Linking Violent Thinking
Implicit Theory-Based Research
With Violent Offenders

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Violent offenders often articulate offense-supportive cognitions during rehabilitation, yet these statements have received little theoretical attention, and intervention approaches have targeted each type of statement individually, as if they were unrelated. An implicit theory approach to cognitions has proved fruitful for research and intervention. The authors apply it to violent offenders. The first study presents a grounded theory investigation of offense-supportive cognition in prisoners attending an intensive rehabilitation program for violent offenders. Analysis of offense transcripts enabled the identification of several implicit theories. These results were refined with a second sample and trialed in the rehabilitation program. Findings suggest that several implicit theories held by violent offenders are linked to each other through the widespread normalization of violence. Few offenders experienced their violent behavior as abnormal, or completely outside of their control, once initiated. The authors make suggestions for enhancing the empirical status of this research domain, particularly through experimental investigations.

Keywords: domestic violence; homicide; youth violence; violent offenders

Western societies are preoccupied with what to do about violent crime and violent offenders. Yet our understanding of how to effectively rehabilitate violent offenders has a long way to go (Polaschek & Collie, 2004). The dominant model of offender rehabilitation is cognitive–behavioral, with cognition listed as one of the “big four” criminogenic needs (Andrews & Bonta, 1998). Thus, violent offender rehabilitation program designers invariably report that they target cognitive factors (Polaschek & Collie,
2004), but there is as yet little theoretical guidance about which forms of cognition to target or how.

This article focuses on offenders’ violence-supportive thinking. The small number of descriptions in the published literature of how violence prevention programs tackle violence-supportive cognition—often viewed as distorted or deviant beliefs—imply that each belief statement an offender raises should be challenged as if it exists in isolation from a more substantial network of related cognitive content (see Polaschek & Collie, 2004). Alternatively, programs are based on broad approaches to dealing with “irrational thinking” associated with other forms of psychopathology (e.g., Ellis, 1977; also see Serin & Preston, 2001) or on non–empirically derived typologies from related fields (e.g., Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, 1977; also see Bush, 1995). This piecemeal approach is both theoretically incoherent, and unhelpful for practitioners.

In this article, we describe part of a program of research that explores whether the statements offenders make about their offending can fruitfully be conceptualized as the products of their underlying causal theories. First, we outline the theoretical background to the implicit theory (IT) approach and clarify why it is preferable to the term *schema*. Second, we review previous research on schemata and violence, before presenting two studies that develop and cross-validate a series of ITs derived from offence transcripts obtained from violent offenders. Finally, we discuss our results and consider future research.

The IT Approach

Theorists in developmental (Wellman, 1990), cognitive (Kuhn, 1989), and social psychology (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995) have proposed that humans process efficiently complex social information by developing and using ITs. Based on past experience, ITs are composed of structured interconnected belief networks organized around an underlying dominant theme, or theory. These structures are hypothesized to guide behavior implicitly and allow individuals to predict and anticipate what usually happens during a social event (Ward, 2000).

There are two central features of ITs: beliefs and desires. Put simply, individual actions are carried out to achieve certain desires, but these actions are guided by prior beliefs rather than an objective judgment of the world (Wellman, 1990). For many researchers, the term *theory* serves as a useful metaphor for explaining how everyday ITs function. First, rather like scientific theory, knowledge within ITs is intrinsically linked through an underlying
theme. It is impossible to meaningfully isolate knowledge fragments because meaning is determined by interconnections with other pieces of knowledge embedded in the theory framework (Wellman, 1990). Second, everyday ITs resemble scientific theory in that they identify ontology. That is, individuals are described with reference to their minds and their basic mental functioning. Finally, like scientific theories, everyday ITs involve inductive and deductive reasoning. Put simply, like scientists, ordinary people develop comprehensive theories about the actions of individuals. They construct hypotheses about the beliefs, intentions, and desires of individuals and how these relate to behavior. Like scientific theories, these causal hypotheses may be revised in the face of contradictory data collected about an individual. However, unlike good scientific theorizing, once developed, well-formed ITs are highly resistant to revision. Theory holders may ignore or “twist” inconsistent evidence to maintain support for the theory’s accuracy. For example, hostile individuals guided by the theory that others also are usually hostile and self-serving will tend to interpret an unexpected bump from another individual as having malicious intent, even when independent judges view the other’s intent as unambiguously benign (Epps & Kendall, 1995).

Ward and colleagues demonstrated the theoretical value of the IT perspective with sexual offenders’ offense-supportive beliefs (Polaschek & Gannon, 2004; Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999). For example, Ward and Keenan (1999) argued that during childhood, some child molesters develop ITs about children and sexuality that help to explain and predict atypical sexual experiences such as child sexual abuse. In time, these children develop into men who use these theories to make predictions about children’s beliefs and desires. The result may be that offenders interpret friendly, innocent child behaviors as revealing underlying sexual intent.

