Violence explained? A review of theoretical explanations of violent behavior

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Abstract

There is a large body of theories and research on violence and criminal behavior in the social sciences, mostly coming from psychology and sociology. While psychologists in most cases tend to focus on individuals in face-to-face interaction and neglect large scale conflict between people and groups, sociologists, on the other hand, mostly focus their analysis on the social structure to explain how violent behavior of an individual or group may be socially and culturally embedded. In this paper, we briefly review some of the major theoretical perspectives that have attempted to explain violent behavior. These perspectives include those macro theories focusing on social structure on the societal level, and those micro level theories focusing on personality characteristics on individual level. Our aim is to reveal the common points of these theories in order to help in better understanding violence and aggressive behavior. Moreover, this paper will also help researchers on violence and aggression in choosing the right theoretical model for analyzing research findings.

Keywords: violence, aggression, crimes, theories, individual, social structure.

Introduction

There is a large body of theories and research on violence and aggressive behavior in the social sciences, mostly coming from psychology and sociology. Psychologists in most cases tend to focus on individuals in face-to-face interaction and neglect large scale conflict between people and groups. Psychologists focus on how mental processes impact individual propensities for violence. Psychologists are often interested in the association between learning, intelligence, and personality and aggressive behavior. Sociologists, on the other hand, mostly focus their analysis on the social structure to explain how violent behavior of an individual or group may be socially and culturally embedded. Broadly speaking, some theories provide general or macro level explanation while other theories provide specific or micro level explanation of violence. These theories primarily try to answer

questions relating to the 'why' and 'how' of violence in an abstract fashion. In the following pages, these theories have been explained in detail.

Theoretical Perspectives on Violence

Over the course of the last 50 years or so, two major strands of research on violence have developed in socio-anthropological and psychological studies, namely the etiological research and ethnographic research. The etiological research has gone to the extent of claiming that there are definite and identifiable causes of violence. Abbink (1999) asserts that there are predetermined paths to violence but rules (in every society) limit its exercise. Various types of motives or causes of violence have been identified (Abbink, 1999). Prestige as a motive for violence, initially undervalued though, was later considered important. Vayda (1961) proposed the notion of competition for resources as reason for violence to which Helbling added that this analysis needed addition of demographic variable, i.e. population density affects the rate of occurrence of factions, feuds, wars etc. (Helbling, 1999).

Scholars have developed criteria or benchmarks for developing theory, especially general theory, of violence. The criteria range from five conditions/objectives (Tittle, 2009) to four conditions (Eisner, 2009: 44) for the development of a general theory of violence. Based on his criteria, Tittle (2009: 72) believes that there are at least seven general theories of violence attempting to explain the socially disapproved violence: 'social learning, general strain, self, social support/coercion, social integration/social control, self-control, and control balance' (Tittle, 2009: 72). In contrast, Eisner (2009: 41) identifies three major theoretical approaches to violence: 'a theory of the judgment and decision-making processes operating in the situations that give rise to violence; a theory of the evolutionary processes that have resulted in universal cognitive and emotional mechanisms associated with violence; and a theory of the way in which social institutions structure violence by selectively enhancing its effectiveness for some purposes (i.e. legitimate use of force) and controlling other types of violence (i.e. crime)' (Eisner, 2009: 41).

For academic purpose, we could divide discourses on violence in two broad groups, viz. the general or macro theories of violence and specific or micro theories of violence. With respect to the former, some of the most well-known theories of violence are 'Interactionist theory' (Collins, 2009),

'Evolutionary theory' (Eisner, 2009), 'Situational action (moral) theory' (Wikström and Treiber, 2009), and 'Rational Choice theory (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Matsueda *et al.,* 2006). These theories contribute towards our understanding of characteristics of offences and the individuals who carry them out. Furthermore, these theories also shed light on the nature of social relationships and social process that contribute towards germination of violence (Tittle, 2009: 61). These theories have been explained in detail.

