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# The Evolution of Scientific Psychology and Public Policy: On Violence and Its Antidotes

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**Abstract.** This article presents a conceptual context for considering the utility of psychology for public policy and addresses this utility for the public policy goal of minimizing human violence.

Psychology may denote the creation of descriptive and inferential knowledge about human behavior (including intrapsychic processes) and the application of that knowledge to achieve goals. As such, psychology seems to be a pursuit that may be a defining feature of humanity and, therefore, a pursuit engaged in by individuals besides those who claim or are attributed membership in guilds and other sociocultural groupings formally labeled as psychological.

Public policy becomes the goal when psychology is engaged in intentionally influencing formally constituted government--including non-state actors--in the latter's attempt to affect people represented by, controlled by, or otherwise coming to the attention of that government. In fact, psychology--as engaged in by all individuals, not merely those claiming or attributed the formal label of the psychologist--has addressed three main facets of public policy. First, it has addressed what goals public policy should address--i.e., the function of public policy. Second, it has addressed how public policy should be developed, implemented, and evaluated--i.e., the structure and process of public policy. Third, it has addressed how to affect people as desired by a formally constituted government--i.e., the substance of public policy.

Has psychology been successful in influencing public policy? As an example, let's just focus on the psychology carried out by individuals formally labeled as psychologists--a generic construct including sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, psychiatrists, professional educators, and so on. And of these psychologists, just those who assert the practice of scientific psychology and embrace a logical positivist cast to epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. And of these psychologists, just those whose work has intentionally affected the incidence, prevalence, and quality of human violence through influencing public policy. With this last group, the results seem to be very significant--but often not in a direction that supports the notion that psychology can help supply even a partial antidote for human violence.

Psychologists have affected military selection, training, and management policies so that personnel can kill more efficiently. Psychologists have affected military health policies so that people who kill but are wounded or injured can more quickly return to violence and kill again. Psychologists have affected education and social policies so that violence perpetrated by and towards racial and ethnic minorities can more easily be perceived to stem from intrinsic deficiencies of these minorities. Psychologists have affected economic policies so that the poor and deprived, so often correlated and conflated with racial and ethnic minorities, continue to experience associated violence as perpetrators and victims and to more easily be perceived as deserving their fate. Psychologists have even intentionally constructed political ideologies and systems to overtly and violently repress and oppress national majorities in the service of a minority. Psychologists have affected civilian health and legal policies so that most people who are at risk to suffer violence to the mind and soul are fated to only depend on secondary and tertiary intervention or primary intervention that do not do away with primary and putative causes of

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this violence. This last group of psychologists includes competent and well-meaning practitioners who seek to minimize and treat the civilian casualties of political violence and crime (that make up the vast majority of the perpetrators and victims of violence today) and to help identify and apprehend the perpetrators before they kill again.

Many scientific approaches to psychology are implicated in these unfortunate and significant results, including the Big Four scientific macro-theories of social behavior: cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, behaviorism. Why is this? First, most psychologists addressing violence ignore or discount macro-social variables for individual differences--the latter comprising inferred traits, self and other-described intrapsychic content and processes, and variously observed and recorded behaviors. A number of these individual differences and micro-social variables involving familial, work, and school experiences are static as opposed to dynamic and, therefore, rather intractable to intervention. Second, most psychologists belittle values as irrelevant or even injurious to the creation and application of knowledge. They are still in the grasp of a putative and pristine objectivity that is valueless and an empirical and interpretive stance that is alleged to have no effect on that which is observed and interpreted. Third, most psychologists are constrained and blinded by reified hypothetical constructs so that the "as if" of the world assumes an undeserved ontological validity. Although the "as if" existential and behavioral stance can often bring power to the powerless when confronting a politically repressive and violent government, the stance too easily remains in the service of the status quo in the social world of the psychologist. Fourth, most psychologists are more affected by the quest for social prestige, money, and the pleasure of the unexamined life than they care to let on--even if the route is through the examined life. In fact, the telos of the unexamined life quite baldly and insidiously transubstantiates the examined life into something that should not be hallowed. Fifth, psychologists often are operating at the sufferance of those for whom violence undergirds political power. Relative to these power zealots, most psychologists strike an impotent stance precluding combinations of ability and will to carry out the action research--necessitating restructuring and even blows against various empires--that could make a difference. Sixth, and most tragically for those who sincerely would like to live in a world without violence, most psychologists are knowingly or unknowingly play-acting in a script about attenuating violence written by those who are violence's keepers and operate by any means necessary.

There are yet other contributors to scientific psychologists' track record on violence. Theoretical and experimental propensities are often reflections of psychologists' character, their own conflicts, cognitive complexity, formative experiences, and the all-pervading zeitgeist encompassing paradigms of professional propriety--all of which may have little to do with appropriateness for the subject at hand. For example, the very Title of "Evolutionary Psychology and Public Policy: On Violence and Its Antidotes" suggests that the question is which antidotes are truly antidotes, not whether the notion of antidotes for violence is a ridiculous one. Would Division 48 (An American Psychological Association Division of peace psychologists) have sponsored this symposium if the subtitle were "Why the Future Belongs to Natural Born Killers as Opposed to Peace Psychologists"?

Today we can closely read the texts and intently follow the presentations of eminent researchers--scientific psychologists--who favor variants of an evolutionary psychology perspective on questions of public policy. Can these researchers create descriptive and inferential knowledge and apply it to the goal of creating an antidote for violence? Given that an antidote is a remedy for counteracting the effects of poison or disease or something that prevents or counteracts injurious effects, these researchers risk embarking on a mythic voyage fated to end perversely because the alien other to be slain may be a doppelganger. Thus, to induce an evolution of scientific psychology and public policy pertaining to antidotes for human violence--with implications for peacekeeping, peacemaking, and deterrence in their

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widest denotations and connotations--these researchers must make a significant break with the past. Whether it is through terror management or the ensuring of reproductive success, the same must be said for the human race. (See Buss, D. M. (1997). Human social motivation in evolutionary perspective: Grounding terror management theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 22-26; Buss, D. M., & Shackelford, T. K. (1997). From vigilance to violence: Mate retention tactics in married couples. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 72, 346-361; Buss, D. M., & Shackelford, T. K. (1997). Human aggression in evolutionary psychological perspective. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 17, 605-619; Fox, D., & Prilleltensky, I. (Eds.). *Critical psychology: An introduction*. London, England UK: Sage Publications, Inc.; Lieberman, J. D., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & McGregor, H. A. (1999). A hot new way to measure aggression: Hot sauce allocation. *Aggressive Behavior*, 25, 331-348; McGregor, H. A., Lieberman, J. D., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., Simon, L., & Pyszczynski, T. (1998). Terror management and aggression: Evidence that mortality salience motivates aggression against worldview-threatening others. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 74, 590-605; Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1997). Return of the living dead. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 59-71.) (Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology, Violence.)