

FEATURED ESSAY

Preventing Violence: Insights from Micro-Sociology

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Micro-sociology of violence looks at what happens in situations where people directly threaten violence, but only sometimes carry it out. This process and its turning points have become easier to see in the current era of visual data: cell-phone videos, long-distance telephoto lenses, CCTV cameras. New cues and instruments are on the horizon as we look at emotional signals, body rhythms, and monitors for body signs such as heart rate (a proxy for adrenaline level). There has been a concomitant sharpening of the ethnographic eye as to what details to look for, and theoretical frames build relevance of accumulating research. Unusually for social science, micro-sociology of violence offers some optimistic results: applications in everyday life that can reduce many kinds of violence.

I will selectively summarize discoveries and theoretical advances since Collins (2008).

(1) Violence Is Hard to Perform, Not Easy

Confrontational tension/fear (CT/F) arises because face-to-face threat of violent action produces highly focused bodily entrainment between the participants, but at cross-purposes; this contradicts the Interaction Ritual (IR) tendency for mutually focused persons to become entrained in solidarity. Threatening violence generates emotional and bodily tension between an IR building toward collective effervescence and participants divided in a struggle for control; IR pulling each other together, violence pushing against each other. Successfully unleashing violence requires finding one of a small number of paths around the barrier of CT/F that generally makes violence abort or be carried out incompetently under the debilitating

effects of high tension, with poor aim or hitting the wrong target.

The general point that violence is difficult to carry out, even when persons are motivated for it, is shown in several ethnographic and video studies. These methods avoid sampling on the dependent variable—a major flaw in most research on violence, which samples after the turning point and thus is unable to see that situational turning points exist. Curtis Jackson-Jacobs (2013) provides an ethnography of a group of several dozen young white males who look for fights in order to escape from their middle-class ethos, seeking underground prestige. Although they are often looking for fights at parties, they seldom get them; when an occasional fight happens, they talk about it excitedly for weeks thereafter—being beaten is OK, as long as they were in the action. One might think that starting fights would be easy for them, since they don't look for easy victims and relish (or at least brag about) confronting tough guys. But, in fact, bumping into someone, staring at them—all the usual marks of disrespect do not get automatic pushback. Jackson-Jacobs details the micro-moves that both sides have to make before they (tacitly) agree to a state of fighting. Tough-guy "respect" and looking for action are not enough; most of the time the belligerent moves remain abortive.

Mark Levine, Paul Taylor, and Rachel Best (2011) use CCTV data (now ubiquitous in British pubs) to examine incipient quarrels and fights. Although these are sites of heavy drinking and a macho ethos (usually supposed to be instigating conditions for violence), the great majority of pub fights rarely get beyond the insulting and pushing stage. Third parties frequently intervene and are largely successful in breaking fights

up. High-density locales and big crowds did not foster fights (hypothetically this would happen via anonymity or crowding); on the contrary, it was familiar networks that provided the third-party interveners who broke up fights their friends were involved in. Lasse Suonperä Liebst, Marie Bruvik Heinskou, and Peter Ejbye-Ernst (2018), using CCTV from another heavy-drinking city, Copenhagen, found that third-party interveners were not only successful but that they rarely got hurt themselves breaking up a fight. These findings indicate that carousing groups tacitly regulate themselves so that fights are mostly harmless; they operate on two levels, a verbal level of belligerent masculinity, and a tacit level of group controls that keep them from going too far. The tacit substrate is ubiquitous CT/F—it is never admitted consciously, but actions speak louder than hostile or bragging words.

Martín Sánchez-Jankowski (2016) observed conflict between black and Hispanic students for three years in high schools in Los Angeles and Oakland, and between white and black students in Boston, tracking violence over the weeks and months, giving a rare picture of the time-process of escalation and de-escalation and explaining how one kind of violence morphs into another. Avoiding the usual reliance on one-shot survey data, he documented what the students are concerned about in their daily lives from overheard conversations, including the fights they talk about; he also observed fights directly and on the streets to and from school. The shift over time went from small fights (typically the attacking-the-weak pattern, ranging between 2 vs. 1 and 5 vs. 1), to medium-sized brawls (15 to 25 total participants), to large-scale riots (50 to 100 participants).

