

A Systems Based Analysis of Human Violence

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Abstract

As much as we try to live without violence, it remains embedded in our lives. Every day on the television, we see the destruction caused by our violence. Explanations of the causes of violence have typically been biological, psychological, or social, each revealing part of the story. This paper uses the author's *Dynamics of Life* model to demonstrate underlying dynamical tensions that enable life processes that manifest in different ways at each of the three levels. The levels then interact with each other.

We analyse the tensions to reveal how abuse and violence arise in human behaviour. The biological level is based around the body and how it is used to change situations. The psychological is about learning to regulate emotion and improve thinking patterns. The first part of the social level looks at two people dynamics before exploring societal patterns and how structural violence arises. A list of strategies to help reduce levels of abuse and violence follows and the paper ends with a summary and conclusion.

Introduction

We are bombarded daily with examples of violence against each other and the environment in which we live. Our modern way of life disconnects us from ourselves, others, and our shared environment. Violence is a major impediment to our continued thriving, and perhaps even survival on this planet. Understanding the nature of violence is important if we wish to find more effective ways to resolve conflict. In this paper violence is viewed as any behaviour intended to cause harm, so it can be not only physical but also emotional, mental, and even spiritual or cultural.

The study of violence tends to have become siloed into investigating biological, psychological, and social causes. Biological approaches focus on violence being inherent in human nature and focus on work with animals harking to Hobbes (2019), Lorenz (1966) and Freud (Sampson, 2005). De Waal (de Waal, 1986) and Peterson and Wrangham (1997) provide a more modern biological approach examining violence in primates. Ling et al. (2019) write about biological dysfunction as causes of violence.

Psychological causes of violence focus on thinking and emotions, particularly anger. Cognitive Behaviour Theory (Beck, 1979) views violence as a learned behaviour that can be unlearned, focusing on controlling thinking and emotion to develop alternative actions. Dialectical Behaviour Theory (Linehan, 1987) also emphasises emotional states and how violent tendencies can be modified by techniques such as mindfulness. Acceptance and Commitment Theory (Harris & Hayes, 2008) focuses on learning not to react to distressing emotions leaving one free to commit to life changes. Attachment issues (Metcalf, 2010) are often linked to violent behaviour.

Some social explanations maintain that violence arises because of the social environment particularly during childhood. This can include poverty, parenting style, and witnessing violence. Bandura (1977; 1973) writes of adult behaviour modelling violence that the child incorporates. This can include viewing violent content on television or other media (Paik & Comstock, 1994).

Other social explanations focus on patriarchy and colonisation as the underlying cause of violence in modern life (Gandhi, 2019; Hill, 2020; hooks, 2010). Men and white people have

been in control of social structures and framed the worldview or habitus (Weininger, 2005) for millennia and have come to feel entitled to the dominance that can lead to barbaric, violent social institutions like slavery and lynch mobs.

It is apparent that while all three approaches have some explanatory power, none of them can completely explain violence. A systems approach would suggest that there is a bigger picture connecting these three approaches. The *Dynamics of Life* model proposes that there is a common underlying process true for all human and social systems that undergirds life at the biological, psychological, and social levels that informs each level and how the dynamics of human functioning manifests at that level.

The Dynamics of Life model

The author has developed a model called, The Dynamics of Life, that uses Systems Theory principles to provide a framework for gaining an overview of how abuse and violence might arise at the different levels of life. There are three parts to the model. The first is the Dynamics of Life diagram. The second is the Tree of Life, and the third is the life cycles of living systems, which links to Holling's Adaptive Cycle (Gunderson & Holling, 2002).

First, the model will be introduced, to reveal the inherent tensions and tradeoffs that living systems must manage. When those tensions and trade-offs are out of balance, the space is opened for actions that harm other living systems or subsystems in a variety of ways. This then leads to ways to better manage situations that could otherwise erupt into abuse or violence.

The Dynamics of Life model

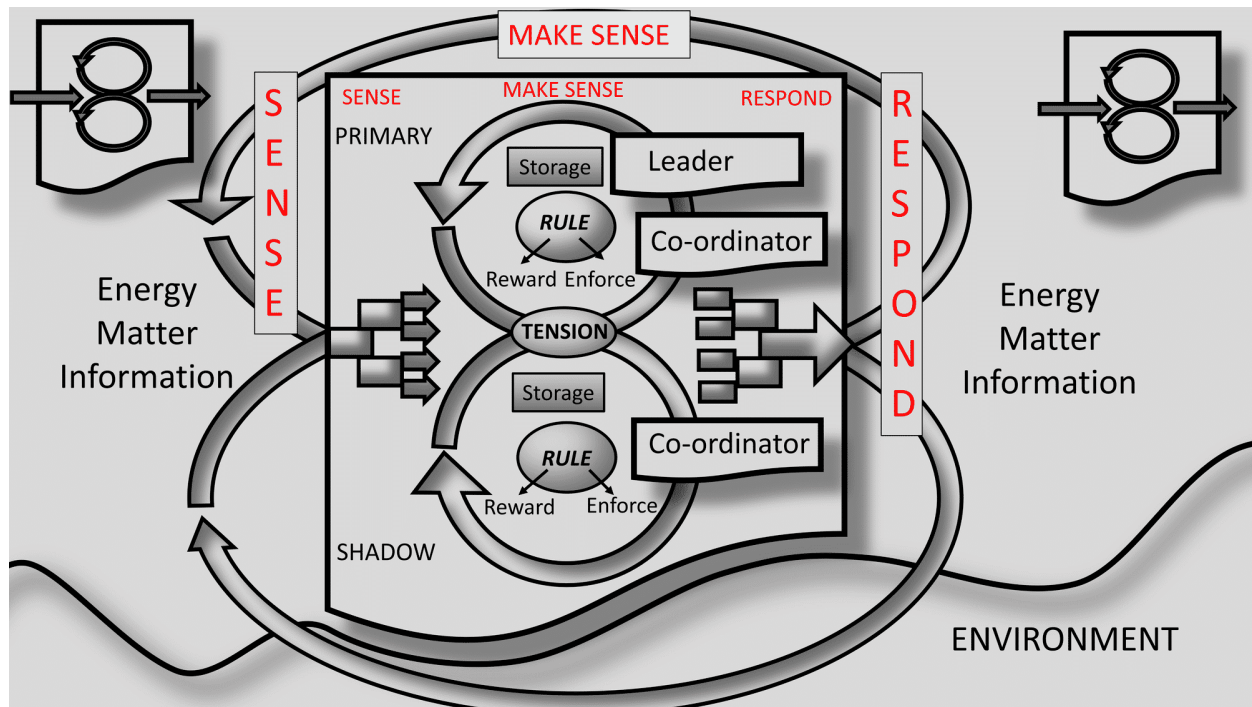


Figure 1: The Dynamics of Life diagram with a double figure of eight loop showing the primary and shadow structures inside and outside of the human or social system.

