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Media Violence: Miscast Causality

Interpersonal violence within the United States is an issue of great concern to psychologists, law makers, and other concerned citizens. As noted by Bushman and Anderson (2001) the past few decades have seen alarming increases in violent crime in the United States. Arguably, the United States is one of the most violent industrialized nations. It would seem reasonable to suggest that violence within the United States results from a complex mixture of factors, on both societal and individual levels. Yet when an issue of critical social concern arises, there is the risk that society may demand quick, simple answers. The debate over the influence of violence in the media on the violent impulses of individuals who view media seems to typify this tendency. Few would argue with Bushman and Anderson (2001) that the media has become saturated with violence. Similarly, the decades since the 1950's have seen an increase in violent crime that seems to parallel the increase in media violence. Still, attempts to make a causal connection between violence in the media and violent crime may be premature. In effect, undue emphasis is placed on a symptom, ignoring underlying causes that reflect on either our society as a whole, or the choices made by individuals with criminal intent.

In comparing research on media violence with research on smoking and lung cancer, Bushman and Anderson (2001) suggest that, "In both cases, the industry claims that there is no good evidence have persisted long after the scientific data clearly indicated that there could be no reasonable doubt about the seriousness of causal impact" (p. 482). Comparing media violence research to that on smoking is a powerful polemic. The extents to which the cigarette industry went to deny the effects of smoking were a

travesty. Anderson and Bushman are probably correct in suggesting that we should not expect the media industry to be quick to embrace research which condemns the excesses of violence in film, music, television, and news media. However, it is not clear that research on media violence has reached the “no-reasonable-doubt point” that was reached by cigarette research. Cigarette smoking was demonstrated to be a necessary and sufficient cause of lung cancer. But is media violence a necessary and sufficient cause of violent behavior? As Horgan (1999) points out, social scientists have often been guilty of vastly overstating the significance of their findings. It could be that Anderson and Bushman present one example of such an overstatement. In support of that premise, several critiques of Anderson and Bushman shall be presented namely that:

- 1.) Humans are by nature a violent species, and may demand violence in their entertainment. Violent media, then, is not a necessary precursor to violent behavior.
- 2.) Unlike lung cancer, which is rare outside of individuals not exposed to cigarette smoke or other inhaled carcinogens, violent behavior is common in the absence of violent media whereas many who are exposed to violent media demonstrate no violent behavior. Violent media, then is not sufficient to cause violent behavior.
- 3.) The effect sizes of media violence research are small, account for only a small fraction of the variance in violent behavior.

Humans are a violent species. In 1998 Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their high school in Littleton, Colorado and systematically killed twelve students and one teacher before killing themselves. Although these two individuals had an established

history of psychological disturbance (Holmes & Holmes, 2001), it seemed difficult to admit that two young men might have willingly perpetrated a massacre within their community. Quickly, blame began to shift to media influences including gothic music, violent movies such as “The Matrix”, and violent video games. For many it may have been easier to believe that Harris and Klebold were poor child victims of an insidious media rather than to accept that these children were, themselves, malevolent. Yet evidence suggests that violence is a basic facet of our species’ nature. In a review of research on primates, Sagan and Druyan (1992) note that violence, including assault, rape, murder, infanticide and even warfare are common to primates including chimpanzees and baboons. Violent behavior may similarly have proven to be adaptive in humans (Wilson & Daly, 1996). As a function of species-wide evolution, some form of violent behavior may be a natural (though not desirable) trait in many individuals. While it could be argued that such genetic tendencies merely place some individuals at risk for violent behavior and that violent media acts as the catalyst, it seems unlikely that violent media alone is sufficient to bring about violent behavior. Further, though higher rates of violence in the United States than in other industrialized nations may be blamed on media (though we share much of our media with other nations) a more likely catalyst for violent behavior within the United States may be our easy access to handguns (which we do not share with most other industrialized nations). In other words, people in the United States and the other industrialized nations may actually be equally violent. In the United States we may simply have better access to better tools with which to kill. Hare (1993) suggests that violent behavior may be innate and inborn to the personalities of some individuals, and that attempts by society to change the behavior of these individuals is unlikely to

succeed. In effect, we deflect the blame for the actions of individuals onto a larger societal process, so that no one individual need accept responsibility for their behavior. Individuals such as Harris and Klebold then are victims, not victimizers.

Media violence is not necessary to produce violent behavior in individuals. Bushman and Anderson (2001) acknowledged that the surge of violence in the media is a recent trend. Yet violence within the United States and the world at large is nothing new, and in fact, quite common. In examining crime rates only since the 1950's, Bushman and Anderson ignore surges in homicide rates in the 1930's, which rivaled and even exceeded homicide rates of the late 1980's (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988). Further, though crime records prior to the 1930's are fragmentary, the United States saw violent crime waves in the late 1800's and early 1900's which rivaled or surpassed current rates of violent crime (National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1969). Thus the United States has a long history of violence. It seems reasonable to suggest that the ebb and flow of violent crime rates through the 1800's and early 1900's do not particularly coincide with changes in either the availability or graphic nature of available media. Furthermore, recent statistics actually document a decline in violent crime in the United States, despite little change in the amount of violence depicted in the media (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1951-2000). If media violence is a necessary and direct cause of violent behavior, a significant decline in violent crime should not be occurring unless violence in the media is also declining. Bushman and Anderson (2001) do not seem to suggest that that is the current state of affairs.

The effect sizes of violent media research are small and lack practical significance. Bushman and Anderson (2001) note that the correlation coefficients for

meta-analytic examinations of the relationship between exposure to media violence and violent behavior range from $r=.11$ to $r=.31$. Using the coefficient of determination (r^2) this indicates that exposure to media violence is associated with from 1.2% to 9.6% of the variance in violent behavior. Thus, the majority of the variance in violent behavior remains unexplained. Further, this observation is true not only between individuals, but also within individuals. In other words, exposure to media violence may covary with 1.2% to 9.6% of the variance in violent behavior within any given individual as well as between individuals. Thus the authors' suggestions that violent media may univariately create violent behavior within a small percentage of the population is unwarranted. It may be that were exposure to media violence included into a multivariate analysis of violent behavior, the variance explained by media violence may be subsumed by other variables such as individual personality or family environment. As Bushman and Anderson suggest, we should not ignore small correlations, but neither are they cause for us to grab our muskets, pitchforks and torches and storm the Bastille of corporate media.

In essence, unlike the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, exposure to violent media is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain violent behavior in individuals. The authors, while well meaning, make the error of mistaking the symptom of a problem for the cause. Media violence may not be the root cause of violent behavior now any more so now than at any other time in the long history of human violence. If we wish to truly understand violent behavior, we must focus away from symptoms, and onto the difficult and perhaps hard to face causes, such as family structure, poverty, abuse, evolution, and even the motivations and predilections of those individuals who choose to engage in violent behavior.

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