

The Contagion of Violence

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Abstract

Violence is a contagious disease. As with other contagious diseases, if people are exposed to violence, their own risk of behaving violently increases. Yet, unlike most contagious diseases, a person does not need to be very close to the violence in order to be infected with it. One can catch it at a distance. The infecting exposure can be an exposure to violence right in front of the person or it can be an exposure to distant violence through electronic media. The violence can be real-world violence or it can be dramatized violence. Furthermore, once a person catches the violence disease, the person becomes an infecting agent passing the disease to others. This contagion happens because various social cognitions and emotional reactions underlying violent behavior are automatically acquired from observing violence and subsequently promote violent and aggressive behavior. In today's talk I elaborate on the observational learning processes that are important for the contagion of violence. These processes are as powerful as they are because imitation and observational learning are innate and automatic in young humans. Then, I provide empirical data in support of the contagion of violence through exposure to proximal real-world violence and also through exposure to more distal and unreal violence in the electronic media. Finally, I present some recent empirical data showing how exposure one very specific forms of violence, weapons violence, can be contagious and lead to increased risk for the observer to commit weapons violence later on.

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