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Predicting Problematic Approach Behavior Toward Politicians: Exploring the Potential Contributions of Control Theory

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PREDICTING PROBLEMATIC APPROACH BEHAVIOR TOWARD POLITICIANS:

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONTROL THEORY

by

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A DISSERTATION

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PREDICTING PROBLEMATIC APPROACH BEHAVIOR TOWARD POLITICIANS:

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONTROL THEORY

Douglas O. Cacialli, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2010

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The potential merits of Carver and Scheier's (1981) control theory in the prediction of targeted violence are reviewed and several novel indicators of risk that are consistent with this theory are suggested for study. It was hypothesized that: (a) similarity between inappropriate contact with politicians and extremist group literature and writings; (b) the temporal proximity to violent or otherwise criminal actions and notable anniversaries of such groups; (c) detailed specification of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior, and; (d) self-focus, will be significant predictors of problematic approach behavior. A sample of 506 individuals who engaged in threatening or otherwise inappropriate contact toward members of the United States Congress was drawn from the case files of the United States Capitol Police.

Results of the present research indicated that detailed specification of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior was strongly predictive of actually engaging in problematic approach. Furthermore, high self-focus was significantly related to problematic approach between-persons, although within-person, higher-than-average self-focus showed no such relation. Neither temporal proximity to notable acts of extremist violence nor similarity to known extremist group writings was found to be associated with problematic approach in this sample.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the men and women of the law enforcement community, who put themselves in harm's way to ensure a safer society for the rest of us.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Violence targeted at high-profile government officials and notable celebrities, although statistically rare, has the potential to fundamentally disrupt our way of life. The assassination of John F. Kennedy and attempted assassination of Ronald Regan irrevocably changed the United States of America. The impact of similar violence targeted at individuals outside of the national spotlight also cannot be minimized. Theodore Kaczynski's campaign of bombings between 1978 and 1995 and the April 20th, 1999 school shooting incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado caused fear among the public on an unprecedented scale. Regardless of how rarely they occur, the dramatic and far-reaching effects of such violent incidents justify intense efforts toward their prevention.

The United States Secret Service (USSS), perhaps one of the most well-known law enforcement agencies responsible for the prevention of so-called *targeted violence*, has played a vital role in the development and early implementation of techniques aimed at identifying and deterring potential perpetrators of violence toward the Presidents of the United States and their families, Presidential candidates, and visiting foreign dignitaries. These techniques, collectively known as threat assessment, have been continuously developed and increasingly applied since their entry into the public domain. Evidence of this growth can be observed in the application of threat assessment for originally unintended purposes (e.g., school-based threat assessment) as well as the annual increase in membership of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP).

Despite continued development of the threat assessment approach, theoretically-based research on the phenomenon of targeted violence is strikingly limited. The

premises and guiding principles of threat assessment stop short of helping us comprehend the reasons *why* a particular individual pursues a violent course of action when so many others, especially those in similar circumstances, do not. A better understanding of this fundamental question would undoubtedly have major implications for the assessment of targeted violence and its prevention.

This dissertation is presented in the context of over ten years of largely atheoretical research on the phenomenon of targeted violence, including its prediction and management. The purpose of this manuscript is two-fold. First, threat assessment will be described and research pertinent to this approach and the phenomenon of targeted violence will be critically reviewed. Second, the potential utility of applying psychological theory to targeted violence in improving the understanding, prediction, and management of this phenomenon will be briefly discussed.

An Overview of the State-of-the-Art of Threat Assessment Techniques and Research

Overview and Development of the Threat Assessment Approach

The investigative and operational techniques that are collectively known as threat assessment were widely disseminated through a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) *Research in Action* bulletin entitled *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence* (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995). Since the publication of this work, the term *threat assessment* has been used to refer to a number of activities, some of which have no bearing on the construct advanced in the NIJ publication. By way of example, in 1999 the journal *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* published a special issue, edited by Charles Patrick Ewing (Ewing, 1999), on the topic of threat assessment. Many of the articles contained within this issue were authored by pioneering researchers in this field and were

directly relevant to the designated topic (e.g., Borum, Fein, Vossekuil & Berglund, 1999),

however the issue also included articles promoting the utility of so-called "offender

profiling" (Salfati & Canter, 1999) and the prediction of non-targeted institutional

violence (Wang & Diamond, 1999). The topics addressed in these latter articles,

although potentially useful in their own right, are antithetical to certain assumptions

underlying the threat assessment approach, such as the belief that there is no single

profile of individuals who engage in targeted violence. In order to provide a concise

summary of the applicable literature, only research pertaining to targeted violence and

threat assessment as defined by Fein et al. (1995) will be addressed herein. *Targeted*

violence henceforth refers to "situations in which an identifiable (or potentially

identifiable) perpetrator poses (or may pose) a threat of violence to a particular individual

or group" (Fein et al., 1995, p. 1). Likewise, *threat assessment* henceforth refers to "the

set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement

professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its

potential perpetrators" (Fein et al., 1995, p. 2).

A number of circumstances in the 1990's, including new stalking legislation and

widely-publicized acts of violence that occurred in schools and the workplace, have been

cited by Borum et al. (1999) as having provided an impetus to develop strategies and

techniques to prevent targeted violence perpetrated by potentially identifiable individuals.

Although a great deal of research had been conducted with regard to assessing the risk of

general violence and violent recidivism (see Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 2006 for

an excellent review on this topic), unique characteristics of targeted violence proved

problematic in applying prior findings and research methodologies to this issue. For

example, Monahan's (1981) widely-accepted recommendation that clinicians base their assessments of violence risk upon base rates of actuarial risk factors was largely rendered moot by the relatively low base rates of targeted violence. Furthermore, Melton, Petrila, Poythress, and Slobogin (1997) have noted that guided clinical judgment was the predominant method for conducting assessments of violence risk, and some would argue that it remains so today. The research base pertaining to targeted violence that would be necessary to implement such an approach, however, has lagged far behind the research base pertaining to general violence and violent recidivism, a literature which has questionable generalizability to the prediction of targeted acts of violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). For example, a great deal of literature has highlighted the relationship between impulsivity and general violence and violent recidivism risk (e.g., Serin, 1991; Wang & Diamond, 1999). The great deal of planning and preparation that often precedes acts of targeted violence and problematic approach run contrary to prior findings pertaining to impulsivity, and has led researchers to conceptualize targeted violence as a unique form of violent behavior. Threat assessment was developed, in part, to address these limitations and shortcomings.

The threat assessment approach is based upon three fundamental principles (Borum et al., 1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). First, targeted violence is conceptualized as the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behaviors. The demographic and psychological characteristics central in profiling-based approaches to the identification of potential perpetrators of targeted violence are de-emphasized in favor of thoughts and behaviors consistent with future violence toward an identifiable target or targets. Second, targeted violence is understood as resulting from an interaction among

three distinct factors: the perpetrator of the violent act(s), a stimulus or "triggering
condition" (Fein et al., 1995, p. 3) that leads the perpetrator to view violence as a solution
to some problem or concern, and environmental characteristics that facilitate the violent
act. Third, the planning and preparation in which the potential perpetrator engages
necessarily results in discrete, observable behaviors that evince his or her intention to
engage in targeted violent action. The identification of these behaviors is key to the
assessment and management of potential perpetrators.

As stated above, the purpose of threat assessment is to identify potential
perpetrators of targeted violence, as well as to assess and manage the risks of such
violence. Fein and colleagues (1995) discussed each of these three functions in greater
detail. With regard to the identification of potential perpetrators of targeted violence, the
authors enumerate four important components: (a) the development of criteria that would
trigger the initiation of a threat assessment investigation; (b) the identification of
individuals or groups within an organization who are responsible for receiving
information and conducting investigations; (c) the notification of organizations and
individuals that may have direct contact with potential perpetrators that a threat
assessment program is in existence, and; (d) dissemination of the criteria that would
trigger a threat assessment investigation to those organizations and individuals. Although
the discipline of psychology may be useful in the development of such criteria, the
components listed above are largely within the purview of those law enforcement
agencies and security organizations responsible for conducting threat assessment
activities.

The second purpose of threat assessment investigations, the assessment of

potential perpetrators and risks of targeted violence, has received the overwhelming

majority of attention from researchers in law enforcement and psychology. Fein et al.

(1995) distinguished between investigative and evaluative functions as two component

tasks in this type of assessment. In investigating potential perpetrators, the importance of

collecting information from multiple sources is stressed, as is the collection of

information related to the behaviors that brought the subject to attention. The potential

relevance of recent stressful experiences and the subject's ability to cope with those

stressors are also emphasized, as well as attack-consistent behaviors including expressed

interests in possible targets, communications directed toward or in reference to potential

targets, attempts to harm one's self or others, weapons procurement and usage, and

stalking behaviors. With regard to the evaluative function of threat assessment, Fein and

colleagues (1995) suggest a two-stage process in which information is first evaluated to

determine whether attack-consistent behaviors are present, followed by an evaluation to

determine whether the potential perpetrator is "moving *toward* or *away* from an attack"

(Fein et al., 1995, p. 5). Those authors suggested a number of questions to be utilized in

making the latter determination, including:

1. Does it appear more or less likely that violent action will be directed by the

   subject against the target(s)? What specific information and reasoning lead to this

   conclusion? (p. 5)

2. How close is the subject to attempting an attack? What thresholds, if any, have

   been crossed (e.g., has the subject violated court orders, made a will, given away

   personal items, expressed willingness to die or to be incarcerated)? (p. 5)

3. What might change in the *subject's* life to increase or decrease the risk of

violence? What might change in the target's situation to increase or decrease the risk of violence? (p. 5)

The final purpose of the threat assessment investigation as outlined by Fein and colleagues (1995) is management and reduction of the risk of targeted violence. This has been conceptualized as consisting of three discrete components: (a) the development of a plan to manage the potential perpetrator and the risk posed by the individual; (b) implementation of this plan, and; (c) making the determination that the potential perpetrator no longer poses a heightened risk of violence.

Although threat assessment as advanced by Fein and his colleagues (1995, 1998) and Borum et al. (1999) was novel both in the conceptualization of targeted violence and the techniques used to assess and manage it, their approach was based largely on the findings of three prior ground-breaking studies of targeted violence and attempts by individuals to come within close physical proximity to notable public figures where physical attacks are most likely to occur. Park Dietz and his colleagues published the first two of these studies, separately examining threatening and otherwise inappropriate letters to Hollywood celebrities (Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991) and members of the United States Congress (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991). Verbal and written communications such as those studied by Dietz and his colleagues are useful in that they offer what is arguably the best means available to threat assessment professionals to ascertain the thinking and motivations of the author as well as the first indication that a threat may be present. The authors of these studies drew many operationally-relevant conclusions from their examination of correspondence characteristics in the cases examined. For example, in letters written to Hollywood celebrities, the presence of a

communicated threat was shown to be unrelated to subsequent approach behavior. In

letters written to members of the Congress, the presence of a communicated threat was

found to be associated with *lower* levels of approach behaviors than among those whose

did not make a threat. These findings, as well as those of Fein and Vossekuil (1999)

showing that none of the subjects studied had communicated a threat about their target to

the target or to law enforcement prior to their approach, appear to provide the empirical

basis for the widely-accepted tenet in threat assessment that "those who *pose* threats

frequently *do not make* threats" (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, p. 14) and support deviation

from the traditional reliance upon threats as a threshold for risk assessment.

Although a complete account of the conclusions of Dietz and his colleagues is

beyond the scope of this review, a number of findings seem especially worth noting.

Individuals who approached sent a greater number of letters, were more likely to attempt

to make contact via the telephone, and more often expressed a desire for face-to-face

contact; these factors held true whether the target was a member of Congress or a

Hollywood celebrity. Subjects who provided some indication of having constructed a

plan of action (e.g., providing a time, date, or place that an approach would occur) also

appeared more likely to approach, although the low numbers of such cases in the study of

contacts toward members of Congress precluded statistical significance. A number of

factors was found to differentially predict approach between celebrities and members of

Congress. Evidence of transience among the authors of letters to Hollywood celebrities

was related to an increased likelihood of approach, whereas this was not the case for

authors of letters to members of Congress. Among letters to this latter group, however,

characterization of the congressional recipient as a benefactor, potential benefactor,

rescuer, or an attempt to elicit help from the congressperson, was associated with higher rates of approach; this was not the case among letters to celebrities.

Research conducted by Fein and Vossekuil (1999) also played an important role in the development of threat assessment techniques. Touted as a departure from prior research on assassination which either examined the psychological and demographic characteristics of individuals who had never come close to successfully attacking a target (e.g., Logan, Reuterfors, Bohn, & Clark, 1984) or did not contribute to an understanding of risk factors for potential violence (e.g., Hoffman, 1943; Sebastiani & Foy, 1965), the authors reported upon the findings of the USSS Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), a study of the behaviors and reported thoughts of 83 individuals who attacked or approached with the intention of attacking USSS protectees, as well as major federal officials, notable government officials below the federal level, celebrities, and leaders of industry and commerce. This sample was purported to represent all individuals known to have attacked or approached to attack these so-called "prominent persons of public status" in the United States since 1949. The stated purpose of this research was to "gather and analyze information that Secret Service agents and other law enforcement professionals could use to prevent attacks on public officials and figures" (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999, p. 322).

