

Chapter 7

DOING WHAT OTHERS DO

When Example of Others Leads to Violence

Does watching shootings and fights and killing in stories make it more likely that people will really do the same thing in real life? For most people, of course not—they see these things all the time and would still never hurt a fly. But if these things are shown to a whole lot of people, then yes, there will be some who will imitate what they see. They'll have thoughts of violence uppermost in their minds, and so they will act that way. Even little kids will be more aggressive in their play after seeing violence on TV than they will seeing a show that isn't violent.

There have been loads and loads of studies on this, and that's what most conclude. The people who make the violent TV shows and movies object to the conclusion, but they make money from it. They argue that parents should be the ones to keep children from seeing stories that are too gory. It doesn't seem to occur to them that kids that have parents

good enough to pay attention to such things aren't the kids to worry about. It's the very parents who don't care that much about their children that are most likely to have the children who are less stable.

The most violent ghetto isn't in South Central L. A. or Southeast Washington D. C; it's on television. About 350 characters appear each night on prime-time TV, but studies show an average of seven of these people are murdered every night. If this rate applied in reality, then in just 50 days everyone in the United States would be killed and the last left could turn off the TV"

—Michael Medved, film critic

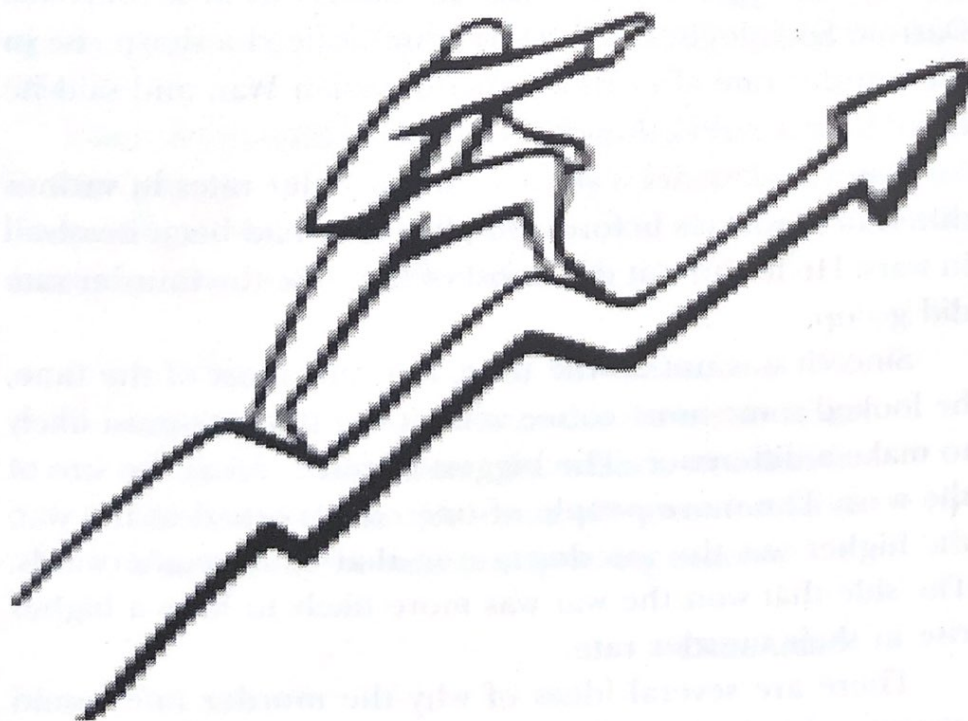
Some have said that the violence in stories actually helps prevent real violence, because watching it is a substitute for actually doing it. Watching it gets it out of the system. But this can only work if there is violence in people's systems, violence that will come out one way or another. While it's true that almost everybody has things that they're angry about, that doesn't mean that everyone would do violent things if only they were allowed to.

Anyway, the studies show the opposite. Seeing violence puts violence more on the mind.

What about violent video games? They're even worse than just watching other people doing something on TV. They expect people to get practice in doing the violence themselves. And practice does make perfect. Some of the school shootings have been done by people who had practiced a lot on video games. We can tell that was important to their shooting, because they kept shooting without waiting first to see whether they had hit the target and it and gone down. In battles, people normally do that. In video games, you get more points by not waiting to see, but going on shooting.

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This kind of perfect practice has been used to make more killing happen in war, too. When men were trained to shoot at bull's-eye targets, they were learning to make their shooting more accurate. But people don't commonly see bull's-eye targets flying around battlefields. The bull's-eye practice means they weren't learning to be able to kill without thinking about it. And the human mind does tend to want to avoid killing others. There's evidence that in a lot of wars, there were actually only a few of the men who fired their guns, or fired them where people actually were. But then they changed the training. Instead of a bull's-eye target, there would be a target the size and shape of a person. The target would go down when someone hit it. So it looked a lot more like what really happened. That way, they got most of the men to shoot when they were in battle. They had good practice in doing it without thinking.



