



## Psychological Theories of Violence

Bryn King

To cite this article: Bryn King (2012) Psychological Theories of Violence, Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 22:5, 553-571, DOI: [10.1080/10911359.2011.598742](https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2011.598742)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2011.598742>



Published online: 28 Jun 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9310



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Psychological Theories of Violence

BRYN KING

*School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, California, USA*

*Psychology, as a discipline, largely attributes the causes of aggression, especially extreme or chronic criminal violence, to individual and familial dysfunction or pathology. The pathways to violence are considered at an individual level that includes internal characteristics of perpetrators, their immediate circumstances, and the type of violence committed. This literature review provides an overview of larger theoretical models for understanding violence, which can facilitate the integration of multiple psychological constructs from varying schools of thought. From that general overview, theories of violence were separated into two major categories: violence as a condition of human nature (including psychobiological and temperamental vulnerabilities and violence as an instinct) and violence as the consequence of a damaged psyche (including five interrelated processes: self-regulation; attachment and relationships; the role of shame; self-concept and self-esteem; and learning and cognitive theories).*

**KEYWORDS** *Violence, aggression, evil, psychological theories, biological vulnerabilities*

## INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF VIOLENCE

Questions about the psychological origins of brutality and evil are most often sought when we are faced with extraordinary acts that seem to defy common understanding. On October 24, 2009, a 15-year-old girl was gang-raped out-

---

Address correspondence to Bryn King, School of Social Welfare, University of California, 120 Haviland Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. E-mail: brynking@berkeley.edu

side of her high school homecoming dance while a group of other teenagers watched but did nothing to stop the assault. A writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, struggling with both the event and its aftermath at the high school asks, "How, when confronted with such an obvious violation of humanity, could so many teenagers fall so short and feel so unashamed about it?" (Banks, 2009, p. 2). On November 5, 2009, an army colonel and psychiatrist at Fort Hood went on a shooting rampage in which he killed 13 people and wounded 30 others. In an editorial for *The International Herald Tribune*, David Brooks wrote that in the well-intentioned public commentary, the response to the event "denied, before the evidence was in, the possibility of evil. It sought to reduce a heinous act to social maladjustment" (Brooks, 2009, p. 7).

Psychology, as a discipline, largely attributes the causes of violence to individual and familial dysfunction or pathology (Fagan & Wexler, 1987). The pathways to violence are considered at an individual level, asking questions about the internal characteristics of perpetrators, their immediate circumstances, and the type of violence committed. Indeed, an understanding of individual differences in criminal violence is critical for effective rehabilitation (Chambers, Ward, Eccleston, & Brown, 2009). This individual, dispositional model often ignores a situational analysis that includes the processes operating at political, social, economic, cultural, and historic levels (Zimbardo, 2004). There are exceptions, most notably the contributions of social psychology, which focuses on examining roles (victim versus perpetrator) rather than people (victim versus perpetrator; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In his volume of the social psychology of evil, Miller (2004) explores the relationship between "ordinariness" and the capacity for committing evil acts rather than explicating the behavior of those who are extreme in their maladjustment, sadism, bigotry, or hatred. He states that locating the causes of evil within evil people reduces the significance of the impact of situational events on influencing behavior, especially behavior that can be categorized as evil (Miller, 2004).

For the purpose of this literature review, a more limited perspective on violence is used to examine those concepts and theories that facilitate understanding of extreme or chronic criminal violence that is rooted in individual characteristics and pathology. The review describes two conceptual models for analyzing and understanding violence to integrate multiple psychological constructs from varying schools of thought. These models also provide a useful reference point for describing violence as a *condition of human nature* and violence as the *consequence of a damaged psyche*. The theories relating to human nature encompass psychobiological vulnerabilities, evolutionary psychology, and classic psychoanalytic theory. The theories relating to a damaged psyche are presented as a set of concepts that include problems with self-regulation, attachment, shame, self-concept and self-esteem, and cognitive-behavioral processing. In addition to synthesizing the information

presented, this review concludes with a diagram that illustrates how these theories are interrelated.

## METHODS

A literature search was conducted for this review using the University of California, Berkeley online databases and Google Scholar. UC library databases included PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES and the University of California MelvylNextGen Pilot, (provides access to all UC holdings, including books, journal articles, newspapers and government publications). Initial keyword searches included the following: “psychological theories and violence,” “psychological theories and aggression,” and “psychological theories and evil.” Truncated search terms were also utilized, including “biblio\* and psycholog\* theor\* and violen\*,” “psycholog\*, theor\*, and violen\*” and “psycholog\* and violen\*.” Additional searches were completed to locate specific publications, theories, or authors based on articles most frequently cited, such as “cognitive theories and violence” or “Megargee and violence.” Finally, *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia* (Gottesman & Brown, 1999) and *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression* (Flannery, Vazsonyi, & Waldman, 2007) were consulted to ensure that all potential areas of psychological thought were captured.

