5 Easy Ways To Become An Activist

Can researchers also be social activists? Absolutely! In fact, in my opinion, if you are researching social issues, you should also be doing activism work. But somehow we always come up with excuses not to: I don’t have time. I need to work on more publications. I have too much grading to do. I just want to relax when I’m not working.

But activism is an important part of fighting the good fight. Without setting examples as activists, we are just generating research that will get lost among the stacks of journals in the library. Here are a few ideas for incorporating activism into your life as an academic:

Write a letter to a representative or sign a petition.
With the internet and email, this has become incredibly easy to do. In fact, if you join some organizations who are actively engaged in activism efforts (e.g., Planned Parenthood, One.org, moveon.org), they will often do the work for you by emailing a letter to which you just have to attach your contact information at the bottom.

Attend a protest.
If you live in/near a large city or on a large campus, someone is always protesting something. Power really is in numbers, so get out there with all of your friends and show your support (or dislike) for issues about which you are passionate. Besides, this is one of the most fun ways to be an activist.

Write an op-ed or letter to the editor.
Don’t like what a columnist said in your local paper? Or even the New York Times? Want to draw the community’s attention to a pressing issue? Write an op-ed piece or a letter to the editor. You’ll be surprised how many people read those responses in newspapers and magazines just to get the flip side of an issue. And if you can cite psychological research to support your stance, all the better!

Incorporate social activism into your classroom.
Consider requiring a social activism project instead of a final paper in your classes. Have students do some sort of activism project on campus or in their community, make a presentation to the class, and write a final paper that discusses the experience and how it relates to the class content. I have found many students love having this opportunity, and some of them continue to engage in the activism activity after the semester ends.

Do activism in a creative new way.
Host a movie night where you watch an important film to spread awareness on a social issue. Have a party with an entrance fee that goes to a worthy cause. Send cards to all of your friends and family for a reason other than birthdays or Christmas (e.g., Women’s History Month, Martin Luther King Day, International AID Day) to let them know that issues such as racism, sexism, and high HIV infection rates still exist.

While the thought of adding activism to your to-do list sounds exhausting, if you incorporate it into the activities you already do it can be fun, rather than just another task on a never-ending list.

Michelle Kaufman
Graduate Student Committee Chair
When Violence Becomes A Reflex: The Role of Automatic Information Processing in Child Physical Abuse Rick

Universal symbol of harmony and love, the family should constitute a safe haven for children throughout their formative years. Instead of safety however, many times children face danger, instead of love they encounter anger and neglect, and instead of being cared for, they suffer terrible physical or psychological abuse at the hands of their own parents. Approximately three out of 1000 children fall victim to substantiated child physical abuse (CPA) every year, (NCANDS, 2002), and many physically abusive parenting situations occur during ambiguous or complex parent-child interactions.

All parents possess chronically accessible cognitive schemas that continuously guide parental perceptions, interpretations, and child-related behaviors. In contrast to low-risk for CPA parents however, under ambiguous or complex parenting situations, parents activate aggressive, interpersonal schemas, interpreting their children’s behavior negatively; this process is automatic, happening outside of awareness, and guiding subsequent violent behavior (Crouch & Milner, 2005). In addition, structures that are temporarily activated are believed to have the same effect on social information processing as chronically active, preconscious structures (Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982).

In an effort to understand parental information processes as they relate to family violence, Farc, Crouch, Skowrons, and Milner (2004) designed a series of studies to test whether CPA risk status (as assessed by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory; Milner, 1986) and supraliminal/subliminal exposure to aggression cues are independently and additively associated with increased activation of aggression-related information structures, leading to higher levels of hostile interpretations of ambiguous child pictures. We applied previous findings on automatic schema activation to the parenting context, and found that parents’ and children’s interpretations of ambiguous child pictures were influenced both by chronic accessibility for hostility-related schemas and by exposure to cues of aggression. Thus, parents categorized as high-risk for CPA were significantly more likely than low-risk parents to rate the children portrayed in the ambiguous child pictures as more hostile. These results illustrate the fact that high-risk for CPA parents might be more likely to interpret ambiguous care-giving situations as containing signs of hostility. Moreover, we found that temporarily activated schemas have similar effects as chronically accessible constructs do. In the context of an unclear or difficult parenting situation, parents who have recently been exposed to hostility-related constructs (e.g., through violent media) might be unaware of the fact that they are more prone to interpret their children’s actions as hostile.

Understanding the role automaticity plays in the cognitive activation of aggression-related structures represents a pivotal first step in combating CPA, by effectively reducing hostile information processing biases. Intervention strategies should aim to change destructive information processing activities that occur automatically. If parents are taught to control automatic influences on their perceptions, interpretations, and actions, the rates of CPA may lower significantly in families where control principles are applied, thus breaking the cycle of violence.

