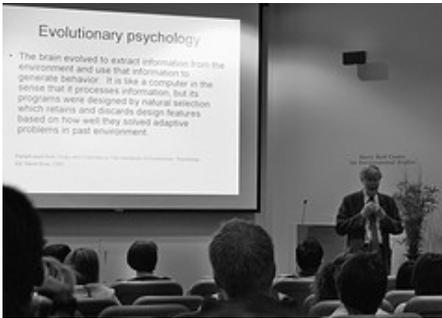


# Asking why humans kill : The Rebel Yell

February 26, 2009 by [Lisa Rush](#)

**Barrick Lecture Series hosts UC, Berkeley professor to discuss “Sex and War”**



Malcom Potts’ lecture presented his outlook, which links population growth and aggression in conflicted hotspots.

Photo by Shawn Reynolds

“I asked myself, as I’m sure you have: Why do human beings fight each other?”

Dr. Malcolm Potts of the University of California, Berkeley discussed his book “Sex and War” as a part of the Barrick Lecture Series Monday. The book, co-authored with science writer Thomas Hayden, discusses findings that suggest men are more aggressive than women and consequently are responsible for the existence of human warfare.

Potts, professor of population and family planning and the director of the Bixby Center for Population, Health and Sustainability at UC Berkeley, explained how humans and their closest relative the chimpanzee are both uniquely violent creatures. Historically, both species show increased violent and risky behavior in males compared to their female counterparts.

Both species engage in team aggression (deliberate and systematic forms of group violence) and same-species killings, which are both notably strange behaviors. In team aggression, animals that are related to each other take risks for each other. With humans, these behaviors are rewarded with the Medal of Honor for soldiers who are brave in battle.

Researchers have found that chimps tend to use these forms of violence to gain territory. Potts said these behaviors are a low-risk strategy to be able to increase resources in order to better reproduce, suggesting that these are evolved behaviors.

“Evolution is not about what is good, just or moral. It is about what works,” he said.

Potts pointed out how the first “Ice Man” was found with an arrow in his back and three different blood groups on his body. He argued against the popular view that this must have been “some poor Shepard that lost his way,” saying the man was more likely someone who “was involved in killing other people and was killed himself.”

Potts suggested that, contrary to popular belief adopted by the American Anthropological Association and the American Sociological Association, humans are not generally nice, peaceful creatures.

Potts discussed a survey that asked a sample of men whether they would rape a woman if they had the opportunity to do so without consequence. According to Potts, 35 percent said they would.

Potts said that since humans and chimps are highly sexual and very intelligent, it is intrinsically difficult for them to kill members of their own species.

“Therefore, my speculation is that we have a mental mechanism... that enables us to dehumanize... the person we’re attacking and I think we see that throughout history,” he stated. “Any of us could make a good soldier.”

Potts claimed that environment also influences behavior.

“Those who had encountered abuse as a child... tend to be more violent,” he explained.

Men ages 18 to 30 are the most volatile in the age spectrum, and most prone to risky behavior. Therefore, Potts claimed, “testosterone is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction.”

Potts explained how the 9/11 commission draws attention to the fact “that a large, steadily increasing population of young men without any reasonable expectation of suitable or steady employment” are a “sure prescription for social turbulence.”

Potts suggested that the Palestinian territories, particularly the Gaza Strip, are the most dangerous areas in the world. He claimed that the population of males aged 15 to 30 will increase drastically in the region, adding to the tensions.

“They’re full of testosterone, they’re uneducated, they can’t get a job...I would be a terrorist if I lived in the Gaza strip,” Potts exclaimed.

Potts believes that the availability of contraception, along with the option of safe abortions, is the only solution to population problems in the Middle East.

“Those unwanted pregnancies are going to be the world’s next terrorists,” he said.

Cara Connolly, an anthropology graduate student, found Potts’ views on abortion to be of interest.

“[Potts suggested] it’s a doctor’s job to do what the woman wants, [not what the culture thinks should be allowed.]”

Potts even admitted he taught people in the Philippines how to perform abortions and that he was not ashamed to do so even if it was illegal in the country.

Despite his arguably grim arguments, Potts said, “We’re much less violent than we used to be and I think we should rejoice in that.”