Interactionist Theory: Speaking from interactionist perspective and irrespective of (il)legality of a violent action, Collins (2009) proposes that under normal interaction patterns human beings avoid violence because it is barely always successful and thus every human tries not take risk for it. To become violence an individual has to overcome 'confrontational tension and fear' – a key concept in Collins' theory of violence (Collins, 2009). He identifies five pathways through which an individual could cross the barrier of confrontational tension and fear. These possible pathways or strategies to violence include 'attacking the weak; audience-oriented staged and controlled fair fights; confrontation-avoiding remote violence; confrontation-avoiding by deception; and confrontation avoiding by absorption in technique' (Collins, 2009: 10; Karstedt and Eisner, 2009: 6). Whether legal or illegal, violence is quite hard to undertake given the difficulty in crossing over confrontational tension and fear through either of the above five strategies. Resultantly, '…only a small proportion of persons can belong to the elite which does most of each type of violence' (Collins, 2009: 10). Interestingly enough, Collins (2009) believes that these pathways to violence are exhibited in seemingly remote instances of 'victory and defeat in war, and in struggles of paramilitaries and social movements as well as in the popularly known instances of domestic violence and gang violence (Collins, 2009: 10).

Evolutionary Theory: Eisner's (2009) evolutionary position is exactly opposite to Collins' theory discussed above. Eisner focuses on violence as reward-oriented behavior. Despite the fact that violence is risky behavior, the motivation to achieve extrinsic and intrinsic rewards is the driving force behind violence. Talking from an evolutionary perspective, Eisner (2009; Kasrstedt and Eisner, 2009) considers violence as a 'successful functional and adaptive strategy of action' (Kasrtedt and Eisner, 2009: 6). Eisner (2009) provides bases for his general (evolutionary) theory of violence on certain findings. He argues

that it is well-known that it is primarily men who inflict violence; that individuals usually in the age group 18-35 have the highest frequency of violence; that the essential goals of violence (material resources, status etc.) are universally found as reasons for violence; and that specific types of situations pave way for infliction of violence. In addition to this, Eisner (2009: 47) has proposed a long list (see below) of various categories of violence, which according to him should be addressed by a general theory of violence.

Table.I: Manifestations of Violence Covered by a General Theory of Violence

S#	Category of violence	Type(s) of Violence(s)
1	Childhood Aggression	(1) bullying; (2) fights
2	Violence in non-state societies	(1) ritualized fights; (2) revenge killings, feuds; (3) violent self-help; (4) raids;(5) battles; (6) massacres; (7) rape; (8) assassination of visitors; (9) infanticide, suicide; (10) torture; (11) human sacrifice
3	Interpersonal Criminal Violence	(1) assault; (2) rape; (3) robbery; (4) homicide; (5) infanticide; (6) child abuse; (7) domestic violence;
4	Punishments	(1) parental corporal punishment; (2) state capital punishment; (3) flogging, stoning;
5	Organized Private Violence	(1) hitting, beating, raping, killing subordinates and dependents; (2) organized piracy and robbery; (3) assassinations; (4) private warlords; (5) gang wars;
6	Legitimate and Illegitimate State Violence	(1) assassination; (2) torture; (3) wars; (4) massacres; (5) concentration camps; (6) executions; (7) genocide; (8) police use of force;
7	Organized Political Violence	(1) assassinations; (2) civil war; (3) extortion of protection rents; (4) terrorism; (5) resistance/liberation wars; (6) revolutionary violence; (7) riots; (8) lynching; (9) vigilante violence; (10) extremist and hate violence

Source: Eisner, M. (2009). The uses of violence: An examination of some cross-cutting issues. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence, 3*(1), 40-59.p.40

As we can deduce form the above explanation, the approaches of Collins and Eisner are unique in the sense that each has attempted to develop a general theory on violence irrespective of the illegality and legality of violence. Furthermore, both have quite distinct perspectives: the former has used interactions perspective, while the later has based his theory of evolutionary p-respective.

