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Violence in context: Embracing an ecological approach to violent media exposure

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Abstract

This commentary expands on Anderson, Bushman, Donnerstein, Hummer, and Warburton's agenda for minimizing the impacts of violent media exposure (VME) on youth aggression. We argue that in order to effectively intervene in the development of aggression and other maladaptive traits, researchers and policymakers should take an ecological, developmental psychopathology approach to understanding children's exposure to VME within developmental, relational, environmental, and cultural contexts. Such a framework holds the most promise for identifying at-risk groups, establishing targets of intervention, and testing mechanisms of change.

In "SPSSI Research Summary of Media Violence," Anderson, Bushman, Donnerstein, Hummer, and Warburton apply a risk and resilience framework to their thorough review of decades of research establishing a significant positive relation between violent media exposure (VME) and aggression in children and adolescents. In an earlier review identifying risk factors for violent outcomes in youth, Loeber and Farrington (2000) took an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), outlining 41 individual traits and contributing factors from the child's family, peer, school, and neighborhood systems. Of note, cultural differences, child abuse and other trauma exposures, and genetic or neuropsychological factors were not included in their discussion, highlighting the inexhaustive nature of their list as well as the ever-developing body of knowledge in this area. Given the breadth of factors associated with VME and with aggression or violent behavior, it is no wonder that "no specific group has consistently demonstrated immunity to aggression-related effects of exposure to media violence" (Anderson, et al., 2015, p. 8).

A true developmental psychopathology approach – the origin of a risk and resilience framework – would center the effects of VME ecologically, or within the multiple unfolding individual, environmental, social, and cultural influences on children's trajectories over time. However, this perspective is remarkably absent in Anderson et al.'s summary. In this commentary, we posit that an ecological, developmental psychopathology perspective would enhance our understanding of VME by 1) Highlighting the importance of individual and environmental contexts of VME, especially caregivers; 2) Examining risk and protective factors across development, which can inform prevention and intervention efforts; and 3)

Framing a specific research agenda emphasizing longitudinal and intervention-oriented methods.

First, the critical importance of the context in which VME occurs is underscored by the authors' recommendations for action (e.g. improved rating systems, media literacy programs, and public education), nearly all of which rely on caregiving adults as the mechanism of intervention. As the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP; 2009) recommendation for covieing implies, family (as well as peer and cultural) contexts mediate the meaning and effect of VME, yet Anderson et al. do not discuss the caregiver's role in VME until the recommendation section. In this way, their summary leaves largely unqueried the "how" and "why" of children's VME, which are the bedrock of effective interventions. If we expect caregivers to be primary targets of our interventions, monitors of children's VME, and cognitive and affective mediators of content, we should include them in our theoretical and research models. Additionally, as reflected in the AAP's (2009) unique recommendations for children under two years of age, our models should be conscious of the context of the developmental level of the child, a critical component of understanding how *any* environmental factor impacts development. By identifying internal and external factors that predict children's exposure and adverse outcomes, rather than assuming that parents and children will benefit *a priori* from public education or rating systems, we will build vital knowledge for effective targeting of prevention and intervention efforts.

Second, and relatedly, when examining developmental, cultural, and environmental contexts of exposure, it is important to remember that "multiple risk factors do not simply add up like weights hung around a child's neck" (Coie, Miller-Johnson, & Bagwell, 2000, p. 100). Rather, risk and protective factors – individual and environmental – interact in complex ways throughout the course of development. For example, youth with high exposure to community violence (an ecological risk factor for aggression) show lower physiological reactivity to media violence in the lab (an individual risk factor for aggression; Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz & Walsh, 2001). This study further illustrates that children's exposure to VME occurs in the context of *other* violence. Understanding the transactional nature of influences both within and around the child across development holds the most promise for yielding effective, targeted prevention and intervention efforts. Further, whereas most of the recommendations offered by Anderson et al. are what prevention science would deem "primary prevention efforts," which are aimed at the whole population, a true public health prevention approach would also include secondary or selective prevention efforts, targeting individuals who are at risk. Such targeting requires knowledge of risk groups and will therefore rest on sound developmental, longitudinal research of children's VME and other risk factors in ecological contexts.

Finally, a developmental, ecological approach to curbing the effects of VME in youth dictates a specific research agenda. In their suggestions for policymakers and media developers, Anderson and colleagues argue for an improved ratings system, increased development of prosocial content, and introduction of media education programs. However, research has not yet provided definitive evidence to support the universal efficacy of these efforts. In accordance with Anderson et al.'s recommendation for increased longitudinal and intervention research, we caution against the use of correlational studies as evidence for the

causal effect of VME on aggressive or violent behavior. Also, given criticism of laboratory methods as potentially invalid measures of aggression (Felson, 1996; Olson, 2004; Savage, 2004), researchers (including Anderson et al.) have called for longitudinal, developmental, multilevel studies beginning in early childhood to elucidate specific causal processes that underlie developmental outcomes, as well as large-scale, randomized clinical trials to test these mechanisms and examine the efficacy of intervention or prevention efforts (e.g. Hinshaw, 2002). Ultimately, research should move away from a linear approach to risk assessment, instead considering multidisciplinary, person-centered, transactional approaches to examining adverse developmental outcomes that consider individual and ecological risk and protective factors.

We applaud the authors for a thorough review as well as for their call for continued longitudinal and intervention research. Their recommendations are especially important given the increase in screen time among youth. Violent media exposure does not occur in a vacuum, and it is only when we begin to understand the co-occurring factors that contribute to and guard against the development of aggression in youth – as well as how to modify them – that we will be able to generate targeted programming in order to effectively intervene in these processes.

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