



Sociocultural Theories of Violence

This Factsheet explores and evaluates the sociocultural approach to understanding violent behaviour. It reviews theories of violence and describes relevant research. Guidance is given on writing effective examination answers and the terms in bold are explained in the glossary. You will also be able to test your knowledge in exam-style questions.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

1. Describe and evaluate the sociocultural approach to violence.
2. Describe theories within the sociocultural approach that aim to explain why violent behaviour occurs.
4. Support your answer with reference to published research.

A. What is Violence?

Violence is behaviour that lies at the most extreme end of the continuum of aggressive actions. According to Huesmann (2007) it is behaviour that involves the “...more serious forms of physical aggression that have a significant risk of seriously injuring the victim”. So, although violent behaviour is a form of aggression, not all aggression is necessarily violent. For example, shouting angrily or even pushing and shoving are examples of aggression that do not amount to violence, but any behaviour that seeks to cause pain, injury or even death, such as striking someone with a weapon, is both aggressive *and* violent.

The Sociocultural Approach

The sociocultural approach is a broad perspective within psychology that emphasizes the influence of society on behaviour. Within this perspective, violence is to be understood as a behaviour that is strongly influenced by cultural factors such as **norms**, **values**, and **beliefs**. Social institutions and networks, such as the family or the peer group, are also known to play a significant role in the development and maintenance of violent patterns of behaviour.

In this factsheet we consider two different types of explanation for violent behaviour found within the sociocultural approach, namely (1) the influence of social systems and social relationships and (2) cognitive factors, such as how knowledge is represented. Within these we will look at theories about how violent behaviour may be caused and facilitated.

B. Social Identity Theory

Although we are all part of society we are also members of much smaller social groups such as a family, a political party, or a sports club within that larger unit. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that our membership of such groups is fundamental to our **social identity**, i.e. to our sense of who we are. Being accepted as a member of a group increases our self-esteem and we feel we share the same values and beliefs as the other members and experience strong emotional ties to them. The extent to which we identify with a group helps determine the view that we have of ourselves and also how we behave.

Some of the strength of our attachment to a group comes from feeling that the group that we belong to – our **in-group** – is better than another group, e.g. Manchester United is a fantastic football team, but Everton are pathetic. As Cialdini (1976) points out, we tend to

strengthen our positive feelings about a particular in-group by holding negative views about other groups. Essentially, we divide the world into “us” and “them”. On our side there are the in-groups to which we belong, and on the other side are all the **out-groups**.

Evidence that identification with a group can underpin violence comes from research by Harris et al (2011). These researchers interviewed 38 violent offenders in the UK who were also gang members. They found that violence was a fundamental feature of this type of social group. They found evidence that a gang functions as an in-group for its members against out-groups composed of other gangs. The perception of “them and us” was used by individuals in this sample to justify violent behaviour and the carrying of weapons. They believed that the streets were dangerous, but if the members of other gangs knew you were carrying a weapon, and were prepared to use it, they would be less likely to attack you. *Violence sanctioned by the in-group can become a way of life for gang members*



These respondents saw violent behaviour as the main way of confirming their identity as gang members. For example, they reported that exhibiting extremely violent behaviour was a way of gaining the approval of other gang members, and acquiring a higher status within the group. Violence, whether as a response to threats to its reputation or to its illegal activities such as drug dealing, was the way in which the status of the gang as a whole was raised. Some respondents reported that violence was so central to their membership of the group that they felt compelled to continue to exhibit violent behaviour in order not to be excluded from the group. Declining to engage in violence, or especially running away from it, was viewed as a such a serious violation of group norms that the rest of the gang would be likely to turn on them.

Exam Hint: Ensure you make the links between violent behaviour, membership of the in-group, and hostility to out-groups as clear as you can.

C. Subculture of Violence Theory

A subculture is a group of people who see themselves as alike in terms of some characteristic, such as their social class, ethnicity, or religion, and who consequently share a particular set of norms, beliefs, and values that are different from those held by the wider society. So, a violent subculture is one in which individuals are committed to a particular set of sub-cultural norms and values that support violent behaviour.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) found a strong subculture of violence among black working class males in a suburb of Philadelphia. The core values of the subculture were concerned with the importance of maintaining their status and reputation in the eyes of other gang members. Violence was the normal way of dealing with disputes, of protecting reputation and gaining the respect of the other members of the subculture and they were prepared to respond violently to any threat to their honour or reputation, even if it meant risking their own lives. A similar relationship between subcultural values supporting violence and the corresponding norms of behaviour was found by Berburg and Thorlindsson (2005) when they surveyed male and female adolescents in Iceland. The participants were asked how often they engaged in various threatening and physically violent acts (e.g., fighting, kicking, punching). The answers indicated that boys were more likely to behave violently than girls and that, in this subculture, violent behaviour was governed by specific norms of conduct. The most violent students reported that when they engaged in violent acts they believed themselves to be conforming to the rules and expectations of the group. For these individuals, exhibiting violence was the way that they maintained their status and position in the social structure of the group.