The fruitfulness of the IT approach with sex offenders is also already evident in the therapeutic and research domains. Therapists have begun to use the IT approach to reconceptualize treatment programs for child sexual offenders (see Drake, Ward, Nathan, & Lee, 2001), and it has also generated novel research (e.g., Gannon, Wright, Beech, & Williams, 2006; Mihailides, Devilly, & Ward, 2004).

To summarize, we view ITs as a type of schema. However, the term schema has several diverse meanings in psychology (Ward, 2000). The advantages of using the term IT include (a) its specificity (theory content is organized around beliefs and desires, and theories are actively involved in interpreting and organizing incoming information and in predicting behavior) and (b) the substantial body of associated psychological theory that
provides a robust developmental context for ITs, facilitating the integration of offense-supportive cognition into etiological theories of offending (see Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006).

Schemata and Violence

Although the IT approach has not been applied previously to nonsexual violent offending, several studies have examined the variously defined concept of schemata both experimentally and in qualitative designs. Schemata are irregularly defined as caches of stored knowledge (Alba & Hasher, 1983), structures that organize knowledge abstractly (Fiske, 2004), or theories about how parts of the world function (Alford & Beck, 1997). Like ITs, however, schemata are assumed to exist largely outside conscious awareness and to take an active role in drawing meaning from incoming stimuli. In addition, the accessibility of schemata—like that of ITs—is hypothesized to vary. Schemata may become more prominent and influential when primed by situational factors and are difficult to override under conditions of high cognitive load in which information processing is particularly likely to be automated.

Social cognitive research on aggression in children (Quiggle, Garber, Panak, & Dodge, 1992), adolescents (e.g., Graham & Hudley, 1994), and adults (Matthews & Norris, 2002) has focused on a single schema type: the hostile attribution bias (HAB; Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1980). The HAB refers to the tendency to attribute hostile intent to others’ behavior, even when there is no objective evidence with which to do so. Typically, aggressive research participants who are exposed to unambiguously hostile, ambiguously hostile, and benign social stimuli demonstrate that they perceive the first two types as hostile (e.g., Dill, Anderson, Anderson, & Deuser, 1997). Sometimes, they may even rate benign stimuli as hostile (Epps & Kendall, 1995). The HAB is a relatively automatic occurrence for highly aggressive people (Tiedens, 2001; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995), yet only one experimental study has been conducted with criminals. Copello and Tata (1990) compared violent and nonviolent offenders with hospital workers and found that both offender groups were more likely to demonstrate the HAB for ambiguous stimuli than were the hospital controls.

Honor-related schemata have also been subjected to experimental research. Nisbett and colleagues (e.g., Nisbett, 1993) have undertaken a historic study of the honor-related schemata of men in southern states of the United States. Their experimental findings demonstrate that southern men have complex schemata related to the social preservation of an honorable self-image. Compared to northern men, when southern male students were insulted in
front of a bystander, they sought redress through violence. That is, they were more likely to complete a scenario with the male protagonist’s injuring or threatening the approacher (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996).

Qualitative studies with violent offenders have identified themes in their violence-related thinking that are suggestive of schemata. Polaschek and Donovan (2006) conducted a grounded theory analysis of cognitive content from two sources: (a) 20 offense process narratives obtained from violent prisoners undertaking a rehabilitation program and (b) audiotapes of 15 group treatment sessions from the cognitive restructuring module of the same program. Grounded theory is a rigorous approach to inductively building theory from basic descriptive data about phenomena and is ideal in domains in which there is a dearth of theory and the phenomena themselves may not even be well described. Polaschek and Donavan found that these predominantly Maaori and Pacific Island men believed their violence to be (a) an acceptable way of exacting revenge, having fun, increasing social status, and obtaining material needs or wants, (b) something they were meant to do because they were good at it, (c) a normal way to interact with others, vital to survival and to reputation maintenance, and (d) beyond the offender’s control, made inevitable by others’ behavior or their own self-regulative inadequacies.

Lopez and Emmer (2002) interviewed 17 mainly Hispanic and African American adolescent male Texans selected because their violent offenses appeared to be primarily driven by strong belief systems. Similarly to Polaschek and Donovan (2006), each participant took part in a semistructured interview designed to elicit as much detail as possible about their offending and used grounded theory as the primary analytic tool. They focused on 41 descriptions that they labeled belief driven/violent assault, in which offenders reported using very high levels of violence “based on a ‘hypermusculine’ concept of what it means to be a ‘man on the streets’” (p. 34). They identified two subtypes: vigilante and honor crimes. Vigilante crimes were enacted to protect other less capable individuals (e.g., women), and honor crimes to protect oneself or one’s gang from perceived threats to physical well-being, status, or reputation.

