

Violent Cognitions:
Do Violent Offenders Express Evaluations, Norms, and Mitigations of Responsibility for Violence?

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2 Why study violent cognitions?


- Being able to identify violent cognitions can help to predict and prevent future violence
- Research has shown some types of violent cognitions to be associated with violent behaviour, including
 - Evaluations** (e.g., Nunes et al, 2015)
 - Subjective Norms** (e.g., Finigann-Carr et al., 2015)
 - Mitigations of Responsibility** (e.g., Agnew, 1994)


3 Problem in the Literature

- Lack of clarity and consistency in how researchers think about and measure different cognitions (e.g., Nunes et al., 2015; Polaschek et al., 2004)
- Munes and colleagues (2015) suggested the term "attitudes" is often used as a synonym or superordinate label for various cognitive constructs
 - (e.g., evaluations, normative beliefs, excuses, etc.)
- Does this reflect how offenders think about violence?

4 Mixed Methods


- Examine nature of phenomena with a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods
- Using mixed methods in a single study allows for better understanding of phenomena (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003).



5 Research Question 

Do evaluations, subjective norms, and perceptions of responsibility naturally appear in statements made by violent offenders?

- Coding Manual (outlines definitions)
- Inter-rater reliability (for subsample of interviews)
- Proportion of statements coded as each cognition (for all interviews)
- Identify exemplary statements reflecting each cognition

6 Research Question 

EVALUATIONS are defined as the extent to which the actor regards violent behaviour as favourable or unfavourable (e.g., Ajzen, 1991).

SUBJECTIVE NORMS are defined as perceptions of whether people close to the actor (e.g., peers) think the actor should commit violence, or perceptions of how violent or how non-violent these people act (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005).

MITIGATIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY are defined as explicit attempts to deny or minimize personal responsibility for a negative behaviour, and claim that the behaviour was due to processes outside of the actor's control (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

7 Participants

- 44 male incarcerated violent offenders
- Ages ranged from 21.13 years to 52.93 years ($M = 32.99$)
- Ethnicity
 - 43.2% = Caucasian
 - 29.5% = Black
 - 15.9% = Aboriginal
 - 4.5% = Arab or West Asian
 - 6.9% = Other
- Education
 - 6 with \geq gr. 10
 - 19 with \leq gr. 9
 - 19 missing info.

8 Measures

- Demographic information
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Coding Interviews (quantitizing data)
 - Inter-rater reliability
- Identifying exemplary statements
 - E.g., "[Rapists are] taking advantage of people that can't help themselves. You're not a man if you do that. I don't think [the assault] was a lesson, it was just what he deserved, you know?"

9 Measures (Coding Interviews)

- Coding Interviews (quantitizing data)
- STEP 1 – Cognition present or not present?
- STEP 2 – Rate valence of cognition on 3-point Likert scale

1	2	3
Anti-violent	Neutral	Pro-violent

10 Measures (Inter-rater Reliability)

- Inter-rater reliability
 - Is the cognition **present** or **not present**?
 - Cohen's kappa is acceptable if greater than .67 (Krippendorff, 1980)
 - What is the **valence on a 3-point Likert scale**?
 - Intra-class correlation (ICC) is acceptable at the .60 level, and is excellent at the .75 level and higher (Cicchetti & Sparrow, 1981)

11 Results (Inter-rater Reliability)

- Is the Cognition Present or Not Present? (Cohen's kappa)
 - Evaluations kappa = .77
 - Subjective Norms kappa = .75
 - Perceptions of Responsibility kappa = .68
- What is the Valence on a 3-point Likert scale? (ICC)
 - Evaluations ICC = .71
 - Subjective Norms ICC = .69
 - Perceptions of Responsibility ICC = .64

12 Results (Proportion of Statements Coded as a Single Cognition)

- From 44 interviews, 939 statements coded as single cognition

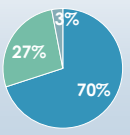
Evaluations (70%)
Perceptions of Responsibility (27%)
Subjective Norms (3%)

13 Do evaluations, subjective norms, and perceptions of responsibility naturally appear in statements made by violent offenders?

Inter-rater Reliability

- Present or Not Present?
 - All kappa's above .67 cut-off level!
- Valence of Cognition?
 - All ICC's above .60 level!

Proportion of Statements Coded as a Single Cognition



Category	Percentage
Blue	70%
Green	27%
Red	3%

14 Do **evaluations**, subjective norms, and perceptions of responsibility naturally appear in statements made by violent offenders?

When asked "What are some positives about violence?"

- "It's an immediate solution";
- "Depending on how your violence is used, I would say it gives you a lot of power";
- "In jail, [violence] can get you a certain level of demanded respect, and you can protect yourself. Guys won't mess with you if you've proven yourself."

15 Do evaluations, **subjective norms**, and perceptions of responsibility naturally appear in statements made by violent offenders?

Many anti-violent subjective norms were about friends intervening

- "I just clocked him right in the face, and that was it. That was just the one thing, [then] my boy jumped in and stopped it";
- "I got him in the hallway. That's when I put the choke on him, because then my girlfriend was trying to get me off this guy and begging me just let him go";
- "I pulled out my shank and my friend grabbed my hand and was like no, no, no. Let's keep walking."

16 Do evaluations, subjective norms, and **perceptions of responsibility** naturally appear in statements made by violent offenders?

When asked "Did you feel in control at the time of the violent incident?"

- "A little bit but not really, because I didn't know what was going on";
- "I felt very in control at first, but then I felt like I was losing control, even though I was losing control I was loving it";
- "I wasn't really in control, I was in control because I was fighting him and I was winning, but I wasn't in control because my mind was telling me to do something that I shouldn't have done".

17 **Limitations**

- Small sample size for a quantitative study (N = 44)
 - Generalizability to other samples?**
 - HOWEVER!** Relatively large sample for a mixed methods study
- Transformed qualitative statements into quantitative data
 - Oversimplifies themes from data**
 - HOWEVER!** Study's goal was examining specific themes from interviews
 - AND** we reported some exemplary statements

18 **Future Directions**

- Replicate results with larger sample of offenders
- Examine relationship between these cognitions and violent behaviour
- Use provided definitions to develop measures of each cognitive construct

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Conclusion

- Lack of clarity and consistency in how researchers think about different cognitions (e.g., Nunes et al., 2015; Polaschek et al., 2004)
- Results suggest theoretical definitions (taken from the literature) do reflect how offenders think about violence.
- Current study adds to literature by:
 - Examining whether theoretical definitions correspond to how offenders talk about violence
 - Identifying exemplary statements reflecting each cognition



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Thank you!

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More about our research

Aggressive Cognitions and Behaviour Research Lab
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