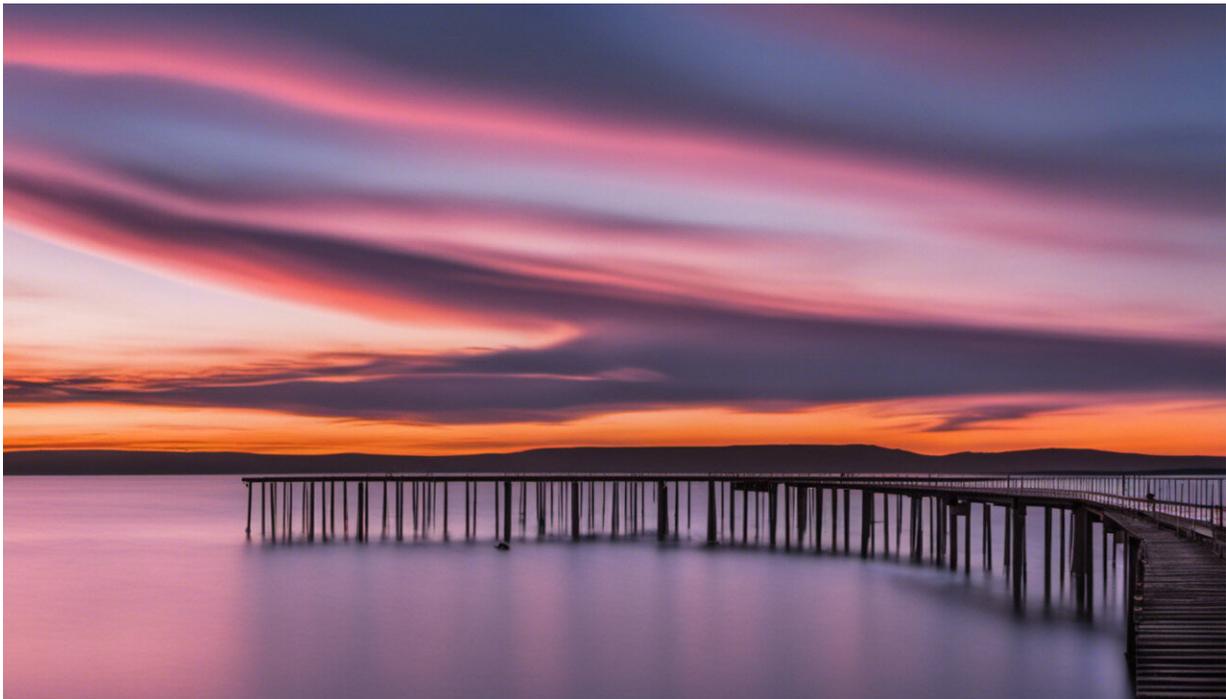


How much do we know about the psychology of violence?

December 16 2016, by Paul Salkovskis



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Violence is one of society's biggest, most tragic problems. The human cost of violent crime is all too obvious: victims, perpetrators and witnesses all suffer. Violence occurs on an enormous scale: in 2014-15, there were [1.3m violent incidents reported](#) in England and Wales alone. The financial impact is staggering, too: violent crime was estimated to

have cost the UK £124 billion in the year 2012 – that's [7.7% of the nation's GDP](#).

But while we have some idea about the impacts of [violence](#), we don't know a lot about how it works. If we're to find ways to reduce violence – either by rehabilitating [violent offenders](#), or preventing violence in the first place – then we'll need a much better understanding of what causes it. Specifically, we need to know what makes people more likely to be violent, and what changes can be made to reduce this tendency.

One thing we can be sure of is that violence has something to do with psychology. Violence is a set of behaviours, which have their roots in complicated emotional motivations and reactions. As with other psychological problems, health experts think that violence can be seen as an extension of an otherwise normal reaction; we all get sad, but only some of us get depressed; we all worry, but only some of us develop anxiety disorders.

Perhaps the same approach can be applied to understanding violence. We can all be aggressive or hostile, but maybe for some, these feelings become so severe that they are translated into violent behaviour.

More than a feeling

If you follow this logic, you might assume that violence occurs when feelings of anger get out of control. But if that were true, then you would expect anger management interventions to reduce violence. [Evidence suggests that](#) they are not. Anger may indeed play an important role in activating violence for some people, but it is neither necessary, nor sufficient for violence to occur. Likewise, while drug use and [mental health problems have been linked](#) to violent behaviour there's no evidence to suggest that they actually cause it.

So far, psychological research has largely failed to deliver the kind of results which would allow us to identify the true causes of violence. This, in turn, means that we have made little progress on preventing it, and even less on the rehabilitation of those who act violently. [The best predictors](#) of who will be violent are age, gender and a history of previous violence – none of which can be used to target interventions.

Yet there is [some research which indicates](#) that violence occurs in two different ways; that we can distinguish between "instrumental" violence and "affective" violence. Instrumental violence is used as a means to an end – for example, in a robbery to obtain cash or goods. Affective violence is an end in itself, driven by emotion – as we see in cases of aggravated assault.

At the University of Bath's [clinical psychology research group](#), we have been focusing on the latter form. We're seeking to understand why an individual becomes violent, by looking at the different ways that violent and non-violent people interpret a range of situations.

Shame and blame

[Earlier work](#) in this field assumes that the way people make sense of the world is influenced to some degree by their earlier experiences. Our early experience leads us to develop general assumptions about how the world works, or at least how it should work. For example, most people believe that to some degree "life should treat me fairly", up to and including that "other people should treat me fairly".

Research [with high-risk, violent offenders](#) indicates that low self-esteem, developed from a young age, can play a key role in triggering [violent behaviour](#). For example, a person may feel badly about themselves following a difficult, traumatic, abusive or neglectful childhood. Yet that individual may outwardly appear confident, even arrogant – scholars

propose that this is a defence against inward feelings of shame, weakness, vulnerability and inadequacy.

The theory goes that these feelings are so painful, that if the individual perceives that someone humiliates them or shows them disrespect, they are unable to tolerate it. A violent response restores a sense of self-worth and pride, while also punishing whoever caused that sense of injury or humiliation.

There's still a lot of work to do, to test whether this theory holds true across a variety of cases. And we're a long way from determining whether or not the mechanisms proposed in this theory do, in fact, apply to those who become violent. But if we can answer these questions, we may be able to come up with cognitive behavioural treatments of violence, which help people to challenge the thoughts and interpretations that trigger violent reactions, and to respond in a different way. To this end, we're looking for men over the age of 18, both with and without a history of violence, to [participate in our research](#).

We are hopeful that this study can contribute to the growing understanding of violence, and to new approaches to prevention of violence and rehabilitation of perpetrators.

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