

4-10-1998

Effective Treatment of Psychopaths Who Violently Offend: Suggestions from Political Psychology and Virtual Reality Technology

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1998) "Effective Treatment of Psychopaths Who Violently Offend: Suggestions from Political Psychology and Virtual Reality Technology," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 14 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss14/1>

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Title: Effective Treatment of Psychopaths Who Violently Offend: Suggestions from Political Psychology and Virtual Reality Technology

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 14

Date: 1998-04-10

Keywords: Deception, Psychopathy, Violence

Abstract. This article describes some difficulties in treating psychopaths who have been convicted of violent offenses. As well, it offers some suggestions for resolving these difficulties.

Psychopathic violent offenders bare a fragile edifice that forms part of the body politic--an edifice with which that body is very uneasy and of which it is often motivated to be unaware. (1) These offenders have committed violence and face negative sanctions. Yet perpetrators of the same behaviors may at times face positive sanctions from social authorities and peers. (2) Violations of social rules, regulations, modes of reciprocity, and values constitute clinical criteria in labeling psychopaths. How different is this from ascribing mental disorders to anyone who challenges the legitimacy of a political order? (3) These offenders seem to more often commit violent offenses after undergoing and completing treatment programs than psychopaths who don't receive treatment. This observation subverts the common notion of therapy being either effective or ineffective that is harbored by judicial control agents and that affects political management of psychopaths through legal adjudication. (4) Compared to other offenders, psychopaths who commit violence seem to more often subvert the hierarchies of political power within prisons and probably at different points of the criminal justice system and "outside society" as well--through sexual and other seductive strategies. This seduction, in turn, blurs the psychopolitical distinction between offenders and nonoffenders. (5) In many ways, some of the cardinal characteristics of the psychopath--such as superficial charm, grandiosity, conning, lack of guilt, shallow affect, callousness, and, at best, shallow attachments to people--are similar to those of successful politicians and extreme versions of what works in the success of many people within the polity. So, in many ways, the psychopath is but a reflection of a political dark side that most people would rather ignore, discount, or deny.

How to best treat the psychopathic violent offender? To best protect mental health staff, other representatives of the polity, and the polity itself, to best control the nature of treatment, and to best monitor reactions and real and alleged changes of the offender, therapy based on virtual reality technology (VRT) might be most appropriate. Through virtual reality technology, the offender would have the opportunity to rework and reestablish attachment phenomena--through cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral interactions with audio and visual stimuli...(actual and animated)--concerning family members, developmental issues, and the like. They could participate in virtual therapy groups with specially chosen members throughout the world or with notional members. Assessment interactions could involve scenarios similar to those exploited in the past by the offenders. Psychophysiological monitoring could be concurrent with VRT sessions and assessment. Not only would staff be better protected from face-to-face con jobs, but offender efforts to indirectly con the staff through reactions to VRT therapy also would provide further descriptive information on the nature of psychopathy.

Interestingly, rudimentary VRT through training films and role-playing have been a useful adjunct in treating schizophrenics who often exhibit poor social skills. VRT may also be helpful in treating a dangerous subpopulation whose social skills are rich in a poor cause. (See Cornell, D.G., et al. (1996).

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Psychopathy in instrumental and reactive violent offenders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64, 783-790; Hare, R.D. (1996). Psychopathy: A clinical construct whose time has come. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23, 25-54; Quinsey, V.L. (1995). The prediction and explanation of criminal violence. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 18, 117-127; Rice, M.E., & Harris, G.T. (1995). Psychopathy, schizophrenia, alcohol abuse, and violent recidivism. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 18, 333-342; Salekin, R.T., Rogers, R., & Sewell, K.W. (1996). A review and meta-analysis of the Psychopathy Checklist and Psychopathy Checklist-Revised: Predictive validity of dangerousness. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 3, 203-215; Salter, A. (1998). Risk assessment of sexual offenders. San Diego, CA: Specialized Training Services, Inc.; Weiler, B.L., & Widom, C.S. (1996). Psychopathy and violent behavior in abused and neglected young adults. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 6, 253-271.)(Keywords: Deception, Psychopathy, Violence.)