

Forensic Psychiatry

Spirals of violence

by Martin Thurau



Source: ddp images/dapd

Nature, nurture: Norbert Nedopil, Professor of Forensic Psychiatry at LMU Munich, is one of the most highly respected expert witnesses in Germany. His basic task is to uncover the roots of violent behavior.

In September 2009, on the platform of the local railway stop in Solln, south of Munich, two young men kicked a businessman named Dominik Brunner to death. The horrific incident sparked an unprecedented debate on the roots of violent behavior among young people. What precipitates such brutal attacks? Professor Nedopil, you were quoted as saying that such offenders “have no chance, from the moment of their conception on.”

Nedopil: It is true that many young people are poorly equipped genetically to meet the particular challenges of the environments in which they grow up. Take the following hypothetical case. Consider a mother from a marginal social milieu. She is most likely to form a relationship with a male who lives in a similar situation. Very often, both will have a problem with alcohol or drugs. They may well pass on to their children certain personality traits, which are at least partly genetically based and, as we now know, are indeed heritable. These include characteristics like impulsivity, inability to learn from experience, lack of concern for the consequences of actions. Moreover, during pregnancy, these mothers are less liable to behave in the best interests of their offspring, as mothers usually do. Consumption of toxic substances, stresses of all kinds, latent dissatisfaction with their condition – all these factors have an effect on prenatal development.

And after the child is born?

Nedopil: Such disadvantaged children do tend to stick out a little. They cry more, may be undernourished, are more difficult to deal with and generally cause more problems. Their parents, who are usually not of the most caring sort, are unwilling or unable to cope with the special stress these children cause and so the children often feel rejected. As a result, the children suffer greater emotional stress, and react with anger and defiance. Outside of the home they also experience rejection – by nursery-school teachers and by their own playmates. The result is that they withdraw from these circles and look for a sphere in which they are not subjected to constant criticism and correction. They find it in groups made up of people like themselves, with similar predispositions. They are sometimes taken up by individuals who are a bit older than they are, hang about with them, learn to fight their corner and take risks in response to dares. Here, for the first time, they feel respected, their emotional needs are satisfied, they can act on their impulses, indulge their taste for thrills and excitement. In this way, they cultivate a forceful and domineering attitude, determined “not to put up with any impositions.” All this makes them especially prone to aggressive reactions.

The media give the impression that aggressive behavior has become a mass phenomenon.

Nedopil: The incidence of aggression and violence among young people is not on the increase, as is indicated by surveys among adolescents who are intimately acquainted with the scene. Our own parents also complained of the rudeness, insolence and unruliness of teenagers. The increases suggested by crime statistics can be readily attributed to higher detection rates and greater willingness to report incidents. What is striking is the increased involvement of youngsters between the ages of 12 and 14, and a rise in cases marked by exceptional levels of brutality. There are a number of factors that may contribute to these developments. Informal social controls are much weaker than they used to be; now everybody looks the other way. In the past, boys were expected to be rather boisterous. Nowadays scuffles in the schoolyard are no longer tolerated. The limits of what is acceptable have narrowed. Beyond them is a kind of vacuum which knows none of the conventional restraints. The widespread availability of drugs also weakens inhibitions, and it leads to social isolation. And – although this is not a general phenomenon – in some of the susceptible population, overindulgence in violent videos and computer games encourages the use of excessive violence.

Research

Until recently there was an often heated controversy over the question of whether, to put it crudely, nature or nurture plays the dominant role in making someone a delinquent. Has this dispute been settled?

Nedopil: Yes. At least since the 1980s it has become clear that both genetic and environmental factors must interact in the process. Medical professionals have formulated the "stress vulnerability" hypothesis, others have developed biopsychosocial models. Basically both approaches come to the same conclusion. There are biological and genetic predispositions, whose effects are modulated by other factors during an individual's development. Finally, a triggering event is needed. I think most professionals would agree with this view.

Nedopil: There are two prototypes. One begins to exhibit violent behavior at around the age of 16, but grows out of it by the time he's 25. The great majority of young offenders conform to this type. Members of the second, much smaller, group display high levels of aggressiveness even before puberty, and continue to commit violent acts into adulthood. This type, a small minority as I say, has a relatively high risk of continuing to follow this pattern in the longer term. Of course, as with all prototypes, there are many exceptions to the rule.

There is one group of violent youngsters who are generally not the products of broken homes – those who embark on murder sprees in schools. What makes murderers of these middle-class kids?

often quite explicitly. Most have easy access to arms. This not only puts the weapon within reach, it further inspires their vengeful fantasies. And in their isolation, they have no occasion to question their own behavior. They get caught up more and more in their vindictive plans until they finally put them into practice.

Are their victims always chosen at random?

Nedopil: The victims of school rampages are not targeted as individuals, but they are not randomly selected either. For the perpetrator they are part of the system that he regards as oppressive. He feels ostracized by them, just as he feels excluded by the school. He believes that he does not receive the attention he deserves, and this hurts him deeply.



Brutal assault on a 19-year-old at the underground station Blissestraße in Berlin on 9 February 2008. Police used frames from a surveillance video in the hunt for the attackers.

