What do we really know about attitudes towards violence?

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Attitude = Evaluation

- General agreement in the social psychological literature that the key feature of attitudes is evaluation
  - Conrey & Smith (2007); Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Fazio (2007); Gawronski & Bodenhausen (2007); Petty, Briñol, & DeMarree (2007); Schwarz (2007)

Violence is....

-3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

Very negative Very positive

What’s So Great About Evaluation?

- Strong foundation of theory and evidence
  - Conceptualization and measurement
    - e.g., Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum (1957); Taylor (1971)
  - Influence on behavior
    - e.g., Glasman & Albarracín (2006)
  - Change
    - e.g., Gawronski & Bodenhausen (2006)

Evaluation of Violence?

“Sometimes a person may have to carry a weapon to protect themselves”
“When your main business is crime, being violent is just part of the job”
“I see myself as a violent person”
“Sometimes you have to threaten people to get them to do the right thing, even if you don’t like doing it”
“Lots of people are out to get you”

“A raped woman is a less desirable woman”
“Rape is unlikely to happen in the woman’s own familiar neighborhood”
“A lot of times, sexual assaults on children are not planned . . . they just happen”

Evidence for Distinctiveness and Relevance of Evaluation of Violence

  - Criminal Attitudes to Violence Scale (CAVS; Polaschek et al., 2004)

  - Evaluation of Rape Scale vs. RAPE Scale (Bumby, 1996)

Questions

- Do scales often interpreted as measures of attitudes towards violence actually assess evaluation of violence?
- Are the cognitions assessed by these measures and evaluation of violence independently associated with violent behavior?

Evaluation was Distinct

- Measures of evaluation of violence formed a distinct factor from measures often interpreted as assessing attitudes towards violence

Evaluation was Relevant

- Measures of evaluation of violence and the other measures were independently associated with violent behavior
- Together, evaluation and the other measures were more strongly associated with violent behavior than either one alone

Interpretation

- Our preliminary results suggest that evaluation of violence may not be assessed by widely used measures thought to assess attitudes towards violence, and both evaluation and these other cognitions may be relevant for understanding violence.

If Not Evaluation, Then What?
- Excuses to mitigate perceived responsibility?
- Stereotypes about violence and victims?
- Perceived normative behavior?
- Perceptions of baserate of violence?

Conclusion
- Despite the ubiquity of the term “attitude” in the criminological literature, evaluation of violence may have been largely overlooked in theory, research and practice

Why Does This Matter?
- Different types of cognitions may have different causal associations with violent behavior and may be responsive to different interventions

Next Steps
- More research on measurement of evaluation and its relevance for violent behaviour
- Attend to and build on more established areas
- Increase clarity and precision of operational definitions
- Construct validity
  - Do scores on the measure correspond to independent indicators of the construct of interest?

Trivial or Foundational?
- Increasing precision and clarity of conceptualization and measurement → better understanding of causes
  → better assessment and intervention → reduce violence

For more information: