

MOTIVATION

Aggression: The Nonviolent Semai

Can culture order the lives of people so that aggression is an unusual aspect of their behavior? If so, under what conditions might ordinarily nonviolent people act aggressively?

The Debate about the causes of human aggression has raged since time immemorial. Are humans innately aggressive, or is aggression a learned phenomenon? We humans are clearly *capable* of being rather violent at times. But this should not be confused with the claim made by some that we have an innate *tendency* to be aggressive. Anthropologists have studied societies in which warfare is nonexistent and in which interpersonal violence is a rare occurrence. One such society is a Malaysian group called the Semai.

The Semai are farming people in central West Malaysia whose unaggressive nature and customs were described by Dentan (1968). They had no need for police, judges, or jails. Their government was based on cooperation within the village, with no one empowered to enforce rules. The Semai simply assumed cooperation to be normal and conceived of themselves as nonviolent. According to Dentan, their nonviolent self-image “is not merely an ideal to strive for. The Semai do not say, ‘Anger is bad.’ They say, ‘We do not get angry,’ and an obviously angry man will flatly deny his anger. The Semai do not say, ‘It is forbidden to hit people.’ They say, ‘We do not hit people.’” (Pgs 55-56)

The Semai contrast themselves with outsiders in regard to their treatment of children. Other people, according to the Semai, hit their children, but the Semai do not. According to the Semai, you should never hit a child. After all, “How would you feel if it died?” they ask (Dentan, p. 58). According to Dentan, the Semai almost never hit their children. Physical aggression among adults is rare. Dentan says, “Some idea of the horror that physical violence implies in Semai is revealed by the fact that when east Semai are talking Malay they translate their word for ‘hit’ as ‘kill.’” (P.58)

True, Semai individuals sometimes violate their expectations of nonviolence, but this is rare. For instance, Dentan found that murder was almost unthinkable to the Semai. People claimed that there were no penalties for murder, because “it never happens, in the olden days or today” (p. 58). Indeed, Dentan could find no instance of murder, or maiming among the Semai from 1956 through 1968. He summarized the role of violence among the Semai this way:

In brief, little violence occurs within Semai society. Violence, in fact seems to terrify the Semai. A Semai does not meet force with force, but with passivity or flight. Yet, he has no institutionalized way of preventing violence—no social controls, no police or courts. Somehow a Semai learns automatically always to keep tight rein over his aggressive impulses. Given the weakness of external controls, the Semai need internal ones. (p. 59)

The Semai have no authority figures in their society. There are no “headmen” such as those in the rest of Malaysia who have authority to give orders. Trying to make others do something they do not want to do is unacceptable behavior. Even parents do not have authority to force their will on their children, and the Semai have no word for “adult” in their language. If a child does not want to do what its parents ask it to do, the parents let it follow its own inclinations. How then do the Semai socialize their children into a life in which they think of themselves as nonviolent—and generally behave unaggressively towards others?

The Semai do not believe that they actively teach their children. Rather, they believe that children simply learn by themselves. It is their view that if a child is unready or unwilling to learn,

coercion will not be effective. Indeed, any coercion is taboo. The actual Semai word for "taboo" is *punang*, which means behavior that is unacceptable because it makes someone else unhappy and, therefore, accident-prone. Again, that the Semai wish not to be the cause or harm to others is at the bottom of their child rearing practices.

Paradoxically, letting Semai children have their own way doesn't open the door to aggression on their part, probably because they have no aggressive (or coercive) role models.

Many Semai believe that children are inherently "naughty," however, and to teach their children to refrain from improper behavior, they use fear tactics. They may shout at a child and even threaten to hit it, although, according to Dentan, "the blow freezes inches away from its target, and the worst the child gets is a tap." (p. 60) It is this inhibiting of aggression that the child models. In one game:

Children of both sexes from two- to ten-year olds flail away widely at each other with long sticks, assuming dramatically aggressive postures. Yet the sticks always freeze inches away from the target, and although it seems inevitable that someone will be hit by mistake, no one ever is.

This pattern of inhibited aggression shows up in other forms of play as well. For instance, in wrestling, children will throw their opponents almost, but not quite, to the ground.

Parents also try to instill fear by telling a child to be afraid when the child is behaving improperly. For instance, the Semai encourage their children to fear nonSemai: "The Pale people have come to stick you with hypodermics... Fear! Fear! They are going to eat you! Fear! Fear!." (p. 60) In thunderstorms, adults also cry "Fear!" and encourage children to cover their eyes and ears. Later, the same word, "Fear!" will be yelled at a child who is becoming noisy or who is about to lose self-control.