In small fights (as expected), the winning side usually had a supporting audience from their own ethnic group, laughing and encouraging the fight; where numbers were more equal, the result was usually a standoff, unless one side was armed and the other was not. Over time, smaller fights and brawls declined as they were supplanted by large-scale, mass-participation riots. Some riots ritualistically attacked the school itself, targeting school authority or engaging only

in property destruction; a third type of riot consisted in mass ethnic violence. An unexpected finding is stampedes—where virtually the entire student population, when hearing of a disturbance, got up and spontaneously left the school. Stampedes became increasingly common over time, outnumbering riots. And since only a fraction of the students took part in riots (ranging from an estimated 6 percent to 23 percent; an estimated 3 to 18 percent took part in small fights), in effect the great majority of students were “voting with their feet,” opting out of the fight scenario even as an audience. Stampedes defocused and demobilized riots, sending an emotional mood message that they were not socially acceptable. By the third year, riots had disappeared, and fights were mostly confined to one-on-one scuffles. Thus a streak of optimism in Sánchez-Jankowski’s research: over time, the usually unmobilized majority who are peaceful, rather than fighters, becomes collectively organized to show their disapproval of fights. The default propensity to avoid CT/F, plus the power of audiences to control the severity of violence, results in a collective tactic that cuts off incipient violence.

(2) Code of the Street

Bluster is a ritual that constrains violence. Elijah Anderson (1999) describes the street code as a Goffmanian frontstage performance, showing the gestures and bodily postures of being potentially violent and thereby both deterring others and expressing membership so one is not attacked as an outsider. Joseph Krupnick’s participant observation among the fragments of gangs on Chicago streets after the huge megagangs were broken up (Krupnick and Winship 2015) shows how gun-carrying gang members manage to pass members of opposing gangs on the streets without starting fights. They follow an etiquette of “fronting”: when a potential enemy approaches, avoid eye contact, appear nonchalant and absorbed in something else like beat-boxing to music; keep your hands in plain view, not in your pockets; make brief eye contact when your enemy passes, give a fist-bump or say something casual; after

passing, don't look back—being overtly vigilant is read as looking for a fight, even defensively. Violating these rules is called “slipping” and will get you beaten up. The choreographed performance is generally successful in avoiding gun violence; when shootings happen, it is usually by misunderstandings and accidents. Even in drug disputes or robberies, the cool response when someone catches a “Hustla” unawares is to just let the man with the drawn gun get away with it; this is considered appropriate etiquette, doesn't damage your reputation, and even typically winds up with the robber closing the encounter with a ritualistic fist pound or slap on the back.

Jooyoung Lee (2016) did participant observation (as a rapper/street dancer) along with video recordings of ad hoc gatherings of amateur street rappers. As Anderson has shown about the code of the street, the culture of violence is not so much about real violence but about blustering and dramatizing one's capacity for violence; playing the part is usually enough to satisfy standards of respect and personal identity. Lee adds two important developments: one is that the rap culture, with its insulting and violence-laden lyrics and its threatening vocal tone, is a form of bluster, developed into explicit entertainment. Outsiders see rap as encouraging violence; in the immediate situation, however, it makes bluster an end in itself, so that violence is unnecessary—indeed, violence would destroy rapping as entertainment, so the performers themselves work to keep rap/bluster from going over the edge. For them, rapping is a path toward potential commercial success, and thus a pathway out of the world of gang violence.