Fein and Vossekuil (1999) reported that among individuals studied in the ECSP, there was no single profile or consistent demographic or psychological feature of the individual who engages in attack-related behavior, underscoring the futility of a profiling-based approach to the prevention of targeted violence. There were, however, commonalities of note. Although ECSP subjects voiced a variety of reasons for their

attack, their reasons comprised eight discrete motives: (a) to achieve notoriety or fame, (b) to avenge a perceived wrong, (c) to end personal pain, often through their death by law enforcement or members of a protective detail, (d) to bring national attention to a perceived problem, (e) to save the country or world, (f) to achieve a special relationship with the target, (g) to make money, and (h) to bring about political change. The authors noted that even subjects who suffered from mental illness often had motives that were rational when considering the sometimes delusional nature of their beliefs. The importance of these motives cannot be ignored, as Fein and Vossekuil (1999) reported that targets and actions often varied as a function of the attacker's motive. For example, subjects whose stated desire was to be killed by law enforcement were more likely to select a well-protected target such as the President of the United States. Notably, targets and actions were also noted to vary according to found or perceived opportunities to attack. Additional findings of the ECSP can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Major findings of the United States Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project

- Wide range in ages of subjects (16 years of age – 73 years of age)

- Approximately half of subjects had attained college or graduate education

- Approximately two-thirds of subjects were characterized as "social isolates"

- Subjects often had a history of transience and mobility

- Subjects often had a history of harassment of others

- Subjects often had a history of demonstrating "explosive, angry behavior," although only half of subjects had previously engaged in violent behavior

- Subjects often had a history of weapons use, despite often having had no formal training

- Subjects often demonstrated interests in "militant / radical ideas and groups," despite not being members of such groups at the time of attack or approach

- Subjects often demonstrated depression, despair, and suicidal ideation or attempts prior to or during the attack or approach

- Subjects often received mental health care prior to their attack or approach, although few revealed their intention to attack to mental health care professionals

- Subjects rarely demonstrated command hallucinations or substance use problems prior to the attack or approach

- Subjects rarely had histories of arrest for violent crimes or crimes involving weapons, and rarely had been incarcerated in state or federal prisons

Current Directions in Threat Assessment Research

The empirical findings reported by Park Dietz (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991) and the USSS (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) spurred the development of the threat assessment approach. Since the publication of those studies a great deal of empirical research examining inappropriate communications with individuals in the public spotlight, as well as problematic approach behavior and targeted violence, has been conducted. The overwhelming majority of this work has pertained to two applications: (a) the assessment and management of targeted violence risk and problematic approach toward celebrities and high-ranking government officials, and; (b) the assessment and management of targeted violence risk in schools. Although threat assessment has recognized applications in the prevention and management of workplace violence (Turner & Gelles, 2003) and relationship stalking (Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999), research pertaining to the application of threat assessment to these issues has been far more limited. In an effort to provide a concise review of the pertinent literature, research pertaining to these latter applications has been omitted from review.

Research pertaining to the assessment and management of targeted violence and problematic approach toward celebrities and high-ranking government officials.

Although the research of Fredrick Calhoun and the United Stated Marshals Service (USMS; Calhoun, 1998), the organization responsible for protection of the federal judiciary, began prior to the wide dissemination of threat assessment techniques by Fein and his colleagues (1995), Calhoun's findings are relevant to the assessment of targeted violence and understanding the relationship of threats made to threats posed.

Although a number of articles published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* discussed the problem of targeted violence toward judicial officials (Jenkins, 2001; Vossekuil, Borum, Fein, & Reddy, 2001), the work of Calhoun (1998) is the only known work to provide empirical research findings. Given that Calhoun (1998) based his research methodology on that of the 1991 research studies of Dietz and his colleagues (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991) (Calhoun, 2001), the relevancy of his findings to the threat assessment approach is not surprising. Three-thousand and ninety-six inappropriate communications sent to federal jurists between 1980 and 1993 were examined. These included threats made toward judicial officials, as well as communications characterized by additional criteria listed in Table 2 that prior work (e.g., de Becker, 1998; Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991) has shown to be related to problematic approach behavior. Contacts were assembled and classified according to the nature of the language used in the communication, allowing the author to examine the relationship between the language used and subsequent approach behavior.

Table 2

United States Marshals Service criteria for referral of inappropriate communications

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‒ A particular complaint or sense of outrage over the handling of a court case.

‒ Pseudo-legal court filings.

‒ References to a special history of special destiny shared with the judicial official.

‒ Evidence of suspicious behavior, stalking behavior, or research on the personal affairs of the judicial official.

‒ Religious and historical themes involving the judicial official (including admonishments for the judicial official to change lifestyles or personal behaviors).

‒ References to death, suicide, weapons, violence, assassinations, acts of terrorism, or war.

‒ Extreme or obsessive admiration or affection.

‒ Obsessive desire to contact the judicial official (including plans for meetings, interest in home address or other personal information, surveillance, or following).

‒ Belief that a debt is owed to the person by the judicial official (not necessarily money, but any kind of debt).

‒ Perception of the judicial official as someone other than himself / herself (an impostor, a historical figure, the suspect's relative, God, or the devil).

‒ References to public figures who have been attacked (Lincoln, Lennon, Sadat, Kennedy, Judge Vance, etc.).

‒ Reference to individuals (or their acts) who have attacked public figures or committed notorious acts of violence or terrorism (Timothy McVeigh, Oswald, Hinckley, Sirhan Sirhan).

- Reference or claims of mental illness, such as psychiatric care, anti-psychotic medication, etc.

- References to body guards, security, safety, danger, etc.

There were a number of notable findings from Calhoun's (1998) research. Consistent with findings from the ECSP (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), violence and attempted violence toward the federal judiciary varied as a function of the motives expressed by the perpetrator. The motives associated with approach differed, however, from those found to be related to near-lethal or lethal approach of USSS protectees and notable public figures. Amongst individuals engaging in problematic approach behavior and violence toward members of the federal judiciary, motives tied directly to the federal jurist as well as ideological motives that appeared unrelated to a specific case were predictive of problematic approach behavior and violent outcomes. Additional factors that were found to be predictive of problematic approach behavior and violent outcomes included attempts to obscure one's identify, having known accomplices, and having affiliated with a group or ideological cause. Of particular note, Calhoun (1998) reported that the method of communication delivery (e.g., written, telephone, face-to-face verbal) was highly related to case outcomes, such that delivery methods requiring close physical proximity to the target were more likely to result in violent or enhanced risk outcomes. This finding underscores the importance of examining approach behavior as a proxy for violent behavior and justifies its use as a relevant operational variable in its own right. Indeed, federal law enforcement agencies, such as the United States Capitol Police (USCP), have been noted to use approach behavior as a proxy for actual violent behavior (Scalora & Callaway, 2000).

Early research examining targeted threats posed to political officials was solely focused upon members of the federal government. This research broadened our

understanding of threats and inappropriate communication directed toward the President

of the United States (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), members of the United States Congress

(Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991), and the federal judiciary (Calhoun, 1998), yet

research examining this phenomenon at the level of state government was lacking despite

Fein and Vossekuil's (1998) efforts to promote threat assessment among local and state

law enforcement officials. Baumgartner, Scalora, and Plank (2001) were the first to

conduct such research, examining characteristics of threats and problematic approach

behavior toward state government targets, including the capitol, governor, legislators,

agency directors, and staff, in the state of Nebraska. Using a representative sample of 46

subjects responsible for 169 incidents occurring between 1987 and 1998, the authors

reported a number of significant findings that largely mirrored those reported at the

federal level. Nearly equivalent percentages of individuals that Baumgartner et al. (2001)

termed "approachers" and "non-approachers" had a documented history of involvement

in the criminal justice system (29% v. 18.8%, among approachers and non-approachers

respectively) or a known history of unwanted pursuit behavior (7.1% v. 9.4%,

respectively), again highlighting the problem inherent to the application of risk factors for

general violence in the assessment of targeted violence and problematic approach

behavior. Also consistent with prior findings, the use of threatening statements was not

significantly predictive of subsequent approach behavior. In contrast, however, to earlier

findings suggesting that the duration of contact was unrelated to approach status (Dietz,

Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991), Baumgartner et al. (1991) reported that approachers had

a significantly longer duration of contact than non-approachers (222.4 days v. 90.1 days,

respectively) and significantly longer intervals between contacts (106 days v. 25 days,

respectively), leading the authors to speculate that "the motivation to make contact was a more pervasive and persistent experience among approachers than among non-approachers" (p. 55). The authors also reported that while the frequency with which certain topics and motives, such as child custody (21.4% v. 3.1, respectively) and political or government issues (0.0% v. 25.0%, respectively) were voiced differed significantly between approachers and non-approachers, these motives differed from motives identified in prior research.

Scalora, Baumgartner, and Plank (2003) continued their examination of threatening and otherwise inappropriate contact and approach behavior at the state government level with a focus on the role of mental illness in such behavior. The literature pertaining to mental illness among those who engage in inappropriate contact or problematic approach had not yielded a consistent finding in this regard. Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al. (1991) did not directly address the role of mental illness among the subjects they studied, although with regard to the relationships these individuals perceived sharing with members of Congress they stated that "… most of the role relationships perceived by subjects were obviously the product of mental disorder, often delusions" (p. 1456). In a later review of threats made against the President of the United States, Coggins, Steadman, and Veysey (1996) reported that approximately 50% of individuals issuing such threats had previously received mental health care and that approximately 90% of those believed to pose a legitimate threat had a history of mental health treatment. Fein and Vossekuil (1999) reported that among lethal and near-lethal approachers comprising the ECSP sample, 61% had been evaluated or treated by a mental health professional at some point in their lifetime, although 75% of attackers were *not*

delusional at the time of attack. In their sample of 56 individuals with mental illness and 71 individuals without mental illness, Scalora et al. (2003) found that individuals with mental illness engaged in more frequent contact, more frequently issued demands, and were more likely to display help-seeking and religious themes. Individuals with mental illness were notably less likely to display insulting or degrading content in their contacts. Although the authors did not find any difference between the groups studied with regard to approach or attempted approach behavior, it is notable that the variables upon which subjects with mental illness were noted to have differed have been previously found to differentially predict approach behavior.

Research conducted by David James and his colleagues (2007) demonstrated that the mental illness is a contributing factor to targeted violence against European political figures as well as political figures in the United States. In their study of 24 attacks occurring between 1990 and 2004, they found that ten attackers were psychotic at the time the incident took place. While pre-attack warning behaviors were identified in only 11 of the incidents, the authors of this study reported that most of individuals identified as suffering from a mental disorder gave some warning, and that these same individuals were responsible for most of the 12 attacks resulting in serious or fatal injuries. These findings truly emphasize the importance of understanding the role mental illness plays in targeted violence and problematic approach behavior.

The role of mental illness in problematic approach behavior and targeted violence was more recently examined by James and colleagues (2008). Subject characteristics of the 23 persons known to have individually attacked a member of the British royal family between 1778 and 1994 were analyzed with an emphasis on: (a) the target, and the harm

inflicted; (b) where and how the attacks occurred; (c) the nature of prior warnings or stalking behaviors, if any; (d) the attacker's motivation; (e) the attacker's psychiatric history and mental state at the time, and (f) the outcome for the attacker. It should be noted that although this study resembles the ECSP in that both examine attack behavior toward some of the most notable individuals in the United States and Great Britain, some of the attacks examined by James et al. (2008) were not likely to result in critical injury (e.g., the throwing of a wet, black t-shirt at Queen Elizabeth II on February 6th, 1990). Approximately half of individuals used a firearm in their commission of their attack, a percentage far lower than the 81% of ECSP subjects who possessed a handgun, rifle, or shotgun at the time of their lethal or near-lethal approach (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). In further contrast to the findings of the ECSP, 48% of attackers were determined to be delusional or experiencing auditory or visual hallucinations at the time of their attack and an additional 17% had histories of mental illness, although no evidence pertaining to their psychiatric state at the time of their attack was available. Ten subjects engaged in contact behavior prior to their attack or voiced their intentions to attack to others.

Most recently, the role of mental illness in problematic approach and harassing behaviors targeting political figures was studied among members of Parliament and the legislative assemblies in Canada. Adams, Hazelwood, Pitre, Bedard, and Landry (2009) surveyed Canadian Federal and Provincial politicians in office during March 1998 regarding their experience with harassment perpetrated by individuals believed to be suffering from a mental disorder. Of the 424 politicians that responded to the survey (approximately 40% of those contacted), 30% reported experiencing harassment and 87% believed that the perpetrator of the harassment may have suffered from a mental illness.

Although the generalizability of these findings to the issue of targeted violence are potentially affected by the self-selection of participants, lack of objective evidence of mental illness among perpetrators, and use of harassment as the behavior of interest, this study does suggest that mental illness may play a significant role in the difficulties Canadian politicians encounter with problematic approach and other inappropriate behaviors.

Although Dietz, Matthews, and Martell et al.'s (1991) study of problematic contact toward members of the United States Congress significantly deepened our understanding of factors related to problematic approach toward these government officials, their sample of 86 cases was relatively small, even when compared to the sample of 214 cases used by Dietz, Matthews, and Van Duyne et al. (1991) in their study of problematic contacts toward Hollywood celebrities. Scalora et al. (2002a) redressed this issue in their study of 4,387 cases involving threatening and otherwise problematic contact toward members of the United States Congress. Consistent with prior research on this topic, the authors reported that subjects who engaged in approach behavior were significantly more likely to have engaged in multiple contact attempts toward a target, to be of younger age, and to have demonstrated symptoms of serious mental illness (e.g., delusional thinking, hallucinations). Subjects who attempted to obscure their identity or issued a direct or veiled threat were significantly less likely to engage in approach behavior. A number of motives were noted among the cases studied, and help-seeking was significantly associated with an increased risk of approach. Interestingly, Scalora et al. (2002a) reported that subjects engaging in approach behavior were significantly more likely to have prior criminal records. Although Dietz and his colleagues did not examine

the criminal histories of their subjects, findings from the ECSP (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999)

suggest that individuals who engage in lethal and near-lethal approach behavior often

have no criminal history. It may certainly be the case, however, that subjects who

approach with unknown intent differ in subtle, yet significant, ways from those who have

attempted or successfully assassinated a notable public figure.

In a follow-up study published shortly following the aforementioned work of

Scalora et al. (2002a), Scalora et al. (2002b) sought to assess the predictive value of a

number of subject-related and contact behavior-related factors among a smaller sample of

individuals heterogeneous with regard to their history of approach. Once again, the

authors reported a number of findings that were largely consistent with previously

reported research findings. Individuals engaging in approach behavior were more likely

to have identified themselves prior to or during contacts and to have demonstrated

symptoms of severe mental illness, and less likely to have issued threats prior to

approach. Consistent with Scalora et al.'s (2002a) prior findings, individuals engaging in

approach behavior had significantly more prior criminal offenses across a number of

crime categories (although prior threats and harassment charges notably failed to

significantly differ between groups), and were more likely to have had contact with other

federal law enforcement agencies. Finally, individuals who engaged in approach

behavior toward a Congressional member were more likely to employ multiple methods

of contact prior to their approach and to articulate themes and content of a personal

nature in those contacts.

