Violence or Nonviolence: Which do We Choose?

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A large mass of research on violence now exists, yet the utilitarian value of this vast amount of scientific endeavor may be rated as low, comparing it to the levels of violence at all levels abounding in the world today. The author calls for centralizing funding and work on violence at the national level in the United States, perhaps forming a separate National Institute for Violence. In addition to focusing on violence, nonviolence must be studied with more vigor for scientific work in this area to increase in utilitarian value.

Keywords: violence; nonviolence; federal institute

Kindness and compassion toward all living things is a mark of a civilized society. Conversely, cruelty, whether it is directed against human beings or against animals, is not the exclusive province of any one culture or community of people. Racism, economic deprival, dog fighting and cock fighting, bull fighting and rodeos are cut from the same fabric: violence. Only when we have become nonviolent toward all life will we have learned to live well ourselves.

Cesar Chavez

In writing this article, I was asked to give my answers to three questions: (a) what is the most important thing we have learned about violence and trauma in the past 20 years, (b) what is the most important thing we need to learn in the next 10 years, and (c) what is the most promising methodological innovation in the past 20 years for the study or treatment of trauma or interpersonal violence? I was asked to restrict my reply to no more than eight pages; a task that I have come to realize has been the greatest challenge of my research

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career on interpersonal violence. However, in writing this short piece, I have found an invaluable change of pace from my usual program of research inquiry.

My own research career on interpersonal violence fits very neatly within the time frame of the questions posed to me as well as to the levels of inquiry that violence research is studied at. I began researching my dissertation work nearly 20 years ago, focusing on individual risk factors of intimate partner violence (IPV): substance abuse–induced cognitive deficits as predictors of IPV and poor communication patterns. This work was funded and expanded by a research grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA; 1995 to 2001). Prior to this, my training had shifted from a field focused on individual risk factors (psychology) to one at a completely different level: quantitative epidemiology. Accordingly, I began studying IPV from an epidemiological perspective as well; I analyzed data from the first nationally representative study that collected data from couples and focused on the interplay between drinking, ethnicity, and IPV. The study was funded in 1995 by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), with my mentor, Raul Caetano, Ph.D., M.D., as principal investigator (Caetano, Schafer, Clark, Cunradi, & Raspberry, 2000; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998).

With a strong interest and training in advanced statistics and methods, I became intrigued by the problem of measuring the prevalence of IPV with couple-level data (please see Figure 1; Schafer et al., 1998). I found that instrumentation in the area of IPV was very underdeveloped and that the problem of building statistical models of IPV that relied on discrepant reports from partners was an issue that most IPV researchers were uncertain of how to deal with. In addition, epidemiological studies designed to produce prevalence estimates could not provide accurate information to researchers and policy makers without incorporating discrepant reporting. I became immersed in the problem of instrumentation in research on IPV, and I was funded in 2001 by NIAAA (K02AA00319) with an Independent Career Scientist Award to study this problem. I am actively tackling this issue as of this writing. I believe that almost all scientists would agree that it is extremely important to measure a phenomenon accurately to be able to study it and build models that correctly reflect the reality of the concept under study. Yet, in research on IPV, the foundation stones of accurate measurement are still being built.

I am also involved in many other violence-related studies, the most important of which is funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR, 2001-2004) and headed by primary investigator Marilynn Sommers, Ph.D.
This study is the first controlled experimental study of photographic evidence of rape.

Why have I spent the reader’s time going over my research career and agenda? One answer is to give a contextual framework for better understanding my answers to the questions Dr. Conte has asked of us. In addition, an important answer lies in the recent publication by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 titled *World Report on Violence and Health* (Krug et al., 2002). In this report, a typology of violence is given in Figure 1.1 where the different types of violence—physical, sexual, psychological, and deprivation or neglect—are crossed with the different levels at which violence occurs—to the self, interpersonal, and collective. I have been lucky in my research career in violence to be able to study several different aspects of violence at different levels, as outlined in the model developed by WHO. This report contains a foreword by Nelson Mandela that is an outstanding, articulate depiction of the state of the world in terms of visible and invisible consequences of the enormous levels of violence that the majority of the world’s population suffers. The WHO definition of violence is adopted here:

> the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

With this definition of violence, we see it permeating every aspect of our lives from our homes to schools or work, and even including traveling to and from work when we encounter such things as road rage. Violence seems to be an inescapable aspect of human life, and reading the popular and research literature and viewing the world news leaves the recipient of this information in
an appalled state, perhaps accompanied by feelings of helplessness: How can we turn this tide? How can we make the world a safer, less violent place for ourselves and our children and our legacy to all peoples yet to come? The answer might lie partially in what Dr. Conte has asked in his second question, which I now address below.

