Threat Assessment: Scholars, Operators, Our Past, Our Future

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“I think you know me well enough, Watson, to understand that I am by no means a nervous man. At the same time it is stupidity rather than courage to refuse to recognize danger when it is close upon you.”

- *The Final Problem*, December, 1893
Richard von Krafft-Ebing
Hugo Munsterberg
What have we learned in the field of threat assessment?
What are the BIG IDEAS (some researched, some not) in threat assessment?
• Violence is not homogeneous

• Affective (emotional, reactive, defensive)

• Predatory (instrumental, targeted, offensive)
Sala et al., *PLOS One*, May 27, 2015: Lethal Violence 430,000 years ago in north Spain
Threat Assessment

• We primarily focus upon predatory (instrumental, targeted, offensive) violence
• But also concern ourselves with less violent acts of intentional aggression, such as harassment, bullying, intimidation, boundary violations, etc.
• There is often a **pathway to violence**, but it varies in:
  – Speed
  – Duration
  – Vector or direction
  – Location at any point in time
Threat assessment is different from, and similar to, violence risk assessment

- It is dynamic
- It is operational
- It is often urgent
- Both focus upon management of the threat
• Threat assessment and threat management are dynamically related; when you do one, you do the other.
Static factors may help predict long term risk of violence, but dynamic factors work best in the short term management of threats.
• Structured professional judgment is superior to unstructured professional judgment to assess risk
  
  • Ipsi Dixit—”he himself said it”
  
  • “I am the doctor…”
I WAS JUST CHECKING YOUR RECORDS, KLEINZWECK, AND YOU HAVE A PH.D. IN PSEUDOSCIENCE!
• We select our SPJ instrument based upon:
  – Outcome we want to measure
  – Goodness of fit between our subject and the validation sample(s)
  – Our training in the instrument
  – The scientific foundation of the instrument
The map is not the territory
• Precision can be the enemy of accuracy
  – Because we can be more precise, we desire to do so; but it forces others to also be more precise, and therefore often inaccurate
For the consultants.....

- Follow the rules, but think outside the box.
  – Kris Mohandie
• Your work is their reputation
  – Steve White
• Good work speaks for itself
• Monitor your own narcissism
“I am very, very rich!!!!”
“One day, I do want to run for Prime Minister...”
Eleanor Roosevelt:

• “You wouldn’t worry so much about what others think of you if you realized how seldom they do.”
• There are two rules for success:
  1. Never reveal everything you know
• Our recognition of patterns is an evolved skill that helps us survive threats

– Is it friend or foe? The amygdala reacts faster, the pre-frontal cortex is more accurate, but slower; the high road vs. the low road.
Gestalt Psychology

• How can I read these words without any vowels?
Stalking

• Understanding stalking, and work in this area of criminality, has contributed much to threat assessment

• Stalking is an old behavior, but a new crime
The most dangerous stalkers are prior sexual intimates of the victim.
• Most public figure stalkers are psychotic.
• >80%
Criminal Violence

- Criminal violence is decreasing throughout the United States, but mass murder is on the rise
FBI Uniform Crime Report 2013
FBI Active Shooter Study 2014

• “An individual(s) killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.”
• 11.4 incidents annually (N=160)
• 6.4  2000-2006
• 16.4  2007-2013
• 150% increase
• Consistent with Harvard public health study
Terrorism

• We face threats from the extremes
  – Secular
  – Religious
  – Single Issue
  – Bizarre (usually psychotic)
The Violent True Believer as Lone Wolf?
Rick McIntyre, wolf researcher

• “The main characteristic of an alpha male wolf is a quiet confidence, quiet self-assurance. You know what you need to do; you know what’s best for your pack. You lead by example. You’re very comfortable with that. You have a calming effect.”

  • New York Times, June 6, 2015, p. A19
• Let’s consider not using the terms “lone wolf” or “school shooter”

• Do you want to help the likes of James Holmes and Dzhokahr Tsarnaev strike a cool pose?
Let’s call it what it is:

- An act of lone terrorism
- An act of mass murder
Much to their surprise, the Jihadists found the virgins awaiting them in heaven were not what they had expected.
• Mental illness is one ingredient in many factors that increase risk for targeted violence, but a very small piece of the pie.
Who is responsible?

- THEM
- US
Psychopaths walk the earth.

- “Intraspecies predators”
- Evolutionarily adapted for predation
- Account for the largest proportion of explainable variable in violence risk

--- Usually are the most disturbing subjects of concern in threat assessment
“There are no saints in the animal kingdom, only breakfast and dinner.”

ARE YOU A PSYCHOPATH?
YOU BETTER CHECK

Please TAKE ONE
Targeted violence is a rare event, and cannot be predicted

- Yet, unless the probability of an event is zero, it will eventually occur
Population-based epidemiological studies are of little use in predicting rare events.