A second point Lee makes is that rap performers do get angry at their co-performers and rivals; mock battles can threaten to turn into real violence—not so much because of the insults as because of interruptions of one's rhythm. But there are micro-interactive techniques that they use to signal awareness of danger points and moves they can make to defuse the danger. This happens less on the explicit verbal level and more in tacit communications through shifts in rhythm, touching, eye gaze, and

emotional expression. Lee distinguishes between the techniques of ethnographic research (participant observation, in-depth interviews) and micro-sociological observations (of very fine-grained moves in the rhythms and emphases of speaking and in the back and forth of bodily gestures, movements, and emotional expressions on face and body). Focusing on micro-interactive detail underscores the value of adding video recordings of interaction to standard ethnography.

Tyson Smith (2014) makes a similar point about the hyper-macho performance of pro wrestling. That it is staged and rehearsed we have already suspected, but what we did not know is the extraordinary degree of cooperation that goes into it. Front-stage performance in the arena is not just showy violence but joint emotion work, in the over-the-top form Smith calls “passion work.” Projecting hyper-macho performance requires a backstage of protective cooperation—working together in their rehearsed antagonism so that their apparently hard aggressive bodies are actually soft and yielding, hyper-sensitive as lovers so that they don't cripple each other. It is more akin to ballet than battle, except that all the effort goes into giving the opposite impression. It is, more or less literally, the code of the street on steroids.

Altogether, the researches of Krupnick, Lee, and Smith extend Anderson's understanding of violence-threatening bluster as a frontstage performance; and when the ritual is successfully performed, it reduces violence in that here-and-now situation. Even if local cultures value violent masculinity, ritual performance is enough to satisfy the gods of this culture. The micro-nuances of how to perform and recognize the performances of others is “street smarts” that heads off much (if not all) violence. Since confrontational threats either turn into violence or not in a string of micro-situations across time, anything that reduces the chances of violence one situation at a time will reduce the violence-to-threats ratio. That should be the case the more people become situationally aware of what kind of ritual performance is going on.

(3) Turning Points to Violence (or Not) in Protest Demonstrations

Research on when political demonstrations turn violent or stay peaceful, by Anne Nassauer (on the United States and Germany) (2013; 2016) and Isabel Bramsen (on Arab Spring protests) (2017; 2018), have zoomed in on turning points. Using videos, police radio traffic, and interviews with protestors and police, Nassauer found that demonstrations that announce they are going to use violence nevertheless may remain peaceful, just because the militant protestors do not find an opportune moment for breaking into violence. That moment happens when there is a two-part sequence of heightened tension (visible in the shift from loose to tense body postures) followed by a sudden shift to emotional domination among the protestors or police locally on the spot, which unleashes them against a temporarily off-balance opponent. Falling down while running away from police tends to create a contagious reaction in which the cops behind the first in line will join in striking at the fallen person. Protestors who outnumber a cop who has fallen into knee-deep water are emboldened to attack.

There is also an optimistic side: at such moments of tension, and even when a local cascade of violence is unleashed, participants can cool their opponents down, or at least provide immunity for themselves. Protestors (or cops) can achieve this by directly facing the opponent (not turning one's back, which creates a weak target inviting attack) and calling out in a strong, clear voice a message such as, "We are peaceful, what about you?" There is a crucial detail here. Screaming the same message hysterically, with an expression of terror or rage, does not deter violence but just adds to the emotional atmosphere. It has to be done with voice, face, and body postures that are strong and calm.

But although this may happen in the relatively civil protest traditions and policing tactics of contemporary western democracies, what about in societies where demonstrators aim for maximal disruption and regime forces brook no defiance and are authorized to use maximal force? Surprisingly, Bramsen (2017; 2018) shows that even

here, local conditions of time and emotional mood determine when and how much violence will occur on either side. Although the spectrum is shifted toward more violence overall, nevertheless there are moments of emotional equilibrium when demonstrators and regime forces let each other go through ritualized displays without using violence and times when tension rises uncontrollably into situations of local advantage and, hence, violence. Many of the demonstrators in Bramsen's analysis are women cloaked in traditional Arab dress who sometimes stand off against Arab men; conversely, women in German and American protests can confront the police successfully or give the wrong micro-signals and get beaten up.