Members of a street gang in Philadelphia

Exam Hint: Some candidates may find it difficult to separate Violent Subculture Theory (VST) from Social Identity Theory (SIT). One difference is that whereas SIT links in-group membership and conformity to group norms to the members' sense of self, VST focuses on how group norms and values directly structure violent behaviour.



D. Social Cognition

Cognitive processes, such as learning and thinking, have a social dimension since they are the means by which we are able to interact with the social world that surrounds us. Social cognition therefore offers an alternative explanation of violent behaviour that focuses on the information processing that occurs around violent encounters.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory

Can children acquire violent behaviour from observing a violent model? An important study by Bandura et al (1963) showed that it can. Violent behaviour can be learned when a child watches other people behave violently, even if only a single example of the behaviour is seen. Bandura's research participants were 72 children aged between 3-6 years divided into 3 groups. These contained equal numbers of boys and girls who had also been matched for their tendency to be violent. The three groups were treated differently in the research. The first group was taken one at a time into a room where there were a number of appealing toys, a **Bobo Doll**, and an adult. They were told that the toys were only for the adult to play with. After a short time, the adult began to behave violently towards the Bobo Doll. This included punching and hitting the doll with a toy mallet and showing verbal aggression by yelling such things as "Sock him", "Kick him", and "Throw him in the air". The second group was also taken individually to the same room where they observed an adult who was peacefully playing with the other toys that were there. Half the children in Groups 1 and 2 watched models that were the same sex as themselves and the other half watched models of the opposite sex. The third group (the controls) were not provided with a model at all.

In the next part of the experiment, the children from all three groups were taken one at a time to another room containing interesting toys such as trucks and dolls. The children were invited to play with them but after about 2 minutes were told to stop. This was done to generate frustration. The experimenter then said that the child could instead play with the toys in the experimental room that included the Bobo Doll. In that room, play was allowed for 20 minutes while measures of verbal and physical aggression were recorded.

Bandura's team found that the children in the first group, who had observed the violent model, were significantly more violent, both verbally and physically, than the children in the other two groups. The number of instances of physical aggression that copied the model were 38.2 for boys and 12.7 for the girls (Hock 2009). The data also showed that boys were more likely to learn violent acts when they saw violent male models compared to seeing female models. When exposed to a male model, boys averaged 104 violent acts compared to the 48.4 averaged by boys who were exposed to a violent female model. Boys were thus not only more likely than girls to imitate the physical violence they had seen, but also more strongly influenced by a same-sex model. Although the female participants did show some examples of violent behaviour the research clearly suggests that boys are particularly likely to learn violent behaviour from adults, especially if the model is also male.

Subsequent studies, such as Gergely et al., (2002), have shown that this ability to learn from observing a model is found in children as young as 14 months. The children he studied also showed they had the ability to infer a model's intentions and to decide whether they would be able to imitate the model's behaviour and support the idea that the experience of observing violence within a family can lead to violent behaviour later. However, it is also possible that observing violence within the family can exert a longer-term influence on a child's behaviour. Field research in a community setting, by Totten (2003) supports this. He interviewed 30 marginalized adolescent males (average age 15 1/2 years) in a large city in Canada who all admitted having used violence towards their girlfriends. All the respondents had been exposed to violent behaviour at home during childhood. Their fathers were men who demanded rigid gender roles and used violence in order to control the family members and maintain their '**honour**', i.e. their standing in the eyes of other men.

Out of the 30 participants, 21 had adopted the same violent behaviour towards their girlfriends that they had witnessed at home, and for the same reasons as their fathers. They believed their violence was justified if their girlfriend was not behaving as they wished. In some cases, the father had given guidance on how to abuse women. The participants all supported their behaviour by reference to beliefs about the role of violence in relationships, a rigid definition of gender roles in which the male was the dominant partner, and a narrow concept of masculinity. It seems from this research that boys who grow up in a violent family acquire a repertoire of violent responses that they go on to use in their own relationships in order to get what they want or to dominate others. They also see violence as a normal part of a relationship and justify their uses of it by reference to a particular conception of how men should behave. Observational learning allows children to acquire violent responses from adults that they can use in other contexts.



Exam Hint: Bandura's social cognitive theory explains how violent responses can be acquired but you should also support your description with evidence from at least one other source.