Situational Action/Moral Theory: Wikström and Treiber (2009) consider instances of violence as essentially moral actions and therefore can, and should, be analyzed and explained as such. They defined violence as 'situational action'. They consider violence as moral act and therefore believe that violent actions need explanation with the framework of moral decision-making. In their situation action theory of violence, they argue that violence is always done according to certain rules. Depending on the situation at hand, every type of violence – wars, massacre, domestic violence etc. – is carried out according to certain rules. The specific arguments of Wikström and Treiber's (2009: 77-78) situational theory of violence are as follow. Acts of violence are moral actions in the sense that human beings think through their actions in terms of right and wrong. Secondly, human beings choose, out of habit or deliberate thinking, a violent act because they see it as viable alternative to seek a goal(s). Thirdly, a human being's susceptibility to violence is determined by his/her readiness to do violence, which are grounded in his/her moral values and self-control and the interplay between them with respect to the setting in which that individual might exhibit violence. Fourthly, larger social structure and individual's developmental path and changes in life should be analyzed as causes of violence. Finally, only those factors from social conditions (integration, segregation etc.) and individual's developmental trajectories should be considered as causes of violent acts which actually triggered him or her towards that act (Wikström and Treiber, 2009: 77-78).

Rational Choice Theory: With respect to individual-level question of why violence occurs, considerable portion of contemporary debate side with 'rational choice theory', which in its characteristic tone considers violence as the product of human beings' thinking in terms of costs-benefits. This argument is supported by a number of studies (see, Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). For instance, in their recent study of Denver Youth Survey, Matsueda *et al.* (2006) confirmed that rational choice making significantly influenced juveniles' violent acts. Moreover, it was found that violence was positively associated with preference for risk, perceived elevation in status and gain in opportunities but it was negatively associated with the perception of risk for arrest (Matsueda, Kreager, & Huizinga, 2006). Furthermore, this cost-benefit analysis and perceived positive outcomes have been documented with respect to corporal punishment (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999), school bullying (Ireland & Archer, 2004), physical aggression against partner (Archer and

Graham-Kevan, 2003) and aggressive behavior in children (Tapper & Boulton, 2004).

In addition to theorizing violence in general terms at macro level, there are a number of theories at individual or micro level. The micro/individual theories are predominantly proposed from psychological and socio-psychological point of view and as such they attempt to answer as to when and how an individual acts violently. It is also worth mentioning that in academic disciplines such as social psychology, we do not as of yet have separate section/chapter on violence. The topic of violence is usually discussed as part of the topic of aggression (Tedeschi *et. al.*, 2003). Until 1940 research on aggression and violence was limited to examination of biological factors. The Frustration Aggression (FA) theory inspired researchers to conduct experimental research on the issue.

Frustration Aggression (FA) Theory: FA theory, first promulgated by Dollard *et.al.* in 1939, argues that frustration, defined as "… an interference in obtaining a goal when an organism is striving to obtain the goal, automatically—because of biological prewiring—creates aggressive energy or drive" (Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003, 460). The aggressive drive develops in aggressive behavior directed towards frustrating agent. Once aggressive behavior is exhibited then aggressive drive decreases (catharsis). Just like other behavior, aggressive behavior operates on the principle of rewards-punishment, i.e. if aggressive behavior is punished then it would be inhibited; if rewarded then it would be repeated again and again. Furthermore, the theory states that if aggressive behavior is not exhibited, the (aggressive) drive would sustain and it may lead organism towards 'displaced aggression' – either in the form of non-inhibited aggressive behavior towards the agent of frustration or towards other object which is in some ways similar to the frustrating object. It is worth-noting, however, that not every type of frustration leads to aggressive behavior.

