HOW VIOLENCE ERUPTS

Two guys get into a quarrel over something stupid. Their dispute escalates. Finally one of them hits the other and somebody gets hurt. This seems to be an entirely irrational sequence of events, but is it? Violent decisions are included among the crime decisions I discussed in the last chapter. It may surprise you that one of the best ways to study how disputes escalate is to carry out experiments at universities.

MAKING STUDENTS ANGRY IN A LAB

Psychologists at universities have conducted a variety of experiments in which they seek to create disputes and to make people angry. In a typical experiment, a student subject walks into a room where he finds another student sitting. The other student insults him, perhaps saying, “That’s an ugly shirt you are wearing.” The other student is really working for the professor, who is sitting behind a one-way mirror watching the situation. Will the subject answer the insult and escalate with a worse insult?

In general, a young male is more likely to answer and escalate if insulted by another young male. A young man is less likely to insult a woman back, least of all an older woman. (I think young men have long been insulted by middle-aged women—their teachers—and are quite used to it.) The most important finding is that young males respond worst to perceived insults by other young males.
Remember to look at this from the viewpoint of the person experiencing an insult, regardless of whether you think he is right or wrong in his perception. His viewpoint counts the most. Does he think he was insulted and does he feel he must answer?—that is the question.

Now you can vary the experiment in a number of ways:

- Add an audience, so the subject is insulted in front of others
- Vary the ages and sex of the audience
- Add a peacemaker, who tells him to ignore the insult
- Add a troublemaker, who tells him to stand up to the other guy
- Give the subject some alcohol to drink before you insult him

When these experiments are carried out we learn that subjects are much more likely to answer and escalate when there is an audience for the insulting experience. They are also more likely to escalate when a young male is insulted by another young male in the presence of still other young males—a recipe for trouble. Comments like “Don’t pay any attention to Joe” or “You guys knock it off” generally suffice to quiet the waters. On the other hand, some members of an audience may act as troublemakers or provokers. Statements such as “Are you going to let him say that to you?” tend to encourage escalation. Thus, a peacemaker can quiet things down and a troublemaker really can escalate the situation by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Alcohol can reduce inhibitions and escalate verbal aggression in the university lab, but also outside the lab.

IN REAL LIFE

Tedeschi and R. Felson (1994) review a substantial literature justifying the points I made in the last section (see also R. Felson & Outlaw, 2007). But they also showed that these principles apply outside the laboratory in real-life incidents. Barroom settings, for example, have patterns of aggression, and disputes arise and escalate more often when young males drink together. This gives us a policy handle, reminding us to be careful about heavy-drinking bars and all-male settings. It tells us also that barroom regulation has a major role in violence prevention.

The barroom literature shows that bars generate more aggression with heavy drinking, especially when the barrooms are large, disorganized, and dominated by males who are given more to drink when already drunk. Barrooms are quite a bit worse when they bring together small groups from different places.
This occurs when one group of guys go to a large bar and then clash with another group from another part of town. All-male groups of strangers are especially volatile. Very large bars create more problems. Bar mismanagement and bad design is an important factor—I take this up later in the current chapter, then return to the issue in discussing how to design and manage safer bars (Chapter 10).

FIGHTS VS. PREDATORY ATTACKS

Fights are violent interactions involving two or more persons in the same conflict role. Most fights emerge from quarrels in which neither party is fully innocent. Often they are equally guilty, or almost so. They frequently have a preexisting relationship, but sometimes strangers or near-strangers get into a fight.

True, one guy might have thrown the first punch, but if the other guy insulted or taunted him, it is hard to call that a predatory crime. Fighting words and a fighting response may incriminate both sides in the eyes of a local judge or police officer. Typically, the police take the winner of the fight to jail and the loser to the hospital.

The escalation sequence typically works like this:

1. One party perceives an insult from the other.
2. He responds to the insult and escalates the confrontation.
3. That answer evokes a similar escalation.
4. Someone throws the first punch, and so it goes.

