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VIOLENCE AND LEARNING:

Why Violence Breeds Violence

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PRESS RELEASE
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The copy of the attached article, SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND LEARNING, spotlights neglected aspects of the impact of ongoing violence in our schools, on our streets, and in our bedrooms on youth who physically survive. In summary, a new interdisciplinary theory is presented which maps the causal nexus and interweaving of neurological workings with psychological and social factors. Evidence for the effects on self esteem, and academic and moral learning are presented. In addition, the immune system may be permanently impaired. Finally, recommendations are made as to how such effects may be counter-acted.

It is hoped that this article may serve as a catalyst to awaken concern to the multi-faceted dimensions of the problem caused by what is defined herein as terrorist violence. It is the author's thesis that, until the problem of prolonged violence, and the fears it engenders, are better understood and acted on, the basic roots of our multi-cultural and democratic society are endangered.

A note at the end of the article outlines the author's qualifications (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1967). Her long interdisciplinary studies, published and unpublished, in fields of criminology, social psychology, and imagery psychology have contributed to the integration of these fields on the subject matter.

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The Problem

I remarked recently to the mother of a little girl--as we washed our hands in the lady's room--what a beautiful child she had. A second later, I thought to myself, "Oh God, I hope that mother doesn't think I have a sexual interest in little girls." The next day, as I was walking out of the town post-office with a package too large for me to carry, a man dressed in army fatigues came up to me and offered to carry the package. I was relieved and thankful, and we struck up a conversation as to where he was from; what part of the army he was in, and so on. I could not get the passenger door open, where I suggested he place the package, and was forced to open it on the driver's side. In doing so, I told him that the large dog in the back seat would not bite him. I felt a guardian angel had appeared to help me in my need. The next day, however, I wondered if he really was that, or was rather a potential assaulter, in the context of a recent daylight rape in a nearby office.

Such growing mistrust in a climate of violence is what the sociologist means when he suggests that violence strikes at the foundations of our democratic society. We are at the point where our children are taught to be wary of strangers, and even other family members. Politicians and citizens move towards "locking'em up and throwing away the keys." Prisons newly built are immediately filled up, as state budgets are overwhelmed by escalating costs of crime. Police and metal detectors are in place in our schools. Television programs search for the causes and solutions to violence, seldom mentioning the contribution of television in teaching children violence. As in previous times, gang members are being hired to achieve gang peace and redirect gang activities. New fronts in school call for teaching children "conflict resol-

ution" and mediation techniques, in the belief that such skills can be learned by doing. All the while, new generations take the place of the old, with the same conditions--root causes--at work.

In sum, our schools have reached a point in which many teachers can't teach, and students can't learn. While the new young may not be able to read and write, they have learned to hit the floor and the streets, when the bullets whiz about them. What are the facts?

--A poll of 729 school districts by the National School Board Association found that violence in schools has reached "epidemic" levels, with 82 percent of districts polled reporting increases in violence over the past five years.

--The University of Michigan reports a similar finding, namely that 64 percent of urban principals and 54 percent of suburban principals state school violence has increased over the past five years.

--The Centers for Disease Control report that one in 20 students brings a gun to school at least once a month.

--The National Education Association found that 25 percent of twelfth graders admitted they were threatened with violence, and fourteen percent were injured in 1991. Further, 91,000 of over two million teachers were attacked in 1987.

--The National Safety center reports that some 800,000 students stay home at least once a month because of fears of violence.

--The Department of Education reports that 39 percent of urban districts experience shootings or knifings and 23 percent drive by shootings in a year.

--The Carnegie Council concludes "Youth violence has no geographic limitations."

Violence is political. Few politicians have the courage to attempt to recommend dealing with the root causes of such manifestations. The National School Board Association concluded that the leading causes of violence in the school are family breakdown and media violence. Twelve summary pages of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence issued by a top panel of "experts" in 1969 remain largely unread and unacted on, in spite of the enthusiasm of President Johnson's Executive Order. Today, as then, some 36 years ago, there are calls for innovative programs in education and jobs for youth. Not much was said about families.

Today, it is clear that traditional agencies of socialization, notably the family and play groups that instilled customs and moral rules have broken down. Two parent families are increasingly at work; one parent families, usually women, often work two jobs to survive; television becomes the baby sitter, and video violent games replace old-time games. Rules have been replaced by winning through violence. And what can give power to the powerless more quickly than a gun? Children learn violence and instant sex on their major teacher, television, while family and school become increasingly unable to deal with the larger trends that evolve problems landing in their lap. With parents so often in absentia, the one remaining institution that reaches most children is obviously the schools. Yet educational achievement seems a goal less achievable just as the passport to world dominance is verbalized increasingly as addressing "competition" and "technical advance," i.e. the new dimensions of "progress."