There are some limitations in the methods listed; in particular, the overlap between psychological and sociological theories made it difficult to ascertain whether works were truly psychological theories. As a result of the focus on individual pathways to violence, even psychological theories that consider the impact of social status (including gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and other structures of potential power and dominance) are not included in this review. In spite of the focus on pathology, conceptualizations of violence as they relate to severe mental illness (such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder) are also excluded. As noted later in this review, distortions of reality are common with those who commit violence, but psychotic motives for violence are understood as being consistent with the content or theme of delusions or hallucinations, which are necessarily divorced from an objective reality (Junginger & McGuire, 2004).

An additional note on terminology is required. Based on the literature collected for this review, a violence continuum is conceptualized that labels “destructiveness” at one end, builds up to “aggression,” escalates to “violence,” and ultimately culminates in “evil,” which includes the most extreme examples of cruelty and brutality. The use of these various terms through the review may be specific to the writer reviewed or the particular behavior being conceptualized. In the cases where there were more generic opportunities, the terms *violence*, *violent behavior*, and *aggression* are used interchangeably.

## Psychological Models for Analyzing Violence

A number of models that consider the psychological determinants of violent behavior have been developed, and though these are not necessarily theories, they provide a conceptual framework that acknowledges multiple and varied causes of violence. Baumeister's "Four Roots of Evil" describes how violence is utilized and attempts to answer the question of why some people do things that other people regard as evil (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Megargee's "Algebra of Aggression" reflects and organizes a number of theories into an "abstract" conceptual framework that provides guidance for assessing a single episode of violence that often represents the interaction of varied factors, motivations and unconscious decisions (Megargee, 1982).

### Four Roots of Evil

Baumeister proposes that violence is utilized in four ways: (1) as a means to an end; (2) in response to threatened egotism; (3) in a misguided effort to do what is right; and (4) as a means for achieving sadistic pleasure (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In instrumentalism (a means to an end), the focus is on gratification of immediate needs, including resources, power, sex, or influence, with little concern for the long-term utility of such methods. Threatened egotism refers to a response to wounded pride or violated honor, in which the image of self is at risk. High and unstable self-esteem (rather than low self-esteem) is at the core of this idea. Idealism, as misguided attempts to "do good," is sometimes perceived by the perpetrator as a moral imperative in which "the ends justify the means," regardless of how evil or immoral the belief system or action appears to others.

True sadism, the fourth root of evil, is relatively rare but often leads to the most extreme examples of human cruelty (beyond those of other causes). For those who overcome a previous aversion to inflicting harm, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) propose the opponent process theory. They propose that when faced with situations that trigger an aversive or negative reaction, an opposing or pleasurable response is generated to restore a homeostatic state. As one continues to engage in the aversive act (violence), the opponent process increases the pleasurable experience. Guilt provides a necessary restraint for most people, which often inhibits the enjoyment of the experience.

Last, in spite of the fact that the conceptualization of the model is "four" root causes, Baumeister and Vohs propose a fifth cause, the proximal cause of self-control (2004). This cause is a breakdown in self-control or capacity for self-regulation that restrains impulses, minimizes reactivity, and allows for appropriate behavior. If aggressive impulses are not stifled, they become aggressive actions. In addition, there are situations that undermine self-

control and increase aggression, such as alcohol intoxication (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).

### Algebra of Aggression

Edwin Megargee formulated his conceptual framework for the analysis of aggressive and violent behavior to answer the question of how formerly “overcontrolled” assaultive people, who are characterized by massive inhibitions against expressing or enacting aggressive feelings, overcome those inhibitions and commit astonishing acts of violence (Megargee, 2009). He believed that most aggression is automated (i.e., both reactive and mechanical) and, therefore, difficult to deconstruct into its various motivations and circumstances, which is why he developed a model in which a single episode of violence could be analyzed. In terms of the “algebra,” he considered it an internal process in which there is a reactive and unconscious calculation of a cost-benefit analysis. Decisions made on the basis of this analysis and the associated response allow for maximum benefit and minimal dissatisfaction).

He identifies four broad factors that combine to form the strength of the response: (1) instigation to aggression, (2) habit strength, (3) inhibitions to aggression, and (4) stimulus factors. When the sum of motivating factors exceeds the sum of inhibitory factors, the act becomes possible and introduces the fifth and final element in the algebra of aggression: competition, in which the decision is made regarding the costs and benefits of responding with violence (Megargee, 1982). Though these are the basic elements of the concept, some explication of the broad factors is necessary to assess the breadth and depth of Megargee’s theoretical model.

When considering the instigation to aggression, Megargee separates the construct into two types: “intrinsic” or angry aggression, in which harm to the victim is an end in itself, and “extrinsic” or instrumental motivation that satisfies a particular need or goal (Megargee, 1982). Intrinsic motivation encompasses the range of affect that includes anger (moderate and short-lived), rage (long-term and moderate), and hatred (chronic and extreme). The anger spectrum can be generated by biological vulnerabilities, internal drives, and innate characteristics and as situational events that have impacted the person’s ability to modulate anger. Based on a wide range of motives, instrumental motivation includes material acquisition; enhancement of the self-concept; elimination of the self; approval from the group, and maintenance of group solidarity; power, control, and dominance over others; achieving political or social goals, including the maintenance or overthrowing the power structure; and altruism.

