EXAMINING THE RESEARCH TO PRACTICE GAP IN TARGETED VIOLENCE THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Zachary Zilinski

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Preventing acts of targeted violence in schools is a necessary good because of institutional and social harms. Acts of targeted violence in school are low probability, though high-impact events have often garnered a high degree of media attention and thus attention from society at large. In lieu of attempts at perpetrator profiling, current best practice approaches emphasize prevention and intervention measures that consider the environmental factors such as school climate that can serve to incubate school violence. School psychology as a field straddles education and applied psychology. For this reason, school psychologists are often called upon to participate in threat assessment for targeted violence. Many applied helping fields, including school psychology, have recognized that there is a discernable gap between best-practice guidelines and actual practice. This study explored the gap between idealized guidelines and actual practices around threat assessments for targeted violence by undertaking phenomenological semi-structured interviews with current school psychologists using a hermeneutical approach. Open note taking was used to clarify themes, understand barriers, environmental factors, and other phenomenon which help to understand how practicing school psychologists conceive of and implement threat assessments for harm to others.

Keywords: Threat Assessment, Targeted Violence, School Psychology

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The phenomenon of targeted violence in schools is a threat to individuals and institutions as well as activating reasonable fears that our most vulnerable loved ones may be at-risk in the very place in which they should be safest. Because the issue itself is complex, any inquiry into understanding how to address this challenge must be equally varied and multifaceted. Chapter one will provide a theoretical underpinning for understanding the main research questions and will create a framework for the proposed research study. It is an exploration of meaningful institutional, social, and theoretical schema that describe and define modern conceptualizations of threat assessment for targeted violence in schools and informs the primary research questions aimed at the lived experience of school psychologists. The study itself has been crafted as an intentionally subjective phenomenological study aimed at exploring the space between expected and actual practice vis-à-vis threat assessment for targeted violence within the lived experiences of practicing school psychologists.

Central to the purpose and methodologies of this study is an understanding of targeted violence in schools as being a social, institutional, and psychological challenge to individuals and institutions. Because targeted violence is definitionally an act or series of acts of violence that are planned (Vossekuil et al., 2015) and involve the perpetrator selecting victims for harm (Böckler et al., 2014; Reddy et al., 2001, p.158), any attempt to understand and prevent such acts must also address practical and existential concerns around the idea of youth as perpetrators and thus a potential risk to the community (Flannery et al., 2012). This study will investigate the factors that explain any gaps between prevailing best practices for threat assessments for targeted violence in schools and actual practice with a focus upon both context and content. Within this

gap analysis, a central vein of exploration will include school psychologists' own thoughts, fears, and challenges.

Targeted violence in schools is a phenomenon impacting individuals and communities throughout the world (Tackling violence in schools: A Global Perspective: Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice, 2012). Since the year 2000, high profile acts of school violence with firearms have typified the discourse and media response in the United States (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). The earliest responses to the ongoing threat of targeted violence have included attempts at profiling perpetrators, the use of physical and law enforcements measures, and then most recently, school-wide systemic efforts at identifying and supporting students at risk for perpetrating violence (Bachman et al., 2010; Meloy et al., 2021). In conjunction with other allied disciplines, school psychology has been involved in conceptualizing, managing, and engaging with the challenge of targeted school violence (Kelly, 2017).

The school psychology literature has further honed interventions to address the problem of targeted school violence through an aegis of responding to potential individual acts and addressing the host environments that may make such acts more or less likely. These efforts include creating universal supports that foster environments in which staff are trained to identify warning signs (Fiedler et al., 2020), changing schools so students are more likely to report concerns about peers (Syvertsen et al., 2009), and attempts at engaging with and offering mental health services to students before a crisis occurs (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021).

At the turn of the previous century Furlong et al. (2000), suggested that school psychology is the best discipline to address the broad and systemic challenges of violence in school, because of expertise in varied competencies ranging from individual assessment to the social dynamics that may incubate school violence. More recently, Olinger Steeves et al., (2017)

make the point that school psychologists have the requisite background in both individual and systems-level supports that are required to address the challenge of targeted violence. Because school psychology straddles the world of applied psychology and education, school psychologists are amongst the most likely professionals called upon to respond to and address the challenge of targeted school violence (Kelly, 2017).

This pivotal role means that school psychologists are often engaged in helping to make critical and meaningful determinations that can impact students, stakeholders, and communities at-large. Because relatively little is known about what habits, practices, and conclusions are common in the field, let alone why there may be gaps between ideal and actual practice, taking an accurate account of the lived experience of school psychologists is pivotal. For this reason, understanding how and why practitioners may or may not apply best practice guidelines is not only a worthy endeavor, but potentially a matter of life and death.

Background

An emerging and significant trend in the school psychology literature is documenting that there is significant variance between prescribed best-practice professional guidelines and actual practices in the field. This realization has been characterized as a research to practice gap (DuPaul, 2003) and is conceived of as being particularly acute within applied psychology and other allied helping fields (Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019). Ringeisen et al., (2003) posit that some of the research to practice gap is because of a focus on content over context. As a consequence of this mismatch between perceptions of those at the highest strata of professional practice, professors and those at national professional organizations, who are instrumental in crafting best practice guidelines, guidelines may not be appropriate or realistic. This means that practice guidelines or practice recommendations in the published literature may be promulgated,

even though they have little chance of being carried out in the field (Hagermoser Sanetti &

Collier-Meek, 2019). One example of this is trying to fit clinical interventions to schools, where

the context of practice is markedly different, both relative to resource allocation and in how

services themselves are provided (Ringeisen et al., 2003).

Those wanting to understand the etiology of the research to practice gap have observed

that this gap is rooted in the lack of shared understanding between those creating policies and

guidelines and the end users at the point of mental health service delivery (Kehle & Bray, 2005;

Bearman et al., 2015). This gap appears to be particularly acute relating to the application of

evidence-based paradigms (Barnett et al., 2013), where structure and a focus on practice fidelity

is required.

Posited causal factors leading to these gaps include a lack of continuity between

conceptual definitions or frameworks in addition to a lack of grounding in current professional

action research (Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019). Another possible causal

consideration for the research to practice gap generally, is that researchers and those publishing

in peer reviewed journals may assume resources and conditions that are drastically different from

the status quo.

Because this research to practice gap is context-specific, highlighting the many potential

perceptual errors that might occur between individuals, at varying levels of the professional

practice spectrum, is vital to understanding the research to practice gap (Ringeisen et al., 2003).

Specific to this context, how school psychologists interpret, use, and make meaning from current

best practices for threat assessment might serve to shed light on how to reallocate resources or

change procedures to ensure efficacy. Because the phenomenon being studied cannot be

separated from the lived experiences of the subjects, a purposeful research methodology has been

selected to place school psychologists' experiences as central to any conclusions, and thus

recommendations. Furthermore, the phenomenon of a research to practice gap might best be

understood in both the content of guidelines and the context in which the guidelines are to be

implemented.

<center>**Situation to Self**</center>

In stark contrast to putatively objective forms of data collection and problem formulation,

quantitative methods, and modes of exploring the research to practice gap have been selected by

design. Qualitative methods have been deemed to have the best goodness-of-fit because of a

need to merge methodology and philosophy, so as to be consistent with the belief that

psychology is philosophy in action (Davidson, 2001). In the context of this study, this means that

the best choice must also by definition be one that can be carried out. Because of this marriage of

purpose and methods, phenomenology has been deemed to be an apt framework through which

to construct and investigate research questions that are inherently subjective and highly

contextualized. Specifically, phenomenological endeavors are chiefly centered around

understanding elements of the world not just as individuated artifacts (Laverty, 2003), but also in

the contexts and individuals in which they appear (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological enquiry is

by design a methodology that understands the world in context. Because of this facet,

phenomenology posits that realities and experiences occur within individuals and between

individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and therefore the study of phenomena must be rooted in

active listening and critical thinking within a specific context.

This fusion of purpose and meaning is where active listening and understanding the

subject in context is critical, as the phenomenological researcher must be open to the shared

invention of reality within the subjects as well as within themselves (Schmidt, 2016). For this

reason, there is no separating the subjects from the environment wherein the phenomenon takes place, and the phenomenon itself. The construct of radical empiricism (James & James, 1974) places the experiential analysis of phenomena on both the parts and the whole. This means that in essence, there is little benefit in understanding the forest without the proverbial trees, because objectivity is not the paramount ethic of human exploration. Instead, the seeking of truth that is useful and meaningful to the subject is of ultimate importance (James & Shook, 2011).

The central research questions are being asked because of a desire to understand and describe how school psychologists make meaning and apply the corpus of best practice literature and guidelines in service of the maxim that "the first duty of love is to listen," (Patton, 1979, p. 81). The process of understanding these constructed meanings might be an optimal way in which to engage in a gap analysis.

Problem Statement

The problem is that while school psychologists are asked to engage in critical decisions around threat assessment for targeted violence daily, there are few to no extant studies that elucidate what barriers or conditions impact these assessments. Furthermore, little research has been undertaken to understand to what degree there is a gap between actual and best practices within the practice domain of threat assessment for targeted violence. A search of published literature elicited no research that addresses how school psychologists construct their roles in threat assessment. Further, there are few published works that address a potential gap between actual and best practices, and why these gaps may exist in context. Even as conceptual frameworks and professional practice guidelines vis-à-vis threat assessment have coalesced around a team-based public health model that is rooted in early identification, addressing school climate, and using immediate information to quantify risk, there is little-to-no evidence that

elucidates how school psychologists construct these paradigms or what their thoughts and feelings are on the topic. Furthermore, there are few cited works that begin to explore how school psychologists balance the competing and compelling interests and risks inherent to threat assessment for targeted violence. This study seeks to address the central research question by addressing how psychologists' lived experience to frame how the process of threat assessment is carried out.

In service of addressing the gap between practice guidelines and actual practice, and perceptions of these expectations in the field of school psychology and applied helping fields generally, it is essential to understand what barriers, resources, and elements of lived experience impact how and why school psychologists conduct these threat assessments in the ways that they do within larger school contexts. One underlying and often unseen factor in understanding how the chasm between expected and actual actions can be understood is the role of treatment integrity (Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2011).

School psychologists report a strong belief that treatment integrity is paramount to effective practice (Sanetti et al., 2020). This means that as a profession, school psychologists value the role of fidelity of actions to established guidelines, whether in manualized interventions or professional practices more broadly (Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2011). Specific to threat assessment and school psychological services, this means that the procedures involved in threat assessment need to be understood not only at the level of policy makers and professional organizations, but also at the level of the practitioner through a lens of treatment integrity. It cannot simply be assumed that what should be done is being done. Likewise, some implementation components may be more challenging to carry out in context. Any such level of analytical research that endeavors to study the contexts and conditions in which threat

assessment for targeted violence occur should then be equally interested in the beliefs, thoughts, and experiences of those implementing these principles.

While school psychology as a profession puts a strong emphasis on fidelity and effectiveness of services, there are significant challenges to the role of school psychologist in most practice settings, especially within the role of threat assessment. Unlike most other school and allied helping professions, school psychologists are usually *singletons*, who work mostly or exclusively without school psychology peers from day-to-day (Boccio et al., 2016). Unlike many helping profession, it is not always as clear who the primary client is in school psychology because practice usually involves interventions with multiple individuals such as students, parents, teacher, and administrators (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Due to unclear and competing interests of school psychologists' clientele, this can lead to a multiplicity of ethical challenges in everyday and ongoing circumstances (Harrison & Thomas, 2014).

Likewise, because the time intensive duties of counseling, collaboration, and system support are often in addition to more heavily valued assessment duties such as assessment for special education eligibility, there can be a mismatch between institutional imperatives and how school psychologists themselves believe their time is best spent (DuPaul, 2003). This mismatch can cause significant role conflict within the professional, as school psychologists see themselves as advocates for individual students and students collectively as a group (Nastasi et al., 2020), which would necessitate spending time working with individual students at-risk for violence and consulting to make systems' changes to facilitate healthier school environments to avoid the problem.

This self-assigned role can be in contrast to role perceptions on the part of other educators and administrators, who may believe that the role of the school psychologist is mainly

assessment or individual counseling over more comprehensive school-wide practices in addition to assessment.

This phenomenon or mismatch has been called the School Psychologists' Paradox (Conoley & Gutkin,1995, as cited in Watkins et al., 2001). The paradox is that many school systems value school psychology practice as being mainly in assessment, whereas most school psychologists indicate that they believe most of their practice should be in providing direct services to students individually and through school-wide instructional and behavioral consultation to prevent challenges from occurring in the first place. Even assuming a situation in which school psychologists were more able to practice in a way consistent with their own perceptions of need, there is still a matter of a serious shortage (Hendricker et al., 2021).

There is a long-standing shortage of school psychologists in almost all geographics regions except large urban areas in the United States (Schilling & Randolph, 2020). For this reason, many psychologists are in fact doing the work of multiple people- whether because of unfilled positions or a dearth of funding. In practice, this can mean that many school psychologists serve multiple school sites- which impacts areas of services such as counseling, family collaboration, and other non-assessment duties that are primary to preventing violence, though often not prioritize by school systems (Hendricker et al., 2021). NASP recommends a school psychologist to student ratio of no more 1:500-700, with a maximum of 1000 students per psychologist in order to provide comprehensive services. The national average is currently 1:1381 (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010; Hendricker et al., 2021).

Given the essential work of identifying students and youth who are at-risk for committing acts of targeted violence, and the mounting evidence of the large and perceptible research to practice gap within the field generally, it is a worthwhile task to understand what constructed

meanings and attributions school psychologists make around their actual practice and their understanding of best practices in the domain. For all of these reasons, addressing potential research to practice gaps within the realm of threat assessment is essential to understanding how to keep our schools as safe as possible.

Gap Analysis

Current practice standards are general at best, though some basic tenets have emerged as required to complete threat assessments with fidelity. In addition to exploring what individual school psychologists do, it is perhaps equally important to understand why there may be gaps between expected and actual practice for assessing risk for targeted violence. Kehle & Bray (2005), make a clear case that the research to practice gap is influenced by variables within the school setting, and as such, these matters have a potential influence on practice. Similarly, without a discrete accounting of current activities, it is very difficult to identify practical and conceptual fallacies that school psychologist and other stakeholders, such as educational administrators and researchers, may have that serve as impediments to aligning with extant principles and constructs as best practices.

As comprehensive approaches that address both individual and school-wide approaches become the norm, it becomes ever more important to understand current practices, both for data collection and to understand to what degree research and policy positions have made their way into the field of school psychology. For instance, Van Der Heyden & Burns, (2018), suggest that in progress monitoring academic skills for special education that school psychologists "let go of assessment practices that do not result in positive outcomes for students" (p. 385). They go on to describe that many former practices have been the result of a focus on schema and models that have never been validated, instead leaning on beliefs that are common, though incorrect. It might

be important then to understand the research to practice gap with an awareness that some

existing practices may not be empirically validated, but rather, are perceived to be part of what is

simply assumed to be true because of past training or incidental learning over the course of a

career.

The research to practice gap acknowledges that there is significant variance between

published best practice guidelines and actual practice within the field of school psychology. The

is due to both systemic issues- such as divergent state and district guidelines and norms- and also

because of individual school psychologist beliefs, experiences, and training (Riley-Tillman et al.,

2005). Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek (2019) point to another factor that they claim may

influence the gap between actual and best practices, which is a lack of access and literacy to

published research. They note that school psychologists may not only not have access to or

choose to read existing research, but also that they may lack the skills to adequately interpolate

and integrate new findings and conclusions in the field.

This dearth of access or lack of desire to access available training could be due to a lack

of training and acumen in data analysis and research methodology or a lack of prior knowledge.

In addition to ensuring that evidence-based practices are applied, Wilcox et al., (2021) also

highlight that it is equally critical to ensure that non-empirically validated practices are omitted

from practice. It is not sufficient to engage in validated practices, professionals must actively

stop engaging in activities that are not empirically validated or have been found to be unhelpful

(Wilcox et al., 2021). This is especially important, because practitioners may have incorrect

beliefs about these practices that remain despite evidence of their efficacy or indeed, evidence

that they are ineffective or harmful (Barnett et al., 2013).

