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‘The Aquarium’, HM Prison Grendon, Silver Award for Painting 2017
Image courtesy of Koestler Arts.

Koestler Arts runs the annual Koestler Awards for arts in criminal justice. The charity aims to encourage people in prisons, secure hospitals, detention settings and on community sentences or probation to participate in the arts, and to share that talent with the public. Over 3,500 people take part annually. Each entrant benefits from recognition for their work and feedback. They can also win cash awards, be exhibited, or published, and apply for arts mentoring.

Koestler works in partnership across the UK to present one UK exhibition at Southbank Centre annually, as well as regional and national shows. It will present an East of England programme at Snape Maltings, Suffolk from 1 – 31 August 2019 and a UK programme at Southbank Centre, London from 19 September – 3 November 2019. Volume 2 of the charity’s poetry anthology Koestler Voices will be published in September 2019.

www.koestlerarts.org.uk
‘Extremism means extremism’

Extremists with violent behaviour towards the others ‘exist in various forms. Western extremists attack Muslim minorities or others who disagree with them, and Muslim extremists carry out terrorist activities against the West or others. Both groups claim the moral right to do so.

In a series of studies, social psychologists demonstrated that perceived inter-group threat is a common driving force of anti-group hostility. They studied a total of 705 Muslims and 522 non-Muslim Westerners in three groups and several social contexts: non-Muslim Westerners, Muslims in Western societies and Muslims in the Middle East.

They found that the more individuals in each group felt that the other group was a threat to their culture, traditions, norms, values and way of life, the higher their hostility. This attitude was the same in all subjects, irrespective of whether they were Westerners or Muslims, living in the West or the Middle East.

Symbolic and real threats had the same effects. A meta-analysis of all the studies showed that symbolic threat was most strongly associated with inter-group hostility, and that individuals with high religious group identification experienced heightened levels of threat.

These findings go some way towards explaining why Muslims and non-Muslims engage in mixed-ethnic conflict. We address themes that have received little attention in the literature on religion and violence and in the broad public.


Anson Shah (UK)

‘To act or not to act?’

Being treated unfairly causes anger and a wish to take revenge. Some of us act on our anger and punish the culprit, and some do not. Are there differences in our actions reflected in our brain activity and, if so, what are the areas involved?

Researchers in Geneva, Switzerland, examined the relationship between feelings of anger and revenge and brain activity. They devised an economic game aimed at generating feelings of injustice and anger and offering the possibility of revenge. Twenty-five subjects were recruited to play with two other players, who were pre-programmed (the participants were unaware of this). One of the players was friendly, offering the participant financial interactions and sending nice messages, while the other player made sure to multiply only his own profits, going against the participant’s interests and sending annoying messages.

All subjects underwent magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain throughout the three phases of the test to identify the areas activated in the process of playing the economic game.

In phase 1, the participant was in control and able to choose whether to reward the other two, and it was observed that in general participants were fair with the other players.

In phase 2, the participant was the passive position of receiving the decisions of the other two players, one of whom was acting as a provoking and unfair player, the participant was asked to rate his anger in response to this, on a scale from 0 to 10. During this phase, MRI activity was observed in the superior temporal lobe and the amygdala (the latter is generally associated with feelings of fear), the higher the level of anger as rated by the subject, the stronger the activity.

In phase 3, the participant was back in control and was given the choice to reward the other two players. Most of the participants remained fair to the fair player but took revenge on the unfair player. However, 11 of them also remained fair to the unfair player. This allowed the researchers to look at differences in brain activity between those who took revenge and those who did not.

They found that the greater the activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) during the provocation phase, the less the participants punished the unfair player. By contrast, lower activity in the DLPFC was associated with more pronounced revenge on the unfair player.

The DLPFC is the executive power of our brains, the area that regulates our actions in response to our emotions. The more our DLPFC is engaged, the more control we can exert on our actions, at least according to this paradigm.