



Lonnie Athens revisited: The social construction of violence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2012

Received in revised form 19 November 2012

Accepted 27 November 2012

Available online 16 December 2012

Keywords:

Etiology of violence

Aggression

Bullying

Theory construction

ABSTRACT

Researchers are continually looking for the definitive answer to the question of what causes violence; whether it is a product of biology or socialization or, perhaps, a bit of both. Lonnie Athens, a criminologist, is known primarily for his theory about the unique transforming process gone through by individuals to become dangerous, violent offenders. Athens, himself, said that discourse about the etiologies of violent behavior cannot be broken down into a dichotomous model; either bio-physiological or socialization, but rather should be conceptualized more holistically. This paper analyzes Athens's theory within a greater context of leading theories about violence.

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Contents

1. Introduction	281
2. Violence defined	281
3. Athens's theory	282
4. The arguments against Athens	283
5. Why it works	283
6. Conclusion	284
Appendix I.	285
Appendix II.	285
References	285

1. Introduction

It would be fair to say that this work has not entered the criminological canon, and is seldom referred to in discourses about violence. (O'Donnell, 2003).

Researchers are continually looking for the definitive answer to the question of what causes violence; whether it is a product of biology or socialization or, perhaps, a bit of both. Lonnie Athens, a criminologist, is known primarily for his theory about the unique transforming process gone through by individuals to become dangerous, violent offenders (1989, 1997). Athens, himself, said that discourse about the etiologies of violent behavior cannot be broken down into a dichotomous model; either bio-physiological or socialization, but rather should be conceptualized more holistically.

Although Athens's work in this area is intriguing and, certainly, merited further research along that direction, he had been largely discounted and criticized by mainstream academics. Recently however, his theories have been re-visited by academics and researchers who are finding that they have merit. This paper will examine the major criticisms of Athens's work; chiefly that by studying the inner cognitive processes of violent offenders he ignored biological etiologies, and, that his study was not scientifically sound because of lack of randomness with his sample and other such issues. Further, this paper will attempt to show that, notwithstanding Athens's exclusion of the biological etiologies of violence, there is a great deal of merit in his theory about the social construction of violence.

2. Violence defined

Violence involves the bodies of both perpetrator and victim and it may thus be defined as a bodily response with the intended infliction of bodily harm on another person. (Glasser, 1999)

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Any discussion about the etiologies of violence must begin with the definition of violence, particularly, when debating the relative merits of the social construction model versus biological model. According to the predominant medico-legal approach, physical violence is the result of action carried out with the intention of causing injury or harm to oneself or others. It is dealt with by determining who is at fault and then punishing offenders according to their adjudicated degree of intent and premeditation (Felson & Messner, 1996; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The notion of aggression at once serves as a descriptive label for particular acts (e.g., punching, hitting), and at the same time explains the destructive or injurious outcomes of such acts as being due to an intention to produce this result. Aggression, in fact, is the leading hypothesis of physical violence (Mawson, 1999). Connected to the notion that aggression causes physical violence is the underlying belief that certain areas, pathways, or substances in the brain uniquely elicit aggression (or specific types of aggression), as distinct from other behaviors, and that aggression is a behavioral tendency or predisposition akin to eating, sexual activity, and care of the young. Aggression is thus transformed from a concept into a bio-behavioral phenomenon with a distinct neuroanatomy and neurochemistry. While debate continues on the definition of aggression and the extent to which it is learned or innate (Volavka, 1995), the assumption that aggression explains physical violence has largely gone unchallenged.

Raine's work has been especially instructive in the biological correlates of aggression and violence. He described the low arousal state of the offender; lower anxiety levels, lower heart rate, lower galvanic skin responses, and found that only during aggressive acts did the physiological state elevate to what would constitute a normal state. In essence, this suggests that individual differences in arousal levels influence the behavior of individuals to seek or avoid sensation as necessary to maintain an optimal level of arousal; the violent actor needs the stimulation of violence to raise his physiological functioning to a normal level (Gatzke-Kopp, Raine, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Steinhauser, 2002).

Graham and Wells (2003) said that there are four general explanations of aggression and violent behavior: honor, face saving or impression management; addressing a grievance; emotional or impulsive reactions; and fighting for fun or excitement. Of those four, the latter two explanations are more closely aligned with the biological explanation of violence. They address the arousal or stimulating effects, on the physiology, that violence creates.