The most recent research to examine the characteristics of threatening and

inappropriate contacts and subsequent approach behavior was conducted by

Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, and Garner (2007). Again using data collected with the USCP, the authors compared the contact and approach characteristics of individuals who engaged in contact via letter to individuals who did so via e-mail. They found significant differences between these groups. Individuals who engaged in contact via letter were more likely to demonstrate symptoms consistent with serious mental illness, have a criminal history, write more, use multiple methods of contact, and mention multiple targets. Individuals who wrote e-mails, on the other hand, were more likely to focus on government concerns and use obscene language in their contact. Most notably, individuals who sent letters of a threatening or otherwise inappropriate nature to members of Congress were more likely to engage in problematic approach toward their target. Schoeneman-Morris et al. (1997) were careful to note that many of the variables that distinguished letter-writers from e-mailers have been previously found to be related to an increased risk of problematic approach behavior, as can be seen from the literature reviewed above suggesting that letter writing, per se, is not predictive of approach behavior apart from other predictors.

Mullen and colleagues (Mullen et al., 2009) recently addressed the fixation upon and pursuit of public figures in their discussion of the various forms of pathological fixations and more normative forms of loyalty and admiration. Based upon research undertaken for the UK Home Office, it is proposed that individuals who demonstrate pathological fixation may be conceptualized as belonging to one of five categories: *relationship seekers*, who believe they have or are destined to entered into a special relationship with the targeted individual; *petitioners*, who request or demand assistance for some cause or personal issue; *pretenders*, who assert a false claim to royalty or some

elevated position; *persecuted*, who believe they are being persecuted against by either the targeted individual or a third-party; and, *chaotic*, who demonstrate incoherent or disorganized behavior. The authors noted that many individuals whose fixated behavior falls into one of these categories suffer from major mental illness, and that difficulty in understanding their motivation contributes to difficulty assessing their risk. It is interesting to note that the typology forward by these authors is consistent with the motivations identified in the literature reviewed above; consider, for example, the similarity between the findings of Scalora et al. (2002a) regarding help-seeking motivations of individuals who engage in approach and the "petitioner" category.

Research pertaining to the assessment and management of targeted violence in schools.

The first peer-reviewed research regarding the application of threat assessment in a school setting to appear following the seminal works of Fein et al. (1995), Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999), and Borum et al. (1999) was conducted by Kim Ryan-Arredondo and her colleagues (Ryan-Arrendondo et al., 2001). The article describes the process undertaken by the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) to develop the Dallas Violence Risk Assessment (DVRA) for use in evaluating the risk of targeted school violence and determining the most appropriate intervention given the details of the case. Each of the 18 individual items on the DVRA correspond to a violence risk factor selected based upon the extant school violence literature, although the influence of a checklist created by the National School Safety Center (NSSC; NSSC, 1998) consisting of purported characteristics of juveniles who had caused school-associated violent deaths, as well as research conducted by Kingery, Biafora, and Zimmerman (1996), appears

considerable. The DVRA is scored by averaging item rankings (e.g., "Risk present, but lower" = 1; " "Medium" = 2; "Higher" = 3) provided by school staff members, and the resulting score is the compared to predetermined score ranges corresponding to categories of risk (e.g., "Low," "Medium," "High").

The efforts of the DISD in creating the DVRA, notable for their primacy, deviated heavily from the threat assessment approach and suffered from a number of methodological constraints limiting the generalizability and usefulness of their findings and the resulting measure. The initiation of threat assessment procedures and administration of the DVRA occurred only following an explicit verbal or written threat made by a student. Although threats should never be ignored, the threat assessment approach places an emphasis on the identification of individuals who pose threats, not simply those who make threats. Furthermore, the emphasis on demographic and psychological characteristics of students in DVRA items, such as "Empathy, sympathy, or remorse" (p. 187) and "History of aggressive behavior" (p. 187), is inconsistent with the emphasis on attack-related thoughts and behaviors in the threat assessment approach. It should also be noted that many of the DVRA items, such as "History of previous threats," were selected for inclusion based upon their predictive utility for general violence, although as stated above, the unique characteristics of targeted violence have proved problematic in applying findings regarding predictors of general violence. With regard to methodological limitations, the data presented by Ryan-Arrendondo et al. (2001) indicated that the overwhelming majority of students who were eventually charged with making a terroristic threat were not assessed using the DVRA leading the authors to conclude that DISD procedures regarding DVRA administration were not being followed.

Finally, the results of this research were descriptive in nature and the omission of a comparison group precluded assessment of the clinical utility of their approach in preventing targeted violence.

The fact that Ryan-Arrendondo et al.'s (2002) study suffered from a number of methodological shortcomings and deviated significantly from the threat assessment approach originally promulgated might have been expected given that there was no precedent for the use of threat assessment in a school setting and no prior research on which to build. Several review articles had identified threat assessment as a potentially valuable tool in assessing violence risk among youth. Borum (2000) briefly addressed threat assessment in his review of techniques for the assessment of violence risk among youth. Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, Fein, and Modzeleski (2001) later discussed the relative merits of threat assessment in the school setting against other approaches such as profiling and automated decision-making. And although Burns, Dean, and Jacob-Timm (2001) incorrectly characterized threat assessment techniques as "actuarial … which [have] consistently been demonstrated to be more effective than a clinical approach" (p. 244), these authors also provided a favorable review. It was not until 2002 that researchers with the USSS and the United Stated Department of Education provided a research base and precedent for use with the publication of a guide to implementing threat assessment techniques in school settings (Fein et al., 2002). This guide was a product of the Safe School Initiative (SSI), a project with the stated purpose of exploring "the potential for adapting the threat assessment investigative process developed by the Secret Service to the problem of targeted school violence" (Fein et al., 2002, p.4). The research methodology underlying the SSI was based upon the earlier ECSP; the

characteristics of 37 incidents of targeted school violence known to have occurred in the

United Stated between December 1974 and May 2000 were examined. Both the sample

size and time period examined exceeded that used in prior targeted school violence

prevention research conducted by the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI; O'Toole,

2000), which examined the characteristics of 18 incidents of targeted school violence

occurring between 1988 and 1998. Remarkably, the results of Fein et al.'s (2002) study

mirrored that of the ECSP in many ways: most attackers were found not to have

threatened their targets directly, although attackers were found to have engaged in certain

behaviors prior to the attack that were indicative of a high risk for targeted violence.

Students engaged in violent action for a number of reasons, although these reasons

generally corresponded to four motives: (a) revenge for a perceived injury or grievance;

(b) yearning for attention, recognition, or notoriety; (c) a wish to solve a problem

otherwise seen as unbearable, and; (d) a desire to die or be killed. These motives are a

subset of the motives Fein and Vossekuil (1999) identified as driving the lethal or near-

lethal actions of subjects in the ECSP. The key findings of this study can be found in

Table 3.

Table 3

Key findings of the United States Secret Service Safe School Initiative

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– Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely are sudden, impulsive acts.

– Prior to most incidents, other people know about the attacker's idea and / or plan to attack.

– Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing their attack.

– There is no accurate or useful 'profile' of students who engage in targeted school violence.

– Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

– Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered suicide.

– Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

– Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to their attack.

– In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

– Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention and most were brief in duration.

Although the research underlying the SSI was patterned after the ECSP, the

resulting guide authored by Fein et al. (2002) differed considerably from Fein and

Vossekuil's (1998) guide for state and local law enforcement officials, as well as their

1999 article outlining the findings of the ECSP. This difference is most notable in the

concrete nature of recommendations made regarding the creation of a safe school climate

and the identification, evaluation, and management of students who may pose a

heightened risk of targeted violence. Fein et al.'s (2002) guide was designed for use by

law enforcement officials as well as school administrators, the latter group being less

likely to possess the prerequisite skill-set to successfully implement a threat assessment

program, a possible explanation for this difference. In their development of school threat

assessment guidelines, Cornell et al. (2004) note that:

> It was recognized that an elaborate process of threat assessment would be
>
> burdensome to school authorities and that it would be necessary to design an
>
> efficient process to design an efficient process to distinguish the commonplace
>
> threats … from the more serious threats … (p. 531)

It is, perhaps, this recognition which explains why much of the psychological literature

pertaining to the prevention of targeted school violence through the application of threat

assessment has focused upon the dissemination of guidelines or directions in lieu of

empirical research findings (e.g., Patrasso, 2005).

Fairly read, the existing empirical research examining targeted school violence

and school threat assessment is not as well developed as that examining targeted violence

and problematic approach toward notable public figures. In a review published four

years following publication of the joint USSS – Department of Education guide,

Randazzo et al. (2006) did not note *any* data-driven research pertaining to school-based

threat assessment during that time. Cornell (2003) and Cornell et al. (2004) describe the

results of a demonstration project designed to field-test school threat assessment

guidelines. Although the authors cited seminal threat assessment literature, the approach

utilized in this research appears to be synthesis of suggestions made by the FBI (O'Toole,

2000) and those outlined in Fein et al.'s (2002) guide. In some respects, the authors

deviated significantly from the threat assessment as defined by originally defined by Fein

and Vossekuil (1999) and Borum et al. (1999), such as the issuance of a threat as a

threshold for initiation of threat assessment procedures (Cornell, 2003). Student threats

were monitored in 35 schools over the course of a single school year and a decision-tree

model was implemented to evaluate the risk of targeted school violence, as well

determine an appropriate response. The authors reported that of the 188 reported threats,

70% were deemed "transient threats," or "statements that do not express a lasting intent

to harm someone and can be resolved with an apology or an explanation" (Cornell et al.,

2004, p. 533) and 30% were deemed "substantive threats" that "represent a sustained

intent to harm someone beyond the immediate situation where the threat was made"

(Cornell et al., 2004, p. 533). Substantive threats precipitated a more extensive

evaluation by members of the threat assessment team; only three students were expelled

and no acts of targeted violence as threatened were noted. Although this implementation

of a targeted school violence risk reduction program was successful in that no targeted

violent action occurred, it is important to again note that targeted school violence is an

extremely low base-rate behavior; probabilistically, one could expect no acts of targeted

violence even in the absence of a specialized program for its prevention. Furthermore, in the absence of a control group, the clinical utility of the results of this study are unknown. Finally, this research, as well as other research conducted in an effort to understand targeted school violence, may have little generalizability to targeted school violence occurring on college and university campuses, such as the shooting deaths of 32 individuals by Seung-Hui Cho on the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University campus on April 16, 2007.

Recent research by Allen, Cornell, Lorek, and Sheras (2008) is cause for optimism that when provided, threat assessment training for school personnel is effective. These authors provide outcome data following a single day training program based upon the Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence (Cornell & Sheras, 2006), provided to approximately 350 individuals. Although the preventative effects of this training on targeted school violence could not be assessed, data obtained through pre- and post-training surveys revealed that staff reported a significant decrease in concerns about school homicide and an increase in awareness of effective violence prevention efforts. Analyses also revealed that staff endorsement of violence prevention efforts that lack empirical support for their use, including zero tolerance and profiling approaches, decreased, and that knowledge of threat assessment principles and concepts was improved.

While Allen and colleagues (2008) examined changes in perceptions and beliefs among school staff following the dissemination of threat assessment training, Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, and Fan (2009) examined the beliefs of students attending schools in which threat assessment procedures or an alternative violence prevention strategy had

been implemented. Compared to students attending schools in which local threat

assessment procedures or a violence prevention strategy not based upon threat assessment

principles was in effect, students attending schools utilizing the Guidelines for

Responding to Student Threats of Violence (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) reported less

bullying, a greater willingness to seek help, and more positive perceptions of the school

climate. Additionally, schools utilizing the approach designed by Cornell and Sheras

(2006) have fewer long-term suspensions. While violence prevention strategies were not

randomly assigned, post-hoc analyses revealed that these differences were not attributable

to school size, socioeconomic status of the student body, neighborhood violent crime, or

the extent of physical security measures in the schools.

The Potential Utility of Psychological Theory in Improving the Assessment and

Management of Targeted Violence

Through research conducted since Fein et al.'s (1995) seminal publication, the

knowledge base regarding assessment and management of targeted violence and

problematic approach behavior has grown considerably. A number of similarities can be

noted across studies, regardless of the population studied. The relationship between

issuing a threat or using threatening language and engaging in problematic approach

behavior is one of the most notable similarities observed, both with regard to the

consistency with which it is observed and the implications for the threat assessment

investigations. Simply put, those who *make* a threat rarely *pose* a threat. Perhaps just as

notable with regard to consistency across studies is the role motivation plays in approach

and attack behavior. Whether conceptualized as motive (e.g., Fein & Vossekuil, 1999,

James et al., 2008) or theme (e.g., Baumgartner, Scalora, & Plank, 2001; Dietz,

Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991), most studies conducted to date have emphasized the role

an individual's motivation plays in the thinking and actions leading up to the approach.

Another similarity emerged with respect to negative life events occurring in the weeks

and months leading up to the attack. Many researchers noted that subjects engaging in

problematic approach and attack behavior often had histories or evidenced symptoms of

mental illness, although it was frequently the case that subjects who attacked were not

currently psychotic.

The equal importance of theory and solid research methodology in research

conducted by the USSS was explicated by Coggins, Pynchon, and Dvoskin (1998), who

stated that the USSS Behavioral Research Program "strives to ensure that its study of

specific issues is grounded in proper theoretical and empirical foundations and that its

methods and findings adhere to the standards of scientific peer review" (p. 60).

Regardless of how much has been learned with regard to the behaviors and thoughts of

those who engage in acts of targeted violence, the threat assessment community,

including psychologists and law enforcement personnel who develop and apply threat

assessment techniques, has largely failed to develop a proper theoretical foundation in

their research despite calls for such work. In their article addressing violence against the

federal judiciary, Weiner and Hardenbergh (2001) acknowledge the work of Calhoun

(1998) and emphasize the multiple domains which must be considered when assessing an

individual's risk of violence (e.g., psychological aspects of the individual, sociological

aspects of the community or subject's in-group), an emphasis that is quite similar to

Borum et al.'s (1999) focus on "a more situational / contextual understanding of risk" (p.

329). These authors explore the utility of theories based in environmental criminology

and rational-choice perspectives. Weiner and Hardenbergh conclude, however, that "no systematic theory based on multiple perspectives, analytical levels, and methods has evolved that adequately explains the wide continuum of threats, approaches, and attacks against people sharing the common occupational designation and workplace of the judiciary" (p. 29). In a later examination of individuals who stalk the President of the United States, Phillips (2006) noted that extant stalking typologies were not useful in understanding this specific type of stalking behavior. The author noted that stalking typologies evolve from the synthesis of empirical and theoretical accounts of stalking behavior, and given the high quality and quantity of empirical data collected by the USSS pertaining to individuals who stalk the President, it would seem that the lack of relevant theory is central to this issue.

