

The Psychology of Attacks and Attackers

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1. Introduction

Purpose of presentation - To understand the psychological components of dangerousness and violent behavior to better assess risk and implement prevention strategies.

Key concepts:

- **Violent behavior is NOT** about a person (or profile) but rather about a combination of **situations**, **actual behaviors** and **ways of thinking** (cognition). All human beings have the mechanisms and capacity to behave violently. (Some are more *primed* and prone to this behavior than others).
- **Violent behavior is NOT** random and unpredictable. There are “red flags” and “pre-incident” indicators that if recognized and taken seriously can be used to assess risk and prevent violence.

2. The Primal Mind:

3 levels of mind – Reptilian, Mammalian and “Neo” or new Brain.

As we grow and evolve through the lifespan we integrate these levels. These levels of thinking are always present and can be activated at any time. These types of thinking have important evolutionary purposes for survival, and are adaptive in emergency situations. They can be very maladaptive in non-emergency situations and in dealing with interpersonal or group conflicts.

*** Violent behavior is the result of a situation or combination of situations that create a perceived threat to a person or group and a response to that threat that involves egocentric, dichotomous (e.g. black or white, good or evil) and distorted thinking.**

“It’s NOT logical” everyday examples to understand the cognitive mechanisms of violence. One of the difficulties in understanding these attacks is that they are not rationale or logical. It can be helpful to think of other everyday examples of distorted thinking. A good example is *road rage*. Drivers experiencing road rage- have very distorted “primal” thinking about the other drivers which is all imaginary- but the results and victims of rage are real.

Dichotomous Thinking- (black and white, all or nothing, good vs. evil) typically associated with childhood- (up until age 11) when we move into abstract thinking beginning in

adolescence and through adulthood and realize how complex the world's issues and problems are. This thinking style is at the heart of radical movements and fundamentalism ("true believer" or "zealots"). Even people who exercise abstract (higher level) thinking, logic, and reason, and the ability to recognize complex issues (shades of gray) can resort to this thinking style when threatened.

Dichotomous thinking can be supported when individuals find groups with similar beliefs. Education and teaching people to think critically and logically and consider alternative points of view is key to moving beyond black and white thinking.

Egocentric Thinking - ("I" self-references, personalization) This form of thinking is the hallmark of adolescence. The notion of being the central "actor" or figure in our lives - everything is referenced to the "self."

Even people who demonstrate non-egocentric thinking in many areas of their lives, can also resort to this thinking style under times of stress.

Often people who are violent against others view themselves as "heroes" in their own minds using egocentric and distorted thinking to justify their actions.

When a person can identify another as "like them" empathy and non-violence is more likely. When a target is labeled as "Enemy" then a series of cognitive steps have occurred (Homogenization, Dehumanization and Demonization, Beck, 1999) that justify violent behavior and prevent altruism and empathy.

Distorted Thinking- (Errors and distortions) when operating from more "primal" modes, we tend to ignore *any* (and very important data) in our environments that do not support our thinking and beliefs. We are especially likely to make errors if we already have a negative bias towards a person or group. This can cause us to misinterpret the most innocuous behavior and perceive offenses where they don't exist.

3. Perception of Threats:

In a threatening situation or emergency, we resort to the primal (fastest) part of the brain, as well as survival instincts (fight, flight and freeze). These are adaptive in true emergencies but very dysfunctional in interpersonal conflict or group conflicts.

When a person (or group) perceives a threat, a sequence of responses is activated to address the potential threat - fight, flight or freeze. When we are highly emotionally aroused, we typically do not have access to the higher, logical, rational problem-solving areas of the brain. They are *too slow*. The problem then becomes being "stuck" in the primal thinking mode and using distorted thinking to maintain justification for retaliation and violent behavior. Issues that are highly emotionally charged tend to prevent us from considering alternative viewpoints and perspectives.

Threats can be physical or social, 'real' actual or in the mind of the perceiver (dream example).

Social Threats - loss of value, status have even more relevance in understanding violence in today's world.

4. Coping with Prospective Attacks- Logic, Awareness and Intuition

The same cognitive mechanisms we discussed can be utilized for preventing violence.

- Logic, reason and planning - Each agency should take the time to have a detailed well-thought out plan to *document every threat* that is not *reactive* but the result of rational thinking and strong risk assessment strategies.
- Agencies PR messages and communication should have a high level of awareness about common “myths” or distortions in the publics’ thinking and address errors by carefully presenting complex issues that have high emotional content.
- Awareness of the potential for violent behavior is *not* about a *person* but rather recognizing it as a *combination* of situations, thinking-styles and behaviors that can result in violence.
- Intuition - Our evolutionary, instinctual heritage means that we *all* can sense danger and dangerousness, but unlike our animal companions, we often choose to ignore or dismiss these signals.

Resources and Recommended Reading:

Beck, Aaron (1999) “Prisoners of Hate: The cognitive basis of anger hostility and violence.” Harper Collins Publishers. ISBN 0-06-019377-8

DeBecker, Gavin (1998) “The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that protect us from violence.” Dell Pub. ISBN 04402266198

De Becker, Gavin (2002) “Fearless: the real truth about risk safety and security in a time of terrorism.” Little Brown & Co.

DeBecker’s MOSIAC Threat assessment systems (artificial intuition) is a computer-assessed method of conducting comprehensive assessments on whether or not a situation has the right combination of factors associated with escalated risk and danger.

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