

Note to Instructor re: Discussion 2 on the Body

The first “disciplinary” perspective on conflict focuses on the physical body – as an organism – that may hold clues to better understand conflict. The readings examine different facets of our physical selves that can offer insight into sources of, or triggers for, conflict behavior. Examples include: our genetic make-up; our hormonal system and other chemicals produced within our bodies; the impact of externally introduced chemicals (such as tobacco, medicines and other chemicals like drugs); the impact of physical changes or injury to the brain or other parts of our physical organisms. The central question here is whether, by examining these physical sources, we can see evidence that may link to conflict behavior. For example, can we observe, and possibly correlate, a change in adrenaline levels and aggressive behavior? Can we observe a behavioral impact on cognitive processes and decision-making by increasing or decreasing serotonin levels in the brain? And so on.

There are two primary areas where confusion may arise from this perspective:

- First, it is not always clear what is meant by the “physical organism.” For example, some might observe a difference in behavior related to observed physical characteristics (such as skin color or physical features). This is not necessarily a “biological” source of conflict. While skin color and physical features are physical characteristics, the real question is whether those characteristics are the *source of a physiological reaction within that same organism* that may be a causal connection to that organism’s aggression (conflict behavior). As we will study in upcoming weeks, many physical characteristics are given meaning through belief systems which have nothing to do with the body itself. Said differently, a physical source of conflict behavior is very different from conflict behavior that is a cognitive, emotional or psychological *reaction to* a physical characteristic that is observed (which may be interesting but would need to be analyzed using a different set of theories other than theories from the biological/physiological perspective).
- Second, there can be confusion about whether biology, or any single perspective for that matter, can be argued to be “THE” cause of conflict behavior. Some students assume that if it isn’t “THE” sole cause, then it must not be relevant or useful at all and should be dismissed altogether. That logic creates a false dilemma (a “sucker’s choice”) and misses an important point for the Theories class. The perspectives we are studying do not claim to offer the only or “best” explanation for conflict. Instead, like a mosaic, they each offer some unique insight into conflict that, when taken together with other perspectives, help a conflict professional to develop a more complete and sophisticated picture of what may be the causes for a given conflict. Thus, the question we are examining is whether biology – or any perspective for that matter – help us gain greater insight into one of any number of contributing factors to a conflict. Even if evidence of a biological source only explains a small dimension of a conflict (let’s say, even 5%), that is still worth examining and adding to our mosaic.