In discussing the philosophical and theoretical foundations of acceptance and commitment therapy, Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (1999) stated:

> Descriptions of technique, devoid of underlying theory, have little to say about novel situations. As a result, when new situations present themselves many clinicians simply throw old techniques at new problems just to see what happens. ... For practical reasons we need to develop and use statements that have broad applicability, while maintaining a high level of precision. (p. 14)

Although the authors of this passage were referring to the use of theory in a context entirely different from threat assessment, they could just as well have been referring to the development of these techniques. Research pertaining to the relationship between motives and problematic approach behavior provides an effective illustration of this point. Although motive and contact theme variables have uniformly been shown to be

related to problematic approach behavior, motives and themes have been found to vary as a function of the role of the target as reviewed above. An atheoretical approach to the development of threat assessment techniques results in as many discrete findings regarding the contact themes and motives of individuals who approach or attack as there are target roles. A theoretical approach, on the other hand, provides a systematic means by which to relate these findings to each other.

Control theory is one of many psychological theories that take an information-processing approach to understanding human cognition and behavior. In their seminal text, Carver and Scheier (1981) present research pertaining to this subject from the perspective that "attentional focus is an important determinant of people's perceptions and constructions of reality, that variations in attentional focus also have a major impact on people's actions, and that the consequences of attentional focus are best conceptualized in terms of the processing of information" (p. 4). The assumptions underlying targeted violence and problematic approach behavior, when viewed from this perspective, run parallel to the assumptions of the threat assessment approach. These parallel assumptions, outlined elsewhere in this section, provide the rationale for examining control theory to the exclusion of many other, potentially useful theoretical positions.

Although a comprehensive review of control theory is far beyond the scope of this manuscript, a number of central tenets must be understood in order to appreciate the potential relevance of this theory to the prediction and management of targeted violence. Carver and Scheier (1981) stress the importance of inwardly-directed versus outwardly-directed attention as conceptualized by Duval and Wicklund (1972), as research has

demonstrated that behavior varies according to attentional focus when dichotomized in this manner. Outwardly-directed attention, otherwise referred to as environment focus, can be characterized as the processing of information originating outside of one's body. Inwardly-directed attention, otherwise referred to as self-focus, plays an important role in the comparison between one's current state and one's goal state, or behavioral standard. These comparisons, in turn, motivate the individual to engage in behaviors that minimize the discrepancy between the current state and the goal. Self-regulation through this mechanism serves as the basis for human behavior from the standpoint of a control theorist.

Behavioral standards are presumed to exist at multiple levels, ranging hierarchically from very concrete (e.g., move fingers up and down in a typing motion) to very abstract (e.g., complete requirements for doctoral candidacy). Powers (1973) posited a framework that has been adopted by Carver and Scheier (1981) to illustrate this hierarchy. For the current purposes, a conceptual understanding of the three most abstract levels of the hierarchy, the Principle, Program, and Sequence levels, is of particular importance. Standards at the Principle level constitute the most general goals serving to guide an individual's behavior. Within the context of problematic approach behavior toward politicians, standards at the Principle level are largely synonymous with what has heretofore been referred to as motives (e.g., achieving notoriety or fame, achieving a special relationship with the politician). As they are the most abstract of all behavioral standards, they can be achieved through a variety of actions. By way of fictional example, an individual who has as his goal to bring attention to a suspected clandestine, illegal spy satellite program may achieve this goal in a number of ways,

including the dissemination of this information to media outlets, activism and protest in a crowded public venue, or the assassination of a high-ranking federal government official, as Sirhan Sirhan did when he assassinated Robert F. Kennedy in an ostensible attempt to bring attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. These various actions represent behavioral standards at the Program level and are the means by which this individual may achieve his behavioral standard at the Principle level (e.g., bring attention to an illegal spy satellite program). It is important to recognize that behavioral standards at the Program level can also be conceptualized as goals, albeit more concrete in nature than goals at the Principle level. And just as possible behavioral standards at the Program level constitute means by which to achieve the behavioral standard at the higher Principle level, behavioral standards at the Sequence level constitute means by which to achieve the behavioral standard at the higher Program level. In keeping with the previous example, let us suppose that the individual has selected the assassination of a high-ranking official in the federal government as the best means by which to bring attention to the spy satellite program. He may achieve this goal by traveling to the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., visiting traveling the White House, or traveling to the district offices of a notable Congressional member. Regardless of the hierarchical level, behavior is generally aimed at the reduction or negation of any perceived discrepancy between an individual's current state and the relevant behavioral standard, such as in the action of a negative feedback loop. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of this example in toto.

Figure 1

Application of Powers (1973) hierarchy of behavioral standards to a fictional instance of

problematic approach behavior toward a member of the United States Senate
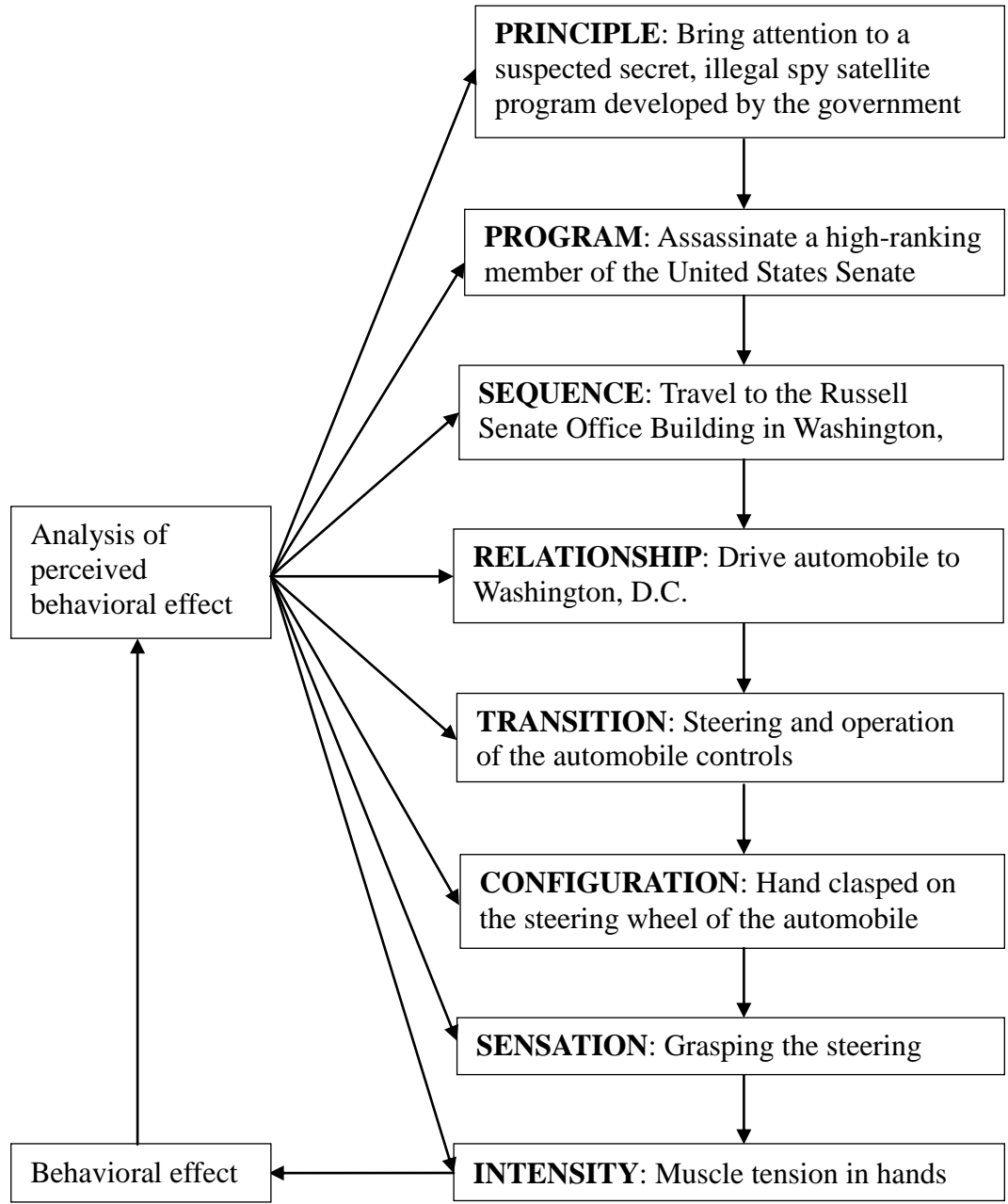
There are several points that must be considered in order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a predictive model of targeted violence that is based upon control theory. First, the relationship between behavioral standards and the likelihood of engaging in problematic approach behavior is likely to decrease as the standards become more concrete. Returning again to the example provided above, exceedingly few individuals strive to bring attention to clandestine satellite programs which they believe are developed and operated by the federal government with the purpose of spying on United States citizens. Given the small number of individuals who maintain such standards and the empirical research findings that suggest such motives have previously led individuals to engage in near-lethal approach behavior (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), one might expect this behavioral standard to be highly predictive of problematic approach behavior. Now consider the predictive utility of the behavioral standard at the Intensity level, the most concrete level in Powers (1973) hierarchy: muscle tension in the individual's hands. Billions of people exhibit some degree of muscle tension in their hands each day, and it is reasonable to suspect that such muscle tension typically has no relationship with problematic approach behavior. A second, related, point complicates this issue: the practical utility of behavioral standards in predicting targeted violence will likely decrease as the level of abstraction increases. Although the behavioral standard at the Principle level may be highly related to problematic approach behavior, behavioral standards at this level can only be observed if explicated by the individual, such as in the context of a threatening or inappropriate communication. Despite the strong relationship, the inability to accurately assess behavioral standards at this level largely renders moot

behavioral standards at the Principle and Programs levels for the purposes of threat assessment. Behavioral standards at the Sequence level, on the other hand, are likened to "events" (Carver & Scheier, 1981, p. 68), and like behavioral standards at the Relationship level, are observable and potentially predictive.

A final point that must be considered is that multiple behavioral standards exist at each level of abstraction. In order to achieve the behavioral standard at the Program level in our fictional example, the assassination of a high-ranking member of the United States Senate, the individual must do more than simply travel to the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. He or she must also obtain weaponry, choose a Senator to attack, determine precisely where that Senator will be and at precisely what time. Had the individual chose another behavioral standard at the Program level (e.g., activism and protest in a crowded public venue), an entirely different set of behavioral standards at the Sequence level might have applied (e.g., travel to a crowded public venue, the creation of picket signs, obtaining a bullhorn). Simply put, behavioral complexity increases exponentially as behavioral standards become more concrete. This complexity has another implication: the predictive utility of observable behavioral standards at the Sequence and Relationship levels is vastly improved when considering these standards together as opposed to individually. For instance, a tourist to our nation's capitol may travel to the Russell Senate Office Building on a sightseeing expedition, a lobbyist may determine precisely where a Senator may be and at precisely what time, and an avid hunter may obtain weaponry, but it seems unlikely that any of these individuals poses a heighted risk of violence toward the Senator in question. An individual who exhibits all of these behavioral standards, however, would pose a significantly greater risk.

Although there is no indication that control theory has influenced the development of threat assessment techniques to-date, there is considerably overlap between the guiding principles of threat assessment and the tenets of control theory. Recall that from a threat assessment perspective, targeted violence is conceptualized as the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior. This is also the case when targeted violence is examined from the perspective of control theory, only this latter perspective advances a well-defined self-regulatory mechanism by which comparisons between one's current state and one's behavioral standards elicit actions designed to reduce perceived discrepancies. It could be argued that the provision of a specific mechanism with which to understand the process of thinking and behavior studied by threat assessment researchers would advance our understanding of targeted violence. Also recall that from a threat assessment perspective, the planning and preparation in which the potential perpetrator engages is presumed to result in discrete, observable behaviors that betray the intention to engage in targeted violent behavior. As stated above, achieving behavioral standards at the Sequence and Relationship levels of Power's (1973) hierarchy, which results in observable events, is necessary in order for an individual to achieve his or her superordinate goal, which may include targeted violent action. Determination of the superordinate goal may be possible when these events are considered in relationship to each other.

While the overlap between control theory and threat assessment is fascinating, the novel insights that are gained when considering targeted violence within this theoretical context may significantly improve our ability to predict an individual's risk of engaging in such behavior. For example, the influence of group opinions and attitudes on an

individual's risk for engaging in targeted violence may be better understood within the framework of control theory. Drawing on Festinger's (1950, 1954) social comparison theory, Carver and Scheier (1981) note that individuals often seek out the opinions and attitudes of others for the purpose of determining a behavioral standard. The authors go on to state:

> … [T]he theory assumes that ambiguity leads to a tendency to search out others and collate information gained from them (through either communication or observation). The end product of this collaborative process is a consensually defined standard. In the case of attitudes, the standard is the group's normative attitude. In the case of behavior, it is the behavior that the group appears to collectively deem appropriate to this time and place. This standard, then, will be used to guide one's subsequent verbalizations and actions. (p. 124)

This may have striking implications for understanding the influence of extremist group ideologies and violent activism. Individuals who affiliate themselves with extremist groups may adopt violent or destructive group principles as their own behavioral standards at the Principle level, or adopt violent or destructive actions committed by group members as their own behavioral standards at the Program or Sequence levels. This would be consistent with the phenomenon of so-called copycat crime (e.g., criminal action that is based upon the characteristics of previously publicized crimes), as well as the anecdotal increase in violent threats observed on the anniversaries of violent or extremist events. Drawing upon the mass media literature, Surette (1990) reviewed incidents of copycat crime and despite noting a number of limitations in the extant literature at that time, he concluded that "copycat crime appears to be a persistent social

phenomena" (p. 97). Surette (2002) later examined this phenomenon among violent juvenile offenders and found that one-fourth of the juveniles questioned reported that they had previously attempted to commit a copycat crime. The relationship between extremist group affiliation and extremist actions, and threats and problematic approach behavior toward high-profile officials has received little attention, however, in the threat assessment literature.

