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Trends. Social Violence: The Jigsaw Classroom as a Piece of the Puzzle

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One very common psychological approach to minimizing violence within a society is to develop assessment techniques to identify people as high risk to engage in violence. These high-risk individuals are then taught anger management and violence-devaluation techniques in individual and group settings. However, extremely robust, early socialization experiences that engender violent propensities often are ignored or discounted. So is the plain fact that violence may be depicted as attractive and even glorified through vicarious conditioning via movies for mass markets, the language of successful politicians and business leaders, amateur and professional sports, and the praxis of everyday life--the last affording direct conditioning as well.

It would, thus, seem that a comprehensive and effective psychological approach to minimizing social violence must involve changing the societies in which people live and interact--not changing people as if they can be meaningfully isolated from a social context. One psychological approach--with supporting data from about 30 years of research focused on changing how children receive and experience their formal education--is the "jigsaw technique" developed by social psychologist Elliot Aronson. This technique focuses on engaging groups of students in learning tasks wherein all succeed or fail dependent on each group member's contribution. In fact, each student must successfully complete a portion of the overall task and effectively communicate this completion with the rest of the group for the group to be successful. The cooperative styles, empathy, and compassion conditioned and shaped by the jigsaw technique may have implications not only for minimizing cliques and bullying in school but also--when broadly applied as the dominant mode of school socialization--for minimizing social violence based on other malignant social experiences.

Interestingly, research that has found less support for the violence-reduction potential of the jigsaw technique is vulnerable to critiques that it has only effected components of the technique, employed the technique for short periods of time, and otherwise effected the technique within a microsocial context. This underlines the difficulties lying in the way of psychology's development and application of macrosocial interventions, interventions which may comprise an important piece of the puzzle whose solution will yield a less violent world. (See Aronson, E. (May/June, 2000). Nobody left to hate: Developing the empathic schoolroom. The Humanist, 60, 17-21; Aronson, E. (2000). Nobody left to hate: Teaching compassion after Columbine. New York: W. H. Freeman; Jigsaw classroom at http://www.jigsaw.org; Aronson, E., Blaney, N., Sikes, J., Stephan, C., & Snapp, M. (February, 1975). Busing and racial tension: The jigsaw route to learning and liking. Psychology Today, pp. 8, 43-50; Aronson, E., & Osherow, N. (1980). Cooperation, prosocial behavior, and academic performance: Experiments in the desegregated classroom. Applied Social Psychology Annual, 1, 163-196; Evaluation of jigsaw, a cooperative learning technique; Moskowitz, J. M., Malvin, J. H., Schaeffer, G. A., & Schaps, E. (1985). Contemporary Educational Psychology, 10, 104-112.) (Keywords: Jigsaw Technique, Schools, Social Psychology, Social Violence, Violence.)

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