The most authoritative and complete qualitative analysis of how violent men think is the work of Hans Toch (1992). From interviews with seriously violent inmates and parolees, Toch proposed that offenders shared two broad approaches to thinking about interactions with others that made violence more likely. Self-preserving strategies are concerned with consolidating and increasing social status for one’s own or others’ appraisal. Second, approaches that dehumanize others are ways of thinking about and using violence in which it is clear that other people’s rights and needs are of little importance compared to getting one’s own needs met.
Taken together, previous studies have suggested that violent offenders may have distinctive cognitive structures that go beyond the HAB, warranting a more systematic investigation of the utility of an IT approach with their beliefs. We report here two studies that examine the potential utility of an IT approach with violent offender cognition. In the first, we developed a preliminary series of ITs using a grounded theory analysis of offenders’ narrative descriptions of violent offenses. The aim of Study 2 was to examine the validity and reliability of the results of Study 1, using data from a second set of transcripts, and two raters, and also to report on a trial of the ITs in a group therapy context. Finally, we present the refined ITs, link them to previous research, and consider next steps in their development.

Study 1

Method

Data source. The raw data used in this study were archival, comprising 20 typed transcripts of offense process interviews conducted with men in the assessment phase of a multimodal, high-intensity group rehabilitation program for violent offenders during 1999 and 2000 (the National Violence Prevention Unit [NVPU]; Polaschek, Wilson, Townsend, & Daly, 2005). During assessment, offenders completed a battery of psychometric tests and several interviews. The offense process interview was conducted by psychologists specifically trained in offense process interviewing (see Polaschek, Hudson, Ward, and Siegert, 2001), aimed at gaining as much detail as possible from the offender about the events surrounding his index offense, along with his thinking, affective responses, and the volitional components of the resulting offense process. Either in the interview or shortly afterward, the interviewer typed the resulting narrative onto a computer. The average transcript length was approximately 2,500 words.

The mean age of participants at the time of the index violent offense was 22.4 years ($SD = 7.9$, range = 17 to 45 years). Mean sentence length was 3 years and 2 months (i.e., 38 months; $SD = 3.2$, range = 1 year, 8 months to 6 years, 6 months). At the time of data collection, all men were in the second half of their sentence. Half of the sample identified their ethnicity as Maaori, a quarter as Pacific Island, four as New Zealanders of European descent, and one as Asian. Most (80%) had violent convictions prior to their index offense. The index offenses were primarily serious assaults but included three aggravated robberies and two homicides.
**Data analysis procedure.** The data were coded using a grounded theory procedure based on Strauss and Corbin (1990). We chose this approach because of its suitability for research that is primarily inductive (i.e., where the process involves generating a few broad categories of phenomena from many specific instances) and where there is a dearth of theory.

In the first stage, the first author identified in each narrative vignette all of the content that contained evidence of offender theorizing. A liberal approach was taken to identifying material for this first step: Anything the offender said to explain or provide some way of understanding his violent behavior or that of others at the scene (e.g., victim, bystanders, co-offenders) was included at this stage. Once identified, this material was broken down into meaning units, blocks of text varying in length from a single phrase to one or two sentences.

Next, meaning units were coded into provisional categories on the basis of semantic similarity with other units. Each category was assigned a descriptive name based on the common semantic content of the meaning units. Each meaning unit was assigned to one or more categories (*multiple coding*), and a new category was created if the concept did not fit any existing category.

Consider the following example from a transcript: “(I had to beat him up) (for pulling that stupid stunt on me).” The parentheses delineate meaning units. The first meaning unit was coded to the provisional category *violence is expected of me*, and the second to *victim deserved violence for his actions and I am entitled to punish others*.

When this coding was completed for the first 10 transcripts, provisional categories were combined or subsumed under more abstract categories. Next, further meaning units were coded from the other 10 transcripts and used to test the adequacy of these provisional categories. Individual categories were expanded or two or more categories were combined and given a more abstract label to accommodate more data, and, where necessary, new categories were developed to allow new data to be incorporated.

**Results and Discussion**

Four violence-related ITs emerged from this analysis: (a) *beat or be beaten*, (b) *I am the law*, (c) *violence is normal*, and (d) *I get out of control*. We briefly describe each of these theories but leave more detailed description and examples until after they have been refined further, in Study 2.