- 1 out of 10,000 people commit homicide.
- We apply a risk prediction instrument that is 90% accurate.
- Even though most offenders will be correctly predicted, we will be wrong 9,473 times for every time we are correct.
- This is the Number Needed to Detain (Singh, 2013).
Black Swan Events Do Occur

- Unpredictable
- Catastrophic
• Prevention does not require prediction
  – Can your cardiologist predict who will have a heart attack?
  – Can your cardiologist manage risk factors associated with a heart attack?
Deaths attributable to cardiovascular disease (United States: 1900–2008).

Writing Group Members et al. Circulation 2012;125:e2-e220
• Watch your cognitive biases
  – Confirmatory
  – Availability
  – Predictable world (hindsight and foresight bias)
Beware of inductive reasoning

– Moving from the particular to the general:
  “I have done two stalking cases and they were both psychopaths, therefore all stalkers are psychopaths.”
• Social Media Investigation (SMI) is critical to threat assessment and management
  – Emails
  – Blogging
  – Listservs
  – Twitter
  – Facebook
  – Tumblr
  – Instagram
  – Snapchat
  – Etc.
SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLAINED

TWITTER  I'M EATING A #DONUT
FACEBOOK I LIKE DONUTS
FOURSQUARE THIS IS WHERE I EAT DONUTS
INSTAGRAM HERE'S A VINTAGE PHOTO OF MY DONUT
YOUTUBE HERE I AM EATING A DONUT
LINKED IN MY SKILLS INCLUDE DONUT EATING
PINTEREST HERE'S A DONUT RECIPE
LAST FM NOW LISTENING TO "DONUTS"
G+ I'M A GOOGLE EMPLOYEE WHO EATS DONUTS.
Do you mind if I strap your phone to my forehead so I can pretend you’re looking at me when I talk?
• We need Occam’s Razor
  – Among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions is better.
    • 9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy orchestrated by the Zionist Operated Government (ZOG) to start a war against Islam, and also involved plotting by the CIA
    • 9/11 was a terrorist attack by Al Qaeda
• We remember the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and try to be comfortable with it
  – There is a fundamental limit as to the precision with which we can know something
  – Walter White is Heisenberg
• We are wary of the observer (Hawthorne) effect
  – People change their behavior when they know they are being observed.
  – When do we interview or not?
  – How aggressive should our risk management be?
• Directly communicated threats are on the stage of threat assessment, but usually do not have the leading role
• Leakage occurs during the pathway toward violence in the majority of cases
• However, most leaks will be false positive
School Schooters (N=9)

- Pathway: 100%
- Fixation: 100%
- Identification: 100%
- Novel aggression: 56%
- Energy burst: 22%
- Leakage: 100%
- Last resort: 78%
- Direct threat: 11%
European Lone Terrorists $n=22$

(Meloy et al., submitted, JTAM)
• Posing a threat is more important than making a threat (Fein & Vossekuil)
  – Thinking
  – Feeling
  – Behavior
However,

- The “intimacy effect” has some scientific validation
  - The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the more a direct threat is predictive of violence
Risk of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intimate</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Stranger (public figure)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Directly communicated threat

Correlation + frequency
Suicide risk positively correlates with homicide risk
Gun homicide and suicides in the US, 1999 to 2013

Source: CDC / WISQARS
• Psychosis does not necessarily disorganize behavior
18 dead, 83 injured
Firearms: What do we know?

- Weak predictor of violence in general
- Strong predictor of lethality risk if possessed by a person of concern
Supporting the Second Amendment

- **Register** all firearms and their sale
- **Regulate** to keep firearms away from felons, the mentally ill, and others who are at greater risk to misuse them
- **Require** competency in their use and safe keeping
• Cultural scripts are important
Columbine was a cultural script leading to an international copycat effect beginning in 1999.
• The science of threat assessment, and particularly threat management, is just beginning.
Our Strengths

• Our emphasis on multi-disciplinary teams
• Our growth through networking, organizations, a science journal, newsletters, conferences, and meetings
• Our attention to certification, best practices, standards of practice, and scientific foundation
• Our ATAP Code of Ethical Conduct
Our Vulnerabilities

• Our science (we strive for evidence-based practice)
• The lack of understanding of TATM among professionals outside our specialty, including most mental health professionals, law enforcement professionals, and courts
Our Vulnerabilities

• Our lack of formal study of threat management and what actually works
• Our definitions of terms
• Our credentialing for skills, knowledge, and experience to do TATM: is our testing reliable and valid?
• Our lack of clarity and measurement of outcomes
Our Future

• Build the science of threat assessment and threat management
• Disseminate to practitioners within all disciplines in clear and direct language
• Teach TATM whenever there is a teaching moment
• Define our outcomes
• Recognize this historical moment for TATM
I hope I die during an inservice because the transition between life and death would be so subtle.
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