Although no national data set appears to exist, some literature appears to utilize statewide threat assessment data. As the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines have been amongst the researched, statewide data have been published around how many threat assessments have been completed, and how many of these threat assessments yielded transient or substantial findings (Cornell et al., 2012; Cornell & Maeng, 2017). This type of data analysis helps to facilitate an awareness of what is and is not working. Likewise, state-level research has addressed the efficacy of Virginia's comprehensive model against prior other approaches (Cornell & Allen, 2011). That said, even in Virginia, one of the epicenters of research on this topic, little has been published on individual school psychologist beliefs around best practice recommendations and perhaps more importantly, the degree to which published practice guidelines are being applied in the field.

Crepeau-Hobson & Leech (2021a) address statewide practices within Colorado, but they were focused on the demographic features of students who were assessed, in addition to the outcomes of those assessments. Although many guidelines have been published, there appear to be few actual studies that address either school psychologist practices in this domain or school psychologist beliefs about what constitutes best practices in risk assessments for homicide. Perhaps most critically, no published literature exists that addresses systemic factors or resources in school psychology practice that serve as barriers or supports to implementing best practices.

Given the impact on both individual students and larger social institutions, there would appear to be utility to further exploration of any potential research to practice gap amongst school psychologists in the arena on threat assessment. As the field has seemingly coalesced around practice and meaningful practices, it is now time to determine what next steps might be

instrumental in ensuring that these practices become dominant in the field. The stakes for our children and communities are simply too high to do otherwise.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand and explore the research to practice gap in threat assessment for targeted violence amongst practicing school psychologists practicing in varied locations. At this stage in the research, the research to practice gap will be generally defined as an observable dissonance or variation between established best-practice guidelines emanating from researchers or professional organizations and actual practice on the ground (Ringeisen et al., 2003; Wilcox et al., 2021). The critical theory that is guiding this study is the theoretical work of psychologist and religious philosopher William James who posited that the truthfulness of an idea was in part mediated by the utility to the individual. James's work further focuses on a blending of lived experience and factual knowledge that may be an apt lens to apply to the research to practice gap, whose exploration might appear to require an equal measure of factual and experiential inquiry.

Significance of The Study

Although the roadmap for ensuring durable and evidence-based approaches to targeted violence threat assessment in schools is taking shape, no national guidelines from federal educational agencies have yet given specific programs with a national data gathering component, that states and/or districts must follow. The National Association of School Psychologist (2010) has not endorsed one model or any specific tools to be utilized. Instead NASP has focused on promoting a few evidence-based practices such as the use of multidisciplinary teams (Harrison & Thomas, 2014). Likewise, threat screening protocols in the form of checklists with empirical validations are still a disparate collection of research projects.

The still emerging focus on threat assessment as a field is linked to data gathering done after recent incidents of high publicity acts of violence in schools (Cornell, 2020). In order to understand the efficacy of this transition to more structured systems, a more comprehensive approach is surely needed not only on student and community outcomes, but in the practices that are occurring in the field.

To date, very little information exists about the prevalence of specific practices in school psychology around threat assessment; to include whether school psychologists are acting in concert with a team or as singletons, what information is being gathered, and what structured procedures are in place for follow-up (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). There is no national clearinghouse that details state and district-level procedures. Woitaszewski et al., (2017) found that after reviewing policy within every state, that only one state mandated threat assessment procedures by statute, and that states had differing levels of support for districts in relation to evidence-based tools and procedures. Similarly, outside of the FBI gathered data for multiple casualty events, there are few data gathered on the state or national level that categorize trends around matters of violence, homicide, or threat assessment to address them.

In one study, Erps et al., (2020) surveyed school psychologists relative to their own perceptions and roles in threat assessment for suicide. Erps et al., found that current professionals indicated that they were most likely to be involved with students at the point of assessment and crisis response, but not in universal supports for all students, management of school climate, or noncritical supports, as is suggested in the best practice literature (Cornell, 2020; (Cornell et al., 2018). Additionally, a quarter of respondents indicated that their schools do not have a recognized crisis team and a quorum of respondents indicated that they engaged in no universal

psychoeducation or universal efforts to address threats of suicidality. No similar studies have been found for threats to others.

This study will highlight which factors and resources acts might act as barriers to implementation and goes beyond simply asking what practices should be occurring, in favor of a more nuanced exploration of what is occurring and how actual practices may be differing from best-practice guidelines. The ultimate end is to assist school psychology practice by understanding and making meaning from practitioners that can inform professionals along the professional practice continuum to make threat assessment practices for targeted violence more aligned with validated practices while helping to identify barriers to implementation.

Research Questions

RQ1: "How do school psychologists experience their roles in threat assessment for targeted violence?"

Are assessments completed in a multidisciplinary team?

What experiential challenges do subjects describe in their setting?

RQ2: "How do school psychologists understand what specific practices are empirically validated for assessing for and assisting with threats of targeted violence?

Does the subject's practice include structured means for understanding whether a threat is transitory or serious?

How are school climate and other universal supports to prevent targeted violence incorporated in the subjects practice?

RQ3: What barriers, challenges, or constructed meanings do school psychologists share that contribute to the gap between best and actual practices around threat assessments for targeted violence in schools?

Definitions

Essential definitions are as follow:

1. *Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS):* A public health approach to problem solving in schools that involves universal screening, matching those at risk with early interventions, and ongoing progress monitoring to support the efficacy of interventions (Von der Embse et al., 2021).

2. *Research to practice Gap*: This is the identified and observable variance between identified best practices and actual practices in the field (Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019).

3. *Targeted Violence*: Acts of violence that are goal-directed, predatory, and focused on a specific individual or group (Vossekuil et al., 2015)

4. *Threat Assessment*: The complex process of identifying, assessing, and managing threats of violence (Woitaszewski et al., 2017). In the context of schools, this usually involves a combination of systemic policy and individual adult actions (Allen et al., 2008; Augustyniak, 2005).

5. *Treatment Integrity:* An evaluative framework for professional practices that emphasizes an adherence to evidence-based practices and the monitoring processes that ensure desired outcomes (Hagermoser Sanetti et al., 2011).

6. *Comprehensive Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG)*: A series of procedures, trainings, and data gathering steps required by the Virginia legislature to codify actions for assessment and follow-up for threats to others in schools (Cornell & Maeng, 2017).

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological (Creswell & Poth, 2018) study addressed the experiences of school psychologist through the United States around the topic of threat assessment for acts of targeted violence. Specifically, school psychologist thoughts and experiences were queried related to their own roles in threat assessment for targeted violence, in addition to engaging in dialogue around potential contexts for gaps between current practice and best-practice guidelines.

The Worldview that informed this study was that of William James's fusion of context and content (James & James, 1974). The idea that truth must have utility to the user and that lived experience is as vital to the construction of meaning as objective facts, guided the inquiry and analysis (James & Shook, 2011).

The research to practice gap in school psychology has been explored to some degree, particularly in the realms of researched based paradigms (Bearman et al., 2015), and evidenced-based interventions (Ringeisen et al., 2003). However, no inquiry specific to the topic of threat assessment and the research to practice gap has been identified. Given the gravity and attention that this topic receives in society at large, this study begins to create a window into the lived experience of school psychology and how to address practice gaps around an issue that is a matter of vital public import.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Although targeted school violence is a long-standing phenomenon, in recent decades a renewed focus on addressing and preventing incidents has become a focal point in social and educational policy (Augustyniak, 2005, Cornell, 2020). This shift is posited to be due to both larger social phenomena such as media attention, as well as an emphasis on the part of law enforcement and educational policy makers (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). Whether viewed through an educational or public policy lens, the challenge of addressing targeted violence is one that is formative to current discourse.

Targeted violence is defined as goal-directed, predatory, and focused violence towards a specific individual or group (Vossekuil et al., 2015), that is conceptualized as a high impact, low probability event in schools (Livingston et al., 2019). Targeted violence is neither random nor reactive, it involves violent acts that are planful on the part of perpetrator(s) and are accompanied by a set of grievances or beliefs about the target(s) that is the focal point for the violent acts. Because of the volitional element of targeted violence, the perpetrators intent and thoughts are central to these violence acts (Cornell, 2020) Targeted violence is taxonomized and differentiated from more disorganized and reactive violence (2002), which is usually more spontaneous and responsive to immediate circumstances and stressors, as might be seen in a verbal altercation escalating to violence (Pollack et al., 2008) or other situations that are mainly driven by external situations. The counterpoint to targeted violence is usually identified as affective violence and is a result of physical and emotional arousal as an immediate response to environmental stressor (Hoffer et al., 2018), rather than a larger grievance, as is more typical of targeted violence (Levi et al., 2010).

This conceptualization of targeted violence as being purposeful within the worldview of the subject is significant, because it implies that there are means and modes of identifying those who may be at risk for perpetrating acts of targeted violence before they occur (Augustyniak, 2005), whereas less planful acts of affective violence are more likely to be an immediate response to a stressor, and thus potentially more difficult to predict in a quickly changing world (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

The hallmark of targeted violence, then, involves knowing and planning to harm a specific individual or a specific subtype of individuals in a chosen fashion. Although the larger threat assessment literature addresses both threats of violence to self and others, this study is primarily focused on addressing targeted and intentional threats of violence that are focused upon others.

Theoretical Framework

Christian Worldview Integration

The bible calls on the faithful to create safe societies for the daughters and sons of God, not only as a form of stewardship (*King James Bible*, *1769/2017*, Jer. 32:37-38), but also as a means to allows God's plans for us can be made manifest (*King James Bible*, *1769/2017,* Jer. 29:11). Creating and maintaining safe schools is thus a component part of the mandate to protect the most venerable among us. Addressing how and why threat assessments occur in schools and how to make them more effective can be seen as a moral, religious, and social imperative. For this reason, a theoretical orientation that seeks to understand truth through the lived experiences of school psychologists and through utility to others has been consciously selected.

The theoretical lens of William James's pragmatism, which seeks to understand truth within a context of the utility of a given idea, might indeed be a bridge between the secular and

the spiritual (James & Shook, 2011). The hallmark of this worldview attempts to apply a

rigorous standard of usefulness to individuals and their beliefs. James's spiritual and secular

beliefs focus on blending context and content and are in line with those of phenomenology itself,

in that constructs cannot be parsed meaningfully from the constructs themselves and that the

goodness of an idea is made manifest in the life of the believer. Taking into account the lived

experience of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and need to understand phenomenon in the

context of individual utility makes James' lens one that might be very useful in understanding

matters of the spirit and within the world.

The bible sets forth that one can come to understand the a given practice or idea by its

outcomes (*King James Bible*, *1769/2017*, John 15:1-27). Similarly, James's work orients

individuals to apply a schema of utility and pragmatism to our Christian beliefs. For James, the

very presence of God is indicated by the value of faith to the individual (Dastmard & lzadpanah,

2019; James & James, 1974). Within the context of the research, the desire to understand any

gap between best and actual practices in threat assessment for targeted violence in school might

then be an academic as well as spiritual endeavor.

Scope of the Problem

School is by all accounts the safest place for children and youth relative to risk of death,

with school deaths accounting for around 1% of all youth murders (Cornell, 2015). Statistically

the chances of a child dying at school in the United States from either homicide or suicide are

fewer than one in a million (Anderson, 2001). Reddy et al., (2001) point to the fact that given the

low relative numbers of acts of targeted in violence that base rates themselves may not

encapsulate the impacts of the phenomenon, as the social impacts of school-based acts far

outweigh their statistical likelihood.

When narrowing the lens to acts of targeted violence, the indications are that these acts are even rarer in schools (Borum, 2000). In 2019, 7% of high school students reported being threatened with violence at school (Cornell, 2015) and between 11-75 school-aged children died by homicide from shootings at school in that same year. In one school year in the United States, 2016, 38 children were victims of homicide at school (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). When comparing the location of completed acts of violence, schools are less likely to be the location of a child or adolescent homicide when compared to home settings or other public settings by several orders of magnitude. (Cornell, 2015; Livingston et al., 2019; Nekvasil et al., 2015).

While the likelihood of being a victim of violence at school is low, rates of threats of violence are comparatively higher, meaning that there are many more threats than completed acts of violence at school (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). When taking an account of the statistical likelihood of student threats of violence, Nekvasil & Cornell, (2012) utilized a survey of over 3000 students and found that around 12% of secondary students reported a threat of violence in the preceding 30 days. Of those, only 9% reported that a threat had been carried out. Thus, relatively few students are victims of violence at schools, and most threats occur without ensuing violence. Although threats of violence are certainly powerfully negative forces on students and other stakeholders- when addressing the actual propensity to be a victim at school, these events remain as outliers.

Even accepting the low probability nature of acts of targeted violence in school, events such as the mass casualty events that took place at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have garnered great amounts of media and public attention, beginning in the early 2000's to the present (Larkin, 2009; Petkova et al., 2016). Responses to these acts often include months and years of coverage that include describing both

the putative reason for the acts on the part of the perpetrator and the actual events themselves

(Silva & Capellan, 2018).

It is perhaps this form of media attention that seeks to make coherent meanings around

these tragedies that lends itself to a primary and largely incorrect view that there is homogeneity

in how and why these events occur (Reddy et al., 2001). The idea that there is a great amount of

commonality between perpetrators has unfortunately not been validated (Burns et al., 2001;

Cornell, 2020). Because of the heterogeneity of perpetrators of targeted violence, superimposing

the traits of past offenders is insufficient to understand this phenomenon and is certainly not able

to sensitively predict which individuals have or lack the propensity to commit future acts of

targeted violence.

Although this dissertation focuses on threats to others, initial conceptualizations of threat

assessment have often included uniform approaches to preventing threats to self and threats

within a singular approach. In the early years, there was initially much overlap for both homicide

and suicide in early guidelines for threat assessment. As frameworks for understanding both

threats to self and others began to diverge, practitioners and researchers recognized early-on, that

significant differences exist between effectively addressing threats of suicide and harm to others,

especially in a school context (Burnette et al., 2018a).

One important distinction is that threats to self-make-up the vast majority of threats that

are addressed in schools (Burnette et al., 2018b). In a similar vein, when assessment for threats to

others do however occur in schools, the outcomes are more likely to involve serious disciplinary

and legal outcomes- often resulting in loss of opportunities to learn. Finally, those threats to

others that are addressed in schools are far more likely to include a weapon and thus raise the

potential lethality (Burnette et al., 2018b; Silva & Capellan, 2018).

Understanding the scope of the problem of targeted violence necessitates taking a global and multifactored view. The United Nations issued a document titled *Tackling Violence in Schools*, (2012), that indicated that although most of the extant research focuses on school violence committed in Western Countries and the Global North, that the problem is not specific to developed or Western countries and that violence may even be more common in developing countries. Just as there is no uniform sets of traits that typify a perpetrator of targeted violence in schools, there is also variance in how these acts occur. In Germany for instance, knives and bludgeoning are the most common lethal means for targeted school violence (Funk, 2000).

No understanding of the scope of this phenomenon is complete without an accounting of the impacts of school violence on overall student climate as well as effects on achievement, teacher performance and retention, and larger social implications. One of the most obvious and primary impacts is the traumatic loss of life and related trauma of loved ones left behind. The intangible and psychological impacts on students and communities are long-lasting and are often typified by student and community fears around attending school (Haddad et al., 2021). When acts of targeted violence occur, communities, educational policy, and societies are also irrevocably changed by these acts (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021; Johnson, 2009).

Students and community members who experience acts of violence at school are less connected to school, are less engaged academically, and experience their academic lives as being less safe (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). These same students are therefore less likely to attend, engage with, and complete secondary grades. There are also second-order effects of school violence. Climates in which violence and threats of violence are prevalent have been noted to be uniformly less effective at meeting needs of students (Steffgen et al., 2013) and carrying out the core mission of educating students (Booren et al., 2010; Kingston et al., 2018). School

environments, in which violence is disproportionally threatened and/or observed, are linked to

higher rates of student drop-out (Murakami et al., 2006), and correlate with reduced success in

post-secondary settings. Public acts of violence, to include school violence, appear to be

cumulative as well. Those students and others who experience compounding events are more

likely to have negative outcomes (Daniels et al., 2007), creating a dose-dependent effect.