The Dynamics of Life diagram outlines how human and social systems turn chaos into order (Prigogine & Stenger, 1984) by utilising flows of energy, matter, and information through their boundaries. They use fractal structures (Mandelbrot, 1982) to most effectively manage the flows through the boundaries so as to access the free energy (O'Neill & Hall, 1996) vital for life. Inside the organism or social group, a rule set determines the constraints on the parts within the system. Within a human body the coded molecules of DNA determine the possible configurations that enable the cells to maintain internal cohesion and the ability to respond to perturbations caused by their external environment. Human beings have belief systems as rule sets and organisations typically have a written document outlining the rule set.

Living systems do work to maintain internal structures and respond to perturbations from outside. They have limits on how much chaos or entropy they can manage. Energy, matter, and information that cannot be managed is expelled into the environment as waste, which may be

useful such as in compost or a builder's waste that someone else might use, or it may be toxic as in a polluted landfill. Everything that returns to the environment will change the environment that may well elicit a response from the environment creating a feedback loop of recursive actions..

There will be energy, matter, and information that cannot be used or expelled that remains trapped within the system to become toxic. This might manifest as tainted food, suppressed emotions, distorted thinking, or rebellion in a group. Because living and social systems wish to avoid having to cope with toxic material, they play a game of 'Hot Potato' passing on what cannot be managed as quick as possible lest the music stops and the person left with the potato must face the consequences. Emotion (Bowen, 2004) or aggression can be passed down a pecking order.(Conley, 2005)

Growing entropy in the system is typically managed by forming a lower entropy co-ordinator subsystem operating on behalf of the whole group that co-ordinates the interactions of the whole system. The group may be formed by a shared decision of the whole or a person or group may claim the status. Sometimes, the coordinating group is not sufficient to manage the entropy and another level of hierarchy is formed called the leader subsystem. In a large organisation there can be many levels of hierarchy designed to cope with the entropy not otherwise contained.

The Viable Systems Model (Beer, 1984; Espejo, 2003) proposes that all viable systems are comprised of five subsystems that are themselves viable systems. The subsystems have their own boundaries, rule sets, energy flows and so forth. They also therefore play Hot Potato within the system expelling what they cannot process back into the wider system, so there will be places where uncontrollable entropy leaks into the living system to become toxic.

There is tension between the subsystems that have their own rule set and the whole system with its rule set. If the subsystems have too much autonomy, the cohesion of the whole suffers, but if there is too much connectivity in the whole system, the autonomy of the subsystems suffers. The subsystems must constrain their behaviour sufficiently to meet the needs of the whole system or it will lose cohesion and die. Reward and enforcement procedures are put in place to build compliance. Compliance with the rule set is never perfect; there will almost always be some

rebellion against the imposed constraints. The Police do not catch all criminals, but if they are enough of a deterrent, there is sufficient cohesion for the social system to survive.

As soon as a rule set is established, the space is created for resistance against the rule. The rule set establishes its authority through the primary cycle (the top cycle in Figure 1, which has an internal cycle and an external cycle), and the resistance forms the shadow cycles (The bottom cycles). The recessive cycles may absorb some of the unresolved entropy, but conflict arises between the primary and shadow story. The shadow might manifest as a suppressed emotion, an unhelpful thought pattern, or unrest in a group. The shadow structure can also form subsystems to help it function more effectively.

All living system sense, make sense, and respond. They sense their internal states to recognise when body states might stray beyond those adequate to sustain living processes and externally, by noticing the perturbations in their sense organs as a result of external threats and opportunities to their continued wellbeing. Once sensed, the data gathered must be made sense of, leading to an adequate response.

The Tree of Life

Gregg Henriques (Henriques, 2017) formulated his Tree of Knowledge to explain the major phases in the development of life on earth.