The predictive utility of the content and language used in threatening communications may also be better understood within the framework of control theory. Sherman (1980) conducted a study in which he asked participants whether they would engage in specific behaviors if they were asked to do so at a later time. At a later time, participants were again contacted and, in fact, asked to engage in the specific behavior that they had previously been polled about. Results indicated that participants who predicted that they would engage in specific behaviors were more likely to do so than participants in a control condition who had not previously been asked to make a prediction. This finding held true even when the behavior in question was not desirable to the person, such as writing a counterattitudinal essay or singing the Star-Spangled Banner over the telephone. Carver and Scheier (1981) reasoned that "specifying a hypothetical intent may have made that intent salient as a behavioral standard" (p. 125), and that this increased salience resulted in later use of that behavioral standard. In view of these findings, one might expect that threatening communications characterized by high specificity would be more predictive of problematic approach behavior than those characterized by low specificity. Although this hypothesis has not been tested, the findings of Dietz and his colleagues (1991a, 1991b) demonstrating that evidence of

having constructed a plan of action (e.g., providing a time, date, or place that an approach would occur) seem to support the above assertion.

Analysis of the degree to which self-focus is evident in inappropriate and threatening communications may also improve the prediction of subsequent problematic approach behavior. As stated above, self-focus precipitates the comparison of one's current state and relevant behavioral standards, leading the individual to engage in behaviors that minimize the discrepancy between the current state and the goal state. It might, therefore, be expected that the authors of communications characterized by a high degree of self-focus would be more likely to behave in a manner consistent with the standards explicated within the communication. Prior research has demonstrated that the use of first-person pronouns does increase as a function of increased objective self-awareness (Davis & Brock, 1975), lending a degree of empirical support to this hypothesis.

Chapter 2 - Purpose and Specific Hypotheses

The targeted violence knowledge base has grown considerably over the past decade due to empirically sound research examining this phenomenon across a range of contexts, and the techniques used by threat assessment professionals have been significantly refined. Without testable theory regarding the process by which an individual comes to regard violent action toward some target as an acceptable means to resolve some problem, however, the threat assessment community will be limited in their ability to adapt existing research findings to novel perpetrators, environments, and targets. The purpose of the present research is examine the predictive utility of several proposed risk factors for targeted violence and problematic approach behavior toward members of the United States Congress that are based upon Carver and Scheier's (1981) control theory, and that have been previously unexamined in the threat assessment and targeted violence literature. With this purpose in mind, the present research is designed to examine the following hypotheses:

1. The degree of similarity between the content of threatening or inappropriate contacts and the literature and writings of known extremist groups that support violent or otherwise criminal action will be a significant predictor of problematic approach behavior, both between-persons and within-person, such that increased similarity will predict increased risk of problematic approach.

2. Temporal proximity to anniversaries of notable violent incidents or violent or otherwise criminal action consistent with extremist group ideologies known to support violent or otherwise criminal action will be a significant predictor of

problematic approach behavior, both between-persons and within-person, such that increased temporal proximity will predict increased risk of problematic approach.

3. Specification or evidence of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior will be a significant predictor of problematic approach behavior, both between-persons and within-person, such that increased specificity or detail will predict increased risk of problematic approach.

4. The degree of self-focus evident in the content of threatening or inappropriate contacts will be a significant predictor of problematic approach behavior, both between-persons and within-person, such that increased self-focus will predict increased risk of problematic approach.

Chapter 3 - Methods

In an effort to enhance the generalizability of the proposed research to previous

empirical work, the following definitions will be employed: *Problematic approach* will

henceforth refer to an attempted or actual appearance at the grounds of the United States

Capitol, at a Congressional office, or at another location where members were present

and a member was the target, during which the subject engages in threatening or

harassing behaviors. *Target* will henceforth refer to the person or persons toward whom

the subject's threatening or harassing behavior are directed, or to the person or persons

who incidentally become involved in the subject's actions (e.g., congressional staff,

USCP officers). C*ase* will henceforth refer to the entirety of documented contact and

approach behaviors enacted by an individual subject toward any USCP protectees.

Sample

The sample for this study will be randomly drawn from the population of subjects

who have engaged in threatening or otherwise inappropriate contact toward members of

the United States Congress and have subsequently been investigated by the Threat

Assessment Section (TAS) of the USCP. As noted by Scalora et al. (2002a; 2002b), the

USCP is responsible for the safety and security of members of both the United States

House of Representatives and the United States Senate, congressional staff, visitors to the

Capitol grounds, and congressional offices throughout the nation. Having been

established in 1828, the USCP is one of the oldest law enforcement agencies with

significant protective responsibilities. The TAS is specifically responsible for performing

investigative and risk assessment activities in response to threatening or suspicious

activity involving Congressional members, or which occur on Capitol grounds (including

the Capitol building proper and office buildings), Congressional district offices, the

residences of Congressional members, or at public events where a Congressional member

is present.

In the absence of any prior literature suggesting an effect size for the variables of

greatest interest, Cohen's (1989) conventional definition of a small effect size, $d = .20$,

was used in the power analysis to determine the sample size for the proposed research.

Based upon this effect size and a statistical significance level of .05, a sample size of 192

subjects (96 individuals who engage in problematic approach behavior, 96 individuals

who do not engage in such behavior) will be targeted in order to achieve a statistical

power of .80.

Procedure

Subject characteristics, characteristics of problematic approach behavior, and

characteristics of threatening and inappropriate contact toward Congressional members

were extrapolated from investigative records maintained by the USCP TAS. These

records consist of information from a variety of sources, including interviews with the

subject, interviews with third parties (e.g., subject acquaintances and family members,

witnesses), and any written correspondence from the subject. Formally analyzing the

reliability of information contained within TAS records was not logistically possible in

the proposed research for a variety of reasons, including the tremendous resources such

an analysis would necessarily entail. As has been the case in prior threat assessment

research, however, variables selected for study inclusion were those for which highly

reliable corroborating sources were typically available. As noted in Baumgartner (2004),

TAS cases are subject to review by supervisory staff trained in investigative techniques

devised for targeted violence risk assessment, techniques which, as previously noted, stress the importance of collecting information from multiple sources. Investigators of the TAS receive specialized training on evaluative techniques to determine the presence of psychiatric symptomatology previously shown to be predictive of violent behavior, so-called threat / control-override symptoms (e.g., Link & Stueve, 1994). Both the aforementioned techniques and the internal review mechanism ensured a high level of reliability of this data.

In order to minimize reliability issues among variables central to the guiding hypotheses of this research, written contacts, including postcards, letters, facsimiles, e-mails, pamphlets, and any text-based enclosures or attachments to those contacts (e.g., magazine or newspaper clippings) were electronically scanned. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, ABBYY PDFTransformer, was used to convert contact materials from ink-and-paper to electronic text files (.txt files) for further analysis. Self-focus was operationalized as the density of first-person pronouns appearing in contact materials authored by the subject. Utilizing the Practical Extraction and Report Language (Perl) computer programming language, the total word length was divided by the number of first-person pronouns (e.g., "I," "me," "my"). In an effort to avoid the potential variance introduced as a function of the differences with regard to the verbosity of subjects, a secondary self-focus variable was extrapolated as the ratio of first-person pronouns and second- and third-person pronouns (e.g., "you," "they," "them").

The degree of similarity between the content of threatening or inappropriate contacts and the literature and writings of known extremist groups was determined using a pseudo-Bayesian statistical approach. A number of advantages of using such an

approach have been noted. Filters designed using Bayesian principles have been

previously shown to properly classify messages with a false negative rate of less than one

percent and no false positive errors (Graham, 2004). Furthermore, the use of a naïve

Bayes classifier in which the assumptions underlying Bayes theorem are relaxed,

allowing for interdependent message properties to be treated as independent properties,

has been shown to result in highly unexpected efficiency (Zhang, 2004). In order to

avoid the logistical difficulties inherent to processing extremist group literature and

writings that are composed in non-English languages, only domestic extremist groups

were considered. An electronic compilation of writings attributed to domestic extremist

groups identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center and listed on their website were

used to construct a corpus of writings.   A naïve Bayesian filter was created using the

Perl computer programming language and based upon the programming syntax presented

by Graham (2004), a probability estimate was computed (e.g., the probability that a

communication is consistent with extremist group writings). The probability estimate

was used intended to be used in later analyses of problematic approach behavior.

Although it was initially intended that probability estimated would be estimated

separately for several different groups (e.g., the probability that a communication is

consistent with Ku Klux Klan writings, separate from the probability that a

communication is consistent with the Army of God), significant similarity in language

used between groups precluded such an approach. As such, writings from the internet-

based extremist group, stormfront.org, was used as the sole source of extremist group

writings.

The temporal proximity of problematic approach behavior to violent or otherwise

criminal action consistent with extremist group ideologies occurring elsewhere in the United States was determined using a small sample of notable incidents of extremist violence, including the Ruby Ridge incident, the Columbine school shooting incident, September 11th, and the Oklahoma City Bombing / Waco siege. Temporal proximity was computed in days for all subjects.

Specification or evidence of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior was determined based upon the presence of explicit details indicative of such planning. A scaled variable was extrapolated based upon the presence or absence of the following details: a physical setting (e.g., Congressional district office), temporal setting (e.g., a specific date or time frame), behavioral intent (e.g., "... to consummate our love ..."), and other miscellaneous details relevant to approach. One point was assigned for the presence of each of the aforementioned factors.

Chapter 4 - Analytical Methods

Model Specification

A series of logistic multilevel models were estimated using SAS PROC
GLIMMIX in order to determine the model, based on both substantive and statistical
considerations, that best explains the relationship between the predictor variables
identified above and problematic approach behavior. At a basic level, the mixed model
can be thought of as being composed of two separate models, a within-person (level-one)
model and a between-persons (level-two) model. Using an example with variables of
interest in the present research, the within-person model (below) examines problematic
approach behavior for a given individual *i* at time *t* (Approach behavior$_{ti}$) as a function of
the individual intercept (B_{0i}) and the individual effect of within-person variation in self-
referential language (B_{1i}). Although the dependant variable in a linear mixed model
varies also a function of a time specific residual (e_{ti}), the time specific residual is not
estimated in the type of logistic mixed models estimated herein.

**Level 1:   Approach behavior$_{ti}$ = B_{0i} + B_{1i}(Self-referential language$_{ti}$ – Mean self-
referential language$_i$)**

The between-persons model (below) examines problematic approach behavior for
a given individual (B_{0i}) as a function of the fixed intercept (γ_{00}), the main effect of
person-mean self-referential language (centered at zero; γ_{01}), and a random intercept for
the individual (U_{0i}). The individual effect of within-person variation in self-referential
language (B_{1i}) is, in turn, a function of the main effect of within-person self-referential
language (centered around the individual's mean; γ_{10}).

Level 2: $\quad B_{0i} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\textbf{Mean self-referential language}_i - 0) + U_{0i}$

$\quad\quad\quad\quad B_{1i} = \gamma_{10}$

As case files are not generated on a regular interval, there is little logical reason to expect variances and covariances to change predictably with time. As such, random effects of time were not examined.

Although the separate treatment within-person and between-persons effects of a predictor upon a chosen outcome may seem overly complicated, an example may illustrate that this methodology is not as complicated as it appears at first glance. Consider an individual who has written five e-mails to his Congressperson, resulting in the assignment of five separate cases by the USCP TAS. If our interest is in examining this individual's use of self-referential language in the e-mails he authored, we may calculate his use of first-person pronouns (a common representation of such language) in each e-mail and take the average. Our author's average use of first-person pronouns is a between-persons, or level-two, representation of self-referential language, because it represents his average use and may be compared to the average use of other individuals who contact their Congressperson. This would allow us to answer the question, "Is an individual who generally uses a lot of self-referential language in their communications more likely to engage in problematic approach behavior?"

We may also be interested, however, in comparing the individual's use of self-referential language in a given e-mail to his use in the other e-mails he has written. Our author's use of first-person pronouns in each e-mail is a within-person, or level-one, representation of self-referential language, because it represents his use on a single

occasion and may be compared to his use on other occasions that he has written. This would allow us to answer the question, "Is an individual who uses more self-referential language in their communications than is usual for that individual more likely to engage in problematic approach behavior?"

Disregard of the time-specific residual may be viewed as an inherent limitation of logistic mixed modeling, but one that is unavoidable in the present research; the outcome of interest, problematic approach behavior, is dichotomous in nature and cannot be examined using the general linear model. Assumptions of the general linear model regarding normality (e.g., that level-one errors are normally distributed) and heteroscedasticity (e.g., that the level-one residual variance is constant over varying values of the predictors) cannot be met with binary outcome data, as errors are forced to take one of two values based upon the observed outcome minus the predicted outcome. Additionally, the variance is dependent upon the predicted probability of approach. Generalized linear modeling addresses these problems through use of the logit link function, which applies a logistic transformation to binary outcome data. This results in a continuous distribution of possible outcome values that will result in an estimated predicted probability between zero and one.

