

The killer ape hypothesis is based on the notion that aggression and violence are the driving force of human evolution and remain at the core of our being. Fans of the science fiction movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* may recall that the opening of the movie depicts this scenario—one population of apes begins to become aggressive and violent, ultimately leading to the development of humans.

The killer ape hypothesis is used by some to rationalize violence, particularly male violence. The reasoning is that humans are essentially genetically programmed to be aggressive and violent. There is, however, no research that shows such behavior to be genetically determined. Robert Sapolsky (2017:326–27), who is in a unique position as both a neurologist and a primatologist, describes the important role of both biology and culture for humans: “what is most consequential is childhood, the time when cultures inculcate individuals into further propagating their culture. In that regard, probably the

most important fact about genetics and culture is the delayed maturation of the frontal cortex—the genetic programming for the young frontal cortex to be freer from genes than other brain regions, to be sculpted instead by environment, to sop up cultural norms.... It doesn’t take a particularly fancy brain to learn how to motorically, say, throw a punch. But it takes a fancy, environmentally malleable frontal cortex to learn culture-specific rules about when it’s okay to throw punches.” Anthropologist Agustin Fuentes (2017:286) provides a similar view, stating “Violence is an option for humans, not an obligation.”

Support for the killer ape hypothesis is often based on observation of aggression and violence in other living primates, especially among male chimpanzees. Chimpanzees in the wild are usually quite social and demonstrate considerable friendly behavior within their communities, but they are also known to be occasionally aggressive and violent toward those within their

group and to neighboring communities. One group of chimpanzees is known to have tracked down and killed several male members of a neighboring community.

Opponents of the hypothesis often look to bonobo groups that are just as close as chimpanzees are to us, but tend to be much less aggressive and violent. Some critics of the killer ape hypothesis also suggest that even though male aggression and violence has been witnessed among wild populations, those communities had been habituated by humans for some years, which may have altered the chimps normal behavior.

Russell Tuttle (2014) explains how the popularization of the killer ape hypothesis changes with current events. He notes, for example, that it was following the horrors of World War I and World War II that the killer ape hypothesis first reached prominence, and then again in the 1960s and 1970s when North Americans were involved in

Vietnam. There has been a revival of interest in North America in recent years, perhaps correlating to the ongoing violent international conflicts the United States has been involved with in the early twenty-first century. The reasoning here is that accepting that humans are innately aggressive and violent may serve to rationalize lethal violence.

The idea that aggression and violence were the driving force that led to becoming human has little support. Similarly, many anthropologists are skeptical that humans are innately aggressive. It would be a mistake to believe our ancestors lived in a perpetual state of bliss and harmony. We do see evidence of violence in ancient skeletons and wounds from battles as well as weapons. In general, however, it appears that aggression and violence in humans started to increase in significant ways only within the last several thousand years.