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Some Thorny Issues in Threat Assessment

Four Issues

1. Is there a "path to violence"?
2. What is unique about "targeted" violence?
3. What is unique about "intended" violence?
4. Is there a meaningful distinction between "affective" and "predatory" violence?

1. Path to Violence

“

The path to violence
may be universal.

”

History

- ▶ Dietz and Martell (1986), US Secret Service (1995)
- ▶ US Secret Service (2002), followed by Calhoun & Weston (2003) and others

Semantic Analysis

Path = track, course of movement, schedule

- ▶ Assumes there is a single path to violence, traveled by all, that is clear or well marked
- ▶ Assumes paths to other outcomes may exist (e.g., to non-violence)

Theoretical Analysis

Implicit/unacknowledged foundation is Action Theory

Action = Goal → Intent → Behavior

- ▶ Assumes all violence is rational

Specific Concerns

- ▶ Simplistic

- ▶ Is the path really universal, applicable to all people and all types of violence?
- ▶ Is the path always followed to its end with a simple, step-wise progression?
- ▶ Why do people choose the path to violence, and how can we disrupt their travels?

Specific Concerns (cont.)

- ▶ Leads to inherent problems in the practice of TAM
 - ▶ Confirmatory bias

2. Targeted Violence

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Targeted violence involves a very specific symbolic choice of victim—
person, property, or place.”

”

History

- ▶ US Secret Service (1995), followed by many others

Semantic Analysis

Targeted = directed, focused

- ▶ Assumes existence of other types of violence that are untargeted

Theoretical Analysis

No specific theory

Specific Concerns

- ▶ What are the types of untargeted violence?
 - ▶ Impulsive, opportunistic, etc.?
- ▶ Is there ever a situation in which some aspect of targeting (people, property, place) is not present?
- ▶ Incompatible with the “path to violence”?

3. Intended Violence

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Intended violence is premeditated and motivated by the desire to acquire property or, in the case of terrorism, to achieve a political end.

”

History

- ▶ Calhoun & Weston (2003), followed by many others

Semantic Analysis

Intended = deliberate, premeditated, and goal-directed

- ▶ Assumes the existence of violence that is unintended

Theoretical Analysis

No specific theory

Specific Concerns

- ▶ Unintended violence is oxymoronic
 - ▶ Violence may be ill-considered or reckless, but not negligent or accidental
- ▶ What are types of unintended violence?
- ▶ Isn't all violence goal-directed?
- ▶ Incompatible with the "path to violence"?

4. Affective vs. Predatory Violence

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Threat assessment aims to interrupt people on a path to commit predatory violence”

”

History

- ▶ Bard (1928), Wasman & Flynn (1962), McEllistrem (2004), etc.
- ▶ Meloy (1997), Raine (1998), etc.

Semantic Analysis

Affective = emotional, attitudinal

Predatory = exploitative, selfish

- ▶ Assumes two types are necessary and sufficient to categorize violent acts

Theoretical Analysis

Implicit/unacknowledged foundation is evolutionary theory

- ▶ Two types of aggression have survival value

Specific Concerns

- ▶ Relevance of ethological foundations
 - ▶ Are models based on predatory animals sufficient to understand the violence of humans?
- ▶ Coverage
 - ▶ Are there more than two types of violence perpetrated by humans?
- ▶ Incompatible with the “path to violence”?

General Concerns

Concerns for Theory

- ▶ We don't know precisely what we are talking about
 - ▶ Causes confusion, apparent (dis-) agreement
 - ▶ Impedes knowledge cumulation and dissemination

- ▶ The conscious decision to kill or physically harm specific or symbolic victims in a workplace is now categorized as targeted or intended violence. In contrast to affective or impulsive violence, targeted violence is by definition planned, emotionless, and predatory. Systematic research and extensive case experience by ourselves and others has demonstrated the central notion of a targeted "pathway to violence," and its significance for workplace violence risk assessment.

- ▶ On the path to “targeted” or “intended” violence (as opposed to violence for gain such as robbery, or impulsive acts of violence) a potential perpetrator follows often observable stages or steps leading up to an attack.

▶ **Intended Violence**

Violent acts that meet the following criteria: intent to commit the act; selecting an attack mode that ensures injury, death, or property damage; and a motive that does not profit the attacker

Concerns for Practice

- ▶ Is it a model/typology of acts or actors?
- ▶ What is the coverage of the model/typology?
- ▶ How do we assess it?
- ▶ When do we assess it?
- ▶ What is the reliability of the assessment?
- ▶ What are the implications for TAM?

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