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Trends. Getting Emotional on Nonlethal Weapons

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Abstract. This article describes a significant biopsychosocial impediment to developing nonlethal weapons affecting emotional functioning.

A recent report, An Assessment of Nonlethal Weapons Science and Technology, and a recent counterterrorist operation to free hostages in Moscow have cast significant attention on the potential effects of weaponized chemicals on humans who become military, law enforcement, and other security targets.

One school of thought is that nonlethal chemical weapons may be more morally and ethically suspect than lethal weapons. The rationale for this stance is that, as with propaganda, disinformation, and "dirty tricks," nonlethal chemical weapons contaminate cherished values, can be soul-destroyers, and leave a residual of evil through changing for the worse those who implement such weapons. In contrast, lethal weapons that kill instantaneously are somehow "cleaner" on the human historical slate.

Another school of thought is that only further psychopharmacological research stands in the way of the most elegant surgical strikes fostering or preventing the most subtle of emotions. The implication is that beyond general physical incapacitation, weaponized chemicals may induce various degrees of fear, anxiety, anger, elation, and so on.

However, the biopsychosocial foundation of emotions clearly mitigates against emotional surgical strikes via weaponized chemicals. Beyond the biological substrates of emotional functioning that clearly can be directly influenced by chemicals are the meaning of situations constructed by human targets, behavioral expectancies, information processing styles, interpersonal and collective phenomena, and values. Through all these phenomena and constructs, the same chemical contact may induce different emotional sequelae in different human targets.

In conclusion, besides the emotional reaction to supporting or not supporting nonlethal chemical weapon policy is the biopsychosocial reality that predictable emotional consequence may be both nonlethal and a non-event. (See An Assessment of Nonlethal Weapons Science and Technology. (November 4, 2002). http://www4.national academies.org/news.nsf/isbn/0309082889?OpenDocument; Broad, W.J. (November 6, 2002). Report urges U.S. to increase its efforts on nonlethal weapons. The New York Times, p. A14; Schachter, S., & Singer, J. (1962). Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state. Psychological Review, 69, 379-399; Skinhoj, K.T., Larsson, S., Helweg-Joergensen, S., & Hansen, E.H. (2001). Experiences of long-term tranquillizer use: A psychodynamic perspective. Substance Use and Misuse, 36, 1165-1186; Sullivan, R.J., & Hagen, E.H. (2002). Psychotropic substance-seeking: Evolutionary pathology or adaptation? Addiction, 97, 389-400; Whitney, D.K., Sharma, V., & Kueneman, K. (1999). Seasonality of manic depressive illness in Canada. Journal of Affective Disorders, 55, 99-105.)