Situational predictors of violent intentions: Results from a factorial survey

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ABSTRACT

Though many sociological and criminological theories of violence provide a role for both situational and individual-level factors, research largely focuses on individual-level characteristics. The current research, drawing on the psychological and sociological aggression literatures, utilizes a factorial survey approach to identify important situational risk factors. Multi-level regression results indicate that provocation, aggressive cues, and the presence of an audience are all statistically significant risk factors. Moreover, these factors maintain their importance even after statistically controlling for well-known individual-level characteristics. These results highlight the importance of situational factors and serve as a call for more situationally oriented research and theory on violence.

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1. Introduction

A number of scholars claim that empirical research on violence tends to overlook important situational factors (Collins, 2008; Katz, 1988; Wikström & Treiber, 2009). Collins (2008), for example, recently argues that undue focus on individual factors limits theoretical and empirical knowledge about violence. While acknowledging individual-level factors may create a predisposition for violence, Collins (2008, p. 20) suggests that individual-level factors are "not sufficient; situational conditions are always necessary." The rationale for this argument is simple: Even those individuals possessing numerous traits and characteristics predictive of violence do not engage in violence all the time. People engage in violence in certain situations and not others. Clearly, theory and research need to account for the causal relevance of situations.

Other sociologists and criminologists echo these comments. Katz (1988, p. 4) points out "whatever the relevance of antecedent events and contemporaneous social conditions, something causally essential happens in the very moments in which a crime is committed." More recently, Wikström (2006) argues this point forcefully, noting the current trend in criminological research of focusing on individual differences in violent tendencies obscures understanding of the processes by which violence occurs. This suggests there is an unmet need for social scientists to study events, not just individuals. The analysis of specific events allows for a more proximate test of the social-psychological processes implicit in many theories and allows researchers to explain within-person variation in behavior.

This is an acknowledged issue in the field of violence research, and many theories and perspectives provide individual and situational explanations for violence (Agnew, 1992; Amodei & Scott, 2002; Wikström, 2006). Research on individual violence overwhelmingly focuses on individual-level arguments and on explaining individual differences in violent tendencies. Though examining individual-level variation is important, this body of research cannot fully

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address the etiology of violent actions without a consideration of situational factors. There are at least two negative consequences of failing to study situational factors. First, individual-level research cannot easily address within-person variation in behavior. While people undoubtedly vary in their predisposition towards violence, situational factors can help explain why people engage in violence in some circumstances and not others.

Second, it is difficult to empirically evaluate the situational processes described by theories of violence and aggression without focusing on both the situation and the person. This is a major shortcoming given many theories of violence highlight both individual and situational factors as part of the violence process. This gap in the literature may be reflective of the fact that it is difficult to study violent situations. Two of the more common approaches to violence research, the standard survey and the analysis of existing data, are limited in their ability to examine situational factors. Most surveys gather extensive individual-level data and tend to measure violence as a matter of frequency, for example, by asking respondents to indicate how many times they have struck another person in the last year. Such data, while useful for explaining individual differences in violent propensities, says nothing about the role of situational factors. Similarly, the analysis of existing crime data generally cannot address situational factors. Even when some situational information is recorded, as with National Incident Based Reporting System NIBRS data, comparative information on situations where violence did not occur is not included.

The present study uses a factorial survey approach to study violent intentions. The primary focus is to explore the situational factors influencing violent intentions in public situations between strangers. This approach accounts for situational factors through a quasi-experimental vignette in which situational factors vary from scenario to scenario. Individual-level factors are captured by the accompanying questionnaire, which measures a variety of individual-level variables thought to be predictive of violent behavior. Though this approach is clearly limited as it is only able to examine violent intentions, this approach provides a useful tool for examining violence at the situational-level.

A key issue with using factorial surveys is determining which situational factors to randomize across vignettes. Therefore, the study begins by briefly summarizing the psychological and sociological literatures on the situational correlates of violence to produce hypotheses linking provocation, cues of aggression, the presence of onlookers, and the characteristics of potential combatants as key situational predictors of violent intentions. The theoretically derived hypotheses are then tested using multi-level regression analyses; the study concludes by discussing the implications of the study for theory and research.

2. Literature review

Broadly speaking, theoretical perspectives on violence highlight two categories of situational factors should predict violence: the content of the situation and the characteristics of actors involved in the situation (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Vigil, 2009). The content of a situation refers to the variables of a given situation, including the type of provocation (verbal or physical) and presence of an audience, while the characteristics of actors refers to factors like race, size, and appearance of the other party in a given situation.

Provocation, cues of aggression, and the presence of an audience are all situational risk factors for violence. Provocation, a situational factor discussed by various criminologists (Agnew, 1992; Tittle, 2004; Wikström, 2006), includes verbal insults and unwanted or unexpected physical contact. For example, Wikström (2006) conceptualizes provocation as one of the primary motivations for breaking moral rules. Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest people are more likely to respond with aggressive behavior when provoked, which could include both verbal insults and physical prompting, like pushing or bumping. In addition to these criminological perspectives, the general aggression model (GAM) in psychology (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) also highlights the importance of provocation. The GAM suggests provocation may increase the likelihood of aggression by producing negative affect, increasing physiological and psychological arousal, and by inducing cognition effects in which aggressive memory concepts are primed (Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Violence resulting from situational provocation and associated generation of negative affect, like anger, is a common theme in criminology (Agnew, 1992), and research demonstrates emotional responses like anger can provide motivation for aggressive behaviors (Sell, 2011). Provocation may also increase the likelihood of aggression in that the provocateur becomes a viable target for blame (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Hoffman & Spence, 2010).

It should be noted that provocation, while perhaps a strong predictor of violence, is unlikely sufficient to cause violence by itself. Collins (2008) suggests the majority of potentially violent situations consist of bluster and rarely result in violence. Collins's discussion of bluster focuses on verbal exchanges over physical provocation; though verbal provocation may be unlikely to generate violence, it is important to remember physical violence usually occurs following a back-and-forth exchange of verbal insults (Daly & Wilson, 1988). While not explicitly addressed by any of the theoretical perspectives discussed, physical provocation may be more likely to lead to violent behavior than verbal provocation since physical provocation may send stronger cues regarding the intentions of the person in a scenario (Shantz & Voydanoff, 1973). In addition to both verbal and physical provocation, other individual and situational factors may be necessary to increase the likelihood of violence.

Psychological research suggests situations involving cues of aggression also increase the likelihood of violence. These cues include factors like the presence of weapons and proximity to violence. Anderson and Bushman (2002) note the presence of weapons can increase the likelihood of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Research indicates exposure to actual violence, such as other people fighting or rioting nearby, can also increase the likelihood of a person engaging in violence (Myers, 2000; Patten & Arboleda-Florez, 2004). According to Anderson and Bushman (2002), these cues, either in the form of