

Psychology's Quixotic Quest For the Media-Violence Connection

By
Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D.

An Invited Address at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Boston, August 21, 1999

'The plethoric effluence of screen violence, murder and mayhem is an undisputed menace to society.'

That's the message from such sources as President Clinton, Congressman Henry Hyde, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the American Psychological Association (APA), The American Academy of Pediatrics, Congressional committees, and Surgeon General reports.

These denunciations are clear and, for most Americans and most psychologists, both intuitively obvious and obviously true.

- Yes, the snack counter availability of guns and the NRA defenders of the right to market and bear these snacks are a problem.
- Yes, poverty, teenage alienation, lack of parental involvement with transmitting proper social values and behaviors to their children is a problem.
- Yes, a culture which is steeped in materialism and conspicuous consumption and which judges one's worth as a person by one's economic worth is a vexing issue.
- And, yes, drug and gang-related crime is a problem.

But, if the amount of devoted newshole space, the number of "scientific" studies done over 50 years, and the number of pronouncements, advisories and appeals issued by professional and lay organizations, is any indication, if we can just get a handle on violence in film and television, our "shining city on the Hill" would be launched on the road to salvation.

The trouble with all these political and scientifically based pronouncements, nostrums, and admonitions is that what is obvious is not always true and what is true is not always obvious.

For years, interminably and predictably, Hollywood vigorously denied or sidestepped the charge that the violence on movie and TV screens is a major cause of real-life violence. Hollywood questioned the research supporting the causal connection between media violence and real-life violence, and diverted attention from its hegemonic entertainment machine to drugs, single-parent families, absentee, negligent or materialistically obsessed parents, the NRA, or to other social institutions. When all else failed, Hollywood wrapped itself around the flag of First Amendment freedoms of the press and of speech and raised the clarion cry of creative freedom.

Of late, however, especially in the wake of the sense-defying massacre at Columbine High School, in Littleton Colorado, such verbal sleight of hand is falling on cynical ears. The drums along the Potomac are beating ever louder and Hollywood is running out of First Amendment whining turf and out of the compromise turf of the current film rating system. The film and TV folk in Hollywood are running for cover. Finger pointing, reminiscent of the Black List period in the 50s, has already begun.

There are, of course, many other factors that contribute to violence in general and Columbine violence in particular. But they embrace social forces, which are far more difficult to manage. These are socially and politically desperate, perilous and opportunistic times. Media-manufactured violence is an easier and, in truth, a slower moving target. And Congress is taking dead aim.

Because of our belief in the media-violence connection, we are primed to search for the usual suspects. What movies did the trigger men at Columbine High School, Harris and Kleibold, see before they mounted their assault? What were their favorite TV shows and video games and music genres? They saw *The Matrix* or *Basketball Diaries*? They own *Mortal Kombat*? They listen to gangsta' rap. Bam! That's the answer. The media did it. The fact that they were neo-Nazis, had arrest records, were on prescriptive drugs, and

were treated by counselors for their anger and aggressiveness somehow, for many, got lost in the shuffle of feet looking for easy answers -- media answers.

Paradoxically, though, Hollywood's defense of itself by questioning the research behind the charges that it inspires such violent acts as Columbine may, in fact, be quite on the money, although probably asserted for dubious and self-serving reasons. Even if Hollywood was not the slow moving target that it is, does the scientific literature actually support the connection between violence portrayed in the entertainment media and violence enacted in real life? More pointedly, does extant scientific research in this area help us, in any way whatsoever, to predict or prevent events like the Columbine?

Let us call this alleged link between media portrayals of violence and real-world viewer violence the "media-violence connection." What does the research literature actually say about this connection?

After 50 years and over 1,000 studies (a conservative estimate), there is, I submit, not a single research study which is even remotely predictive of the Columbine massacre or similar high school shootings in the last few years. Yes, there may be research which may predict fights on school yard grounds and may account for teenage aggression in the streets and spousal abuse after televised prize fights (and much research which argues the other way; research which you rarely hear about). But as for making the explicit connection between on-screen mayhem by the bodies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger, the minds of Oliver Stone and Wes Craven, and real-life singular, serial or mass murder, scientific psychology, albeit noble and earnest in its tireless efforts, has simply not delivered the goods. It asserts the causal nexus but doesn't actually demonstrate it.

The paucity of research evidence doesn't stop with connecting media violence to murderous rampages. There are dozens of studies, which suggest that watching sexually violent movies desensitize males to the plight of rape victims. These studies further allege that, as a consequence of viewing sexually violent material, males are more likely to acquit a rapist or assign more blame to a rape victim (or even be more likely to commit rape themselves).

Abhorrent as what I have to say may be, however, I believe that there is not a single study that is externally valid because there is not a single study that has explored such supposed post-exposure rape attitudes in an even quasi-decent jury simulation setting or gained the cooperation of the courts to test the desensitization hypothesis in a real juridical setting? All the arguments about desensitization have come from lab situations with subjects reading transcripts or watching videotapes of real or simulated testimony.

