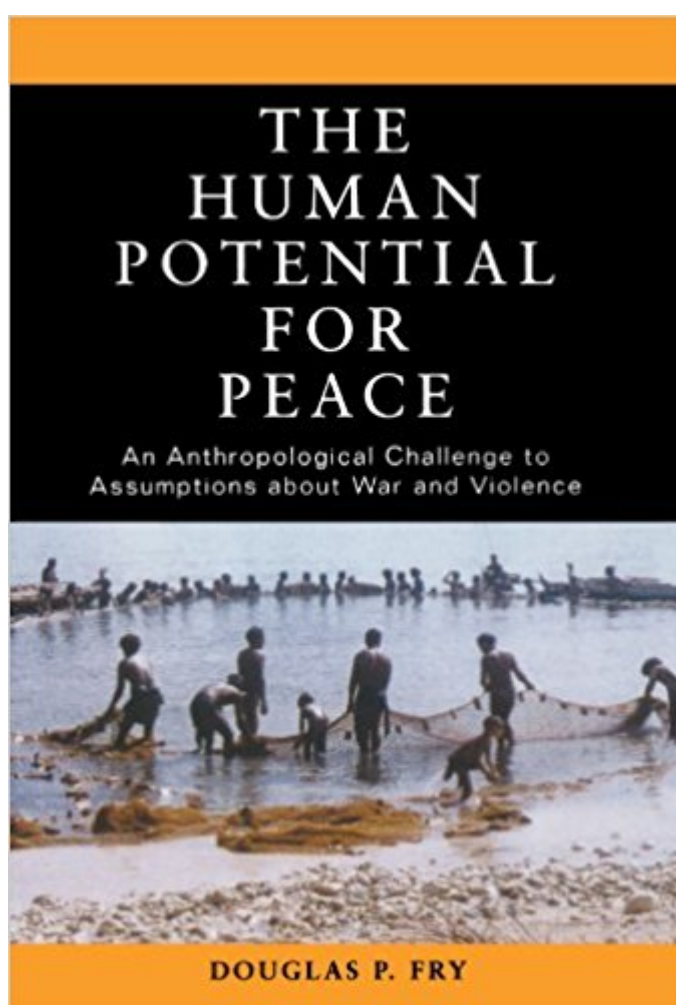


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# The Human Potential For Peace: An Anthropological Challenge To Assumptions About War And Violence



## Synopsis

In *The Human Potential for Peace: An Anthropological Challenge to Assumptions about War and Violence*, renowned anthropologist Douglas P. Fry shows how anthropology--with its expansive time frame and comparative orientation--can provide unique insights into the nature of war and the potential for peace. Challenging the traditional view that humans are by nature primarily violent and warlike, Professor Fry argues that along with the capacity for aggression humans also possess a strong ability to prevent, limit, and resolve conflicts without violence. Raising philosophy of science issues, the author shows that cultural beliefs asserting the inevitability of violence and war can bias our interpretations, affect our views of ourselves, and may even blind us to the possibility of achieving security without war. Fry draws on data from cultural anthropology, archaeology, and sociology as well as from behavioral ecology and evolutionary biology to construct a biosocial argument that challenges a host of commonly held assumptions. *The Human Potential for Peace* includes ethnographic examples from around the globe, findings from Fry's research among the Zapotec of Mexico, and results of cross-cultural studies on warfare. In showing that conflict resolution exists across cultures and by documenting the existence of numerous peaceful societies, it demonstrates that dealing with conflict without violence is not merely a utopian dream. The book also explores several highly publicized and interesting controversies, including Freeman's critique of Margaret Mead's writings on Samoan warfare; Napoleon Chagnon's claims about the Yanomamā; and ongoing evolutionary debates about whether "hunter-gatherers" are peaceful or warlike. *The Human Potential for Peace* is ideal for undergraduate courses in political and legal anthropology, the anthropology of peace and conflict, peace studies, political sociology, and the sociology of war and violence. Written in an informal style with numerous entertaining examples, the book is also readily accessible to general readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Human Potential for Peace is a real achievement, the first systematic book of its kind, and a welcome part of the anthropological literature. I especially liked the sweep of the book, which broadly covers both the history of aggression as well as the ethnographic record, moving forward to contemporary society and applied implications."--Thomas A. Gregor, Professor of Anthropology, Vanderbilt University

"This is an important book, and a serious one, although it is enlivened with a number of anecdotes and personal reminiscences. The book has great strengths, including breadth of scholarship in different areas, as well as a critical depth in tackling some common assumptions and cited conclusions."--Peter K. Smith, Department of Psychology, University College London

<http://www.israsociety.com/bulletin/isradec2005.pdf> "Read the full review here."

