

Update on Social Understandings of Violence

Thomas W. Blume

Oakland University

* Please address correspondence to Thomas Blume, Ph.D., LMFT, LPC, Oakland University, Department of Counseling, 456 Pioneer Drive, Rochester MI 48309-4482. E-mail: blume@oakland.edu.

Abstract

In a 1996 Michigan Family Review article I explored ways of understanding violence in social context. That article was written during a time of escalating increased community violence in the U.S. -- and heightened public concern with public safety. I applied three socially oriented perspectives to understanding community violence and its prevention: functional analysis, social constructionism, and systems theory. In this update I reflect on 20 years of changing patterns of violence, changing social understandings of violence, and implications for prevention as well as treatment.

Keywords: violence, social context, social construction, theory, patterns, prevention

My 1996 article, [Social Perspectives on Violence](#), was an optimistic paper. In *Michigan Family Review*'s special issue, "Attacking violence: Prevention and Intervention in the late 20th Century," other authors were addressing domestic violence, post-divorce conflicts, and elder abuse. Although and one author proposed an evolutionary understanding of violence, I chose to focus on the community violence that was dominating news stories and public consciousness in the 1990s. I took the position that human violence is not universal and therefore it should be possible to study its variations, learn how to work with the contexts where violence is more common, and thereby promote conditions in which violence will be less likely.

When the current editor invited me in 2016 to revisit that article and the topic of violence, I expected that I might need to revise many of my assumptions. At the time of my earlier writing, the killing of 12 students and wounding of 21 others at Columbine High School had not yet happened. The World Trade Center attacks had not yet taken place, and police violence was generally seen as a rare occurrence. At the same time I also expected that the theoretical resources I used

in 1996 could prove to be seriously outdated when applied to current patterns of family and community violence.

Given that I had emphasized the potential for change, some of the trends I found were encouraging. I found data indicating that Community Violence and Intimate Partner Violence have become much less prevalent. In the theoretical realm, I was pleased to see more attention being given to social perspectives. But I found other changes that I found disturbing. In this update I will address some changes in the social context of violence that have occurred since 1996 and some significant innovations in the various branches of professional literature that apply to violence.

The Social Context of Violence

The 1980s and 1990s were a period in which street violence—often attributed to the epidemic of crack cocaine addiction—led to a constant level of fear among residents of U.S. cities (Koop & Lundberg, 1992). It was my contention in 1996 that this community violence could best be understood in light of social conditions and social forces. I argued that economic disparities and power differences based on gender, race, and ethnic identification were so great that people were unable to understand each other and saw violence as their best option. I also noted that the climate of fear seemed to be feeding a new pattern of mass incarceration.

Levels of community violence in the U.S. have dropped considerably. Lurigio (2014) summarized data based on both police reports and household surveys, showing dramatic decreases in violent crime rates beginning in the early 1990s. The reductions were so great that homicides reached a 60-year low point in 2010. Furthermore, other data show a decline of reported violence in intimate relationships. The U.S. Department of Justice (2015) reported an overall 64 per cent decline in intimate partner violence from 1994 to 2010 and noted an even higher decline for Hispanic females.

But these changes do not necessarily indicate that U.S. society has become less violent. Sylvia Walby (2012), a leader in the emerging sociology of violence, notes that many countries have experienced declines in interpersonal violence committed by disadvantaged individuals: robbery, homicide, and some kinds of domestic violence. The growth of state control, she says, may be credited to some extent with having suppressed these offenses against the public order. But Walby observes that greater attention is now being given to “forms of violence that had previously been unseen, buried, disguised and otherwise denied, which are directed from the more powerful to the less powerful.” (p. 98). In 2016, consistent with Walby’s observation, public and professional attention in the U.S. was shifting to kinds of violence that may have been common but were overlooked because the victims lacked a voice. For example, sexual violence on campuses—in many cases committed by privileged members of athletic teams and fraternities—has become the object of intensive prevention and intervention programs. Hate crimes against LGBTQ individuals have been rising dramatically, mass shootings in schools and churches have become more common, and a horrendous escalation of police violence toward African American males is raising concerns about the culture of law enforcement.

The 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign offered an opportunity to hear politicians and voters talk about the current state of violence. Those public conversations rarely mentioned violence in the family. Instead, elected officials and candidates for office talked about terrorist attacks, often attributing them to immigrant populations. At the same time, trends in U.S. violence may have been overshadowed to a great extent by international news stories of gender-based violence, genocide, and warfare (Lee, 2016).