A basic question remains unanswered, namely "why does violence breed violence?" This, at once a Biblical and a scientific truism. A new body-

mind theory is presented in what follows, along with evidence on it. The explanation aids in explaining the seemingly unexplainable. As well, it can help us to understand the grotesque crimes of violence that so often are otherwise not understandable.

An Interdisciplinary Explanation

To gain insight into how this theory works, imagine that you are, as now perhaps, sitting in the comfort of your armchair. Suddenly you are faced with a man in your doorway. He points a gun at you. If you have ever before been in a threatening emergency, you know the familiar phrase of choice, "fight or flight." To deal with the crisis, your body automatically releases a flood of hormones that enable you to react. Now, picture in your mind the likelihood that you will face this same danger, the threat of a gun, a knife, or a bomb, continuously at any moment, hour, day, week, month, or year. And there is no escape. This is, of course, the reality of millions in our own country affected by "street wars", as well as those undergoing prolonged civil and/or international wars. In a classroom, a corridor, a playground, or on a street or in a bed, the wrong move may provoke death. This is terrorism.

Terrorism. The concept, terrorism, tends to bring to mind an explosion in a Middle Eastern airport. The essence of terrorist threat, however, encompasses a much larger range of action. A definition of terrorism by a 1976 Presidential Advisory Commission on Terrorism and Violence defined it as:

"a tactic or technique by means of which a violent act or threat thereof is used for the primary purpose of creating overwhelming fear for coercive purposes."

Thus, terrorism can be at once political and/or PERSONAL. The latter instance

embraces a wide variety of situations, whether in bedrooms or barracks, prisons or playgrounds, streets or schools. The common denominator is the creation of fear over extended time periods by threats to ones very physical survival.

With the prolonged constancy of threats and debilitating fears, the brain-body interacting autonomic system is forced to turn itself off. The constant release of stress hormones, adrenalin and noradrenaline, function well for occasional episodes of stress. Long-term stress and these bodily yields burn out the body. As this occurs, the autonomic system turns off memory, an obvious crucial element in learning, as well as for crucial social-psychic development. As well, the immune system appears to be permanently impaired.

The physical psychologist, Jeanne Acterberg (Imagery in Healing), has described the nature of the physical processes involved when prolonged stress occurs:

"To the great and ultimate detriment of the long-stressed individual, the primary action of the (hormones released) is to reduce inflammatory activity, i.e., the work of the immune system...A body under chronic stress adjusts itself downward, so that fewer of the potentially destructive hormones are released."

Richard Restak, neurologist (The Brain), notes the loss of memory:

"Once aroused, the limbic system can become a directive for hours, sometime days, and can rarely be shut off like flipping a switch...At some point in this process, memories for ongoing events become permanently lost: false memories may be created as the frightened and rageful person lives over and over in his mind the act of violence that erupted in him in response to what he perceives as a threat to his life."

Why is memory so crucial to human development? Plato reminded us

centuries ago that all learning is remembering. As well, memory interferes, if absent, with a sense of time, of sequences of events, of cause and effect. The lack of a sense of time, past, present, and future, forecloses chances for the development of the humanity or humanness of becoming human.

What is meant by this? Philosophers and religious leaders repeatedly urge the injunction, "Know thyself." And why is this important? Without knowledge of self, it is nigh impossible to know others. In trying to understand others, in taking into account their motives and being before we act, we need empathy. That is, the capacity to place ourselves in the position and feelings of others. The presence of empathy, in turn, is closely linked to the development of morality, and its absence to immoral actions and crime. Conversely, well-developed self concepts ("self esteem") are reported to be a crucial link for high moral development.

Recent publications affirm the dimensions of the problem outlined above. One writer states that "memory is the bedrock of the self" (Jill Neimark in The Myth of Repressed Memory). She adds that drugs can block or enhance memory. And the well-known flight-or-flight response can "sear indelible memories into the brain." In a discussion of recent advances in tracking memory pictures in the brain, she suggests that it is likely that memories can be reactivated. This would presumably be an important step for therapeutic success in treatment of individuals and, potentially, groups affected by long-lasting terrorist efforts.

This explanation of the effects of prolonged violence can be mapped in the following Diagram:

Figure 1
Effects of Prolonged Terrorist Violence on the
Body and Development

Constant fears due to terrorist threats of violence



The brain signals the body to release hormones initially and then makes downward adjustments



Memory Failures



Developmental Failures

Self-concept
Empathy
Morality



Violence

Chart by the author.

