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Psychological Profiles and Illegal Political Violence: A Commentary

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Title: Psychological Profiles and Illegal Political Violence: A Commentary

Author: Editor

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Abstract. This article provides guidance as to the nature of psychological profiles that best facilitate predicting, preventing, and attenuating illegal political violence.

There are many examples of illegal political violence: --terrorism, genocide, assassinations, violent crimes against humanity, war crimes, some variants of rape and ethnic cleansing, and pillaging. Political psychologists have most often sought to facilitate decreasing illegal political violence, sometimes to induce or increase it. A significant problem in developing reliable and valid psychological knowledge towards both pursuits has been the seeming arbitrariness of what has been deemed illegal or legal in different eras for different local, regional, national, and international levels of analyses.

Psychological profiles used to elucidate illegal political violence--much as criminal violence in general--typically have focused on three main areas. (1) Sociological approaches study an individual or group's social position in salient hierarchies as to status, power, or stigma. Variables include age, social class, caste, economic status, race, or ethnic group. (2) Social psychological approaches study interpersonal, intergroup, and other social interactional variables--including intrapsychic events with social content. Variables include (a) interactions with friends, acquaintances, family members, and strangers; (b) criminal history; (c) family dysfunction; (d) beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behaviors towards socially proscribed behaviors such as substance abuse; and (e) social stimulus characteristics and affordances generating greater potential for illegal violence. (3) Individual psychological approaches study cognitive, affective, and motivational phenomena and related dispositions such as traits, intelligence, and conative tendencies. (Social content may relate to these phenomena but are not primary in delineating them.) Variables include comprehension, memory, associative linkages, the moral substrates of social attitudes and behaviors, impulsivity, moods, needs, instincts, and desires. They also include psychopathological phenomena.

Contemporary research including reviews and meta-analyses strongly suggest that the social psychological approach most robustly encompasses variables that are significantly associated with illegal violence--viz., substance abuse, criminal history, dehumanizing and antisocial stances of attitude, social stimuli and affordances, and family dysfunction. In the domain of illegal political violence, this research should inform the general risk assessment of military recruits and the selection and training of special military and political personnel for tasks and situations in which the probability of illegal political violence is especially salient. Individuals and groups judged at risk may be required to undergo more intense and frequent human rights training addressing the specifics of current tasks and situations. Policymakers may be better informed to influence macromolecular variables that in turn affect the social psychological variables affecting the risk of illegal political violence.

The bottom line is that psychological profilers can begin to move, once and for all, away from the nomothetic picture of the abnormal violator towards the potential violator who but for the grace of God lies in each of us. (See Bond, D., Jenkins, J.C., Taylor, C., & Schock, K. (1997). Mapping mass political conflict and civil society: Issues and prospects for the automated development of event data. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41, 553-579; Bonta, J., Law, M., & Hanson, K. (1998). The prediction of criminal and

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