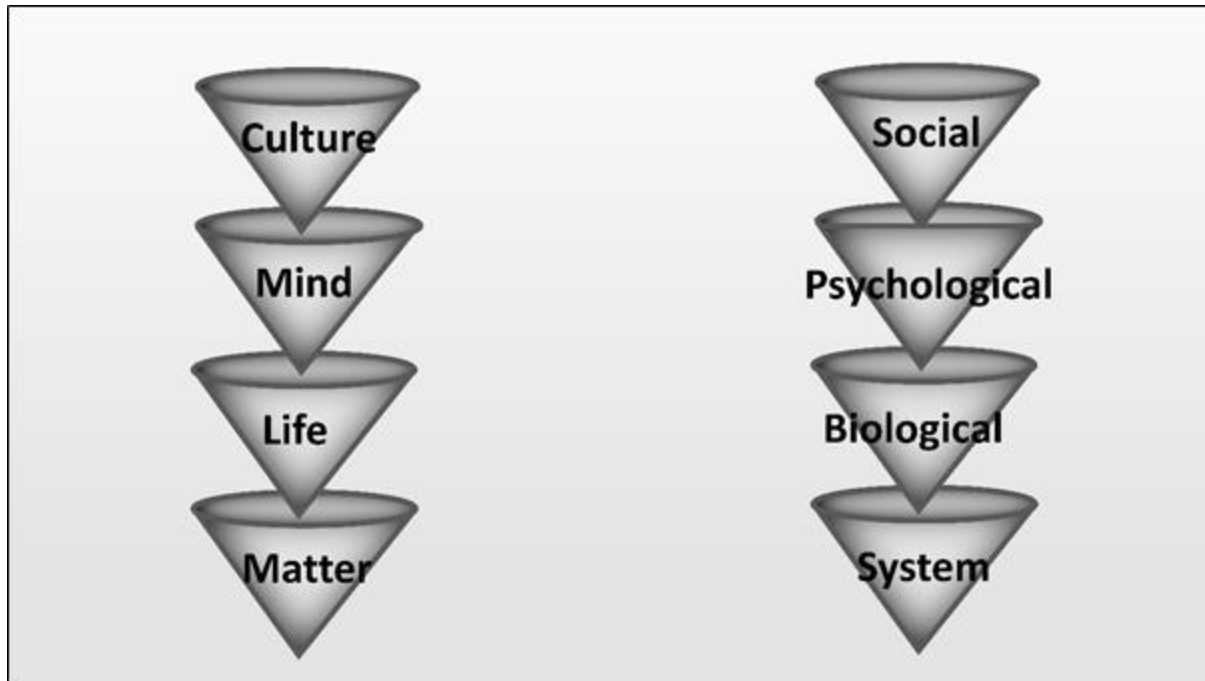


Figure 2: Henriques' Tree of Knowledge on the left and the proposed renaming for the purposes for this paper on the right. Note how the levels are nested with each new level emerging from and dependent on the previous level.

Henriques' Tree of Knowledge model demonstrates how the nested layers fit with mind/psychology emerging from life/biology and culture/social emerging from mind. The lower the level, the more fundamental the influences, but the higher the level the more complex the influences. Henriques' matter level sits as the foundation of life. Cabrera and Cabrera (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2015) in their DSRP model write of the four fundamental aspects of a system (distinctions, systems, relationships, and perspectives), which they found to be the fundamental building blocks of the cognitive realm just as electrons, neutrons, and protons form the fundamental building blocks of the material world.

I propose, therefore, that Henriques' matter level could equally be named the systemic level explaining how emergent properties arising from the constraints on complex systems manifest as life and explain many of the tensions and constraints living forms must negotiate to survive and thrive.

The Dynamics of Life demonstrates the nature of life at each level to form the Tree of Life. There are two forms to the tree. The first is the Eros tree (Wilber, 2007) that is the creative aspect where new evolved levels emerge from the previous level. You will notice similarities between the central trunk and Maslow's triangular shaped Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 2014). But the top of the tree is still open for growth and the term co-actualisation is used rather than self-actualisation to emphasize that the higher level is an inclusive level in that we co-create ourselves through our interactions with others.

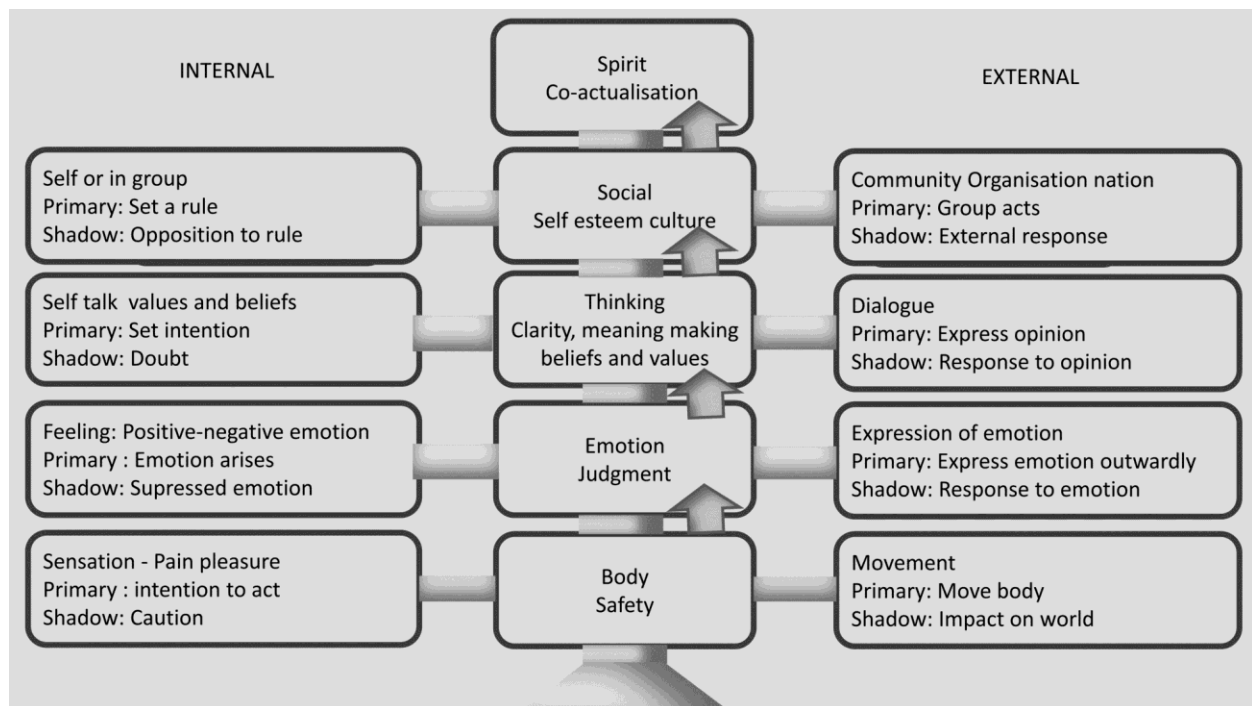


Figure 3: The Eros tree demonstrating levels of evolution from the physical to the spiritual.

Free energy is still available at each level that can be productively managed to spawn a new level. At the biological level matter is moved through the living system to sustain its existence. The psychological is divided into the emotional and thinking levels. The emotional level moves energy through the body and the thinking level moves information through the system. At the social level energy, matter, and information are organised in order to do work.