Bramsen analyzes videos from the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Bahrain, and Syria, culled from viewing hundreds of videos and selecting those that meet the criteria of showing both sides in the conflict, showing the presence of violence or visible threat, having sufficient detail, and being unaffected by editing. She also interviewed protestors (a major source of videos), got them to comment on their own videos, and participated in protest marches. Kinetic data caught on video make it possible to capture processes en route, situation by situation. Emergent processes shift demonstrators away from their avowed strategy; demonstrations strenuously attempting to stay non-violent and to avoid religious splits (e.g., the uprising in Bahrain initially chanted for Sunni/Shi'a unity) veer off their intended path. The en route analysis explains the divergence in Bramsen's three cases, which had similar structural root causes of conflict (highly unequal, authoritarian regimes) but very different kinds of violence and outcomes. At times in her three Arab Spring cases, fighting falls into a dance-like equilibrium. Recent peace research has shown that non-violent tactics have a greater chance of success in regime change than violent tactics. Bramsen shows how and when this happens or fails, en route.

Neil Ketchley (2014) combines interviews with online videos and photos of the first success of the Arab Spring in Egypt at Tahrir Square to depict the micro-moves by which

protestors made friendly gestures toward the soldiers tasked with repressing them. The resulting solidarity ritual (building shared focus, emotion, and rhythm) created the turning point that brought down the authoritarian regime. When the regime turned from its unreliable soldiers to ad hoc paramilitary forces to attempt to violently clear the square (“the battle of the camel”), the military was forced to choose sides and did so to support the crowd. The side that splits loses; success or failure of mass interaction rituals is the mechanism that determines who hangs together and who splits.

(4) EDOM in Armed Violence

Emotional domination (EDOM) determines who wins, loses, or stalemates, even when people have weapons. Stefan Klusemann (2010) analyzed a news team’s videos of the hours leading up to the massacre of Bosnian Muslim forces by the Bosnian Serb army at Srebrenica in 1995. The Serbs captured the city, but the Muslims remained armed, and the two sides were separated by Dutch peace-keeping troops. In a confrontation between the Serbian commander and the Dutch commander, the latter was browbeaten into apologizing for calling in NATO air strikes, tacitly giving a free hand to the Serbs with their captives. Serbian soldiers now began to ostentatiously dominate the Dutch peace-keepers, taking their vehicles and weapons and mockingly donning their blue helmets. In this emotional atmosphere of triumph, Muslims were crowded into vehicles, taken to remote areas and killed. The time-dynamics followed the pathway from tension (the Serbs look wary as they take over the city, expecting NATO or peace-keepers’ resistance), to an emotional turning point where the defenders are dominated, to an atmosphere of joyous triumph and humiliating the defeated, culminating in a forward-panic type massacre of demoralized and unresisting victims.

Nassauer’s (2018) research on videos of robberies recorded on CCTV shows that successful robbers establish the rhythm of interaction, getting the store clerk to immediately fall into passively doing what the robber demands. This is not merely a matter of

verbal commands, but a visible rhythm of body movements and reciprocal postures. But store clerks do not always fall into the robber’s rhythm; it can be disrupted if a robber trips in vaulting the counter, or if the clerk is obviously on the phone or grabs a broom and starts swinging. When micro-moves on either side create uncertainty and disrupt the expected script, there is an opening for a shift in emotional domination (or just to emotional equilibrium between the sides), leading to a failed hold-up. Holding superior weapons is not a guarantee of compliance, and armed robbers can lose their nerve and retreat. Floris Mosselman, Don Weenink, and Marie Rosenkrantz Lindgaard (from an Amsterdam video research group) (2018) similarly found that robberies were resisted when the robber showed insecure body movements or lost the nonverbal body profile of dominance; guns and knives were most important as props for imposing a robbery frame, and the need to use them signaled its failure. As in getting street respect, flawless bluster is the key to armed robberies.

