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*J Interpers Violence* 2005; 20: 26
DOI: 10.1177/0886260504268090

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Reflections on 20 Years of Research on Violence and Trauma

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This article is part of a special issue reflecting on what people have learned about violence and trauma over the past 20 years and where we need to go in the next 10 years. The author emphasizes the importance of learning to communicate in order to form effective community partnerships. Evidence-based research is noted as a methodological innovation for policy research. Looking to the future, the author suggests that it will be important for crime prevention researchers to not just rely on Internet-based library searches so that they may avoid problems of innumeracy and ahistoricism.

Keywords: violence; trauma; retrospective

Twenty years of the Journal of Interpersonal Violence is an impressive accomplishment. Congratulations to the editor, associates, board, and the staff for their service to the journal. I also would like to specifically thank Jon Conti for his achievements with the journal and for his invitation to address three questions in this article: What is the most important thing we have learned about violence and trauma over the past 20 years? What is the most promising methodological innovation? What do we still need to learn about violence and trauma in the next 10 years?

MOST IMPORTANT THING DURING THE PAST 20 YEARS

When I began my graduate career in sociology in 1982, it was very exciting to be surrounded by people who were studying crime, poverty, urban problems, and other social issues from a multidisciplinary perspective. I was taught and learned plenty of interesting things in classes and discussions with sociologists, geographers, political scientists, economists, psychologists, and people from other areas such as policy studies and family studies. It
seemed odd to me, though, that the “multi” in multidisciplinary meant little more than there were a bunch of people from different disciplines who really couldn’t agree about much of anything. The multi in multidisciplinary simply seemed to mean that different people brought incompatible perspectives to the table when it came to discussing what causes crime, as they published research articles with contradictory findings.

I first read Wilson’s (1975) Thinking About Crime in 1985. It was (and still is) a controversial book as he asks us to forget about resolving differences in our search for an understanding of the causes of crime. Instead, he argues that the focus should be on policy analysis to reduce crime, and these policies may be atheoretical in nature. Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) broadly applied broken windows thesis gives a straightforward explanation of how changing public policy on the organizational behavior of policing can have a substantial effect on crime rates. Wilson and Kelling clearly suggested that although we might not be able to agree on what causes crime, we may be able to agree about what kinds of things can be done to prevent crime.

I disagree with Wilson’s argument that we do not need to understand the causes of crime. Nonetheless, I believe that many multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research projects were doomed to failure because the researchers and coordinators could not agree on where to go with the projects. Interdisciplinary projects were somewhat better as people recognized that multidisciplinary implied different perspectives and people actively tried to deal with them. Interdisciplinary journals such as the Journal of Interpersonal Violence have provided a strong forum for people to report on their experiences with studying and treating trauma and violence.

Wilson and Kelling (1982) provided a strong argument for policy analysis over academic studies but, from my vantage point, the critical turning point of the past 20 years for learning about violence and trauma came in 1992 as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services pronounced in Healthy People 2000 that violent crime (homicide in particular) was a public health problem. Homicide was the leading cause of death for young Black men in America. By calling homicide a public health problem and setting a clear and measurable benchmark for reduction of the murder rate, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners alike were called on to recognize that violence was a serious problem. Healthy People 2000 was a highly visible document to the general public. I don’t believe we have done nearly enough to reduce murder in America, but I do believe that this simple pronouncement of violent crime as a priority area forced researchers and practitioners to see that violence was not just a subject that would be studied by criminologists. Since that time, I have been much more actively involved in multidisciplinary,
interdisciplinary, community partnerships and urban outreach projects where people have actually tried to work with each other to deal with violent crime. Examples include the Kennedy (1998) pulling levers model for deterring violent crime used with some success in the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative. Our department is also currently working as a site in the project safe neighborhoods. We have seen substantial movement in research projects going from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary to community partnerships. Communication among diverse working groups is critical. Coming to an agreement about common goals for reduction of violence has led to some policy and organizational change, with the end result being our learning that it is possible to prevent violent crime in our city of Memphis.

METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION

I’ve often been bemused when listening to discussions of “methods” in criminology and criminal justice. The reality is that theory, methods, and policy are intertwined so that we cannot talk about one without the others. Nonetheless, I will argue that Sherman and colleagues’ (1998) Preventing Crime was the most innovative piece in the past 20 years for the study of violence. Sherman introduced this volume with the simple thesis that it is important to evaluate the quality of studies when you are attempting to compare results of different studies. Criminology and criminal justice has long faced the problem of contradictory results across studies. Sherman and his associates showed us that it was possible not only to summarize a large body of research but that we could understand contradictory results across studies just by using a fairly simple 5-point scale for assessing the quality of research designs.

The 5-point scale on the validity of studies is innovative because of its simplicity. It is attractive to policy makers, researchers, practitioners, and the general public because it allows for a wider discussion of what policies will and won’t work when trying to deal with crime. As a research fellow of the Memphis and Shelby Crime Commission, I don’t think I can overemphasize how often I was asked by the president and research staff of the crime commission, “How would Sherman rate so and so’s study?” Sherman, Farrington, Welsh, and MacKenzie (2002) have recently changed the terminology to “evidence-based” research, but the thesis remains that policy research should be based on evidence.
WHAT TO LEARN IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS

What do we need to learn in the next 10 years? I’m going to say the same thing that I tell many students when they hand in a draft of a paper. It is important to go to the library! Internet searches are bogged in the present and materials are often uncited and unsubstantiated.

John Laub (2004) talked about avoiding “presentism” in his 2003 presidential address at the American Society of Criminology meetings. We need to pay attention to our own successes and failures. The reality is that we can learn from our mistakes. It is rare that crime or violence prevention projects will be entirely innovative. Go look at what other people have done in previous issues of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and in other research periodicals. It is amazing to find that someone else may have tried to do a similar project 20, 50, or even 100 years ago. For example, the Chicago crime commission was formed to deal with the issues of truancy and organized crime. Familiar topics? You bet.

A reliance on the Internet to find information would be great if materials were not limited to newer materials and if students and faculty who are using the Web weren’t drawing on unsubstantiated sources and often from poorly cited sources. Finding the newest study on the Internet doesn’t mean it is the best study.

I expect that the thing we will need to learn the most, and unfortunately I also believe we will relearn it over and over during the next 10 years, is that library research is critical for studying violence and trauma. Problems of innumeracy (see Vandiver & Giacopassi, 1997), presentism (Laub, 2004), or ahistoricism characterize criminal justice and students of criminal justice. These problems will simply get worse if we don’t learn from our own mistakes. At the moment, our university libraries are facing substantial cutbacks in their budgets. Internet-based searches can help us to learn about violence and trauma, but only if people insist on a stronger inclusion of historical documents. My hope is that people will recognize that we have come a long way in the past 20 years by making significant strides toward a common and truly interdisciplinary understanding of crime and crime prevention methods. I hope that we won’t need to repeatedly reinvent our research tools and will continue to learn from our successes and failures.

REFERENCES


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