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The Utility of Psychological Research To Aid and Abet Violence: Terrorist Talent Scouts and the Selection and Management of Youthful Terrorists

Editor

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Abstract. This article identities the political implications of psychological research intended to prevent or minimize youthful violence. The article then focuses on how this research can be used to help select and manage youthful terrorists.

The overriding assumption permeating psychological research intended to prevent or minimize violence perpetrated by youths is that said violence should not occur. More explicitly, said violence is assumed by many researchers to be immoral as to personal behavior, unethical as to youths' social and cultural roles, and rightly illegal so that it merits the attention of criminal justice systems. (For some researchers, such assumptions about this research are largely irrelevant because of prepotent research values to obtain academic tenure and promotion, funds from grants and commercial opportunities, and a professional reputation as a stellar font of wisdom.)

However, a case can be made that all these researchers--intentionally or otherwise--are functioning as social control agents to protect the political power of authorities who benefit from as large a number of people as possible believing that youthful violence should not occur. The belief in the wrongness of violence becomes a vital part of the many cognitions--e.g., judgments, plans, narratives, and story lines-- that people employ to engender action that will support the power of political authorities especially through not challenging this power. One can even say that the intrapsychic and interpersonal discourse generated by the belief that youthful violence should not occur subjugates those who espouse this belief. They become their own most efficient surrogate jailers within a political prison whose bars are rarely perceived.

Assuming such a case has merit, one then might posit whether psychological research intended to prevent or minimize youthful violence can only continue to strengthen the prison bars and further induce self-subjugation of adults and youth alike. One answer might be that as the psychological research in question globally diffuses through varied population segments via the Internet and other mass media, individuals and groups with different agendas may attempt to use the research in a converse manner. That is, as opposed to identifying so-called risk factors for youthful violence and then seeking to do away with them in youth manifesting the factors or instead constraining the liberties of these youths, one would seek to increase the frequency and amplitude of these factors and nurture youths manifesting these factors for the commission of violent acts. An example of this would be the identification, recruitment, and management of youths for acts of political violence.

Much as intelligence officers assess prospective espionage agents for vulnerabilities--e.g., financial status and desires, vocational status and desires, various narcissistic wounds, ideological content and its press on social behavior, and aspects of sexual orientation--terrorist talent scouts would assess prospective youthful terrorists for the presence of risk factors for violence. What follows is an annotated list of common risk factors--following Borum (2001)--for youthful violence. Again, the list has been generated by psychologists seeking to prevent or minimize violence, but it could be usefully mined by

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terrorist talent scouts. All factors (unless otherwise noted) are asserted to be positively correlated with youthful violence.

Static risk factors denote those that cannot be changed and usually comprise the historical and demographic. (1) A history of violence. Researchers disagree about what acts constitute violence, whether intention to commit violence should be present or even "count" in the absence of a violent act, how or if the history should be verified, and the role of a violent history in the narrative of an individual or that of others about the individual. (2) A history of non-violent offending. Researchers disagree about whether each violation needs to be of a law or of various social and cultural practices and standards. (3) Early initiation of violence. Researchers disagree about the import of whether early violence appears to occur spontaneously--i.e., via self-initiation--and of the psychological significance to the individual and social status of others who are involved in the initiation of the individual. (4) Past supervision/Intervention failures. This factor is controversial in that it seems to imply that the pertinent societies and cultures in which violence occurs harbor change agents that would furnish supervision and intervention to prevent or minimize violence. The factor might be moot or even nonsensical if such violence is highly valued by significant political figures in the familial and larger social contexts of the individual. (5) History of self-harm or suicide attempts. Researchers disagree about the import of the individual's intention, approaches to verification, lethality of the act, and hypothesized intrapsychic processes such as externalizing violence against the self toward others. (6) Home-bound violence. Researchers disagree about whether this includes only mass media-transmitted violence available within the home, only interpersonal violence without violence towards the individual in question, and only verbal violence to the exclusion of physical violence. (7) Parental/Caregiver criminality. Researchers disagree about whether the criminality must involve violence and must result in a conviction. (8) Early parental/Caregiver disruption. Researchers disagree about whether the disruption must be a choice of the pertinent family member(s), a dictate of an extrafamilial political authority, a statistically deviant occurrence in the larger social and cultural context, or poor parental management involving consistency and adequate monitoring. (9) Poor school achievement. This factor is controversial in that the very option of schooling is not one available to many children. Researchers also disagree about the import of various causes for poor school achievement--e.g., so-called learning disabilities, low motivation, emotional disorders, familial chaos or devaluing of education, and so on.