The lack of violence and threats of violence is also inversely associated with negative life

events (Baker-Henningham et al., 2021). Schools in which acts of violence are less prevalent

tend to include a higher proportion of students who endorse the belief that school rules are fair

and that the climate has an orientation towards order (Kingston et al., 2018; Steffgen et al.,

2013).

Haddad et al., (2021) point to a possible link between high profile acts of school violence

and an increase in threats of violence in the community generally, even in communities that

present with lower baseline violence. This finding supports the idea that school violence may

have community-wide impacts that are not limited to schools and youth. In a model for

understanding how acts of targeted violence serve to undermine school communities and their

larger communities, Ildırım Özcan & Erbay, (2021) posit that after acts of targeted violence,

students lose faith in trusted public institutions such as public schools, as well as within society

at-large, create an existential crisis that can impact students' propensity to follow social norms.

Further, acts of targeted violence such as school shootings appear to have measurable

impacts on the mental health of students long after the events. Liao et al. (2015) point towards a

predicable trajectory of disruptive behaviors in schools in which targeted violence has occurred

that persists long after the events in question. This includes those students who may never have

been primarily exposed to these acts, but rather have secondary exposure to the events. Thus,

acts of targeted violence serve not only to change individuals affect directly, but also the communities in which they occur more generally.

The matter of school violence, and the threat thereof, has serious impacts on achievement and school attendance. Pervasive and negative effects on academic and mental health of students (Cornell, 2015; Cornell, 2020) are well established to include increased fears and reduced levels of trust. The impacts on achievement appear to be both personal to students and impact the learning environment itself. It is for this reason that prevailing means and modes of interfacing with the problem of targeted violence include both universal and targeted supports to engage with general climate and individuals at-risk (Syvertsen et al., 2009). This fusion of intervention and prevention is seen as central to intervening with students before, during, and after a crisis event (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021).

Systemic impacts of targeted violence are not limited to students. Threats against staff, for instance, occur infrequently, though a disproportionate impact is felt on professional retention and the quality of instruction (Maeng et al., 2019) in addition to how teachers report levels of their own disengagement (Galand et al., 2007) and subjective wellbeing as professionals (Daniels et al., 2007; Espelage et al., 2013). Grayson & Alvarez, (2008), also point to an association between schools where violence is prevalent or threatened at higher levels and measurable levels of teacher depersonalization and burnout. Adding to the impacts is the fact that those schools in which violence is prevalent, to include ongoing and persistent high levels of stress and violence, are more likely to include staff members thinking of leaving the field (Zysberg & Sabbag, 2021). Staff impacts accrete with student and community impacts to demonstrate that school climate is important in understanding propensity for targeted violence and also impacts after these events

(Varela et al., 2019). Community and staff impacts represent both primary and second order impacts that are often a challenge to quantify.

Addressing the matter of target violence in school must also consider the matter of social policy. Larger perceptions that schools are violent places because of infrequent, yet highly publicized events undermine trust in schools as institutions (Booren et al., 2010), thus creating the potential for defunding of public school as a vital social good. This has the potential to create political pressures to implement policies, some of which may be publicly popular but ineffective, if not outright counterproductive.

The phenomenon of targeted violence and thus policies to prevent it in schools, is not limited to the United States, however. Global acts of violence have been perceived as becoming ever more common, partly because of increasing levels of attention from infrequent events, and are partly due to a greater social awareness of school-based violence (Leuschner et al., 2012). In the decade following the Columbine shootings in 1999, Bondü et al., (2011) reviewed over forty high-profile acts of targeted violence outside of the United States. They concluded that because of the global ubiquity of this phenomenon, the potential for understanding cross-culture links as a means understand and prevent these acts is an inherent duty for those doing research in the field. For instance, they found that the role of media use around prior acts appears to be a common theme in those who committed acts, irrespective of geographic location (Verlinden et al., 2000). Thus, addressing how media deals with the topic of targeted violence may be critical across cultures.

One potential area of geographic divergence in occurrences of targeted violence in schools globally is the presence of absolute environment deprivation. Akiba et al., (2002) highlight the link between abject poverty and school violence as a general principal and also

place the United States somewhere in the middle in occurrences of school violence, with countries like Hungary, Romania, and The Philippines presenting with the highest relative number of violent acts at school. Conversely, Denmark, Singapore, and Switzerland proffered the lowest relative number of violent acts at school (Tackling violence in schools: A Global Perspective: Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice, 2012). It is noteworthy that economic deprivation is linked with acts of school violence globally, though this association diverges from retrospective data and epidemiological evidence that most acts of targeted violence in schools in the Unites States appear to occur in middle- or higher-income communities and schools (Bachman et al., 2010). In addition to divergence in the economic status of communities in which events occur, the United States also appears to have an over representation of targeted violence perpetrated with firearms when compared to other geographic regions.

While gun-based violence is most common in the United States, and is evident in other countries as well, the global phenomenon of targeted violence extends far outside of gun violence (Bondü et al., 2011;). Amman et al., (2022) reviewed international acts of mass stabbing violence for over a decade. They found that half of the events Worldwide occurred in China and that the demographics and motivations of perpetrators were largely like those of acts of targeted violence using other means, such as firearms.

In Israel, 10% of secondary students report a prior violent incident with a knife at school (Zeira et al., 2003). In a sample of urban schools in Jamaica, 84% of student reported knowing a peer who carried a knife to school (Gardner et al., 2003). Granero et al., (2011) note a troubling trend of a doubling of middle school-aged student bringing knives to school. While violence at school appears to be universal, this phenomenon exhibits marked geographic differences.

Although the United States has by far more acts of targeted school violence, prominent and target acts of violence have occurred in Europe, the Americas, and Australasia (Leuschner et al., 2012).

Defining Threat Assessment for Targeted Violence

Educational policy and school psychology paradigms have moved towards a public health model of intervention that promotes universal screenings, interventions, and ongoing progress monitoring (Bohnenkamp et al., 2021, Johnson, 2009). This represents a shift away from reactive modes of practice that only engage with problems once they are identified at higher levels of concern. This means putting the onus on addressing not only potential perpetrators at the point of crisis, but addressing school culture, discipline, and at-risk students before reaching a critical point of crisis "and using this information to address the root of the problem rather than simply disciplining the student," (Cornell & Allen, 2011). This wholistic approach means not waiting for students at risk to be identified at the point of violence, but also to address host environments and climate, monitoring students at low levels of risk, and using evidence-based practices to intervene.

Kelly (2017, p. 163) succinctly summarizes the requisite steps to a valid threat assessment process as including:

(a) prevention and intervention planning,

(b) identifying members and clarifying roles within the multidisciplinary threat assessment team,

(c) responding to threats and threatening behaviors,

(d) reviewing records and gathering information,

(e) determining the level of concern, and

(f) designing and monitoring intervention plans.

Threat Assessment

Early Constructs: Profiling

Policy makers and federal law enforcement agencies such as the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have crafted policies and procedures around screening for violent offending for decades (Mitchell & Palk, 2016); long before the premise of threat assessment became prominent. The then prevailing FBI model was primarily focused on targeted attacks with firearms (Augustyniak, 2005) and "Although the model provided some concrete examples of response and prevention plans, the main focus," (p. 31) was on preventing acts at the point of violence, and primarily on the part of law enforcement. As much of the earliest work of modeling and understanding targeted violence comes from outside of the school literature, the preceding frameworks were not school-specific (Louvar Reeves & Brock, 2017). The earliest threat assessment models did not take into account the specific characteristics typified by school violence, namely characteristics of children and adolescents, nor the critical school-community links that make threat assessment in schools critical and complicated (Mitchell & Palk, 2016). This mismatch between law enforcement models and ongoing acts of targeted violence in schools led to an awareness that any attempt to understand and prevent acts of targeted violence necessitated sensitive and specific processes, which represent a challenge to the reactionary prior profiling approach.

One critical construct undergirding current conceptualizations of threat assessment is the categorization of potential for future acts of violence based on information at-hand as well as what is known about the student at risk from past interactions. Prior to the coalescence of current frameworks, there was initially very little aegis towards creating credible and reliable methods

for categorization of risk that facilitated follow-up (Louvar Reeves & Brock, 2017), because of information-poor methodologies. This evolution in thinking about threat assessment as a social and institutional, as well as law enforcement matter also extends to terminology.

Whilst some early researchers favored the term risk assessment over threat assessment, the use of the term threat assessment is said to reflect the then changing and more research-based belief that evaluating risk of harm for targeted violence should be focused upon the presenting circumstances, such as threats made in the recent past or current challenges in relationships at school, over longer-term characteristics or typologies (Reddy et al., 2001). The earliest criminological research was more geared towards creating profiles of potential perpetrators (Burns et al., 2001). The countervailing hope was that by understanding prior similar acts, that a typology of perpetrators could assist in identifying likely future perpetrators. One note is that although the initial stated purpose of profiling was to address schoolwide efforts to reduce violence, in practice schools used this approach to fit students to a given profile.

This approach was given a tailwind by media portrayals of perpetrators after events (Bailey, 2001) as being homogenous. As these offenders were often depicted as have common traits such as antisocial characteristics or past acts violence, the premise of profiling as a suitable mechanism to identify potential perpetrators of target violence became dominant (Bailey, 2001; Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000). All of this was instrumental in shaping a larger social vision that every troubled and socially maladjusted youth was a potential perpetrator of targeted school violence. This is notable as profiling assumes that those who commit acts of targeted violence are heterogenous enough to be distinguished from non-perpetrators and that durable and reliable traits exist and can be recognized before the offending event (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000).

The imprimatur of the trench coat-wearing troubled teen was largely unhelpful because while many perpetrators of target violence in schools do present with a history of social and behavioral challenges, as do many students, most of these young people do not commit acts of targeted violence or present as violent at all (Sharkey et al., 2011). While social alienation is the closest characterological shared traits identified to date, there is no uniform pattern or trait that predicts an act of targeted violence (Böckler et al., 2014). Further, some of the most sweeping assessments of past acts have found the age of the perpetrator to be the best indicator of potential risk status (Livingston et al., 2019). It goes without saying that suspecting every older school-aged student who presents with conduct problems, without further inquiry, of potential targeted violence is not a sound schema.

These initial attempts to engage in profiling did help to identify that although acts of aggression may by highly dissimilar, understanding and categorizing these acts is possible and essential in interrupting the cycle of violence. One critical difference identified in the earliest stages of the profiling movement was the difference between targeted and affective violence (Cornell, 2020). The former being the most indicated in planful acts of mass violence in schools, including an identified target for a specific reason, and the latter taking on reactive characteristics because of limited skills to cope or otherwise challenging environmental circumstances (Burnette et al., 2018b). This conceptual shift helped to lay a groundwork for beginning to understand risk in the context of the potential offender outside of more stereotypical profiles.

Even during the period in which profiling became the prevailing methodological approach, there were concerns raised about the legality, ethics, and validity of this approach. Bailey (2001) indicates that within the field of threat assessment, the use of profiling is more

likely to yield results that are based on factors unrelated to the immediate threat situation. These

factors include race and gender and thus could be deemed inherently discriminatory, without the

effect of making identification more sensitive or specific. A further challenge to the profiling

approach is one of addressing mental illness as a cofactor. Many students with mental illness

present as disturbed and threatening in schools, yet very few commit acts of violence (Böckler et

al., 2014)). For all these reasons, a profiling approach does little to address how to correctly

identify students at risk committing acts of targeted violence.

Current Trends in Threat Assessment

Current conceptualizations of threat assessment are multimodal (Cornell, 2020) and more

comprehensive than former profiling efforts. By addressing the interaction between the

individuals, their environment, and their thoughts and feelings, the hope is to better understand a

potential perpetrator in context (Flannery et al., 2012). This is due to applications of threat

assessment theory that include both prevention and interventions while constructing the problem

of targeted violence as both a systems and individual challenge.

This shift occurred within a larger movement towards a public health model in which

universal screenings, early and ongoing intervention and progress monitoring are favored

(Bohnenkamp et al., 2021). These universal screenings often include measuring both

externalizing (acting out) and internalizing (depressed and anxious) traits (Katsiyannis et al.,

2018). This dual focus on overtly aggressive and more withdrawn behaviors is key. This shift

within threat assessment mirrors contemporaneous efforts addressing both academic and

emotional and behavioral concerns within Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and

Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks (Hughes et al., 2017) in lieu of a 'wait to fail,'

model (Von der Embse et al., 2021) in which those at risk are only identified after significant

deficits in functioning. A preference towards a wholistic systems approaches is now becoming the dominant approach to solving most problems in schools, including learning and behavior concerns (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010). This is now inclusive of threat assessment.

Above and beyond universal support to all students that address climate and screen for students at-risk, a valid threat assessment protocol must be ready to address threats that are identified at a higher level of risk. This may be after a threat is reported by another student or staff member or the student makes a direct threat of harm. Any comprehensive methodology must include readily understood procedures for quantifying a potential threat as quickly as possible in these circumstances. The assessment process itself should be tailored to using immediate information at-hand at the time of assessment, rather than application of a given profile to a subject that includes potential prior threats.

The information that is initially gleaned should be supplemented by the multidisciplinary team with information from observers, members of the school community, and the student themselves to determine the level of the threat and to establish necessary supports (Cornell, 2020). The context of any threat should be addressed by any and all parties involved. One critical reason that using the multidisciplinary team is that the school may have separate though related disciplinary mandates in addition to threat assessment protocols (Cornell & Allen, 2011). The context of any disciplinary actions informs the threat assessment team's process, and the inverse is also true.

Finally, all of these various sources of data must be used to come to a summative conclusion about the level of the threat. By creating a framework for understanding which threats are transient or substantial (Burnette et al., 2018), and thereby what level of supports and responses are appropriate, the team can create a plan of action that is tailored to both the

triggering events and the individual student(s) involved (Cornell, 2020). A critical part of this endeavor is ensuring information gathering that is broad enough to understand the student and the incident in question, to include potential reasons for acts of harm to others.

One critical reason for engaging with multiple individuals with knowledge of the student is that in many past acts of targeted violence at school, perpetrators have made public threats, sometimes in various forms and across multiple venues (Hendrix et al., 2022) before engaging in acts of violence. This concept of leakage is one of only a few characteristics that appears to typify what are mostly heterogenous events (Lankford et al., 2019; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). Given the feelings of anonymity and the general shift towards communicating via social media, it is also not surprising that some researchers are positing the need to consider what students post or have posted in online fora such as social media as well (Cowan et al., 2022).

The most common sequence of events relative to the actual assessment of an immediate risk is initiated when a peer or staff member reports a risky behavior or threat, or a disciplinary event at occurs at school (Cornell et al., 2018; Crepeau-Hobson & Leech, 2021). Once the multidisciplinary threat assessment team comes together, gathering information from the student(s) and others with knowledge of the student and precipitating events, the team should then use some form of rubric for establishing the level of the threat.

Quantifying the level of the threat not only helps to inform what actions are taken, but also helps administrators to communicate to district, parents, and other stakeholders about the risk in a defined fashion (Burnette et al., 2018). Understanding the level of risk can help to ascertain whether an immediate referral for medical or psychological evaluation is in order, whether school-based counseling is warranted for psychosocial or academic concerns, and to what degree a safety or care plan is required (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The specific risks to

others that have been gleaned are also instrumental and essential to forming any safety plan to keep the student of concern and others safe.

Now that actual data around any given threat has been placed at the center of the threat assessment process, current models have focused on categorizing risk as either transient or substantial. Substantial threats are those with either a credible means of being carried out or involve a significant number of other risk factors to be concerning and are more a measure of degree than a type (Meloy et al., 2021). Retrospective studies have identified that a substantial finding is more common in circumstances where highly lethal means such as firearms and knives are involved or the student(s) in question presented with a history of violent behavior. Retrospective analysis found that when the multidisciplinary threat assessment team found that a situation was substantial, there was a 36-fold increase in the likelihood of a future completed act of school violence (Burnette et al., 2018b).

Another critical consideration in the process is that retrospective analyses in which a lower transient level of risk was assessed initially, before a completed act of targeted violence actually occurred often involved a common error. Teams tended to discount students who presented with multiple risk factors who lacked immediate access to lethal means at the time of assessment (Fiedler et al., 2020).

