

Chapter 93

Why Psychology and Criminal Justice Can Only Take Us So Far: The Value of and Need for a Social Psychological Perspective in Studies of American School Violence

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about continued increases in violent behavior in American schools and schools' ability to mitigate and reduce risks abound. Psychology and criminal justice have contributed much to what we know and understand about violence in schools; however, the author argues that these dominant disciplinary perspectives also obscure some important aspects of these phenomena, namely focus on underlying cultural logics that may be impacting violence in schools. In this chapter, the author sets out to achieve two objectives. First, she provides an overview of areas of focus in current literature in psychology and criminal justice that represent the dominant framework within which school violence in the U.S. is viewed. Additionally, she examines those disciplinary perspectives in terms of specific strengths and limitations. Second, she presents and describes a series of social psychological theories and pulls those theories into a coherent framework to demonstrate the value of the social psychological lens in studies of school violence and stimulate further discussion and research on this important topic.

INTRODUCTION

Psychology and criminal justice are the primary lenses through which the problem of violence in American K-12 schools has been examined. These two disciplines have contributed much to what we know and understand about violence in American schools; however, there are also some sticking points.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3432-8.ch093

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Findings focused on school-based prevention efforts remain largely inconsistent (Blosnich & Bossarte 2011; Ryan-Arredondo, Renouf, Egyed, Doxey, Dobbins, Sanchez and Rakowitz 2001), and scholars and practitioners allege outdated, ineffective policies and practices (Brooks 2017; Craig 2016; Madfis 2017; Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, Fein & Modzeleski 2001). They also question the effectiveness of standard physical security measures such as surveillance cameras and security officers (Blosnich & Bossarte 2011; Reddy et al 2001). At the same time, concerns about continued increases in violent behavior and schools' ability to mitigate and reduce risks to students abound (Brooks 2017; Madfis 2016), especially as the FBI reports increases in school violence incidents (Blair & Schweit 2014).

It goes without saying that this is a social problem that deserves greater scholarly and practical attention, but, in light of where things stand now, I found myself asking, "have psychology and criminal justice taken us as far as they can at this point?"

As a sociological social psychologist, I am trained to examine circumstances and seek connections between phenomena by analyzing underlying social norms and assumptions that may be taken-for-granted but very much at work shaping circumstances. When examining a social problem, it is important to critically consider structural conditions, contextual circumstances, and underlying social norms and assumptions, as those shape how we define the problem, how we attribute cause, the research questions we ask, and, ultimately, the solutions at which we arrive.

When I stepped back to examine the literature around school violence, I saw an opportunity to apply the lens of sociological social psychology to critically examine these very issues. I set out to analyze topics of focus in the body of research on school violence hailing from psychology and criminal justice, social norms and assumptions that appear to be driving the trajectory of inquiry and support for the current approach, strengths and limitations evident in the body of literature, and means by which social psychological theory might provide fresh insights for this important vein of research.

TOPICS OF FOCUS IN THE LITERATURE ON SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Studies of school violence in American K-12 education are often approached through the disciplinary perspectives of psychology and criminal justice. Scholars and practitioners in these fields examine topics that vary from friendship and isolation to bullying; individual and family risk factors that may predict antisocial, violent, and criminal behavior as well as protective factors that reduce the likelihood of such behavior and means of intervening and addressing problematic behavior (for ex: Brooks 2017; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber & Reskin White 2008; Langman 2009; Finley 2014). There is also a great deal of focus on mental health and topics such as stress, coping skills and mental disorders (Langman 2009; Langman 2010; Newman, Fox, Harding Mehta & Roth 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum & Modzeleski 2002).

Most of the studies examined here employ a psychological perspective but incorporate criminal justice either through examination of monitoring or punishment for violent behavior, collaborative efforts between schools and law enforcement or use of techniques such as profiling. Of interest for this chapter is not the specifics of those studies' findings or differentiation between specialized tracks of research but rather how scholars have focused their analytical attention overall.

In general, this body of research focuses on assessing and averting threat by examining individuals who are thought to present threat and designing prevention efforts. Not surprisingly, schools remain the

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