The second broad factor in the algebra of aggression is habit strength where aggressive or violent habits are acquired through direct experience with reinforcement of aggressive behavior and imitative learning through observation of aggression. Bandura’s social learning theory adds further depth

to this concept, in which the acquisition of aggressive patterns of behavior are drawn from three different sources: (1) familial influences (physical abuse, domestic violence, or parents who favor coercive tactics and punishment); (2) subcultural influences (communities that have both high rates of violence and a value system that places high value on aggression); and (3) symbolic modeling (from popular media and in the shaping of collective aggression) (Bandura, 1978).

The Algebra of Aggression and the Four Roots of Evil provide models in which both interrelated and disparate psychological theories of violence can be integrated. The first set of theories to be discussed is conceptualizations of violence as human nature, meaning that aggression develops as a result of internal, biological characteristics or instinctual drives.

### HUMAN NATURE: THEORIES OF VIOLENCE AS INNATE CHARACTERISTICS

The theorists and researchers who constitute this general category of thought would argue that the capacity to commit violence is innate, that people who commit violence are reacting to either instinctual drives or biological vulnerabilities. All acknowledge that violent behavior is not solely determined by these internal characteristics and that the process of development and environmental circumstances mitigate the growth of aggression and the inhibitory functions that can prevent violence. The theoretical constructs examined in this section will cover the psychobiological determinants of violence and the concept of violence as an instinct, either for survival (as elucidated by evolutionary psychology) or toward death and destruction (as postulated by classic psychoanalytic thought).

#### Psychobiological Determinants of Violence

Some researchers within the field of psychobiological theories of violence take a very limited view on the etiology of violence. For example, some insist that although there may be environmental factors that mitigate the development of aggressive behavior, aggression is the product of brain functioning through a complex and interdependent interaction of anatomical, chemical and physiological causes (Gontovsky, 2005). Other theorists, particularly those who have adopted a biosocial framework, suggest that it is the interaction between biological and psychosocial variables that provides the most comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of violence (Scarpa & Raine, 2007). Most modern psychological theories of violence, regardless of their orientation or framework, acknowledge that research has demonstrated that there are biological factors that play a significant role in increasing an

individual's vulnerability to other critical experiences in the development of violence.

Psychobiological theories of violence include brain dysfunction, autonomic functioning, hormones, neuropsychology, and temperament. When considering biological impact, most theorists consider the stability of aggressive traits that emerge early in the child's development indicate the presence of biological or inherent vulnerabilities (Englander, 2003). Much of the research has not produced definitive results over time or across populations (i.e., research using samples from the prison population versus the general population), however, for the purposes of this exploration, concepts that have been generally well established will be presented.

#### BRAIN DYSFUNCTION

Brain dysfunction results from a number of causes, including head trauma/injury, brain tumors, organic brain dysfunction, and perinatal or delivery abnormalities. Head injuries have been strongly linked to violent behavior, with up to 75% of violent criminals experiencing a serious head injury (Mednick, Pollock, Volavka, & Gabrielli, 1982). Head trauma in children is associated with increased rates of conduct disorder and externalizing behavior problems (Scarpa & Raine, 2007). Regardless of the cause, impairment in different spheres of the brain has been linked to violence and identified risk factors or precursors to aggression.

Modulation of aggression and violent behavior has been associated with the limbic and paralimbic structures of the midbrain (including the amygdala, hypothalamus, and periaqueductal gray matter), the temporal and frontal lobes, and the thalamus. Limbic and paralimbic systems are responsible for many components of emotion and behavior, including aspects of aggression (Gontovsky, 2005). Frontal limbic dysfunction produces affective disturbances, hypersexuality, increased aggression, and elevated sensitivity to alcohol. Dorsal-lateral frontal lobe dysfunction leads to deficiencies in concentration, abstract abilities, and language capacity (Mednick et al., 1982). Problems with executive functioning (governed by the prefrontal region) are associated with aggressive behavior as a result of impulsivity and a reduced capacity to utilize inhibitory feedback cues to regulate behavior (Gontovsky, 2005). Last, dysfunction in frontal or temporal brain regions is linked to impaired self-control and inability to comprehend the consequences of one's actions (Mednick et al., 1982).

#### AUTONOMIC FUNCTIONING

Another significant concept in the biological determinants of violence is central nervous system functioning as measured by using electroencephalographic evaluation (EEG). Violent criminals have a higher percentage of abnormal EEGs, especially recidivist aggressors, which suggests an underlying



organic dysfunction, including maturational lag in cerebral development, cortical under-arousal, or temporal lobe epilepsy (Mednick et al., 1982). One of the most replicated findings demonstrates support for the theory that the violently antisocial experience autonomic under-arousal, which may indicate deficits in emotional reactivity, fearless or disinhibited temperament, and a tendency toward stimulation-seeking behavior. This process has been consistently measured by low resting heart rate, which demonstrates that heart rate does not increase in spite of exposure to potentially aversive or punishing stimuli (Scarpa & Raine, 2007). Another measure for autonomic response is skin conductance, which assesses electrodermal activity (most common response is sweating) and has also demonstrated that there is a link between under-arousal and antisocial behavior (Glenn, Raine, Venables, & Mednick, 2007).

