

**TEACHING ABOUT VIOLENCE**

**What We Teach about When We Teach about Violence**

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During recent months, U.S. news media have reported deeply disturbing events involving the intrusion of violence into hitherto less vulnerable settings, namely schools and churches. The multiple school shootings of 1998 paled in light of the Columbine High School massacre last spring in Colorado. The late-summer multiple-murder/suicide incident at a Baptist Youth Meeting in Texas brought further angst and perplexity to citizens. Although feelings of outrage surface appropriately, in order to learn from these troubling occurrences, it is important to examine them with an objective lens.

American cultural discourse has always included the kind of violence portrayed in media, such as homicide and urban rioting; it has only recently begun to acknowledge violence in the home, in the forms of family violence and child abuse (e.g., Gelles, 1987). The intrusion of violence into the traditionally safe havens of school and church has intensified public concern about violence and brought it to the attention of most segments of the population. Political figures and bodies have responded, but with superficial analyses of the problem. Although the visibility of individual-level violence is unmistakable, systematic understanding of underlying processes is lacking. To accomplish any appreciable reduction of societal violence, it is necessary to understand its complexity. Causes, interventions, and prevention strategies are contingent upon the validity of definitions available. Here I consider issues of definition that need to be addressed in an undergraduate course on violence, with implications for scientific and public-policy circles as well.

**Problems of Definition** | Earlier attempts to define violence have been hampered by several factors. First, researchers and policy makers have categorized the forms too rigorously, concentrating their efforts on such varied topics as homicide, domestic violence, and urban rioting but generally not searching for common themes. Although each form of violence is complex and worthy of scrupulous analysis in its own right, only rarely does one find the boundaries crossed from one topic to another. Identifying the commonalities among different forms of violence could advance violence studies significantly.

Second, there is a culturally induced tendency in America to focus on questions of personal pathology in most violence-related inquiries, whether the setting is the home or the street. Comments about sanity and craziness permeate discussions. Analysis searches for who is to blame and what might be wrong with a person who commits violent acts. Although questions regarding psychological factors and personal pathology require attention, exclusive emphasis on this type of explanation precludes any analysis of social-structural and interpersonal factors. When the need to blame motivates a search for the "bad guys" responsible, one will, of necessity, miss any social-structural dimensions.

The second problem brings into focus the issue of level of analysis needed for each form of violence. Violence occurs at both individual and collective levels. A more fine-grained approach, advocated by Turpin and Kurtz (1997), would distinguish the national and global levels as well. They cite the feminist

argument that "the personal is political" to communicate the importance of understanding micro-level violence in the home in informing our perceptions of violence at broader institutional levels (Brock-Utne, 1997). Similarly, Eisler (1997) argues that the connection between physical and structural violence is the "missing link" in the area of human rights theory.

Both of the above problems create rigid distinctions between various forms of violence that hamper a clearer understanding of the causes of violence. By contrast, Turpin and Kurtz offer a different model, a "web of violence," which synthesizes the divergent areas of violence studies and allows fluidity across levels. For Turpin and Kurtz, there is a dialectic between the macro- and micro-levels of violence, and there are common factors underlying different forms of violence (e.g., street assaults and child abuse) at any level of focus.

C. Wright Mills's classic notion of "sociological imagination" stresses the importance of looking beyond people at the individual level to the structural backdrops of all personal lives. Drawing our attention to the intersection of biography and history, he argues that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own changes in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances (1959:5).

His contemporary, Peter Berger, also appreciates the importance of social location in understanding individual actions. According to Berger, to be located in society means to be at the intersection point of specific social forces. Commonly one ignores these forces at one's peril. One moves within society within carefully defined systems of power and prestige (1963: 67).

Location is generically important because it influences a whole gamut of conditions ranging from life-chances and health to worldview. Without an appreciation of location, one fails to see the contrasting perceptions of or vested interests in violence based on one's place in society. Children of a lower social class have been subjected to physically dangerous conditions at school for several decades, in contrast with middle-class students, for whom violence and its consequences are only a more recent phenomenon. Ignoring this intersection of people and social structures has serious ramifications for violence studies in that analyses will be short-sighted and incomplete at best.

Psychiatrist James Gilligan's work, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*, provides an excellent antidote to these problematic tendencies to categorize, pathologize, and focus exclusively on the individual level. Gilligan identifies the multifaceted components of violence (biological, psychological, and social), but, like Turpin and Kurtz, he recognizes that the now dominant biopsychological explanations ignore structural or macro-level dimensions. Like Mills, Gilligan stresses the importance of appreciating the intersection of biography and history: "Any one family's violence can only be understood fully when it is seen as part of the macrocosm, the culture and history of violence, in which it occurs" (1996:15).

