Sports crowd violence: An interdisciplinary synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Crowd violence is a regular feature of spectator sports around the world. Contemporary research recognizes the diversity and complexity of this violence, but serious interdisciplinary work on the topic remains sparse. This article suggests that there is a need for increased dialogue across academic disciplines. I examine how themes and issues emanating from different disciplines may be brought together to produce a fuller, multi-level analysis that integrates distal and proximate causes of sports crowd violence. Using a socio-ecological model, it is shown that fan violence arises from the dynamic interplay between individual, interpersonal, situational, social environmental, and social structural factors. I also review key continua of sports crowd violence pertaining to its scale, coordination, purpose, sources, and relation to social norms. The article concludes by presenting directions for future research on sports crowd violence.

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1. Introduction

Sports-related violence continues to attract media attention and public concern in many societies. On February 1, 2012, the Egyptian city of Port Said witnessed one of the deadliest episodes of sports-related violence in modern history. Seventy-four people were killed and hundreds injured when spectators invaded the playing field after a soccer match between Al-Masry and Al-Ahly. Most of the deaths were caused by concussions, stab wounds, and suffocation from the stampede. The sentencing to death of 21 soccer fans on charges of having been responsible for the brawl sparked fierce protests on the streets of Port Said.

Fortunately, most episodes of sports-related violence are less severe. For example, in October, 2012 the inaugural National League wildcard game between the St Louis Cardinals and the Atlanta Braves was halted for 19 minutes after Braves fans expressed their anger at a controversial umpire decision by throwing cups and plastic bottles on the field. The Braves condemned their fans' behavior, describing it as "uncharacteristic and unacceptable" (Rogers, 2012, p. A1). More recently, in April, 2013, English soccer violence re-emerged in the public spotlight. Millwall fans fought between themselves during their FA Cup semifinal defeat to Wigan Athletic, with the police making 14 arrests and four officers receiving minor injuries. That same weekend, 29 people were arrested as Newcastle United fans threw glass bottles, firecrackers, bricks, and rocks at the police.

Recent episodes of crowd violence have not been restricted to professional sport. The deadly assault by teenage players on a linesman at a youth soccer match in the Netherlands in November, 2012 sparked international outrage and prompted the Dutch government to introduce a zero-tolerance approach to player and spectator misconduct. "A victim of the passions that football provokes, of the anger that this form of entertainment can generate," wrote *The Times* (Evans, 2012, p. 9). "Referees under siege", CNN headlined (Krug, 2013). Growing rates of violence against sports officials were soon reported in other European countries. In Spain, a 17-year-old referee was assaulted after attempting to send off a player who had insulted him. The player, a police officer 10 years his senior, struck him in the face, then delivered two kicks to the body (Krug, 2013). In Germany, violence against match officials was described as "reaching alarming proportions" (Eberle & Neumann, 2012).

Considering the frequency with which sports-related violence is reported in the mass media, it is unsurprising that the issue has attracted academic attention. Three decades ago Jeffrey H. Goldstein (1983) could reasonably claim that violence and aggression represented one of the "relatively neglected issues" (p. v) of contemporary sport, but today there exists a rich body of theory and research on sports-related violence. This literature provides important insights into the nature and determinants of sports-related violence; yet, several issues remain unresolved. There is still disagreement between scholars regarding the definition of sports-related violence, its frequency and scale across time and space, and its causes and remedies. One reason for this is that sports violence is far more diverse and encompassing than scholars typically acknowledge (Young, 2012). Explanations of sports-related violence also remain entrenched within disciplinary boundaries, which have inhibited the development of a fuller, multi-level analysis. There is a need for increased dialogue across academic disciplines to overcome this issue and to identify effective strategies for dealing with sports-related violence (Fields, Collins, & Comstock, 2007).

This article aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of the factors and social processes that influence sports crowd violence. It will do so by examining how themes and issues emanating from different academic disciplines may be brought together to produce a multi-level analysis that integrates distal and proximate causes of sports crowd violence. The article will show that there are important areas of common ground. Scholars in different disciplines have often found similar themes and issues, while also offering different insights that, in conjunction, provide a fuller analysis of the problem (Fields et al., 2007).

Recognizing the diversity of sports-related violence (Bodin, Robène, & Héas, 2005; Jamieson & Orr, 2012), and the impossibility of doing justice to this diversity within the space of this article, the principal focus will be on violence among spectators. However, it is acknowledged that different types of sports-related violence may be driven by the same social processes and conditions. Some of the linkages that underpin different forms of sports-related violence will be identified.

This article will first clarify what is meant by sports crowd violence and identify its multiple modalities. The paper proceeds by proposing a socio-ecological model that brings together and synthesizes themes and issues from different disciplines. This model compels scholars and practitioners to acknowledge the multiple, inter-related influences on sports crowd behavior. The article concludes with ideas and recommendations for further research on sports crowd violence emanating from the proposed framework.

2. Definitions and distinctions

2.1. Defining sports crowd violence

The definition of sports-related violence is the subject of academic debate. There is no universally agreed upon scholarly definition of violence in sport. The literature reveals diverging conceptions of sports violence, ranging from minimalist to comprehensive. The term "sports violence" is frequently used in a cover-all sense, in which various forms of deviant or criminal behavior are lumped together to refer to acts that threaten the social fabric. Minimalist definitions view sports violence narrowly in terms of physical force and physical harm or injury to others (Parry, 1998). Thus, Coakley (2009) defines sports violence as the use of excessive physical force which causes or has the potential to cause harm to others or damage to property. Most scholars consider this behavior in direct relation to the sporting environment; yet, some include in their definition the possibility of the diffusion of violent acts resulting from direct or indirect involvement in sport, where sports violence "can occur in the home, school, workplace, recreational site, at events and many other venues due to the sport contest or involvement itself" (Jamieson & Orr, 2012, p. 4). Similar to minimalist definitions of violence more generally (Ray, 2011), narrow definitions of sports violence have been criticized for not taking into consideration the wider contexts of social relationships in which violence occurs nor psychological harms. Feminist critiques of symbolic violence and masculine domination in sport are a case in point (Anderson, 2010; Messner, 1990).

An analytical distinction can be made between the violent conduct of *players*, either on or off the field, and violence caused by *spectators* to a sporting contest. The latter can be defined as "acts of verbal or physical aggression (threatened or actual), perpetrated by partisan fans at, or away from, the sports arena that may result in injury to persons or damage to property" (Young, 2012, p. 42). However, the requirement that spectators be "partisan" effectively excludes those forms of violence that are caused by spectators with a relatively weak or ephemeral sport/team identification, for example those who use the sports arena to express their political or ideological grievances (as in the example of terrorism below). Moreover, following Ward (2002), spectators can be taken to refer to "the crowd of onlookers and not the people watching sports on television at home or in a bar" (p. 455). The effect that watching sport on television may have on spectator aggression is an interesting issue (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001), but not explored in this discussion. Pre- or post-event violence caused by spectators away from the sports arena, such as celebration or defeat riots, will be included in this review. Finally, it is recognized that player and crowd violence can be intertwined in practice. Sports crowd violence can result from violence on the field of play, where the observation of player violence can weaken inhibitions against the expression of aggression and violence (Smith, 1976; Wann et al., 2001). Yet, many scholars believe that the roots of sports crowd disorder lie predominantly in