To argue that because subjects in a lab situation displayed desensitization to violence we can safely predict that non-quiche-eating real men, watching sexually violent films in real theaters or in real homes are more likely to acquit a real-life rapist in a real jury setting is a psychologically huge and untested leap of faith. The leap suggesting that such men will be more likely to rape someone is even more chasmic and, I think, professionally irresponsible. And the leap from so-called aggressive behavior in a lab setting to murder in real life is just as -- how shall I say it?--loony.

The importance of the question of external validity, i.e., valid generalizations to the real world, is monumental when it comes to taking lab results about acquisition of violent attitudes, values or behaviors or about desensitization to sexually violent behavior and predicting real world behavior. It is especially important when the results of such research are used as the basis for advocating or passing socially restrictive government legislation.

I should point out here that desensitization to continuous exposure to any movie theme, not just sexually violent themes, or to any sound, smell, taste or other sense receptors, is how the nervous, perceptual and cognitive systems function. Tell a joke once, it's funny. Tell it 10 times, it's boring, even for 3 year olds. Even lovers of such romantic movies as *Ghost* or *The English Patient* have to wait a few weeks or months before they can watch it again. Satiation, habituation, or whatever word is used is, by definition, boredom and, as a consequence, productive of an anemic response potential. It probably is also the basis of much marital infidelity.

Therefore, capturing desensitization to violence in the lab, as the programmatic research of Ed Donnerstein and Dan Linz has done, is no big surprise; in fact, it would be

a surprise if desensitization were not evidenced. We would also expect desensitization to occur if we exposed Ss to repetitive Public Service Announcements (PSAs) about the hazards of driving without seatbelts and tried to bring the point home by showing twisted bodies and blood-spattered windshields. Such repetitive film gore would eventually produce near-flat arousal responses. Does that mean that such desensitized people who believed in the value of seatbelts prior to such repeated PSA exposure, would then go out and discard them? I don't think so.

I would submit, instead, that lab research on desensitization to sexually violent films is not the basis on which to make strident and dire Chicken Little predictions about rape predilections, especially when discussing men with no history of rape. The critical issue here, once more, is one of external validity. Moreover, the fact that Donnerstein and Linz's rape research also showed that re-sensitization to the shock of sexual violence occurs not long after viewing of sexually violent movies has ceased, is a crucial and, sadly, frequently ignored aspect of their design and conclusions. My students do it all the time.

If watching sexually violent films does affect viewer judgment about rape, it is extremely important that we fully understand the parameters of such a relationship. It matters considerably what kinds of people are repeatedly watching sexually violent films, what their pre-existing attitudes toward rape are, their motives for watching such films and what one thinks about or does, by oneself or with one's friends, after one finishes watching a sexually violent movie. When you think about it, what kind of person is it who watches sexually violent movies day after day, week after week in the first place? Someone more likely to be found on the pages of DSM IV than in an Abe Maslow pantheon of self-actualizers. Alas, these are personality and attitude issues that none of the brief personality and attitude tests used in sexual violence studies can hope to meaningfully address.

And, endless assertions in the survey literature notwithstanding, the fact that rapists and murderers prefer to watch films compatible with their appetites is no indication of a causal connection, any more than the fact that golfers like to watch golf games proves that watching golf games cultivated their interest in golf. Only a five-iron fetishist or

person who plays golf could possibly watch the glacial pace of televised golf and find it scintillating.

The said truth is that psychologists are on a perpetual and reckless tear when it comes to predicting social disease dynamics based on laboratory-observed symptoms. But this is nothing new.

More than 50 years ago, Gordon Allport in his APA presidential address foreshadowed a deep concern for psychologists' tendency to overgeneralize their laboratory and field research. Former APA president Ronald Fox paraphrased Allport in a 1996 *American Psychologist* article:

“Allport believed that psychology did not have the proper frame of reference to be able to predict, understand, and control human behavior. Our inability to make meaningful predictions about individual behavior, Allport believed, stems from an over-reliance on methodologies that neither take direct experience as a model for its constructs nor return to that experience for validation of its results. In order to predict critical behaviors, one must actually deal with those behaviors, not with analogues or overly simplified imitations that bear little resemblance to the real thing. Allport urged the study of the actual behaviors that are of pressing social significance, at a suitable level of complexity, and then the verification of predictions by the actual lives men lead.”

Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, why are Allport's concerns 50 years ago still haunting the ivory castles of academia today? Because legitimate caution about problems of external validity in media-violence research has been buried under an avalanche of crisis-driven, politically correct and philosophically driven research and research funding that speak the speech that people and politicians want to hear -- violent media causes violent behavior.

I'm sure that everyone in this audience has, at some point, made the following sort of observation, probably in private and probably **not** to a journalist or in front of a TV camera: “I grew up watching James Cagney in *White Heat* or Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, watching the Three Stooges poke, bop or boink each other, took heady joy in watching the Road Runner drop an anvil on Wiley Coyote, Popeye

punching Bluto into orbit, leering wide-eyed at *Tales From the Crypt*, or reading Mickey Spillaine's *Kiss Me Deadly*. It didn't make me want to go out and commit mayhem."

