

Why Competition?

Alfie Kohn

My thesis is admittedly extreme; it is, simply put, that *competition by its very nature is always unhealthy*. This is true, to begin with, because competition and cooperation are mutually exclusive orientations. I say this fully aware of the famed camaraderie that is supposed to develop among players--or soldiers--on the same side. First, I have doubts, based on personal experience, concerning the depth and fullness of relationships that result from the need to become more effective against a common enemy.

Second, the “realm of the interhuman,” to use Martin Buber’s phrase, is severely curtailed when those on the other side are excluded from any possible community. Worse, they are generally regarded with suspicion and contempt in any competitive enterprise. (This is not to say that we cannot remain on good terms with, say, tennis opponents, but that whatever cooperation and meaningful relationship is in evidence exists in spite of the competitiveness.) Finally, the sweaty fellowship of the locker room (or, to draw the inescapable parallel again, the trenches) simply does not compensate for the inherent evils of competition.

The desire to win has a not very surprising (but too rarely remarked upon) characteristic: it tends to edge out other goals and values in the context of any given competitive activity. With respect to this last phenomenon, it is fruitless--and a kind of self-deception, ultimately--to shake our heads and deplore this sort of thing. Similarly, we have no business condemning “overly rough” football players or the excesses of “overzealous” campaign aides or even, perhaps, violations of the Geneva Convention in time of war (which is essentially a treatise on How to Kill Human Beings Without Doing Anything *Really* Unethical). We are engaging in a massive (albeit implicit) exercise of hypocrisy to decry these activities while continuing to condone, and even encourage, the competitive orientation of which they are only the logical conclusion.

The cost of any kind of competition in human terms is incalculable. When my success depends on other people’s failure, the prospects for a real human community are considerably diminished. This consequence speaks to the profoundly antihumanistic quality of competitive activity, and it is abundantly evident in American society. Moreover, when my success depends on my being *better than*, I am caught on a treadmill, destined never to enjoy real satisfaction. Someone is always one step higher, and even the summit is a precarious position in light of the hordes waiting to occupy it in my stead. I am thus perpetually insecure and, as psychologist Rollo May points out, perpetually anxious.

...individual competitive success is both the dominant goal in our culture and the most pervasive occasion for anxiety...[This] anxiety arises out of the interpersonal isolation and alienation from others that inheres in a pattern in which self-validation depends on triumphing over others (*The Meaning of Anxiety*, rev. ed.)

I begin to see my self-worth as conditional--that is to say, my goodness or value become contingent on how much better I am than so many others in so many activities.

If you believe, as I do, that unconditional self-esteem is a singularly important requirement for (and indicator of) mental health, then the destructiveness of competition will clearly outweigh any putative benefit, whether it be a greater effort at tug-of-war or a higher gross national product.

From the time we are quite small, the ethic of competitiveness is drummed into us. The goal in school is not to grow as a human being or even, in practice, to reach a satisfactory level of intellectual competence. We are pushed instead to become brighter than, quicker than, better achievers than our classmates, and the endless array of scores and grades lets us know at any given instant how we stand on that ladder of academic success.

If our schools are failing at their explicit tasks, we may rest assured of their overwhelming success regarding this hidden agenda. We are well trained to enter the marketplace and compete frantically for more money, more prestige, more of all the “good things” in life. An economy such as ours, understand, does not merely permit competition: *it demands it*. Ever greater profits becomes the watchword of private enterprise, and an inequitable distribution of wealth (a polite codeword for human suffering) follows naturally from such an arrangement.

Moreover, one must be constantly vigilant lest one’s competitors attract more customers or conceive some innovation that gives them the edge. To become outraged at deceptive and unethical business practices is folly; it is the competitiveness of the system that promotes these phenomena. Whenever people are defined as opponents, doing everything possible to triumph must be seen not as an aberration from the structure but as its very consummation.

This orientation finds its way into our personal relationships as well. We bring our yardstick along to judge potential candidates for lover, trying to determine who is most attractive, most intelligent, and...the best lover. At the same time of course, *we* are being similarly reduced to the status of competitor. The human costs are immense.

Whether a competition-free society can actually be constructed is another issue altogether, and I readily concede that this mentality has so permeated our lives that we find it difficult even to imagine alternatives in many settings. The first step, though consists in understanding that rivalry of any kind is both psychologically disastrous and philosophically unjustifiable, that the phrase “healthy competition” is a contradiction in terms. Only then can we begin to develop saner, richer lifestyles for ourselves as individuals, and explore more humanistic possibilities for our society.

ESSAY TOPIC

Alfie Kohn says: “Competition by its very nature is always unhealthy” (paragraph one). In your opinion, how effective is Kohn’s essay in supporting this claim? Examine his evidence and arguments and assess their validity in a carefully reasoned response.