Beat or be beaten is a complex IT. Men holding this theory appeared pre-occupied with how others—especially other men—view them. They are vigilant to cues that indicate that their self-image is being challenged or
threatened and believe that only violence can dissipate this threat. Some men see the resulting violence as essential to preventing others from exploiting them, whereas others see it as an opportunity for self-advancement. The greatest number of meaning units (57%) was identified as representative of this IT.²

Offenders who hold the I am the law IT appeared to see themselves as assuming a mantle of moral leadership in their family or wider community. They do not commit violent acts because they are threatened but on behalf of others, usually their clan, gang, extended family, or friends. They act as judge, jury, and executioner, sometimes at the specific behest of others but sometimes without consulting the parties they claim to be protecting. The targets of their violence can thus be despised groups in society (e.g., foreigners, gays, or sex offenders) or individuals who have transgressed against someone under their protection. I am the law was the supraordinate category for 39% of meaning units.

Violence is normal captures the commonly expressed view that violence is a routine occurrence between people, achieving goals such as having other people agree with one’s point of view and making children do what they are told. Offenders expressed this view when talking of others’ violence as well as their own. They regarded violence as superior to other methods for solving problems: with no significant negative consequences for victims or themselves. Because of the pervasiveness of this view, it often co-occurred with other ITs in the same narrative, and 46% of meaning units were coded as representative of this IT.

Finally, I get out of control refers to the theory that an offender is unable to regulate his aggressive behavior without outside intervention. The characteristic of this IT is the passive observer role taken by the theorist: He sees his behavior as unfolding once triggered without any active agency on his part; he feels consumed by larger forces. This was the least common theory, with about 12% of meaning units exemplifying it.

In conclusion, Study 1 demonstrated that a systematic qualitative examination of offenders’ descriptions of their violent offenses produced 237 codable meaning units that could be collapsed into four distinct ITs. However, further investigation was needed to ensure that raters using new data could reliably identify these theories.

**Study 2**

The purpose of Study 2 was to investigate—and, if necessary, improve—the reliability of categories proposed in Study 1 across new cases. There
were several stages: (a) A new sample of transcripts was drawn from the same source as Study 1—archived files of prisoners who underwent assessment at the NVPU—and relevant passages were coded by two raters (the first and second authors); (b) the results of Study 1 were trialed in the offense-related thinking component of the NVPU program, and the first author collated therapists’ feedback on clinical utility; (c) information from these activities was used to refine the theories and their descriptions; and (d) this final version was used by the same two raters to recode the transcripts.

**Study 2a: Independent Coding Study**

*Method of data collection and analysis.* As for Study 1, transcripts were extracted from the archived treatment files of 23 men entering the rehabilitation program at the NVPU. The mean age of these men at the time of the index offense was 24.6 years (SD = 8.4), and their mean sentence length was 4 years and 3 months. Most participants were Maori or Pacific men; 26% were European New Zealanders. Index offenses were equally divided between aggravated robbery and serious assault or homicide.

The first author examined each new transcript for examples of relevant material and marked each passage of text for later coding. This process identified 38 passages, varying from one sentence to a paragraph in length. The first author also prepared detailed descriptions of the theories and examples of the relevant meaning units from Study 1. This material, along with the text passages from Sample 2, was forwarded to the second rater, who then independently coded the new passages to ITs. Rater instructions allowed for multiple coding; that is, the coding of text to more than one IT.

*Results and discussion.* Rater 1 made 46 classifications, and Rater 2 made 48. Of these, 41 were in agreement. Among the disagreements were 3 cases in which Rater 1 chose I am the law, and Rater 2 chose beat or be beaten. Thus, of 53 classifications made by one or more raters, there was agreement on 77%, with evidence that there was a degree of confusion in reliably differentiating I am the law from beat or be beaten. Although no excerpt was classified to more than two categories, almost 40% were coded to more than one category, also suggesting that clarity of definition could be improved. Finally, these 53 classifications were unevenly distributed across the categories. Almost half (26) were to beat or be beaten, 14 were to I am the law, 8 to violence is normal, and 5 to I am out of control.

Discussion between raters suggested three areas of development that could enhance classification reliability and improve discriminability. First, beat or
be beaten appeared to take two distinct forms: positive, approach-oriented self-enhancement and negative “I had no other choice” self-preservation subtypes. Second, confusion over I am the law and beat or be beaten could substantially reduce if I am the law was the only category used when an offender viewed himself as acting on behalf of others. Third, raters agreed that violence is normal was functioning as a suprareordinate category for I am the law and beat or be beaten. Reexamination of the material surrounding the excerpts chosen for coding showed—as it had in the original study—that violence is normal was an underlying assumption of both of these theories. However, raters only used the violence is normal category in coding when the offender in the transcript directly spoke to the assumption because it was being challenged by an outsider, such as child protection services. Otherwise, offenders rarely questioned whether violence should have occurred, even when they were discussing the actions of others. Thus, we reasoned that violence is normal often did not warrant active theorizing because it was so pervasive a theory, it had attained the status of a kind of universal truth that did not warrant conscious attention.