#### HORMONAL INFLUENCES

The two hormonal influences that have had the most impact on the development of aggression and violence have been testosterone and cortisol. Testosterone (one of the male sex hormones known as androgens) has higher association with more sexual and assaultive offending and dominance behaviors (habitually confrontational, intractable, and power-based; Englander, 2003). As a result of these androgens, males tend to engage in more aggressive behavior than females (Gontovsky, 2005). High levels of prenatal exposure to male androgens can lead to two outcomes: lowered capacity for prosocial behavior and increased risk for aggression and violence by affecting levels of monamine oxidase, an enzyme that in low levels is also linked to aggression and impulsiveness. One theory that has developed from this basis involves chemical or surgical castration to reduce male sex drive, thereby decreasing sexual forms of violence (Englander, 2003). Less is known about the impact of cortisol, the hormone that regulates stress in the body, but it has been demonstrated that low levels of cortisol have been linked with a tendency to engage in aggression.

#### NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

The discussion of neuropsychological factors focuses on neurochemical functioning, specifically on dopamine and serotonin, which have been linked to aggressive behavior. Dopamine (commonly associated with providing feelings of pleasure) dysregulation has been linked to increased aggression. Serotonin (linked, in this context, with mood regulation) has been found to play a role in mediating reactive aggression. Increased serotonin activity inhibits aggression, whereas diminished levels of serotonergic activity tend to promote aggression, especially in boys and men (Gontovsky, 2005; Englander, 2003).

## TEMPERAMENT

In addition to psychobiological vulnerabilities to aggression, it has been hypothesized that temperament may contribute to the development of violent behavior. Temperament refers to the idea that individuals are predisposed to certain behaviors because of a particular personality style and means of coping with stressors and new experiences.

Temperament, however, is not destiny; it is probability. Temperament is what a child offers up to the world as a possibility and a challenge, or a direction. It is important to understand how children see and experience the world . . . temperament takes place in context, too—temperament predicts violence in some situations but not in others—and we can override temperament to a large degree (Garbarino & Haslam, 2005, p. 449).

Research into temperament has demonstrated that adult psychopaths have unique temperaments, which are characterized by a lack of fear and inhibition and a tendency toward stimulation seeking (Glenn et al., 2007).

## Driven to Be Violent

In addition to biological considerations, there are psychological constructs that contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the capacity for violence and development of aggressive behavior. Evolutionary psychology and traditional psychoanalysis offer two perspectives on whether people are born with an instinctive drive toward violence. Though both schools acknowledge that aggression can be adaptive and positive and ultimately ensure survival and success, their formulation differs regarding how and why the human condition also involves aggression that is destructive to the point of extreme cruelty.

## EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Evolution by natural selection operates in a context in which the heritable (genetic) characteristics that lead to reproductive success are those that evolve. From this perspective, all humans are “evolutionary success stories” and are “reproductive competitors with other humans to become ancestors” (Duntley & Buss, 2004, p. 105). Murder, as one form of violence, is particularly effective in this regard, robbing the victim of the opportunity to reproduce. To continue to compete, it became necessary to not only select characteristics capable of defeating the competition but to defend against homicide and other potential threats to survival at various points in the life cycle. Overall, the logic of selection operates on whether the benefits of a particular strategy outweigh the average costs over time (Duntley & Buss, 2004).

Evolutionary psychology posits that humans have evolved adaptations designed to harm other humans that are fundamental and universal compo-

nents of human nature. Whether these characteristics are acted upon depends on external contingencies (social, familial, etc.). Those phenomena that are intentional and unprovoked can inflict particular harm and massive cost to the victim and are often considered “evil.” Another strain of defensive adaptations have co-evolved in response to the threat of harm, which influences the development of increasingly sophisticated mechanisms to counter those defenses (Duntley & Buss, 2004). Further, evolutionary psychology can lead to a reevaluation of commonly held assumptions regarding violence. For example, Duntley and Buss postulate that impulsive aggression is really an evolved adaptation that is designed to appear impulsive but allows humans to maximize their tactical effectiveness by making decisions quickly.

#### THE DEATH INSTINCT

Traditional psychoanalytic thought, as articulated by Sigmund Freud, bases its conceptions of violence on the theory that purely aggressive impulses are generated by a destructive death instinct. The death instinct is managed by a defensive system that modulates aggression, but when defenses are overused or underdeveloped, violent behavior may be the consequence (Walker & Bright, 2009). This also includes the idea that aggression is derived from the “self-preservation” instinct. Glassner (as cited in Harding, 2006) believed that aggression is caused by the perception that the self is under threat from internal and external dangers. Anything that disrupts psychic equilibrium may provoke self-preservative aggression (Harding, 2006).

According to Royston (2006), Freud conceptualized the death instinct as engaged in perpetual battle with the life instinct. These two opposing, yet unconscious, forces operate at cross-purposes, with one consistently seeking to thwart the other. The death instinct drives the psyche toward a state characterized by the dissolution of desire and the absence of tension, pain, and agitation. The sexual instincts, seeking to preserve life, fuse with the destructive drive and redirect it as aggression toward the other (Royston, 2006). An example of how the sexual instincts absorb and retransmit aggression is Glassner’s concept regarding the development of sadomasochism (Harding, 2006). In his formulation, self-preservative violence is triggered for those with a fragile sense of self while they are in the midst of an unwinnable contest between the longing for intimacy and the fear of abandonment. The dilemma is resolved by the sexualization of aggressive impulses and consequent conversion of the urge to destroy into the desire to hurt and control. “The anxieties associated with either intimacy or abandonment are eroticized and turned from murderous rage into excitement” (Harding, 2006, p. 6).

