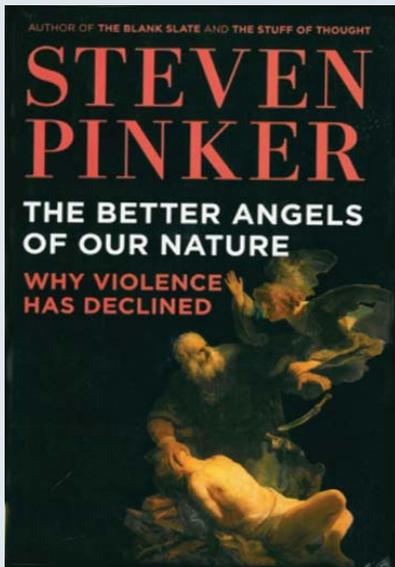


Remarkable, important and brilliant

Pinker's latest book is a tour de force on the steady decline of violence in human history. It is a fine effort by a gifted writer at the peak of his powers and reputation. The book has a powerful message elaborated with plenty of ideas and facts, and written with sly wit and erudition.



The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined
Steven Pinker

Pinker anticipated that the decline of violence might be a hard sell, especially after the bloody 1900s, but the book pulls it off beautifully. He starts with stories from the Bible, calling it 'one long celebration of violence'. Somehow my Sunday school teachers never pointed out how much gratuitous gore drips from those holy pages. To take the Bible literally, God exhorted the Israelites to massacre entire populations mercilessly, and they followed his genocidal commands proudly and enthusiastically. Other ancient classics, such as the *Iliad*, likewise celebrate massacre, atrocity, torture, and other cruelties.

The fact that nowadays we tend to gloss over these violent aspects of ancient works is to Pinker not a matter of hypocrisy – instead, it reflects how our sensitivities have changed. In a revealing and insightful passage, he mentions the story that Jesus was crucified alongside two minor thieves. Christians are taught to be indignant at how the ostensible spiritual savior of mankind was punished alongside petty criminals. But perhaps the really shocking part is that petty thieves were routinely punished in such a cruel and heinous fashion.

Hunter-gatherer conflicts did not kill in the millions, because the raids involved small groups. But statistics enable one to compare rates rather than mere tallies, and these show that hunter-gatherers were more likely than modern citizens to engage in all forms of violence (from fist fights to armed combat) and less likely to die by non-violent means.

Pinker builds his case steadily and eventually it is overwhelming. It is not just violent combat that has declined. Fisticuffs have become rarer. Slavery has been almost eliminated. Rape has been reduced. The beating and spanking of children has diminished. Coercive exploitation is down. Violence by governments against their own citizens has steadily declined, also capital punishment, torture, arbitrary arrest and seizure, mass deportation, and the like have been in decline all over the world.

Pinker's book does more than document the decline in violence. It offers a thoughtful set of ideas to explain it. (By way of full disclosure, he borrows liberally from my own book, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* – and I thought my ideas were slightly improved by his revisionist recounting!) He relies heavily on Norbert Elias's thesis, which asserts that the progress of human culture is heavily facilitated by increases in self-control. Being a civilised person requires one to restrain and subdue one's impulses, very much including aggressive and violent ones.

Part of my job as reviewer is to criticise, so let me briefly note some negative features of what is certainly overall a remarkable, important and brilliant book. First, it is too long. My feelings about the length were actually mixed, because the length contributes to making the point. It is true that where one anecdote would suffice, Pinker often gives three or four – but then again I did enjoy them. If you don't, just skip ahead once you've gotten the point.

Second, there is bit of fashionable male-bashing throughout. This may be inevitable in a book on violence, because men commit most of it. But the violence is not some weird flaw in the male psyche. Arguably, men have been aggressive because that was vital to survival. Francis Fukuyama points out that when resources were limited, populations expanded to the limit that would allow, and beyond that point, the only way to get more was to take from someone else. Given the choice between warfare and starvation, many societies opted for war. It has become a cliché of feminist-inspired thinking that the world would be less violent if women ran it. Fine, but why are there no societies in the world that were created by women? Female-dominated societies probably existed but failed to compete.

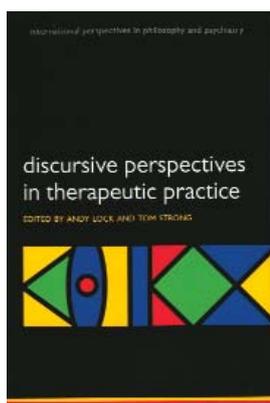
Third, I think the opposition to violence is embedded in the nature of culture, and so the gradual progress of world culture inevitably though gradually reduces violence. In previous books, Pinker has resisted the idea of thinking of society as a kind of super-organism or system that exists at a level above the individual. The biologist sees things through a biological lens, but economists, sociologists and political scientists deal with realities that cannot be entirely explained in biological terms. There are social systems that are more than the sum of their biological parts.