Ironically, however, the alarm is sounded by these same people, perhaps by most of you in the audience, that today's media violence is driving our nation into a frenzy of convulsive and violent civic disintegration. This "third person effect" -- "it didn't affect me in my youth but it does affect the youth of today " -- is far too alive and far too well in professional psychology.

Regrettably, arguing against the lock step litany of the media-violence connection, as I am today, is like having professional halitosis: Few people want to listen closely. Even fewer want you to talk. How many of you here are familiar with the research by Stanley Milgram, William McGuire, Ron Milavsky, Jonathan Freedman, Dolf Zillmann, Jennings Bryant, and dozens of others whose research doesn't support the media-violence connection? Few most likely, and how often were some of these researchers interviewed by the media on the subject? Not often, if at all. Recently, Henry Jenkins, Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program, testified before a Senate hearing on media and violence. When he argued that there is no research which would connect media violence to the Columbine massacre, his views were mocked and dismissed. One Senator even charged that Jenkins had succumbed to "the dark side." It must have been Jesse Helms.

The media themselves are no safe harbor for such "deviant" opinions either. The news media's take on this issue is to go with whichever way the wind blows. And the wind usually blows in the direction of media-violence causing life-violence. Privately, many TV and print journalists with whom I speak disagree with that position but feel that it's impolitic to make the case on the air because it looks like their defending their news coverage or their programming practices. Screen and television writers feel the same way. No surprise there.

This public face vs. private face is a schizophrenogenic balancing act for the media spokespersons. Sometimes, however, they take a chance and air the minority view. Recently I appeared on the CBS network show *This Morning*, about a week after the Littleton massacre, when news programs were scrambling for something new to say so

they could keep the story on the front burner and bring in the ratings. During a pre-interview I told them that I would not take the party line of many of my professional colleagues, viz., *cherche la media*. I told them about my misgivings about the extant research on the subject of the media-violence connection. Demurely, I suggested that what I had to say was probably not what they wanted to hear, given the climate of post-Littleton anger. The producer with whom I was speaking said she wasn't sure they could go that way, but that she'd get back to me.

I had already danced the same gavotte with NBC's *The Today Show* and the Marilyn Manson connection to Littleton, and they backed off. A few hours later the CBS person did call back. "You're on," she said. To their credit, the producers felt it would be interesting and novel to have a psychologist take the alternative POV of the matter.

Novel and interesting were her words. But why "novel"? Because, as research on talking head show "experts" has shown repeatedly, news programs go to the same experts repeatedly, experts who will deliver the conventional POVs that audiences expect and want to hear to validate their worldviews. Novel, then, because the electronic and print media will rarely present the opinions of psychologists who downplay the media-violence connection.

I did the CBS *This Morning* show and presented a rather moderated POV, viz., our evidence doesn't make the case because of the restrictions placed on our research designs. It might in the future make the case, but it hasn't yet.

The next day, I'm told because I did not hear it, a psychology talk show host in LA got on the air, outraged at my observations. She and her call-in minions took me apart, limb from limb, even calling into question my credentials for talking about the subject as they had seen me on other TV news shows talking about other areas of psychology beside the media, so obviously I was out of my element. If I had been a food group, I would have been fried goose. Curious that the host never bothered to invite me to comment. No, that would have spoiled the fun. Clearly I was a traitor to the church of psychological political correctness and unfettered airwave pillorying was what I deserved. The last time that happened to me was when I was on a radio show and questioned the clinical and

actuarial plausibility of the sudden explosion of recovered memory patients who were busily nuking their parents' reputations.

The drumbeat of political correctness on this issue is professionally exasperating. On a regular basis tawdry whores of research design and questionable conclusions pass for elegant ladies of scientific respectability. Let me provide an example. I recently agreed to do a review and analysis of a highly touted research article (the media was, as they say, all over it), about media and violence. The request came from *The Forensic Echo*, a newsmagazine of psychiatry, law and public policy.

I won't burden you with the morass of conceptual and methodological outrages perpetrated by the research design which totally undercut the validity of its conclusion which, not surprisingly, affirmed the media-violence connection. I would just point out that the operationally defined measure of aggression in the study was the willingness of the college student subjects to recommend against renewal of the research grant of a research Director and her assistant. This display of so-called aggression occurred after the experimental procedure had openly deceived the subjects and held them hostage to their promised reward by cutting short the experiment they had signed on for, and demanding they participate in another experiment. After this forced experimental march, the Director had roundly insulted their performance and abused their intelligence.

At various places in the discussion and conclusions of the article, the terms violence, aggression and hostility were used interchangeably. Finally, the authors concluded that the study had demonstrated the **long-term effects** of media violence exposure (viewing four violent movies in four days!) on aggressive behavior. What!!!

