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A Moral Dilemma for the Political Psychologist: Decreasing Criminal Violence as Symptom

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Substitution or Getting at the Real Problem

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Abstract. This article describes two approaches to decreasing criminal violence and the moral dilemma in choosing between them.

How to decrease criminal violence? There are two schools of thought. The first is to minimize proximal causes of violence. This approach comprises the (1) provision of mental health research, diagnosis, and treatment for individuals at risk for aggressive behavior through biological, chemical, and psychological dysfunction; (2) modification of environmental correlates of criminal violence, such as (a) entertainment media (for certain subtypes of criminal aggressors), (b) the presence of and access to weapons (again, for certain aggressor subtypes), (c) the de-facto policy of short but brutal confinement for people convicted of criminal violence, (d) the often insensitive and complicated nature of government bureaucracies, and (e) the various acute crises serving as precipitating factors for criminal violence; (3) reduction of emotional correlates of criminal violence, such as anger, rage, and fear by political, social, and cultural praxis; and (4) the same sort of reduction for cognitive correlates (belief systems and thought processes) possessed by some "hyperinstrumental" and antisocial types of criminal aggressors.

The second school of thought addresses the macromolecular, distal, and long-term correlates of criminal violence--e.g., (1) poverty, (2) huge disparities in socioeconomic status among citizens, (3) huge disparities in applications of the legal system dependent on socioeconomic status, (4) ownership of sources of wealth by the few in conjunction with the advertent or inadvertent exploitation of the many, and (5) racism and ethnocentrism.

A very crude analogy encompassing the two approaches is that the first is geared to decrease the amount of suffering in a concentration camp, the second to do away with the camp. Supporters of the first approach may justly argue that the second approach is undoable, while the first approach can likely decrease the number of people committing criminal violence and ease the difficulties that many people face in navigating through the difficulties of life. Supporters of the second approach may justly argue that the first approach co-opts its practitioners into being no more than control agents for those political authorities who have vested interests in not reallocating resources, in not directly and successfully eradicating macromolecular correlates of criminal violence--in not rocking the boat.

Sure, some political psychologists might claim to be doing both or trying to. The question is whether one can actually be engaged in both or whether working inside the system precludes a correct understanding of it. (In essence, one becomes part of the problem instead of part of the solution.) There are no easy answers. Perhaps this is why some very talented and compassionate people have chosen self-violence--e.g., suicide--to being confronted with the Scylla and Charybdis of the two schools of thought. (See Catalano, R., Novaco, R., & McConnell, W. (1997.) A model of the net effect of job loss on violence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1440-1447; Corvo, K.N. (1997.) Community-based youth violence prevention: A framework for planners and funders. *Youth and Society*, 28, 291-316; Heimer, K. (1997.) Socioeconomic status, subcultural definitions, and violent delinquency. *Social Forces*, 75, 799-833.) (Keywords: Conflict, Control, Policy, Violence.)

