Four Approaches to Measuring Attitudes Towards Violence: Beliefs, Explicit Evaluation, Outcome Expectancies, and Implicit Evaluation

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Purpose: To explore the relationship between attitudes towards violence, impulsive and premeditated aggression, psychopathy, and risk of violent recidivism.

Attitudes are typically defined as evaluations of a psychological object (e.g., person, behaviour).

• Attitudes towards violence are evaluations of intentional and unintentional violence.
• Attitudes theoretically play a causal role in violent behaviour and are considered to be an important criminogenic need that can be targeted in treatment to reduce violence.
• Much of the research conducted to date on cognitions about violence has not specifically examined evaluations of violence (see Nunes et al., 2014).

Implicit evaluations of violence are automatically activated evaluations:
• Mixed evidence for the relationship between implicit evaluations of violence and violent behaviour.

Explicit evaluations of violence are deliberative evaluations:
• Mixed evidence for the relationship between explicit evaluations of violence and violent behaviour.

Beliefs regarding violence are cognitions about violence that a person believes to be true.
• Beliefs regarding violence tend to be associated with indicators of violent behaviour.

Outcome expectancies for violence are indicators of attitudes towards violence. They are evaluations of the outcomes of violent behaviour and/or evaluations weighted by their perceived likelihood.
• Outcome expectancies of sexual violence are related to sexual aggression.

Attitudes theoretically play a causal role in violent behaviour and are considered to be an important component of violent behaviour (see, e.g., when primed by a perceived threat). It is also possible that our IAT measure did not adequately assess implicit evaluation of violence.

Hypotheses 2 was partially supported:
• Explicit evaluation of violence and outcome expectancies for violence were moderately to strongly associated with premeditated aggression and had small relationships with risk for violent recidivism (non-significant). Outcome expectancies had moderate relationships with psychopathic affective and interpersonal traits (non-significant). As well, there were moderate to large differences between predominately premeditated aggressive participants and predominantly impulsive aggressive participants on both explicit evaluations and outcome expectancies for violence (non-significant). These results are generally consistent with the notion that outcome expectancies and explicit evaluations may play a role in both violent behaviour. Future research should continue to explore the role of attitudes in violent behaviour.

There was a large relationship between explicit evaluations and outcome expectancies. However, both measures also had large relationships with beliefs regarding violence; as such, these constructs may not be as distinct as previously suggested. Future studies need to examine the distinctiveness of these constructs with offender samples should be conducted.

Hypothesis 3 was partially supported:
• Beliefs regarding violence had a moderate relationship with risk of violent recidivism, risk of violent aggression, and psychopathic affective and interpersonal traits, and premeditated aggression. These findings are consistent with past research on beliefs regarding violence with student and offender samples.

Limitations
• Small sample size (N = 30) limited our statistical power. To compensate we focused on effect sizes instead of p values. Small sample size also limits the generalizability of our results.

• None of the attitude measures examined in the current study have much, if any, available evidence regarding construct validity, therefore we cannot be confident about how accurately we assessed the intended constructs. However, some of our results provide evidence suggesting these measures were assessing their intended constructs (e.g., large correlations between explicit evaluation of violence and outcome expectancies of violence). Future research should continue to explore the construct validity and utility of these measures.


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