This human process helps to explain how the victim so frequently becomes the victimizer, in turn. Of course, the academician can call, as he/she always does, for more research. Certainly questions remain. For example, how long does stress need to operate for the limbic system to close down? How do individuals and groups vary in their responses? Can we reduce illiteracy by rote teaching, and not paying attention to the above sequence? Is it necessary to retrieve traumatic memories of violence to address failures in development as suggested above?

Thus, with this new integrative theory as a road-map guiding the complex physiological-psychological-criminological interactions, preventive and restorative programs can be interpreted. Widespread direct intervention to improve self esteem and literacy, for example, could be doomed to failure unless the entire causal complex is taken into account. A continuing environment of fear would continue, obviously, in its impacts .

The Evidence

How does research evidence stack up on the expected impacts of prolonged threats of terrorist violence outlined above? A wide range of findings tends to be consistent with hypotheses stemming from the above paradigm.

War can be interpreted as terrorist activity. A comprehensive study of calamities on man, including war, was made by a Harvard sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, in 1937 (Social and Cultural Dynamics). Relying on historical and eye witness accounts, Sorokin discovered that the all-pervasive emotion among men at war is fear. He found that soldiers exhibited memory losses; failures in imagination and in complex thought; highly volatile emotions; declines in autonomy and self regulation, as well as a "disintegration of the unity of self."

The psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan (The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry), also observed, in studies of the mentally ill, that extreme anxiety affects memory.

The 1967 National Commission on the causes of violence (Crimes of Violence) reported findings consistent with the cycle expounded here. That report states:

"The social self is the most fundamental element in human interdependence... (It is) impossible to live with any degree of enthusiasm or energy without some reasonable sense of one's worth."

The Commission relates lacks in self image (today often referred to as self esteem) to violence proclivity. These, in turn, are interwoven in a causal nexus of depressed opportunities for some groups, within a culture that idealizes wealth.

Consistent, once again, are the works of criminologists. Nathan Glaser (Ethnicity: Theory and Experience) reported that violent offenders show loss of memory, poor learning, low intelligence quotients, abnormal EEG's, deflated self esteem, and a loss of self control. Marvin Wolfgang (Patterns in Criminal Homicide) reported that killers appear to have an imbalance in their autonomic nervous system. If there are threats to their self esteem, they appear to fall apart. Donald Cressey (Criminology) looked at cumulative research on juvenile delinquents. He reported that these youth are "inadequate on the dimension of time," as well as "hedonistic, impulsive, and impatient." Gynn Nettler (Explaining Crime) reported that, in turn, failures in moral development are linked to a lack of sense of time. The psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, discovered the same relationship in his studies of moral behavior. The author's own research with inner city delinquents found severe memory gaps in life histories.

A neuropsychiatrist, Frank Putnam ("Dissociation As a Response to Trauma"), in studies of Vietnam soldiers with Traumatic War Syndrome, found characteristics similar to those already reported above. They showed periods of amnesia, altered personalities, and isolation. Similarly, Cugle and Savage reported such veterans showed poor concentration, self loathing, and explosiveness. In earlier studies of World War II veterans, sociologist Stouffer and his colleagues reported similar findings. They found a "loss of ego ideal;" lack of social cohesiveness and social growth, with outbursts of "primitive aggression."

There is not much research available currently on the effects of war on populations involved. Rona M. Fields, a psychologist, reviewed the sparse findings of civil conflicts in Northern Ireland on children. She stated that children were "under-developed in play," and "lacking in concern for other people." One researcher interpreted these findings as helping to explain "savagely shootings." Fields linked the long-term devastation of the Irish Civil War to viciousness and inter-generational war. Mental imagery research by the writer of this current article (Gloria Count-van Manen, Toward a Sociology of Mental Imagery) similarly predicted recurring cycles of ethnic violence, such as in the former Yugoslavia, today.

Putnam, in a literature review of victims of childhood sexual abuse, finds similar effects, namely: amnesia gaps; disturbed time sense; negative self images; and losses in control. Autobiographical memories relating to a sense of self are largely absent. Further, parent-child abusive interpersonal styles survive inter-generationally in all social classes. Nevertheless, he found an over-concentration of abuse among poor and non-white minorities.

Thus, by enlarging the common sense concept of terrorism to include all interpersonal situations in which there are long-term constancies of fears from threats of violence, numerous studies show similar impacts, in dissimilar samples.