One core distinction between prior profiling methodologies is that the threat assessment model has a strong orientation towards after-action planning that benefits the student of concern and also serves to gather ongoing data around the student's real-time risk (Crepeau-Hobson & Leech, 2021b). Whereas prior risk assessments usually culminated in disciplinary actions without addressing student's needs, newer approaches try to include student supports that involve keeping students at lower levels of risk at school and engaged. These supports may

include traditional mental health supports within or outside of school, safety plans, or academically oriented interventions that may address critical risk factors. The multidisciplinary team then, also serves as a wrap-around service that coordinates on-going care for students of concerns.

School Psychology and Threat Assessment

It is only more recently that school psychological and educational policy have begun to address and codify best practices around the matter of school-based targeted violence (Cornell et al., 2020) via threat assessment protocols. The earliest professional literature appears to look at physical security measures such as metal detectors and school resource officers as being the focus and locus of addressing the social and institutional challenges of targeted violence at school. The shift from a reliance on physical security to broader systems approaches transpired over time after several high-profile events occurred even with physical security measures in place (Cornell, 2020). It should be noted that a retrospective look after several decades of focusing on physical security in the form of metal detectors, school resources officers, and single-entry points in schools have not resulted in fewer acts of violence (Furlong et al., 2000). To the contrary, these measures may indeed make students feel less safe (Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2012) with few actual benefits.

After recognizing that schools themselves- and the adults who inhabit them- had to change to accommodate this problem, the school psychology literature has moved towards using the idea of multidisciplinary crisis teams (Kelly, 2017) to address critical decision making such as suicide and homicide threat assessment, in addition to responding to critical events such as the death of a student or staff member. Because these crisis teams are often tasked with determining whether specific threats are developmentally or contextually appropriate, many have placed

school psychologists at the helm of these teams, as they are versed in both educational and

school practices in addition to psychology and human development (Poland, 1994; Erps et al.,

2020).

In a similar way, school psychology has tried to grapple with the matter of equity and

disproportionality within threat assessment. While some findings indicate no disproportionalities

relative to racial biases towards those students deemed to be a serious threat to others (Cornell et

al., 2018), a larger and broader conclusion from the prevailing literature is that the practice of

engaging in threat assessment itself constitutes an improvement over prior methods in the realm

of equity (Cornell, 2020; Maeng et al., 2019). The prior zero tolerance policies that invariably

required out-of-school suspensions disproportionally impacted students of color, and

incorporated few preventative strategies (Daly et al., 2010), replacing these outdated and largely

unproven (Kyere et al., 2018) methods with threat assessment procedures serves the larger goal

of efficacious identification of those who are a risk to others while minimizing bias.

Zero Tolerance policies around threats made at school disproportionally effect students in

minority communities, as well as males. Because many of these students face suspension or

expulsion for threats that they are statistically unlikely to commit, the current literature points

strongly to an intervention over zero tolerance stance to school violence (Teske, 2011). One

example of the primacy of comprehensive threat assessments over the prior profiling

methodology with zero-tolerance is that students who are assessed using comprehensive threat

assessment procedures are less likely to results in out-of-school suspensions (Maeng et al.,

2019). A focus on equity was a key driver doing away with zero tolerance and reactive threat

assessment procedures.

Although little or no data exist to support the premise that African American and other minority students are more likely to commit acts of target violence- they are disproportionately meted out harsh disciplinary outcomes such as suspension and expulsion (Kodelja, 2019). Further, although both African American and White students rate their perceived safety as being improved by physical security measures such as metal detectors in comparable ways, African American students do not rate their own safety as demonstrably improved by armed security such as school resource officers (Bachman et al., 2010). All of these matters come to the fore when violence threat assessment is seen as more than a mere matter of policing or criminology, but rather as a challenge to existing institutional supports and frameworks.

School psychology is also well placed to address the multilevel challenge of targeted violence that involves individual prevention and intervention efforts as well as systems' change. The current practice model endorsed by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2010), which represents the field and credentials the highest level of practice, the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential, endorses the belief that school psychologists are engaged in solving student problems at the individual, group, and systems level (Harrison & Thomas, 2014). Consultation, individual and group counseling, assessment, and system support activities are all component elements of the NASP practice model.

Sheridan & Gutkin (2000), go on to point out that unlike other areas of applied psychology, school psychologists are aptly placed to engage in ecologically based problem solving by working directly with students and their parents, and also through consultation with multiple stakeholders. It should be noted that the vision of broad role school psychology is often in contrast to prior conceptualizations of the role- in which psychologists have often spent most

of their time engaged in psychoeducational evaluation in service of special education eligibility

(Sullivan & Long, 2010).

Prevention as Intervention

Contemporaneous to the evolving practices around how school psychologists and others

might assess risk, education as a whole has begun to move from responsive approaches to

challenges in schools towards a public health model. This conceptual shift is made evident in

recent approaches to harm-to-others assessment in schools. Sood et al., (2021) highlight that

across countries, the most effect strategies to combat violence in schools include both targeted

approaches to individuals who present in crisis and addressing the needs of the entire population

in questions. Further, strategies should address special and at-risk populations. Prevention efforts

must work together with interventions and safety measures to create a larger continuum of

institutional steps to address potential threats and the mental health needs that often underly these

threats (Johnson, 2009). Miller et al., (1998) make the case specific to anti-social student traits

and a comprehensive public health approach that "prevention efforts designed within this

framework would have a dual focus: lowering the risk of continuing along the deviancy pathway,

while strengthening one's chance of developing successful life competencies (p. 367)."

One inherent addition to threat assessment that school psychology has been instrumental

in adding to the field is the inclusion of the essential component of mental health approaches to

both assessment and postvention (Cornell, 2020). As the vast majority of those assessed will not

commit any acts of targeted violence, threat assessment procedures should also build-in attempts

to address the inherent mental health needs of those who are assessed.

Physical security measures such as metal detectors and school resource officers can be

minimally effective, but outcomes are more improved via comprehensive focuses of prevention,

school climate, and case management (Bachman et al., 2010). Nonetheless, their use in schools has increased dramatically in the preceding decades (Mowen & Freng, 2018). This precipitous change is only now being measures for effectiveness and unintended effects. To this end, it has been identified that schools with more physical security measures have greater rates of student arrest (Na & Gottfredson, 2011) and some forms of suspension (Mowen, 2014). The matter of suspension, expulsion, and arrest are central to the negative outcomes of ineffective school-wide policies, because they deprive students of their educational rights and can propagate low trust environments.

Attempts to address targeted violence in schools recognize that a multimodal approach that integrates both comprehensive training of staff around structured assessment procedures and attempts to change school climate are necessary (Allen et al., 2008; Kingston et al., 2018). Since school staff members are the most likely to report behaviors of concern, it is essential that threat assessment procedures train all school staff, not just psychologists, counselors, and administrators (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; Verlinden et al., 2000).

A nuanced look at the relationship between school climate and problematic behaviors-including targeted violence, and thus the need for a comprehensive view of addressing this challenge, shows that those school environments that are perceived as being the most consistent and fair are also the least likely school communities to incubate rule-breaking-including violence (Gottfredson et al., 2005). This finding highlights the need for a consistent application of policy. Bullying is a common topic addressed in the literature around targeted violence. This makes sense, as many perpetrators report prior conflicts as a reason for acting out, though there is mounting evidence that more universal traits such as student trust in adults and school institutions (Williams et al., 2018) and clear and evenly applied disciplinary rules may be more

effective at changing school environments in a way reduces school avoidances and potentially violent acts (Crepeau-Hobson & Leech, 2021b). For this reason, one part of universal strategies for school climate management is staff training.

Education and training not only about the threat assessments process, but also about human factors related to threats of violence are clearly a requisite part of a comprehensive approach to address violence in schools. Allen et al. (2008) used staff training about threat assessment processes and measured staff perceptions and fears before and after the training. After the training, staff were less fearful about being a victim of violence in schools and were more likely to demonstrate a knowledge of which steps to take if a student exhibited behaviors of concern. This same study found that the one-day staff training also significantly reduced staff fears around the process itself. Those who underwent the training were more likely to endorse approaches that were supportive of struggling students rather than zero-tolerance policies.

In Jamaica, staff training around social-emotional learning skills and self-management proffered a significant reduction in student violence at school in early childhood students (Baker-Henningham et al., 2021).

Addressing the universal climate of schools also acknowledges that violence does not occur in a cultural vacuum and that environments that are more hostile and in which students feel unwilling or unable to seek help are more likely to incubate targeted violence in schools (Cornell, 2020). Threat assessment for targeted violence in schools should be responsive to individual student factors but also includes feedback mechanisms that address school community factors (Varela et al., 2019) that appear to impact the prevalence of targeted violence. If there is an element of policy or the physical environment that can be addressed, it should be.

One element of this analysis around school environments is the awareness that some perpetrators of targeted violence perceive that they are under threat and avoid school as a means for avoiding these perceived threats (Williams et al., 2018). By fostering open, trusting, and consistent environments, the potential for targeted violence is decreased because it reduces perceived threats and offers venues for redress of interpersonal conflict. In addition to considering the role of universal supports of school climate, a framework and series of processes is the key to ensuring a continuum of care to identify and support students who require a higher level of intervention because of a risk of committing acts of targeted violence.

Effective School-Based Threat Assessment

As the work that was initially done in law enforcement and public policy filtered down into local and state level entities, a small coalition of researchers and policy makers have aligned the first set of best practice guidelines for threat assessment in schools. The Comprehensive Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) is the most heavily researched and used model for threat assessments in schools (Cornell & Allen, 2011). Its origins can be traced to the Virginia state legislature requiring the adoption of a unified and systemic set of guidelines and procedures, with ongoing training and data-gathering (Cornell & Maeng, 2017). Thereby, the CSTAG also became the United States' first proof-of-concept for a comprehensive approach to reducing violence in schools. The creation of this set of practice guidelines has its proximate roots in the tragic acts of violence that occurred in Columbine High School in Colorado (Cornell & Allen, 2011) in addition to other high-profile acts of targeted violence in schools. The creators of the CSTAG view it as a fundamental problem-solving approach that addresses behaviors of concern with both assessment and intervention (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018) on both the systems and individual levels. It incorporates comprehensive training for staff in schools and

districts and requires a structured approach when a potential threat has been identified (Cornell et al., 2011).

The CSTAG's comprehensive approach moves away from the preexisting practices of zero-tolerance and reactionary policies that purport to minimize acts of violence through suspension and expulsion, instead favoring paired prevention and intervention (Augustyniak, 2005). The CSTAG is conceived and funded as a state-level initiative to include data gathering and support for local school districts (Cornell et al., 2018). Because data are gathered on a state-wide basis, it is possible to draw conclusions about effectiveness and to monitor implementation fidelity.

The CSTAG was crafted with retrospective analysis around past completed acts of violence, particularly school shootings. Because of this, there is a fundamental acknowledgement that since these acts are targeted and not affective violence (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018), some level of warning behaviors is often identifiable before the events transpire. Often these behaviors could have been reported by a peer (Hendrix et al., 2022). If preventing acts of targeted violence is partially a matter of using known information about potential extant student conflicts and challenges, then one central component has to be using the correct information and the best time on the school, district, and state level.

One critical component of the CSTAG is broad and systemic data gathering. State level supports have encouraged school districts to make their own processes accountable by measuring the numbers of threat assessments and the proportion of students deemed to be a transient or substantial risk (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The belief is that pattern analysis and reflective processes help to change school climate and cultures in ways that not only address threats when they occur, but also serve to prevent the conditions that incubate school-based violence. This

element of the CSTAG is an entreaty to consider local and regional culture and climate when building interventions and critical planning.

Brown et al., (2009) show evidence that geographic and local culture may play a role in how individuals interpolate threats. They indicate that those localities that are more representative of a culture of honor, in which it is vitally important for individuals, and particularly males, to appear competent and regain face after a slight, are more likely to incubate acts of violence. Similarly, to addressing larger school and regional cultures, individual relationships and interactions are a core feature of the CSTAG Model. The assessment process involves information about past conflicts and psychosocial stressors. Since those children and youth who have experienced extreme rejection or conflict are predisposed to carry their threats out (Böckler et al., 2014), the assessment process includes not only environmental, but also personal and psychosocial artifacts before determinations are made about the level of the threat.

Now that the CSTAG has been in use for decades and has the benefit of data gathering in a wholistic fashion, it is possible to understand the proportion of assessments that yield transient versus substantial findings. Findings included that inarticulate, nongenuine, or poorly planned acts of violence that were deemed to be transient typically make up ~70% of total assessments completed (Burnette et al., 2018a). While the rest include credible threats of violence, threats that include a weapon to which the individual has access, a history of violent acts, or other factors that lead to a significant chance of a lethal act (Cornell & Allen, 2011) One other important factor is that threat assessments have been more likely to have been deemed to be substantial in cases where individuals threat both harm to self and others.

Relative to the actual team-based process, once a potential student has been identified, the multidisciplinary threat assessment team engages in a multiple-step decision tree process

(Cornell & Allen, 2011) that is designed to be both comprehensive enough to identify students at

a substantial risk and avoid lengthy assessment of students at low risk that remove the student

from instruction (Meloy et al., 2015). This decision tree allows for comprehensive analysis of

teachers and peers if required and comprehensive safety planning if warranted.

Figure 1

Threat Assessment Decision Tree
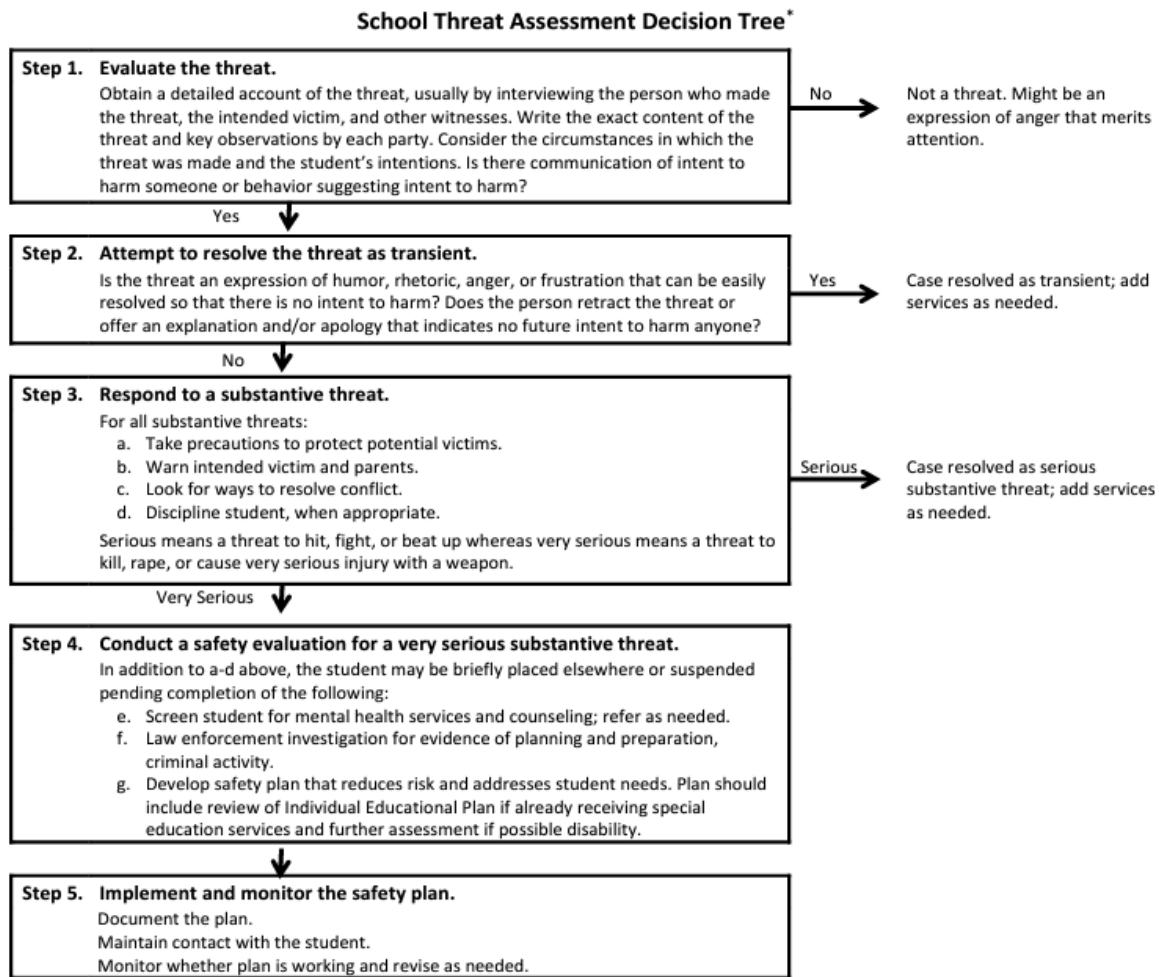
Cornell 2018, as cited in Potter, 2020.