Amongst the various anthropological texts that have emerged over the last decade, this is clearly one of the most important. At a time when practitioners in the social sciences continue to haggle over the relative merits of interdisciplinary approaches, of paradigm shifts, and of the role of war and peace in human endeavors, this book strikes a relevant chord. Douglas Fry reminds us that in the human experience it is neither solely nature nor nurture, neither aggression nor camaraderie, rather it is a complex synthesis of human endeavors resulting in a clear and resounding potential for peace."--Agustín Fuentes, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

<http://www.peacefulsocieties.org/NAR/051222gen.html> "Read the full review here."

Douglas P. Fry is at University of Arizona.

Brilliant book. Fry demonstrates that war is a choice not an inevitability. As such, we see that we can do something about it if we have the political (this is a biggie) will to end war. Well researched, well thought out, credible conclusions.

The book is interesting, has a lot of information regarding different cultures, tribes, villages, and their peaceful efforts. The author traveled to so many places himself, so it is interesting to read his own observations.

Great book. Had to get it for an anthropology class. Now I enjoy lending it to friends and telling them to at least skim it.

Everyone needs to read this book!

This is an excellent book. The author argues convincingly that the human being is not inherently warlike. We have a great capacity to create peace and live in harmony. This may at first seem strange and an utopian dream, but, looking at the data that the author provides it turns out to be undeniable, the evidence is truly overwhelming. We see war and violence every day in the news, we study the history of our civilization and others and discover that they all had war. So, why wouldn't we assume that human is inherently violent? Our cultural beliefs, as Douglas P. Fry argues, constrain us in our search for the truth. Many times, we make the mistake of portraying sedentary agricultural tribes as windows of the past. These tribes are predominantly warring and hierarchical. Warfare, as Fry states, increases with social complexity. The truth is that, despite being a small minority today, all humans were nomadic hunter-gatherers until around 12,000 years ago and lived in a sparsely populated planet (the highest estimates say that humans numbered about 10 million at the time). There were plenty of resources back then contrary to our beliefs due to the low population density (1 person per 8 sq. miles). In the worst Australian desert conditions that's the exact density needed to support a hunter-gatherer. Surely there were much more abundant places than Australia's harshest desert back then. Hunter-gatherers are predominantly non-warring and egalitarian. Individuals may fight over women but groups don't. Normally, in these societies, women possess as much power as man Fry also demystifies many writings of the so-called "realists" with powerful arguments and evidence and denounces how they tend to overlook peaceful pre-industrial societies overlooking them or explaining them away as they constitute a nuisance to the theories of warfare. My favourite chapter is the one in which he criticizes (and, indeed, demolishes) some assumptions people make about the past. These are 'The assumption of warring over scarce resources', 'The assumption of warring over women' and 'the assumption of warring over land'. Moreover, in conditions where resources are scarce (such as access to waterholes in the Kalahari Desert), cooperation rather than fighting is the chosen option for nomadic hunter-gatherers and much more advantageous.

This book represents an informed and well-reasoned attempt to articulate many of the problems

with prevailing cultural assumptions about human warfare. Fry is deliberate about defining terms appropriately, looking to a wide body of particularly ethnographic data, and challenging flawed arguments. He argues persuasively that warfare correlates with different degrees of social scale and complexity, and ultimately asserts the importance of conflict resolution over lethal aggression in many societies.

This book convincingly challenges assumptions about war and violence by drawing upon a vast amount of anthropological evidence. The overall theme of the book is that Western culture has been and continues to be heavily influenced by an assumption that man is naturally warlike. However, a careful re-examination of the actual anthropological evidence leads to a different conclusion. Humans obviously have a capacity for violence and war, but they also have a huge potential for peacemaking, reconciliation, and avoiding violence in the first place. Basically, anthropologist Douglas Fry argues that we have been sold on a bunch of assumptions and presumptions that do not match the actual facts. One chapter points out how a widely cited study on the Yanomamö people of South America, that supposedly shows that "killers have more kids," is analytically flawed. Fry presents a re-analysis and poses the question: Why does this obviously flawed study continue to be widely cited? The answer seems to be that it matches preconceived notions about a violent human nature. The book is extremely well documented. A listing of societies that do not engage in warfare is provided in support of the thesis that humans are not naturally warlike. Fry's writing style is fun to read. He takes the reader along on adventures in anthropology to discover some surprising findings. He also uses anecdotes very effectively as a literary device to keep the reader's interest. One of my favorite chapters is when he tells of his own fieldwork experiences in Mexico and is not afraid to point out his own follies in the field. In sum, this is a very well documented re-evaluation of very commonly held assumptions about human nature and war. It is an important book. It also is interesting, and in places down right funny. I recommend it not only to all the people who "wished that they had majored in anthropology in college" but also to anyone who ponders why men continue to go to war. This book provides some insightful, "unconventional wisdom" on this timely topic.

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