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Recommended Citation

Joe P. Tupin, *The Causes of Violence by Individuals*, 21 DePaul L. Rev. 156 (1971)

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol21/iss1/10>

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THE CAUSES OF VIOLENCE BY INDIVIDUALS

JOE P. TUPIN*

IT is asserted by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence that since 1948 the United States has been among the half dozen most tumultuous nations in the world with regard to assassinations, riots, and politically related demonstrations.¹ During the period 1960-1967, violent crime increased by fifty-seven percent in this country,² and the rate of homicides by firearms was higher than any Western European nation, Japan, New Zealand or Australia.³ Debate continues as to whether this record of violence is actually increasing and whether it is greater than other countries or not. Irrespective of the absolute validity of these figures and assertions, the magnitude is significant, and, consequently, is of individual and collective concern to us. This concern resulted in the appointment of a Presidential Commission to study violence. The Commission focused in its research primarily on the social, historical, political, and legal aspects of violence by looking at the individual in the context of group membership. Likewise, the recommendations which flowed from the Commission were predominantly related to social, governmental, and legislative remedies. There is little question that the Commission's efforts were relevant and their recommendations appropriate; however, a focus which is limited to group phenomena obscures the vital role of the individual.

Furthermore, to study all civil disorders together tends to cloud

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1. THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: A REPORT TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE (Graham & Gurr ed. 1969).

2. *Id.* at chap. 13.

3. Gillin & Ochberg, *Firearms Control and Violence*, in VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE 244 (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

the unique characteristics of any specific civil disturbance. Whether looking at group or individual violence, it is important to view it from the vantage point of the individual or the specific event of collective violence. In other words, one cannot learn all there is to know about murderers by studying the collective description of one hundred murderers; rather the study must eventually focus on each individual to gain a total understanding of the murderer. The focus of this paper will be to view violence from the perspective of the individual, whether acting alone or as a member of a group. This is especially relevant to psychiatry and the law for *individuals* are ordinarily the focus of the practitioner's activity in any judicial proceeding. Ultimately what is learned from the individual is placed in context with what is learned from group study and enacted into law.

Violence is behavior that inflicts physical harm or abuse on one's self, another individual, or property. It may be described as legal or illegal, moral or immoral, justified or unjustified and has numerous roots including social, cultural, and psychological factors. Since violence is such a verigated phenomenon in both cause and effect, to hope to encapsulate it in a single explanation, *e.g.*, in terms of territory or morality, seems impossible. It is probably more accurate to view a single bit of violence as the external act which arises from multiple factors in unique relationships and varying intensities, impinging both internally and externally on an individual. Human behavior is always the result of a balance of forces, some promoting an action, others inhibiting it. Violence is only a specific example of human behavior and does not qualitatively differ in its process, that is, the checks and balance phenomenon, from any other behavior. Thus, what we say about violence in particular will have general relevance to all aspects of human behavior.

Carried throughout this discussion will be the assumption that these are the forces which promote and inhibit a specific act. These facilitory and inhibitory phenomenon exist as a domain of potential forces, which may act at any point in time with the ultimate outcome being a specific bit of violent behavior. This domain can be divided into a number of descriptive categories. Whether others would divide them as I have is debatable, however, I think the domain itself would be generally accepted. This group of categories should not

be seen as a theory of violence, or any other behavior for that matter, but rather as a mechanism which will promote the organization of the information obtained through the study of a specific violent act by an individual or group. Within each broad category there may be a number of specific factors which may influence violent behavior. The broad categories which I believe to be relevant are cultural, social, psychological, biological, and inanimate environmental factors. Within each of these categories there are a number of specific events that would contribute to a violent act. Although the broad categories are relatively autonomous they are at times clearly interactional and even interrelated. Within each broad category the specific events are both interrelated and interactional. For example, within the broad category of social events there will be interaction between educational and recreational opportunities in a poverty stricken neighborhood, which will clearly affect childhood experiences, child-rearing practices, and, ultimately, the personality (psychology) of the child.

These broad categories then will be discussed in light of current research regarding specific events which have clear relevance to the promotion of violence. Specific inhibitory factors will not be discussed in this paper, although it must be kept in mind that in virtually every instance the final behavior is a product of the balance of these inhibitory and facilitory forces.

CULTURAL FACTORS

Cultural factors refer to those beliefs and values which shape the normative patterns of action of a particular group, *i.e.*, the characteristic behavior of a group. Excellent reviews and documentation of the cultural roots of violence in America are contained in *The History of Violence in America*—specifically, Joe Frantz's essay *The Frontier Tradition: An Invitation to Violence*⁴ and Richard Brown's essay *The American Vigilante Tradition*⁵ document the positive value placed on violent behavior in our past. The necessities of the frontier may have produced violence as a natural phenomenon, but time has

4. Frantz, *The Frontier Tradition: An Invitation to Violence*, in *THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICA* 127 (Graham & Gurr ed. 1969).

