

## Educating Away from Violence: Referential Directness vs. Obliqueness

Education away from violence generally adopts what I shall call a “referentially direct” approach to the subject. By that, I mean that making direct reference to violence in the education process is central to the approach. A good example of the referentially direct approach is in a program introduced into the Israeli high-school system in the mid 1990’s. The program was spurred, in part, by a desire to educate for peace between Israel and the Palestinians after the signing of the Oslo peace agreement. The Ministry of Education then accelerated the program after the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzchak Rabin, by an Israeli. The program utilized prominent slogans such as “No to Violence!” and “Say ‘No!’ to Violence.” In addition, the materials gave referential focus to violence, as, for example, in a workbook entitled, “Violence: Distinctions and Definitions.” This workbook consists of extensive discussions of different kinds of violence and laws covering violent behavior. Finally, teachers’ guides heavily engage in such subjects as “dealing with your violent tendencies.” So, this program exemplifies well what I call the referentially direct approach to education away from violence, involving central references to violence in its method.

On paper, at least, the referentially *direct* approach should have a serious effect on behavior. Studies by various researchers, including Kimble and Perlmutter (1970), and Martens and Landers (1972), have shown that focusing on an act one is about to do can have a definite inhibitory effect on the performance of the act. Merely so focusing brings various options to a subject’s awareness, causing the subject to consider which option to chose, rather than simply doing the contemplated act. In addition, if the subject can then recall a reason for not performing the act under consideration, then the subject is likely to choose a different option. Hence, if a

person can be trained to focus on contemplated acts of violence, and then recall the reasons for not engaging in violence, this should have an inhibitory effect on violent behavior. Studies by Dijksterhuis and van Kippenberg (2000) have shown, in addition, that just being keenly aware of one's *self* at the time can have an inhibitory effect on actions one might otherwise perform. This finding is consistent with noted effects of various Buddhist meditation practices that train for full awareness of one's self and one's actions in the course of one's daily behavior. Such awareness can strongly shape behavior by inhibiting immediate, habitual responses.

Based on recent psychological and neuroscientific studies, my thesis is that especially in conditions prevailing in most Western societies, the referentially direct approach has serious shortcomings. These shortcomings can defeat the purpose of an educational program away from violence. Because of these shortcomings, I suggest that a "referentially oblique" approach would be better conceived than a referentially direct approach. A referentially oblique approach de-emphasizes central reference to violence, educating for behavior that *in fact* precludes violence, without spelling that out. For example, on a referentially oblique program, we would educate for "peacableness" or "equanimity," or the like, and make scant or secondary reference to violence itself.

The idea is this. A referentially direct approach is compromised, by the heavy referential-field for violence, it introduces, accosting a subject's consciousness when about to commit a violent act. The inhibitory effects of focusing on an act-candidate can be defeated by the ready availability of the category of violence in the subject's consciousness. Here's why.

Psychologists have coined the term "ideomotor action" to cover a fascinating phenomenon, namely, that having in mind the very idea of a type of action can

actually prompt a person to perform that action. The action will occur without conscious intention. This has been shown most strikingly in studies of ideomotor mimicry of other persons' behavior. For example, studies by Bargh, Chen and Burrows (1996) showed that young subjects, following a session of being exposed to the idea of elderly people, will unconsciously mimic the slow and shuffling gait of the elderly. Similarly, students having just gone through a session thinking about professors will score higher on immediately following tasks requiring general intelligence.

We could all probably think of examples from daily life, where just having the idea of an action results in our doing the action straight away. For example, in watching a game, my wanting a player to kick a shot on goal can cause me to make movements mimicking a shot on goal, without any conscious intention on my part. And while I am engaged in deep conversation with a friend, the very thought of picking a leaf from a bush can prompt the action with no decision on my part. In all of these cases of ideomotor behavior, there exists an immediate link between the thought and the behavior.

Recent studies by Andrea Halpern on auditory imagery (2001) suggest a foundation in the brain for ideomotor action. Halpern studied what happens in the brain when a person sings a tune "in the head" while remaining silent. Interestingly enough, Halpern discovered the activation of the supplementary motor area (SMA) of the brain during such activity. This is strange, since no overt action was being contemplated. Halpern's hypothesis was that a person singing a song "in the head" was imagining his or herself as rehearsing for an actual singing, and this is what caused the supplementary motor area activity. To test this hypothesis, Halpern tested people for imagining the timbres of various instruments "in the head." Since a person

could not readily mimic out loud the timbre of various instruments, Halpern, together with Robert Zatore, Marc Bouffard, and Jennifer Johnson (2002), hypothesized that a subject would not think of this silent task as a rehearsal for an overt action. Lo and behold, the results confirmed this hypothesis: when imagining the timbres of various instruments the supplementary motor area was not activated. This suggests that in the activation of the SMA we have a brain basis for ideomotor behavior. Here we can see a direct connection between the very idea of doing an action and the brain's being primed for performing that action.

Of course, not all priming for ideomotor behavior will issue into action. Inhibiting circumstances can negate ideomotor acts. For example, classical studies by Jacobson (1932) have shown how just having the idea of moving your right arm causes proto-active electrical activity in the appropriate arm muscles. This may be considered ideomotor priming. However, when people's muscles deflect when told to think about moving their arm, they do not actually move the arm because they understand they are not to move their arm just then. For similar reasons, in auditory imaging the activation of the SMA of the brain does not issue in actual singing. So, inhibiting thoughts can inhibit ideomotor behavior. On the other hand, ideomotor behavior will be strengthened by the vividness and ubiquity of the idea of the prospective act.

Now, consider people subject to referentially direct education "against violence." The referentially direct education will prompt such people to be thinking of violence and violent acts as those sorts of things they must not do. According to what we have seen, however, this bringing to mind of violence can have two effects. One effect can be to inhibit the act because the person is thinking about it and because the person can recall the reasons for not doing it. On the other hand, if the idea of

violence is vivid enough, the very *idea* of it can activate the supplementary motor area of the brain and bring about an ideomotor performance of violence without a prior intention, overcoming an inhibitory impulse.

Thus, referentially direct education for “non-violence” will set up conflicting fields of psychological force. Which force will win out here, the inhibitory force, or the ideomotor one? The very posing of the question shows how referentially direct education endangers the efficacy of education away from violence, by creating an opportunity for ideomotor violent behavior without conscious intention. Indeed, the danger of referentially direct education is especially acute in Western societies. In these societies, the *idea* of violence is practically everywhere, from the morning newspaper to the rented video to the neighborhood cinema. Television programming affords countless presentations of violent behavior, forming a vivid background for ideomotor violence, unintended and outside of the influence of directly referential education away from violence. Because the education makes central reference to violence and causes a focus on a prospective violent act, the result is to bring forth in a subject’s mind the very idea of violence, strengthened by the subject’s exposure to the portrayal of violence in general.

I propose that referentially oblique education away from violence creates a more encouraging psychological scenario. There a person is trained to have ideomotor reactions to acts of love, peacableness, compassion, and the like, by being presented with portrayals and actual instances of actions, and people, embodying these virtues. The *idea* of violence occurs only secondarily, or peripherally, in this type of education. A framework identifying forbidden or undesirable behavior is indispensable, but serves only as a latent background in referentially opaque education away from violence.

I would not guarantee that this education would overcome the violence-saturated culture in which it would take place. However, it would diminish the dangers of the education itself tending to *contribute* to violence. Furthermore, it does suggest that indeed any education away from violence requires a congenial culture to succeed, a culture saturated with portrayals of acts and lives dedicated to virtuous activity.

Jerome Gellman

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Beer-Sheva, Israel