



Violence risk: Re-defining variables from the first-person perspective

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 25 years, there have been notable advances in violence risk assessment of mentally ill individuals using actuarial methods to define high versus low risk groups. A focus on readily observable risk factors, however, has led to a relative neglect of how the offender's subjective states may be valuable to consider in research on the ongoing assessment and prevention of violence. We argue for the relevance of considering idiographic features of subjective experience in the development of structured assessment methods. We then identify three heuristic groups of existing constructs related to aggressive and illegal behavior that may capture modifiable, time-varying aspects of mental functioning leading up to involvement in an act of violence. These hypothesized domains are: (i) construal of intent and cause; (ii) normative reference points; and (iii) emotion recognition and regulation. We suggest that risk state for violence can be studied in a parsimonious and direct manner through systematic research on coded speech samples. The coding method for such an assessment procedure would be almost identical to existing structured clinical judgment instruments with the difference that variables be defined from a first-person point of view. Some implications of this approach for the tertiary prevention of violence in high-risk individuals are described.

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"[M]eaning" is not something one can see or hear in the act *qua* external material fact, as one can perceive in an object its natural properties and functions, such as colour, rigidity, and weight...A plant cannot say anything about itself to the botanist. It makes no attempt to explain itself in terms of the natural sciences. A social act,

however, may very well carry with it a self-interpretation, a statement about what it means, for the acting individual himself attaches to his act a certain sense, which is expressed in some way or another and which is understood by those to whom the act is addressed (Kelsen, 1934/1992) page 9.

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1. The need for first person accounts

Observation alone does not always provide information about the meaning of an action to the individual who engages in it. This holds