Although the Semai do not punish aggression in their children, they have a low tolerance for it. They expect their children to conform to the Semai self-image of nonviolence, and they communicate this expectation by how they react when children show aggression. According to Dentan:

Children become aware of this expectation as it is manifested both in subtle daily ways and in the open shock of adults when a child loses its temper. In the latter case, an adult immediately snatches up the angry child and carries it off wailing to its house. This abrupt intervention is probably all the more frightening because adults usually are indifferent to children's activities. (p. 60)

It's hardly surprising that by the time Semai are adults, their attitude toward the very thought of violence is one of horror. Does this mean that no Semai ever engages in aggression? By no means. The Semai are much less violent than Americans, but they do violate their own rules occasionally, just as we do. According to Robarchek and Dentan (1987), "Dentan has seen an east Semai man beat a dog that stole food from his baby, for instance, and another throw a frog against a tree to kill it rather than have to carry it home to eat." (p. 362). The Semai also cook birds and other small animals alive but they do not think of this as aggression, since they do not anthropomorphize animals the way that Euro-Americans do. According to Robarchek and Dentan, "For them, such actions seem no more emotionally charged than killing a mosquito, scarcely as overwhelming as the eruption of repressed emotions would be in Freudian theory." (p. 362)

During the Communist insurgency of the early 1950's, the Semai had their first taste of warfare when the British recruited troops from among them. Initially, the Semai recruits did not seem to comprehend the role they were expected to play. According to Dentan, many Semai recruits did not realize that soldiers kill people: "When I suggested to one east Semai recruit that killing was a soldier's job, he laughed at my ignorance and explained, 'No we don't kill people, brother, we just tend weeds and cut grass.' Apparently he had up to that point done nothing but grounds duty." (p. 58)

Nevertheless, although many who knew the Semai did not expect them to make good soldiers, the Semai recruits sometimes outperformed all expectations. In Dentan's words:

A typical veteran's story runs like this. "We killed, killed, killed. The Malays would stop and go through people's pockets and take their watches and money. We did not think of watches or money. We thought only of killing. Wah, truly we were drunk with blood." One man even told how he had drunk the blood of a man he had killed.

It appears that the Semai were certainly capable of extremes of violence when they were removed from their normal cultural environment. The Semai veterans were unable to account for their own extreme behavior and, on returning home, reverted to their former gentle and timid style of life. In spite of their military experience, their traditional non-violent self-image remained intact when they returned to civilian life.

A number of writers have portrayed the Semai "blood-drunkenness" as an outburst of aggression that Semai culture had kept bottled up. These writers have used the Semai as evidence for an innate aggressiveness in humans (Eible-Eibesfeld, 1978; Konner, 1982; Paul, 1978; Wilson, 1978). However, Robarchek and Dentan believe that this overstates the facts. In their opinion, the drastic change is some Semai is explainable by circumstances that made it easier for them to become violent when their military situation encouraged them to do so. Most Semai in the military did not give themselves over to extremes of violence. For instance, over a twenty-year period, the original Semai unit of 300 to 400 soldiers killed an average of only one person per year. Thus, the typical Semai soldier was not dramatically violent.

Robarchek and Dentan also point out that many of the Semai who were involved in violence had been previously affected by terrorists, who had murdered a number of influential Semai. The British had bombed and strafed Semai villages, driving the people into the rain forests. They then told the Semai that it had been the communist insurgents who had harmed them. In the opinion of Robarchek and Dentan, the violent outbursts of a few Semai soldiers simply proves that we all have the capacity for violence even if nonviolence is our cultural and personal ideal. The violent Semai soldiers were simply "people with little or no prior experience in either committing or dealing with violence, transplanted from an egalitarian (equal), peaceful society into one that taught and rewarded killing, where they were trained in military behavior, including how to kill." In the "heat, fear, and excitement of sudden firefight" they did what they had been trained to do against enemies they believed had harmed and killed their own neighbors and friends.

Robarchek and Dentan also argue that the Semai concept of "blood-drunkenness" has been misunderstood, because the English phrase has very different connotations than the original Semai term from which is translated, *buul bhiib*. The "drunkenness" of *buul bhibb* does not have the connotation of "pleasurable wooziness and loss of restraint that Americans associate with being drunk, but an 'intoxication' which disorients and nauseates." Semai veterans who killed and then described themselves as "blood drunk" were not saying that they had gone berserk with a lust to kill. Quite the contrary, they meant that they had felt "an acute state of nausea, fear, disorientation, and disgust which the sight of human blood evokes among the Semai."

The Semai, then, seem to tell us that although all humans may be violent under the circumstances, people can also be socialized to inhibit aggression in their daily lives. It is even possible for people who are socialized to live nonviolently to incorporate in image of nonviolence into their self-image. They might still behave aggressively when so encouraged by special circumstances, but they will probably be bewildered and even disgusted by their own behavior and will return to their nonviolent lifestyle as soon as circumstances permit.

References:

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