Melanie Klein further developed the concept of aggressive and destructive instincts as part of the human condition. Her ideas were based on the notion that aggression is constitutional (i.e., innate and inborn) and

not impacted by trauma or the malignancies of the external world. Klein hypothesized that the infant expresses this aggression through fantasies of attacking the good that is the mother's breast (Royston, 2006). The infant, at a later stage of development, will isolate the projected aggression toward the good breast by attributing it to the "bad breast." The capacity for the mother to withstand the onslaught and for the infant to reconcile both breasts as aspects of the same person allows for the good object to be introjected and the child to utilize loving feelings to manage destructive impulses (Harding, 2006).

The traditional psychoanalytic framework is one that enjoyed wide acceptance in terms of its conceptualization of aggression, regardless of its ability to explain extreme cruelty and its unwillingness to consider other issues, such as trauma, parenting styles, or environment. Though most current theories consider how violence is created and developed, classic psychoanalytic thinking is characterized by the development of mechanisms that curb the natural instinct toward aggression. Royston (2006) asserts that the notion of the death instinct should be rejected. If there is constitutional destructiveness, he insists, it is interpersonal in origin and exacerbated by toxic experiences with primary caregivers.

### Violence Is Created through Experience

One significant contribution of psychoanalytic thought is the idea that all behavior is both psychologically meaningful and expressed by its own symbolic language (Gilligan, 1997). Moreover, unconscious processes largely drive action, particularly destructive or harmful behavior. This section describes a set of interrelated ideas and theories about the development of violence and aggressive behavior through experience (largely traumatic or damaging) that impacts self-regulation, interpersonal functioning, self-concept, and cognitive and emotional processing. Some of the theories described will fall neatly into their designated categories, but others encompass more than one process and have been assigned based on their most prominent feature.

#### SELF-REGULATION

Stinson, Becker, and Sales (2008) describe a model of multi-modal self-regulation theory as applied to sex offenders. The theory states that self-regulatory deficits in emotion and mood regulation, behavior regulation, cognitive regulation, and interpersonal regulation are potential causal mechanisms for development of and/or relapse to sex-offending behaviors. In their formulation, they ascribe particular developmental antecedents, specifically that biological and temperamental dispositions, such as high emotional sensitivity and reactivity, compromised ability to return to emotional "baseline" and increased likelihood of negative emotionality, shape later emotional,

interpersonal, and behavioral outcomes. Hostile, punitive, or inconsistent parenting styles also interfere with the development of adaptive and effective coping mechanisms, which, coupled with dispositional vulnerabilities described earlier, can lead to even greater emotional dysregulation. The authors postulate that sex-offending behaviors serve as “attempts to regulate the self and alleviate internal or interpersonal tension and distress” (Stinson et al., 2008, p. 48).

#### ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS

Attachment theory is a behavioral system that regulates attachments, fear, and exploration. Bowlby (as cited in Renn, 2006) defined attachment as any behavior that results in a person's attaining and maintaining proximity to a meaningful and differentiated other (Renn, 2006). Renn expands this theory by asserting that the quality of love and security provided by a parent or caregiver also plays a role in helping to modulate the conflict between love and hate. He theorizes that traumatic disturbance in the infant-caregiver relationship can cause aggression, particularly affective violence (violence that is caused by the inability to control or regulate emotions or affect), which he believes is caused by a disorganized maladaptive reaction to a perceived threat against the self.

Insecure attachments may also trigger violence, particularly when faced with abandonment by the attachment figure (as in intimate partner violence). Brown (2004) asserts that the stressor may not only be abandonment but the perpetrator's subjective experience of the attachment figure as insensitive, nonresponsive, or unsupportive. Actual rejection, whether it is parental rejection, interpersonal rejection, or social rejection based on race or sexual identity, is internalized as a repudiation of one's identity. Rejection generates shame and produces “anxiety about psychic annihilation,” and violence is a method for demonstrating and reasserting one's existence (Garbarino & Haslam, 2005, p. 449).

#### SHAME

Shame can be broadly defined as the fundamental absence of love, either from within or without (Gilligan, 1997). Internal shame results from negative self-evaluations, whereas external shame relates to being rejected, ridiculed, judged, or disgraced in the presence of an audience (Walker & Bright, 2009). Shame may be activated any time that a current event is reminiscent of the historical event that caused the original shame, whether that experience is relational or due to a failure to meet expectations (Brown, 2004). Lewis (as cited in Good, 1999) theorized that shame is fundamentally relational, and bypassed or unacknowledged shame that is largely unconscious can be particularly destructive and can lead to what she terms “humiliated fury” (Good, 1999). Further, Scheff and Retzinger (as cited in

Good, 1999) assert that disavowed shame, when activated, essentially triggers a rapid sequence of emotions (from shame to anger to rage) that can lead to aggressive actions and impede effective management of other emotions.

