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Project 2 Interview with: Hillary L. Smith, M.S.
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- 1) Some of my studies measured the effects of violent media based on aggression while others measured the behavior that followed after viewing that media, what do you think is a better measure and which is more telling of what is happening to us because of our media?
 - a. I think it's important to view these questions in the context of the populations being examined and through the lens of the Diathesis Stress Model. The fact is, as a society, a large proportion of people are exposed to violent films/television (e.g., Game of Thrones) by choice. Also, it's important to recognize that a very small portion of the population perpetrates violent crimes/behavior. The link between violent media and violent behavior is not entirely clear, however it's certainly true that most people who watch violent shows/movies do NOT perpetrate violence. For that reason, I think it's important to look at psychological/biological vulnerabilities that may predispose someone to react aggressively or to mimic aggressive behavior. I would also be curious to see what sort of aggression measures your studies were using. There are many measures that tap into different facets of aggression (e.g., reactive aggression vs. instrumental aggression), which assess entirely different constructs.

2) Do you think there may be any positives, on a neurological level, that may be seen in brain development because of videogames or movies?

- a. There has been some recent research from our department, actually, that suggests engaging in “brain training” games only make people better at “brain training” games...and do not generalize to other areas of functioning. This finding comes from Wally Boot and colleagues. I am by no means an expert on this idea, but I would imagine that practice at any sort of activity (video games included) would influence someone’s fluency/ability in that activity.

3) How relevant do you think Bandura’s BoBo Doll experiment is in this day and age? Do the same principles apply when a child views something on tv?

- a. I think Bandura’s BoBo doll experiment maintains relevance in today’s world because it clearly demonstrated the effects of modeling on child behavior. I don’t think the effects of modeling stop at aggression, though. Modeling is a powerful behavioral learning phenomenon that extends to all types of social behavior. To a certain extent, I think that children can model behavior that they see on TV in the sense that it may affect their play by providing scripts or they may mimic or quote the show. If there’s a child who is acting violently toward his/her peers in a way they saw on TV, the likelihood is that that child was already prone to acting violently and would do so regardless of what TV they watched. When it comes to modeling, the most salient behavior is that of your family and peers because you spend most of your time with them and learn from them; television is not reliably salient.

4) What would you describe as “pro-social behavior” and how would a lack of it affect someone’s life?

- a. Prosocial behavior is defined as actions intended to help others, with the most extreme form being altruism, which is the desire to help others with no expectation of reward. If you consider prosocial behavior on the continuum model, you could imagine one extreme being altruism and the other being ‘antisocial’ behavior, which is behavior that is against social norms (e.g., committing crime, physical fights, manipulation of others without remorse). Prosocial behaviors have benefits including building/boosting social networks. If someone lacks the drive toward prosocial behavior, they may become more isolated and may lack friendships.

5) Do you think there is a deep desire from mankind to surround themselves with violence? The Romans loved gladiator fights, how is this different than a violent film now? (other than the lack of actual murder)

- a. I like to think of humanity’s interest in violence through the lens of Terror Management Theory (TMT), which suggests that every action/decision we make in life is related to our awareness of our own mortality and impending death. Essentially, we make our decisions in an unconscious effort to be immortal—to live past our own mortality (e.g., by making a mark on the world etc.). Ernest Becker wrote several books on this theory including “The Birth and Death of Meaning,” which explores this idea and relates it to events throughout history. Considering this theory as it pertains to your question, you can consider the analogue of the ‘rubbernecker’ on the road. You’ve likely observed this

phenomenon: there's a gnarly crash on the highway and cars are lined up for almost a mile despite the fact that nothing is blocking the road. You realize that the slowing is caused by people hitting the breaks to gawk at the wreckage.

Through TMT it is argued that this behavior is evolutionarily instinctive because observing this wreckage is an intense reminder of one's mortality and provides some information on how to stave off death (i.e., stay alive). With violence and sport, you could view gladiator fights as the ultimate match against death.

Whoever is cheering for the victor vicariously experiences that conquest of mortality.

6) Do you think that viewing these violent acts on screens is messing with our mental state and behavior, or is it natural for us to be violent and desire it?

- a. I think all of the above could be true. I believe that it is possible for individuals who may possess certain vulnerability factors predisposing them to violent behavior could react to violent media in a way that is destructive or pathological. I don't think it would ever be guaranteed. I also think that to a certain extent violence is a part of our make-up as humans. Any denial of this is also denying the fact that we are creatures with base instincts (i.e., we need to eat, sleep, and ultimately survive...sometimes by violent means).