5. Brown, *The American Vigilante Tradition*, in *THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICA* 154 (Graham & Gurr ed. 1969).

subsequently romanticized and placed a positive value on these events. The outgrowth is a model of behavior that emphasizes self-reliance, independence, assertiveness, and the justification of violence for "legitimate" and "good" purposes. Though few of us value violence as represented in the western movie we do value those elements associated with it and understand its necessity when "good meets evil." Thus, to some this may be understood as a sanction to violent action.

The relationship between violent behavior and child-rearing practices has been compared among cultures. Various violent acts occur more frequently in cultures in which there is a high pressure for self-reliance and achievement, and a negative reaction when the child is unsuccessful achieving these goals.⁶ Our culture clearly values self-reliance and high achievement and is strikingly punitive, both individually and socially, of failure in these areas. These expressions of value in child-rearing practices may carry hidden seeds of violence. Conversely, there are cultures in which passivity, peace, equanimity, and interdependence are valued, and violent behavior seems to be minimal in that setting.

Cultural standards are largely transmitted by families through their child-rearing practices and seem to set the stage for a certain range and type of behavior which may be manifested as the child grows older. As noted above, the value of violence may be explicitly related to, or the secondary outcome of, these other interrelated values.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Social factors refer to any attitude or behavior that is influenced by past or present experience of the behavior of others. Social characteristics refer to those shared descriptors that typify a particular group, *e.g.*, poverty, unemployment, high income, job stability, etc. The report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence⁷ arrives at the conclusion that violent crime is associated with certain social characteristics such as poverty, age (a much higher rate for the age group 18-24), and the nature of the commu-

6. Bacon, Barry, & Child, A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF CORRELATES OF CRIME, 66 J. ABNORMAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 291 (1963).

7. NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, TO ESTABLISH JUSTICE, TO INSURE DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY (1969).

nity (urban versus rural). These are static factors but are highly correlated with incidence of violent crime.

Social factors of an interactional nature can also play a role. In this regard frustration whether of an intangible nature (the unavailability of educational opportunity) or of a more specific and immediate personalized nature is posited to lead to violence.⁸ This concept is directly concerned with that interactional social arena of interpersonal relationships. This is a phenomenon which is frequently associated with violence, particularly murder and rape. John McDonald's study of murderers emphasized the role the victim may play in precipitating the final response from the murderer.⁹ This may be done by the victim taunting or teasing the murderer, or brazenly exposing themselves to a high degree of risk. For example, one victim supposedly said, "Why don't you go ahead and shoot me," at which point the murderer did. The question of why a victim behaves in such a provocative way so as to precipitate his own demise is obscure, but may represent an unconscious suicide wish. This example, is interactional and social to an extreme, but clearly individualistic without question, and consequently factors of a psychological nature play a part.

Does interaction suggest that such behavior is a result of an unwinding inexplicable train of external events accelerated by "passion" which are reciprocally reinforcing without modification by the individual? There is no evidence to suggest that human behavior is exclusively a series of reflex actions linked end to end; rather at each step of an interaction there are several alternative behavioral paths available. However, these alternatives are conditioned by the individual's past experience, values, motives, biological endowment, personality, and intellectual capacity, and may be so severely limited that the sequence appears reflex in nature. Thus, there may be some degree of chain reaction for a given individual. This clearly brings us to the next category, those individual psychological factors.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Psychology refers to the individual's mind and mental processes—

8. Dollard, *et al. Frustration and Agression*, in *THE DYNAMICS OF AGGRESSION* (Megargee & Hokanson 1970).

9. MACDONALD, *THE MURDERER AND HIS VICTIM* 75 (1961).

consciousness, sensation, ideation, memory, *etc.* This, as reflected in mental illness, has had dramatic impact on the judicial process. The relationship has been reviewed by John McDonald in his book, *Psychiatry and the Criminal*,¹⁰ and also by Seymour Halleck in his book, *Psychiatry and the Dilemma of Crime*.¹¹

In Cole's¹² study of women murderers the following psychological styles were noted: masochistic, the overtly hostile violent, the covertly hostile violent, the inadequate, the psychotic, and the amoral. These descriptions clearly suggest something of the psychological nature of murderers. However, psychological factors act as they always must in a uniquely individual way within a broad pattern; in this case one of a high level of hostility is adequately opposed by a personal inhibitory system (morals, positive value on violence, conscience, *etc.*). This, in the broadest view, outlines the psychological factors of violence.