(5) Emotional Self-Entrainment in Fights and Forward Panics

When violent threat gets past the barrier of CT/F, the perpetrator may get into a self-reinforcing rhythm of repeating their own violence (an overkill of firing bullets, a frenzy of beating or kicking a fallen victim) so that it looks irrational and out of control. (I have referred to this as falling into the “tunnel of violence.”) This is only one of several forms of violence. A high level of emotional self-entrainment (prolonged attack-frenzy) is especially characteristic of a forward panic, a three-part sequence in which (1) both sides have high confrontational tension; (2) suddenly the tension is released by one side showing itself weak and helpless; (3) whereupon the now-dominant side launches an attack featuring piling-on and a temporary inability to stop their own violence movements (the self-entrainment aspect).

A vivid example is given by Mark Gross (2016) on vigilante groups that burn a captured robber to death with a rubber tire around his neck. In the South African slums,

where police protection is non-existent, householders are constantly in fear of violent crime; this intensifies through alarm signals—whistles that people signal from house to house when they believe a burglary or attack is going on. The mob that answers the alarm signal is full of collective excitement; when it catches an (alleged) perpetrator, it tends to spill over into “necklacing” as a solidarity ritual among the crowd, which is simultaneously a temporary island of collective strength in a sea of beleaguered feelings. Gross shows (by in-depth interviews as well as surveys) that such vigilante justice is more prevalent in neighborhoods that have a higher feeling of community solidarity. The causality may be that witnessing the lynching ritual is the generator of solidarity feelings. Its emotional energy comes from the three-part dynamics of a forward panic: ongoing tension over self-help crime defense; the excitement of the alarm signals and the chase; and the necklacing carnival, an attention-commanding community street assembly.

Martin McCleery (2016) applies the forward panic model to the infamous massacre of protestors in Northern Ireland on “Bloody Sunday” (January 1972), when British paratroopers shot 26 unarmed civilians, killing 13. A civil-rights-style peaceful demonstration of 15,000 Catholics planned to march into the Protestant city center. Prevented by barricades manned by soldiers, most marchers changed routes, while others attacked the barricades, throwing bottles, bricks, and iron bars. Paratroopers responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons—sticking to non-lethal weapons. Paratroopers were then ordered to move forward and arrest violent demonstrators; but as the non-violent march had split and the crowd was fleeing, soldiers couldn’t distinguish between the two groups. Paratroopers with guns cocked disembarked their vehicles in a neighborhood stronghold of IRA paramilitaries, previously a no-go area for the army, and immediately began firing. All shots were fired by one company within 10 minutes and a half-mile radius. In fact, there was no resistance; the company advanced into a military vacuum.

The events fit the forward panic pattern and the conditions for what Nassauer called a “police riot.” Soldiers had been manning

barricades from early morning until rioting broke out about 4 p.m. The demonstration deviated from its plan and its route; the paratroopers shifted from passively waiting to a sudden advance into touted IRA turf; expecting opposition but finding none, they exploded into attacking fleeing civilians. McCleery offers comparisons where the same paramilitary unit had maintained discipline. Two weeks previously, demonstrators attempted to break into an internment camp where IRA suspects were held; the demonstration was confronted on the beach by the paratroopers, who fired rubber bullets and baton-charged the crowd, causing injuries but no deaths. Unlike the city terrain of Bloody Sunday, they were on an open beach where everything was visible; negotiations between the sides went on, antagonistic but with no surprises, no organizational breakdown, and no forward panic.

The comparison fits Nassauer’s conclusions: In the “police riot,” the main ingredients are a combination of spatial incursions and police organizational breakdown. *Spatial incursions* happen when either the demonstrators or the crowd-control forces do not stay in the zone assigned to them. One’s own turf is one’s temporary comfort zone. Turf incursions produce an emotional grievance: the other side is not respecting an agreement, is acting unfairly or irrationally, and cannot be trusted.

Organizational breakdown is when police units become cut off from each other, higher command loses track of its own forces or the location of demonstrators, or logistics fail so that police in the field are stressed by long hours without relief or ordinary body comforts. Tension among police is exacerbated when their organization breaks down and police units feel that they do not have the backup they ordinarily could call for help. The dangerous moment in a police riot is when high tension has built up and is followed by a micro-trigger that sets off the police reestablishing their habitual dominance by their superior use of force.