Gilligan (1997) identifies shame not as just a trigger to aggression but as the primary cause of violence). His conceptualization of the phenomena of violence begins with the idea that the action of violence must be interpreted as symbolic language, with its own “symbolic logic” and that to understand violence, it is also necessary to understand the fantasy that violent behavior represents. After working in the prison system for more than 25 years with the most violent male offenders, he developed his “germ theory” of violence in which he identifies the three preconditions that need to exist for men to commit violence (Gilligan, 1997):

1. They are deeply and secretly ashamed, often over trivial matters, and are even more ashamed of feeling shame. In other words, their shame is exponential. The more trivial the issue, the greater the shame and the more desperate they are to eradicate it.
2. They perceive that there are no nonviolent alternatives, which means that violence is a last resort to defend themselves against the tide of shame and the death of self.
3. They lack the emotional capacities or resources (love and guilt toward others) that inhibit the violent impulse of shame.
4. They have intolerable wishes for love and care and often are deeply ashamed of their incapacity for independence and their urgent need to be dependent on others (women, the prison system, institutional care, etc.).

Gilligan explains elements of this theory when describing the phenomena of murder. He asserts that murder is the behavioral manifestation of paranoia, which is essentially the inability to differentiate between emotions and reality as a result of overwhelming shame. Murder is the ultimate act of self-defense against the total annihilation (loss of self, mind, sanity) from shame, whereas further brutality and mutilation form the symbolic language of the “why.” This extreme example of violence serves the purpose of restoring a sense of power, potency, independence, and esteem (Gilligan, 1997).

In considering the differences between shame and guilt, Tangney and Stuewig (2004) discuss the role of guilt as a more adaptive method for shaping moral behavior. Guilt can be positive and adaptive whereas shame can be destructive and maladaptive (Tangney & Stuewig). The capacity for experiencing guilt and empathy can also serve as a violence inhibiting mechanism (Walker & Bright, 2009). Ironically, the activation of shame and humiliation can disable this mechanism, particularly with aggression-prone

individuals who seek to mitigate shame by externalizing or blaming others (Walker & Bright, 2009).

#### SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-ESTEEM

The self psychological perspective (as described by Brown, 2004) posits that infant self-object experiences characterized by mirroring (provides validation and a sense of competence), idealizing, and merging form the basis for an integrated sense of self and an ability to regulate affect. When one or more of these experiences is absent, an immature sense of self develops, and individuals engage in a pattern of adult relational reenactment of the infantile merging self-object experience. In that scenario, individuals cannot tolerate difference or separation from the partner, and violence may be the resulting behavior. Further, the impact of this arrested development process generates a grandiose and infantile sense of self that ultimately leads to immature narcissism in which the self is held to unrealistic standards. The resulting narcissistic vulnerability places perpetrators at acute risk for injuries to the self from criticism, insults, and rejection (Brown, 2004).

In their model of false inflated self-esteem and violence, Walker and Bright (2009) describe the process of developing a self-concept that disavows the most negative and anxiety producing formulations. De Zulueta (as cited in Walker & Bright, 2009) theorized that histories of abuse and trauma are causal mechanisms of aggression in children's development because they impact attachment and foster a negative self-concept. Early in their development, traumatized children cannot contemplate blaming or demeaning their caregivers because that could result in unthinkable helplessness and disempowerment and an acknowledgement of the true danger they experience regularly at the hands of the people they most need and expect to trust. Instead, these children seek meaning and control by assuming responsibility for the abuse and conclude that they somehow deserved it. A painful and negative self-concept, in which one is believed to be inherently defective and vulnerable, is masked by a façade of arrogance and aggression. Any threats, real or imagined, can be neutralized by violence (Walker & Bright, 2009).

#### Cognitive Distortions and Pathological Belief Systems

The cognitive-behavioral approach posits that adaptive and maladaptive belief systems, known as schemas, are formed in childhood through both positive and negative events or patterns (Walker & Bright, 2009). In other words, schemata are methods to organize stored knowledge to compose theories about how parts of society or individuals function (Polaschek, Calvert, & Gannon, 2009). Rules based on these potentially dysfunctional assumptions determine when and how strongly these beliefs are activated. The process

of triggering such rules is linked to automated thoughts, which are fleeting and rich in affect, and help to create a pattern of behavior that it ultimately based on a pathological belief system (Walker & Bright, 2009).

