Violence and Peace-Making in Chimps and Bonobos: Analytical Essay

Human history is characterized by violence, war, and conflict. One glance in the news will display countless headlines of tragedy and crime. However, it is important to emphasize that humans are capable of violence, not outright violent altogether. If we were ceaselessly violent, the human species would not have lasted as long as it has. Behaviorally, violence is a defensive behavior in most species, ensuring survival from individual to individual. The modern human population evolved over several thousands of years as hunter-gatherers, where the members of family groups relied on the murder of animals to ensure the entire family's survival. Many anthropologists believe that the reliance on meat-consumption in the human diet contributed very strongly to our development both physically and behaviorally. As a result, humans have also socially developed tricks and coping techniques for these violent and aggressive tendencies. Despite tragic stories that plague the news, humans are much more peaceful than ever before. Thus, the study of humans' closest relatives and ancestors is essential in understanding their behavior. In modern anthropological research, "scientists believe that modern human and...chimpanzee/bonobo lineages split about 8 million years ago...scientists have been curious as to what differences developed between the ape species and how they compare to humans" (GWToday, 2017: par 2). Frans De Waal's Our Inner Ape provides direct evidence for this relationship. De Waal's work relates chimpanzee and bonobo behaviors such as their specific means of violence, group and intergroup dynamics, and their methods of peace-making and resolving conflicts, to those in humans.

Frans de Wall's Our Inner Ape recounts studies performed primarily on chimpanzee and bonobo populations. Before their behaviors are applied to those of humans, it is important to note the distinctions between the two species. The two, despite having extremely similar genetic compositions, have varying behaviors that can individually relate to modern humans. Their major difference exists in the structure of their hierarchies. Chimpanzee groups are traditionally led by the aggressive and violent alpha male, which differs drastically from the bonobo's dominant female groups that regulate tensions through forms of sexual behavior. Traditionally, Chimps are often displayed in media as being extremely "clever and friendly, but are by nature very aggressive and competitive" (Nikkei Review, Kusashio, 2014: par. 9). Their societies stem from strict and rigid social hierarchies and are scientifically characterized as some of the most violent. As de Waal suggests, "chimpanzees would not hesitate to use knives and guns if they had them" (De Waal 2006: 135). Thus, solely studying chimpanzee behavior will suggest that humans have evolved from violent relatives. Bonobos, also distantly related to humans, are characterized by their unity and peace-making behaviors, both within their group and amongst other groups or families.

As mentioned prior, the entire chimpanzee species is characterized by its violence and brutality. These behaviors are constantly on display, and can even be seen through their diet habits. Particularly, chimpanzees are "far more carnivorous than was once thought. [In fact], they eat over thirty-five different species of vertebrate" (De Waal, 2006: 137). Due to their nature, they have gradually "lost all fear of people, [and]... occasionally attack researchers, hitting them or dragging them down a slope" (De Waal, 2006: 137). Likewise, chimpanzees' violent behaviors can be paralleled to modern human homicide, particularly between distinct or competing groups

of individuals. As described by de Waal:

Males kill each other through highly coordinated actions against single individuals of another community...They will stalk, run down, and swiftly overwhelm a victim... so viciously that he either dies on the spot or has no chance of survival. Few instances… leave little doubt...that we're dealing with targeted, deliberate killing… The attackers showed a degree of coordination and abuse not seen during aggression within their own community" (De Waal, 2006: 139).

Because humans do not on all of their aggressive tendencies, mainly due to the existence of police and laws, advanced ethical understandings, and quick social learning, it is not known how connected these chimpanzee behaviors would relate to an unlearned, naturally-acting human's behavior. However, such behaviors in chimpanzees can be related to extreme violence in wars between groups of humans, which are often scenarios that dissolve human empathy and normal social behavior. De Wall relates this to a precision-bombing pilot's concept of war as a game, as well as to the guard's brutality and arrogance in the Stanford prison experiment despite only being given roles in the experimental scenario. Both of these examples prove how the mentioned chimpanzee behaviors connect to the dehumanization of out-group members in situations of human group-violence. Opposite to out-group scenarios, it is also suggested that inter-group violence can also relate. De Waal also displays how the separation of Gombe chimps, once members of the same faction, led to a point of drinking "each other's blood" (De Waal, 2006: 142) and it's parallels in ethnic groups turning against one another once their common purpose is lost. These aggressive tendencies in chimpanzees also manifest in territory patrols, later causing xenophobic behaviors over multiple years. While chimpanzee aggression can be related to that of humans, warfare connections are a tricky subject.

Because chimpanzees have only been observed to have small group conflicts, warfare can be conceptualized as a modern finding and cannot be evolutionarily traced. However, aggression in primate species can only be applied to humans if corresponding behaviors are studied as well, like peace-making. Because chimps are not known for their peaceful tactics, "we need to look beyond the chimpanzee as an ancestral model" (De Waal, 2006: 145). Unlike the chimpanzee species, the bonobo species is characterized by its peace and methods of resolution. Historically, observations have shown that "their neighborhood relations are far from idyllic … yet they keep the door open to de-escalation and friendly contact" (De Waal, 2006: 148) This, as it has come to be understood, is the major contrast between bonobos and chimpanzees: bonobos have behaviors that distinctively resemble human remorse and reconciliation. Frans De Waal provides several examples of aggression in populations and how acts of violence can be de-escalated once the other perspective is understood. To de Waal, "this suggests an understanding of cause and effect… that [these] great apes take… another's perspective, realizing the impact of its own behavior on somebody else...they regret their actions, just as we often do" (De Waal, 2006: 151). However, several anthropologists argue for or against whether this is purely instinctual. Compared to humans, it could be argued that the infant bonobo, for example, stops his cries as a direct response to when its mother "climbs high up into the trees and throws her son to the ground" (De Waal, 2006: 152). Humans are studied as having early, complex social learning capabilities, which is said to be the difference between other primates. But, it is also proven that "primates learn peacemaking early in life" (De Waal, 2006: 152), so there is conflicting evidence in the research to compare or contrast us to these species. Ultimately, what can be concluded is that "human reconciliation is far more complex than in monkeys, influenced as it is by education and culture" (De Waal, 2006: 154).

While there are these significant parallels to human behavior, it is proven that:

we must be sure that we are comparing the same underlying evolutionary processes and that ‘similar’ patterns are indeed similar. Most of what chimpanzees and humans do today is not directly comparable — because we have evolved independently for millions of years. Along those very different evolutionary paths, both species have picked up a suite of distinctive ways of being in the world (Genetic Literacy Project, 2019: par 3).

Thus, it is best to know that this tunnel-vision approach fails in recognizing and outlining the gaps in these evolutionary insights. A characteristically human issue or behavior can not entirely be explained by a distant species. So, Frans De Waal’s work is comprised of mere suggestions based on observation.