On the level of small groups, Don Weenink (2014) analyzes “frenzied attacks,” seemingly “senseless,” emotionally out-of-control storms of punishment on an unresisting victim. Comparing such attacks with other

forms of youth violence, he finds that the attackers' support group (i.e., encouraging audience of onlookers) outnumbering the victims' support group is even more important than the group of attackers outnumbering the number of victims in producing prolonged, frenzied attacks. Emotionally, a "frenzied attack" is "solidarity excitement" from the cheering spectators, and the project of violence is a way to boost this feeling. (This is apparent in Jackson-Jacobs's fight-seeking group.)

Weenink (2015) also uses his large comparative files of Dutch court cases (which include accounts from the viewpoint not just of attacker or victim, but also supporters and bystanders) to show two more types of violence with different motivations and dynamics. "Contesting violence" resembles the seeking-respect/defending-honor model that is so prominent in American accounts of fights. A separate type is "performing badness," what we call "tough guys" who revel in their identity of being a "badass" by picking on victims they encounter accidentally in public places—provoking a perceived slight and proceeding to use violence to humiliate their victims, including making them repeatedly apologize and demean themselves. This type of violence is not usually supported by an audience—any bystanders may even want it to stop—while the attackers' self-encapsulation keeps them going for a while, feeding off groveling feedback from their victim. Contesting violence (also known as dominance contests) is audience oriented and relies on the narrative justifications of honor and fair fights (since fighting too weak an opponent brings no honor); "performing badness" relies little on audience support, instead picking out especially weak and uncombative victims. Why split hairs? Isn't all violence to be deplored and prevented? But there are several pathways to violence, and the causes (and cures) of the various types have to be treated differently.

(6) Heading off Police Violence by Emotional Signs

CT/F is a bodily state, visible in postures and rhythms as well as facial expressions and subjectively experienced in a pounding heart, breathing rate, tunnel vision, and

time-distortion. Heart rates above 140 beats per minute from high adrenaline levels deteriorate fine motor coordination (e.g., trigger finger); above 170 beats per minute, extreme perceptual distortion, clumsiness, and paralysis set in. Since breathing exercises can reduce heart rate, cops and soldiers can be trained to recognize high heart rate and to bring it down before launching an out-of-control attack (Collins 2016).

In sum: because of confrontational tension/fear, even persons motivated toward violence do not easily find it. Pub fights are mostly broken up, and the mobilized minorities of ethnic fighters and rioters can be demobilized (at least in high schools) by the mass withdrawal of other students from the scene. Macho cultures are largely satisfied with belligerent posturing among street gangs, rappers, and professional wrestlers. Violence in protest demonstrations breaks out only when tension-then-weakness scenarios overcome CT/F. Even armed troops unleash most of their violence when their victims are emotionally dominated, and armed robbers fail when they don't get EDOM. Forward panic is the deadliest sequence, when groups under high tension suddenly find a fleeing victim. And some good news: CT/F can be monitored through bodily signs, and tension can be brought down to levels where soldiers and police do not lose control.

The micro-sociology of violence is well positioned to develop the positive possibilities of our ongoing era of information technology.

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Sociology of the Public Sphere

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In *Reign of Appearances: The Misery and Splendor of the Public Sphere*, his important new book, Ari Adut aims to develop a better, more realistic, and more sociological theory of the public sphere. He is concerned that the concept of the public sphere, which has its origins in normative political philosophy, presents a distorted and idealized image of public dialogue among citizens. This image is distorted because it either ignores or laments the kinds of events that attract the most public attention—scandals, grandstanding by politicians and other public celebrities, and other kinds of public

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spectacles. The normative image of the public sphere also has a distorted understanding of spectatorship. As Adut argues, a realistic theory of the public sphere needs to come to terms with the fact that, for most people most of the