What can we say about such academic absurdity and scientific word salad? Are aggression, violence and hostility now synonyms? If so, we have too much redundancy in our language. Is recommending non-renewal of a grant the kind of hostility we're concerned about in America today? Are four violent movies in four days really "long term effects of violence exposure?" I don't think so. What can we say about the reviewers of the article? What can we say about the journal, which published the article? The same journal, incidentally, which only recently published my own article.

I should point out here that it is not that I believe that media violence DOESN'T produce violent behavior in viewers, or in some viewers or in 5-10% of viewers as Leonard Eron, Nancy Signorelli and others have recently come to believe, after decades of asserting before Congress or in other venues, that media violence is a **principal** cause of real-world violence. I am merely asserting that the connection between the two has not been empirically established.

Psychologist Rowell Huesmann has said not that media violence produces violent behavior in 5-10% of the viewers, but that it accounts for 5-10% of the variance in viewer violence. Now, is that 5-10% of violence the violence we see in schoolyards, between sibs, in drive-by shootings, or in the slaughter at Columbine? And how on earth does anyone really know that media violence accounts for 5-10% of real-world violence? Based on the square of .30 correlations in field or lab studies? Incidentally, what sort of aggressive behavior is that which we are dealing with in lab studies? Specifically, what are the critical dependent variables?

A look at the hundreds if not thousands of published and unpublished lab and field studies suggests several classes of aggressive behavior are the usual dependent variable suspects:

1. Assaulting dolls
2. Administering shock
3. School yard fighting
4. Aggressive thoughts
5. Recommending grant terminations

The only study of which I'm aware which purportedly dealt with real violent crime was the Huesmann and Eron study on cumulative effects of TV watching and real-world criminality. In their study, however, watching violent TV did not correlate with real-world violence or criminality when measured concurrently at ages 8 and 30. No, it correlated with violence watching at eight and criminal behavior at 30. In effect, media exposure created scripts not impulses. Thus, there were no short-term, only long-term correlates of media violence watching and anti-social behavior? Yet, if we consider the arguments cited in the popular press and in many text books, the violent behavior in

response to viewing violent TV or film fare is short-fused. Thus, the conclusions of the only long-duration, naturalistic study of media and violence flies in the face of the wisdom dispensed in many psychology text books and lay advocates of legislatively mandated or voluntary media control.

As a profession, do we dare recommend legislation designed to control school massacres when our dependent variables in research are generally so benign, so lacking in external validity for the target behaviors that so concern us? Are we really possessed of such professional hubris that we advocate such restraints on civil liberties when our scientific database is so dubious? Obviously we do and we are.

At the same time, however, we all know that most behavior is multi-determined. We also know that, except for truly sick minds or sociopathic personalities, committing acts of violence requires either a mental hair trigger or, for the less volubly violent amongst us, more deliberation and, moreover, a resolution of a more complex interplay of competing forces than, say, deciding whether to cross against the light or jay walk. Disobeying traffic lights is against the law. But to violate such a law is unlikely to present us with a true moral dilemma. A dilemma of safety over convenience, yes, of morality, no. Not so, of course, when considering murder after watching, say, the movie *Psycho*.

Therefore, when we generalize from lab or field research to real-life aggressive or violent behavior, we must consider *behavior thresholds*. We must consider that what I might do or say in a lab, or might write on a paper and pencil measure of attitudes, beliefs, or behavioral intentions, is strongly affected in the real world by context, and by a lattice of conflicting motives, drives, beliefs, fears, morals, even a concern for being punished. The setting, the environment, may either lower or raise the threshold for behavior. After watching a rape incident movie, I might say I could do something like that, like a rape, but, in fact, never do. The setting in which I might be asked to do it may never be compelling enough to raise the likelihood of that behavior to a threshold of overt expression. Or, my sexual drive level may never override my inhibitions about executing an act of rape. We have attitudes toward actions. We have attitudes toward contexts. Both come powerfully into play any time we're considering or asked about doing something.

Consider, what many of you already know, that today, when student subjects are in a lab setting, they are operating on some implicit assumptions, e.g., the university would not allow me to actually seriously hurt someone . It would present too many legal risks. Matters were obviously somewhat different during social psychologist Stanley Milgram's heyday when he did the obedience to authority research. But even he knew that the setting of Yale had an impact on his subjects. This is why he moved the experiment from Yale and New Haven to Bridgeport in an old office building. He found, you may recall, that obedience went down significantly. The Ss were still obedient, but substantially less so than when they were in the awe-inspiring Yale environment.

Recall also, that where there were other Ss (actually confederates) present in certain conditions of the experiment who encouraged disobedience to authority, obedience to authority plummeted. Thus, peer group pressure influenced willingness to commit aggression.

We may assume, then, that for a person to actually engage in aggressive behavior there must be some social support for it (as well as either desperation or the response being situated high up in a response hierarchy). There must also be a disregard of inhibitory factors. In the Milgram study, for many Ss, the disinhibiting factor was the presence of authority figures authorizing and encouraging the aggressive behavior.