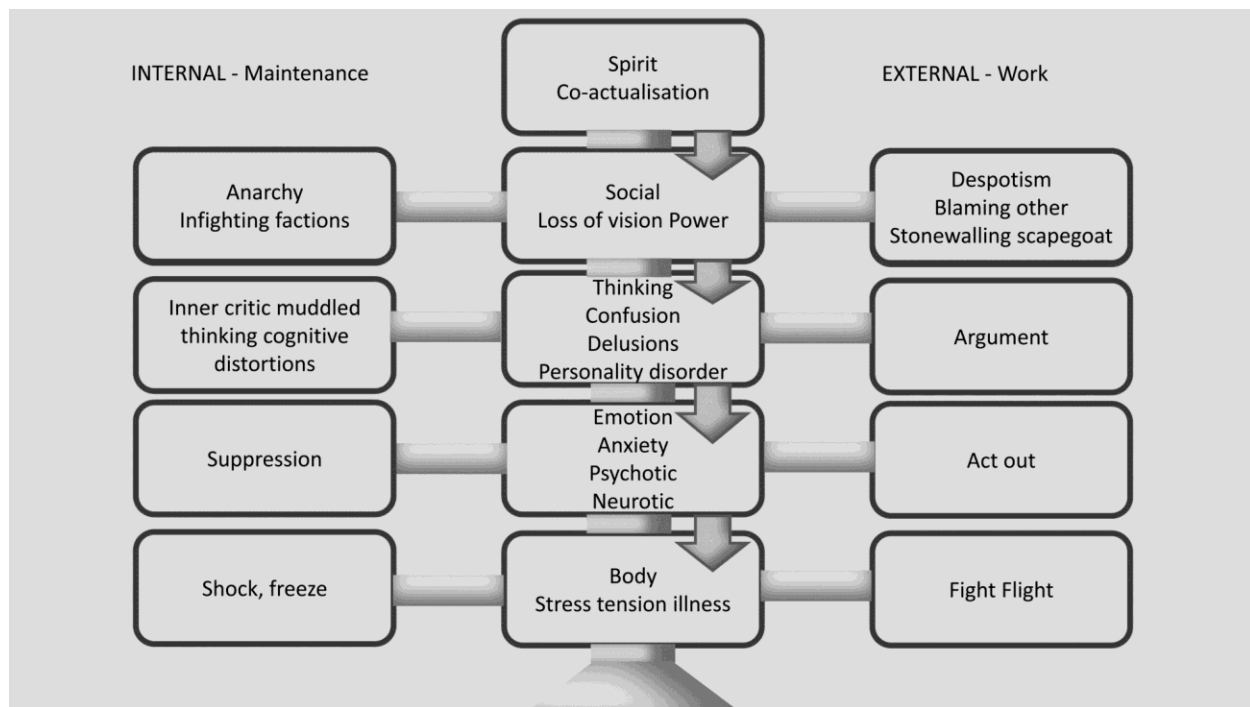


Figure 4: The Thanatos Tree of Life dropping down a level to cope with overwhelm.

When we are overwhelmed at one level and do not know how to act, we often drop down a level. The problem seems to be simplified but we have fewer behavioural options making the response even less likely to solve the problem. This downward movement is the Thanatos tree of destruction and loss. If we are unable to organise at the social level, we try to convince and influence the other at the psychological level. If that fails, we drop to an emotional response, and if that fails, we fall to the final level to seek a physical solution by fighting. Weber states that the sovereign is the “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber, 1972).

The cycle of life

The final part of the Dynamics of Life model recognises that living systems exist as processes unfolding over time. A living system typically starts with little infrastructure. Requisite variety is low but builds very quickly as opportunity creates more opportunity. Growth is often exponential, but as requisite variety grows the difference between the parts also grows, which means conflict that is not apparent in the early stages becomes increasingly apparent. In the

Adaptive Cycle (Holling, 2001) this is the exploitation/growth phase shifting into the conservation phase.

As a living system reaches the conservation phase, its infrastructure becomes more set and inflexible. The law of diminishing returns (Tainter, 2007) perhaps better known as “picking the low hanging fruit” becomes apparent and the external environment continues to change, Eventually, maintaining the system as it is becomes increasingly untenable, forcing it to descend into the release phase, where the existing structure comes apart. This can be creative destruction (Schumpeter, 2009), but more typically, it is a time of loss and suffering. This is often resisted, even to the point of entering the rigidity trap where force and coercion is used to avoid the release phase.

The release phase breaks the bonds that have held up the system, but that breaking enables the parts to move into the re-organisation phase, where they seek new ways to come together in preparation for a new cycle. As well as a rigidity trap, there is a poverty trap, where the system can survive, but does not have the power to initiate a new cycle,

