The Rippling Effects of Testimony-Inspired Empathy and the Historical Decline of Violence: Insights from a Holocaust Survivor on a Mission to Transform the Future

Magda Brown
Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, Aurora University
Speaker’s Bureau, Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center

Andrew M. Sherrill, M.A.
Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University

Decline of Violence

• Pinker’s (2011) “Better Angels”
  • Violence has been in decline
    • From genocide to spanking
    • From millennia to years
  • We are living in the most peaceful time in our species’ existence

*Extreme CliffsNotes Version
Graphs from Pinker (2011)
Why the Decline?

- How can we combine history with psychology?
- Full answer: Pinker's (2011) “Better Angels”
  - Pacification process
  - Exogenous force: Government
  - Civilizing process
  - Exogenous force: Commerce
  - Humanitarian revolution
  - Exogenous force: Affluence and higher value of life? (No)
  - Exogenous force: Printing and literacy (Yes)
Literacy and the Humanitarian Revolution

- “The Enlightenment”
  - Knowledge > Superstition
  - Voltaire: “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities”

- Cosmopolitanism and Literacy (Hunt, 2007)
  - Combinatorial explosion of perspective-taking
  - Rationale thought and the sharing of good ideas
  - Expanding circle of empathy (Singer, 1981)

Genocide

- Not unique to 20th century (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990)
  - Examples in recorded history: Mongol invasions, American colonization, African colonization, crusades, European wars of religion, about a dozen Biblical events, etc.
  - Pre-history: Ancient wars were genocidal in nature

- What makes 20th century genocides different?
Grassroots Empathy

- Is literature the only empathy-spreading mechanism?
  - *Permanent resources*: Films, documentaries, museums, photojournalism, memorials, etc.
  - *Impermanent resources*: First-hand accounts (e.g., Magda)

- How will the next generation know?
  - Rippling effects of empathy
  - Magda’s story becomes our story
Research Needed!

- Why is violence declining?
- Low-hanging fruit: Magda’s cohort
  - Evidence of real-world impact
  - Features of affective messages (Magda > KONY 2012)
  - Psychological models of victim → advocate
    - Posttraumatic growth and the decline of violence
    - Resiliency and the decline of violence
    - Forgiveness and the decline of violence

Magda’s Introduction

- Then:
  - As a 17-year-old Jewish girl, Magda was deported from a Hungarian ghetto and transported via cattle car to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Nazi-Occupied Poland. Her entire family was killed upon arrival. She was forced to work in a Nazi ammunition factory until being liberated by the U.S. Army. After the war, she had no home or community. She moved to Illinois to live with distant relatives.

- Now:
  - As a member of the Speaker’s Bureau of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center (Skokie, IL), Magda has tirelessly given her testimony to countless schools, businesses, religious institutions, and universities. Her story is about love and hate, as well as destruction and growth. She has two missions: honoring the victims and promoting human rights.

- Today:
  - Immediately before this presentation, Magda gave her Holocaust testimony to approximately 100 people in this auditorium. Right now, she will be fielding questions about her experiences after the Holocaust, namely as a person who willingly provides her testimony of experience.
Question and Answer Time!

The End