Of course, the lab experiments I mentioned above stop short of a physical fight, sticking to the first three steps for research purposes.

In a fight, the audience is especially important, for it enhances the embarrassment of being insulted and compels a response. If someone in the audience acts as peacemaker and face-saver, escalation can be averted. Later in this chapter I further discuss barroom disputes and escalations.

VIOLENT DECISIONS

The robbery decision might be the easiest violent decision to explain: “Your money or your life” might not be polite, but at least it makes sense with what the robber wants. Other types of violence are sometimes not so easy to explain.
In their book *Violence, Aggression and Coercive Action* (1994), James Tedeschi and Richard Felson conclude that all violence is instrumental. They deny that any violence is “expressive,” and reject the old distinction between instrumental and expressive violence. They take great care to show how various types of violence have a purpose in the immediate situation.

Suppose three 14-year-old boys throw a rock at a middle-aged man, cutting his arm. His neighbors conclude that “This is senseless violence. These kids did not get one cent for what they did.” But the youths probably have a purpose. They may be punishing the man for yelling at them the other day. They may be putting on a show, proving how strong they are. Tedeschi and R. Felson (1994) show that various principles of social psychology can explain this and other violent incidents quite easily. Violence requires neither a unique theory nor an elaborate one. Unfortunately, many of the people who write about violence are so upset that they cannot calm themselves down enough to analyze it well.

What if two guys get into an argument? They get madder and madder, until one hits the other. Is this irrational violence? Regrettably, the words “rational” and “emotional” are often seen as opposites, implying that a person cannot make a decision while angry. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Angry decisions are part of life. That does not mean an emotional person reasons carefully or for long. Nor are emotional decisions likely to be wise or good for the long run. But they are still decisions. (On this point, see Bouffard, Exum, & Paternoster, 2000; Harding, Morgan, Indermaur, Ferrante, & Blagg, 1998.)

Perhaps we can invent the term “minimal rationality” as a reminder that decisions need not involve wisdom, good sense, or good results. A decision made in a split second for the wrong reasons, even while angry, is still a decision no matter how foolish it appears in hindsight.

Even violence by athletes has a structure. They seldom attack the officials or the most muscular opponents. They almost always drop bats and sticks first. They punch, but don’t kick. Athletes are well aware which acts of violence draw the worst punishments and stop short. They also pay attention to whether the officials are looking, but sometimes they get carried away and end up with a more serious suspension than they bargained for.

Drawing from Tedeschi and R. Felson, there are three types of motivation for a violent act:

Motive I—One person uses violence to force another person to do something he wants. *Example: Making someone give you money or sex.*
Motive II—One person uses violence against another to restore justice, as he perceives it. Example: Punishing someone for being unkind to a woman, or for stepping in line ahead of others.

Motive III—Assert and protect your self-image. Example: Punch someone for insulting you in front of a group of people—the example used earlier in this chapter.

As we shall see in Chapter 10, these goals often make violence highly amenable to situational prevention. Much of that prevention is related to alcohol. But why does alcohol help fuel disputes and their escalation into violent action? Alcohol gives people big mouths and big ears. While drinking, a person is more likely to make aggressive statements that provoke counterattacks and escalation. Alcohol makes bigger ears by getting people to hear things that were not said. The key to crime analysis is always to look at the offender’s viewpoint, even if the offender is drunk. In the case of violent crime, the question is whether somebody perceives an attack on themselves, not whether they are acting like a reasonable person.

I mentioned how robbery is the easiest violent crime to explain. A simple robbery starts out with the robber demanding your money and using or threatening force to get it. The robber is simply getting you to comply with his wishes—receiving your money without an argument (Motive I). But if you challenge the robber in front of his co-offender, he may harm you to assert and protect his own identity (Motive III for violence). That is why it is best not to have a big mouth when someone is pointing a gun at you. It’s also best not to go around giving people grievances against you; somebody might decide to restore justice (Motive II). Fights between drunken young males usually occur as attempts to assert and protect identity (Motive III). Road rage is often an effort to meet the second goal, restoring justice, or perhaps combining Motives II and III. Domestic violence could meet all three purposes (see R. Felson & Outlaw, 2007).