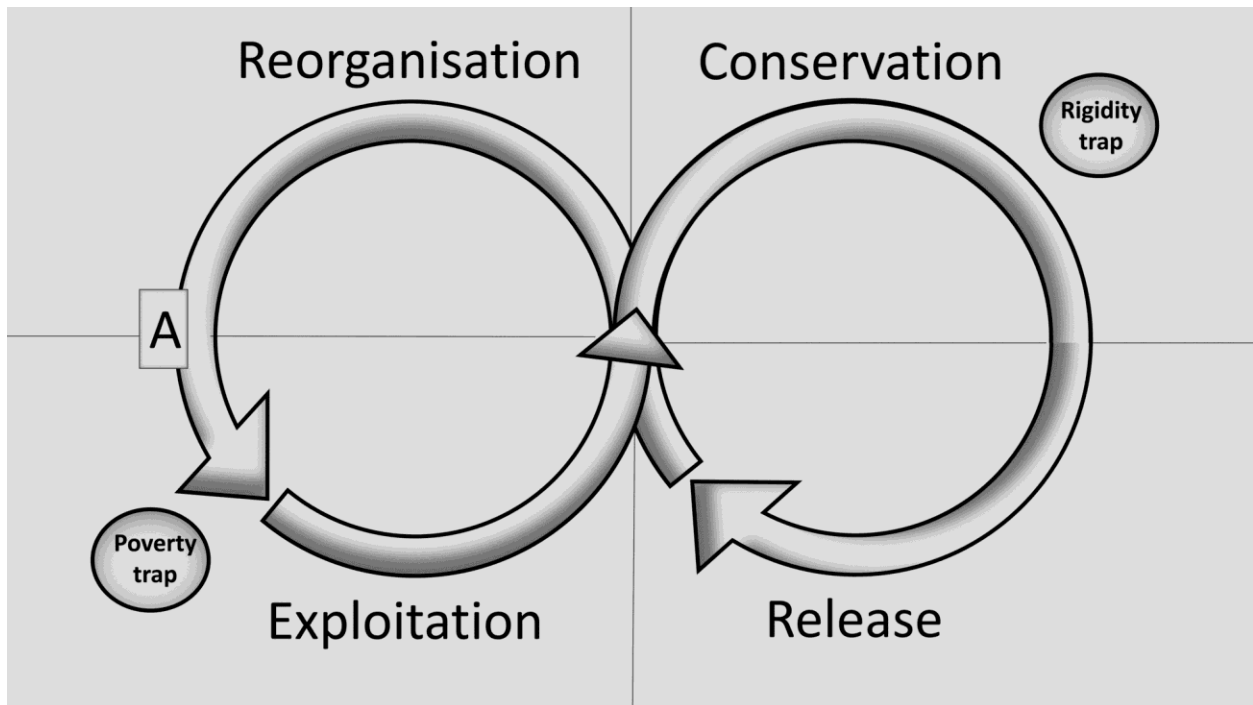


Figure 5: The Holling and Gunderson Adaptive Cycle with four phases: exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganisation.

With the three parts of the model explained, we can move onto explore how the tensions and trade-offs inherent in the process of living create the possibility for the eruption of violence. The beginning point is a definition of violence.

A definition of violence

With the Dynamics of Life model as a framework, we can form a definition of violence noting that conflict arises at a boundary because difference is apparent at boundaries. Violence can be defined as:

The invasion of a boundary or the disruption of a necessary flow across a boundary (MacGill, 2018).

Violence can therefore be the active invasion with the intention of causing harm or appropriating the resources within another living system or interfering with a system's ability to maintain its

ongoing functioning causing harm. The next section explores the various ways interactions between and within living systems can erupt into violence.

Systemic causes of violence identified from the Dynamics of Life model

With the Dynamics of Life model in place we can identify the places where abuse and violence might erupt. There are many tradeoffs and tensions that can fall out of balance and errors that can trigger an event that create harmful outcomes.

Rule set conflict at boundaries

Each living system has a rule set to determine the constraints on the parts to maintain life, which will necessarily be different from the rule set of other systems that come up against its boundaries. Those differences must be resolved. Living systems are comprised of viable subsystems with their own rule sets that will necessarily clash (Midgley & Pinzón, 2011). There is always conflict to be resolved between the needs and desires of the parts and those of the whole. The needs of the suprasystem and the subsystem must be managed by the system using limited resources.

A human body comprises a myriad of systems, subsystems and supersystems that must all conserve a dynamic harmony so all the subsystems, systems, and supersystems remain within the constraints necessary to maintain autopoietic (Maturana, 1981, 2002) flows. My needs as an individual may clash with the needs of my family or community. A leader may be tempted to use organisational resources for personal benefit. My perceived need for alcohol may clash with the needs of my liver. If I prioritise one level, it is often at the expense of another. Parts may dominate wholes, and the whole may dominate parts.

The rule set of a living system arises from making sense of past experiences and the patterns that have been appreciated to make useful future predictions. For a person, the rule set is their beliefs and values, for a nation it is binding laws and a constitution that frames the rule set.

As soon as there is a rule set, the constraints applied form an identity for the living system. The identity is that which is conserved in the process of living. Maintaining the identity arises from a will to live, that Damasio (Damasio, 2000) (after Spinoza) calls conatus. The will to live drives the purpose of the system that then becomes enshrined in the rule set. A threat to identity is a threat to the being of the living system, which may be real or imagined. For a wild animal, identity is the body, but for a human it also includes the sense of self, social status, reputation, possessions and more. As we turn into a parking space, we have mentally claimed it as “mine”, as a part of me. If someone else takes it, it is as though they have injured a limb and the same neural circuits are activated as for a physical threat.

The rule set is often a mental model formed from how we have made sense of our past experience. If this mental model maps the system and its external environment correctly, it will support the systems to function. If the map is inaccurate, such as someone incorrectly perceiving themselves to be a victim of circumstances rather than the author, they may well respond in ways that cause harm.

Scarcity

While a living system has all the energy, matter, and information it needs to survive there is little reason for conflict, but as soon as there is a scarcity and a zero-sum outcome, competition arises for access to those resources. If survival depends on gaining a contested resource living systems can resort to extreme forms of violence to survive or maintain a level of wellbeing.. Many living systems rely on killing and eating other living systems to survive.

Error

Luhmann (Luhmann, 1995) reminds us that a living system is always less complex than the wider environment it finds itself in, so, it cannot know itself and its environment perfectly. Error is inherent in life meaning maladaptive rule sets can form through errors in sensing, making sense, and responding. Incoming sensory information must be attenuated (Hilder, 2005) so the requisite variety, the difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1987), is recognised. A living system may pay attention to irrelevant information or fail to notice critical information. We are

structurally determined (Maturana, 2002), so what we are able to perceive is shaped by the sensory apparatus we have available to us.

Each living system must be a map of itself in its world (Rosen, 2012). Our map comes from how we have created meaning from the patterns experienced in the past. We might misread patterns, connect patterns incorrectly or the environment might change quicker than the creature can absorb. Just as using a faulty map will lead to becoming lost, a faulty cognitive map will lead to maladaptive responses.