In 1996 it was hard to know how much real increase had occurred in rates of violence and how much of the apparent increase was the result of violence becoming more visible. In 2016 the question of increased visibility has new meanings. As Collins (2008) observed, security video systems and smart phones held by participants and onlookers are providing documentation of violence that many people find shocking.

Social Contexts

The pervasive street violence of the late 20th Century in the United States has diminished, but the reasons for this change are not entirely clear. Zimring (2006) attributed much of the decline in violent crime to changing patterns of law enforcement. Lurigio (2014) acknowledged changes in law enforcement but also suggested that fluctuations in crime rates—increases as well as decreases—may have resulted from economic changes, changes in markets for street drugs, and changes in age distribution. But he hesitated to draw conclusions, writing “The only constants in the ever-fluctuating criminal victimization rates are the over-representation among victims and offenders of youth, minorities and the most impoverished residents of urban areas.” (p. 5)

At the international level, acts of terrorism in many parts of the world include massive attacks on ethnic minorities and women. Open warfare seems to be growing as some leaders exploit divisions in their own populace and conflicts with neighboring states. In a parallel with local processes, national leaders find that institutionalized violence is accepted by citizens who fear other kinds of violence.

Conditions that contribute to stress and conflict are not diminishing in the United States. In many rural as well as urban communities, unemployment is unevenly distributed; polarized groups view themselves as competing for resources and portray each other negatively. Gender relations continue to undergo significant change, with women outnumbering men on many college campuses and approaching equal representation in some professions that were historically male. At the level of family life, alternative family forms, including single-parent and multigenerational households, are increasing, and Browning (2002) has suggested that violence may be more likely when social structures are less consistent.

Sociologists are sensitive to group conflicts, especially when power differentials exist, and changes on this dimension over the past 20 years seem to be negative. Social media seem to offer safe havens for hate groups to recruit new members and organize their threats. Mass shootings and other terrorist acts are becoming more common in the last 20 years, and it is not unusual to find that the perpetrators were encouraged by extremist groups.

Social Theory and Practice

My 1996 article proposed that social theories of violence offered hope of at least two kinds. First, greater understanding the conditions that foster violence might point to changes that families, communities, institutions, and larger political systems could make so that levels of violence would decrease. Second, increased understandings of violence might promote the development of approaches that could help individuals, families, communities, institutions, and larger political systems recover from traumatic experiences and become more resilient. Twenty years later, these two goals continue to motivate theorists and practitioners. The following examples of innovation are intended to be illustrative, not comprehensive.

The past 20 years have seen the development of new bodies of literature in which theorists and researchers describe violence in systemic terms that include not only larger systems surrounding violent episodes but also subsystems including the neurological responses of participants themselves. Hamby (2011), for example, in the first edition of a new journal, *Psychology of Violence*, announced a “second wave of violence scholarship” distinguished by an effort to understand how individual, family, and social factors intersect in producing violence. To some extent this new literature has been driven by new technology and advances in neurobiological research into arousal. But examinations of micro and macro processes also are proliferating, focusing on the intersections of elements as diverse as individual cognition and personality, safety planning, bystander effects, relational processes such as attachment, and food and water shortages.

Chan, Hollingsworth, Espelage, and Mitchell (2016) have adapted ecological systems theory to describe the ways in which culture intersects with sociopolitical realities and community structures in creating settings for violence. They describe pilot violence prevention programs that operate at multiple levels, focus on individuals in communities, and attend to culture.

Collins’ (2008) micro-sociology of violence focused on interpersonal elements in violent situations, questioning how some situations are managed in ways that lead to violent acts or to the avoidance of violence. He noted that the micro-level study of violent situations has been enhanced by the rapid expansion of video data sources from actual violent encounters, observing that new data sources increase the ability to observe and theorize about “the intertwining of human emotions of fear, anger, and excitement.” (p.4). Collins examined norms, strategies, the presence of intermediaries, and audience effects that shape “Pathways around confrontational tension and fear” (p. 9),

Social constructionist frameworks have also become more prominent in the violence literature. In 1996 my application of social construction theory was focused on gender messages: masculine discourse, its hegemonic assumption of dominance over women, and its glorification of violence. This theme continues to be highly relevant; a U.S. Department of Justice (2015) report showed that boys and men are still more likely to be aggressors than victims of intimate violence. However, approaches to intimate partner violence (IPV) are changing. Rejecting the assumption that all men involved in couple violence are “patriarchal

terrorists,” some professionals are developing more complex descriptions of interactions that include reciprocal violence (Johnson, in press).