Murderers may often be given a specific diagnosis of either a personality disorder or a psychosis. Personality disorder is a psychiatric, diagnostic label referring to a habitual adaptive life style which diminishes optional coping with the environment, such as being too shy (schizoid personality). Those personality disorders associated with violence are the paranoid personality (the tendency to develop exaggerated or unwarranted suspicions and generally distrust people), the antisocial personality (also called sociopathic, or psychopathic, and characterized by recurring battles with authority, law breaking, and hedonistic behavior), and the explosive personality (episodic violent behavior). Psychosis refers to those major mental illnesses where the person is so disturbed that he cannot appreciate or understand the reality of his environment, and confuses internal psychic events with external perceptions. In Cole's¹³ study of female murderers, eighteen percent were psychotic—none legally insane. Diagnoses of psychotic murderers are either schizophrenic (paranoid type usually) or depressive. Paranoid schizophrenics distort the world and perceive themselves to be the subject of perse-

10. MACDONALD, *PSYCHIATRY AND THE CRIMINAL* (1969).

11. *PSYCHIATRIC ASPECTS OF CRIMINOLOGY* (Halleck & Bromberg ed. 1968).

12. Cole, Fisher & Cole, *Women Who Kill: A Socio-Psychological Study*, 19 ARCHIVES GEN. PSYCHIATRY 1, 2 (1968).

13. *Id.* at 2.

cutions which promote their violent acts, which appear as self protective or retaliatory, but in any event, reasonable. The depressed murderer frequently perceives his personal situation as hopelessly bad and believes the world so corrupt that he chooses to kill his family to save them, and then kills himself. It is interesting to note in Cole's¹⁴ study and a number of others¹⁵ that approximately fifty percent to seventy percent of the time the victim will be a person known to the murderer, and their relationship is frequently intimate.

A recent study¹⁶ assessing the symbolic aspects of presidential assassination suggests conflicts in these murderers regarding authority, ambivalence in relationship to father or paternal figures in general, and a long history of major psychological disturbances. These are ordinarily of a schizophrenic or paranoid nature with frequent episodes of violent reaction in the past. Megargee¹⁷ has related violence to undercontrolled and overcontrolled personality characteristics. The undercontrolled type is notable because of repeated violent outbursts with generally poor impulse control. The overcontrolled individual is typified by the nice, quiet kid who has always been a "model student" who unexpectedly lashes out at family or friends with murder the result; here, resentment or sexual feelings may be involved. These individuals seem to suppress all emotional response until the build up becomes so great they no longer contain it. The resultant act may be impulsive but dispassionate or may be approached with meticulous planning.

Interestingly, mental illness per se does not seem to predispose one to violent acts or criminal behavior—indeed, mental patients on leave from a hospital are not arrested more frequently than a control population.¹⁸

Our recent studies¹⁹ have identified a variety of child-rearing fac-

14. *Id.* at 1.

15. *Supra* note 9, at 64-93.

16. Weinstein & Lyerly, *Symbolic Aspects of Presidential Assassination*, 32 *PSYCHIATRY: J. STUDY INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES* 1 (1969).

17. Megargee, *Undercontrolled and Overcontrolled Personality Types in Extreme Antisocial Aggression*, in *THE DYNAMICS OF AGGRESSION* 109 (Megargee & Hokanson ed. 1970).

18. Gulevich & Bourne, *Mental Illness and Violence*, in *VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE* 311 (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

19. Tupin, *Classification of Violent Behavior* (unpublished manuscript to be presented to the V World Congress of Psychiatry in November).

tors that seem to have implications for personality formation and violence as an adult. In our study of twenty-five repeated violent offenders it was noted that physical violence was common in their childhood in contrast to nonviolent criminals. In addition, there was the surprising finding that the convicts felt themselves to be emotionally distant from their parents, and the object of overt and hostile rejection by them. Thus, violence in the home, whether between parent and child or between the parents, when coupled with overt rejection and isolation of the child seems to be correlated with repeated violence in adulthood. The relationship between psychological factors and violence then is complex and no single characterization, whether a diagnostic label or description of personality, can account for all of violent behavior. It is in this area, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the balance between inhibitory and facilitatory forces speak most eloquently to the final behavior and whether or not it is to be violent in nature.

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Biological factors refer to those innate or acquired physical characteristics of the individual which because of their function or dysfunction may promote violent behavior. Debate about such biological factors in violence centers around the question of whether or not humans have an innate aggressive drive which leads to violence. The evidence supporting this idea has largely been drawn from animal studies where aggression and violence are natural and essential. Proponents of this argument have been Freud²⁰ and Lorenz,²¹ among others. Washburn and Hamburg²² would suggest—and I would agree—that man is born with the biological capacity for violence, but whether or not it becomes an actuality depends on a variety of cultural, social, and psychological factors. On the other hand, there are some exceptional individuals who have a higher biological drive toward violence than others. This has been described by Ervin and

20. Freud, *Why War*, in *THE DYNAMICS OF AGGRESSION* 20 (Megargee & Hokanson ed. 1970).

21. LORENZ, *ON AGGRESSION* (1966).

22. Washburn & Hamburg, *Aggressive Behavior in Old World Monkeys and Apes*, in *PRIMATES: STUDY IN ADAPTATION AND VARIABILITY* 477 (Jay ed. 1968).

Mark²³ as the dyscontrol syndrome. They suggest that certain violent people are characterized by the following symptoms: (1) a history of physical assault, especially wife and child beating; (2) indications of pathological intoxication—that is, drinking even a small amount of alcohol triggers acts of senseless brutality; (3) a history of impulsive sexual behavior; (4) a history of numerous traffic violations and serious automobile accidents. Also suggested is that these individuals by reason of brain defects have an increased propensity to respond to stimuli in a violent manner. Some individuals have specific abnormalities of certain areas of the brain which seem to be characteristically related to violent behavior. These brain areas are located in the temporal lobes and a central portion of the brain known as the limbic system. An abnormality in these areas can clearly be shown to increase the likelihood that violent behavior will occur.²⁴ In some persons this may be part of an epileptic type seizure, while in others it seems to be just an increased likelihood of a violent response with minimal provocation. It may be thought of as a kind of “hair trigger” phenomenon. This is certainly a most exciting and interesting area for study because it offers the opportunity of specific medical control of violent behavior. Recent studies by Tupin²⁵ and Sheard²⁶ have illustrated that certain repeated violent offenders can be controlled by simple pharmacologic agents without resorting to sedation.

Other biological factors also seem to relate to violence. Recent interest has been exhibited in generic abnormalities, specifically the XYY or super male syndrome has been identified. These individuals have an extra Y (male) chromosome and were originally described as larger than average with a decreased intellect and propensity to violent crime. Subsequent studies and a careful review by Kessler²⁷ throws this conclusion into doubt. It does seem unlikely that a de-

23. MARK & ERVIN, *VIOLENCE AND THE BRAIN* (1970).

24. MONROE, *EPISODIC BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS: A PSYCHO-DYNAMIC AND NEUROPHYSIOLOGIC ANALYSIS* (1970).

25. Tupin, *Classification of Violent Behavior* (unpublished manuscript to be presented at the V World Congress of Psychiatry, Mexico City, November, 1972).

26. Sheard, *Effect of Lithium on Human Aggression*, 230 *NATURE* 113-114 (1971).

27. Kessler & Moos, *The XYY Karyotype and Criminality: A Review*, 7 *J. PSYCHIATRIC RESEARCH*, 153-70 (1970).

fect in a genetic system may lead directly and exclusively to complex behavioral patterns without intervening influence by social and psychological factors. However, this area certainly deserves our interest and continued research.

Lastly, there are a number of hormonal factors, particularly male sex hormones, that seem to increase the likelihood of a violent response. Many of these factors have been recently reviewed by Rubin²⁸ in his paper, *Psychobiology of Human Aggression*. It should be emphasized that the biological factors rarely seem to be implicated in exclusively determining a specifically violent act; rather they seem to increase the motive force, the thrust to act in a violent way given an appropriate cultural, social, and psychological milieu.

INANIMATE FACTORS

These refer to those aspects of an environment which seem to increase the likelihood that a violent response will ensue, given an appropriate input from the above categories. Studies have demonstrated that viewing a violent movie²⁹ will increase the likelihood of a violent response given a provocative situation; likewise, the availability of guns³⁰ seems to be associated with a violent act. This has been illustrated on an individual basis as well as statistical analysis of groups. The most potent factor related to the production of violence in this category seems to be alcohol. This has previously been noted in the description of the dyscontrolled syndrome. McDonald³¹ has reviewed nine studies and notes that the percentage of murderers who had taken alcohol prior to the crime ranged from nineteen to eighty-three percent, with an average of around fifty-four percent. Studies in other countries have found a similar relationship between murder and alcohol. Other drugs have been implicated, but perhaps only amphetamines³² seem to be clearly related. This is sug-

28. Rubin, *The Psychobiology of Human Aggression*, to be published in *THE BIOLOGY OF AGGRESSION* (Stolk & Brodie 1971-72).