**Study 2b: Clinical Utility Evaluation**

*Method.* A substantial revision of the manual for the offense-related thinking module of the NVPU program coincided with the results of the first study, enabling the program to trial the provisional ITs identified. Three pairs of group therapists trialed the ITs and associated descriptions and examples used by the raters in Study 2a, in each of their respective groups. Approximately 30 offenders used this material during the module in which they were taught to identify the thinking associated with their offending patterns.

*Results and discussion.* Examination of feedback from the prisoners and from oral discussion with therapists was largely positive. The ITs were clinically credible and easily learned by prisoners, who found many personal examples of the first three: I am the law, beat or be beaten, and violence is normal. However, few examples were found of I am out of control. Therapists reported that in program sessions, this IT was too readily seen as an excuse by men focused on taking responsibility for their offending. And therapists and offenders wanted an IT that uniquely captured “victim thinking,” theorizing that external agents had forced the man into acting violently (see self-preservation below).

Based on the feedback from both parts of Study 2, we made the following changes: Beat or be beaten was divided into two subtypes, labeled
self-enhancement and self-preservation, and we dropped violence is normal as a specific IT, instead recasting it as normalization of violence, a background assumption for both beat or be beaten subtypes and I am the law. The remaining IT, I get out of control, was retained but placed outside of the normalization of violence context: Men who theorized that the violence in their transcript was caused by personal dysregulation—although often normalizing some violence—regarded the violence they were discussing as abnormal in some way. These revisions are displayed in Figure 1, and each aspect is described in the next section.

When these revisions were used by the two raters from Study 2a to recode all material formerly coded as I am the law and beat or be beaten, agreement was improved. Of 35 classifications made, only two disagreements occurred, and just three extracts were allocated to more than one IT. There was 100% agreement on which form of beat or be beaten was present. Final percentages for each of these three ITs were 23% beat or be beaten: self-enhancement, 40% beat or be beaten: self-preservation, and 37% I am
the law. We did not recode I get out of control or make any changes to its definition. It remains a “stand-alone” theory, conceptually distinct from the others (see Figure 1), and was exemplified by 12% of overall meaning units.

Finally, we undertook a preliminary examination of the frequency of ITs and their co-occurrence within individual offense transcripts. For each transcript, we summed the number of ITs found and counted the frequency of co-occurrence, based on the revised model in Figure 1. Two transcripts provided evidence of three ITs. Both were coded as demonstrating I am the law and beat or be beaten: self preservation. One also showed I get out of control, the other beat or be beaten: self-enhancement. Another four transcripts showed evidence of two ITs; there was no consistent pattern of co-occurrence. The remaining 17 evinced only one IT, although there often were multiple examples of it. These findings stand in contrast to the clinical utility evaluation. In the clinical setting prisoners were examining several of their own offenses to discern common patterns and were at a point in treatment where they may have been more open to identifying their offending-related thinking. Hence, most offenders identified multiple ITs as underpinning their previous thinking about their offending.

Final Results and Discussion

Final Theoretical Refinement

Normalization of Violence

Renamed and reconceptualized from a stand-alone IT in Study 1 (violence is normal), the normalization of violence is now proposed as a background assumption for three of the remaining four ITs: both forms of beat or be beaten and I am the law. Violent prisoners spoke of violence as a routine occurrence between people that hardly needs explaining and that could be helpful in achieving some personal and social goals. Violence “resolves” conflicts, “persuades” others to do things, can be exhilarating or simply make you feel better, and usually it makes others treat you with respect. Whatever the end goal, violence is believed to be both acceptable and effective with little or no lasting negative consequences.

Men believed that physical wounds are insignificant and heal quickly. They are also likely to believe that harmful psychological effects, when they do occur, either also ameliorate quickly or are the result of other factors such as a victim’s preexisting psychological problems (“she was already nutcase before this”). Men often minimized the seriousness of their
own childhood or adult victimization. For example, they would comment that severe discipline had not caused them any harm and that it was needed because they were difficult children. Of adult beatings they would say, “Yeah, I got a beating, but it wasn’t anything.”

In the background portions of their offense process interviews, men spoke of having been taught boxing by their fathers so that they could defend themselves properly at school. One man spoke of passing on this tradition: “My son was getting into fights at school. So I taught both sons to box after school, so they could defend themselves. I didn’t want my sons looking like [cowards] or being walking [sic] over by every Tom, Dick, or Harry. Everyone needs respect.” Other examples of violence normalization were “she wouldn’t listen to me unless I hit her first” (A8), “how else was I going to get through to him that schoolwork was important” (A13), and “I told him this would happen if he didn’t pay up in time.”

