Psychological Research on Violent Behavior: Some Ongoing Problems

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advantage. Third, the psychologist's belief that even if there are different variants of murderous behavior the state must have the authority to control them all—without the psychologist realizing that the state might not represent the interests of its citizenry.

3. Typological Problems. Even if one can measure violence reliably and validly and even if one can resolve the social-control dilemmas described above, there remains the challenge of developing an adequate typology of violence. Most research on the psychology of violence employs typologies that are based on the characteristics of the violent actor—e.g., the psychopathic murderer, the psychotic murderer, the murderer under the influence of drugs or alcohol, the political terrorist. Yet such typologies often fail to capture the complexity of violent behavior as a manifestation of the interaction between actors and their environments. A more adequate typology might be based on the function that violence serves—e.g., violence as a means to an end versus violence as an end in itself. Still, even function-based typologies confront the problem that the same violent act may serve multiple functions simultaneously and that the functions may change over time. The development of an adequate typology of violence thus remains an ongoing challenge for psychological research.

4. The Problem of Prediction. Even granting solutions to the problems described above, the prediction of violent behavior remains problematic. The base rate of violent behavior in most populations is relatively low, and the prediction of low-base-rate events is notoriously difficult. Even a highly accurate predictor will generate many false positives when the base rate is low. This creates both practical and ethical problems—e.g., the problem of what to do with individuals who are predicted to be violent but who would not in fact have become violent. The prediction of violence thus raises fundamental questions about the balance between individual liberty and social protection.

These problems notwithstanding, the symposium led by Professor Monahan represents an important contribution to the psychology of violence. By identifying the problems that must be resolved, the symposium points the way toward a more adequate psychological understanding of violent behavior. It is to be hoped that future research will address these problems and thereby advance both the science and the ethics of research on violence.

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oppression. Third, as far as a psychologist is successful in developing and aiding the implementation of violence control techniques, the oppressed incorporate belief systems validating the notion that violence is not acceptable but their oppression is. Of course, acting in the service of social authorities and contributing to the development and reinforcing of false consciousnesses may exemplify appropriate ethics and morals--of the social authorities. And as military victors write history, so, too, do social victors.

3. The Ethics of Research on the Psychology of Violence. In carrying out studies on the psychology of violence, researchers often attempt to elicit information from subjects about the latter's violent past, present, and future. Most researchers (in the United States) either keep such information confidential-- except (when required) information about child abuse--or make a point of stopping people before information is divulged that defy or challenge ethical, moral, and legal precedent. For example, a subject may be asked if they experience violent fantasies--even the specifics of the nature of these fantasies-- but not be allowed to divulge the specific people who may be involved. Researchers seem to believe that errors of omission are more egregious than those of commission--that contributing to keeping the cat in the bag (at times with considerable effort) as opposed to letting it out (often effortlessly) protects one from ethical, moral, and legal challenge.

4. Random Samples. Most psychological research bearing on social Issues employs a common list of subject variables that must be "controlled for" through the art and science of random sampling. These variables include race, ethnicity, religion, age, socio-economic class, and what can be termed macro- locale--nation, state within a nation, perhaps, city. Monahan has developed new data suggesting that neighborhood--a variable that may only somewhat conceptually correlate with socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, and religion--can account for significant variance in violence-related phenomena. This finding--previously explicated in the academic fields of sociology and cultural anthropology--may suggest the need for reinterpretation of much of the past research on the psychology of violence.

Outstanding research such as that of Professor Monahan allows analysts to best parse the Issues intersecting psychology and politics. It remains to be seen whether all psychology is political psychology. (See Heilbrun, K. (1997). Prediction versus management models relevant to risk assessment: The importance of legal decision-making context. Law and Human Behavior, 21, 347-359; Monahan, J. (September 10, 1998). Dangerousness I and II: Assessment and Intervention. In S. O. Pitt (Chair). Dangerousness: Assessment and Intervention. Symposium presented by the Department of Psychiatry, Maricopa Integrated Health System, Phoenix, AZ; Monahan, J., & Steadman, H. (1996). Violent storms and violent people: How meteorology can inform risk communication in mental health law. American Psychologist, 51, 931-938; Steadman, H., Mulvey, E., Monahan, J., et al. (1998). Violence by people discharged from acute psychiatric inpatient facilities and by others in the same neighborhoods. Archives of General Psychiatry, 55, 1-9.) (Keywords: Social Control, Typology, Violence.)

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