29. Siegel, *Violence in the Mass Media*, in *VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE* 229 (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

30. Gillin & Ochberg, *Firearms Control and Violence*, in *VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE* 250 (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

31. MacDonald, *Homicide and Alcohol*, in *THE MURDERER AND HIS VICTIM* 19 (1961).

32. Tinklenberg & Stillman, *Drug Use and Violence*, in *VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE* 331 (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

gested in studies reviewed in *Violence and the Struggle for Existence*,³³ as well as our studies of repeated violent offenders.³⁴ Other drugs such as LSD, marijuana, and heroin seem to play an uncertain or secondary role. Heroin, for example, contributes to violent behavior only in that the person may be involved in a crime of violence to obtain money to support the habit, but not as a direct consequence of the drug itself.

GENERAL FORMULATION

These broad categories ordinarily seem to be interactional. However, there are some apparent exceptions where a single factor seems to be sufficient to cause the violent act. There are reports of violent behavior resulting from epilepsy, a biological phenomenon, which is automatic and a direct result of brain dysfunction without intervening input from other factors. Likewise, riots seem to arise from social grievances exclusively, although it is interesting that in Miller's³⁵ investigation of Chicago rioters, individual psychological and cultural factors apparently contributed to the disruptions.

Ordinarily though, there is interaction between and within these factors, which may vary from time to time and among individuals. It is this variation in combination and intensity that presents the most difficult problems in understanding and studying violence, because in fact the causes are variable and changing, and one can only understand them in the context of the individual or the specific group action. Likewise, these factors may be general or specific; for example, cultural and social factors may act on many men, most of whom will not respond in a violent way. Other factors obviously act only on the individual, and may then be the final loading that may trigger the violent episode.

An increased understanding of how these categories may interact is obtained by viewing them in a stimulus-response model. A stimulus may be internal, *e.g.*, a hallucinated voice, or external, *e.g.*, an argument with a spouse. It is processed either consciously or uncon-

33. VIOLENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE (Daniels, Gilula & Ochberg ed. 1970).

34. *Supra* note 25.

35. Miller, *Revolutionists Among the Chicago Demonstrators*, 26 BULL. ATOMIC SCIENTISTS 16, 21 (1970).

sciously with the visible response following. The internal or mental processing is certainly the most complex step and may be influenced by past experiences, *e.g.*, cultural, social, and psychological factors—many of which may have been forgotten, and by biological factors—an altered threshold to provocative events.

These events which propel the individual to act are affected internally and externally by inhibitory pressures. Events such as the visibility of a policeman, the existence of a law, the threat of prison, and the possibility of retaliation all act to inhibit. In most instances, the individual also has his own set of inhibitory factors, which we label conscience: the internal representation of cultural norms (in psychiatry called the superego). Unquestionably these controls exert a mighty influence on all of us and usually determine that an individual will not act in a violent manner, but rather will seek an alternative way of coping with the provocation. This description suggests a conscious plan, but most of the events discussed above are not conscious and occur in a semi-automatic pattern characteristic for the individual.

Are there other categories or descriptions of the causes of violence which may cut across the categories outlined above? Three of the most common suggestions in this regard argue that violence (or aggression) arises from threats to territorial integrity, personal status, or as the result of a specific frustrating experience. These concepts are of great utility as specific hypothesis, generating ideas that may lead to sophisticated research goals. Furthermore, they can lead to practical programs in the prevention and control of violence. For example, the concept of territoriality implies that each of us needs a space to call our own and that we will defend it when threatened. This may be a hypothetical or real space—it may be related to our body or to where we live, but nonetheless when threatened may lead to a violent response. This has obvious implications in urban crowding and certain ghetto living situations. These three concepts may draw from several of the categories noted above, and serve to relate diverse situations around a coherent model with a particular perspective, but each ignores the potential contribution of certain variables. Consequently, their admitted utility is drawn from the short hand label which may ultimately limit our understanding of violence.

The categories outlined above should not be seen as a theory of violence but rather a series of descriptive areas generated from the study of individual behavior, which help in the understanding of violent phenomena by encouraging a systematic inquiry into each area when studying an individual. Thus, when confronted in the judicial process with the management of a violent offender, the court, prosecution, and defense can be more effective in working toward a suitable solution by reviewing the person's behavior in the context of these categories. Furthermore, by a review of these categories, society can initiate legislation and law enforcement patterns to respond to or prevent violent behavior. Lastly, this model can be equally applied to other behavior, thereby providing an organization and cohesion that is frequently absent from the understanding of human behavior.