Three Critical Factors

Given the enormity of the tasks involved around competently engaging in threat assessment for targeted violence, psychologists or other professional cannot act as a team of one, instead, it is critical that multiple trained individuals come together (Kelly, 2017). Although many schools and districts have adopted structured policies and procedures for homicide threat assessment, these vary widely not only in what is required, but also in who completes the assessments and is responsible for case management and follow-up (Cornell & Maeng, 2017).

The literature points clearly towards the idea that a team-based approach to threat assessment is necessary to gather enough information to reach viable conclusions about a student's level of risk (Cornell, 2020; Nekvasil et al., 2015). Similarly, having multiple individuals involved in threat assessments not only provides for consensus-based decisions, but it also allows for better documentation because one professional can document encounters via an interview while another set of members is asking the subject questions and directly engaging with the student (Kelly, 2017; Poland & Ferguson, 2021). When head-to-head comparisons are made between team-based procedures that include multiple professionals who have been trained in a tool and process, they have been found to be superior to other ad-hoc processes (Kingston et al., 2018).

Another key facet identified in the literature is the need for systemic and written district-wide procedures around threat assessment and follow-up (Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). This serves the purpose of not only ensuring fidelity to procedures across staff and different sites within the district, but it also creates consistency through standard work product (Cornell et al., 2018). This means that threat assessments involve asking the same (or similar) questions in the same ways, and often includes a structured protocol that includes a scoring rubric. Having a

numerical framework for understanding the level of risk is essential to working towards inter-rater reliability and consistency (Van Brunt, 2013).

The last procedural key is addressing school climate. By connecting school climate with the threat assessment process, itself, critical stakeholders come to understand their own role in changing the school environment in ways that reduce the propensity for targeted violence (Crichlow-Ball & Cornell, 2021). One core facet in this endeavor is the need to create environments where students feel comfortable asking for help for themselves and others. Cornell (2020) documents that those schools in which students are willing to seek help are also less likely to undergo acts of violence.

Syvertsen et al., (2009) sampled secondary students about their potential willingness to seek help for threats uttered at school. Their findings indicate that the most common response from students to a theoretical scenario was to take unilateral action without telling staff or another adult. They further found that students with high levels of trust in their school in general were more likely to disclose concerns to staff. Systematic environmental interventions in schools must not only focus on students at risk, but also must foster the belief that sharing a concerning statement or action on the part of a peer is prosocial and encouraged. Some success has been documented around training students directly about the threat assessment process, to include teaching students about the need to seek help if peers say or post concerning things (Williams & Cornell, 2006).

After a one-time training, students endorse responses that indicate that they are more likely to seek help for themselves or a peer (Stohlman & Cornell, 2019). These climate-based changes can be monitored through frequent climate surveys and other procedures that allow for regular progress monitoring.

School Psychologists as Content Experts

School psychologists are arguably best placed to help to inform policy and practice decisions around critical threat assessment in schools (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010; Furlong et al., 2000), see also Kelly, 2017). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is responsible for training and ethical standards for School Psychologists in the United States and has a significant footprint on global school and educational psychology practice. The NASP practice standards set out practice domains that include mental and behavioral health services, services to promote safe and healthy schools, and data-based decision making (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010). NASP further identifies School psychologists as ably suited to the task of addressing threat assessment in schools (Kelly, 2017). Given that school psychologists and train in both individual interventions and assessment and systems' theory, it is perhaps a natural fit that school psychologists take the lead policy (Louvar Reeves & Brock, 2017).

Summary

Threat assessment in schools began largely as an attempt at fitting potential perpetrators to existing profiles of past assailants. As the state of the art moved from being dominated by law enforcement to including prevention and intervention strategies appropriate to schools, a new comprehensive view emerged. Using both universal efforts at addressing school climate and identifying those at risk for committing acts of targeted violence as early as possible, prevailing methods such as the CSTAG have attempted to offer viable strategies for addressing the risk of targeted violence in schools.

School psychology's increasing influence of the practices of threat assessment for targeted violence have widened the approaches and methods that are currently considered to be best practices. Although there is no federal or national set of guidelines or procedures, The

National Association of School Psychologist (NASP), has helped to ensure that the threat

assessment process is structured, involves multiple individuals, and uses structured rubrics to

determine a student's level of risk and involves ongoing follow up.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Overview

This phenomenological research study addressed the lived experience of school psychologists around the topic of critical threat assessment for targeted violence, in service of understanding any gap between practice guidelines and actual practice. The purpose of the study was to address the dearth of research around what practices have proliferated around threat assessments and how school psychologists' beliefs, interpolations, and experiences impact actions in the field.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to detail methodological means undertaken. To that end, a detailed phenomenological exploration of how characteristics and schema were applied to define and understand the topic of targeted violence is detailed.

Design

One of the core tenets of phenomenological research is the rigorous and transparent use of defining ideas to undergird and support conclusions reached (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenology is inherently concerned with real world conditions within and between individuals and uses a conscious focus on context, with an awareness of what is being described, as well as an inquiry into the credibly of any conclusions around the phenomenon (Schmidt, 2016).

Phenomenological research is often further taxonomized based upon the role of the researcher in making interpretations (Laverty, 2003). The hermeneutical methods used in this study applied the researcher's experiences, beliefs, and ideas to apply interpretations to the lived experience of others. To that end, "meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences," (Laverty, 2003, p. 24).

The worldview of this study was grounded in the tenets of William James' focus on an epistemic reality that seeks to understand phenomenon through a lens of both fact and experiential realities (James & Shook, 2011). Human experience is an artifact of both observable and objective realities, and as such, can be experienced via the human senses and analyzed using subjective thoughts, feelings, and meanings. The current methodology was selected in order to ensure an equal focus on both context and content. This ethos of a combination of a fact-based reality and an awareness of internal experience is critical to this inquiry because the research questions targeted not only actual practice around threat assessment for targeted violence, but also the unseen lines of force such as thoughts and feelings that impact why school psychologists engage in said practices.

In order to address validity and provide meaningful structure to the study itself, a review of the relevant literature around conducting phenomenological research yielded a common convention for ensuring efficacy and consistency. Creswell & Poth (2018) posit that there are a series of unifying steps that should be undertaken in phenomenological research. These vital guidelines include ensuring that phenomenological research is the most appropriate method of inquiry, defining and describing the phenomenon with a description of assumptions on the part of the researchers, collecting data which is then described and sifted, and compiling general themes and thereafter larger composite themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Specifically, the phenomenological approach was selected to address this topic because of a desire to derive meanings specific to school psychologists that both address phenomenon in the world, while also addressing meanings derived from these experiences to draw larger conclusions about a potential research to practice gap in the area of threat assessment for targeted violence. This attempt at understanding artifacts in the world, in this case around threat

assessment for targeted violence, and internal thoughts, fears, and beliefs that may impact practices in the field is central to the belief that, while much of our collective experience is evident through our perceptions, many elements of truth cannot be explored solely in the realm of the senses. It is only through the merging of objective reality and the meanings that we make thereof that some elements of the human experience can be fully addressed (James & James, 1974). Creswell & Poth, (2018) delineate that phenomenology is an apt methodology for plumbing below the surface of an artifact to reach more substantial undergirding conclusions.

Research Questions

The primary aim of the study was to identify and describe the lived experience around threat assessment for targeted violence in schools in order to shed light on a research to practice gap between best and actual practices.

RQ1: "How do school psychologists experience their roles in threat assessment for targeted violence?"

Are assessments completed in a multidisciplinary team?

What experiential challenges do subjects describe in their setting?

RQ2: "How do school psychologists understand what specific practices are empirically validated for assessing for and assisting with threats of targeted violence?

Does the subject's practice include structured means for understanding whether a threat is transitory or serious?

How are school climate and other universal supports to prevent targeted violence incorporated in the subjects practice?

RQ3: What barriers, challenges, or constructed meanings do school psychologists share that contribute to the gap between best and actual practices around threat assessments for targeted violence in schools?

Setting/Participants

Eight participants were recruited. Participants were recruited from online fora targeted at practicing school psychologists including Facebook and professional listservs. Selection was based upon an initial online survey that ensured that participants were practicing school psychologists and that they completed at least two threat assessments for targeted violence during the previous school year in which they were employed fulltime as a school psychologist. For those participants who meet inclusion criteria, an online and recorded electronic interview took place.

The smaller sample size in this study was indicative of phenomenological research as there is a focus upon exploring a particular phenomenon or artifact on an in depth and contextual basis (Creswell & Poth, 2018), often necessitating more lengthy inquiry. For the same reason interviews were selected as the ideal way to gather common themes and ideas between participants.

Procedures

Upon initial contact, participants were provided a secure link to the IRB approval, a document detailing the scope of the study, and contact information for the investigator. Before each interview, participants were asked to sign a document giving their consent and were made aware that their data and other critical information would be coded, including the use of a pseudonym. The interviews themselves were between 30- 45 minutes and were recorded and thereafter transcribed.

The Researcher's Role

All data and interviews were gathered by the primary researcher. Permission was first gleaned from Liberty's Institution Review Board (IRB), detailing the methods and procedures to be used. Written transcriptions of each interview were included in this dissertation.

Creswell & Poth (2018), outline and clarify that hermeneutical approaches to phenomenology necessitate interpretation through the researcher's own life experience and worldview. This researcher viewed his status as a practicing school psychologist as being an asset for the task of making meaning from the experience of others, while acknowledging a clear belief that truth must make sense to the subject being studied in order to be meaningful (James & James, 1974). Within the interviews themselves, the researcher was clear about his own professional status as a practicing school psychologist with an interest in the primary research questions. The researcher attempted to enter the study with as few preconceived notions as possible about how informants might answer questions and applied open-ended questions to follow-up with statements made during the interviews. Because the chosen design includes a strong emphasis on the lived experience of school psychologists, questions and follow-ups were directed to both content and experiential elements of understanding the role of school psychologists in threat assessment for targeted violence.

Data Collection

Data were collected via electronic audio interviews using Microsoft teams and transcribed electronically. To ensure accuracy of transcription, the researcher manually edited electronic transcription after each interview. Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and each individual was be assigned a pseudonym and case number before the interview, to ensure a consistent mechanism for tracking. Open notes were taken by the researcher and focused on

main areas discussed by each participant, to include specific themes for follow-up questions and discussion. While each participant received the same set of interview questions. Follow-up questions were specific to the content provided by each participant.

Interviews were scheduled in advance, with participants being given multiple days and time at their convenience.

Interviews

Each participant received a semi structured interview with the same questions. All data were collected during these interviews. Because of an intentional focus on both content and context, 4 questions were content focused, and 4 questions were focused on the subjective experiences of participants around threat assessment for targeted violence in schools. Thus, each respondent received the same 8 basic questions. These questions were asked only after establishing that participants are practicing school psychologists with recent experiences engaging threat assessment for targeted violence.

Content Questions

1. What is your professional experience in carrying out threat assessments for targeted violence, in which threats of harm to others is suspected, in schools?

2. When you have been involved in these assessments, what has your role been?

3. What is your understanding about what best practices in threat assessment means in your professional context?

4. What procedural elements of completing threat assessments for targeted violence are part of your everyday practice? This might include who is involved or what the process entails.

Context Questions

1. How do you understand threat assessment for targeted violence within your school or system's general guidance or frameworks?

2. When completing threat assessments, what environmental/systems barriers or other challenges have you experienced? "What is something you have seen positively impact student behavior regarding threat assessment that has helped you and/or your colleagues?

3. What is a facet of threat assessment for targeted violence that you wish could be improved in your practice context?

4. Do you feel that there is a large difference between best practices and actual practices for threat assessment violence in your practice setting?

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure the fidelity of participant ideas. Transcription was also be facilitated by post-hoc coding of ideas for review after the interviews. Open note taking (Creswell & Poth, 2018), with a focus on the themes brought up by participants, ensured that broad themes could later be reviewed by the researcher. Upon compilation of the data, each participant was asked to review their interview for accuracy.

Trustworthiness

The interview data were intentionally grouped and coded around participants' themes and ideas. In order to ensure that ideas have been conveyed accurately and completely, each participant was asked to review their interview information.

Credibility

Data were gathered from a sufficiently large sample of respondents in hopes of gathering a large swath of school psychologists. The intentional focus on current school psychologists who

are engaged in ongoing threat assessments for targeted violence as respondents was made to ensure that data gathered are representative of any actual phenomenon.

Dependability and Confirmability

Ensuring the use of evidenced-based practices is an engrained element of school psychology practice (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010). This means that it is a generally accepted premise that school psychologists strive to make themselves aware of, and utilize best practices (DuPaul, 2003). Because of this, the use of direct quotations and general themes derived from interviews was used to identify not only current practices within threat assessment or targeted violence, but also any gaps between actual and ideal practice.

Transferability

Information from each informant was memorialized and transcribed. Each participant was asked to verify its accuracy before it was included in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Because of geographic and COVID-19 implications, all interviews were conducted electronically. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and all paper notes were kept in locked drawers. Electronic records, including recordings, were kept in password protected storage.

Assessing researchers' preconceived ideas and biases is an important component of phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One critical consideration is that a gap between actual and best practices is not elucidated via the lived experience of subjects. It is also possible that gaps may exist but in unforeseen ways or because of factors that aren't currently documented in the literature. Taking an account of multiple individual's professional experiences and the use of active listening and noting taking are both steps taken to help to represent the

experience of practicing school psychologists rather than a mere retelling of the researcher's preconceived ideas.

Limitations

All interviews were virtual in nature. Phenomenological research engages in interpersonal narratives and involves a relationship between the researcher and subject (Wertz, 2005). It is possible that the virtual nature of interviews had an impact on the quality of conclusions reached. One purpose for including enough interview subjects is to allow for sufficient analyses across multiple individuals and context. The central idea of phenomenological research is understanding themes, both within and across individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018), so it is possible that any phenomenon addressed has not had a broad enough pool of subject to be fully understood.

<div align="center">

Summary

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A qualitative and phenomenological study was completed using practicing school psychologists as participants. Respondents were asked both content and context questions about their own professional experiences and practices, as well as their understanding of best practices. The aim was to understand the research to practice gap on the topic, in addition to exploring what contexts and barriers may exist in the field.

The participants were screened to ensure that they were practicing school psychologists who have current professional experience with threat assessment for targeted violence. Participants were interviewed virtually and with recording and transcription. Open notes were taken during each interview by the researcher with data validation from each participant after the interview.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

School psychologists have become instrumental professionals in conducting assessments for threats of targeted violence in schools (Kelly, 2017). They and other school stakeholders are being asked to make critical decisions that impact schools and communities by making determinations about the level of risk after threats of violence or other indicators of risk (Haddad et al., 2021; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). This includes ascertaining whether a specific threat is transitory or substantive and what protective actions to put into place after a threat has been assessed. In some circumstances, school professionals, including school psychologists, are engaging in threat assessment in a highly structured context with prior training and established protocol and rubrics (Cornell & Maeng, 2017). In other circumstances, these decisions may be made by singular individuals or in the context of low-information environments with few or no formal processes or tools.

An examination of the gap between actual and best practices is instrumental in understanding means and modes of calibrating the practice of threat assessment in school psychology practice and ensuring school and community safety (Bearman et al., 2015). To that end, understanding the beliefs, experiences, and barriers to effective threat assessment for targeted violence can help to understand barriers and challenges in ways that can be addressed.