Buss (1966) argues that frustration may lead to depression, anxiety, or learned helplessness. It may perhaps lead to very positive behavior (Buss, 1978). Similarly, the idea that aggressive behavior would decrease aggressive – hence catharsis – should mean that once aggressive behavior (& aggressive drive) is decreased, we should expect no more aggression from that person on

immediate basis. Research by Geen & Quanty (1977) concludes that aggressiveness tends towards the development of more aggression (Geen & Quanty, 1977). Buss (1966) explains the phenomenon of aggression in terms of instrumental conditioning, i.e. reinforcement of aggressive behavior increase tendency towards high frequency and intensity of aggressiveness (Geen & Pigg, 1970). Buss (1966) also added the factors of personality and anger in the explanation of aggressive behavior. He associated certain temperament types with aggressive behavior, e.g. impulsiveness, activity level, and independence are types of temperaments associated with aggression.

Emotion-Aggression Theory: Berkowitz's reformulation of frustration-aggression theory into 'emotion-aggression theory' has been quite popular since its presentation in 1993. Recognizing that many acts of aggression are not always the result of frustration, he proposed that it is not frustration itself but the negative emotions associated with aversive conditions which results in aggressive behavior. In other words, Berkowitz shifted the focus of analysis from frustration to negative feeling/emotions and formulated that all forms of negative affects/emotions cause aggressions (Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003, 481). Aversive events can be non-social (such as physical pain, loud noise, extreme temperature) or social (such as interpersonal frustration or provocation). He divides aggression into two types, viz. emotional aggression and instrumental aggression. The former is based on "innate tendencies of organisms to respond aggressively … to aversive stimulation". The development of negative effects is dependent on aversive stimulation – negative effects lead to desire to hurt someone or something which ultimately and consequently results in aggressive behavior. The aversive stimulation may magnify negative thoughts/feelings of an individual already experiencing intense negative affects and therefore the intensity of aggressive behavior. In other words, anger is not the cause of aggression but it induces negative thoughts/feelings adding to the negative emotions. Emotional aggression hurts the target and this is its aim. In instrumental aggression, hurting the target might be means to achieve other goals. "A robber's goal is to get the loot and not to harm the victim. However, harming the victim may be a necessary aspect of getting the loot" (Berkowitz, 1993).

Social Learning Theory: Bandura (1977, 1983) proposed a cognitively oriented social learning theory. Bandura, like other behaviour theorists,

maintained that all human behavior – including violent behavior – is learned through interaction with the social environment. Bandura argued that people are not born with a violent disposition. Rather, they learn to think and act violently as a result of their day-to-day experiences (Bandura, 1977). According to him, individuals learn aggression by observing models, i.e. through imitation, especially when the behavior of model is reinforced positively. Learning involves four interrelated processes: firstly, the cues, responses and outcomes must be closely observed by the observer; secondly, observations so taken should be encoded; thirdly, the encoding should lead to imitation of observed behavior; fourth, if appropriate conditions for incentive to performance exist, then the imitation would actually occur (Bandura & Cervone, 1983). Bandura observed children and stated that they would imitate an adult's kicking, yelling etc. if the adult's behavior was reinforced. Therefore, from the point of view of Bandura's theory, the use of punishment by parents would serve as model to children; when effective, it reinforces parents but children would learn and imitate the same at least in trying it out over others. Bandura and Walters (1963) also assert that children receiving corporal punishment from parents are more aggressive than those children who are not corporally punished (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Similarly, longitudinal researches on the effects of child abuse on violent behavior later in life also confirm this view (McCord, 1983). There are differences with these findings, however: Loeber and Schmaling (1985) conducted meta-analysis of effects of family experiences on delinquency and concluded that "harsh discipline was not an important predictor of misbehavior" (Loeber & Schmaling, 1985).

