How Human Nature Fosters Violence, War and Genocide

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An Evolutionary and Psychological Study

By

Stewart Gabel

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To Max Brody, an uncle long gone, but not forgotten;
a courageous traveller in a sometimes cruel world.

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings have always acted violently toward one another (Keeley 1996), often because of competition for resources, competition for mates, or attempts to acquire territory. At times, violence seems to have been perpetrated against fellow humans because of other reasons, such as racial or religious differences; sometimes these reasons are obscure or seemingly incomprehensible, leading to the notion that there is an innate propensity for violence in humans. Males are heavily overrepresented among those who perpetrate violence, both as individuals and in groups.

During the early post–Second World War era, Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew, coined the term *genocide* to describe rather common phenomena in which one group of seemingly powerful or strong individuals or members of a nation dehumanized, violently attacked, murdered, and/or slaughtered members of another group for reasons that were often ascribed to factors such as ethnic, religious, or racial differences—even when these differences in some cases had been present for many years or centuries without the expression of extremes of violence. This new term came to be used to describe the wholesale destruction of innocent victims in situations intended to decimate large populations (Power 2002, 29–45).

How can genocides, of which there have been many (Power 2002), be understood? Why do we humans so readily kill our fellow human beings? Sociological, psychological, or political approaches have been studied extensively and seem to provide only partial answers. Is it possible to further clarify or understand the phenomena in question? The arguments put forth in this book suggest that the answer to this question is *yes*; and that evolutionary, historical, and psychological evidence presented here support the view that human beings innately strive for dominance, power, and control over their fellow human beings; and that when victimizers are strong enough and potential victims weak enough, mass murders and genocide may occur without much recourse to rational justification.

Studies with chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), probably the closest biological relative to humans among prehuman primates, suggest that extreme violence, sometimes tempered by the influence of civilizing behaviors,

may be a part of our basic nature, ready to erupt with relatively little provocation. Jane Goodall, a pioneering researcher of chimpanzees, has commented that "the DNA of humans and chimpanzees differs by only just over one per cent it seems that the main difference in our genetic makeup lays in the expression of the genes" (2010, i). There is now an increasing understanding among scientists of "ways in which chimpanzees and humans resemble each other, not only biologically but intellectually and behaviorally" (xi). Goodall emphasizes that "there are many similarities in chimpanzee and human behavior—the affectionate, supportive and enduring bonds between family members, the long period of childhood dependency, the importance of learning, non-verbal communication patterns, tool-using and tool-making, cooperation in hunting, sophisticated social manipulations…and a variety of helping behaviors, to name but a few" (235). Goodall also points out, however, that chimpanzees, like humans, engage in warlike activities: "Chimpanzees show hostile, aggressive territorial behavior that is not unlike certain forms of primitive human warfare" (238).

The main emphasis in this book is on possible evolutionary precursors to or determinants of current behaviors related to genocidal actions and how these evolutionary precursors to genocide have been modified or altered into behaviors more consistent with civilized (but not necessarily less lethal) forms. I argue here that genocides and episodes or periods of mass violence reflect innate propensities in human beings for violence and murder that are activated by more proximate causes, such as food and other resource inequalities, racial or religious differences, or territorial ambitions. The underlying causes of genocide and mass violence, however, lie in the proclivities of human beings for behaviors and actions that are demonstrable in our prehuman primate ancestors and that are operative in modern humans, albeit in often disguised or altered forms. These disguised forms reflect developmental and psychological processes in humans that characterize our more civilized human behavior.

I argue further in this book that the actual occurrence of mass murders in genocide generally is not an isolated event, but rather reflects what might be called a process—a genocidal process—that sequentially includes xenophobia, which in turn often leads to dehumanization; and that dehumanization leads to and allows for the final behavioral step of mass murder, including destruction and violence. Genocidal actions, themselves, are often perpetrated by masses or groups, directly or indirectly, that are led by leaders who energize the potential genocidal tendencies of their followers. All these activities that are important in genocide—xenophobia,

dehumanization, extreme violence, irrational behavior of large groups of humanity that are led by and/or instigated by dogmatic and charismatic leaders—can be understood in part through their evolutionary roots. It is these deep evolutionary roots and their relationship to modern genocidal processes that form the basis of this book.

The central argument of this book is that an understanding of our evolutionary past offers us a greater understanding of our present and of our (beneficial and harmful) possibilities for the future—including the possibility of addressing and, to some degree, controlling aggressive behavior and other precursors of genocide. Evolutionary psychology is the main theoretical paradigm used in this book. Evolutionary psychology is a field that has emerged in recent decades that attempts an integration of evolutionary concepts with current psychological understandings of how and why humans adapt and react as they do. As Waller (2007) says, "Evolutionary psychology is a multidisciplinary approach within the Darwinian paradigm that seeks to apply theories of evolutionary biology in order to understand the human mind. Evolutionary psychology is not a specialized subfield of psychology.…Rather, evolutionary psychology is best seen as a different way of thinking in which knowledge and principles from evolutionary biology are put to use in research on the structure of the human mind" (2007, 148–9).

It is important that we do not fall into erroneous binary thinking that considers humans as good or evil. From the evolutionary psychological point of view, our prehuman ancestors and all of life have adapted if at all possible to fulfill their program to survive and to propagate. Those individuals and groups that have been unsuccessful have died. Concepts of goodness, charity, and self-sacrifice reflect either "the most effective ways to compete" (Waller 2007, 158) or our adaptations in the more proximate past and present that enable us to challenge what are thought to be self-centered and destructive impulses in the service of our own adaptation and survival. The United Nations (UN), born from the wreckage of war and genocide that claimed millions of lives, is an example.