Figure 2

An illustration of logistic transformation of dichotomous outcome data in the generalized linear model
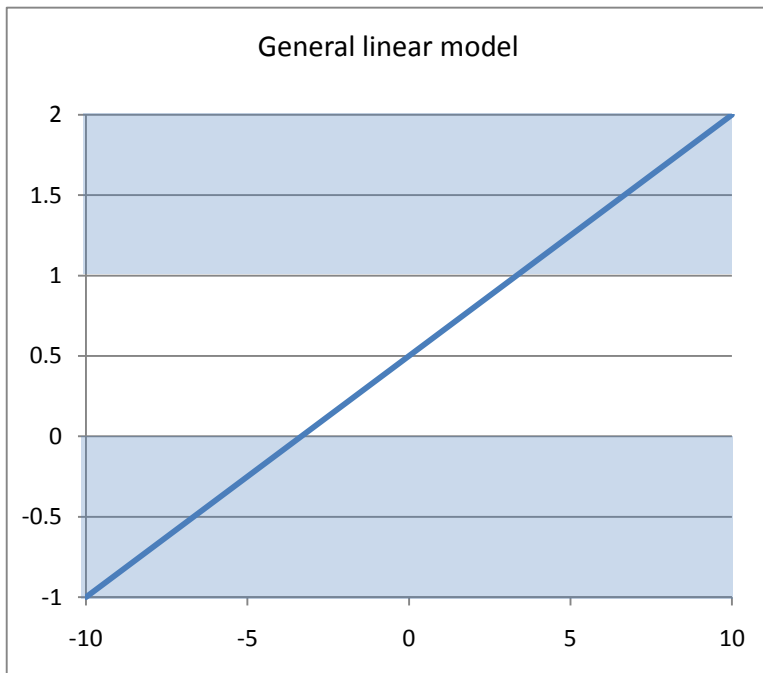
Estimation of a dichotomous outcome in the general linear model results in predicted values that cannot be interpreted (shown in the shaded areas)
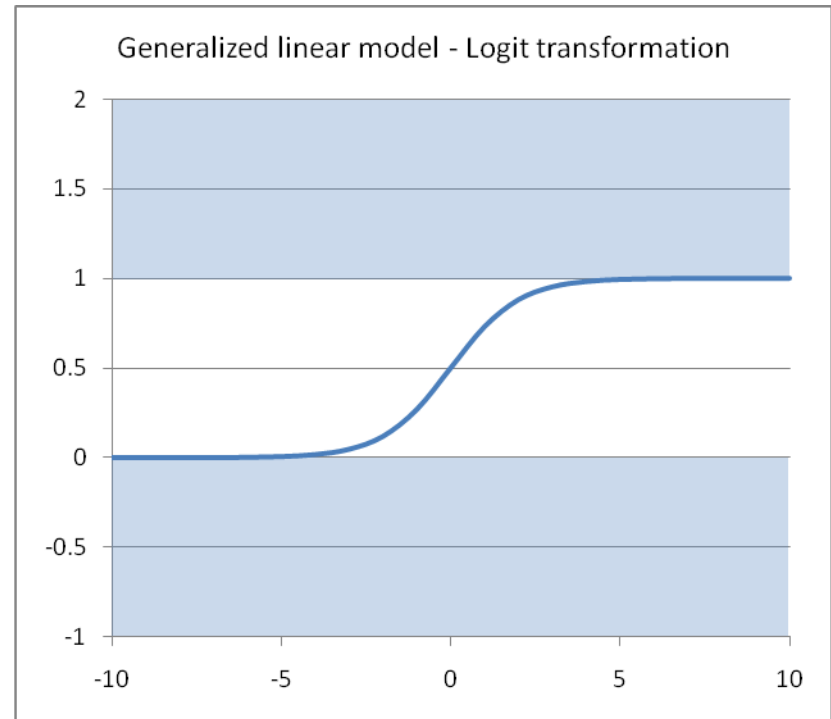
Logit transformation in the generalized linear model restricts predicted probability between 0 and 1 (exclusive), allowing possible logit outcome values to range between $-\infty$ and $+\infty$

The use of an identity link function (as is the case in the general linear model) results in a discrete range of possible predicted outcome values that will result in a predicted probability between zero (e.g., the outcome did not occur) and one (e.g., the outcome did occur), with predicted outcome values outside that range generating estimates that cannot be logically interpreted. Generalized linear models circumvent the aforementioned violations of normality and homoscedasticity assumptions by making different assumptions; that errors follow a Bernoulli distribution with a known residual variance of 3.29.

Subjects were eligible for sample inclusion from the population of subjects for whom the USCP maintains case files if they ever authored a threatening or otherwise inappropriate communication toward a protectee of the USCP.

Chapter 5 - Results

A total of 506 subjects were included in the present analyses. Eighty-nine

subjects (17.59%) could not be identified on the basis of their communication toward

their target; demographic information was unavailable for these subjects. Examination of

the 417 subjects who could be identified revealed an average age of approximately 47

years ($SD = 14.26$) at the time of their first contact with the USCP. Over 83% (n = 364)

of subjects were male. Approximately 82% ($n = 364$) of subjects for whom ethnicity was

known were Caucasian and approximately 11% were African-American. Fewer than 25

total subjects were classified as Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, or

"Other." The number of cases (e.g., files opened by the USCP following a behavior of

concern by the subject) per subject ranged from 1 to 19 ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 2.27$), while the

number of contacts (e.g., separate communications authored by the subject) per case

ranged from 1 to 42 ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 3.11$) among the 611 cases with at least one contact.

Of the total subjects included in these analyses, 70 subjects (13.92%) engaged in

physical approach behavior at some time prior to their most recent investigation by the

USCP. For the purpose of the present research, however, only physical approach co-

occurring with USCP case activity can be considered, as any outcome variable in a mixed

model must be observable at level-1. A subset of 47 subjects (9.29% of the total sample)

engaged in one or more occasions of such observed approach behavior (that is, approach

behavior that coincided with a USCP case entry).

Visual inspection of histograms representing the distribution of scores on the

non-transformed level-1 predictor variables (e.g., prior to calculating the deviation from

the corresponding person-level means, as discussed below) was carried out to determine

the most useful representation of these variables. The maximum percentage of total

pronouns that are first-person pronouns and temporal proximity to anniversaries of

domestic incidents of extremist violence both approximated a continuous, normal

distribution, well-suited to analysis as linear variables. Average (mean) Bayesian

classifier score per case was neither continuous, nor normally distributed, however, with

approximately 60% of values equal to zero and approximately 20% of values equal to

one. Based on this distribution, average (mean) Bayesian classification score per case

was transformed into a dichotomous variable representing scores as falling above or

below 0.5. Similarly with regard to contact specificity, an overwhelming number of cases

contained no specific details regarding planned approach or problematic behavior,

resulting in a distribution of scores best suited for representation as a dichotomous value

(e.g., no specific details regarding plans v. some details regarding plans).

Descriptive statistics for predictor variables are presented below. The maximum

percentage of total pronouns in the first-person from any typed or written communication

within an individual case averaged 52% ($M = 52.21$, $SD = 26.47$). Such communications

were reported to the USCP an average of 37 days ($M = 37.40$, $SD = 29.95$) from the

closest of four anniversaries of domestic incidents, identified in the section above, of

extremist violence. Transformation of the Bayesian classification score into a

dichotomous variable as outlined above resulted in 15.73% of cases containing at least

one contact that received a score of 1, and 27.08% of subjects ever having authored a

contact that received a score of 1. Transformation of contact specificity into a

dichotomous variable as outlined above resulted in 15.42% of subjects having authored a

contact with one or more specific details regarding a threatened approach. Descriptive

and distributional statistics of subject and content characteristics can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Univariate analyses of approach and non-approach samples

Characteristic	N	Group	
		Approach	Non-approach
Age (*SD*)	375	46.58 (11.55)	47.83 (14.73)
Gender			
Male	353	39	314
Female	72	6	66
Race / Ethnicity			
European-decent	305	38	267
African-decent	37	5	32
Hispanic	6	2	4
Asian	9	0	9
Middle Eastern	6	0	6
Native American	1	0	1
Number of cases (*SD*)	506	4.81 (4.05)	1.72 (1.78)
Content Factors			
Maximum first-person pronoun usage (*SD*)	422	64.28 (19.46)	51.44 (26.18)
Temporal proximity to anniversary of violent extremist incident (*SD*)	492	39.99 (18.45)	36.98 (27.80)
Ever authored a communication similar to extremist writings			
Yes	137	11	126
No	369	36	333
Inclusion of one or more specific details regarding planned approach			
Yes	76	12	64
No	417	33	384

In an effort to provide a richer context within which to interpret the results of the logistic multilevel models presented below, descriptive statistics were generated separately for groups defined as having engaged in problematic approach behavior or not having engaged in such behavior (i.e., a between-persons analysis). With regard to sample characteristics, individuals who engaged in problematic approach were 46.58 (SD = 11.55) years of age at the time their first case was assigned and had an average of 4.81 (SD = 4.05) assigned cases, whereas individuals who did not engage in problematic approach were 47.83 (SD = 14.73) years of age at the time their first case was assigned and had an average of 1.72 (SD = 1.78) assigned cases. While the difference in ages between these groups was not significant, $t(373) = 0.55$, $p = ns$, individuals who engaged in approach behavior did have significantly more assigned cases, $t(504) = -9.64$, $p <$ .0001. Neither the distribution of ethnicity, X^2 (5, N = 364) = 4.74, $p = ns$, nor gender, X^2 (1, N = 425) = 0.47, $p = ns$, of subjects significantly differed as a function of whether or not they had engaged in problematic approach behavior.

With regard to the predictors of interest, individuals who engaged in problematic approach averaged a maximum proportion of first-person pronouns to total pronouns of 64.28 (SD = 19.46). This was a significantly greater use of self-referential language than individuals who did not approach ($M = 51.44$, $SD = 26.18$), $t(420) = -2.75$, $p < .01$. Temporal proximity to anniversaries of domestic incidents of extremist violence did not differ between individuals who approached and those who did not, averaging 39.99 (SD = 18.45) days and 36.98 (SD = 27.80) days respectively, $t(490) = -0.72$, $p = ns$. The distribution of individuals who had ever authored a communication with a Bayesian

classification score of 1 was also not significant between the groups, X^2 (1, N = 506) = 0.35, $p = ns$. The dichotomous representation of contact specificity, however, differed as a function of whether the individual had ever engaged in problematic approach such that individuals who had engaged in approach behavior were more likely to include specific details in their communications, , X^2 (1, N = 493) = 4.81, $p = .03$.

Separate unconditional means models were estimated in order to determine the relative between- and within-person variation in the outcome and predictor variables across all recorded USCP cases. The intraclass correlation (ICC) for the percentage of total pronouns in the first-person revealed that approximately 37% of the observed variation was between-persons (approximately 63% was within-person). The ICC for the dichotomous representation of Bayesian classification scores indicating similarity to known extremist writings revealed that 50% of the observed variation in these scores was between-persons. It must be noted that there is no exact equivalent of the ICC for logistic mixed level models given that the residual variance is not estimated, as described in the Analytic Method section. Therefore, ICCs based upon variances estimated in logistic mixed level models (i.e., Bayesian classification scores, problematic approach behavior) should be interpreted cautiously with this caveat in mind. The ICC for temporal proximity (in days) to anniversaries of notable domestic incidents of extremist violence revealed that only 7% of observed variation was between-persons (approximately 93% was within-person). Finally, the ICC for the outcome of interest, problematic approach behavior, revealed that approximately 68% of observed variation was between persons (approximately 32% was within-person). The substantial proportion of within-person variation among the predictors in this study justifies the proposed multilevel analytic

methodology.

In order to examine the separate between- and within-person effects of self-referential language and temporal proximity to anniversaries of domestic incidents of extremist violence, separate variables were created for later use in sequential models. Between-persons effects of the maximum percentage of total pronouns in the first-person and temporal proximity to anniversaries of domestic incidents of extremist violence were represented by calculating the mean values of the percentage of total pronouns that were first-person pronouns and the temporal proximity to anniversaries of domestic incidents of extremist violence respectively, across cases for each subject. Within-person effects of these variables were represented by calculating the deviation from the corresponding person-level means. Representing between- and within-person effects of variables in this manner is useful for predictors that do not change systematically over time. The within-person effect of Bayesian classifier score was represented by the dichotomous variable described above. In an effort to determine how best to represent the incremental between-persons effect of this predictor (e.g., the effect of the between-persons representation of Bayesian classifier score after controlling for the within-person effect), a histogram representing the distribution of Bayesian classifier scores across cases per subject was visually inspected. This supported a dichotomous representation at the between-persons level as well, where subjects were classified as having no scores indicative of similarity to extremist group writings, or having at least one score indicative of such similarity.

Among individuals for whom multiple case files had been created by the USCP, a substantial number of observations resulted in which data extrapolated from the

communication were missing. This occurred when a case contained no faxed, mailed, or

e-mailed communication authored by the subject. Given the nested design of this study,

the effect of missing data was considered both within-person and between-persons. At

level-one (e.g., within-person), cases were characterized as containing missing data for

communication-related predictors or not. At level-two (e.g., between-persons), subjects

were characterized as containing missing data for communication-related predictors

across all subjects cases or having such data in at least one case. The presence of data in

at least one case would allow for the inclusion of level-two data. In an effort to identify

potential bias that may result from the inclusion of large amounts of missing data, two

series of models were estimated for the affected predictors: self-referential language and

similarity to extremist group writings. In the first series, models were estimated using

predictors in which missing values were unchanged, and thus cases with missing

predictors were removed from analysis. In the second series, models were estimated

using data in which missing values were transformed into zero values, and these

transformed predictors were entered as an interaction with a predictor representing

whether the data was missing in the original data at level-one and level-two, along with

the predictor representing whether the data was missing as an individual term. Using the

formulae above, this method of addressing missing data can be represented as:

Level 1: **Approach behavior$_{ti}$ = B$_{0i}$ + B$_{1i}$(Self-referential language case data missingness$_{ti}$) + B$_{2i}$(Self-referential language$_{ti}$ – Mean self-referential language$_i$)(Self-referential language case data missingness$_{ti}$)**

Level 2: **B$_{0i}$ = γ_{00} + γ_{01}(Self-referential language subject data missingness$_i$) + γ_{01}(Mean self-referential language$_i$ – 0)(Self-referential language**

subject data missingness$_i$) + U$_{0i}$

B$_{1i}$ = γ$_{10}$

In these formulae, "case data missingness" refers to whether communication-related

predictor data was missing for an entire case, while "subject data missingness" refers to

whether communication-related predictor data was missing across all cases for an entire

subject. Although there was no difference in patterns of significance between

corresponding models in the two series, logit effects and odds ratio estimates were

reported from the models in which missing values were transformed into zero values to

avoid selection bias. In circumstances in which missing values appear systematically due

to some unidentified, yet non-random, effect, sample selection bias may affect the

validity and generalizability of the results. Thus, transformation of missing values into

zero values was deemed the most prudent course of action.

Self-Focus and Problematic Approach Behavior

It was originally hypothesized that greater self-focus on average, as well as

greater self-focus than usual for the individual, would correspond to an increased

likelihood of problematic approach behavior. Using self-referential language as a proxy

for self-focus, a model was estimated in which the between- and within-person effects of

data missingness were included as separate parameters, as well as the interaction of these

parameters with between- and within-person effects of self-referential language. Results

from this model indicate that the expected logit of problematic approach among

individuals for whom no typed or written contacts were available is -3.34 ($SE = 0.60$, $p <$

.0001), corresponding to a probability of problematic approach of 0.03. The availability

of one or more contacts within *any* case file assigned to the subject corresponds with a

decrease in the expected logit of 2.56 ($SE = 1.04$, $p = .01$) for all cases assigned to a subject and probability of problematic approach of less than 0.01. The availability of one of more contacts within a *given* case file corresponds with a further decrease in the expected logit of 1.02 ($SE = 0.44$, $p = .02$) for that specific case and probability of problematic approach of 0.01. Stated simply, in the present study both the availability of contact data within a given case and within any case assigned to a subject corresponds with a decrease in the probability of problematic approach behavior. Despite the statistical significance of the predictors representing the nature of missingness in this data, the interpretation of these variables is problematic due to the multifarious causes of such missingness. As a result, meaningful interpretation of these predictors is difficult. This may suggest, however, that the mere act of authoring and sending an inappropriate or threatening communication decreases the risk of problematic approach, consistent with the well-documented finding that those who make threats often pose little threat of approach.