Related to schema, the implicit theory (IT) approach is a means for explaining violence-supporting cognitions in which perpetrators experience their violent acts as normal and largely within their control (Polaschek et al., 2009). ITs are “composed of structured interconnected belief networks organized around an underlying dominant theme, or theory” (Polaschek et al., 2009, p. 76). These structures unconsciously guide and determine behavior, filter and categorize knowledge, and become comprehensive theories about the beliefs, intentions, desires, and behavior of people. Using a grounded theory model (inductively building theory from descriptive data), the authors propose four different ITs used by the violent offenders in their studies:

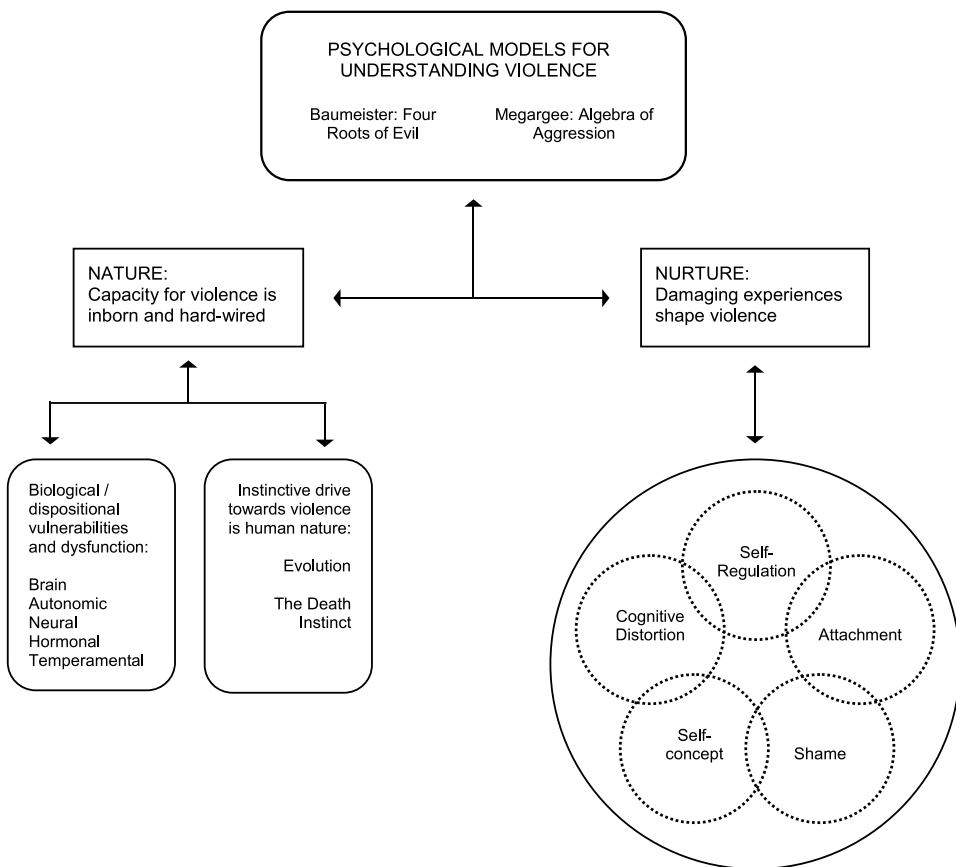
1. Normalization of violence: Violence is both an effective and acceptable method for meeting needs with little to no lasting consequences. The construct of “violence is normal” is both critical and necessary for the formulation of the next two implicit theories.
2. Beat or be beaten: Violence is necessary to attain or protect agency, status, or autonomy in a generally hostile and violent world. It includes two subtypes:
  - a. Self-Enhancement: The social self-image is dependent on the use of violence in order to dominate and demonstrate success.
  - b. Self-Preservation: Violence is the only available means to protect oneself from a world that is largely ready to exploit and victimize.
3. I am the Law: From a moral perspective, violence is utilized in the service of others or to maintain the social order.
4. I Get out of Control: Violence occurred because of uncontrollable circumstances or inadequate self-regulation (Polaschek et al., 2009).

Childhood abuse that causes physical harm in young children (younger than age 5) can be a determinant for later chronic aggression by impacting the development of what Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (1990) call “social-informational-processing” patterns. Insecure attachments consistent with childhood physical abuse can lead children to develop internal working models of the world as a potentially threatening or hostile place. In terms of social-informational-processing, they may not develop the capacity to appropriately attend to interpersonal reactions or embed relevant social cues, and will eventually over-attribute hostile intent to others. In other words, children who experience severe physical abuse in early childhood will acquire a biased and deficient pattern of processing social provocation information that can increase the risk of chronic aggressive behavior.



## SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The body of theory regarding the psychological causes of violence is extensive and diverse, and the theories covered in this literature review are only a small sample. Figure 1 illustrates the framework of this review by mapping the concepts presented. An overview of how the field of psychology conceives of the phenomenon of violence was presented through two conceptual models for understanding and analyzing the utility and causes of violent behavior: The Four Roots of Evil and the Algebra of Aggression. These models facilitate the categorization and etiology of violent behavior by assigning the resulting theories to aspects of either and are placed at the top of the diagram to illustrate their capacity to integrate those theories. Psychology distinguishes two major pathways to violence: the development of violent behavior as either the result of human nature and biological vulnerabilities or as the consequence of a damaged psyche that has been



**FIGURE 1** Conceptual map of psychological theories of violence.

permanently altered due to poor nurturing. Theories related to nature fall into two distinct categories: namely, psychobiological vulnerabilities and instinctual drives (shown on the left side of the figure). Theories related to nurture are depicted on the right side of the diagram as interconnected processes that are impacted by damaging experiences: self-regulation, attachment, shame, self-concept, and cognitive distortion.