Waller said, "We have a hereditary dark side that is universal across humankind. Acts of evil are not beyond, beneath, or outside ordinary humanness. Natural selection has left deep traces of design in our minds, and at least some of those designs leave us evolutionarily primed with the capacity for evil—including the perpetration of genocide and mass killing" (2007, 158–9). It is a central purpose of this book to deconstruct essential elements of genocide to better understand their nature, progression, and

designs and to then emphasize the importance of challenging those destructive aspects of our basic nature to arrive at necessary formulations that deter our own innate potentialities for mass violence and genocide. As indicated in the final chapter, this task should proceed on individual, group, and national levels.

Specific chapters describe what I consider a genocidal process in detail. A final chapter discusses approaches to combat genocide that, of necessity, take the form of our need to challenge or thwart malevolent aspects of our own attitudes and behaviors that reflect our evolutionary heritage. Brief descriptions of individual chapters follow. I have at times taken material or sections from my earlier book that focused on dehumanization and genocide (Gabel 2023) and incorporated that material into this work.

Brief Descriptions of Chapters

Chapter 1, Evolutionary and Primate Considerations, provides an overview of salient aspects of mainly male chimpanzee (*Pan troglodyte*) behavior in relation to territoriality, group and mating behavior, xenophobia-like behavior, extreme violence, competition, and male bonding that is reminiscent of human male behavior. As Jane Goodall (1990) indicates, chimpanzees provide a group whose study valuably enables us to learn more about our own very violent behaviors and murderous inclinations. She points out that "chimpanzees show hostile, aggressive territorial behaviour that is not unlike certain forms of primitive human warfare" (1990, 238). Chimpanzees have "an inherent fear or hatred of strangers; sometimes expressed by aggressive attacks" (238–9). Young adult male chimpanzees find intergroup conflict alluring. These young adult males are likely to team up with age-mates and those of similar rank (Mitani et al. 2004).

Wrangham's work is introduced to provide some of the possible implications of male chimpanzee behavior for understanding aggression in humans. He considers coalitionary killing (the killing of one or more individuals by two or more stronger adversaries) applied on a human level to have massively destructive consequences. "Coalitionary proactive aggression is responsible for execution, war, massacre, slavery, hazing, ritual sacrifice, torture, lynchings, gang wars, political purges, and similar abuses of power" (2019, 246).

I discuss these issues further in Chapter 1 and relate them to possible human behavior. Wrangham and Wilson (2004), for example, describe

potential similarities between chimpanzee and human behavior when commenting on human teenage gang characteristics, including gang members' emphasis on physical prowess to achieve status within the community or group.

Chapter 2, Xenophobia, defines *xenophobia* as the fear of strangers or that which is strange. This seemingly universal fear of or anxiety about that which is strange or about the stranger leads to violence, dehumanization, and genocide. The stronger group may become anxious about its own well-being and then acts violently to quell what it feels are threats to its own safety or survival. Evolutionary observations are presented to suggest that chimpanzees of one community or group have what seems to be an extreme fear of chimpanzees of another community or group without apparent reason except that the chimpanzees belong to different groups. This xenophobia leads to violence and death when the stronger group attacks the weaker group or individual.

Developmental psychoanalytic observations and studies are presented to augment the discussion. These observations suggest that xenophobia in humans may have a biological basis. Human infants in the second half of the first year of life often exhibit what is termed *stranger anxiety*, in which the infant becomes agitated, frightened, and tearful when unknown adults come into their vicinity. Parens (2012) found that stranger anxiety may later lead to xenophobia, especially when caretaking is not adequate.

Illustrations of xenophobia as a precursor to genocide are presented. The biblical narrative of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt is used as a model that provides a good example of xenophobia and potential genocide in antiquity. Other biblical narratives are cited to illustrate the writers' concerns with both xenophobia and xenophilia (acceptance and love of strangers). These concerns support the view that xenophobia and its relationship to genocide probably have been present through much of history. Several more recent twentieth-century genocides, which include the Armenian genocide, the Cambodian genocide, and the Holocaust, are presented to highlight the xenophobia leading to or accompanying these latter catastrophes.

Chapter 3, Dehumanization, offers a selective review of research and writings on dehumanization. Dehumanization-like behavior in chimpanzees is described. Recent research has found that contacts between victimizers and those dehumanized may alter the perceptions of both sides of this dangerous conflict in positive directions.

An expanded definition of *dehumanization* emphasizing the more severe end of the spectrum is provided as follows: "Dehumanization is the process by which a powerful individual or group (the victimizers) actively deny or withdraw a second group's (the victim's) sense of human worth or personal value. The process may reflect external actions taken by the victimizer group and/or internal attitudes held toward the weaker or maligned group.…Dehumanization results in the loss of the victims' sense of personal value, self-worth or 'personhood.' In extreme cases, dehumanization becomes murder as the victims' identities, lives and 'personhood' are taken from them" (Gabel 2023,58). This definition is discussed further in the chapter itself in relation to the role dehumanization plays in establishing the victim as subservient to the power of the victimizer and/or as a prelude to genocide itself. It is important to recognize that this conceptualization of dehumanization emphasizes the importance of power and the establishment of dominance of the victimizer over the victim.

Illustrations in this chapter are taken from the Armenian and Cambodian genocides and from the Holocaust.