*Beat or Be Beaten*

Both subtypes of the *beat or be beaten* IT refer to the need to act violently to achieve or maintain agency, status, and autonomy in a violent world. These theorists view others—especially other men—as prevailingly hostile. Their social status appraisals are focused on the beliefs and desires of others, particularly those who signify hostile intent. The term *beat or be beaten* was chosen to capture the preemptive nature of violence instigated from this IT: Men predicted that had they not taken the first step, *they* would have been assaulted or psychologically violated in some way (e.g., disrespected), and the prediction was “confirmed” when the victim inevitably retaliated. Among violent offenders, the beat or be beaten theory enjoys widespread support. It certainly is not an example of the cognitive pathology of isolated individuals. On the contrary, offenders who hold this IT cluster together, particularly in custodial institutions, thus reinforcing the theory for each other. Commonly, when one offender thought that another offender was sending him a “message” that required aggressive retaliation, checking with the other man confirmed that the affronted man’s perception was correct.

*Self-enhancement.* In this subtype, men view their social self-image as constantly under construction, in much the same way as narcissistic individuals are theorized to do (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Men who manifested this subtype seemed accepting of the adversarial world they lived in and confident that they were meant to succeed in it. They regarded challenges from others as rewarding and even proactively sought out opportunities to demonstrate their social dominance, making predictions about how
to enhance their status. This IT is mainly associated with violence between men, and the following are examples of it:

I thought I was a gangsta, one bad dude, I could do anything I want and no one could stop me. . . . Don’t ever get smart on me, like you’re thinking bad things about me ‘cause I beat you up. If you aren’t cool, don’t even talk to me. (B4)

Used to go to town on Friday nights just to have a fight. If I wasn’t beating someone up I was getting beaten up. I loved it, chance to prove myself. (B18)

**Self-preservation.** This IT subtype shares close links with the HAB. Men who espouse this theory are resentful and mistrustful of others, believing themselves to be victims and vulnerable to exploitation. They describe themselves as forced into violence by evidence of others’ intent to prey on them, a theoretical framework that may become so pervasive as to meet the criteria for paranoid personality disorder. This IT can apply to violence against men or women, sometimes even in intimate relationships.

He was trying it on: if I hadn’t sorted it then, it would just have got worse. (A9)

I am still [angry] at the guys who [stole my drug supply]. It is bad for me. If I get ripped off, people will think that they can get away with it. It has got to stop. (B19)

I was about 20 when I started to go hard. I learned in jail that if I don’t do violence this [derogatory person term] is going to walk all over me. I don’t like hurting people, but what choice have I got? (B11)

**I Am the Law**

In the third IT, the theorist believes himself to be morally superior to and entitled—even obliged—to attack, harm, or discipline others when their behavior requires it. The hallmark of this IT is that violence is delivered in the service of the protection of others: family and friends or the social order. This theory underpins vigilantism: According to men holding this theory, they are the local sheriff, they can identify when violence is needed, and they are best qualified to deliver it.

When working on behalf of society, men may use this IT to perpetrate hate crimes: attacks on foreigners, gays, or child sex offenders. A man said of a premeditated solo assault on a child molester soon after the victim had arrived on his low-security wing: “I beat him up because that’s what you do. That’s what I learned [in a previous placement in a high-security prison]: you go after them. They are scum.”
Men who theorize that they should act violently on behalf of others expect approval and are hurt when their actions meet with disapproval especially from the parties they are protecting: usually a woman or child. Such is their belief in their own judgments that they may not even consult the “aggrieved” party prior to acting or may act despite their objections.

Although both this theory and beat or be beaten are about social identity maintenance or enhancement (Craig, 2002), there is a key difference. The beat or be beaten theorist enhances or retains his status in the eyes of others by standing up to an opponent who has already established high social status by physical prowess. To assault an opponent who was unable to defend himself (e.g., someone who was not a good fighter or was physically small) would result in a loss of status. By contrast the I am the law theorist believes he can achieve a positive outcome for his social group—and thus maintain or elevate his social status—by physically punishing people who may be relatively vulnerable, easily defeated individuals (Craig, 2002). That the victim is unable to defend himself or herself and may be terrified is of little importance when acting on behalf of others.

