

Group discussion: Human Nature isn't Inherently Violent

Time: 10-20 minutes

Supplies: a copy of the Seville Statement (below) for everyone

This exercise also complements the third essay in this session, "Human Nature Isn't Inherently Violent," by Alfie Kohn. It can be conducted in conjunction with the "Everyday Nonviolence" exercise described above, or on its own. Give everyone a copy of the statement and discuss it. If you have enough people, divide into groups and assign each group one of the statements to discuss among themselves and report back.

Seville Statement on Violence

(in plain language)

The Seville Statement on Violence is a scientific statement which says peace is possible because war is not a biological necessity. The Statement was written by an international team of specialists in 1986 for the United Nations sponsored International Year of Peace and its follow-up. The Statement was based on the latest scientific evidence and it has been endorsed by scientific and professional organizations around the world.

Introduction

This Statement is a message of hope. It says that peace is possible and that wars can be ended. It says that the suffering of war can be ended, the suffering of people who are injured and die and the suffering of children who are left without home or family. It says that instead of preparing for war we can use the money for things like teachers' books and schools and for doctors, medicines and hospitals.

We who wrote this Statement are scientists from a countries North and South, East and West. The Statement has been endorsed and published by many organizations of scientists around the world including anthropologists, ethnologists, (animal behavior) physiologists, political scientists, psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists.

We have studied the problem of war and violence with today's scientific methods. Of course knowledge is never final and someday people will know better than we know today. But we have a responsibility to speak out on the basis of the latest information.

Some people say that violence and war cannot be ended because they are part of our natural biology. We say that is not true. People used to say that slavery and domination by race and sex were part of our biology. Some people even claimed they could prove these things scientifically. We now know they were wrong. Slavery has been ended and now the world is working to end domination by race and sex.

1. It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war cannot be ended because animals make war and because people are like animals. First it is not true because animals do not make war. Second, it is not true because we are not just like animals. Unlike animals, we have human culture that we can change. A culture that has war in one century may change and live at peace with their neighbors in another century.

2. It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war cannot be ended because it is part of human nature. Arguments about human nature cannot prove anything because our human culture gives us the ability to

shape and change our nature from one generation to another. It is true that the genes that are transmitted in egg and sperm from parents to children influence the way we act. But it is also true that we are influenced by the culture in which we grow up and that we can take responsibility for our own actions.

3. It is scientifically incorrect when people say that violence cannot be ended because people and animals who are violent are able to live better and have more children than others. Actually, the evidence shows that people and animals do best when they learn how to work well with each other.

4. It is scientifically incorrect when people say that we have to be violent because of our brain. The brain is part of our body like our legs and hands. They can all be used for cooperation just as well as they can be used for violence. Since the brain is the physical basis of our intelligence, it enables us to think of what we want to do and what we ought to do. And since the brain has a great capacity for learning, it is possible for us to invent new ways of doing things.

5. It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war is caused by 'instinct'. Most sci-

entists do not use the term 'instinct' anymore because none of our behavior is so determined that it cannot be changed by learning. Of course, we have emotions and motivations like fear, anger, sex, and hunger, but we are each responsible for the way we express them. In modern war, the decisions and actions of generals and soldiers are not usually emotional. Instead, they are doing their jobs the way they have been trained. When soldiers are trained for war and when people are trained to support a war, they are taught to hate and fear an enemy. The most important question is why they are trained and prepared that way in the first place by political leaders and the mass media.

Conclusion

We conclude that we are not condemned to war and violence because of our biology. Instead, it is possible for us to end war and the suffering it causes. We cannot do it by working alone, but only by working together. However, it makes a big difference whether or not each one of us believes that we can do it. Otherwise, we may not even try. War was invented in ancient times, and in the same way we can invent peace in our time. It is up to each of us to do our part.