Chapter 4, Violence, Killing, and Genocide, reviews aspects of this topic that bear on the apparent innate propensity that humans have for violence. Historical reviews and evidence suggest that violence among humans has been present through the ages. The observations of Goodall (1990) and others have found that violence, killing, and what appear to be warlike activities occur in chimpanzee societies also. As noted in chapter 2, the experience of the other and assumptions about what the other's actions might mean for the majority group is frightening to both chimpanzees and to human groups. This fear serves as a catalyst for dehumanization and violence and aggression.

Psychoanalytic writings on the development of violence and aggression are used to augment the discussion. Freud was interested in aggression but made this behavior a hallmark of his theoretical framework only late in his career. Melanie Klein's work with infants that is also discussed in chapter 2 suggests that a developmental fear of annihilation may result in xenophobia and reactive aggression and violence toward others. Mastroianni's (2019) comprehensive work involving psychological issues in Nazi leaders, including Hitler, was inconclusive around specific diagnoses, psychopathology, or precipitants to aggressive behavior, however. Several authors have provided witness accounts or commentaries (some of which are discussed here) that document horrific cruelty and

malevolence that accompanied violence and killing of Jews during the Holocaust. These behaviors, callousness, cruelty, and sadism have also been noted by authors who have studied and written about genocides apart from the Holocaust.

Severe violence, cruelty, and genocide are conceptualized at least in part as being associated with the desire or need for power and dominance, qualities that are also discussed in the preceding chapter on dehumanization. The Armenian genocide and the Cambodian genocide provide additional examples of violence, killing, and the importance of power and dominance in humans that bring to mind possible antecedents in males in chimpanzee society.

Chapter 5, Leaders and Their Followers, describes evolutionary, historical, and psychological approaches to the understanding of the crucial interplay between leaders and followers as they jointly pursue genocidal actions. There are noteworthy similarities between the dominant male leader of a chimpanzee community and his followers and the authoritarian leader of a group that becomes focused on mass murder and genocide.

Leaders require followers and the reverse also is true. Gustave Le Bon's (1895) classic essay describes the psychology of these two entities. He indicates that in followers, "the conscious personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost" (25). Le Bon points out that "our savage, destructive instincts are the inheritance left dormant in all of us from the primitive ages" (48–9), although, in light of the discussion throughout this book, we might go further and say that our destructive instincts are residua of our prehuman evolutionary past.

Le Bon discusses leadership of the masses also. The prestige of leaders is crucial for the success of the ideas and actions the leader wishes to propagate. "Prestige in reality is a sort of domination exercised on our mind by an individual, a work, or an idea. This domination entirely paralyses our critical faculty and fills our soul with astonishment and respect" (119).

Freud (1923), in *The Ego and the Id,* generally agrees with Le Bon about the characteristics of the large group or masses, but deviates from Le Bon in discussing the leader, whom Freud finds to have characteristics related to the ego ideal of individuals in the crowd. Freud, too, feels that individuals in a crowd act like the primordial herd whose members lose their individuality and their conscious sense of reality or morality.

Mastroianni's (2019) study of the leaders of the Nazi movement provides a comprehensive review of leadership characteristics in that genocide but provides no definitive sense of discrete psychopathology for these men. The work of Coolidge et al. (2007) uses current empirical instruments and finds suggestions of psychopathology in authoritarian leaders that fall along paranoid (and other) dimensions. The classic studies of Milgram (1994) point to the relative ease by which individuals respond to the directions of authority even when these directions may be harmful to others and fly in the face of their own ethical beliefs. Zimbardo's (2007) Stanford prison experiments suggest that individuals can be influenced rather easily to adopt roles foreign to themselves that involve apparent cruelty and subjugation of others.

Classic studies by Browning (1992), Gross (2001), and Goldhagen (1997) illustrate instances of genocide committed in the Second World War by otherwise seemingly ethical individuals who are responding to the dictates of authority and/or the mass intoxication of the crowd. Goldhagen's work suggests that people of an entire nation or group of nations are susceptible to the influences of authority and that they may come to hold destructive beliefs about a minority population and indirectly participate in genocide through the influences of authority, effective propaganda, and sufficient time.

Chapter 6, What Can Be Done to Decrease the Likelihood of Genocide?, discusses the writings and suggestions of scholars who have attempted to understand and decrease mass violence and genocide. It offers my own ideas about the importance of recognizing the evolutionary burden toward violence and its associated characteristics that humans carry, as described in this book. Programs on individual, group, and social levels that emphasize rechanneling destructive competitive energies in activities such as international sports and bringing peoples of different backgrounds together in joint endeavors offer hope in reducing negative feelings and dehumanization, as described in Chapter 3. Isolation from other peoples, groups, and countries offers little protection against negative assumptions of the other. Integration, recognition and acceptance of differences offer more hope against genocide as we challenge our evolutionary (and in some cases developmental) burdens. The situation fortunately is not hopeless, as our evolutionary heritage also provides us with the capacities toward kindness, caring, and engagement with others that should not be overlooked (Wrangham, 2019).

CHAPTER 1

EVOLUTIONARY AND PRIMATE CONSIDERATIONS

The focus of this work is on severe aggression, violence, and genocide—and on their precursors and associated features such as xenophobia, dehumanization, malign leadership, and followership. Various fields of study, such as anthropology and evolutionary psychology, emphasize that human behavior seems to have nonhuman primate precursors that provide models for a greater understanding of our own behavioral patterns. The similarities between human behavior and nonhuman behavior, especially as found in nonhuman primates, lead to many considerations about how we come to be ourselves. Behaviors such as separation from the mother, for example, attest to the similarity, at least in this instance, of human behavior and nonhuman primate behavior around attachment issues.

Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*)

Male Behavior in Relation to Aggression, Violence, and Dominance

Violence in chimpanzees is found in males and females but is most prevalent in males (Sousa and Casanova, 2008). Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) are a species that shares over 98% of its genetic material with humans. Chimpanzees therefore provide a valuable group whose study enables us to learn more about our own very violent behaviors and murderous inclinations (Goodall, 2010, 235).

The following is a brief description of several characteristic chimpanzee behaviors that are similar to behaviors and attitudes that characterize human behaviors found in genocide and other forms of mass violence, such as wars or gang-related behaviors. Causality is certainly not proved, but the relationships between chimpanzee behaviors and human (especially male) behaviors in these activities involving extreme violence is sometimes striking.

There are several developmental and behavioral stages in the life of male chimpanzees that may shed light on the origins of violent and aggressive male behavior in humans. These areas include separation from the mother during childhood; differing developmental trajectories of male and female chimpanzees; strivings for alpha-male prerogatives and status; pursuit of power, dominance and control in males; aggressive, unprovoked, and threatening displays against members of their own community; unprovoked aggression against members of outside groups (communities); and the subjugation and control of females, who are weaker and of lower rank in the chimpanzee community. Sousa and Casanova (2008, 86) emphasize that in chimpanzee communities, "an adult male organizes his whole life around issues of dominance."

Male chimpanzees also feel an imperative to protect (and often patrol) the borders of their community's "territory." If they have an advantage in terms of strength and numbers, they will act violently against actual or feared territorial interlopers (who might be termed "others," as discussed later in this book). Ostracism or forced withdrawal of defeated alpha males from their own community that signifies loss of status and position is an example of a behavior that Goodall has called *dechimpization* to reflect isolation and loss of acceptance in the chimpanzee community that can be compared to the social isolation and dehumanization of rejected humans. Unprovoked infanticidal attacks perpetrated mainly by community males (but also by females who are not the mother) should be included in a discussion of violence in chimpanzee communities. The reasons for these attacks are disputed. They are at times are associated with cannibalism of the infants (Goodall, 2010, 284, 285).

Jane Goodall (2010) is probably the best-known chimpanzee researcher of our times. She has spent decades following and studying generations of chimpanzees at Gombe National Park in Tanzania. She finds an increasing understanding among scientists of "ways in which chimpanzees and humans resemble each other, not only biologically but intellectually and behaviorally" (xi). Goodall points out that the chimpanzee is the "closest living relative" to humans (275). She describes in more detail many of the behaviors and characteristics noted earlier, and emphasizes that "there are many similarities in chimpanzee and human behavior—the affectionate, supportive and enduring bonds between family members, the long period of childhood dependency, the importance of learning, non-verbal communication patterns, tool-using and tool-making, cooperation in hunting, sophisticated social manipulations, aggressive territoriality, and a variety of helping behaviors, to name but a few" (235).

Goodall (2010) also points out that chimpanzees, like humans, engage in war-like activities. “Chimpanzees show hostile, aggressive territorial behavior that is not unlike certain forms of primitive human warfare” (238). Chimpanzees have “an inherent fear or hatred of strangers; sometimes expressed by aggressive attacks” (238-239). This fear of strangers is a behavioral state that has similarities to xenophobia in humans, as described in chapter 2.

Young adult male chimpanzees find intergroup conflict alluring. These young adult males are likely to team up with age-mates and those of similar rank (Mitani et al. 2004). Female chimpanzees also may be aggressive, but not as frequently as males (Pusey et al. 2008).

The descriptions Goodall (2010) provides of aggressive chimpanzee behavior in a chapter of her work titled “War” are illustrative of some of these aggressive behaviors that may become lethal when chimpanzees of different but neighboring communities encounter one another. She states, “At least once a week the Gombe males, usually in groups of not less than three, visit the peripheral areas of their community range. There is no clearly marked boundary between neighboring social groups; usually, in fact, there is an area of quite extensive overlap between them. When the males discover some good source of food in such an overlap zone, they often go back the next day to feed, accompanied then by females and youngsters” (116). On these expeditions, the chimpanzees attempt to ascertain where their neighbors are; they may scan the territory ahead of them, for example. When they can see and hear nothing dangerous, they advance and begin to feed. When chimpanzees from the adjacent community are seen, the response of the first group depends on the size of the group in the neighboring community. With equal size, both neighboring groups may call out, threaten each other but keep their distance and provide a display of strength. “First one group, and then the other, performs wild displays, charging through the undergrowth, slapping and stamping on the ground, drumming on tree trunks, throwing rocks, and all the while uttering loud, fierce calls. Finally, after half an hour or more, each side retreats towards the safe central part of its own home range” (117). The situation is different, however, when one side senses an advantage over the other. In this case violence is more likely to ensue.

Chimpanzees avoid conflict with others who are stronger than they. “It is when two or more males encounter a lone stranger, or a couple of stranger females with infants, that fierce and brutal attacks take place” (Goodall 2010, 117). Females provide welcome targets for aggression and killing

during many attacks, sometimes more so than their infants. This situation (as noted below) is different than in other circumstances, such as when male lions take over another lion's pride and kill the young of the pride. This latter action forces lactation in the females to stop and hastens their readiness for mating with the new male leader. Goodall (2010, 118-119) comments that in the case of adult female chimpanzees of neighboring communities who are attacked, "It seems, then, that the attacks are an expression of the hatred that is roused in the chimpanzees of one community by the sight of a member of another. Strangers of either sex may trigger this hostility, but the unthreatening females are attacked far more often."