One speculative view I have suggested elsewhere is that aggression itself is a holdover from an earlier stage of evolution. Conflicts (over food, shelter, comfort, mates) are part of social life, and social animals need a way to resolve them. Aggression was a simple and effective way to solve these problems: The strongest gets what he or she wants. Culture, however, introduces new and presumably better ways of resolving conflicts, including morals, fairness, courts of law, compromise and cash settlements. Moreover, as a system governing interactions, culture is disrupted by violence and death (hence the invention of retirement). And so the evolution of culture toward ever more efficient systems has slowly and subtly but steadily and repeatedly discovered the benefits from restricting violence.

| Viking Penguin; 2011; Pb £12.79

Reviewed by Roy F. Baumeister

who is Professor of Psychology at Florida State University



Excellent consideration

Discursive Perspectives in Therapeutic Practice
Andy Lock & Tom Strong (Eds.)

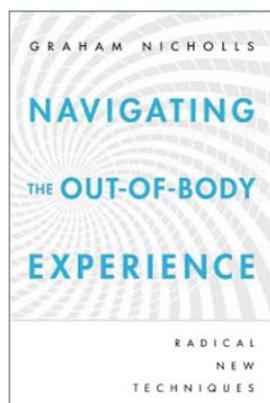
This book contains chapters by a number of authoritative voices in the field of discursive therapy. It addresses the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of several social-constructionist approaches to therapy, including narrative therapy; collaborative therapy, solution focused brief therapy and just therapy. There are also chapters on the politics of evidence-based practice and a systematic review of the current evidence for discursive therapies.

I was particularly impressed by the focus on embedded and embodied practices. Thought-provoking discussions about the role of the body and neuroscience showed an interesting development in social-constructionist debates. However, I felt it would have benefited greatly from a chapter discussing ethics in clinical practice, particularly as discursive perspectives often discuss the possibility of multiple rather than singular truths. Ethical practice appeared to be taken for granted within much of the text.

Overall, the book makes for a sophisticated and excellent consideration of discursive approaches to clinical practice, particularly how it explicitly debates and integrates the issue of embodiment over many of the chapters.

! Oxford University Press; 2012;
Pb £39.95

Reviewed by Mark Wylie
Clinical Psychologist, Autism
Spectrum Team



Promises much, delivers nothing

Navigating the Out-of-Body Experience: Radical New Techniques
Graham Nicholls

This book claims to take a scientific approach to teaching people to have out-of-body experiences (OBEs). Unfortunately, Nicholls applies no science to his work, instead preferring subjective anecdotes.

Nicholls begins by taking a swipe at the sceptic movement, then presents his thesis that anyone can have OBEs by completing his questionnaires and following his personalised programme. His questionnaires fail to take into account psychometric properties (e.g. reliability and validity); they ask such questions as whether you have ever seen a ghost or experienced a vibrational state.

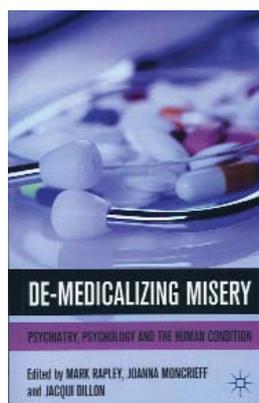
The questionnaire results are used to choose from a menu of DIY techniques to induce an OBE (e.g. sensory deprivation, a vegan diet, vibrational state techniques and chanting).

This book belongs on the New Age shelf, and does not meet the standards required of professional psychologists. Nicholls offers no evidence that OBEs are anything other than hallucinations, and does not mention the Parnia method.

Nicholls' arguments constitute a crime against critical thinking; for a genuinely scientific approach to the subject read Susan Blackmore's work.

! Llewellyn Worldwide; 2012;
Pb £13.99

Reviewed by Anne Kearns
who is a Chartered Psychologist



A complacency monitor

De-medicalizing Misery: Psychiatry, Psychology and the Human Condition
Mark Rapley, Joanna Moncrieff & Jacqui Dillon (Eds.)

How can an attempted solution to a problem turn into another, bigger problem itself? The corrective scripts that psychology employs as alternatives to the pathologising of elements of the human condition risk masking the truths in even more insidious ways. Mark Rapley's challenging chapter in this book highlights the failure of clinical psychologists to mount a challenge to the Western medical 'orthodoxy' and reveals that instead we may find ourselves acting as bystanders or, worse, accomplices.

Alongside this are distillations of familiar critiques of psychiatry: Sammy Timimi on the way masculinity has become medicalised, and David Smail reminding us of the illusory promises of many psychotherapies. There is a rousing chapter by Jacqui Dillon, chair of the Hearing Voices

Network, on how she stood up to the oppressions of the biomedical model; and Lucy Johnstone and Arlene Vetere demonstrate lucidly how 'people do terrible things to each other, and this can drive you crazy'.

This book could not be more relevant than now, in the run-up to the publication of DSM-5, as its own introduction suggests, it provides the ideal 'complacency monitor' for us to keep next to our WISCs and BDIs.

Mary Boyle suggests how we might use non-medicalised language to reinstate context and meaning, and we learn how un-blinding of clinical trials of antidepressants has revealed the power of the placebo response. But this volume asks more questions than it answers, and we need to hear more about how applied psychologists might be trained to use their knowledge and skills to enable ordinary people to make better sense of their own misery and distress.

! Palgrave Macmillan; 2011;
Pb £19.99

Reviewed by Jenny Doe who is
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
with Luton & Bedfordshire
(SEPT) CAMHS

just in

Sample titles just in:

Rewriting the Rules: An Integrative Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships Meg Barker

Torture and Impunity Alfred W. McCoy

Sleep: Multi-Professional Perspectives Andrew Green & Alex Westcombe (Eds.)

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