All living systems must maintain a dynamic balance between speed, accuracy, and energy that further creates space for error to arise. If a living system does not respond quickly enough it will be harmed. If it does not formulate an accurate response and does the wrong thing, it will also be harmed. It must also minimise energy use, which includes cognitive energy. Making assumptions and using habit patterns reduces cognitive energy that usually provides a good enough response (Glanville, 2013). There will be a time beyond which gathering further information will not lead to a better outcome. This leaves considerable space for error to leave a creature vulnerable, especially if the other creature uses deception, camouflage, or other means (Ettinger & Jehiel, 2010; Mitchell & Thompson, 1986) to distort the incoming sensory information. The Wooden Horse of Troy (Homer, 1998) deceived the city's inhabitants allowing Greek soldiers to invade the city walls.

Living systems mental mapping will inevitably err. The urge to defend our sense of identity often leads us to make the world wrong rather than change our map. In perceiving threats. We resist this incongruity between the map and the world by denying, minimising, justifying, or blaming others, which, of course, increases conflict to be resolved (Henriques, 2017).

Overwhelm

Sometimes a living system is overwhelmed by the quantity or intensity of the incoming energy, matter, or information and cannot adequately process it in real time. The result can be trauma. A typical response is to regress to an earlier level of functioning, dropping down the Tree of Life, acting out in the world making violence more likely, or repressing the experience, only to have

the trauma re-triggered by future events (Mate, 2003). Lag times (Meadows, 2008) in feedback loops cause instability and error that increase conflict and make overwhelm more likely.

Suspicion of the Other

Boundaries both reveal and conceal. We focus on what is enclosed within the boundary by defocusing on what is outside so what is inside the boundary is more familiar. In contrast, that which is beyond the boundary is less well known and trusted. The greater the difference between what is inside and the outside of the boundary, the greater the cause for suspicion. Boundary critique (Midgley et al., 1998; Midgley & Pinzón, 2011; Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010) says that where we choose to place a boundary matters and that harm can be inflicted as parts are included or excluded. Butler [34] writes of who is grievable and thus within the boundary of compassion and who is considered beyond and not worthy of compassion and the implications of those choices. Affected stakeholders can be easily excluded from deliberations to their detriment.

All communication carries the risk that the interaction will be negative and have a harmful impact on the living system. There is a threshold to be overcome to enable the living system to take the risk of communicating. Where there is disrespect and distrust of the other, whether internal or external the threshold is harder to reach and the living system can move into a defense or even offensive mode.

Without a willingness to interact, there can be no connectivity in a living system and coherence will be lost. Games like hawks and doves and the prisoner's dilemma (Axelrod et al., 1981) show how trust is gained and lost depending on past interactions. A lack of trust can lead to a perceived sense of threat, real or imaginary, that gives "permission" for a retaliatory or even preemptive attack.

Shadow Systems

As soon as a rule set is imposed on parts, the space is created for a reaction against the imposition. The recessive system is often the source of innovation so communication and co-

operation between the dominant and recessive systems can be valuable, but more often than not the recessive is seen as the enemy within to be countered.

It might be the growth of a cancerous tumour within a body or a rival political group trying to overthrow a country. In all the dynamics discussed here, there is no moral means of deciding what is right. The Nazi regime was a highly effective primary living structure and the French resistance formed a shadow structure. From the point of view of the French resistance, the Nazi regime was an external threat. The French or Russian revolutions are prime examples of a shadow structures that overtook a primary structure, only to end up creating an equally bad or worse new primary structure, that in turn created the space for yet another shadow structure.

Toxic residue

Any energy, matter, or information that cannot be metabolised or otherwise or passed on externally, remains inside the living system as a toxic element. At the physical level the alcohol an alcoholic consumes or cancer cells the body cannot keep under control remains as a toxic element, eventually causing harm to the body to the point that it can become fatal.

Suppressed emotion remains unconsciously in the mind. Maladaptive behavioural schemas lead to unhelpful behaviours (Berne, 2015) and rebellious members of a community or society have a negative influence on the whole group when they cannot be adequately managed. Unhealthy belief systems lead to interpreting and acting in the world in unhelpful and perhaps violent ways.

Hierarchies and inequality

The formation of a hierarchy is a common response to increasing complexity and entropy. The downside of establishing a hierarchy is the increase in inequality within the system. Those on the co-ordination or leader level have a greater access to energy, matter, and information and the ability to use the power entrusted in them as power over others. Especially if this power is misused, it operates to the detriment of others within the system.

Violence is not always an active behaviour. We can be violence through our non-action when action is called for. To stand and not act when one could reasonably act is to allow harm to happen. This can particularly happen when the management subsystem gains by not acting.

Unbalanced enforcement

The rule set of a living system must be followed if coherence is to be maintained. Reward and enforcement procedures help ensure compliance, but the enforcement can become unbalanced. Rules can be enforced that unfairly advantage the coordinating and management structure or the enforcers. Corruption or dictatorship can be used to control and oppress living system members.

Unresolved difference

As mentioned above, when a living system or organisation starts out, requisite variety is low but builds very quickly as opportunities created by the variety are taken up. Growth is rapid, even exponential, but as requisite variety grows, so does difference and therefore conflict.