Participants

Of the 8 participants in this study, there was a diversity within the highest degree earned, gender, and level of practice (elementary or secondary). Thirty-eight percent of participants reported their highest level of training as the doctoral level with sixty two percent of participants reporting training at the master's or Educational Specialist (Ed.S) level. One participant (12%)

reported working primarily at the elementary level, 3 (38%) reported working primarily at the

secondary level, and four participants (50%) reported working at all levels. One participant was

male (12%) with the other seven being female (88%).

Goforth et al. (2021) address the demographic characteristics of surveyed school

psychologists who are NASP members. Their findings indicate demographic characteristics that

align closely with those of the participants in this study. For instance, sixty-two percent of

participants reported the master's or Ed.S. as their highest level of training in this study

compared to seventy six percent of the national sample at this level of training. Thirty seven

percent of study participants reported doctoral training as their highest level of training, whereas

twenty-two percent of school psychologists nationally report this level of training. One of the

participants in this study was male (13%), while nationally twelve percent of school

psychologists are reported to be male nationally. Of the demographic characteristics considered,

it appears that there is strong overlap between the training and gender characteristics of the

participants in this study and school psychologists at large.

Table 1.
Participants

	Doctoral	Masters/Ed.S.	Elementary	Secondary	All Levels
1. Gilda	X		X		
2. Lauren		X		X	
3. Holly		X			X
4. Ramona		X		X	
5. Steve		X		X	
6. Wanda	X				X
7. Lacey		X			X
8. Muriel	X				X

1. Gilda

Gilda is a doctoral level professional who works at multiple smaller elementary schools. She described her background as one in which she has been in school psychology for "several decades," and has practiced in multiple locations in the United States. Her interview included many references to the challenges of engaging in the complex work of threat assessment, often at a moment's notice, and under substantial pressures.

In describing her constructions of what threat assessment is and should be, she emphasized that the process should be "a team approach." She highlighted that this is important because of the contribution that multiple professionals make in assessing complicated situations and formulating appropriate care plans. That said, Gilda described the role of the school psychologist as being "the lead," in any team or dyad. Multiple times she referenced the idea of collaboration as a necessary element in the process particularly when following up on multiple at-risk students simultaneously.

When asked context questions about her experience, she referred repeatedly to the need to address processes and procedures that are wholistic and systematized. To that end, she made mention of the need for approaches that are "proactive and not reactive in nature." When queried about what this means in her practice context, she went on to describe how in her mind, the prototypical example of this dynamic is the need to give support to struggling students as they exhibit noncritical mental health needs as warning signs, rather than waiting for a more exaggerated gesture to occur. For Gilda, this form of lowest-level problems solving is important to serving student needs and solving student challenges at the lowest possible level.

Later in the interview, Gilda went further, exploring this same theme, when she mentioned the need for reentry plans that are focused on student safety. She noted that this

should include elements like follow-up with students and planful adult supervision, in addition to social-emotional supports that are less discipline- and safety oriented.

Continuing this theme of what might be needed to address any gaps, Gilda described a disparity between the knowledge base of differing professions. As evidence for this gap, Gilda referenced that those in charge of making critical decisions and directing work may not have the correct orientation to addressing the problems. "Admin doesn't have the training," to make the correct decisions. From this point, she goes on to describe that administrators often view threat assessment as an extension of discipline duties, rather than a distinct and unique task with impacts on the school and community. This idea that administrators may view threat assessment as an emergency, similar to a fire drill or other proximate threat to be addressed and moved on from, is evident when she explains that when a student is making a threat, this is potentially a matter of discipline and also "a cry for help."

2. Lauren

Lauren described herself as a middle career professional who practices in a suburban school district in the West. Working primarily at the high school level, Lauren described threat assessment as central to her daily practice. She used language that was most often clinical in nature and highlighted the role of decision making in threat assessment as a means for keeping students safe. In describing her own conceptualizations of threat assessment, she created a strong narrative around protecting students and the community. Lauren described threat assessment as fundamentally a risk management and procedural policy. She defined that her role in threat assessment has changed over the last decade as more emphasis has been placed on identifying threats in schools. Lauren posited that this is why threat assessment has "become more frequent," in her everyday practice, with an increased focus of harm reduction.

Regarding the role of the school psychologist in carrying out threat assessments, Lauren noted that in her schools the school psychologist is "the only one with a background in behavioral assessment in general." As a result, she typically takes a leading role in threat assessment and assisting in shaping procedural steps around such practices. Due to the imbalance in practice knowledge, Lauren described that although other professionals may be "theoretically trained," other professionals may not understand why they are engaging in certain actions, and under which conditions a more serious threat should be identified. "It's as if we're creating standard work all over again," because there isn't a unified purpose. Lauren circled back, highlighting that within her current role, others are "ready, willing, and able," to complete threat assessments, but lacking a baseline of theoretical knowledge is the main impediment.

When describing actual procedures for threat assessment occurring within her practice, she brought up the use of structured assessment tools that she uses to assess students- or rather, the absence of standardized instruments. She described these tools as including questions that are "clinically or behaviorally appropriate in the moment." Throughout several questions, Lauren brought up that she has a strong understanding of threat assessment and that there are "definitely best practices within the field of threat assessment in and of themselves," but when structured tools and assessment are considered, "they're mostly centered towards adults."

Both in answering content and context questions, Lauren referred to three distinct parts of threat assessment in her practice:

So basically, our threat assessments come down to a set of kind of three disparate parts. So, one is kind of the initial information gathering stage that includes contact with the child and contact with anyone who's been involved in the situation and may have

information to provide that could be staff that could be other students, that could be parents.

Lauren made clear that the information gathering phase is a problem-solving process and "not an investigation." She described further, that this process is completed by more than one person, including a "group of interdisciplinary professionals from the school with associated subject matter experts."

After data gathering, Lauren explained her views that that a supportive process in which action steps should be implemented after the assessment:

> …recommendation phase, like how are we moving forward. This stage usually involves putting together a plan that not only supports the student and supports their needs, which can be anything from ongoing referrals to medical or mental health professionals.

Parent and community support are included in Lauren's definitions of adequate postvention after a threat assessment. To that end, she referenced both outside mental health agencies or supports and potentially law enforcement. The latter is described as being a collaboration rather than a report.

In addressing barriers to threat assessment for targeted violence and her perceptions around the research to practice gap, Lauren again pointed to a lack of similar levels of competence in the existing framework in her practice setting. She noted "I don't know if that's because people are less aware or not aware of the SOP even though it's circulated widely and regularly." Similarly, when exploring why some staff members may be less familiar with processes and the reason behind them, she offered the idea that "people aren't comfortable with the subject."

Other gaps between Lauren's current practice and her understanding of best practices include follow-up with students once they are identified as being at risk. She went further to note that in her current practice "environment and systems do not support," comprehensive postvention procedures and supports. She followed this up by way of explanation that in many ways this is explained by a desire to ensure safety without adequate resources and staffing to engage in case coordination or thorough follow-up. Lauren says succinctly that this problem is explained by the lack of "bandwidth that administrators, teachers and parents, as well as school psychologists, have to implement this type of work. Realistically, we already have a really significant workload and tracking all of these individualized is not realistic."

3. Holly

Holly begins by identifying herself as working in a K-12 setting in which she works with all ages, and has a broad role in conducting assessments, teaming, consultation, and counseling. She notes that although she has completed several threat assessments for targeted violence in the preceding year, these assessments occur relatively infrequently at her current sites. She described her conceptualization of threat assessment as being one in which "a protocol is followed to ascertain if a student is at risk." She went on to discuss the nature of threat assessment as being a duty to understand which individuals are a risk to the "community and to the school at large."

When describing her own experience in completing these assessments, she noted that she is usually the lead, both in completing interviews with those students exhibiting potentially problematic behavior and with those who have primary knowledge about threats or relevant events. Holly made clear that she usually "has a second in the room, usually a counselor or administrator," who assists.

Holly goes on to discuss previous professional experiences in which she has observed that there are often early warning signs amongst younger (elementary) children that then manifest in the same secondary students. She described these as "early signs of aggression," as well as patterns of thoughts. She noted that in her experience, those students who have made threats of violence often exhibit early signs. "I think…that when kids show three or more symptoms of hateful comments, personally demeaning speech, or -isms, such as racism, that these same students often make threats later," in their school careers.

When describing what was happening within her own school system, she made clear that almost all attempts to address threats were aimed at threats to self and rarely if ever others. "It's crap that we have no tools or policy to address," early warning signs or threats of violence. Holly goes on to say that her administrators "don't think that it's a thing." When queried about this fact, Holly painted a picture of a lack of fundamental knowledge as well as pedagogy on threat assessment-related topics. This lack of knowledge "or awareness," that early identification "can inform tier 1 supports," frustrated Holly.

When asked about the research to practice gap, Holly described an overarching fear of dealing with threats to others in her schools on the part of her system and administrators. She described this as "an existential fear," because few professionals want to acknowledge that such an act might occur there. She also referred to the fact that there may also be a fear about being called out for wrongly identifying a student as a potential threat. Because no one wants "a mention of violence," in a students' record, it's easier to avoid documentation that might go to secondary or other institutions. Finally, Holly describes "a stigma," about being the one to discover something without a proper framework to address the threat.

4. Ramona

Ramona is in the early stages of her career; she indicates that she is "a few years" out of her internship. She described her current placement as being focused on a special program in the district for students with emotional impairments that require special placement above 6th grade. Ramona describes her role in threat assessments as the one "responsible," for ascertaining whether threat assessments are warranted and thereafter coordinating the actions of the team. Within her specialized program, all students are eligible for special education, so Ramona notes that the other person completing threat assessments with her is usually the student's special education case manager, that she describes as being helpful because "the case manager knows the IEP and the history and triggers for that student." Ramona goes on to describe her understanding of best practices as including a team process. She noted that in her work with students with emotional disabilities, threats of violence are common and a comprehensive behavior plan for an individual or the program is a useful tool to reduce aggression. When asked how she thought that this was useful, Ramona said that in her work, there is a need to "weed out," threats that serve as a warning of impending violence from learned behaviors that are a means to cope.

In her work Ramona reported that after calming the student using de-escalation (and sometimes restraint), she and the case manager will ask what is wrong and what the student "intends to do now." If they feel there is going to be ongoing tension in the program, they might talk with the other student(s) involved and then she and the case manager will decide if the student making the threat should have consequences using the programs point system, whether admin should be involved for discipline, and/or whether the students Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or safety plan should be amended.

Ramona described that the processes that her district has in place for threat assessment are primarily for threats to self and that she has had to work with staff in her specialized program to understand how to reliably react to regular threats within a student population that is "sometimes upset and upsetting." She describes that this endeavor to craft these homegrown policies has been challenging because of regular changes to special education staff, as most staffing is with substitutes or teachers who move on when another regular special education job opens at another school. Ramona also notes that when students from her program "graduate," back to their zoned school, their behaviors often result in harsher disciplinary consequences to the same actions, because "the original school is comparing the kiddo to their nondisabled peers," or aren't following the IEP.

When asked about barriers to implementing threat assessments, Ramona indicated that there is a disconnect between her special program and the school in which those classrooms reside. "We're out in these portables and it's like we're on our own." Because the students with whom Ramona works are self-contained, she reported that there are few services for them and little opportunity for them to practice solving problems "without conflict."

Ramona notes that she has seen positive impacts on her work because of district level training within her school psychologist cohort that is focused on understanding threats as being "serious or fleeting." When asked about whether this training has been limited to school psychologists, she indicated that other professionals are unaware of the concepts discussed during her training. She recounted a recent event when a school counselor was uncomfortable helping to complete a threat assessment because the counselor said that "I'm not trained for that."

In describing areas for improvement and addressing the research to practice gap, Ramona noted that when she was in graduate school there was discussion about "wrap around services," in which professional worked together as a team to address the needs of students:

I have gotten the impression that so many people in schools have programs and tasks that they manage that it's really hard to collaborate and communicate because we've all had to specialize and then we're just putting out fires in that one specific area.

Ramona then describes again that administration or others in her building don't know what is going on with students in her program, even those at risk. "I would like to work in a place where all the students are our kids."

5. Steve

Steve indicated that he works at a large high school and his experience is mostly at the secondary level. This was evident in his descriptions of his own work as being a form of "helping kids in their pre-adulting skills." Steve addressed content questions about his understanding of what threat assessment as being a "continuum of care," that include "wrap around supports," for his students. It appeared that this meant a string problem-solving orientation as made evident by his attribution that some of the work of threat assessment with his population is simply helping students work out conflicts in nonviolent and social-appropriate ways. Steve mentioned group (gang) affiliation as a key to this and described the role of saving face as being central to the endeavor of threat assessment within the context of a given student's life.

Steve identified himself as the primary professional completing threat assessments in his setting, sometimes with another professional, if available. He described his role as one of "asking

a lot of questions until I get what the problem is," He did not describe the use of a structured interview or tool to ascertain the level of risk of a given student.

Steve's process descriptions of how he conceives of threat assessment appeared to rely heavily on idea of understanding the reasons that a student might make threats. Steve offered that this process of understanding the threat and "possible misperceptions or beliefs," allow the student to feel angry or threatened to the extent that they might feel the need to threaten or carry out acts of violence at school. It is within this context that he elucidated that threat assessment can't happen in a vacuum. "When a kid makes a threat, it's usually because they think that that's the best way to address an issue." To Steve, this was about not just interpersonal conflict, but also about community-constructed meaning on what it might mean to engage in violence- or not.

Because Steve described that most of his duties involved direct work with students, mostly assessment or consultation-related duties, he indicated that he "probably already knows the kid," if the students has had social emotional challenges in the past and "is on the staff's radar." For Steve, threat assessment process is often in some ways a continuation of a professional larger relationship that he likely already has with at-risk students. It is also perhaps why Steve did not express any open anxieties or distress about the threat assessment process itself, as it appeared that he had the time to explore critical questions to solve student challenges on the lowest possible level.

Within his own school setting, Steve identified multiple challenges to completing comprehensive threat assessments with requisite follow-up. "There's a clear handoff," Steve noted, meaning that if something happens that might be a threat, staff and administration will refer the problem to him without follow-up, including administrators. He went on to mention that

threat assessment was seen as a pseudo-clinical task that is separate from instructional or administrative domains.

Steve went on to describe a recent case in which all follow-up with parents was assigned to him because "he knows what to do," Steve's perception appeared to be that threat assessment is a contentious topic and that many staff members and administrators in his building would prefer to forgo training and avoid the matter altogether. He also constructed this as a strength because he can work with students before they have been disciplined and are upset.

Steve agreed that there "was daylight," between what was expected of his schools for threat assessments and what actually takes place. He specified that not having standardized tools like structured interviews was troublesome and that "we all just need to have the same information about what we should be doing at the same time- that's teachers, administrators, counselors, and psychologists."

6. Wanda

Wanda described herself as being in the "twilight" of her career and her current practice setting as being urban. She is a doctoral school psychologist who also has private practice as a licensed psychologist. She referred to this fact throughout the interview. When addressing her current role in completing threat assessments, she noted that she completes threat assessments (for both threats to others and self) "almost weekly." She ascribes the frequency of threat assessments to the fact that she works in several larger schools. She describes threat assessment in her current setting as being largely "a team of professionals," that can include the school counselor, the school psychologist, and a social worker. She described that her district has recently undergone training with new safety protocols that include new procedures for threat assessment that include district-wide monitoring for those students who are deemed to be at-risk.

Wanda described her understanding of best practices for assessment of threats to others as being centered around "asking the right questions," of the student in question. She uses a recent example of a high school student who made a public threat. The team asked the student questions about intent, the reasons for the student's threats, and then asked staff and the threatened student questions to understand the context of the threat. After describing this recent assessment, Wanda then talked about the need for helping students to 'understand what a student is thinking." When asked about follow-up after the threat assessment in the example that Wanda cited, she indicated that because the threat was not deemed to be "serious," that the student was referred to the school counselor and she had no further contact with the student. She indicated that she felt sad that she could not follow-up with each student, and

> Well…to be honest, with counselors running all of the testing and dealing with schedule changes, and psych's slammed…well- slammed with assessments, and chairing MTSS teams and students acting out- I don't think that there is anyone in our schools to follow-up with kids who are just struggling. I mean, I guess, just kids who are on the radar but who aren't in crisis. I kind of wonder if people outside of education think that mental health folks in schools are mostly working one-on-one with kids, because that just hasn't ever been true in my practice. There's too much to do.