Goodall (2010, 120-126) describes another instance of "war" that bears on the type of violence discussed here. In 1974, the chimpanzee community that Goodall was following began a split into two, a northern and southern group, that over time became separate communities and increasingly hostile to one another. During the initial phases of this split, the males of the two communities related as described earlier, with many insults and displays when encounters occurred in the overlapping zone. At some point, for reasons not described (or perhaps known), males of the original group who were on patrol suddenly and viciously attacked a single male from the second group who soon died. Over the next four years, four more assaults of chimpanzees from the second breakaway group were witnessed. The killers returned to their northern home and were seen to be extremely excited. "Repeatedly they drummed on tree trunks, hurled rocks, dragged and threw branches. And all the time they called out, as though in triumph" (123). Ultimately, all of the adults, males and females, of the breakaway group disappeared and were thought to have been killed. In this way, the breakaway community disappeared and its territory was annexed by the initial community.

Supporting the discussion of dehumanization in chapter 3 of this book, Goodall (2010, 239) states, "Among humans, members of one group may see themselves as quite distinct from members of another, and may then treat group and non-group individuals differently. Indeed, non-group members may even be 'dehumanized' and regarded almost as creatures of a different species. Once this happens people are freed from the inhibitions and social sanctions that operate within their own group, and can behave to non-group members in ways that would not be tolerated amongst their own. This leads, among other things, to the atrocities of war" or, we could say, to genocide, as described in this work (Gabel 2023; Smith 2011, 2020).

Pruetz et al (2017) report a case of apparent intragroup coalitionary killing at the Fongali study site in Senegal that also recognizes the perils of loss of status. In this case, an adult male (named Foudouko) had been the alpha male of the group. For reasons that are unclear, Foudouko was deposed from his alpha leadership position. He then was ostracized to a degree and remained on the periphery of the community for about 5 years. He then attempted reintegration into the community. This seemed to be successful for a period, but Foudouko was later found dead by the researchers, apparently having been killed by one or (probably) more of the within-group chimpanzees. Exactly why he was killed is not clear. Nor is it clear why his killing and other cases of coalitionary killings were associated with partial cannibalism of the body.

Pruetz et al. (2017) suggest a number of possible contributing factors to this killing of a former alpha male that includes high rates of male competition. While Foudouko is not reported to have been vying for greater rank or threatening to become an alpha male again after his reentry to the group, competition may have been a consideration among some of the chimpanzees, although the then-current alpha male did not contribute to the killing. As indicated in the instance described by Goodall (2010) above, issues of loyalty and belonging may have contributed to the killing of this formerly alpha male.

Sandel and Watts (2021) describe another instance of coalitionary killing of an adult male chimpanzee in Ngogo, Kibale National Park, Uganda. In this instance, a chimpanzee who was attacked, called “Basie,” was a high-ranking male who had been on friendly terms with members of a subgroup. Basie had groomed with the original group but also with the newer group. As in the illustration cited above that Goodall (1990) provides, having been associated with one subgroup and grooming members in it, does not seem to protect a given chimpanzee from murderous attacks from the same members for reasons that are not always clear. There is no mention here of Basie trying to achieve alpha status in his seemingly preferred group.

Sandel and Watts (2021) describe three subgroups in this picture: western, central, and eastern. As they comment, “When members of the western subgroup were close to or encountered central and/or eastern subgroup members, they started to behave as they do during intercommunity interactions” (4). In other words, despite periods of positive interactions among subgroup members, mutual grooming or foraging behaviors do not seem to have been protective from the rather sudden violence that

occurred toward members of what the authors considered one overall community. Members of the subgroup that carried out the killing apparently saw an advantage and took it without regard to previous ties—or perhaps because of previous ties. In any case, among the chimpanzee population, rageful, murderous behavior—possibly around territory, boundaries, loyalties, or affiliation disruption—was prominent.

Goodall (2010) emphasizes that chimpanzees' sense of group identity is strong (despite the shifting loyalties described above). Noncommunity members may be fiercely attacked, not simply because of the fear of strangers, although this point may be debated, as noted later. The breakaway group noted above was not composed of strangers, but its members had separated themselves from their original group. It seemed to Goodall (2010) that through separating themselves from their original group, the breakaway members had forfeited their right to be treated as members of the original group and that these deserters were attacked even more viciously and ferociously than members of other chimpanzee communities. As mentioned earlier, Goodall (2010, 240) uses the term *dechimpized* as a pun to substitute for *dehumanized* to describe the hatred reserved for breakaway members of the original chimpanzee community. Speaking again of humans, Goodall (2010, 45) states that "we carry in our genes, handed down from our distant past, deep-rooted aggressive tendencies," a point supported by Silk (2014). In the case cited, lethal aggression was marshalled in the service of retribution for disloyalty to the initial group.

Wrangham (2019), who had been a student of Goodall, also stresses the aggressiveness of chimpanzees, sometimes for reasons that reflect mainly status. "Chimpanzee males fight often with other members of their community. Sometimes they fight over valuable foods such as hunks of meat. Sometimes they fight over mating privileges. Mostly, however, they fight over nothing more than status. They regularly charge at one another in displays intended to demand clear expressions of subordinacy" (88).

