicts in the world are religion-based. Similarly it is obvious that many of the worst examples of the oppression of women around the world have a religious justification. *The Handmaid's Tale* envisions a future America that is engulfed in a religious war where the fundamentalists in control have instituted an extreme form of sexual oppression. Starting from the Biblical tale of Jacob's wives offering their servants to be impregnated by Jacob, Atwood describes a society where women are forced to bear children for powerful military men. This unit should generate lots of discussion and controversy in any literature class.

The seminar stimulated a series of fascinating conversations, dissecting the all-too-common phenomena of violence from very unusual perspectives. We hope that these units will help you and your students recreate some of our excitement.

Robert Wyman

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