Source: ddp images/dapd

Is there any way out of this spiral for offenders like those who perpetrated the outrage in Soln, for the likes of the two young men who in 2008 brutally attacked a 19-year-old on the platform in the Blissestrasse underground station in Berlin, or the pair who kicked a retired teacher into a coma at Arabella Park in Munich just before Christmas in 2007, simply because he had somewhat peremptorily asked them not to smoke on the train?

Nedopil: School shootings are a relatively new phenomenon, and they indeed involve a very different type of personality. In most cases, the perpetrators are lonely and withdrawn adolescents, who compensate for their feelings of inadequacy by developing delusions of grandeur. They see themselves as all-powerful avengers, and nourish their destructive impulses by identifying with similar protagonists in videos. In many cases they announce their intentions in one form or another,

Looking through newspaper archives for court proceedings in which you participated as an expert witness, one inevitably comes upon the 2004 case of the three-year-old Katharina. She died after being repeatedly abused over the course of several days by a 31-year-old man, while her mother, his new girlfriend, looked on. Indeed, the mother may even have been an active accomplice. What can drive a person to such cruelty?

Nedopil: This was indeed one of the most horrific cases that I have had to do with. One cannot imagine what the child must have gone through. That alone shows that both the man and the woman were entirely self-absorbed, and utterly indifferent to others. And they had both extinguished the last stirrings of fellow-feeling, he with drugs and she with alcohol.

How do you actually approach such a case? When you are confronted with the perpetrator, how do you set about assessing his or her personality?

Nedopil: As a psychiatrist: I take an interest in the person. It is not for me to level



Research

accusations. I make the effort to accept the individual as he is. I do not say, even to the murderer of the three-year-old girl, "For heaven's sake, what have you done? How could you do such a thing?" I say, "I want to become acquainted with you. I want to know who you are. Maybe then I can better understand what you have done." On this basis, a conversation may begin in which I give him a chance to be candid with me, to tell me things that he has perhaps kept to himself. This takes lots of time. This kind of probing may require day-long sessions, for three or four days. I keep putting questions until I have a coherent picture, a picture that allows me to say: "That makes sense to me," or is compatible with a known syndrome. But the picture may also be inconsistent, because it does not agree either with my own information or my professional experience. That is something I have to live with. I am not the one who must decide if the accused is guilty or not guilty. That is the court's job. I must judge whether or not the accused is sick.

How does one locate the boundary between the sick and the criminally responsible?

Nedopil: In psychiatry there is no hard and fast definition. How one draws the line depends on a whole series of social currents. And what qualifies as sick or disturbed in a medical sense is not necessarily so in the legal sphere. Distinct definitions of these terms evolved in very different social and cultural traditions. In modern legislation, the term "mental disorder" is used to justify the imposition of permanent confinement. The current law on therapeutic confinement, passed in 2011, adopted a very broad definition of "mentally disordered". The intention was to ensure that as many as possible of those whom the public at large regards as dangerous could be locked away for a long time. Conversely, when

it is a question of assessing culpability, defining the extent to which the offender may be responsible for his actions, the term is interpreted in a very restrictive sense.

Let me get back to the case of Katharina. Do examples like that not make it difficult for you to deny the possibility that people can be evil, in the archaic sense?

Nedopil: I wouldn't say that there is no such thing as evil. I have come across people whom I would regard as evil in the conventional sense of the word. But "evil" clearly cannot serve as an empirically definable category in my work.

Other experts like the neuropsychologist Thomas Elbert in Konstanz, who has studied child soldiers in African trouble spots, speak of a kind of "killer mode" that is inherent in everyone and can be activated under certain circumstances. Is a thin veneer of civilization the only thing that keeps us all from acting in barbaric ways?

Nedopil: One does not have to go to Africa to grasp the idea. We only have to look at our own history. During the Thirty Years War, the population in large areas of Germany was reduced by up to

two thirds, as a result of famine and the plague but also as a direct consequence of acts of war. Or take the appalling methods of torture used in the Middle Ages. Modern civilized societies are far less violent.

In his new book, the Harvard-based cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker tries to weigh the evidence for your last thesis.

Nedopil: Exactly. He cites the example of executions. Two hundred years ago, executions were public spectacles in the US. The death penalty has since been abolished in most states – even in what Pinker refers to as "uncivilized American society." Overall, civilization and social accords help to inhibit violence and archaic destructiveness. But the protection they offer is fragile. Just think of the wars in former Yugoslavia. I'm not sure if you know what sorts of atrocities were committed there. I was called in to assess some of the war criminals who were brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, so I am fairly familiar with the evidence. I appeared in The Hague three times. I don't want to describe the precise nature of the cases, except to say that the details are almost inconceivable.



Prof. Dr. med. Norbert Nedopil is Director of the Department of Forensic Psychiatry in the Clinic of Psychiatry at LMU Munich. Nedopil, born in 1947, first studied Medicine and Psychology. From 1977 to 1984 he trained as a psychiatrist at LMU. In 1989 he was appointed Professor and Director of the newly established Department of Forensic Psychiatry at Würzburg University. He returned to LMU to take up his present position in 1992.