Gender discourses appear to be responsive to interventions that are focused on the social group or the relational unit rather than the individual. Newer IPV intervention programs (e.g., Stith, McCollum, Amanor-Boadu, & Smith, 2012) focus less on stereotyping and more on helping partners overcome alienation and increase mutual respect. The group focus is proving effective in challenges to rape culture, a shared posture among young men who bond through their mutual disrespect for women (Swartout, 2013).

At the same time, the past 20 years have seen the increasing impact of another gendered theme in contemporary violence: assaults on those who challenge traditional assumptions about gender and sexuality. With heightened visibility, many LGBTQ individuals are encountering hate violence at home and in the community. Such targeted violence toward specific groups – including racial and national groups and those who differ on characteristics such as age, abilities, and body types – may be understood using social constructionist frameworks. Increasing use of social media and the growth of specialized media sources seems to feed perceptions of difference with the dual effects of emboldening more aggressive groups and increasing fear levels among those who lack the skills or the tools for violence.

Conclusion

Over the last 20 years, violence has continued to be a major topic for scholarship and community attention in the U.S. and around the world, but the focus has shifted. From a time when street crime was the primary concern, apparently driven by economic stresses and social polarization, intimate partner violence and police violence now share attention with terrorism and war. Social constructionist models have been applied to community-level conflict with the goal of reducing alienation and increasing empathy. The Public Conversations Project (Gergen & Gergen, 2006), for example, trains facilitators for the role of bringing people together to discuss such hotly contested issues as abortion, immigration, and gun ownership. Another social constructionist effort, the Restorative Justice movement (Umbreit & Armour, 2011), works with victims and perpetrators of violence to overcome polarization and work toward a shared commitment to nonviolence. As theorists have made progress in their use of social perspectives to understand different kinds of violence, newer understandings are being applied in prevention activities and programs designed to help survivors of trauma.

References

- Blume, T. W. (1996). Social perspectives on violence. *Michigan Family Review*, 2(1), 9-23.
- Browning, R. (2002). The span of collective efficacy: Extending social disorganization theory to partner violence. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 833-850. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00833.x

- Chan, W. Y., Hollingsworth, M. A., Espelage, D. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2016). Preventing violence in context: The importance of culture for implementing systemic change. *Psychology of Violence, 1*(6), 22-26. DOI: 10.1037/vio0000021
- Collins, R. (2008). *Violence: A micro-sociological theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2006). Narratives in action. *Narrative Inquiry, 16*, 112-121. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.15ger>
- Hamby, S. (2011). The second wave of violence scholarship: Integrating and broadening theories of violence. *Psychology of Violence 1*(3), 163–165. DOI: 10.1037/a0024121
- Johnson, M. P. (in press). A personal social history of a typology of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.
- Koop, C. E., & Lundberg, G. D. (1992). Violence in America: A public health emergency. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 267* (222), 3075-3076. DOI: 10.1001/jama.1992.03480220093036
- Lee, B. X. (2016). Causes and cures V: The sociology and anthropology of violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 27*, 158-163. DOI: 0.1016/j.avb.2016.03.001
- Lurigio, A. J. (2014). *Violent victimization in the United States: Major issues and trends*. (White paper.) Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.
- Stith, S. M., McCollum, E. E., Amanor-Boadu, Y., & Smith, D. (2012). Systemic perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence treatment. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 38*(1), 220-240. DOI:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00245.x
- Swartout, K. M. (2013). The company they keep: How peer networks influence male sexual aggression. *Psychology of Violence, 3*(2), 157-171.
- Umbriet, M., & Armour, M. P. (2011). *Restorative justice dialogue: An essential for research and practice*. New York: Springer.
- United Nations (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. New York: United Nations. Downloaded from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>
- U.S. Department of Justice (2015). *Intimate partner violence, 1993-2010*. Downloaded from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/bjsreleases/ipv10914.html>
- Walby, S. (2012). Violence and society: Introduction to an emerging field of sociology. *Current Sociology, 61*(2), 95-111. DOI: 10.1177/0011392112456478
- Zimring, F. E. (2006). *The great American crime decline*. New York: Oxford.