Social Interaction (SI) Theory: Tedeschi's (1993) Social Interaction (SI) theory offers rather a novel approach. It suggests the replacement of 'violence' with 'coercive action'. SI has questioned the concept of aggression on following grounds. Since aggression is generally defined as "… any behavior that the actor performs with an intent to do harm", Tedeschi, (1993) argues that in its entire history of research on aggression/violence, no theorist has defined the meaning of *intention*; hardly has anyone ever documented the subjective intentions of participants in experimental research on aggression. Secondly, the notion of legitimate action and illegitimate action varies both inter-societal and intra-societal. Therefore, there is no need for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate threats, punishments, or bodily force because the essential motives that explain their use are the same.

Coercive action, according to Tedeschi and Felson (1994), is based on three types of motives, viz. social control, justice and identity (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Tedeschi and Felson have proposed that anger produces justice motivation. When a negative event is blamed on another actor, the victim is angered, and anger produces a desire to remedy the injustice. SI theory assumes that every individual typically behaves as cost-benefit analyst, i.e. people seek rewards and avoid punishment and in the seeking and/or avoiding of something we would always rely on other people's reinforcements: "… if we are going to achieve our goals, we must influence others to do what we need them to do so that we can have what we want" (Tedeschi, 2003: 465). An individual could use persuasion, reward, alliance-formation etc. to influence others towards his/her goals-achievement. Social Interaction (SI) proposes that coercive action is used as a matter of last resort when other means of influencing others would not work and when the individual is clung strongly with the desire to achieve his/her goal. Those low on intelligence or inarticulate are not persuasive; those without resources cannot offer reward in exchange. This observation is attested by Wilson and Hernstein (1985) that violence criminals are low on intelligence than non-violent criminals, and according to Infante, Chandler, and Rudd (1989) inarticulateness is related to spouse abuse. Secondly, when a victim or his/her associates perceive injustice it leads to emotional aggression and the resultant desire to punish the perpetrator. In such situation, a person may take no action, may decide that someone else is responsible for injustice or may redefine the entire situation or forgive the person, may make demand for restitution or may punish him/her. Furthermore, the aggrieved may do nothing when the costs of taking action are high than the expected outcome (Tedeschi, 2003). Thirdly, coercive (violent) action may emerge for the protection or projection of identity. SI also proposes that at given time all of these three motives might be present in a coercive action. Sometimes one motive may become primary, at other situation another motives may become important (Tedeschi, 2003: 467).

The two broad categories of theories discussed above, i.e. macro and micro theory provide useful information about violence and aggressive behavior. The former group of theories argues that violence is the result of the overall structure of society, while the later focuses on the interpersonal conditions and cognitive process of the actors. The belief that violence is a 'structural issue' needs a little more discussion.

The Structure of Violence

        Early structuralist anthropologists in their ethnographies have dealt with the topic of violence as merely deviant behavior and they did not consider violence or deviance as part of normal functioning of every society. Ethnographers working on the issue of violence thought that violence is the result of disorder. They took it as a product of sudden outburst of emotions, that is why those societies which had rather visible rate of violence were termed as 'savage' societies but they did not take note of societies going to warfare in European history. We usually assume violence as a sudden eruption or outburst of emotions – tension, anxiety etc. – (Georg, 2003), but whether we speak of individual violence or organized violence, it is always planned and rationally designed means for the achievement of certain goals. According to Kasrtedt and Eisner (2009: 5) the seemingly distinct forms of violence are quite related to each other. For instance, interpersonal violence increase whenever there are high rates of unemployment, inflation or financial crunch but it generally decreases during and immediately after wars. Similarly, societies with characteristically harsh and frequent infliction of punishments have higher rate of violence. Moreover, being rationally motivated, there is the second assumption about violence, i.e. that it is 'socially embedded'. This should be noted once again that violence is part and parcel of *normal* functioning of society. It is pertinent to point out at this stage that the idea of viewing violence as normal phenomenon and as socially embedded is primarily held by conflict school of thought (Gluckman, 1956; Koch & Irby, 2005). Similarly, for functionalists too violence is normal part of human society (Dubet, 2003).