Maria-Magdalena Farc
Northern Illinois University

(For references and/or other information, contact author: madifar@hotmail.com)

Interpersonal Violence Goes Global

Is the war in Iraq spawning a new generation of terrorists? A recent multiple-agency intelligence report seems to imply that this may be the case. Their assessment of terrorist outcomes due to counterterrorism efforts, such as the confrontation in Iraq, suggested that the war in Iraq is one more motivator for Islamic Jihadists to continue fighting. Following the recent Israeli-Hizbollah war in Lebanon, it was also suggested that the Israeli military strikes only increased Hezbollah’s clout, prompting more young people to take up arms.

One basic question underlies these current events: Does violence beget more violence? In the Western world, despite the dismal frequency in which we hear about high school violence, domestic battering, or stereotyped bashing, societal norms are clear in the open disapproval of such actions. But, in many non-Western societies, interpersonal violence is more openly accepted, tolerated, and considered normal, even a testament to maintaining one’s honor. In these situations, such as in societies throughout the Middle East, it seems but a small step from overlooking the detrimental effects of interpersonal violence to accepting life with daily occurrences of intergroup violence.

These relevant and timely issues are currently being brought out into the public arena on a daily basis across the globe. News stories abound in too many countries where armed militias consist-ently kidnap, maim, torture, and kill innocent civilians. How can we as social researchers confront this issue and prevent further violence? It is possible to find studies in the literature that provide evidence that reciprocal escalations (or the tit-for-tat logic) may act as mitigating factors that further propagate cycles of violence. Few empirical studies, however, offer alternative solutions.

While attending the APA convention in New Orleans this past August, I attended a session detailing the events surrounding the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. What makes this symposium relevant to the discussion of interpersonal violence is that despite threats and resistance from Israeli settlers, no major altercations ensued during the government enforced withdrawal. The speakers, Haim Omer and Nahi Alon of Tel Aviv University, presented their model of non-violent constructive struggle, a tactic based on the teachings of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr, and further developed for use in family conflicts. Omer and Alon’s model was implemented in August 2005 during the Gaza withdrawal to prevent escalations into violent reactive episodes. The model worked beautifully in Gaza, as violence was restrained to an absolute minimum. As Omer and Alon spoke, along with Tammy Rubel from the Conflict Transformation and Management Center at the New Israel Fund, they described the potential use of constructive fighting in social and political conflicts. It struck me that the application of this model on a grander scale is sorely needed. The model comprises a simple shift in approaching one’s opponent. Instead of demonizing the opponent, which encompasses all of the obligatory feelings of winning and retaliation, there is a sense of acknowledgment towards the opponent, while resisting that obligation to retaliate.*

Interpersonal violence touches all of us, be it directly or indirectly, wherever we are in the world. As social science researchers interested in social issues, the cyclical nature of violent world events demand our attention, not to mention intervention. As informers to policy makers, research in these areas could not be any more critically necessary.

*For more information about non-violent constructive struggle, see www.mif.org.

Janice Adelman
Student Chair-Elect

统When Violence Becomes A Reflex: The Role of Automatic Information Processing in Child Physical Abuse Rick

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In an effort to understand parental information processes as they relate to family violence, Farc, Crouch, Skowrons, and Milner (2004) designed a series of studies to test whether CPA risk status (as assessed by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory; Milner, 1986) and supraliminal/subliminal exposure to aggression cues are independently and additively associated with increased activation of aggression-related information structures, leading to higher levels of hostile interpretations of ambiguous child pictures. We applied previous findings on automatic schema activation to the parenting context, and found that parents’ and children’s interpretations of ambiguous child pictures were influenced both by chronic accessibility for hostility-related schemas and by exposure to cues of aggression. Thus, parents categorized as high-risk for CPA were significantly more likely than low-risk parents to rate the children portrayed in the ambiguous child pictures as more hostile. These results illustrate the fact that high-risk for CPA parents might be more likely to interpret ambiguous care-giving situations as containing signs of hostility. Moreover, we found that temporarily activated schemas have similar effects as chronically accessible constructs do. In the context of an unclear or difficult parenting situation, parents who have recently been exposed to hostility-related constructs (e.g., through violent media) might be unaware of the fact that they are more prone to interpret their children’s actions as hostile.

Understanding the role automaticity plays in the cognitive activation of aggression-related structures represents a pivotal first step in combating CPA, by effectively reducing hostile information processing biases. Intervention strategies should aim to change destructive information processing activities that occur automatically. If parents are taught to control automatic influences on their perceptions, interpretations, and actions, the rates of CPA may lower significantly in families where control principles are applied, thus breaking the cycle of violence.

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