In this groundbreaking work, Gilligan offers a multidisciplinary approach within the context of his own finely tuned sociological imagination:

Any approach to a theory of violence needs to begin with a look at the structural violence in this country. Focusing merely on those relatively few men who commit what we define as murder could distract us from examining and learning from those structural causes of violent death that are far more significant from a numerical or public health, or human, standpoint (1996: 191-192).

Gilligan observes that structural violence differs from behavioral violence in three major respects. In addition to its virtual invisibility, structural violence functions more or less independently of individual behaviors; further, its problematic effects operate continuously, not just sporadically.

Gilligan's structural focus is apparent in his theory of shaming. Excessive shame, he suggests, destroys self-esteem, which, in turn, engenders a collapse of the self. Gilligan perceives such "soul murder" as a major underlying cause of violence. Shame, whether rooted in physical or in psychological abuse, "can destroy a human personality in ways that are likely to lead to violent behavior in later life" (1996: 49). Although the consequences of soul murder play out at the individual level, its roots run deep in societal institutions—in particular, the social class system as well as definitions of gender roles, especially masculinity. Perhaps the gender role association is more straightforward, given the aggression component in male gender definitions.

The role of the class system is less obvious. Gilligan uses Gandhi's words to describe its effects: "The deadliest form of violence is poverty" (1996: 191). The poorer access of the lower classes to resources in American society is well documented: Rubin's research (1976) on working-class families connects position in the occupational structure with "husband-esteem" problems and their consequences for the family. The lower-level positions of working-class men deal a devastating blow to their self-esteem, and to their families. Not only are lower classes vulnerable to failure in the major institutions, but society uses a "culture of meritocracy" thesis to explain this failure as a function of the individual's fewer talents and lack of motivation, thereby instilling shame. Research has shown that lower-class deficits lie not only in the material realm, but also in the areas of cognitive skills and language. Socialization of lower-class groups provides them with more limited cognitive capacity to deal with the frustrations arising from the lack of resources (Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Bernstein, 1971). In short, members of the lower classes receive a double whammy: they have access to fewer material resources and are equipped with fewer skills to cope with such a condition; hence, their special vulnerability to shaming.

**Conceptualizing Structural-Level Violence** | A major challenge for contemporary violence studies is to untangle these structural roots of violence and develop a sociological imagination for perceiving violence in structures as well as in individual behavior. Incorporating structural aspects of violence will substantially stretch the definition of violence to a point where meaningful analysis can be conducted. Because American cultural discourse does not encourage structural awareness, it is important to define the concept. Citing the work of Galtung (1975), Turpin and Kurtz propose that structural violence occurs when people are harmed because of inequitable social arrangements rather than overt physical violence. Alternatively, in the words of Epp and Watkinson, structural or "systemic violence is any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups" (1997: xiv).

Because violence covers an enormously complex and multi-level condition, one must gather some organizing principles when developing definitions. Derber's work on Wilding in America may be helpful. He generates a typology of "wilding," defined as "self-oriented behavior that hurts others and damages the social fabric" (1996: 9). His notion juxtaposes individual and structural levels and establishes a format for conceptualizing structural violence. Following Berkowitz (1993), Derber first distinguishes expressive from instrumental violence. The former refers to actions done "for the sheer satisfaction of indulging one's own destructive impulses" (1996: 6), while the latter is represented by behaviors motivated by "money, career advancement, or calculable personal gain" (1996: 7). American cultural discourse is biased toward the expressive; structural forms tend to be more instrumental.

Additionally, Derber organizes wilding behaviors into political, economic, and social categories, each of which may be expressive or instrumental. Use of this typology, or one like it, can activate one's sociological imagination regarding the underlying structures. In the realm of economic violence, labor riots, such as the Haymarket Affair in Chicago in 1886 or the Homestead Strike in Pennsylvania in 1892, are readily construed as examples of offensive violence. Without substantial evidence, "conspirator" workers in the Haymarket Affair were prosecuted, sentenced, and, in some instances, hanged in response to their alleged behaviors. In contrast with these more expressive forms, the numerous contemporary examples of structural violence rooted in the economy are more instrumental and, hence, not perceived, let alone interpreted, as such. Whether one considers health hazards in the workplace (Reiman, 1998), the downsizing of white-collar corporate employees (Newman, 1988), or wage scales that prevent full-time workers from earning wages above the poverty level (Ellwood, 1988), using Derber's typology, each of these exemplifies economic, instrumental violence. Regardless of typology, these are forms of structural violence.