Counteracting Action

Is there a way out of such vicious cycles? We, the unique homo sapiens species presumably capable of foresight, seem to have an infinite capacity to ignore our own problems until the human and ecological garbage lands in our laps: drugs on our playgrounds; suicides by our young; trees dead at our feet; atomic excrement posing as much a danger as the bomb. Then, when the problems hit us

in the face, we have an infinite capacity to look for quick, easy solutions. We retain faith in the macho image of soldiers and police to solve drug and crime problems. Cops on the beat know that they do not "control" crime levels. The production of the causes of human misery, in study after study, are found to be alienation and hopelessness, despair, and family and economic survival. In the context of current political policies, facing such core causes head on seems unlikely.

The recommendation here, then, is the erection of a counterforce. While preventive maintenance is known in medical practise and for automobiles, it has not been practised otherwise on social human beings. The causal linkages demonstrated earlier are, of course, intertwined with the spread of drugs across class and geographic boundaries, exacerbating the problems of memory loss. It would seem that we ignore this complex causal nexus at our risk. Competitive pressures in an increasingly free trade and technological world exert demands on the quality of the children we "produce."

The educational counter-force envisioned here would multiply the individual's chances of improving creativity and judgment, improving memory and literacy, and help to develop innate moral thinking. The radical suggestion, then, is for preventive social maintenance as a new goal of education. Curriculum innovation would be required at all grade levels, to be entitled FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION courses. The techniques suggested are applications and adjustments of well tested techniques (see G. Count-van Manen, Imagery and Sociology), namely role playing, drama, and mental imagery.

In achieving the acceptance of such a goal, many questions would need to be raised and debated. What kinds of human beings are required for survival in a democratic, technologically advanced society? Can "critical thinking" be achieved only at the sacrifice of loyalty? Should a fourth grader who wishes to follow the advice of a former First Lady say "no" to drugs or be loyal to his mother who tells him to sell drugs to support her habit. Peer pressures for toughness and drug use are hard to say "no" to, when a child has no family back-up. Besides, he needs a new pair of expensive designer tennis shoes that working at the local McDonald's cannot provide. The child had no place to express his/her fears, to discuss such daily problems. Gangs, from the 1920's through today, have become the "family" for the family-less.

The Family Life Education classes would provide space for such fears to be expressed; for memory retrievals; and for acting out real life drama difficult choices as illustrated above. All would take place in a safe, play-like atmosphere. Since the play is not real, what is reality and what is imagination; what is learned from others and what is self history become intertwined in new images and role models for planned action. It is likely that new REAL ACTION IMAGES can affect reinterpretations of the past and the present and change the future action potential positively.

There is obvious room for criticism of this proposal. Isn't it dangerous to try to change human behavior? Can't the technique be used for evil as well as for good? Of course. But we still use automobiles, even though they exact more death than war. On the side of such counter-measures, there is general agreement that the family is the basic unit of society, and that family interaction patterns tend to be re-enacted throughout life. Terrorist violence IS inter-generational, both within families and nations.

"More Research Is Needed"

The cry for more research by academicians is almost never ending. It is rare that a finding is final. A small army of researchers could be employed on the directions of the task recommended above for the next century. Questions to be raised include: How many violent incidents are needed before the neural system swings into the actions described earlier? How much variation is there from one person to another before the effects take place? How does the fatalistic attitude assumed by some youth, "If I die, I die!" affect such processes?

But then, how many young can be sacrificed before we take counteraction? We do not hesitate to inoculate our pets and children with preventive vaccines.

To wait for future decades to provide the never final answers to the dimensions of such problems could constitute a fatal delay. Can we afford to allow terrorist violence to destroy the fabric of our democratic society? Can we afford to continue to create human monsters?

The techniques of role playing and imagery have been used for some years, successfully, to bring about positive changes in a wide range of groups: from prisoners to policemen, from cancer patients to those with phobias; from couples with marital problems to children suffering from isolation.

The need is obvious. The risk of no action outweigh the risks of action to overcome.

A Biographical Note on the Author

Gloria Count-van Manen is the author of: Crime and Suicide in the Nation's Capital; Social Systems, Crime, and Deviance; and the major author of Imagery and Sociology. In addition, she has authored many monographs and articles on subjects of family, crime, and mental imagery.

She was awarded her Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago, in 1967, and studied both sociology and psychology there, on fellowships and scholarships. A Fulbright in Southeast Asia and working for the Marshall Plan in Europe broadened her experience. Her first job was as a social economist in the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Later work in her fields took her to Chicago, while working with President Kennedy's Delinquency Prevention program, as well as Mayor Daley's. She retired seven years ago as a full professor at Howard University.

She has consulted with numerous agencies, including the United States Army, on crime.