E. Schemas and Scripts

Schemas and scripts are two ways that we represent and organise our knowledge of the world. A **schema** is a mental representation of some specific area of knowledge that also contains information about the social environment. Research suggests that one of the characteristics of impulsively violent people is that their behaviour is strongly influenced by a “**hostile world**” schema, i.e. one that depicts the world as a violent and hostile place. Individuals who hold this schema tend to have a **hostile attribution bias** – they perceive hostility where there is none. Such misplaced perceptions of hostility can be so deeply rooted that they trigger an automatic response in certain situations. Moreover, people who see the world as a hostile place also tend to feel that other people are out to get them. Zelli and Huesmann (1993), for example, found that college students with a strong belief that people are persecuting them are more likely to perceive hostility when none is present – and would therefore be more inclined towards violent behaviour.

Someone who holds the hostile world schema can escalate a minor disagreement into full-blown violence.



Another way of describing how knowledge is represented is to use the concept of a **behavioural script**. This describes objects, events, behaviours, and even dialogue, for situations in the real world. Scripts are useful because they help to save us the mental effort of deciding what behaviour is required each time we revisit a particular situation. From this perspective, the participants seen maltreating the Bobo doll by Bandura and his co-workers were demonstrating that they had acquired a violent behavioural script from observing others as they engaged in the same behaviour. This suggests that if early experience regularly includes seeing violence on TV, playing violent video games, or experiencing violence from other people, then behavioural scripts that include aggressive and violent responses are likely to be acquired. Such scripts may subsequently be called on to guide behaviour in situations such as disagreement or confrontation. Research has confirmed that violent people appear to possess scripts containing more violence than the scripts of less violent people and also to employ them more readily across a wider than usual range of situations (Dill et al. 1997).

F. Electronic Media

Electronic media, such as TV and video games provide many opportunities to acquire violent behavioural scripts. Huesmann et al. (1986) found that aggression by both boys and girls increased with increased exposure to television violence, even with controls for initial aggressiveness and other background factors. Children who identified with the aggressor and those who perceived the violence as realistic were especially likely to show these observational learning effects. It also appeared that effects of viewing violence on TV were long lasting. A 15-year follow-up of children found that those who had habitually watched more TV violence in their middle-childhood years also grew up to be more aggressive young adults. For example,

of the children who were rated in the top 25% on violence viewing in middle childhood, 42% of males had “pushed, grabbed, or shoved their spouse” in the past year compared with 22% of other males, and 17% of females had “punched, beaten, or choked” another adult when angry in the past year compared with 4% of females who had viewed less TV violence.

Exam Hint: Make sure that you are able clearly to describe the difference between a schema and a script and how each may play a role in the acquisition of violent behaviour patterns.

G. Conclusions

Strengths of the sociocultural approach

This is a widely based approach that recognises there is no single explanation for violent behaviour. It encompasses a range of theories from those that look for answers in the norms and values of a subculture or a smaller group, such as a gang, across to those that take a more individual perspective by looking at how violent individuals process information about their social world.

Limitations of the sociocultural approach

The main weakness of this approach is that it can be accused of ignoring the role of structural factors in society such as poverty, education, or joblessness. Individuals whose prospects are limited by these factors might well see membership of a violent gang as the answer since it can offer the support of a social network as well as the possibility of obtaining an income from illegal activities. The sociocultural approach also tends to downplay the role played by individual differences in attracting individuals towards violent patterns of behaviour. Individuals with low self-esteem or borderline psychopathology may resort to violence as a way of obtaining excitement as well as improving their image of themselves.

Glossary

Behavioural script: A form of knowledge representation that details what can be expected to happen in particular situations.

Beliefs: Ideas that people accept as true or accurate whether there is evidence for them or not.

Bobo Doll: A life-size plastic doll on a weighted base that always returns to a vertical position when struck.

Honour: The code of behaviour that defines the duties of an individual within a social group.

Hostile attribution bias: A bias to social perception that leads some people to see another's behaviour as hostile.

Hostile world schema: The belief that the world in general is a hostile place and can best be survived by being hostile oneself.

In-group: Any group that a person belongs to and to which feels like an integral part of his or her identity.

Norms: The social rules, both formal and informal, that define acceptable behaviour in a culture or sub-culture.

Out-group: Any social group that a person is not a member of.

Schema: A mental representation of knowledge that allows us to organise and interpret information.

Social identity: A person's sense of who they are based on their membership of a social group.

Value: A belief or principle held by a person or group that tells them what is correct, desirable, or proper.

Worksheet: Sociocultural Theories of Violence

Name _____

1. Explain what is meant by social identity. Why might being a member of an in-group (such as a school sports team) be important to the team members' identity?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. What are (a) norms and (b) values? Refer to psychological research in your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. What does Bandura's research have to say about why some people show violent behaviour?

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. How does the research by Totten, (2003) provide evidence to support the social/cognitive theory proposed by Bandura?

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. What are behavioural scripts and how may they explain why some people are more ready to use violence than others?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....