One of the most severe consequences of ignoring structural dimensions of violence is the implementation of short-sighted and ineffectual responses to violent incidents. No matter how energetically social policy-makers address school violence, if the society's structural dynamics continue to produce violence, anti-violence policies and programs are bound to fail. As Elliott Currie has stated, "We have the level of criminal violence we do because we have arranged our social and economic life in certain ways rather than others" (1985: 19).

Unless structural violence is incorporated into American cultural perceptions and definitions of violence, this point will be overlooked and violence will continue to flourish.

**The Role of Claims-Makers** | Who decides which behaviors are violent? Sociological explanations of social problems utilize the notion of claims-making, a process in which "the activities of individuals or groups [make] assertions of grievances or claims with respect to some putative condition" (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 75). Depending upon the particulars of a problem, anyone may make claims: politicians, corporate entities, scientists, and even ordinary citizens. The crucial issue is whose definition achieves dominance.

The claims-making model helps define a social construction of violence. Reiman (1998) asks why the death of an individual killed in street violence is perceived as criminal, while the death of 26 mine

workers due to negligence of a profit-seeking employer is not. He contends that the employer responsible for unsafe conditions in the mine is just as guilty of violence as the street criminals, despite his lack of intention to harm, and argues further that the employer's perceived innocence of any crime reflects a bias against the lower classes—even though an elite-level crime can cause greater physical harm. He concludes, pointedly, that the cultural bias against structural perceptions of criminal violence is rooted in the desire of the upper class to distance itself from wrongdoing.

Reiman's work recognizes the overlooked structural dimensions of violence, but, more important, it reveals the potential for fluidity of definition. As seen in many forms of behavior from cigarette-smoking to sexual mores, acceptability changes over time. The claims-making concept indicates that groups compete for input, involving, as any competition does, differentials of power.

**The Place of Moral Issues in Violence Studies** | What place do morality and moralizing have in violence studies? First, it is important to clarify that morality and moralizing are different concepts. Morality refers to the code of conduct of a society and moralizing refers to self-righteous expressions of those standards. Sociological analysis emphasizes that the social construction of reality extends to morality. Recall Reiman's argument that American society has successfully sustained non-structurally oriented, status-quo thinking about violent behavior by condemning individual intent more than resultant damage. In other words, morality can become an ideological tool to reinforce current definitions. Gilligan supports this position:

Moral approaches to violence do not help us to understand the causes and prevention of violence; and what is worse, some of the moral assumptions about violence actually inhibit us in our attempts to learn about its causes and prevention. The most popular moral ways of thinking about violence lead to the mistaken conclusion that to understand violent behavior is to excuse it. It is easier and less threatening to condemn violence (morally and legally) so that we can punish it, rather than seeking its causes and working to prevent it (1996: 24).

Moral arguments make it easy to punish violent offenders, and therefore they are understandably attractive. However, they also block the analysis necessary to develop effective prevention. More, they can be a form of claims-making, in which advocates argue for the correctness of positions not on the basis of fact but on the basis of moral evaluation. Because this impedes prevention, Gilligan advocates a non-moralistic approach that "neither supports nor opposes the 'forgiveness' of violent behavior—since one has not condemned in the first place" (1996: 93).

Consistent with the social construction of morality, a task confronting violence studies curricula is the formulation of an improved moral stance toward violence in society. According to Gilligan, American violence is the result of our collective "moral choice" to maintain those social policies that in turn maintain our uniquely high level of violence; and I call that choice a moral choice because it is very explicitly rationalized, justified, and legitimized on moral grounds, in moral terms (1996:23).

In sum, the challenge to those undertaking violence studies in the undergraduate curriculum, and to researchers and policy-makers alike, is twofold. First, it is incumbent upon anyone advocating against violence to broaden definitions to include Turpin and Kurtz's "web" idea. Regardless of specific levels,

structural dimensions must be recognized and addressed. Second, despite cultural tendencies to the contrary, it is important to recognize the impoverished state of cultural morality toward violence and the dysfunctional consequences of moralizing about violence. Only careful causal analysis can provide sound prevention policies and, ultimately, sounder moral principles. Only then will the media reports on high-school violence and church shootings disappear.

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