Another way of showing what can happen when people see examples of violence is what often happens with murders

in a country after a war. War is not pretend violence like we see on TV, after all. It's very real.

When people want to compare one country or city to another in how many murders there are, they don't just count how many murders happened in each place. If one city had 100 murders in one year and another had only 20, it sounds like the second city had far fewer. But suppose the first city had 100,000 people in it, and the second city had only 5,000. That means the first city had 1 murder for every 1,000 people who lived there. But the second city had 4 murders for every 1,000 people! When it's put as how many murders happened for every 1,000 people, that's called the murder rate. The second city's is four times as great.

The idea that wars might increase the murder rate, crime and lawlessness has been suggested since the Middle Ages by scholars ranging from Erasmus to Thomas More to Nicoli Machiavelli. The idea that World War I especially had this effect was suggested by Winston Churchill and Clarence Darrow. Sociologist Emile Durkheim noticed a sharp rise in the murder rate after the Franco-Prussian War, and said he thought war strengthened harmful feelings.

Dane Archer did a study of the murder rates in various different countries before and after they had been involved in wars. He found out that most of the time the murder rate did go up.

Since it was not all the time, but only most of the time, he looked some more to see what it was that was most likely to make a difference. The biggest difference was the size of the wars. The more people of one country died in the war, the higher was the murder rate in that country afterwards. The side that won the war was more likely to have a higher rise in their murder rate.

There are several ideas of why the murder rate would go up, and so he looked at the numbers to see how well they fit each idea. One idea is that after a war things just fall apart all over. A rise in crime would go with that. Yet the

nations that won the war had higher rates than those that lost. Also, nations whose economies were going fairly well after the war actually had higher rates than nations whose economies were falling apart. So that doesn't seem to be the reason.

Another idea is that the men who were soldiers in the war have so much practice killing people that when they get back home they don't stop. After the American Revolutionary War, for example, Judge Aedanus Burke said when talking to a grand jury that men who had become accustomed to plundering and killing during the war had since turned on their neighbors. A more spectacular example is a couple of soldiers who rode with the Quantrill's guerrillas during the American Civil War: Jesse James and Frank James, well-known Western outlaws.

This may well be part of how to explain the rise in murder rates, but it can't explain the whole thing. The rate goes up also among women and among men who weren't the right age to be veterans of the war. There's more going on than this.

Dane Archer thinks the idea that best fits the numbers is that people see their governments using killing and destroying to solve their problems, and so they follow this example. They imitate what they see.

"What all wars have in common is the unmistakable moral lesson that homicide is an acceptable, even praiseworthy, means to certain ends. It seems likely that this lesson will not be lost on at least some of the citizens in warring nations."

—Dane Archer

We don't yet know that this is the right way to explain it, because in science we need more evidence than we have yet. But the case is made stronger by pointing out that the

crime rates have at times been known to go down in areas where nonviolent campaigns were going on. Gene Sharp, who studies nonviolence a lot, gave several times when this happened. He believes it's because the active nonviolence made the ideas supporting violence weaker. Actively nonviolent people were showing an example of a different kind. They were giving something different to imitate.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

If examples of violence lead to violence, then the obvious thing to do is to not give examples for violence anymore. In the case of war making it likely that the murder rate will go up, it would seem clear that this could be stopped if the war doesn't happen. Of course, there are often a long list of other reasons why it would be best for a war not to happen, but it never hurts to add another one. There are still people who take war far too lightly and need to understand how serious it is.

The same goes for violence in TV and movies and video games that put doing violence uppermost in people's minds. They can have stories that don't do that instead. Rather than using fantasy violence to solve fantasy problems, they could be much more creative about better ways of solving the problems. Especially when it's all fantasy anyway. They can leave any violence as something that's a problem for the hero to solve, rather than the way to solve it. In the movie *Gandhi*, there actually were scenes where people were beat up and even one with many killed. But this was showing what Mohandas Gandhi and his friends were up against, and how they dealt with it. The heroes in that story used active nonviolence—what Gandhi called “satyagraha,” which in English would be something like the power of truth.

So stories can be made that show a better example of how to do things. Good examples make better stories than bad examples.

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Stories can also be used to help people heal or to cope with really bad conditions. People who have been kept poor have, throughout the world, come up with a lot of the best folk stories and other art.

"The extreme experience of slavery . . . must have taken a kind of genius to survive it. In the jaws of slavery and segregation, blacks created a life-sustaining form of worship . . . a rich folk mythology, a world-famous written literature, a complete cuisine, a truth-telling comic sensibility and, of course, some of the most glorious music the world has ever known."

—Shelby Steele

This art is rich in themes that also help people who aren't poor to cope. That's why it becomes popular outside the group that came up with it. After all, everyone has frustrations, whether they're poor, or used to be, or never were. Stories are a healthy way of working through a lot of those feelings.