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Title: Psychological Research on Violent Behavior: Some Ongoing Problems

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Abstract. This article highlights some significant problems with state-of-the art psychological research on violent behavior. As an example of such research, a recent symposium led by John Monahan, PhD, Dougherty Professor of Law, Goldsmith Research Professor, and Professor of Psychology and Legal Medicine, School of Law, University of Virginia, is critiqued by IBPP.

On September 10, 1998, Professor John Monahan, an international leader in the area of psychology and the law, led a symposium exploring the psychology of violence. This outstanding state-of-the-art program not only offered the latest on topics such as the relationship between violence and mental disorder and the approaches to risk assessment for violence but allowed participants to identify associated research problems that must be resolved. It is to these problems that we now turn.

1. **Reliability and Validity of Measurement.** In psychological research on violence, one might choose to measure an index of violence at two or more different points in time. The first point might be before some therapeutic intervention or during the presence of some factor that allegedly exacerbates or minimizes violence or its threat. The second point might be sometime after the therapeutic intervention or in the presence of some same or different value of the factor that allegedly affects violence or its threat. Assuming the researcher finds a statistically significant difference in measures of the index of violence between the two measurement points, one is still stymied in interpreting the difference. On the one hand, the difference may be ascribed to a reliability problem in the measuring instrument--i.e., there's no change in violence and the difference merely reflects some bias or inadequacy of the measuring instrument. On the other hand, the difference may be ascribed to a valid change in violence--from which inferences about the therapeutic intervention and factors of risk may be made. (Of course, combinations of the two options are possible as well.) The dilemma is a common one for the social sciences in general. One might surmise that the politics of social science research may be implicated in nurturing this dilemma--for resolving the dilemma through a paradigm shift of scientific epistemology might endanger vested interests as described by the sociology and business of developing, validating, and transmitting scientific knowledge.

2. **Psychological Research as a Social Control Mechanism.** Assuming one can develop valid predictors of violence that can confront ensuing validity challenges from the social, cultural, and historical transformations of knowledge, how can one ensure that the information will be used in accordance with appropriate ethics and morals? For example, most research on the psychology of violence seems to suggest that violence per se is criminal and wrong and that violence must be eradicated if at all possible. This suggestion implies that all forms of political violence are--by definition--criminal and wrong and that one cannot legitimately and literally fight an oppressive regime. It would appear that several variants of false consciousness may be at play here. First, the psychologist's own belief system that all violence against authority must be abated without realizing that this belief serves the interests of those with significant power in society. Second, the psychologist's lack of political discrimination between different variants of criminal behavior--e.g., murder as the sole viable act against an oppressor when all other acts have been seen to be ineffectual versus murder as a noxious behavior induced through oppression versus murder as manifestations of the murderer's evil and instrumentality much more than of political

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.)