When Wanda addressed a positive element that she believes has made an impact on her practice, she discussed the newer procedures in her district and the fact that they allow for principals to be made aware of students at risk. "Admin now has some accountability in the process to their chain of command and the shared ownership has allowed principals to help to solve problems between students and between students and teachers before they explode," because the individuals with power are now involved. When asked about this idea of shared

ownership, Wanda indicated that she felt that threat assessment now feels like something the team does together, rather than a burden on the mental health "folks," in schools.

When addressing potential research to practice gap and looking at ways to improve, Wanda picks up the prior thread on staffing and resources. When describing reading her district's new comprehensive threat assessment procedures she notes "it seems like school psychs have time to meet with kids. I test most of the time and try to follow-up with as many kids as I can, but in my district, I serve four-times the recommended students from NASP." Wanda notes that this is an irony, because in her private practice, she is able to spend the time working with young clients to build skills and solve problems. She noted that she thinks "that there is a gap between [the clinical work] that is needed in schools, and our duties," and finally "we just cannot go on with schools and prisons being the only entities that serve everyone."

7. Lacey

Lacey described herself as a "career changer," who began her career as an elementary school teacher who retrained in school psychology because she wanted "to know more about why kids do what they do and how to help them." She works in multiple schools at all levels, in a "working class" community. When describing her role in threat assessment for target violence, she noted that her district uses a dedicated team that is mobile to complete threat assessments. When a threat is reported, the team is notified and visits the school, completing the threat assessment protocol and then her role is to facilitate a plan to address the recommendations of the threat assessment team. This includes "writing support plans to make sure that everyone is safe."

Lacey described her conceptualization of best practices for threat assessment as having good communication with teachers and students in her buildings because, "they know what's

going on in real-time." She further clarifies about the need to address building climate through tools like School-Wide Positive Behavioral Supports (SW-PBS) and other approaches that address the entire school population are useful and important for the school psychologist to support to reduce threats.

In describing how threat assessment fits into larger frameworks or systems in her schools, Lacey notes that because most of the "heavy lifting," is completed by the threat assessment team, there has been little training around the topic for school psychologists or counselors. She did however report that above school leaders do follow-up with challenging or risky cases.

When addressing challenges and barriers, Lacey noted the dearth of communication between professionals, not just about students who have undergone threat assessment, but also with students at-risk generally. "There is always this question about should we call the team or not," which is problematic because "we should be asking how to get the information that we need even if we don't call the team and make a plan locally." Lacey notes that district policy to systemize and define what sorts of threats or actions should be considered problematic has been very helpful because of a transient population. "Sometimes we use to get a kid from another school who has been doing the same thing for years and no action was taken."

When asked if she perceives that research to practice gap exists, she said that she believes that such a gap is "a major factor in school psychology," practice and not just threat assessment. "We tell the world that we are therapists and behavior specialists and grief counselors, but we mostly are trying to keep up with the paperwork."

A lot of guidelines and position statements and things make us out to be like therapists and super-duper skilled in CBT and therapy, but my training is in assessment and brief

counseling that removes challenges so that kids can learn. I think that the guidelines are writing

checks that school psychologists can't cash.

8. Muriel

Muriel is a doctoral level practitioner who works at all levels from kindergarten to 12th

grade. She describes her main role within the realm of threat assessment as mainly being a

consultant to administration around the mental health elements related to threat assessments.

This contrasts with being a central player in addressing and assessing threats directly, as was

more common amongst other participants. When asked about this unique role, she indicated that

her peers and colleagues ascribe threat assessment as being primarily an administrative duty or

process because in threats to others, there is a greater chance "of disciplinary actions," and "as a

mental health professional, I can help with some of the wording of questions, but I can't really

make decisions." Muriel thereafter reported that in her current setting, she is the lead

practitioner, often completing threat assessments with another professional or sometimes alone if

no one else can be found.

When describing her own conceptualizations of what constitutes best-practice in threat

assessments for targeted violence, Muriel pointed out the need for team-based evaluation. She

went on to describe the use of a "written protocol for making that decision, as well as maybe

some guiding questions, although I know they can't cover all situations." This led into Muriel

noting the need for structured communication amongst the threat assessment team, noting "the

teamwork aspect and communication between members on various student situations helps you

or enables you, when you're actually in a threat assessment situation."

When addressing the contextual matters of how understanding threat assessment within

her district's existing frameworks, she notes that there is no unified problem-solving approach

that is involved. Relative to follow up after a threat assessment she notes that the school psychologist is often the only one involved. "In terms of follow-ups like counseling or family, some supports that are available. I think that very much falls on the school psychologist."

Similarly, when describing barriers to completing best-practice threat assessments, Muriel notes a very practical barrier to gathering data around potential threats- specifically electronic threats, "our students have Google Chat and our system does not easily allow us to pull that information for a perceived threat." Muriel also laments the challenges in ever-changing protocols for threat assessments and that differing professionals may be on different pages relative to procedures and forms.

Theme Development

A nuanced and overarching theme amongst almost all informants was a sense of responsibility to their schools and communities around competent decision making in threat assessment. While making notes about commonalities (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this was the most consistent throughline between participants. This extended to both the actual process of ensuring that those who are at risk of hurting others are identified and helped, and that other larger institutions are made aware of these individuals.

A second larger theme was the need for more coordination between allied professionals when completing assessments, specifically between school psychologists and administrators. The third large theme was one of role stress created by a mismatch of perceived needs and allocated resources or time, as well as the concerns around identifying needs that are outside of the usually brief solution-focused role of the school psychologist.

School psychologists are usually trained for brief solution focused interventions for students that are aimed at ameliorating impediments to learning, many interviewees expressed

that they felt like credible responses to the most at risk students called for more clinically oriented interventions for which school psychologist generally do not have resources in the form of time or training.

Theme 1- Examining the Role of Fear

An overarching sense of responsibility was evident in addressing gaps in current practices both within the professional lives of school psychologists and the school systems in which they operate. One inherent theme across participants was the idea that many school processes and systems avoid addressing the matter of threat assessment adequately because of fears around the topics. These fears seemed to coalesce around two central themes: a lack of resources and a more general fear around the topic of school violence.

Several school psychologists who were interviewed recognized that some of the practices and the procedures in their systems were not optimized and consistent with current best practice guidelines. Ramona described a program for emotionally impaired students in which there were no "wrap-around," support services. Gilda noted the need for comprehensive safety planning after identifying a substantive threat, though little to no evidence that this is occurring at her site. When queried about their notions around their interpretations for this variance, several school psychologists made clear that there were inadequate resources in their districts and communities to address the mental health and case management needs that proper identification of student who are at risk might yield. Wanda, who practices as a school psychologist and in private practice noted that her district's practice guidelines presuppose a greater amount of time to meet with students than she actually has to offer as a school psychologist. This she highlights as an irony, as she would have the time to engage in private practice where therapeutic intervention is the primary imperative.

This dynamic also relates to the fact that many informants report that threat assessment is seen in their practice setting as an emergency event that should be addressed by a few select staff. Once these select staff have ascertained the level of risk, because of workload and competing demands from administration and school districts, they must return to the assessment or other related duties.

Another facet of this theme came into relief around the continued existence of stigma related to completing credible and meaningful threat assessment procedures. This includes acknowledging that any given student population inherently presents the potential to yield individuals who are capable of committing acts of targeted violence. This existential fear extends even further, into a form of fear not only of recognizing students who may be at risk, but also about how students at risk of committing acts of targeted violence will be served and who will serve them. Because school psychologists are often asked to engage in so many special education assessments, report writing, and administrative tasks that they have little to do with mental health, many school psychologists acknowledged that they experience a strong sense of dread that they will identify problems that they are unable to address with the level of nuance that is requires.

Theme 2- The Need for A United Front

Many of the participants referred to the fact that there is a mismatch between training and understanding amongst allied professionals on a team that is involved in threat assessment. This mismatch was reported to be most prevalent in coordination of threat assessment procedures at the time of initial threat assessment and during follow-up and support phases. Specifically, the most common precept discussed was that that there may be differing levels of training and perceptions around threat assessment for targeted violence between school psychologists and

building administrators. This includes differing desired outcomes and expectations around the threat assessment process.

Multiple interviewees made a note that administrator will often "hand off," threat assessment and may have limited follow-up in the process. This served to create a general impression that threat assessment is not a wholistic problem-solving process for some building level administrators, but rather a task to be completed like dealing with a minor student infraction. Amongst those interviewed, this gap between role expectations and process awareness accounted for a great amount of the frustration in the professional lives of those interviewed. Around this same theme, references were made to the fact that administrators are not involved in follow-up or understanding how general policy or school climate might have an impact on increasing or decreasing threat or actual acts of aggression in her or his school.

Theme 3- The School Psychologist's Paradox

Most of those interviewed report that threat assessment was important to their practice and that they often recognized that not only was an appropriate set of assessment and follow-up protocols necessary, but that the ability to carry them out is often at odd with the demands and roles of school psychologists. Even given the potential risks of poor implementation of threat assessment procedures, many interviewees contrasted that their schools and practice settings did not prioritize the process of assessment or follow-up by ensuring enough time to work with students beyond triage. This continuation of the school psychologist's paradox (Conoley & Gutkin,1995, as cited in Watkins et al., 2001), in which school psychologists work is mainly focused on activities other than those that they themselves feel are maximally beneficial, might then extend to the realm of threat assessment. Consistent with the findings of this study, those researchers who first identified this paradox also identified that it may be difficult to make

meaningful changes to the status quo of school psychologists' work, "without first positively modifying the attitudes and expectations of school staff " (p.70).

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Results

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Research Questions

RQ1: "How do school psychologists experience their roles in threat assessment for targeted violence?"

Almost all school psychologists described having a professional framework for understanding their own role in completing threat assessments for targeted violence. This included describing the school psychologist as being the central player in completing these assessments- mostly in conjunction with other professionals. The most common word that was used to describe the school psychologist's role was as "the lead." Gilda, Holly, and Muriel all used variants of this terminology.

When reflecting on current actual practices, most of those interviewed described some level of team approach, most commonly in the form of a dyad with the school psychologist and school counselor. Lacey's district, as an outlier, uses an outside threat assessment team that comes to the school after a threat has been detected. That said, however, some respondents described no framework for dealing with threat assessments, including lacking formal structures to ensure that multi professionals are involved in assessment and follow-up. Some school psychologists did not report a larger school or district framework for understanding the level of threat or for following up with a student who is believed to be at risk for carrying out an act of targeted violence.

In general, threat assessment was reported to be a stand-alone process, a reaction to an identified threat and not part of a school or district-wide process for social emotional or other

problem solving. None of the those interviewed mentioned the use of universal mental health screening or school climate surveys to address baseline school climate or policies that impact mental health.

RQ2: "How do school psychologists understand what specific practices are empirically validated for assessing for and assisting with threats of targeted violence?

Largely, those interviewed understand the role of comprehensive assessment as being central to ascertain whether a threat is transient or substantive. Although no individual used this exact language, understanding the role of motivation and intent is as central to understanding a given threat as lethal means and past history.

Few school psychologists interviewed mentioned structured means for ascertaining the level of the threat. Instead, what was expressed was often a need for these validated and structured assessment tools. Along these lines, one school psychologist opined that available tools are mostly targeted at adult populations and are thus not normed for adolescent or child populations.

In a similar vein, many interviewees catalogued an advanced knowledge of best practice principles of threat assessment. Most participants acknowledged the benefit or necessity of using a team to complete assessments. Likewise, many school psychologists recognized that having a framework that seeks to understand the level of the threat was essential for comprehensive threat assessment. While few interviewees use the specific nomenclature of 'transient or substantive' risk, many described an understanding of the need for making informed decisions about a student's propensity to carry out an act of targeted violence based upon a compilation of available information using information from the student and others.

RQ3: What barriers, challenges, or constructed meanings do school psychologists share that contribute to the gap between best and actual practices around threat assessments for targeted violence in schools?

Overarching barriers that were noted by interviewed school psychologist were along three main themes that might help to describe and understand potential research to practice gap. The themes of 1. mismatch of knowledge about threat assessment between various school actors, 2. a lack of suitable tools and processes, and 3. existential fear and concerns that might hamper threat assessment were all prominent and consistently reported across those interviewed.

Relative to research to practice gap, many of the school psychologists interviewed mentioned not only a lack of coordination of resources and procedures consistent with best practice guidelines, but also a series of feelings and experiences that might have a significant impact on implementation of threat assessments for targeted violence. The lack of coordination was most marked in the mismatch between the training of critical players around what threat assessment should be and how they should be completed. This was evident in multiple interviews, when school psychologists mentioned that others professional, including teachers or administrators were unaware of the reasoning behind completion threat assessments as well as what steps to take and why. Lauren noted that she sees the gap between expected and actual practices as being fundamentally one of a dearth of resources or limited "bandwidth." Wanda, who practices as a school psychologist and in private practice noted that her district's practice guidelines presuppose a greater amount of time to meet with students than she actually has to offer. She identifies that what is needed is more clinical type supports, but that school psychologists are tasked with other duties and that she serves four times the number of students recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists.

Orthogonal to this perceived mismatch between competencies and knowledge between school psychologists and others was a pervasive sense of existential ownership around threat assessment that was noted by multiple interviewees. Muriel noted her strong perception that school psychologists are the main mental health players within the realm of threat assessment risk management, which simultaneously noting that she believes that it is admin that should be responsible for making high stakes decisions around the level of risk. This has the potential to create tension around an already challenging set of processes in schools. Holly described an overarching fear of dealing with threats to others in her schools. When asked to describe her own perceptions around this fear, she details fears around inappropriately identifying a student as being a risk, as well as a larger fear about acknowledging the potential for school violence on her site. In a similar way, Wanda discussed how new policies in her district have made administrators more accountable for students who are potential threats, and they are now more willing to help settle conflicts in their schools outside of disciplinary channels.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Overview

Episodes of targeted violence in schools, amplified by media and political attention have become a mainstay of the larger social discussions about public education and policy (Cornell, 2020; Olinger Steeves et al., 2017). The consensus approach to dealing with this ongoing threat is team-based, structured, and problem-solving oriented threat assessment in lieu of profiling or other approaches (Augustyniak, 2005; Cornell & Maeng, 2017). School psychology as a discipline has been placed at the forefront of efforts to craft and hone best practices for threat assessment for targeted violence because of competencies in both social/emotional and assessments realms (Kelly, 2017).

Although much has been written about what should be done about this challenge to schools, students, and the communities they inhabit, little has been written to describe the lived experiences of those carrying out threat assessments. Likewise, the research record presents little information about challenges and barriers to implementation of comprehensive threat assessment approaches.

The purpose of this study was to explore practicing school psychologists' experiences, beliefs, and challenges in carrying out threat assessments for target violence. To understand possible research to practice gaps between expected and actual practice, this work sought to offer additional contextual and real-world frameworks for understanding barriers and resources to ensure that school psychologists and the academic environments in which they work, are able to engage in threat assessments congruent with current literature and practice guidelines.

The following research questions were explored:

RQ1: "How do school psychologists experience their roles in threat assessment for targeted violence?"

RQ2: "How do school psychologists construct what specific practices are empirically validated for assessing for and assisting with threats of targeted violence?

RQ3: What barriers, challenges, or constructed meanings do school psychologists share that contribute to the gap between best and actual practices around threat assessments for targeted violence in schools?

The research methods applied were intentionally context dependent, viewing threat assessment for targeted violence within the contexts in which it takes place. This mirrors the fact that tasks and training necessary to complete potentially risky threat assessments are not unidimensional and do not occur in a practice vacuum. The selected phenomenological lens recognizes the value in understanding both the parts and the whole of this phenomenon. Additionally, this approach establishes that anything that is true requires value and utility to the individual or individuals constructing said truth.