        Socialization and social control function to eliminate violence in society. Durkheim (1970) considered human beings as full of innumerable desires and when anomie occurs it unleashes the problems of violence, such as suicide. Since human beings cannot control their own desires, socially the institutions such as education and system of social control play central role in limiting the desires. Readers should, however, note at this juncture that Marxists and functionalists do not view the normality of violence in essentially the same manner and for the same cause: for Marxists, its existence is evidence of social inequality as well as a movement of resistance against tyranny or exploitation; for Functionalists, violence is not positive – at least for not all the times – but still is part of every human society. A similar type of reasoning was

given by Graham and Gurr (1979) in their theory of relative frustration. When there emerges a wide gap between desires and means for achieving them, frustration occurs which may result in violent behavior.

Violence is structured in our everyday interaction and patterns of behaviors. And as stated earlier, whether we focus on micro-interactions or structure of institution or the whole social structure, we would find it embedded everywhere. With respect to individual-level violence, research from behavioral neuroscience and other related fields confirm that aggression and anti-social behavior is the product of both nature and nurture. Genetic factors have been identified with respect to development of criminal behavior and psychiatric disorders etc. (Baker & Myles, 2003). However, beyond this, existing models of aggression/violence do not satisfactorily delineate the exact magnitude of contribution by nurture and nature in the development of antisocial and violent behavior. Similarly, a number of studies have examined genetic endowment and environmental factors in the development of delinquent and violent behavior but none have clearly identified the etiology (i.e. causes of violence) except that those consistently delinquent might be because of genes while those individuals who temporarily remain delinquent (say in adolescence) might be because of environmental factors (Moffitt, 1993). An important finding with respect to gender differences in violent behavior in children is that male humans are more aggressive than females during the first three years of childhood: boys "… have higher incidences of conduct disorder during childhood, and engage more frequently in criminal behavior from adolescence through adulthood" (Baker & Myles, 2003: 601). This is universally found in all cultures, classes and age groups.

At macro level, violence exists almost in every aspect of our lives. As a starting point we could refer to Eisner's (2009) list of categories of violence given above. According to Georg (2003), violence is repetitive in nature and therefore is a social process. And as a social process "it presupposes rules and penalties, roles and channels of communication, plans and calculations—it cannot be based on emotions alone" (Georg, 2003: 268). Violence is often seemed as unplanned and transitional. This is a created myth because this way of thinking means that if violence occurs we would not have to think too much in its legality/illegality or legitimacy. For example, the 1994 massacre in Rwanda seemed like a sudden explosion of emotions but in fact it was "an

inter-play of systematically planned and ideologically prepared violence, with a process of escalation that developed dynamics of its own" (Neubert, 1999). A conflicting situation existed prior to the massacre. The conflict of interests, goals or motives coupled with power imbalances in any social situation may give rise to violence.

Summary of the review

The various theories reviewed in this paper seem to contradict each other. On a closer look, however, these seemingly contradictory explanations have a number of common points among them. Researchers on violence and violent behavior need to focus on their commonalities, rather than differences among various theories. For example, most of the theories explain that violence is normal part of social life and should be treated as social process. Secondly, violence is 'socially embedded' and should be considered as part of everyday social interaction. Thirdly, while it is true that violent actions have individual and personal motives behind them, valence is essentially a 'structural issue'. It means that individual behavior at micro level correlates with the macro level social environment of the particular society. A culture conducive for violent behavior is likely to increase the chances of individual motivations for violent behavior. Fourthly, the literature suggests that though criminal acts and violent behavior varies in nature, intensity and scale, they are, however, interrelated to each other. Moreover, the nature and scale of crimes also correlates with other changes in society, such as unemployment and inflation. This suggests that far from being the result of one's personal motives and biological make-up, violent behavior is mostly socially determined. These findings will help researchers in synthesizing various theories for explaining a particular phenomenon of violence. On the other hand, understanding the above aspects of crimes and violence will also help policy makers in promoting a peaceful and secure society by addressing the structural aspect of violence.

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