Among subjects for whom contact data is available, greater overall use of self-referential language (e.g., between-persons) results in an overall increase in the expected logit of 0.03 ($SE = 0.01$) for each one percent increase in the percentage of total pronouns in the first-person, implying a greater probability of engaging in problematic approach behavior, $F(1,498) = 6.08$, $p = .01$. By way of example, for each ten percent increase in the percentage of total pronouns in the first person, the odds of engaging in problematic approach behavior (versus not engaging in approach behavior) increase by a factor of 1.288. Greater than usual use of self-referential language for the subject (e.g., within-person) results in an increase in the expected logit of 0.01 for that case for each one

percent increase in the percentage of total pronouns in the first-person, although this does not represent a significant increase in the probability of problematic approach, $F(1,482) = 0.22, p = ns$. The effect of self-referential language, as well as the predictors reviewed below, on problematic approach behavior across subjects is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Generalized linear model parameter estimates

Self-referential language

Parameter	Logit	SE	Odds ratio	p-value
Intercept	-3.34	0.60	-	<.0001
Level-1 data present	-1.02	0.45	.359	.02
Level-2 data present	-2.56	1.04	.296	.01
Person-mean centered first-person pronoun use	0.01	0.02	1.06[1]	.64
Mean first-person pronoun use	0.03	0.01	1.29[1]	.01

Similarity of contact to known extremist group writings

Parameter	Logit	SE	Odds ratio	p-value
Intercept	-3.35	0.60	-	<.0001
Level-1 data present	-0.98	0.51	0.36	.05
Level-2 data present	-0.79	0.71	0.49	.27
Contact similarity – Individual case	-0.31	0.75	0.83	.68
Contact similarity – Any case	0.24	0.72	1.21	.74

Temporal proximity to anniversary of notable extremist violence

Parameter	Logit	SE	Odds ratio	p-value
Intercept	-5.1315	0.73	-	<.0001
Length in days – Individual case	-0.01	0.01	0.99	.28
Shortest length in days – Any case	0.01	0.01	1.01	.31

Specification of a plan

Parameter	Logit	SE	Odds ratio	p-value
Intercept	-5.1028	0.64	-	<.0001
Specification of one or more details	1.10	0.63	3.00	.08

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[1] Odds ratio for a ten percent increase are shown for ease of interpretability

Similarity of Contacts to Known Extremist Group Writings and Problematic Approach

Behavior

It was originally hypothesized that the greater similarity between the content of threatening or inappropriate contacts and the writings of known extremist groups on average, as well as greater similarity than usual for the individual, would correspond to an increased likelihood of problematic approach behavior. Using Bayesian classification scores as a proxy for similarity, a model was estimated in which the between- and within-person effects of data missingness were included as separate parameters, as well as the interaction of these parameters with between- and within-person effects of mean Bayesian classification score. Among subjects for whom contact data is available, high similarity to known extremist writings in any contact authored by subject (e.g., between-persons) results in an overall increase in the expected logit of 0.24 ($SE = 0.72$), while high similarity to known extremist writings in a contact in a given case file (e.g., within-person) results in a decrease in the expected logit of 0.31 ($SE = 0.75$) for that case. The magnitude of these changes, however, does not achieve statistical significance ($F[1,503] = 0.11$, $p = ns$, $F[1,486] = 0.17$, $p = ns$, respectively).

Temporal Proximity to Anniversaries of Notable Extremist Violence and Problematic

Approach Behavior

It was originally hypothesized that closer temporal proximity to anniversaries of notable extremist incidents for each case, as well as temporal proximity averaged across all cases, would correspond to an increased likelihood of problematic approach behavior. Having chosen four contemporary incidents from which to calculate the shortest period of

time between incident and case assignment, a model was estimated in which between- and within-person effects of temporal proximity were entered as predictors. As noted in the Analytical Methods section, it was unnecessary to include parameters representing data missingness in this model as temporal proximity was determined from the date on which a case was created. As such, the absence of contacts authored by the subject did not result in missing data as in the models above. Results from this model indicate that for each case file belonging to a subject (e.g., within-person), the expected logit of problematic approach for that case decreases 0.008 (*SE* = 0.007) for each additional day between the date the case was opened and a noted anniversary date. Examination of the shortest time period between the date a case was opened and a notable anniversary date across all cases assigned to a subject (e.g., between-persons), the expected logit of problematic approach increases 0.01 (SE = 0.01) for each additional day. Neither the within- or between-persons predictors in this model achieved statistical significance, however (*F*[1,416] = 1.19, *p* = *ns*, *F*[1,490] = 1.02, *p* = *ns*, respectively).

Specification of a Plan to Approach and Problematic Approach Behavior

It was originally hypothesized that increased specification of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior would correspond to an increased likelihood of problematic approach behavior. To test this hypothesis, a model was estimated in which the between-persons effect of contact specificity was included as the sole predictor. As data regarding contact specificity was available only for the most recent case assigned to a subject, within-person examination of this predictor could not be performed. Results from this model indicate that the inclusion of at least some detailed specification of a plan to engage in problematic approach corresponds to an increase of 1.10 (*SE* = 0.63) in the

expected logit of problematic approach. An increase of this magnitude approached

statistical significance ($F[1,491] = 3.07$, $p = .08$). Characterized differently, a subject

who included at least a single detail regarding their plan to engage in problematic

approach behavior was three times more likely to actually engage in problematic

approach behavior than subjects who did not include such details.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

In building a case for the importance of this dissertation, it is suggested that the development of an improved understanding of why a particular individual pursues a violent resolution to some perceived injustice or problem would have major implications for the assessment of targeted violence and its prevention. As a starting point, the hypotheses tested in the current research were based on Carver and Scheier's (1981) control theory, which, despite its wide acceptance in the psychology literature, has not been applied to this issue of targeted violence. The results presented here are a modest, initial step toward developing that understanding.

Primary Analyses

It was hypothesized that use of self-referential language, as a representation of self-focus, would predict problematic approach behavior. In the present study, the use of self-referential language was demonstrated to be significantly related to problematic approach behavior such that high use of such language on average predicted that an individual is more likely to engage in approach behavior on average. Variation in a subject's use of self-referential language across communications, however, was unrelated to problematic approach. These findings have clear bearing upon the identification-related goals of threat assessment. The ability to garner threat-relevant information from subject communications would undoubtedly aid law enforcement and protective intelligence personnel in the early identification of individuals who may possess and increase proclivity to approach their target, consistent with the first of Fein et al.'s (1995) four components in identifying potential perpetrators (e.g., the development of criteria that would trigger the initiation of a threat assessment investigation). Prior research, for

example, has demonstrated that content characteristics such as the presence of help-seeking requests (Scalora et al., 2002a) and absence of articulated threats (Scalora et al., 2002b) are predictive of problematic approach among individuals who author concerning correspondence to congressional members. Additional research findings, such as the higher incidence of problematic approach among individuals who write threatening letters as opposed to e-mail (Schoeneman-Morris et al., 2007) and who contact multiple congressional targets as opposed to contacting a single congressperson (Scalora et al., 2002a), demonstrate that both the content of the communication *as well as* the manner in which an individual communicates may inform the development of criteria for initiating a threat assessment investigation. The present finding that use of self-referential language is predictive of problematic approach adds to this growing body of empirically-derived criteria.

Whereas the utility of this finding upon the identification of individuals who may engage in problematic approach behavior is not in question, the bearing of this finding on assessment-related goals is less clear. As stated above, the relationship between self-referential language and problematic approach behavior in the current research was observed only in the between-person analyses; the relationship was not significant in the within-person analyses. Said differently, variations in an individual's use of self-referential language over time did not predict approach toward a Congressional target, it was, rather, the individual's average use of self-referential language across all known contacts that predicted approach. The threat assessment approach is premised upon the notion that violence is a process and that individuals move "*toward* or *away* from an attack" (Fein et al., 1995, p. 5). This movement toward or away from an attack is

evidenced by the individual's thoughts and behaviors. A logical extension of this premise to the behavior of interest would predict that the likelihood of problematic approach would increase with corresponding increasing use of self-referential language across an individual's communications. That prediction was unsupported in this research. Although the use of self-referential language *across all contacts* was a significant predictor, the *individual* contact characterized by this use was often not the approach-related contact.

In control theory, self-focus plays an important role in motivating an individual to achieve their goals through the comparison of one's current situation and their desired situation (Carver and Scheier, 1981). Although research linking self-focus and help-seeking behavior is currently lacking, it stands to reason that help-seeking inherently invokes self-focus in that one must recognize how their current state of affairs differs from their desired state of affairs in order to make a request for help. When so conceptualized, the finding that greater use of self-referential language, a common proxy for self-focus, is consistent with the findings of Scalora et al. (2002a) that subjects engaging in problematic approach behavior toward members of Congress were more likely to author communications with help-seeking motives.

Extensions of cybernetic theories of action control such as control theory have great potential to help us better understand the relationship between self-focus and targeted violence. Central to Carver and Scheier's (1981) control theory is the idea that self-regulation is a process resulting from self-directed attention comparing an individual's current state to their desired state, and the behaviors that minimize the discrepancy between those states. Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister (1998) were among

the first to conceptualize self-regulation as a limited resource, "akin to having a limited supply of strength or energy" (p. 774). In a series of studies, they demonstrated that self-control was impaired by various types of prior exertion, including the suppression of forbidden thoughts (e.g., cognitive suppression). In a separate series of studies, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (1998) demonstrated similarly that the suppression of forbidden affect (e.g., affective suppression) also resulted in impaired self-control. In both studies, the authors termed this phenomenon ego depletion.

Recall from the introduction the rationale behind the hypothesis that individuals who demonstrated high self-focus would be more likely to engage in problematic approach: self-focus precipitates comparison of one's current state and relevant behavioral standards, making approach behavior more likely when one's behavioral standards involve approach. This is consistent with the significant between-persons relationship discussed above. Ego depletion may explain why a significant within-person relationship was not observed. Baumeister and Exline (1999, 2000) make a compelling argument that moral, virtuous behavior is the direct result of self-control, "insofar as virtue depends on overcoming selfish or antisocial impulses for the sake of what is best for the group or collective" (p. 1165). By extension, the loss of self-control by way of ego depletion would result in immoral behavior and, perhaps, problematic approach behavior. This is not to characterize problematic approach behavior as unplanned or impulsive. Rather, problematic approach behavior and targeted violence may be characterized as a planned immoral behavior.

Ego depletion as a causal mechanism for problematic approach may also help explain the relationship between mental illness and problematic approach of political

figures in federal government (Scalora et al., 2002a, 2002b). If we accept the notion that symptoms of mental illness consume limited self-regulation resources, it follows from that deficits in self-regulation may result antisocial behavior, such as problematic approach and targeted violence. Recent research by DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, and Gailliot (2007) supports this explanation. In a series of five studies, they demonstrated that depleted capacity for self-regulation due to ego depletion increased aggressive responding. Their research builds on earlier research suggesting that deficits in self-control may serve as the basis for a general theory of crime (Longshore & Turner, 1998).

It was hypothesized that similarity to known extremist writings would predict increased problematic approach behavior. Analyses revealed no significant relationship between these variables. In formulating the hypothesis that increased similarity between known extremist writings and inappropriate and threatening communications toward Congressional targets would predict increased approach behavior, it was believed that increased similarity would reflect increased influence of extremist group opinions and attitudes upon the subject. Taken a step further, the influence of extremist group opinions and attitudes upon an individual represents the type of environmental characteristics believed to facilitate violent action that, along with characteristics of the perpetrator and a stimulus or "triggering condition" (Fein et al., 1995, p. 3), comprise the factors thought to result in targeted violence. This hypothesis was unsupported in the current research, although the reason it was not supported is in question. It may be that extremist group opinions and group attitudes have a minimal influence upon an individual's intention to engage in violent actions toward a targeted individual affiliated with the United States Congress. While this may seem unlikely based upon the innumerable historical examples

of individuals acting violently and endorsing some group ideology, it is important to recognize that there are countless others who endorse the same ideology but nevertheless choose some variation of non-violent action. Further support for the possibility that extremist group ideologies have a minimal influence upon the decision to engage in targeted violence can be found in the ECSP (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999); among the eight motives for attack behaviors, extremist group action is notably absent. It is worth reiterating that the ECSP studied targeted violence directed toward protectees of the USSS, and that motives behind such actions toward different target groups are known to vary.

There are additional possible explanations for a non-significant finding between similarity of subject communications to known extremist group writings and approach behavior. It may be that the manner in which similarity to extremist group writings was operationalized in this study failed to capture the aspects of similarity important for approach. As outlined above, extremist group writings were obtained from an internet-based discussion board belonging to one of the largest white nationalist groups in existence. Polling writings for text analysis from internet-based resources is not without precedent in the area of text analysis; in their study of linguistic markers of psychological change surrounding the attacks of September 11, 2001, Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker (2004) downloaded the diaries of 1,084 United States users of an on-line journaling service. The topics of extremist group writings were surprisingly diverse, and included a large number of conversations that were remarkable in that they contained little or no extreme content. This would have resulted in calculated probabilities for token words of questionable generalizability to writings that espouse typical extremist ideologies.

One additional explanation for the failure to reject the null hypothesis regarding similarity of subject communications to extremist group writings and problematic approach behavior is that the nature of largely internet-based groups does not exert the same influence upon individuals as groups that physically gather. Although this possibility has not been examined in the context of extremist groups, there is literature to suggest that the phenomena associated with social compliance differs between online and face-to-face groups (Cinnirella & Green, 2007). In one of the earliest contributions to this literature, Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) reported that participation, group decisions, and interaction among members were significantly different in computer-mediated groups. Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990) later reported that the effects of de-individuation on group polarization using a computer-mediated communication system were similar to those observed in face-to-face groups. A fair review of this literature reveals mixed results, and stops short of addressing the pertinent issue for this research.