Clearly, the magnitude of an aggressive act, from pushing, to wrestling to punching to knifing and to shooting, is impacted by existing inhibitions in the person's mind, conscience, what have you. Drugs and alcohol are prime disinhibitors. So are peer groups. Research on group and mob behavior consistently reveal that peers push extreme behavior and mobs, with their promise of anonymity and material and spleen-venting reward, encourage vandalism and violence. These social and environmental forces tug at behavioral thresholds.

How important is the peer group in, say, non-gang related, non-drug related youth violence (or even adult violence, for that matter)? Research conducted over a five-year period in my media psychology lab at Cal State, Los Angeles indicates that young men are the prime consumers of violent movies. Young men, we all know, are also the

primary agents of social violence in our society. They always have been. Even before the advent of mass and electronic media.

Is this relationship between youth and violence just a human problem? Hardly. It is just as prevalent in the infrahuman, animal world. Equivalents of teenagers in the primate world and in the world of big cats wreak the same havoc on the pack, the pride or the troop. Most interesting, recent reports of out-of-control, gangbanging, interspecies-raping teen elephants in Africa were sobering. Orphaned by hunters, raised in a preserve absent adults, they began terrorizing their neighbors once they were released into the larger preserve. It smacked of *A Clockwork Orange* for the pachyderm world. The workers in the preserve had to bring in adult bull elephants to bring the teenage marauders into line.

Elephants have a complex social system and parental control is imperative to keep order. When the adults are absent, it seems, elephant bullyboys emerge and are rather rapacious, not unlike the children stranded on the island in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In addition, adolescent chimps and lions have been frequently observed in naturalistic settings forming roaming bands of violence-wreakers, rapists and baby killers.

Is there a lesson here for our materially preoccupied, two wage-earning parent families? Gosh, I think so. Especially those parents who don't know about the bombs their kids are building in the garage, and leave moral training to adolescent peer groups.

Since violence is largely a young man's game, it shouldn't come as a surprise that, according to U.S. Govt. statistics, as baby boomers born in the 40's and 50's came into adolescence in the 60's and 70's, the rate of violence and crime jumped dramatically. Not coincidentally, as the birth rate declined in the late 70's, the violence and crime statistics also declined in the 90's.

According to data released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the same demographic and epidemiological trends have been found in Germany, France, England and the Scandinavian countries, countries, which are notable for their minimization of violence in the entertainment media.

Furthermore, a recent study out of the Universities of Chicago and Stanford suggests that the legalization of abortion in the early 1970's (and therefore fewer male babies) contributed as well to the drop in crime in the 1990s. The analysis of crime and abortion data suggests that legalized abortion may account for as much as half the overall crime drop in the U.S. from 1991 to 1997.

Current tracking of violence in film and television indicates that there has been little substantive change in the amount of violence to which the young and older of our society are exposed. In fact, there are other streams of violence entertainment that were not prevalent 10 years ago, namely, internet games and chat rooms, video games with their obscene levels of "play" murder and mutilation. And, of course, there is always the ever-nauseating local news for kids to feast on in their quest for the daily electronic violence fix.

Ironically, then, precisely at the time when both the Executive and Legislative branches of government are agitating for a reduction of gratuitous (and maybe non-gratuitous) violence in the media, the U.S. has been on a five-year downward trend in violence statistics. According to FBI crime statistics, both violent crimes (including murder) and property crimes are down substantially, in all regions of the country, both urban and rural. Some drops are very dramatic. For example, between 1993 and 1997 murder in Los Angeles dropped 48%. In Boston it dropped 56%. Divorce is down, marriages are up. Teenage pregnancies have dropped, unemployment is down. Moreover, recent government reports tell us that the number of weapons brought to high schools has dramatically declined.

One would think that, given the egregious degree of violence in the popular media, such crime statistics should be up, especially since there has been no significant drop in violence in the media, especially movies, but also in TV, according to various violence studies reported by both UCLA and UCSB. In fact, some have asserted that there is more screen violence now, graphic, protracted, pornographic violence, than ever before. It is also true that over the past few years, 70% of all motion pictures received an R rating. According to Variety, the Hollywood industry newspaper, most of those ratings were

based on violence content. Clearly film violence is alive and kicking butt, while real violence is down!

Thus, demographic and epidemiological statistics don't square with our view of the relationship between media violence and life violence. Where shall we look for the answer? I believe the peer group, especially the peer group that serves as a family stand-in for preoccupied parents.

Returning to the longitudinal and cross-cultural study conducted Huesmann, Eron, and their colleagues, the authors invoked the theory of behavioral scripts to account for why there was a modest correlation between preference for watching violent TV at age 8 and adult criminal behavior at age 30. Their celebrated long-term study revealed several interesting facts, however:

1. The concurrent correlations between violent behavior and observation of on-screen violence were non-significant.
2. According to psychologist Jonathan Freedman, the researchers with whom Huesmann and Eron worked in Denmark took their name off the project because they disagreed with Huesmann and Eron's conclusions about the long-term effects of exposure to media violence and,
3. One thing the study did not track was peer group influences.