1. What is the most important thing we have learned about violence and trauma in the past 20 years?

When I started to prepare this article, I pulled out what I believed to be the most important books and papers that I have in my research collection so that I could review them prior to giving my response. By the time I had finished pulling out the books alone, I had dozens of them scattered about my workstation. The papers I considered most important had already reached about 100 when I realized my folly: There was simply no pragmatic way to review even the most important literature in violence that has been written during the past 20 years. Scientists have literally accumulated mountains of data and results during the past 20 years from studies conducted to further our understanding of this aspect of the human condition. One guide to selecting the most important science that has been carried out in any field is that of utilitarianism: How useful have the products of research in these areas been in dealing with the problem(s) under study? Unfortunately, when we weigh the amount of research done on violence against the abatement of violence this research has resulted in the scales tip, in my opinion, almost entirely one way: The science conducted to date has been enormous, but the impact this has had on violence in the general human condition has been negligible.

As a scientist I clearly recognize what I am stating: that we have done little to help alleviate the suffering in the world caused by violence. I doubt that this position will be popular with my colleagues, but I believe that it is the truth. So in answering this question, I can only find myself looking at the effects our studies have done in bringing the problem(s) of violence to light. I believe that the most important thing that we have learned about violence in the past 2 decades is the pervasiveness and saturation of violence in the lives of almost everyone on the planet. This alone is a very important achievement and worth noting. Without first understanding the depth and seriousness of a problem, we cannot begin to hope to muster the resources to combat it. The publication mentioned above by WHO is an excellent example of the expanding recognition of the true seriousness of violence today.

2. What is the most important thing we need to learn in the next 10 years?
When reading most publications on violence, there is a tendency for almost all of them to end with a call for more research. If the past 20 years has produced mountains of research with little utilitarian impact, then the paradigm by which further research is conducted must change. As I mentioned above, my own research career has been funded by a variety of sources (including others I did not mention): NIDA, NIAAA, NINR, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and so on. I propose that we need to change the way in which we learn about research here in the United States. To accomplish this, I believe that we need to establish a National Institute of Violence (NIV). Rather than having multiple disciplines funding researchers with diverse backgrounds, I believe that we need a coordinated effort at the national level that makes the best use of all of the diverse backgrounds that violence researchers possess. Rather than a competition between federal agencies, there has to be cooperation that I believe that can only occur by placing our resources to combat violence in one centralized agency.

When this agency has been established, and I believe that we need to do this with the utmost expediency if we are committed to ending most of the violence we are all now exposed to and are immersed in, we must focus our research not only on violence but also on nonviolence. Violence has been articulated and described over and over, but research into nonviolence has been scanty in comparison. For instance, in my own research on nationally representative data on IPV, I have focused on models of violence—not models of the couples that are nonviolent. We need to understand the mechanisms underlying nonviolence as well as violence, remembering Ghandi’s words that “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.” Perhaps the answer to violence lies in our greater understanding not of violence itself, but of its counterpart, nonviolence.

3. What is the most promising methodological innovation in the past 20 years for the study or treatment of trauma or interpersonal violence?

Much of my own training and focus has been in the area of psychometrics. I have focused on the difficulties in measuring heterosexual IPV in terms of agreement (see Figure 1). Men and women in the general population do tend to agree about violence not occurring but do not agree about the occurrence of violent acts. This phenomenon can only be studied by using couple-level data, which seems to be necessary to understand a couple-level behavior such as IPV. It is interesting to note that most national studies of IPV have only used data from one member of the couple, which thereby assumes that one individual’s responses can be used as a proxy for what the partner’s responses
might be. In other words, collecting data in epidemiological studies on IPV using single-respondent methods assumes that the partners agree 100% about the violence that occurred over the period of time the interviewer is asking about (usually, the past year). Disagreement about violence is not constrained to IPV alone; it must be considered in all aspects of violence research. For instance, in the area of family violence, the opportunity for disagreements increases as the number of family members increases.

Advances in statistics, in general, should be incorporated into violence research. With computational power ever increasing, exact statistics that guarantee the researcher’s alpha level should be used in lieu of outdated traditional statistics that rely on theoretical probability distributions and accompanying, often stringent, assumptions about the distributional characteristics of the data (e.g., see http://www.cytel.com).

Qualitative research must be expanded if a deeper understanding of violence is to be gained. We know the limitations of violence behavior checklists; many of these limitations can be overcome by incorporating qualitative methods into surveys on violence.

SUMMARY

Even though papers, books, and other contributions to the research literature are accumulating at an ever-increasing rate, violence remains a primary, if not the primary, health concern for the entire world today. I believe that we must, in this country, establish a federal research institute devoted entirely to the study of violence and nonviolence to best organize and utilize the diverse ranks of violence researchers that abound. If we take this step, we may find ourselves beginning to find ways to increase nonviolence and to decrease the intolerable levels of violence we now endure in our homes, workplaces, and schools.

Perseverance is more prevailing than violence; and many things which cannot be overcome when they are together, yield themselves up when taken little by little.

Plutarch

REFERENCES


John Schafer, Ph.D., is an associate professor of nursing at the University of Cincinnati. His dissertation work, begun in 1989, focused on long-term cognitive functioning relating substance abuse and intimate partner violence. This work was extended and funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse from 1995 to 2001. He is currently very interested in studying agreement about intimate violence between partners and advancing statistics used to describe agreement; he is funded in this endeavor by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism with an Independent Scientist Award (2001-2006). He also works closely with Marilynn Sommers, Ph.D. (PI), on the first study to experimentally test the validity of photographic evidence of rape.