Males' interactions with females and with infants also are of interest when considering violence, killing, and dehumanization (or dechimpization). "During the 10-15 days preceding ovulation, female chimpanzees experience a conspicuous swelling of the ano-genital skin and an increase in sexual proceptivity." (Wilson and Wrangham, 368). Although a female's refusal of sexual advances by a male ultimately may result in violence toward her, "males also commonly beat up on females, often in surprise attacks launched for no obvious reason.…The male's aim in such attacks

is to intimidate a chosen female into readily acceding to his future demands for sex" (88–9). As noted below, infants also are in danger in chimpanzee communities. "Infants less than a few months old have occasionally been killed. Adults of either sex can be responsible for killing an infant, though the killer is never the mother" (Wrangham, 2019, 89).

Wrangham (2019) comments further on the ever-present potential for violence in chimpanzee society. "Interactions between chimpanzee communities are never relaxed or friendly. Most encounters involve wary avoidance, sometimes accompanied by 'shouting matches' when the parties from each community are separated by a large enough distance for individuals to call bravely to each other" (89). When there is a coalition of adult males that unite in aggression, however, physical altercations may lead to death. "Males in the larger party seek to press their advantage against the other community. Sometimes they catch and kill a helpless victim, whether an infant or an adult" (89). Wrangham goes on to state, "The only relationship that has ever been seen between males from neighboring territories is instant hostility, leading to flight, shouting or fight" (91).

Wrangham (2019) discusses some of the possible implications of male chimpanzee behavior for understanding aggression in humans. He considers coalitionary killing applied on a human level to have massively destructive consequences. "Coalitionary proactive aggression is responsible for execution, war, massacre, slavery, hazing, ritual sacrifice, torture, lynchings, gang wars, political purges, and similar abuses of power" (246). He goes on to say, however, that "violence responds to circumstance, not to unstoppable genetic instructions" (253). "Evolution has made the killing of strangers pleasurable, because those that liked to kill tended to receive adaptive benefits" (257). These benefits, in human terms, may include high position, parades, and heroic status.

Wrangham (2019) argues in essence that strangers are dehumanized and reduced to nonhuman status, thus enabling the murderer to kill with impunity or even joyfully, given that the object of the kill is not "really" human. Using cues such as the stranger's weapons, dress, and dialect, the warrior can tell at once whether or not the stranger is part of his society. A true stranger, a member of a hostile neighboring society, will probably be regarded as nonhuman, and is liable to be as dangerous to the warrior as the warrior is to him. To enjoy a successful attack makes grisly sense.…The notion that humans evolved to enjoy killing unknown enemies is unpleasant and inimical to our ordinary view of humanity.…

Where the social divide is sufficient, however, occasional outbursts of killing still seem to manifest a deep joy of killing." (257–8). Wrangham (2019) cites literature that refers to Japanese soldiers killing Chinese people when the soldiers were bored. They did this by burying them alive or pushing them into a fire or beating them with clubs as examples. Nazi treatment of Jewish prisoners in concentration camps provides other examples.

Wrangham (2019) points out that "we are inclined to label callously planned violence such as the Holocaust as 'inhuman'. But phylogenetically, of course, it is not inhuman at all. It is deeply human. No other mammal has such a deliberate approach to mass killing of its own species" (260). As I have stated elsewhere (Gabel 2023), Freud and others who tried to find suitable illustrations of the death drive through clinical and nonclinical examples of modern individuals may have lessened the impact of their arguments by examples that can nearly always be explained, at least in part, by personal or family circumstances. It is when looking at larger groups, as in mobs and genocidal attacks, that the presence of a human desire to kill others may become more easily appreciated. Wrangham (2019, 260) states, "Coalitionary proactive aggression can be responsible not only for execution of selected individuals but also for the deliberate killing of larger groups."

Wrangham (2019) further points out that from an evolutionary perspective, "the critical time and place for the origin of *Homo sapiens* was the Mid- to Late-Pleistocene in Africa. The 2.6-million-year Pleistocene era is the time during which our lineage changed from a chimpanzee-sized prehuman into a culturally sophisticated and psychologically modern *Homo sapiens*" (113). Current human behavior is of course far more nuanced than that of prehuman primates although shadows of chimpanzee-like behaviors, such as fear of the other, or xenophobia, that occurs in one's own or nearby communities is reminiscent of intercommunity interactions among chimpanzees. (See chapter 2, Xenophobia.)

Infancy and Early Development (and Mortality)

Goodall (2010) offers observations about the development of chimpanzees that sounds in some ways similar to what might be said of human developmental psychology: "For chimpanzees, whose brains are more like those of humans than are those of any other living animal, the nature of early experience may have a profound effect on adult behavior. Particularly important, I believe, is the disposition of the child's mother, his or her

position in the family, and, if there are elder siblings, their sex and personalities. A secure childhood is likely to lead to self-reliance and independence in adulthood. A disturbed early life may leave permanent scars" (38–9). She goes on to say, "All chimpanzee infants become upset and depressed during the difficult time of weaning when the mother prevents her child, with increasing frequency and determination, both from suckling and riding on her back" (40).

Male chimpanzees separate from the mother earlier than females do. With separation from the mother, the males begin their first journeys with the adult males of the community and become strongly identified with this group. This process seems to be associated with an attempted subjugation of the weaker females. As Goodall (2010, 131) comments, the young male chimpanzee must challenge the females of the community and then, "when all have been dominated, he must begin to work his way into the dominance hierarchy of the adult males" (131). The young male also must assume particular areas of community responsibilities that are largely required of the males such as patrolling the boundaries of the territory, repelling intruders, searching distant sources of food, and some hunting (137). These experiences require that chimpanzee males devote their time and energies to more typical male activities in the community. (See chapter 4 for additional information on human development, stranger anxiety, and aggression in humans.)