People come to me with their problems because they know they can rely on me to sort them out. (B5)

My niece phoned me up. Her partner had been hitting her. She’d been asking me what she should do. I said “just throw him out” but she said, “I can’t, it’s my baby’s father.” So me and him had a fight. I went a bit overboard, my niece got really mad at me. She called the police. I was really hurt that she did that, after she asked for my help. (A1)

I Get Out of Control

This IT refers to problems with self-control, reflected in offenders’ theorizing that they are unable to regulate their own behavior without assistance. Men who violently assault others sometimes attribute this behavior to uncontrollable anger or rage (see Polaschek & Donovan, 2006). Others make the attribution to their behavior itself, noting that although they intended to carry out a minor act of violence, somehow they became engrossed and “went too far.” Because they perceive themselves to be incapable of adequate self-regulation, they may then hold others responsible when they become dysregulated: “He shouldn’t have done that to me, he knows how I am when . . .”

Loss of self-control of course is often attributed to external situational factors such as drug or alcohol intoxication or unusual life stressors. Given
the neurotoxic effects of a number of drugs and the relationship among arousal, affect, and aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), both of these explanations could be valid on occasion. Yet in these data, alcohol and drugs were rarely offered as causes of severe dysregulation: Serious violent offenders often emphasized that despite drinking alcohol they were in control of their thinking, intent, and behavior. Instead, severely out of control behavior was sometimes theorized to be caused by rage or most often by the forward momentum of violent action.

The following are examples of I get out of control: “I know once on the streets I’m going to get into [violence], it just can’t be helped” (B2), “All of a sudden I go on a rage” (B8), “I really lost it. I really laid into him” (B10), “I was planning on doing things differently but once I got going, just see red, nothing else matters” (A6), and “I only meant to hurt him a bit. But once I started . . . my friends had to pull me off him. That’s how it is sometimes with me” (A14).

Conclusions and Future Directions

In these two studies, we have developed and conducted a preliminary validation of ITs derived from violent offenders’ descriptions of their offenses, using grounded theory. We have discussed the theories as relatively separate entities, but a number of offense transcripts contained evidence of more than one type, and men in treatment who used the ITs from Study 1 usually reported that at least two or three of them underpinned aspects of their violent offending.

A number of links can be made between our final results and previous research, suggesting that these ITs may have ecological validity. For example, the theoretical importance of beliefs that normalize violence, effectively desensitizing people to its use, has been recognized for some time by aggression theorists and researchers (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Huesmann, 1998).

Against this backdrop of widespread acceptance of violence, Figure 1 and the descriptions above illustrate that violence is specifically useful in achieving social influence in three ways: self-enhancement, self-preservation, and the protection of others. These beat or be beaten and I am the law theories are related to results from previous qualitative studies. Lopez and Emmer (2002) found that the most frequently occurring belief-driven type of violent assault was the honor crime of which there were two types, those committed to defend or protect one’s own image (i.e., beat or be beaten: self-preservation) and those committed to defend the image and reputation of a gang (I am the law).
Toch’s (1992) analysis of prisoners’ violence produced three distinct ways in which violence was used to enhance the perpetrator’s image in his and others’ minds. He distinguished between *self-image defending* (the use of aggression to punish those who have shed any kind of doubt on the man’s image) and *self-defending* (perceiving physical danger in others that requires a defensive display of violence), both of which appear to overlap beat or be beaten: self-preservation. His third strategy was *self-image promoting* (creating opportunities to demonstrate one’s prowess in dominating and defeating others), which can be likened to beat or be beaten: self-enhancement.

Nisbett’s (1993) investigations into the underpinnings of honor-based crime in the U.S. South also is echoed in our theories. Nisbett noted that the socialization of U.S. southern men includes the development of several aggression-related “culture of honor” schemata. One is that preemptive violence is necessary to defend, protect, or enhance personal reputation relative to other men and to prevent others’ violence. This description covers both aspects of the beat or be beaten IT.

I am the law also has connections with Nisbett’s (1993) work. Southern men learn that a man has the right to take the law into his own hands to protect himself, his property, and family—here Nisbett quoted a North Carolina proverb: “every man is a sheriff on his own hearth” (p. 444). Toch (1992) discussed a similar worldview when he described the *norm enforcer*: a man who acts as a one-man posse, who feels that he knows when rules have been violated; his conception of how violators must be dealt with is primitive and direct, and invariably involves his active participation. . . . They patrol their beat alertly searching for black knights carrying off maidens. (pp. 164-165)

As we have noted, Toch further observed that such men intervened more to advertise themselves than to help with the actual problem.