There also are at least two sets of dynamic risk factors for youthful violence. Researchers assume that these factors can be changed--presumably in a direction that would help prevent or minimize violence. However, the strategies, tactics and interventions to effect change often are lacking or inadequate. At other times, they are available but not employed because of a lack of political will.

The first set embraces the social and contextual and partially overlaps some of the previously described historical factors. (10) Peer delinquency. Researchers disagree on the import of delinquency severity and frequency, the nature of the bond between the individual and peers, and the degree to which the individual participates in the delinquency along with the peers. (11) Peer rejection. Researchers disagree on whether the rejection can merely include a passive ignoring of the individual or an active dislike and aversion. (12) Stress and poor coping. Researchers disagree on how one would separate out the positive and negative consequences of stress, whether poor coping can still lead to positive consequences, and whether positive consequences--if they exist--would affect the relationship between the risk factor and violence. (13) Lack of social support. Researchers disagree on the import of merely having access to adequate support, whether this support is used, and whether the social support can be mostly intrapsychic based on object relations. (14) Community disorganization. Researchers disagree on the import of the disparity between community disorganization and that of the larger society, expectations

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of the individual and others in the community milieu about disorganization, whether there appears to be a sense of community from the perspective of the individual, and the degree of identification with the community regardless of disorganization.

The second set of dynamic risk factors for violence embraces the individual and clinical and partially overlaps some of the previously described social, contextual, and historical factors. (15) Attitudes supporting the legitimacy of crime and violence. Researchers disagree about the import of additional subfactors, such as few if any cognitive strategies to resolve problems without violence, chronic misperception of the intent of others as hostile or aggressive, and legitimate attitudes supporting the legitimacy of crime and violence--e.g., those in the context of an illegitimate political state, a legitimate revolutionary moment, or a quest for self-determination of a people identified with by the individual. (16) Risk taking and impulsivity. Researchers disagree about the import of socially adaptive impulsivity and the breadth of generalization of impulsivity across situations. (17) Substance abuse. Researchers disagree about whether substances like alcohol or other psychoactive drugs can be used as opposed to abused and whether specific examples of substance abuse can actually be negatively correlated with violence as well as positively correlated. (18) Anger management problems. Researchers disagree about whether controlling expressions of anger is per se a risk factor, whether significant qualifications are necessary in the case of a lack of emotional control that "defuses" the probability of violent actions, and whether internalizing versus externalizing anger is a useful differential subfactor of risk. (19) Psychopathy. Researchers disagree about whether psychopathy is necessary or sufficient as a pathway to violence and about the very nature of what psychopathy denotes as well as its ontological status. (20) Attention deficit and hyperactivity manifestations. Researchers disagree about how such manifestations are identified or diagnosed as well as the degree to which social expectations about appropriate behavior render these manifestations a risk for violence. For example, the risk factor might better be expressed as a social stigma towards certain cognitive and behavioral styles.

Finally, there is a set of factors that putatively contribute to preventing and minimizing violence. These factors often are described as prosocial involvement, strong social support, strong social attachments, a positive attitude towards authority, strong academic commitment, and a stress-resistant personality structure. However, all of these may also be viewed as aiding and abetting violence depending on the intentions of the people making up the "social."

In conclusion, psychological research on preventing and minimizing youthful violence can be used to aid and abet violence in at least two ways. First, the research's lack of sensitivity to the social, cultural, and political increases the probability that applying it may generate the opposite of what is intended. Second, the research can be intentionally used to generate the opposite of what many of the researchers intend. As research becomes more accessible to more people through the Internet and other mass media, both pathways towards unintended consequences may more likely occur. (See Borum, R. (2001). Assessing risk of juvenile violence. Presentation through Specialized Training Services, Inc.; Borum, R. (2000). Assessing violence risk among youth. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 56, 1263-1288; Capaldi, D.M., & Patterson, G.R. (1996). Can violent offenders be distinguished Fein, R.A., & Vossekuil, B. (1999). Assassination in the United States: An operational study of recent assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approaches. Journal of Forensic Sciences, 50, 321-333; Forth, A., & Mailloux, D. (2000). Psychopathy in youth: What do we know? In C. Gacono (Ed.). The clinical and forensic assessment of psychopathy: A practitioner's guide. (pp. 25-54). Lawrence Erlbaum; Hagan, M., & King, S. (1997). Accuracy of psychologists' short-term predictions of future criminal behavior among juveniles. Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 25, 129-141; Myers, W., Scott, K., Burgess, A., & Burgess, A. (1995). Psychopathology, biopsychosocial factors, crime characteristics, and classification of 25 homicidal

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