This analysis has significant limitations, however, and the absence of description of communal, cultural, and structural influences and determinants provides a challenge for developing a comprehensive picture of the causes of violence. In the midst of recent events that have again raised the call for answers to why such brutal and unfathomable acts of violence continue to occur in a civilized society, social causes need to be examined. For example, Richmond, California, where the gang rape took place, has experienced years of unmitigated crime and murder. Major Nidal Malik Hasanis, a Muslim psychiatrist of Arab descent, had spent countless hours listening to American soldiers relate the horrors of killing other Arab Muslims before he murdered 13 people. The causes for these two events cannot be understood without at least understanding the social contexts in which they took place.

## REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (1978). Learning and behavioral theories of aggression. In I. L. Kutash, S. B. Kutash, & L. B. Schlesinger (Eds.), *Violence, perspectives on murder and aggression* (pp. 29–57). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Banks, S. (2009, October 31). Brutality that's hard to fathom. *Los Angeles Times*, 2.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Four roots of evil. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 85–101). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Brooks, D. (2009, November 11). The rush to therapy. *The International Herald Tribune*, 7.
- Brown, J. (2004). Shame and domestic violence: Treatment perspectives for perpetrators from self psychology and affect theory. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 19, 39–56.
- Chambers, J., Ward, T., Eccleston, L., & Brown, M. (2009). The pathways model of assault: A qualitative analysis of the assault offender and offense. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(9), 1423–1449.
- Dodge, K. A., Bates, J. E., & Pettit, G. S. (1990). Mechanisms in the cycle of violence. *Science*, 250(4988), 1678–1683.
- Duntley, J. D., & Buss, D. M. (2004). The evolution of evil. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 102–123). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Englander, E. K. (2003). *Understanding violence* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fagan, J., & Wexler, S. (1987). Crime at home and in the streets: The relationship between family and stranger violence. *Violence and Victims*, 2, 5–23.

- Flannery, D. J., Vazsonyi, A. T., & Waldman, I. D. (Eds.). (2007). *The Cambridge handbook of violent behavior and aggression*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Garbarino, J., & Haslam, R. (2005). Lost boys: Why our sons turn violent and how we can save them. *Paediatrics and Child Health*, *10*(8), 447–450.
- Gilligan, J. (1997). *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Glenn, A. L., Raine, A., Venables, P. H., & Mednick, S. A. (2007). Early temperamental and psychophysiological precursors of adult psychopathic personality. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *116*(3), 508–518.
- Gontovsky, S. T. (2005). Neurobiological bases and neuropsychological correlates of aggression and violence. In J. P. Morgan (Ed.), *Psychology of aggression* (pp. 101–116). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Good, J. A. (1999). *Shame, images of God, and the cycle of violence in adults who experienced childhood corporal punishment*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Gottesman, R., & Brown, R. M. (Eds.). (1999). *Violence in America: An encyclopedia* (vol. 3). New York, NY: Scribner.
- Harding, C. (2006). Making sense of aggression, destructiveness and violence. In C. Harding (Ed.), *Aggression and destructiveness: Psychoanalytic perspectives* (pp. 3–23). London, UK: Routledge.
- Junginger, J., & McGuire, L. (2004). Psychotic motivation and the paradox of current research on serious mental illness and rates of violence. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, *30*(1), 21–30.
- Mednick, S. A., Pollock, V., Volavka, J., & Gabrielli, W. F. Jr. (1982). Biology and violence. In M. E. Wolfgang & N. A. Weiner (Eds.), *Criminal violence* (pp. 21–80). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Megargee, E. I. (1982). Psychological determinants and correlates of criminal violence. In M. E. Wolfgang & N. A. Weiner (Eds.), *Criminal violence* (pp. 81–200). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Megargee, E. I. (2009). A life devoted to crime. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *91*(2), 95–107.
- Miller, A. (Ed.). (2004). *The social psychology of good and evil*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Polaschek, D. L. L., Calvert, S. W., & Gannon, T. A. (2009). Linking violent thinking: Implicit theory-based research with violent offenders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *24*(1), 75–96.
- Renn, P. (2006). Attachment, trauma and violence: Understanding destructiveness from an attachment theory perspective. In C. Harding (Ed.), *Aggression and destructiveness: Psychoanalytic perspectives* (pp. 59–78). London, UK: Routledge.
- Royston, R. (2006). Destructiveness: Revenge, dysfunction or constitutional evil? In C. Harding (Ed.), *Aggression and destructiveness: Psychoanalytic perspectives* (pp. 23–37). London, UK: Routledge.
- Scarpa, A., & Raine, A. (2007). Biosocial bases of violence. In D. J. Flannery, A. T. Vazsonyi, & I. D. Waldman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of violent behavior and aggression* (pp. 151–169). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Stinson, J. D., Becker, J. V., & Sales, B. D. (2008). Self-regulation and the etiology of sexual deviance: Evaluating causal theory. *Violence and Victims*, *23*, 35–51.

- Tangney, J. P., & Stuewig, J. (2004). A moral-emotional perspective on evil persons and evil deeds. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 327–355). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Walker, J. S., & Bright, J. A. (2009). False inflated self-esteem and violence: A systematic review and cognitive model. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 20(1), 1–32.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (2004). A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: Understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 21–50). New York, NY: Guilford Press.