Wrangham (2019) discusses a possible cause of the chimpanzees' fear of (and hostility toward) the other. His understanding bears considerable resemblance to Melanie Klein's theory of infant development discussed in chapter 4. Wrangham states that "in any mammal's life, there is a predictable change as it grows older, more mobile, and less likely to be protected by its mother. It becomes more easily frightened and then, as a response, more aggressive. At an age that varies across species, a fear response kicks in" (175–6). It may be that this fear response leads to the extreme fear of the other that chimpanzees exhibit.

Wrangham (2019) describes the phenomenon of infrequent, unprovoked, sudden infanticide and cannibalism that may occur in chimpanzee communities. He writes that the main perpetrators are female chimpanzees, although others would disagree on the sex of the perpetrator, as indicated below. He comments, "A particularly helpless infant in the arms of a competitor appears to stir something dark in the mind of a female chimpanzee" (210). Males also commit infanticide, but this is explained by Wrangham (and others) as an attempt to increase the killer's chances of

fathering additional infants by forcing a cessation of lactation in females (228). “The death of an infant fathered by a different male would lead the mother to come into estrus sooner than she would if her infant lived…” (228). This is the sexual selection theory of infanticide.

The understanding of infanticide among chimpanzees (and subsequent cannibalism in some cases) remains unsettled. Lowe et al (2020) conducted a study of infanticide among chimpanzees over a 24-year period that occurred in the Sonso chimpanzee community in the Balongo Forest in Uganda. Of the 103 births they recorded, 23% were victims of infanticide. Infanticide was more common among male than female infants, but sex of the infant did not seem to be an overriding factor. Unlike in Wrangham’s (2019) report, the majority of perpetrators were adult males, although female perpetrators also were represented. These investigators found that two-thirds of the targeted infants were under one year of age. Cannibalism occurred in a minority of cases, and consumption of carcasses was incomplete, raising questions of whether cannibalism was the main driving force for the infanticide.

Lowe et al. (2020) considered four hypotheses to account for their findings based on previous hypotheses in the literature: (1.) sexual selection, (2.) male mating competition, (3.) resource competition, and (4.) meat acquisition. They concluded that the last three options were not likely. For competition among males around mating, the age differential between newborn and sexually active or mature males was too great. Competition for resources between these very differently aged groups also was unlikely. While the killers did often eat at least parts of the chimpanzees they killed, often the cannibalism was only partial and the remaining parts of the dead infant were left uneaten.

Lowe et al. (2020) argued that the sexual selection hypothesis fits the data best, although this can be challenged. The sexual selection hypothesis argues that chimpanzees, like other mammalian species (e.g., lions) kill the young of an unrelated female so that the female chimpanzee will come into estrus sooner than would be true if lactation continued and usual weaning occurred at several years of age. Killing the young, in the case of the lion, for example, provides greater likelihood that the new dominant male of the lion pride will be the father of all of the offspring during the period of his dominance. The new pride’s leader’s chances of passing on his genes (as opposed to protecting the genes of his predecessor) are thus enhanced by killing the young males of the pride that he has taken over. In the case of the chimpanzee, the father of the offspring of the females who

have gone into estrus may not be clear given the frequency of mating and the significant number of males who may impregnate a given female during her estrus period.

The most likely male killers of infants in chimpanzee communities appear to be young or upwardly mobile males (Lowe et al. 2019). It may be that the helpless newborn and weaker female mother, at least in part, provide an opportunity for the young male chimpanzee to express his violent capabilities. Since the male chimpanzee may not know whether the female who comes into estrus earlier than expected after he has committed infanticide bears his child, an aggressive display toward the mother that kills her infant may include the desire to express the younger male's power and dominance rather than being an attempt to bring the female into estrus. Wrangham (2019) has stated that there are times when chimpanzees become violent for no apparent reason save to express their dominance.

Chimpanzee communities are clearly violent environments, with aggression directed both toward noncommunity members and toward within group members. The study of bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), another group of nonhuman primates who shares with humans about the same degree of genetic material as does the chimpanzee, provides an example of a nonhuman primate oriented toward the avoidance of violence.

Bonobos (*Pan paniscus*)

The bonobos are a group of primates that was first discovered in the 1920s and came to be considered a separate species in the 1930s, when they were recognized as having separate anatomical and behavioral characteristics from chimpanzees (Trubits 2011, 11–4). These distinct features include relatively smaller size and less difference in size between males and females (although males have larger canine teeth). Bonobos and chimpanzees have strikingly different behaviors and inhabit strikingly different communities. Bonobos are shy and timid; their society is matrilineal, with close relations between mothers and sons. Male-dominant hierarchies are weak, if existent at all. Female preference is important in choosing mates. Males do not form rigid hierarchies, and their status positions depend on promotion by their mothers. There is close female bonding and a female hierarchy, with older females more likely to have the alpha position. Sexual activity is frequent and enhances social bonding. Sexual behaviors are a means of relieving tensions and potential conflict and decreasing the likelihood of aggression. Infanticide does not seem to occur in bonobo communities (Sousa and Casanova 2008).

Trubits (2011, 14) indicates that "chimpanzees resort to violence to obtain what they want while bonobos use sex to solve problems. Sex is not limited to male-female interactions but may involve a variety of sexual behaviors. Chimpanzee social behavior is patrifocal, males form coalitions to obtain resources through the use of violence." Chimpanzees and bonobos are the two closest nonhuman primates to humans, but their behaviors and interpersonal strategies are vastly different. As Trubits (2011, 16)) writes, "Human behavior is an accentuation of both bonobo and chimpanzee social behavior." While humans seem to have behaviors that resemble both groups, activities such as wars, mass violence, and genocide suggest that the chimpanzee influence—at least in these very aggressive killing enterprises—is far greater.