Why is peer group influence so important? Because, as multitudes of research studies show, peer group support or discouragement of violent behavior is pivotal in maintaining such behavior over time. People tend to seek out peers who support, in Milton Rokeach's terms, their instrumental and terminal values, and distance themselves from those who don't. The likelihood that violent youths will end up associating with other violent youths -- as in gangs all over the world -- is very high. The less violent peers will ordinarily stay away from these hyperaggressive outliers and stay with peers who share the same attitude and behavioral inclinations about violence that they do. Consequently, their countervailing non-violent attitudes and behavior norms will be minimal or nil on the more violence-prone members of their age group.

Thus, over time, violent youths will seek out other violent youths, develop life styles of violence and end up, as adults, leading lives of violence and criminality. Even without the access to violent entertainment media.

Other research shows that, unless violence is of personal interest and relevance to teens and children, they will watch other things. Girls, for example, are much less disposed to watch violent films and TV fare than are boys.

My own research on film preferences shows quite dramatically that age also influences film preferences. As people get older they commit violence less and they prefer the violent, action and horror genres less. They come to prefer the drama and romance genres more.

These gender and age appetite differences occur irrespective of what is offered in the mass media. People will seek out programs that cater to their entertainment appetites rather than merely sit mindlessly while programs dance across their video screens. This is the position put forth by research in the Use And Gratifications model of viewer-media transaction, which sees media consumption and focus as reflecting viewer interest and choice rather than passive indoctrination by electronic machine gods.

Since available mass media entertainment fare is a constant for most people, tuning in or tuning out violent or non-violent entertainment must be a personal mood and personality-related choice, having more to do with what a viewer enjoys watching or doing than simply with what is available to watch or do. Research by Bryant and Zillmann at the University of Alabama has shown quite clearly that viewers choose programs, and movies, which compliment or supplement their mood states.

Consistent with these findings by Bryant and Zillmann, other research studies show that violent and aggressive youths are attracted to violent and aggressive entertainment media. It fits their mood and compliments their interests and values. Psychologist Roger Klein presented a paper last year on precisely this subject. Non-violent youths are also attracted to violent entertainment media but, according to some studies, for example, of video games, they are attracted more for the rebelliousness of the drama and the challenge of the violent games, than for feeding the blood lust in their hearts.

Children, of course, are a chief concern since we believe the child is father to the man and young adults are the chief perpetrators of social violence. Children do a lot of imitation of what they see in the media. But this probably has more to do with a child's intellectual, reality-untested, *tabular rasa* than pervasiveness of violence in the media per se.

Children often imitate the aggression they see on TV but they also imitate non-violent behaviors and want the toys, the clothes, the makeup, and the sneakers that they see promoted in commercials or featured as product placements in movies or sported by their latest heroes. They will walk the walk, talk the talk, eat the beef, and drink the juice that they see on TV. They will imitate a lot. If they're young enough, they might try to fly off the second story of their house, like Superman, set little chums afire when playing cowboys and Indians, shoot a playmate with a 45 caliber revolver and expect the dead playmate to get up and resume play, just like they do in cartoons. They don't know about life and the laws of physics and nature so they experiment, with all the risks and tragedies that occasionally follow.

But what behaviors do children permanently encode in their brains, what sticks with them? After watching a cartoon they might think that getting smacked in the head doesn't really hurt. But, one reality check quickly disabuses them of that cartoon canard. More generally, though, what sticks with them are the behaviors that their parents, friends and role models in real life encourage and reinforce. If you behave in ways of which your friends disapprove, you either change your behavior or change your friends, whichever is easiest or more urgent for you to do. You decide, ultimately, what influential force you will side with or brush aside.

Developmental research shows that, as most males age, violence becomes less and less acceptable to the larger social network and, most importantly, to their peer groups. You might get accolades from your grade or high school buddies for dukeing it out with a bully or settling an argument. But the accolades fade fast after high school, unless, of course, your peer group is a gang or professional criminals or your on a sports team which encourages violence as an intimidation tactic in competition; or, you feel like an outsider and are harboring seething, vendetta-spawning anger.

A prime and pertinent example of this peer group influence, of course, was seen most recently in Littleton, Colorado and, a few years earlier in Ft. Meyers, Florida. The Trench Coat Mafia at Columbine high school in Littleton, you are all familiar with. But the Ft. Meyers case some of you may have forgotten about. In 1997 four young men, high school students, nice boys, but loners, who hung around with each other and felt isolated from their H. S. peers, group-thought themselves into a reign of terror, starting with car jacking and arson and ending with the thrill-murder of their H. S. music teacher. They called themselves the Lords of Chaos.