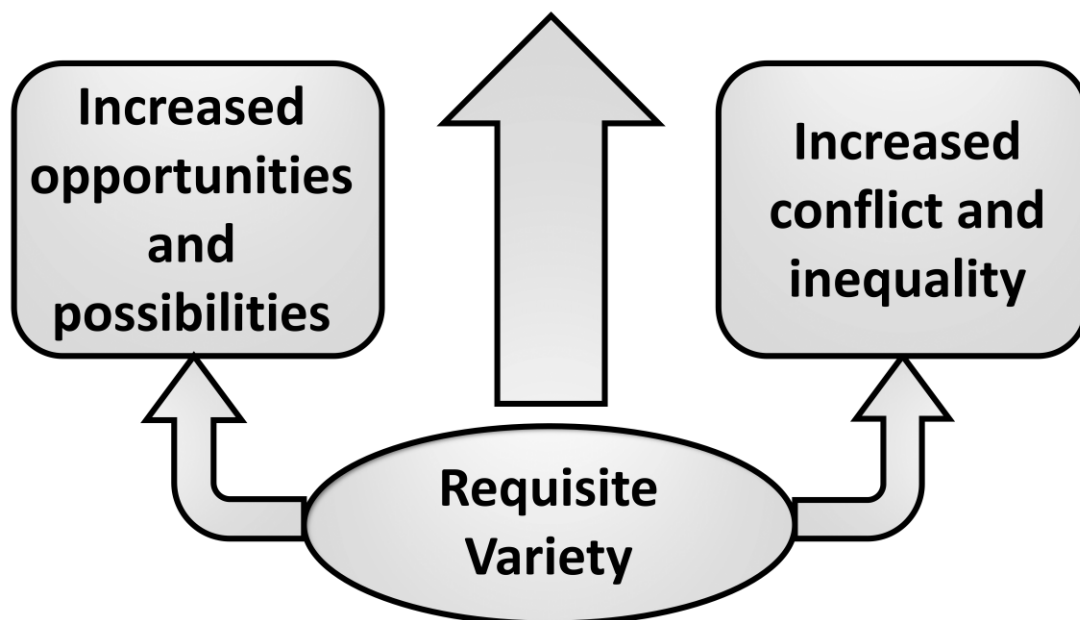


Figure 6: As requisite variety increases so does conflict leading to a tradeoff.

Living systems able to manage higher levels of conflict have access to more requisite variety to create opportunities giving a greater fitness than systems unable to manage such conflict, which lose fitness. Living systems gain fitness by moving towards the “edge of conflict” risking overwhelm and the possibility of lapsing into deep chaos (Tainter, 2007) where violence erupts.

Loss of connectedness

It is easy for a living system to focus too much internally failing to notice how they are embedded in other systems. As systems of systems every action has an impact on its subsystems, other systems, and supersystems it is a part of. Intentionally or otherwise, we often cause harm to others creating the imperative to stop and become aware of the wider impact of our actions. We have lost sight of how harming others ultimately harms us. We fail to notice stakeholders, lose the big picture, become blind to injustice, see people as stereotypes, and lose awareness of our boundaries and their impact (Jackson, n.d.; Midgley, 2016; Ulrich, 2002).

Violence at the different levels

Violence arises at all levels of life from a disagreement between two people to nuclear powered superpowers threatening each other, but the underlying dynamics are similar. Violence at the biological level is about inflicting harm on the body of an opponent. Even a small injury to an animal in the wild can be life threatening, so they tend to avoid violence wherever possible (Collins, 2008). Unless a wild animal feels cornered, it is far more likely to run away.

At the emotional level anger is the most common emotion to lead to violence. Bruce Perry (Perry & Winfrey, 2021) writes of the red brain and the green brain. The red brain includes the brainstem and limbic system that generate a ME NOW response often triggering a fight/flight mechanism. In a wild animal a fight/flight response is triggered by a perceived threat to its identity, that is its body. In humans the threat can be triggered by other perceived threats to identity like a slur on one’s social reputation or name, or something happening to a personal possession. The same part of the brain is activated but the action, which was ideal in a jungle, is not appropriate on Main Street.

The green brain is the pre-frontal cortex that manages social and thinking skills. This focus is US FUTURE rather than ME NOW. The green brain takes a more considered approach particularly taking other people into account and predicting likely futures and their impact. When there is no immediate emergency, the green brain will usually lead to the better decision.

The red brain and green brain operate in parallel, which gives the flexibility of being able to respond to immediate emergencies on the one hand through to situations that need extremely careful deliberation on the other. The downside of running a parallel system is that we must decide which system will take charge in any situation. There can be a battle for control between the red brain perceiving an immediate threat to identity and the green brain wanting to slow down and make a more considered choice. It is like a two-seater car with one steering wheel and two people wanting to drive. The red brain is already in the driver's seat since we always have an automatic habitual response ready to action. The green brain must then inhibit the red brain before the red brain takes control and blocks the green brain. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is involved in inhibiting the short-term red brain response to allow a more considered green brain response (Park et al., 2018). Unless the green brain actively inhibits the red brain, the red brain will step on the accelerator and drive off. Daniel Kahneman's (Kahneman, 2015) compares System I to Perry's red brain and System II to Perry's green brain.

Psychological violence manipulates a person's emotions and thinking processes to gain power over them. They typically wear down a person's confidence in themselves, isolate them socially, intimidate and coerce, lie and blame, and economically restrict their victim (Gondolf, 2007; Pence & Paymar, 1993)

At the social level, relationships range from two-person intimate relationships to international relations. If all the boundaries, rule sets, dominant systems and recessive systems seems daunting, as soon as humans communicate, the situation become immeasurably more complex. Figure 6 uses the parent, adult, and child of Transactional Analysis (Berne, 2015) to demonstrate some of the interconnectedness when two people meet.