As indicated in this book thus far, human beings, like chimpanzees, but unlike bonobos, seem to have a proclivity toward aggression and violence. Murder and extreme violence, for examples, are sometimes engaged in by otherwise peaceful human beings when certain precipitants, such as perceived mating challenges or encroachments on disputed land, elicit or activate this tendency toward violence that at times becomes murderous. Sometimes extreme violence occurs because of the desire to demonstrate to oneself, the group, or the other that the aggressor is dominant and powerful enough to subjugate or kill the weaker victim. At other times, if the inhibitions to killing are too great, a lesser form of physical, social, or emotional violence and murder may be exhibited. The offending other is dehumanized, shunned from the dominant society, or denied basic human dignities or rights (such as voting), perhaps as a prelude to murder, as occurred in the Nazi era.

A Relationship Between Personal and Environmental Triggers and a Human Tendency Toward Violence

Buss and Shakelford's (1997) elaboration on this interactionist approach to the understanding of severe aggression, violence, and killing from an evolutionary perspective emphasizes the interaction between biology and environment. They contend that "all human behavior is a product of mechanisms internal to the person, in conjunction with inputs that trigger those mechanisms" (607). All of these psychological and physical mechanisms, such as rage and aggression, are themselves the products of evolution by selection. These mechanisms are "information processing devices with special properties" (608). They react to forms of input that may be internal or external to the organism in question. They then provide

reactions and outputs. “The mechanisms are fashioned by selection processes to solve *adaptive problems*” (608). In other words, aggression is an attempted solution to particular problems that is derived evolutionarily from natural or sexual selection. Wilson and Wrangham (2003, 385–6) seem to agree when they state, “Contemporary behavioral biology…views primate aggression as a strategic response to appropriate environmental conditions.” Of course, this strategic response may be harmful or disastrous, depending on conditions. Warfare and genocide may be deadly responses to highly mistaken perceptions.

Buss and Shackelford (1997) consider what the adaptive solutions required by particular problems might be, and in the context of this discussion, how aggression, from an evolutionary standpoint, comes into play to address these problems. The problems they highlight include attempting to co-opt the resources of others; defending against others; inflicting costs on same-sex rivals; negotiating power and status hierarchies; deterring rivals from future competitions; deterring females from infidelity; and reducing resources spent on unrelated individuals (e.g., offspring of other males).

As Buss and Shackelford (1997) indicate, “men have inherited from their successful ancestors psychological mechanisms sensitive to contexts in which aggression probabilistically leads to the successful solution of a particular adaptive problem” (617). This does not mean that the aggressive solutions that have been advantageous in the short term for particular males necessarily have long-term benefits—or that along with possible benefits there may not be detrimental outcomes. It is important to recognize that Buss and Shackelford’s (1997) formulation suggests that violence and aggression that do not have clear external precipitants may still occur if internal demands are great enough.

Aggression, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, is interactional. It involves strategies that manifest under specific contextual conditions. Biology, environment, and culture interact. Evolutionary psychology offers an approach that at least in part accounts for several common situations in everyday life (e.g., aggression of males against other males, male sexual jealousy of partners, increased rates of aggression, and abuse against stepchildren). Aggression comes to the fore under particular conditions. From evolutionary perspectives, considering the chimpanzee as a useful model, an underlying biological propensity for particular behavior is activated by specific personal, environmental, or cultural conditions to become manifest in individual and collective spheres. Chimpanzees illustrate the readiness with which this prehuman species

invokes violence (and killing) to obtain its ends. Bonobos, also genetically close to humans, illustrate that aggression need not be an automatic tool to address conflicts.

The manifold examples of violence in our society, from an evolutionary perspective, are entirely understandable. Humans share a common ancestor with the chimpanzee and seem to be biologically programmed for aggressive, violent responses under particular conditions. A good example of this potential for violence and aggression occurs in the inner-city male gang. Wrangham and Wilson (2005), for example, emphasize the similarities between male youth in gangs and males in chimpanzee communities. They state that "like youth gangs, therefore, chimpanzee communities are characterized by males competing for status through fighting ability" (244). "A common thread is that males fight to uphold their honor. If they do not fight, they risk being perceived as weak, and more likely to be attacked in the future" (251). In other words, those who will not or cannot fight are potentially dehumanized and subject to increased violence themselves.

The many peace conferences, organizations, and attempts to negotiate peaceful solutions to social, community, and international conflicts suggest that many people—knowingly or not—take seriously our own omnipresent tendency to draw on violence in an attempt to solve conflicts. We have created personal and social structures to address and (it is hoped) diminish this violence toward which we are so prone. We also have created zones of dehumanization in which people are socially and psychologically diminished (dehumanized) in part through loss of some aspect(s) of our identities when direct violence is not an option. Subsequent chapters will discuss these points in more detail.

To summarize, this book attempts to show that killing other human beings, especially when done in groups such as occurs in genocides, is a tendency for which human beings have a propensity when situations are conducive to perceived adaptive advantage or when the loss of personal or social control occurs. This innate propensity may be enhanced, modified, or lessened by personal, social, and environmental circumstances. This chapter has provided a brief glimpse into activities around aggression in the chimpanzee, the primate that may be humankind's closest genetic relative (except perhaps for the bonobo), to offer greater understanding of possible evolutionary roots of the tendency toward violence, killing, and dehumanization of others in humans.