When they were finally caught, after engaging in that ill-conceived but so adolescent tendency to brag about their deeds, they blamed the leader of the pack and averred that each one pushed the others to take more and more risks and engage in more and more criminal behavior. Except for the leader of the Lords of Chaos, each one admitted that they wouldn't have committed the murder had they not been worried about being ridiculed by their fellow Lords. The leader, it should be noted, had an arsenal of guns in his home and virtually no parental oversight. The parents were otherwise engaged.

More recently, there were the two teenagers who murdered their own mother, stabbing her to death all the while sporting the fright mask made famous by Wes Craven's movie *Scream*. Did the movie make them do it, drive them to do it, to murder their mother? Or, was the movie only the inspiration for the mask, not the inspiration for the passion behind the mask?

The defendants' lawyers will probably invoke the "media made me do it" defense. It didn't work for Ronnie Zamora, the teenager who killed his 82-year-old female neighbor back in the 70's and blamed the television program, *Kojak*. It won't work today. Juries repeatedly reject the media defense and, quite pointedly, the volumes of psychological research and testimony cited in support of it. Clearly juries of our adult peers don't buy our claims of media-inspired violence and murder. They look to the individual and his or her background for the principal agents of responsibility.

Laboratory research aside, elements beside peer groups and possible media influences are factored into the equation when we look at the multitude of legal cases where

defendants in murder trials argued that they were influenced by viewing such films as *Natural Born Killers* or *Scream* or listening to a Tupak Shakur CD. Invariably it turns out that either drugs or alcohol were involved and/or the defendant had a history of psychopathology or active, violent, anti-social behavior. In other words, such instances of actual homicide invariably involve clinical not social issues; choirboys were not converted to killers by virtue of media exposure.

Stanley Milgram's obedience study and Phil Zimbardo's now famous Stanford Prison Study both demonstrate that social and environmental forces can produce aggressive behavior in otherwise normally functioning people. We also know well that solitary gang members rarely commit gang violence. Serial and mass murders and crimes of passion are usually the only sorts of murders conducted by people on their own. We also have the phenomena of what Irvin Janis labeled Groupthink, and of attitude polarization, each demonstrating how and why like-minded group members push each other to take more extreme and more risky positions, or engage in more risky behavior. This research furthers the experimental and theoretical support for the influence of peer groups on aggressive behaviors.

Years ago, social psychologist Fritz Heider talked about certain cognitive behavior patterns, patterns which later researchers dubbed "the fundamental attribution error." Heider was referring to our preferred tendency to blame events on people or people's dispositions rather than on physical or social situations in which those people are enmeshed.

As a species, we can't resist blaming events on people rather than circumstances. For humans, who are genetically wired to seek out explanations, human beings (or their personifications into gods or monsters) are the conspicuous agents of action in all situations. Unless we can be persuaded otherwise, human agency is the default explanation.

Well, since Heider first formulated the fundamental attribution error, it has transmuted from the compellingness of people as an explanation of events to the compellingness of the entertainment media as causal prime suspects. With apologies to

Dr. Heider, let's call this neo-fundamental attribution error the *fundamedia attribution error*.

The current violence in society is disturbing to all of us. The current excessive, gratuitous violence in film, in video games, in music lyrics is disturbing to all of us. But because two phenomena are both disturbing and coincident in time does not make them causally connected, any more than the correlation between ice cream consumption and drowning can be understood as yielding a causal nexus. So, let us all beware

Yet, we are intent on making this media-violence connection, this *fundamedia attribution error*. Politicians and psychologists cite thousands of studies that have, to use Rowell Huesmann's words, "provided incontrovertible evidence of the strong media-violence connection."

Well, let me suggest again that the evidence for this vaunted connection is very controvertible. Whether we cite 100, 1,000, or 10,000 research studies which conclude that exposure to violent media produces violent behavior, 10,000 is no more persuasive or credible than 100, if the designs of the research are flawed and/or the generalizations to an external population of behaviors are patently unjustified.

So, you ask, why not just do the necessary research in controlled settings and see if exposure to violent movies produces real-world type violence, not just benign, ersatz violent behaviors like those listed above? The simple answer is, we can't. We can't and we don't because ethical guidelines at all American universities explicitly prohibit the conduct of real violence in experimental settings or, by deception, getting human subjects to do things about which they might later feel intense guilt.

There are, of course, certain things you can ethically do in an experiment. You can show a subject filmed violence and ask him if he would be more likely to commit similar aggression if someone insulted him. You can even give him the opportunity, after watching some violent footage, to administer (supposed) shock to an opponent in some competitive contest after the opponent angered him. You can even get him or her to pummel a Bobo doll.

But what researchers cannot do is show a subject ten violent movies and see if he will pick up a gun and shoot another subject who has insulted him or “dissed” his saintly mother (even if, in reality, there are only blanks in the gun). Consequently, laboratory expressions of violence lack external validity, i.e., they simply do not generalize to or predict events like Columbine.

