

Introduction

The word “violence” finds its way into our language from the Latin during the Middle Ages. The behavior is far, far older. Interpersonal violence seems to be a fundamental characteristic of our species. Humans manifest random, inexplicable violence far more often than any of our higher primate relatives. Humans have ritualized purposeful violence such as torture, execution, and war for centuries. Ethnic groups, gangs, and families all use violence as a method of interacting. In our own country today, the control of violence is a predominant theme. Of all the concerns of our aging population, the fear of violence ranks at the top. Are we fundamentally a violent species? Is the violent person an aberration or the norm? Do we cover a basic violent core with a veneer of civilization?

For centuries violent behavior has been the domain of philosophy, theology, and the law. More recently, medicine and psychology have entered onto the scene.

The papers presented here examine the phenomenon of individual, senseless violence from several perspectives. They were presented in 1986 at a symposium held in Philadelphia during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law. The symposium was the idea of Frank A. Elliott, MD, a distinguished Philadelphia neurologist. In many ways the symposium was a tribute to him—his creativity and contributions in this field. All of the authors are preeminent in their respective areas. The Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital was pleased to co-host this symposium and to participate in the growing knowledge of the psychology of this behavioral phenomenon.

Layton McCurdy, M.D.
Psychiatrist-in-Chief
Pennsylvania Hospital
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania