Unit K17: Culture, Conflict and Violence

### 1.	Summary

Violence can occur as a result of socio-cultural and societal causes, but society and culture are also codified systems to deal with the problem of violence. Depending on how this mutual relationship is defined, the violence prevention and violence intervention that is applied will also look like.

### 2.	Culture and conflict

What do culture and conflict have to do with each other? Although it may not seem so at first: a great deal. One could understand culture(s) as a set of attempts to deal with human conflict at various levels, to develop and apply rules of the game for it, and to not only create but reproduce procedural rules of social interaction. This means two things: On the one hand, culture(s) always contain experiential knowledge of how conflicts can, must or should be dealt with, or how they should or must not be dealt with (taboos!). This experiential knowledge expresses itself over time in the form of rituals, rules of conduct, forms of interaction, value concepts and norms of behavior, but also in institutions, facilities and laws. This implies - and this is the other point - that cultures are always changeable, are always questioned - and must be questioned. This is especially true when objective or subjective conditions have changed, when the previously valid rules of the game and institutions no longer apply. Thus, culture is not only about conflicts and how to deal with them, but culture itself is conflictual: It is in a permanent confrontation with changing environmental conditions, expectations, frameworks and ways of life.

Culturally developed conflict regulations are in force as long as people have confidence in them to be able to regulate or at least handle conflicts. In other words, if people lose trust in cultural regulations, these themselves become the cause of conflicts. From this point of view, Huber (1990:49ff) is certainly right when he views culture not only from the perspective of conflict, but also in close connection with reconciliation. And thus culture aims centrally at a basic religious concern: In all religions, the invitation to reconciliation, to

peace with other people and with the divine, is a central basic concern (cf. Friedli 1974:204/205). This is true even for worldviews that explicitly see themselves as non-religious, such as humanism, liberalism, or Marxism.

As Assmann et al. (1990:12) correctly point out, culture is not an antipole to conflict, but a direct consequence of conflict and equally its cause. In this context, cultures not only produce interaction (and thus "communicative action"), but also violence.

Until the 20th century, "culture" was a "polemical fighting term with which bourgeois intellectuals repeatedly tried to put the brakes on the process of civilization, rationalization, bureaucratization, economization, and last but not least: aestheticization of the lifeworld" (Assmann et al. 1990:35). Despite a not inconsiderable number of nationalist and neo-nationalist and racist nostalgists, the use of the concept of culture has changed massively today. Culture can be used less and less as a polemical fighting term. This is because the concept of culture has been de-ideologized on the one hand, but also trivialized on the other - and is used almost arbitrarily for countless areas of life. Culture can "as a suffix ... almost any constellation: Insurance culture, physical culture, laughter culture, urban culture, shopping culture, etc." (Assmann et al. 1990:35). It is thus becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish "good" from "bad" culture.

2.1 Culture and Violence

Alberto Godenzi (1996:272) points out that "the vast majority of empirical studies of violence in social proximity ... is monocultural." Most of these studies are "concerned with a particular group (nation, subculture, ethnicity) without attempting a comparison with other groups" (Godenzi 1996:272). In this regard, for example, a cross-culturally based study of family and marital violence could unlock important overarching insights into the causes and mechanisms of violence in social settings.

For transculturally valid research on violence - according to Godenzi (1996:273) - four things would be necessary:

-        universally binding definitions of violence and culture,

- a consensus on the research design (design, methods and instruments),

- a representative sample of diverse cultural groups, rather than just the selection of two or three groups that often have little relevance in the society in question, and

- global and longitudinal comparative studies.

Culturally specific differences in the use of inherently identical survey techniques also pose a particular problem: "Only ten years ago, Straus et al. (1980) believed they had demonstrated, on the basis of their first U.S. national survey, that intrafamilial violence against women was nearly four times higher in the black population than in the white population.... Meanwhile, there are doubts that the black minority may not simply have been more candid in answering the questions posed to them..." (Godenzi 1996:278).

Underlying all of this is the question of whether violence has primarily cultural causes, or whether violence is more likely to be culture-independent. In the first case, it would be necessary to examine which cultural factors promote or reduce violence. In the second case, it would have to be clarified which are the actual causes of violence.

Without wishing to revisit the question of whether violent behavior is innate or caused by society or the sociocultural environment, the following should be said here: There are a number of indications that

a) violence is based on innate aggressive behavior, but this behavior can also express itself in ways other than (physical) violence,

b) violence is more likely to be caused by social, economic and political circumstances, such as situations of anomie, structural inequality, etc,

c) cultural and socio-cultural mechanisms (e.g., codes, understandings of sanctions, etc.) can, under certain circumstances, promote or diminish certain forms of (physical) violence; and

d) physical violence has occurred at all times and in probably all human cultures.

The same is true for structural violence. For conflict and crisis intervention in intercultural fields, this means that violence-reducing interventions and violence prevention should only in exceptional cases be primarily tied to certain culture-specific contents. Universal-

emancipative ideas such as human rights, social rights, applicable criminal law seem to be more promising.

At the same time (case c) certain forms of violence (e.g. blood revenge, clitoral circumcision) can have culture-specific (co-)causes. But it must be said here without ifs and buts that in all cases in which a person's personal integrity is violated, any so-called "culture-specific" concession is irresponsible, even dangerous: Such regulations are not infrequently used to justify, via a back door, behavior that has a normal criminal character or that serves the unjustified extraction of (power and violence) privileges.

Here, however, a pedagogical problem arises: How can people who justify their violent behavior with culturalist or culture-specific arguments be taught without (Western or modernist) paternalism that, how and why they should behave differently? This can be a problem, for example, in religious fundamentalist attitudes, or in strongly traditionalist families. But it can also be an issue in subcultures that see themselves as violent protest groups (e.g., with ethno-nationalist backgrounds).

Again, it is not the justification of such culturalist argumentation that is at issue here, but how to deal with it preventively and at the level of intervention.

2.2   Cultural Anthropology and Violence

Paul Hugger (1995:19) has suggested asking about the "cultural function of violence, not primarily its pathological features." Every society and every time would have its typical forms of violence. Because violence is "culturally subjective," it is also recognized, interpreted, and enacted differently by different groups and individuals. However, the conclusion drawn from this that violence is an "anthropological determinant" seems problematic to me because the question must first be answered as to whether - to use the words of a social scientist - violence is an independent or dependent variable: It is undoubtedly true that every society exercises violence, permits or sanctions certain types of (individual) exercise of violence. But it is still unclear whether violence is a consequence or expression of certain social constellations, or - vice versa - whether society is a codification of certain (permitted and

prohibited) forms of violence. If the second is true, then Hugger (1995:19) is certainly not wrong when he claims "that violence is one of the basic constituents of every society, that it is an anthropological determinant." Depending on which version one chooses, this leads to far-reaching consequences for the view of the world and of human beings, and ultimately also for the intervention and prevention strategy that is considered meaningful: namely, if violence is understood as a consequence of societal conditions, then prevention must first and foremost address the societal causes. In other words, prevention in this case can only be meaningfully conceived as social reform - anything else would be purely symptom control. If, however, violence is constitutive for being human and thus for every human society, then it can only be a matter of providing the "instinct for violence" with a path that is as harmless as possible. Violence prevention is then primarily a substitutive technique: dangerous forms of violence are to be replaced by "harmless" forms of violence, e.g. physical violence by verbal violence. To put it somewhat exaggeratedly: verbal "arena settings" should be created for violent groups or individuals in which they can let off steam verbally.

As can be seen, both approaches are one-sided and thus problematic on their own.

It seems to me that both understandings of violence can apply - or even mix: Violence is both reactive and active: it is more a question of to which context of meaning one refers it than a question of the definition of violence as such.

In addition, violence in relation to society can be functional - i.e. expected or justified by society - or dysfunctional - i.e. in contradiction to societal structures and social rules. A strict distinction must be made here - also with a view to prevention and intervention. I suspect that opinions about "increasing violence" primarily mean violence that is dysfunctional in relation to society. Otherwise it would be hardly logical if right-wing bourgeois parties on the one hand demand an expansion of the police, stricter laws against criminals, etc. (= more functional violence), but on the other hand push economic globalization and free trade to the extreme, although both massively increase dysfunctional violence in many countries and regions, but probably also in our country (ghettoization of certain places and neighborhoods). Seen in this light, even individual, physical-and dysfunctional-violence can be the societal response to social, economic, or political undesirable developments or

extremes (for a detailed discussion of functional and dysfunctional conflicts, see also ► Unit C1: "Concept of Conflict" and Jahn 2012:31).

Hugger (1995:22) points out that there are two levels of violence: "First, that violence which every society needs to guarantee its own social order, violence, that is, as it emanates, for example, from state power." So what I called functional violence. "The other area of violence is that which breaks through the social order, the transgression of order. It is also met by society with violence in order to defend the order." In other words, dysfunctional violence is countered with functional violence. Moreover, if one relates the functionality of violence not to a momentary, current state of the state or society, but to a - real or assumed - lawful course of intra-societal conflict, then seemingly dysfunctional violence can suddenly become functional: In the sense of Karl Marx's class struggle, the revolutionary violence of the oppressed class is functional in relation to the development towards an egalitarian, classless society. In contrast, the violence of a revolutionary working class is clearly dysfunctional for the ruling bourgeoisie because it seeks to overthrow the existing social order (which is advantageous for it). The example shows that the question of violence can never be separated from the question of the (personal or institutional) standpoint and the respective special interests.

Therefore, everyone who is active in violence prevention or in violence-reducing intervention must always give an account of the interests of all those involved: of his or her own (violence-reducing prevention or intervention is also interest-driven - even if only because one's own job depends on it), but above all also of the interests of the conflict parties involved. This does not mean, however, that intervention has to be dispensed with, it only means that the location and interests of the perpetrators of violence are recognized. From this, important conclusions can be drawn for combating the causes.

Case Study: Violent Youth Group
In a working-class neighborhood of a medium-sized city, fights between young people occur repeatedly on the premises of a youth club. An Albanian-speaking group is very dominant. Swiss and Italian youths only dare to visit the meeting place on special occasions. In the case of verbal arguments between individual youths, the members of an Albanian gang call for reinforcements by cell phone. They show up a short time later and threaten or beat up the opponents. The incidents are repeated and always follow the same pattern.

One Saturday evening, the youth club leader intervenes and is also beaten up. He calls the police, who arrive a short time later and arrest several Albanian youths.
While the victimized youth club leader sees the arrest and criminal proceedings as justified, the Albanian youths once again feel disadvantaged, criminalized and unjustly accused. In their perception, their behavior serves to "defend" themselves against hostile young people and institutions, because otherwise they will be subjugated. They believe that the Swiss youths are "cowards" because they do not dare to fight back (physically) but have to call the police to do so. The Swiss youths find the Albanians aggressive, always ready to hit and arrogant because they do not talk to them.
The Albanian youths are mostly unemployed, and a disproportionately large number of them attend work classes.
All those involved feel that they are in the right in their behavior - and substantiate this opinion with the actual events and facts.

It is true that violence is perceived differently depending on the point of view, but also on the type and role of involvement (e.g. as perpetrator, victim, intervention person with power or as uninvolved witness). This is then quickly expressed in a corresponding positional reference.

As Hugger (1995:25) rightly points out, people's relationship to violence is ambivalent: violence fascinates and repels at the same time. Hugger (1995:26) argues that sequences of violence - as repetitive social processes - have a ritual character: "Perpetrators as well as victims are involved in such rituals, and the victim himself often reacts to them with a certain acceptance." If this is true, interesting perspectives open up for violence prevention and intervention: rituals can always be changed, but must also be reproduced again and again by the actors. In other words, behavior contrary to the ritual rules can break well-rehearsed rituals of violence or change them in the direction of nonviolence: Especially in youth sub-cultures, violence can be broken in this way. A good possibility is the powerful creation of alternative, non-violent or less violent rituals. In this sense, Gandhi's Satyagraha has undoubtedly been an extraordinarily creative and effective tool. However: the personal risk (sanctioning power of the perpetrators of violence, whose position is threatened!) for such interventions is considerable. Gandhi and his followers also had to experience this.

It is true that - as Hugger (1995:26) correctly notes - non-violent societies are probably utopian. But the extent of violence can certainly be reduced. For: "The extent of violence

and violent activity in a society is not constant. There are times of increased violence and times which are relatively non-violent" (Hugger 1995:26). This brings us back to the question of what the social determinants are for the extent of violence.

3.   Control Questions

1.   What do cultures and conflict behavior have to do with each other?

2.   Why is culture always conflictual?

3.   Why is reconciliation always a cultural achievement?

4.   Is culture the consequence or the cause of conflict - and why?

5.   Distinguish the polemical from the open concept of culture!

6.   Which four points would have to be fulfilled for cross-cultural research on violence according to Godenzi?

7.   Explain which questions arise if a) violence is culture-dependent, or if b) violence is culture-independent!

8.   Discuss the four statements on the causes and manifestations of violence (a, b, c and d on page 3).

9.   What special issues arise from the fact that cultural mechanisms can promote or reduce certain forms of violence?

10.   Why is it dangerous to justify "culturally specific" violence?

11.   Explain Hugger's statement that violence is "culturally subjective"!

12.   In your opinion, is violence "constitutive of society", or is violence the consequence of social constellations? Please give reasons for your opinion!

13.   What consequences does the answer to question 12 have for the prevention and intervention of violence?

14.   What is functional and dysfunctional violence?

15.   Why is it crucial to which context of meaning a concrete expression of violence is related?

16.   Explain why violence is interest-driven!

17.   What are the differences in the perception of violence between perpetrator, victim, intervener, or uninvolved witness?

18.   To what extent is the relationship to violence ambivalent?

19.   How does ritualized violence manifest itself?

20.   What special intervention options exist in the case of ritualized violence?

4.   Links

Galtungs Gewaltdreieck: Kulturelle Gewalt – strukturelle Gewalt – direkte Gewalt
https://inkovema.de/blog/galtung-gewaltdreieck/

Schulprojekte: Konflikte und Gewalt
http://www.school-scout.de/themen/schulprojekte/konflikte-und-gewalt

Immer mehr gewalttätige kulturelle Konflikte?
Empirische Studie der Bertelsmann Stiftung: Kulturelle Gegensätze verstärken oftmals
Konflikte, sind aber zumeist nicht die eigentliche Ursache
http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/presse/pressemitteilungen/pressemitteilung/pid/immer-mehr-gewalttaetige-kulturelle-konflikte/

Trainings zum kreativen Umgang mit Konflikt und Gewalt: Chili SRK Luzern
https://www.srk-luzern.ch/sites/srk-luzern.ch/files/documents/a5_falzprospekt_chili_2016.pdf

Eine gemeinsame Kultur als zentrales Präventionsmittel
http://www.phzh.ch/Documents/phzh.ch/Beratung/Publikationen_Presseberichte/Publikationen/Bandli,%20O.%20%282013%29%20Eine%20gemeinsame%20Kultur%20als%20zentrales%20Pr%C3%A4ventionsmittel.%20In%20ph-akzente,%201.pdf

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