3. Athens's theory

Athens explained the creation of dangerous violent criminals from an intensive study of them using personal interviews with the inmates in prison (Athens, 1989). In his research on the etiologies of violence, he chose to employ an ethnographic methodology, which consisted of his spending hours of face-to-face interviews with incarcerated offenders convicted of committing violent crimes. This process allowed him to hear, first hand, the offenders' personal accounts of their crimes and the antecedents to them. He developed a theory about violence based upon their accounts and determined that what they had in common was a sequential developmental process, which caused them to become violent individuals and which led to their respective criminal careers. Athens described several motivating social interactions and subsequent personal decisions that result in persons who inflict violent harm upon others.

In developing his theory, he utilized a method of inquiry known as symbolic interactionism. This allows the researcher to understand the experience from the perspective of the actor and to see how the social interactions shape the experience and outcomes. As Athens (1989) said, "True rapport is achieved only when communication between two people has reached the point where events in their respective lives can be accurately communicated to each other, even if the events are unsatisfactory (p. 20)."

Athens had some disdain for the quantitative methods employed by most social scientists. He referred to his mentor, Herbert Blumer stating that when social experiences are reduced to numbers, the appearance of precision is almost always gained, but at the unacceptable expense of sacrificing the very heart of the meaning of the social experiences studied (Blumer, 1969).

During Athens's interviews with the inmates, he found that the dangerous, violent offender group shared a set of particularly significant childhood experiences. These particular experiences were articulated as a distinct process consisting of four separate stages: (1) brutalization, (2) belligerency, (3) violent performances, and (4) virulency. Though various contingent factors may interrupt the process and thus prevent the creation of a dangerous violent criminal, "any person who does ... complete ... the entire experiential process, will become a dangerous violent criminal ... regardless of the social class, race, sex, or age and intelligence level" (Athens, 1989, p. 81). This particular experiential phenomenon shared by the violent offenders in Athens's study is what distinguished them. The stages are summarized as follows:

Brutalization: One or both of the guardians or parents of a child use physical force to discipline, intimidate, control or hurt. Whether it is from ignorance, personal frustration, or from his or from her own experiences, the guardian's actions towards the child results in a battered, suffocated, scared, tortured and/or humiliated child. Brutalization has three elements or sub-stages: violent subjugation, personal horridification and violent coaching. Violent subjugation is a parent or other adult using violence to force submission. It ranges from psychological intimidation to physical attacks used to force obedience and respect. Personal horridification is another component of brutalization. The child witnesses someone they care about, a parent, sibling, family member or close acquaintance, being violently attacked or subjugated. The child desperately wants to stop the abuse but is unable to because of feelings of fear for him, which may overcome feelings of concern for the victim, as well as the feeling of personal powerlessness. This failure to act creates feelings of intense anger and shame in the child. Violent coaching is an insidious process. The abuser will coach the child in the ways of physical aggression; teaching the child to use violence as a way of solving personal conflicts with others. The coaches personalize violence and make it real for the child. Violent coaching is combined with taunting the child; "You little pussy, don't let people push you around, be a man."¹ Violent coaches use name-calling, ridicule and threats to encourage violent responses. *Belligerency:* Is the beginning of a conscious decision made by the child to make the brutalization stop; the oft-traumatized child attempts to placate the parent or authority figure by threatening others. This marks a distinct change in the brutalized child from one who is terrorized and abused to one who becomes emotionally distant from the abuse and begins to develop a hardened exterior. This leads to the third stage, violent performance. Essentially, the abused child turned belligerent begins to act out violently in diverse ways; he/she wins physical fights, instills and senses the fear in others, and finds that he/she likes behaving violently.

Violent performance: As the child grows up a response pattern develops, if provoked, attack especially if there is a chance you can win the fight. This stage, violent performance, is the beginning of a pattern of violent behavior. Reaching this step is momentous for the child because, as Athens points out "it takes courage to cross that portentous barrier" because you are putting yourself at risk. This step occurs, generally, following provocation by another child (not the parent/abuser) wherein the child tests his abilities to fight back. He also learns whether he can fight back successfully—without incurring retaliation from his victim.

Virulency: Success at violent performances pushes the child to the fourth stage, virulency. If violent performance has been rewarding,

¹ Author's example.

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