It was hypothesized that increased specification or evidence of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior would predict such behavior. This hypothesis was marginally supported in the relationship between increased contact specificity and approach, in that results of these analyses approached statistical significance at the .05 significance level. In formulating this hypothesis, it was thought that specification of a plan would increase the salience of the author's intentions. Within the context of the threat assessment literature, however, increased specification of a plan to engage in problematic approach behavior may be conceptualized as a manifestation of the discrete, observable behaviors demonstrating an individual's intention to engage in targeted violent action, which the astute reader will recognize as the third of three fundamental

principles outlined by several threat assessment researchers. Data regarding contact specificity could be obtained on only one contact per subject and was therefore treated solely as a between-person variable.

It was hypothesized that temporal proximity to notable incidents of extremist violence would be related to problematic approach behavior. This relationship was not observed in the present study. There are several limitations inherent to the current operationalization of temporal proximity, however, that may explain the absence of this relationship in the present study. As noted in the Methods section, temporal proximity was calculated as the number of days between the date a USCP case file was opened and the closest anniversary date of an incident of extremist violence. The date a USCP case file may differ substantially from the date the author wrote the communication; this latter date holds far greater relevance for temporal proximity. Factors affecting this difference may include delays in transit time between the subject and the letter's intended recipient, delays by the recipient in reading the communication after receiving it, and delays by the recipient in reporting the communication to the USCP. These factors may have introduced considerable variance into the analysis of temporal proximity, resulting in the observed non-significant results. Unfortunately, the aforementioned delays are difficult to control in cases that include written communications.

The hypothesis that temporal proximity to notable incidents of extremist violence would be inversely related to problematic approach behavior was based upon the belief that individuals who affiliate themselves with extremist groups may adopt violent or destructive group principles, as well as violent or destructive actions committed by like others, as their own behavioral standard. An additional limitation inherent to the current

operationalization of temporal proximity lies in the inability to identify which incidents of extremist violence are notable for the individual. For example, an individual angry about perceived abuses of constitutional liberties by federal law enforcement may view the anniversary of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building as a highly salient date due to ideological commonalities between the individual and Timothy McVeigh. Alternatively, the anniversary of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School may hold little salience for that individual. Although the decision to use the nearest anniversary date was an attempt to use the most salient anniversary date, it is unclear what effect this limitation had on these analyses.

In their review of construal level theory, Trope and Liberman (2003) discuss the implications of that theory for temporal changes in evaluation, prediction, and choice. Construal level theory shares fundamental assumptions with control theory regarding goal-directed action, specifically in the presumption that superordinate goals are translated into subgoals as the time of implementation nears. These authors contend that an individual's representation of plans become more concrete, and include more contextual and incidental details, as time to a future event diminishes. This line of reasoning provides additional theoretical support from a slightly different perspective that is, nevertheless, grounded partially in the principles underlying control theory.

Despite the best efforts for the researchers involved in collecting the data used in the current research and utilizing a statistical methodology that minimizes the influence of missing data, the only conclusion that can drawn with certainty is that the hypotheses advanced herein were, with two notable exceptions, largely unsupported in this data. It cannot be determined with more than a modest degree of certainty whether the failure to

find a significant relationship between problematic approach behavior and temporal proximity, as well as similarity between the contact and known extremist literature, is due to the large proportion of missing data, or due to a weak relationship between the outcome variable and these predictors.

Implications

Beyond the significant findings of the current research, this project has a number of practical implications for threat assessment practices. As law enforcement and protective intelligence personnel make greater use of database storage systems, and constituents make greater use of e-mail and web-based methods of contact, the potential exists for designing and implementing automated systems of detecting anomalous contacts based on empirically-derived criteria. In addition to providing a more sophisticated, data-driven, and comprehensive method to identify concerning communications, it also potentially provides a solution to an even greater problem for both the research and practice of threat assessment: the selective referral of cases by Congressional staff members. Although many congressional staff receive training in the identification of communications and situations characterized by an increased risk of problematic behavior, communications containing more subtle risk indicators that would nonetheless be of concern to a threat assessment professional may go unnoticed or unreferred. Acknowledging that the automated forwarding of communications meeting empirically-derived criteria to threat assessment personnel would likely constitute an insurmountable breech of the confidentiality of Congressional communications, an electronic screening system that alerts Congressional staff that a communication has met such criteria would likely go a long way toward resolving the problem of selective

referral.

Outside of the practical implications of these methodologies for the threat assessment of subjects who engage in inappropriate behavior toward members of Congress, they may have some relevance for predicting approach in cases of stalking. In their comprehensive review of the stalking literature, Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) identified a cluster of distinguishable stalking behaviors which they termed "mediated contacts." They defined these behaviors as "all forms of communication efforts performed through technologies, including email, IM, the Internet, PDAs, cellphones, faxes, pagers, and the like" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007, p. 71), and characterized so-called "cyber-stalking" as a type of stalking exemplified by the intrusive use of these types of communications. In light of the results of several studies demonstrating that cyber-stalking and physical stalking overlap in some proportion of cases (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Finn, 2004; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002), predictors of approach from electronic communications and a means by which to quickly obtain that information has the potential to improve violence prevention in cases of stalking. Many of the cases included for study in the present research did not include the behaviors listed above, however, and much additional research is necessary to determine the implications and generalizability of these findings to the phenomenon of cyber-stalking.

In some of the earliest published threat assessment research, Fein and Vossekuil (1999) stated that, "those who *pose* threats frequently *do not make* threats" (p. 14). As stated previously, however, the author of this dissertation contends that written communications offer what is perhaps the richest source of information regarding threat-relevant cognitions and behaviors that are directly attributable to the subject. James

Pennebaker, one of more well-known researchers in the area of text analysis, commented that, "The way people use words convey a great deal of information about themselves, their audience, and the situations they are in" (p. 548). Furthermore, the analysis of communications authored by subjects to determine the presence or absence of psychological factors such as mental illness and negative emotionality help the threat assessment professional avoid reliance on the judgment of untrained third parties. Further underscoring the importance of studying the communications that precede or coincide with problematic approach behavior is the prevalence of intrusive communications concomitant with stalking (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007) and other problematic approach behavior. Although the application of threat assessment techniques to stalking was intentionally omitted from the preceding review of threat assessment literature due to the relatively modest treatment of stalking behavior in the threat assessment literature, predictors of problematic approach based upon communication characteristics may be especially relevant when considering that over 50% of stalking cases are estimated to include some use of threat (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The incidence of violence toward targeted individuals has been shown to be quite high, as well, with 32% of stalking cases involving physical violence and 12% involving some sexual violence (Spitzberg & Cupach). Thus, the implications of the current research for cases of stalking is discussed with the caveat the current sample contained a limited number of cases containing stalking behavior, and additional research is necessary to determine the implications and generalizability of this research to the phenomenon of stalking.

Despite the modest, non-significant relationship observed between the similarity of threatening and otherwise inappropriate communications to known extremist writings

and problematic approach behavior, the potential ideological motivations of individuals who attempt to engage in targeted violence will likely be of increasing scrutiny among threat assessment professionals. In recent years, one may observe with a sense of concern the increase in the violent activities of fringe militia groups and members of ideological movements. In 2010, for example, after the public listing of a home address purportedly belonging to a USCP protectee on a web blog belonging to a Tea Party activist, alongside a message encouraging readers to "stop by," the gas line to the home was cut, leading law enforcement officials to conclude, "… investigators do believe that the leaking gas could have posed a danger if there had been an ignition source" (Cooper, 2010). In an unrelated incident occurring within one week of the above incident, nine members of a right-wing militia group calling themselves Hutaree were arrested after planning to kill a targeted law enforcement officer and bomb the funeral procession using improvised explosive devices (Bunkley & Savage, 2010).

It must be noted that the findings of prior studies have been mixed with regard to the importance of ideological beliefs as a motivational factor in targeted violence and problematic approach. Whereas ideological motives did not play a significant role in attacks upon USSS protectees, Calhoun (1998) reported that such motives were significant in attacks upon the federal judiciary. Assuming that similarity to known extremist group writings is a suitable proxy for the strength with which extremist ideals are internalized, it may be the case that these ideals are unlikely predictors of approach against Congressional targets, but are likely predictors of approach against other targeted groups.

The results of this study have questionable implications for use in school-based

threat assessment. The characteristics identified by Fein et al. (2002) in the USSS School Safety Initiative in many ways minimize the utility of these findings, even if they are generalizable to this younger population. Student attackers were largely found not to have threatened their targets directly, and their motives were not ideologically-based and help-seeking was not identified as a possible motive. While these characteristics suggest limited implications for school-based threat assessment, the greater use of electronic communications among younger individuals may provide a more comprehensive source of communications from which to draw information and make threat predictions. And while empirical research on so-called copycat school violence has been limited, Dewey Cornell, whose research on school-based violence has been extremely influential, was quoted as stating that, "Attention is part of [the issue of copycat school violence], attraction to notoriety, but [also] the suggestive power of the event and some desire to share in that kind of event or to be part of that" (Dechter & Bowie, 2006). While temporal proximity to notable acts of extremist violence was not a significant predictor of problematic approach toward USCP protectees, it may act as a significant predictor of approach among school students who possess different motives for their actions.

There is one final comment regarding the implications of the current research that must be made. However rich or informative an individual's communications, they are only one form of behavior that an individual can perform. A subject's communications must be interpreted within the larger context of the subject's life circumstances and their ability to pose a threat to the target. A subject may author a communication characterized by every known communication related risk factor, but if that subject is serving a life sentence in a federal correctional facility, their risk of engaging in targeted violence

toward the target may nonetheless be considered to be quite low.

Directions for Future Research

Despite the wide use of problematic approach behavior as a proxy variable for targeted violence, it is not without issue in research intended to further our knowledge of the cognitions and behaviors that precede acts of targeted violence. As mentioned above, problematic approach behavior is an outcome is highly relevant for law enforcement and protective intelligence personnel, as it is often the last step at which intervention may occur before an actual violent act. Calhoun's (1998) finding that communication or the delivery of communication requiring close physical proximity to the targeted was more likely to result in violent or enhanced risk outcomes supports this assertion. But the quality of problematic approach considered strictly from the standpoint of its appropriateness as an outcome variable in empirical research suffers from the heterogeneity of behaviors it describes. By way of example using cases included in the present sample, an unarmed, homeless individual living in a park less than one mile from the Russell Capitol building entered the office of a Congressperson to inquire about the theft of personal information, a belief related to the subject's mental illness. While a heightened potential for violence certainly exists in that case, the character of the approach behavior is remarkably different from a second case in which an armed individual who traveled across several states and was apprehended by law enforcement personnel within a building in which the targeted Congressperson was within. While this latter case necessarily involved an increased degree of planning and preparation which would have resulted in identifiable risk-relevant behaviors, the prior case would have resulted in far fewer of such behaviors. As can be plainly inferred, the main issue with

the use of problematic approach behavior as a dichotomous outcome variable in threat assessment research is the variability in risk posed by the subject that is unaccounted for due to the heterogeneity of behavior falling within this broad category.

Future threat assessment research may benefit from an ordinal, rather than dichotomous, representation of problematic approach behavior. Characterization of the outcome in this manner would allow for useful distinctions to be drawn among problematic approach behaviors that vary in the potential for lethality, as well as other characteristics relevant for the intended end users of this research in the law enforcement community.

A literature review conducted by Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer (2003) on the methodologies and findings of research examining natural language use outlines several important avenues for future research development. Gottschalk (1997), for example, summarizes a well-developed approach for accurately determining psychiatric syndromes through content analysis. Applied to threatening communications, this approach, if successful, could provide an empirically-sound method for determining if the author suffers from mental illness. As mental illness has been repeatedly demonstrated to be factor relevant to approach (see Scalora et al., 2003, for example), this would be especially useful in situations which the subject's mental health cannot be formally assessed by trained professionals. Additionally, Pennebaker et al. (1990) discussed an approach for assessing a concept the authors termed "levels of thinking" from both verbal and written language use. In that levels of thinking are closely related to coping with stressors, this approach may be relevant for assessing a subject's ability to cope well with a significant stressor or alternatively, engage in problematic approach or targeted

violence.

Despite the relative recency of empirical efforts toward understanding the phenomenon of targeted violence, it is a behavior that dates back centuries to ancient Rome, and will likely persist well into the future. The extant threat assessment literature has greatly advanced our understanding and efforts at prevention of this behavior. Without greater integration of theory into this area of study, however, progress toward the development of new techniques and even deeper understanding may be slowed. This dissertation is offered as a small step toward that integration.

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APPENDIX A

<u>SAMPLE EXTREMIST GROUP WRITINGS FROM STORMFRONT.ORG</u>

"BEING BORN INTO THE NATION AND BEING VERY PROUD OF MY

HERTIAGE, I FAIL TO SEE HOW A WHITE WOMAN CAN DEFLATE HERSELF TO

SUCH A LOW LEVEL. IT IS WOMEN LIKE THESE WHO SCAR OUR RACE WITH

THEIR STUPIDITY. WHAT A DISGRACE AND SLUR TO OUR RACE. I HAVE NO

USE FOR THESE TYPES. IF THIS IS THEIR CHOICE, THEN IT IS BEST TO LEAVE

THEM IN THE CESSPOOL THEY HAVE CHOSEN. THEY DO NOT EVEN

DESERVE TO BE CONNECTED WITH THE SUPREME RACE!"

"its not actually cormac..i firmly believe that the white race is better than the blacks for

instance but i dont believe in divisions within our race,the irish arent better than the

norwegians for instance and nor are the british better than us."

"I don't know if the the term 'White Nationalist' was ever officially trademarked. The

boundaries of the 'White Nationalist movement' are difficult to draw even by those who

consider themselves 'White Nationalists'. I think the same is true for any movement. The

trend now for those who secretly hate white people is to make unfair and illogical

comparisons between white activists who sincerely want to protect the white race and the

mentally ill anarchists who want to commit a crime then play the race card.

Is the Aryan Brotherhood part of the 'White Nationalist movement'? Ask Jesse Jackson if

the blacks who attacked innocent whites and destroyed the city of Los Angeles after the

Rodney King affair are part of the 'Civil Rights movement'.