I am out of control has not been reported in previous sociological and qualitative research with seriously violent men. Instead of being a theory about social relationships and self-image, we suggest that this IT may be more the man’s observation of the experience of profoundly deficient self-regulation, possibly underpinned partly by biological and genetic factors. There is a developing body of empirical research that suggests that serious chronic violent offenders may not be simply making excuses. They may be right: It is harder for them to regulate themselves than it is for others. Research with a New Zealand birth cohort identified a variable in young children that Caspi, Henry, McGee, Moffitt, and Silva (1995) called *lack of*
control, which they described as encapsulating “an inability to modulate impulsive expression, impersistence in problem solving, as well as sensitivity to stress and challenge that is expressed in affectively charged negative reactions” (p. 59). Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, and Silva (1996), using the same large cohort of New Zealand boys, found that scores on the lack of control variable as early as 5 years were uniquely predictive of violent convictions at 18 years. Because genetic endowment and environment so often work together, young boys with this under-regulated temperament are also likely to be undercontained by parents with a similar temperament and to see affective and behavioral dyscontrol modeled by those same caregivers. As such a person matures, he may learn both that some people around him engage unpredictably in behavior that harms others and that he too is incapable of anticipating the consequences of his own responses in some circumstances, leading him to develop this theory about himself.

Each of the ITs, then, shows external consistency. In other words, our proposed ITs can be linked to existing bodies of research, but we believe that they tie together existing work in a more theoretically coherent and clinically useful manner. And clinically, therapists reported that the use of the ITs greatly streamlined and simplified the process of identifying and challenging offense-supportive thoughts in the program. It was easy for men to grasp the concept that if they continued to theorize in the ways we identified, they were much more likely to move toward further violent offending. Grouping cognitions into theories as this approach does greatly simplifies the task for men who already often have compromised learning ability. And because they are theories, they can be generalized to new situations offenders run into in the course of rehabilitation, enhancing retention of the key cognitive concepts and greatly assisting release-related safety planning.

There are several limitations to the present studies and many fruitful directions for future research. First, the transcripts for these studies were constructed with men approaching the end of their sentences, thus creating a substantial time delay between offending and recall that is likely to have reduced participants’ recall accuracy compared to soon after the offense. Different styles of interviewing by therapists in obtaining the descriptions may also have influenced how offenders talked about their offending. Both of these concerns, along with the characteristics of our sample, support the importance of additional studies with new raters and samples at this early stage of development. We would not expect our findings—obtained as they were from high-risk, chronically violent men entering a particular prison rehabilitation program—to necessarily generalize to other samples such as mentally disordered offenders, or women, or even men with less significant histories of
violence. Another interesting question is the extent to which these ITs support nonviolent offending by violent offenders. Are they relevant for use with men who specialize in intimate violence? A history of intimate partner assault is common in men entering the NVPU program, but it is rarely the only type of violence they perpetrate, suggesting that as intimate violence offenders, they belong to the higher risk subtypes who commit other forms of antisocial and violent crime (see Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004). Do lower risk intimate violence subtypes hold these ITs?

We were also reluctant to report rates of IT co-occurrence in our preliminary study because our main aim was to identify the ITs themselves rather than to investigate individual differences in IT use. Future qualitative research is needed to investigate IT co-occurrence within individual offenders and relationships between ITs and offense characteristics.

Experimental studies, in addition to qualitative approaches, would enhance empirical validation of the proposed ITs. If ITs are often outside of awareness, implicit methods may be ideal, rather than questionnaires that rely on conscious, deliberative processing. For example, priming men using cues from social situations relating to each of these ITs should increase the likelihood of particular kinds of aggressive behavior (e.g., toward particular targets). So exposure to an opportunity to prove himself should make a man who holds the beat or be beaten: self-enhancement IT more likely to be aggressive toward a worthy (i.e., high-status) opponent but not toward a woman (Bargh, 2006; Kamphuis, de Ruiter, Janssen, & Spierling, 2005).

In contrast, performance on inhibitory control tasks—with or without arousal-related priming—could provide more information about the veracity of the I get out of control theory. There is some evidence already that some violent men find stopping tasks and altering goals difficult, once started (Bergvall, Wessely, Forsman, & Hansen, 2001). Identifying and comparing inhibitory performance for men who provide this IT as an explanation for their offending with those who do not may have value in establishing whether it is a genuine observation or simply an excuse.

Finally, humans do not theorize in a vacuum. Some ITs may be associated with particular motivational structures. For example, beat or be beaten: self-enhancement would be predicted to be associated with approach-related goals and self-preservation with avoidant goals. Experimental designs can permit examination of behavioral intentions and attitudes (Palfai & Ostafin, 2003). We encourage researchers to follow up with empirical investigations of our hypotheses and look forward to the further examination of the rehabilitative utility of this approach to working with offense-related cognition.
Notes

1. These men were from a later cohort of the program.
2. Percentages add up to more than 100% because of multiple coding.

References


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