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Addicted to Violence

Prison is a great place to witness all kinds of addictions, and how far they drive their victims. Prisoners sell their meals for cigarettes, and their bodies for drugs. The most common ~~experiment~~ addiction doesn't involve drugs, porn, or anything you can buy or sell. Many people, both prisoners and guards, are addicted to violence. There is a big difference, however: The guards almost never face any kind of punishment.

Why do people like to hurt each other? Our brains are wired with instincts, things we don't have to think about. Although these instincts exist to help us survive, they can be hijacked by drugs, video games, porn, or violence. Violence, whether used for hunting, social dominance, or to retaliate against enemies, played an ~~key~~ essential role in our ancestors' survival. Anyone who lacked the potential for violence could not survive.

Addictive behaviors trigger the release of dopamine in the brain, specifically in the hindbrain, the "lizard brain". Conscious thought is not involved, which is why people form, and are unable to break, so many bad habits. Violence also triggers the release of adrenaline, which acts to shut down the forebrain and allow for instant action, without dangerous contemplative delays.

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Adrenaline by itself causes the fight-or-flight reaction, extreme anger or fear, and is generally not addictive, but when dopamine is added a powerful one-two punch results. Prison guards do get scared, sometimes, but usually have all the advantages: Size, numbers, and a complete lack of witnesses, and a helpless victim. In these circumstances, an addiction to violence is nearly inevitable. This isn't a conscious choice, ^{isn't} a rational decision to become a super-bully, it is an automatic consequence of the way our brains are wired.

It gets worse! Research into gambling addiction has revealed that the dopamine surge occurs before the person knows if he won or lost. It isn't the winning that gets you high, it's the feeling that you might be about to win. This is why people keep pulling the lever on a slot machine - even losing feels good! Prison guards who become addicted to bullying and beating prisoners get that dopamine rush every time they try to ~~set~~ trigger a fight/beadown, even (especially) when their abusive rants don't lead to violence.

Anyone who has tried to break a bad habit, even something as simple as biting one's nails, knows just how hard it is to quit, and how easy it is to start again. Even occasional reinforcement is enough, but that's not necessary either. The internal reaction becomes the reward, the bad behavior becomes self-reinforcing, regardless of what happens to the victim. The rush comes because you (subconsciously) expect it to.

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Addicted to Violence, Robert Johan Richter

Why does bullying (and abusive behavior generally) occur in the first place? Not every behavior is adaptive, conscious, or beneficial. The hindbrain is full of simple routines and drives; sex, hunger, hunting, exploration, and more. Sometimes the wires get crossed, causing men to treat women as prey (serial killers) or animals as sex objects (perverted sickos). We shouldn't look for "good" reasons why people do bad things. Furthermore, we live in vastly different circumstances than our ancestors. Behaviors which served a useful purpose, which worked, such as killing one's enemies, are not tolerated in modern societies.

Prison brings out the absolute worst in people. In the free world, a victim of bullying can flee (perhaps permanently), fight back, press charges, or counterattack from ambush. Bullies must always wonder what is going to happen, and something always eventually does. In prison, the bully can exert total control over his victim, call for unlimited support, threaten the victim with criminal charges, confine him in the box, and transfer him away to make revenge impossible. This minimises the fear reaction experienced by free world bullies and thus maximises the pleasure of the dopamine rush. Without fear, the adrenaline reaction can be experienced as pure rage.

I personally know of a case in which a prisoner (Rufus Woods) was brutally beaten by guards, who then brought him over to the Mental Health unit and claimed that he had beaten himself up. Rufus was then sent to

Clinton CF, where he was beaten again and confined in a "strip cell" where he had no way to report these crimes. He was denied food and medical attention for days. Not one prison or OMH employee made any effort to help him. I personally reported these crimes to numerous officials, yet no investigation has ever been done. Why not beat people up, when you never face any adverse consequences?

The most popular video game genre is first-person shooter games. In the digital world, there is no punishment for committing even the most heinous and brutal murders. Similarly, prison is an unreal environment, almost completely separate from the real world. Powerless victims emit agonised screams and beg for mercy, to no avail. Just like turning off a computer, leaving work (the prison) ends the drama and returns the monster to normal life, where he is a good citizen, a normal person, a respected law enforcement officer, not a uniformed gang member.

Violent attacks in the real world carry the risk of prosecution, lawsuits, and vengeance, which tempers the addictive dopamine rush and limits the numbers of violent bullying reckless maniacs, but being a prison guard offers a set of perverse incentives. District Attorneys never prosecute prison guards, even those convicted of Federal felonies. Guards can claim that the ~~prison~~ prisoner assaulted and injured them, leading to weeks or months of free vacation or disability. People pay to play violent video games, yet get paid to hurt and kill in real life. Prison is the ultimate alternate reality, a place where violence is its own addictive reward.