The field of threat assessment has honed a series of vital and fairly well researched precepts, as it has emerged from law enforcement to a problem-solving framework. Clarity around the procedural and training needs have emerged over several decades (Cornell, 2020). At the same time, less is known about what factors, beliefs, and barriers exist in the professional lives of school psychologists, even as they are often the primary professionals guiding and implementing ever more complicated policies and procedures involved in threat assessment for targeted violence. This chapter explores these factors as relayed by practitioners in the field and offers an analysis of the research to practice gap in threat assessment for targeted violence through the phenomenological lens of William James's Christian radical empiricism.

Summary of Findings

In direct interviews with 8 practicing school psychologists, this study applied a phenomenological approach to understanding and describing the lived experiences of those engaging in threat assessment for targeted violence in schools. The process of interviewing these professionals and entering their world involved a series of iterative conversations that guided the researcher towards three outstanding themes that were the product of the interviews and the discussions that were shared.

Throughout the process of interviewing these practicing school psychologists, it became increasingly clear that threat assessment as a construct, and specifically the school psychologists' role in carrying out threat assessments, were very much on the mind of each individual who was interviewed. No single participant expressed that they were unaware of what threat assessment involves, or indeed that they thought these related matters were not within the purview of the school psychologist's practice and role. Many participants expressed both strong thoughts and feelings about the topic, conveying a sense of responsibility and a related need to address processes in their respective practice setting. This was further compounded by the perceived mismatch between competencies and knowledge between school psychologists and others as well as a pervasive sense of existential ownership around threat assessment.

Discussion

Even though the tenets of comprehensive approaches such as the CSTAG include broad training and processes for multiple professionals that might interact with students who are at risk, many school psychologists report that within their own professional contexts that they are the most common point of contact for addressing threat assessments, even when assessments themselves are completed in dyads or teams. Likewise, school psychologists feel a sense of

responsibility for ensuring that threat assessment is accurate and that interventions are appropriate. In this study, the school psychologists expressed fears around identifying concerns within systems that may not be optimized to competently and comprehensively assess and follow-up could serve to address conceptual and procedural gaps. Many psychologists noted concerns around discovering problems that current school systems are unable or unwilling to solve.

The existential worry around being one of the only school professionals sensitized to needs of a vulnerable and often unpredictable subset of the student population weighs heavily on the minds of school psychologists. This is no less palpable as school psychologists must labor to complete various assessment and procedural duties while also being tasked with carrying for the welfare of a growing population of struggling young people.

Because of these fears, there is a need to address and reframe who should be involved and how threat assessment should be constructed in a larger institutional context within schools. Specifically, making threat assessment procedures and training part of the standard operating procedures for a broader array of school staff might create more sustainable support in a way that makes threat assessment an ongoing priority beyond the purview of school psychologists. By including a broader array of professionals, specifically teachers and administrators, school psychologists might have more allies in engaging with and using best practices for threat assessment. Offering training to staff school-wide on necessary procedures, and education in the theoretical foundations, might be an excellent entrée into ensuring threat assessment is everyone's responsibility.

One conceptual change that might be considered is the inclusion of threat assessment procedures within existing schoolwide frameworks such as Multitiered Systems of Support

(MTSS) and Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports (SW-PBS). This could capitalize on existing imperatives around universals supports.

As an example, SW-PBS already integrate tier 2 and 3 supports that match students who are at-risk with research-based interventions via a team process (Kelly, 2017). These existing problem-solving teams that track students who are at risk in academic and social-emotional domains (Von der Embse et al., 2021) include many professionals, notably teachers, school counselors, and administrators (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010). Integrating threat assessment under the larger umbrella of these teams might serve the purpose of supporting the threat assessment process by giving more resources and a greater breadth of professional experience to the process, perhaps making school psychologists less singularly responsible. It might also make the threat assessment process more central to the functioning of school processes.

Integrating students who are identified as being at risk through a threat assessment within existing structures might allow stakeholders to view students and the process of threat assessment as a continuation of universal efforts and not merely as an emergency management strategy. Furthermore, relying on the tiered approach to student problem solving, allows a seamless approach in incorporating an emphasis on early intervention through mental health screening to identify those students with social-emotional needs before a crisis occurs. Students who identified as being at risk through a threat assessment within existing structures might allow stakeholders to view students and the process of threat assessment as a continuation of universal efforts and not merely as an emergency management strategy.

As a practicing school psychologist, this author also noted that the school psychologist's role has become ever broader over the course of a career. While for several decades school psychologists were primarily involved in psychoeducational assessments (Boccio et al., 2016).),

today's school psychologists are now seen as having a primary role in academic and emotional problem solving in addition to core educational consultation. These changes are overall positive. One important observation however is that even as the role of the school psychologist has evolved, our psychologist to student ratios continue to remain far higher than those recommended by NASP, our national organization (Armistead & Smallwood, 2010; Hendricker et al., 2021).

As school psychologists continue to be asked to do more, including increased high stakes threat assessments, without changing the school psychologist to pupil ratios, it becomes ever more challenging to competently serve student and families across so many domains of practice. In fact, many participants noted that their paperwork burden was a major impediment to ongoing and regular contacts with students that are needed to assess and manage those students who are most likely to engage in acts of aggression at school. Thus, while participants agreed the school psychologist role is central in completing threat assessments job barriers impede thorough, high-quality processes.

Implications

The undergirding theoretical framework for this study was the work of William James and specifically his insistence that religious and secular truth is experienced not only in the realm of fact and knowledge but also in utility and the lived experience of the individual for whom a precept is true (James & James, 1974). This study examined the relationships between what should be, what is, and what could be in addressing threat assessment for targeted violence in schools.

Findings indicate that school psychologists are acutely aware of the need for schools to identify and assist individuals who have the propensity to commit acts of targeted violence.

School psychologists are aware that teams are the best units to gather data about a potential threat. They are also aware that structured protocols are the best means by which to consistently reach conclusions about a student's level of risk that are sensitive and specific enough to prevent serious adverse events. These findings also highlight that school psychologists are attempting to engage in threat assessment in teams or dyads in which a clear purpose exists.

In the spirit of synergy between knowledge and the utility of practice, these same school psychologists are attempting to examine a given threat and follow-up with students in an environment in which a gap exists between the training and expectations that school psychologists and other professional have around threat assessment. Many interviewed school psychologists made it clear that school administrators either see threat assessment as something to be handed off and handled by someone else as a hot button issue, or as a matter of discipline. This contrasts with prevailing models in which threat assessments occur in a larger framework for problem solving and ongoing monitoring (Cornell et al., 2018). The purpose of effective threat assessment is primarily one of helping students solve problems to avoid violence (Cornell, 2020). If school administration is not acutely aware of, and involved in these processes, it becomes substantially more difficult for resources and staff to be marshalled at the right time and intensity. This gap was reported to be a stressor in many of those interviewed.

Finally, in evaluating the lived experience of school psychologists engaged in threat assessment, there appears to be a significant emotional and existential stress around completing threat assessments. This is reportedly both because of fears around making critical situations in professional silos, without broader input and oversight and because of fears that school psychologists may find problems that they are not equipped to address, whether due to of a lack of time or expectations of therapeutic services beyond the scope of the school psychologist.

Limitations and Delimitations

As is true of all phenomenological research, this study was focused on the perceptions and thoughts of individuals and uses these as a means to study a particular facet of the human experience. In this study, the phenomenon of threat assessment for targeted violence is filtered hermeneutically through the experience of the researcher as a school psychologist (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology includes inherent potential threats to the external validity of the study, as the phenomena described by interviewees may not generalize to a larger subset of individuals. Likewise, the use of an intentionally subjective form of research has the potential to invoke researcher bias. Even though data gathering, and thematic analysis were standardized, the potential for bias is still a consideration.

Another limitation to consider is that of work setting. This study incorporated a Christian worldview, however all the school psychologists in this study reported working in public secular settings. Similarly, no individuals interviewed specifically addressed the matter of faith in their interviews.

This study made use of voluntary participants from social media. Because school psychologists who are willing to give their time to discuss a topic might inherently be more interested or otherwise vocal about a topic, it is possible that the subset of individuals who responded to online requests for participants don't mirror the larger subset of school psychologists.

Recommendations for Future Research

To-date, the primary concern in the literature has been amassing a set of procedures and techniques that accurately serve to protect schools and communities in a seemingly consistent wave of school-based violence in the United States. The purpose of this study was to look at the

application of these techniques in order to understand what factors on the ground may impact the day-to-day implementation of best practice techniques on the part of school psychologists. Future research could include understanding how human factors such as a differential conceptualizations of threat assessment precepts between types of professionals, the role of collaboration between threat assessment team members, and the inclusion of school administrator-supports in the application of threat assessment procedures can impact implementation.

This study broached a key subject that might be further investigated, namely the power of perceived accountability and role awareness in threat assessment. Those interviewed in this study indicated fears about identifying students at risk played a role both in policy and practice in their respective schools. Future research might explore the utility of the interoperability of staff- namely that multiple school staff are trained to complete a given task on the threat assessment team, to address concerns around "being the only one," to notice and deal with the students who are the most likely to commit acts of target violence.

Finally, none of the school psychologists interviewed in this study denied the presence of a gap between best and actual practices relative to assessment for targeted violence. Ongoing research might use this study as an entrée into how school psychologists can work collaboratively with building and district level leadership to point out policy and practice gaps in ways that are productive and that sustain a positive feedback loop in which past successes and failures can inform practice in the here and now.

Summary

This qualitative study used a hermeneutically oriented phenomenological approach to understanding the research to practice gap in threats assessment for targeted violence in school

psychology practice. The main questions focused upon to what degree actual school psychology practice mirrors fundamental best practices and then exploring what barriers or other factors serve to create a gap between best and actual practices. This study did not occur in a vacuum. Prolific, highly publicized, and ongoing acts of targeted violence in schools and in society were acknowledged by an intentionally subjective study design that placed the lived experiences of school psychologists as central to the study and its findings.

William James's vision of radical empiricism in which secular and religious truth must not only be rooted in logic and knowledge, but must also have utility, was used as a meaningful lens to ensure that the lived experiences of school psychologists were captured wholistically and within the contexts in which they occur (Laverty, 2003; James & James, 1974). For this reason, individual interviews and subsequent thematic analysis were used as the primary means for understanding research questions.

Of those school psychologists interviewed, almost all noted a keen awareness of the necessity for threat assessment practices that utilize a team-based process, with structured universal processes, and follow-up. This, however, often differed from their actual practice. Specific thematic analysis proffered three common areas. A sense of responsibility that focused on identification and institutional warning, a greater need for coordination and standardization in training and procedures across allied school professionals- especially school administrators, and role stress that is created by identifying needs in schools that cannot be met because of time and role constraints and related fears.

Implication and recommendations for further inquiry included the exploration of some of these human factors that impact policy and procedures to include to what degree ensuring cohesive and unified training on process and procedures help to address practical and existential

concerns that may impact how and who carries out threat assessments in schools and how and if

follow-up is appropriate thereafter.

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Appendix A: Invitation and Informed Consent

Greetings! Please read the description and consent below.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand how practicing school psychologists understand their role in threat assessment for targeted violence, specifically trying to understand the potential gaps between best and actual practices in the field.

Procedures: This study is interview-based and involves asking school psychologists questions about their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. No one will be paid to be in the study. The results and data will involve the use of pseudonyms. To be in the study, you will first be asked to give some demographic questions to ensure that your experience matches the needs of the study. If you are eligible, then the researcher will schedule a time to meet with you electronically for an interview.

Risks: There are no risks to participating in this study other than the everyday risk of being on your computer as you take this survey. The survey does not ask for harmful or confidential information but focuses on general overall feelings and experiences. Some questions could provoke negative reactions or emotions depending upon experience. You may opt out or terminate the survey at any time as participation is voluntary.

Benefits: Your answers will assist in understanding how school psychologists make meaning of the often rewarding and challenging work of threat assessment in schools.

Confidentiality: All data will be collected and coded using pseudonyms. No personally identifiable information will be solicited though if you answer in a manner which your identity could be predicted, any such information will not be included in any publication or report. No confidential student or client information will be solicited or included in this study. The data you provide will be held privately. Additionally, all data will be destroyed three years after the study ends.

How to Withdraw: If you choose to withdraw while you complete you are being interviewed, you may do so verbally at any time. Your responses will not be included in the study.

Contact and Questions: You may print a copy of this for your records. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Zach Zilinski at _____.

Statement of consent: I have read and understood the above information. I consent to participate in the study as described

Name:_____   **Signature:**_____

_ I consent (1)   _ I do not consent (2)

Appendix B: Recruitment via Electronic Fora

I am conducting a qualitative study as part of the research requirement for a doctorate in Community Care & Counseling degree with a cognate in Traumatology. The purpose of my research is to describe and understand how practicing school psychologists make meanings around threat assessment for targeted violence in their work. To participate, you must be credentialed and working as a school psychologist and have completed at least two, threat to others assessment in the past school year. Participants who are selected will be asked to participate in an interview and thereafter review their transcript for accuracy. Please note that pseudonyms will be used and that no protected student or client information will be solicited or used in this research, as the focus is on practitioners. The interview will be conducted virtually to assess participants' perspectives, motivations, and values. The interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded for accuracy. One week later, I will send an email, which will include a copy of the interview transcript for you to clarify and validate the data collected. A consent form will be emailed to you prior to the interview. Please complete and return this consent form. Please note that a signed consent form must be returned via email prior to scheduling the interview.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Title of the Project: Examining the Research to practice Gap in Targeted Violence Threat Assessment in School Psychology Practice: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Zach Zilinski, Ed.S., M.Ed., NCSP, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be credentialed and working as a school psychologist and have completed at least two, threat to others assessments in the past school year.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research study.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of my research is to describe and understand how practicing school psychologists make meaning around threat assessment for targeted violence in their work in hopes of understanding a gap between best and actual practices.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1.   Participate in an audio-recorded, virtual interview. You will be interviewed virtually to assess your thoughts feelings, and experiences. The interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded for accuracy.
2.   Review your interview transcript for accuracy. Approximately one week later, you will be sent an email containing a copy of the transcript to clarify and validate the data collected.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct financial benefit from this study.

Benefits to society include an increase in understanding how to augment school psychology practice around the topic of threat assessment for targeted violence.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. As you will not be asked to disclose any specific student or client information, and none of these types of information will be used if disclosed, there is no risk to a comprise of protected information.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted using electronic means (virtually) so that others will not easily overhear the conversation.
Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. The data (without any identifying information) may be used in future presentations.
Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Zach Zilinski You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. K. Cowsert.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐　　　The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix D: Screening Form

1. Are you currently employed as a school psychologist?

2. In your work as a school psychologist, did you complete at least two threat assessments for threat to others (homicide or violence related)?

3. In your last full year of practice as a school psychologist, did you complete at least two threat assessment for harm to others or targeted violence?

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to understand how practicing school psychologists understand their role in threat assessment for targeted violence, specifically trying to understand the potential gaps between best and actual practices in the field. Targeted violence involves planful acts of violence towards others because of the perpetrator's beliefs, conflicts, or thoughts. The main research questions are asking about how school psychologists construct their roles in threat assessment for targeted violence and examining a potential gap between best and actual practices. The stated purpose of this study is to understand both the content (what school psychologists actually do) and the context (thoughts, feelings, and environmental factors) that impact the import work of carrying out threat assessments for targeted violence. Do you have any questions before we begin? Questions:

Content Questions

1.   What is your professional experience in carrying out threat assessments for targeted violence, in which threats of harm to others is suspected, in schools?
2.   When you have been involved in these assessments, what has your role been?
3.   What is your understanding about what best practices in threat assessment means in your professional context?
4.   What procedural elements of completing threat assessments for targeted violence are part of your everyday practice? This might include who is involved or what the process entails.

Context Questions

5.   How do you understand threat assessment for targeted violence within your school or system's general guidance or frameworks?
6.   When completing threat assessments, what environmental/systems barriers or other challenges have you experienced? What is something you have seen positively impact student behavior regarding threat assessment that has helped you and/or your colleagues?
7.   What is a facet of threat assessment for targeted violence that you wish could be improved in your practice context?
8.   Do you feel that there is a large difference between best practices and actual practices for threat assessment violence in your practice setting?

At the end of the interview, "thank you for agreeing to participate!"