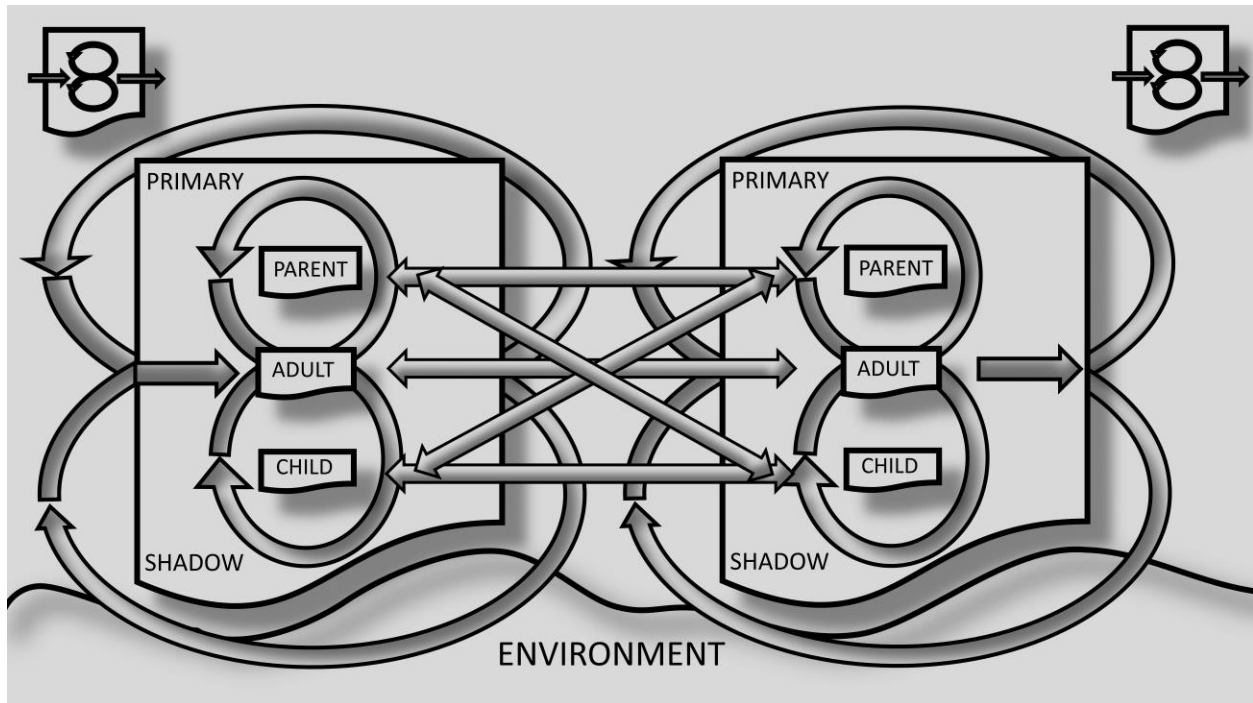


Figure 7: The dynamics of life model describing a two-person interaction.

When we come together in societies, we manage entropy by organising. Over our history we have used many social structures to attempt to meet our needs. As the human population in towns and cities increases, so does the challenge of organising and managing such large numbers (Dunbar, 1998). As opportunities for growth and development increase, so do the opportunities for defecting from the social contract. Mechanisms for enforcement are needed leading over time to formal institutions such as the police, courts, and prisons (Foucault, 1977) as well as ways of rewarding efforts in line with the dominant worldview. Ensuring compliance with the rule set becomes very expensive and uses many valuable resources that could be better used for other purposes.

The shared story that defines the rule set can become distorted. Patriarchal social structures have predominated western nations for thousands of years, to devastating effect. Whole races have been marginalised and even exterminated, scapegoated to pay the cost of unsustainable western lifestyles.

Structural violence (Galtung, 1969) or symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989; Weininger, 2005) is violence that is not so much in the people of a social system, but inherent to the social structure and its underlying worldview. Western thought has been pervaded, at least since the time of Descartes (Damasio, 1994) to see the world as disconnected units assigned a monetary value and exploited for the benefit of seemingly all-powerful multinational corporations (Homer-Dixon, 2006; Korten, 2000). Systems theory, in contrast sees the interconnectedness between the parts and recognises the folly of devastating the natural world and not acknowledging how we are inextricably interwoven with our “other” (Galtung, 1990).

Strategies to reduce abuse and violence

Having developed the Dynamics of Life model and explored how human violence arises out of the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in the flow of life, we can move to suggesting some remedies to reduce and manage our inherent willingness to use violence to resolve difference.

Acknowledge and accept error

The human tendency to resist change and justify our actions to make ourselves right and others wrong is deeply embedded in our nature, but it can be changed. It takes courage to be open to our fallibility and change our story and our guiding rule set, but the reward is enormous.

Violence is often seen as something external, something sinful that has invaded us. We need to come to terms with our violence rather than pretend we can eliminate it. Until we acknowledge and accept our violence, we remain hostage to it and perpetuate its place in our lives.

Look for the wider perspective

Where we place our boundaries matters and as we lay boundaries, those we exclude are marginalised. We need to remain aware of the wider impact of our actions. This includes identifying all stake holders including those we have labelled as the “other” and look for ways to reframe that relationship in more wholesome and life-giving ways.

Learn skills to regulate emotion, review beliefs and values, mindfulness

We all have and need a red brain, but it opens the space for violence. There are many ways of building skills to better regulate emotions such as mindfulness, relaxation, meditation and so forth. There are techniques for exploring our beliefs and values and choosing more effective beliefs.

Explore alternative societal and organisational structures

The institution more equitable forms of social organisation will reduce structural violence. There is a wide range of social structures that have been tried through history. We tend to be so accustomed to the top-down hierarchical forms that we rarely consider other options. Peer to peer structures may be an example that will help us reconnect our lives to live more healthy and flourishing lives.

Co-operatives have a more equitable structure and are used for work, housing, food and more. While typically small scale there are large scale alternatives like Mondragon for demonstrate the potential at large scales over long periods of time. The Enspiral model of businesses networking for mutual support and Semco for worker participation also demonstrate the viability of co-operative models.

Summary and conclusions

The core of human violence arises from the fundamental tradeoffs and tensions within human and social systems as they move towards the edge of conflict [52]. In human beings this manifests at the biological, psychological, and social levels in increasingly complex ways. Rule Set clashes, error, suspicion of the other, recessive systems, toxic residue, unbalanced enforcement, and loss of connectedness were some of the reasons that opened the door for abusive and violent behaviour. Further to this, the way our human brain evolved has left us vulnerable to using a red brain emergency threat response in situations where there is no real threat.

Although abuse and violence is inherent to our nature and there many ways abuse and violence can come into our lives, we can learn skill to improve our abilities to resolve difference without resorting to abuse and violence. There are techniques of body work, mindfulness, behavioural therapies, resolving trauma, building awareness that help us live together peacefully. We can learn to live better with our violent tendencies.

Societies create shared narratives. Our current narratives are full of structural violence. Reshaping those narratives and societal structures are an important part of moving towards a world with less violence. The problem of violence must be addressed simultaneously at all levels, using the strategies outlined and collaboratively seeking leverage points [50] to address the complex issues that restrict us from living more fulfilling, healthy lives.

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