There’s the rub: Our vaunted scientific research machine is stymied when it comes to investigating the sorts of aggressive behaviors that we, as a culture, are most concerned about. To suggest we have accomplished this task based on the dependent variables we have used in previous studies is the moral and logical equivalent of marketing a drug for cancer which research has shown cures acne.

We all decry the volume of violence in our popular culture. Such violent images must have some effect on the sensibilities of our society and its values and civility. And, frankly, more creativity in the artistic process would permit less recourse to using murder and brutality to keep a story moving or audiences in their seats. Furthermore, there is probably no doubt that media coverage of violence, such as Columbine, breed copycat acts of violence. Media portrayals of most any high profile screen acts, phrases, etc., breed copycat behavior including jumping out of windows in the belief that one can fly. The constitution guarantees the right of people to be foolhardy, even stupid. News coverage of events such as Columbine do run the risk of copycat crimes, as events across the country following the Columbine massacre clearly indicated. The question is, however, did the coverage inspire young men who were already searching for a means to commit the acts and near-acts that followed and gave them a modus operandi by which to execute the acts, or did the coverage inspire young men to commit acts of violence that they previously had no such inclination toward? I believe the answer is the former, though some may disagree.

But to get beyond simple intuition (or politically motivated jihads) and move into the realm of legitimate scientific evidence about the media-violence connection, any alleged cause and effect relationships must be viewed and tracked over a long period of time. Such longitudinal research studies are expensive, time-consuming and fraught with alternative interpretations. Quick lab studies with benign measures of aggression are far

easier to conduct. What's worse, were the media-violence connection actually demonstrated by well-designed research, it would likely never help us understand or predict the sensational but rather rare events such as high school massacres.

I believe it comes down to this: If you believe that the existing body of literature on the media-violence connection is adequate to make the case that media violence translates into interpersonal aggression in the school yard, backyard, or stockyard, then there's no need to spend any more time and money reinventing the wheel. Let social scientists get on with research on other pressing topics and let relevant authorities implement the policies which control the media images that come into the homes, such as V-chips, and let them mandate the provisions for more precise labeling on CDs, and on TV program and film ratings.

However, if you believe that media violence may translate into acquitting rapists or encouraging rape, then press for permission of the courts to do research with real juries in factually mock but seemingly real rape trials. Expose jury members to violent sex films during sequestration, and look for results in trial outcomes. Otherwise, let us cease beating a dead horse with jury simulations. They have produced no useful information about whether men will be enhanced rapists after exposure to sexually violent films or whether they will acquit an actual rapist in a trial where their vote actually affects the outcome of a trial.

If you believe that the media-violence connection may help us understand a Littleton or Paduka, then let us demand a government dispensation, along the lines of those granted states to try out different models of welfare reform, to conduct a field study in the spirit of that done by Martin Deutch and Mary Collins. Thirty years ago, Deutch and Collins were able to use federally funded housing programs to determine the effects of integrated housing on prejudice and stereotyped beliefs. A similar study that monitors a town and its children controls the access to media violence and tracks violent behavior is what I have in mind. It is doable, up to a point. Perhaps not at the level of that depicted in the movie, *The Truman Show*, but doable nonetheless. Tannis McBeth Williams conducted a study along those lines a number of years ago in Canada. Failing a controlled field experiment like I'm suggesting, there is simply no way our prevailing constrained

research designs can even start to meaningfully answer the questions raised by Columbine.

Nor, I doubt, can we ever look at the truly long term effects of media violence exposure on behavior from the additive perspective, i.e., looking at the impact of individual sources of media violence as a summative, collective influence, from CDs, movies, television (news and entertainment), and the array of print media. I'm not even sure a *Truman Show* design could untangle that rat's nest of influences.

In effect, it is time to stop offering explanations for social behavior that our research designs are actually unable to investigate and therefore are unable to address. We can offer educated opinions but we can't offer anything even approaching incontrovertible proof of these opinions. Can you imagine doing medical research on drugs or other treatments for life-threatening illnesses without doing long-term clinical trials?

If we want to control our popular culture and our crime, we had better do the right studies with the right populations, in the right conditions, over the right period of time before we hand out cultural prescriptions and proscriptions at congressional hearings and in our classrooms. I abhor the gratuitous media violence in film, in video games, on TV as much as you do. I think it produces an ugly cultural landscape, a landscape littered with the trash and the psychological graffiti of ego-centric or puerile minds, minds that put the value of money and convenience above the value of a livable, sustainable physical and social environment.

I believe the roots of social violence lie in our social values about what's important in life, what sustains us as a culture, not what drives us as an economy. I believe we need to pay more than lip service when we say our children are our future and then buy their quiet and quiet their demands for parenting with credit cards, cell phones or electronic baby or child sitters like televisions, computers and internet access. Conceiving children can be a mindless, biological act; parenting is always a mindful, psychological commitment. Too often we see people embrace the first and abandon the second. When that happens, the specter of the "tyranny of the peer group" raises its perilous head. And

if we wonder what that will yield, the Trench Coat Mafia and the Lords of Chaos offer a vivid reminder.