Although predatory violence is generally oriented toward the first motive—gaining compliance—predatory offenders will sometimes seek to protect identity or restore justice. For example, youths angry at the store owner who yelled at them may rob him not only for loot but also to retaliate and punish. Remember, all these evaluations are based on the offender’s viewpoint. To understand violent or nonviolent crime, we cannot be distracted by our own moral outrage, or by the legal code, or by objective facts about what a person ought to think of others. If the guy in the bar hit you because he thinks you insulted him, the fact...
that he heard you wrong is entirely beside the point. Thus, nonacquisitive violence also has a purpose. Punishing others for what you think is bad behavior is also a purpose. Saving face for yourself after someone else has diminished your reputation is also a purpose. Hence, social psychological purposes are just as important as money—maybe even more important for explaining violence.

Moreover, violent actions are often carried out in practical ways. R. Felson (1996) explained that “big people hit little people,” and more generally offenders find victims who are relatively smaller, or enlist help from co-offenders when the victim is able to defend. Rana Sampson’s (2002) review of the bullying literature establishes that weaker youths are more likely to be “picked on.” None of this sounds “irrational.”

IT MIGHT NOT WORK OUT WELL

Yet people often have regrets later about their violent decisions. An offender hits someone who hits back harder. Another offender restores his self-image for a moment, then spends a month in jail. Another wins a fight but is punished by the loser’s friends. He thought he was advancing his own interests, but it didn’t work out that way.

Consider the headline in the newspaper, “Cab driver murdered for one dollar.” The news story implies that the robber knew he had only a dollar and killed him to get it. Probably something like this happened: The robber entered the taxi hoping to wave a gun at the driver and take home a few hundred dollars for a few seconds’ effort. It went badly. The driver did not comply and even insulted the robber. The robber got mad and shot him, then grabbed his wallet, only finding a dollar within, and then was picked up by police, ending up with a long prison term. We cannot infer the offender’s intention from the outcome.

Barroom Impacts on Violent Escalations

As I stated earlier, a good setting for examining the escalation of disputes in real life is a barroom. You will see many more references to barrooms in this book, since they are often crime generators and even crime attractors, and are very amenable to design (see Chapters 10 and 11). Although they vary greatly, some barrooms create the worst-case conditions for conflict to emerge and escalate. It is not just that people are drinking. Many barrooms assemble
numerous young males. You recall from earlier in this chapter that young males are more likely to escalate a dispute than other social categories. In addition, barrooms have an audience for a dispute, which makes it harder to shrug off an insult. Since potential peacemakers are themselves drinking, they might not be able to calm things down. In addition, barrooms create disputes between customers and their own staff, who may refuse entry to underage youths or try to shut a drinker off or kick him out. Often bartenders are themselves the problem, acting with excess verbal or physical aggression against patrons instead of as peacemakers. (For the sources of information contained in these sections, see Homel & Clark, 1994; Homel, Hauritz, Wortley, McIlwain, & Carvolth, 2007; Scott & Dedel, 2006.)

Problems are especially likely with very large bars where guardianship and place management are much more difficult. In addition, such bars can assemble clashing groups of young males. After each group of friends arrives they encounter other groups they don’t know. A youth who is bumped in front of his peers may lose face and an escalation is more likely.

In studying discos and other nightclubs, researchers observed brushing, bumping, knocking, spilling drinks, pushing, shoving, hitting, and fighting (Homel, 2001; Macintyre & Homel, 1997). Conflicts were enhanced when activities were too dense inside nightclubs, or when their tables, pillars, and design caused people to bump into each other. Disk jockeys played a role in watching the crowd and calming them down when necessary. In later chapters we come back to the environmental design issue, but the point for now is that barroom contingencies can cause patrons to become more peaceful or less. Disputes can emerge much more often in some bars, and escalation can be prevented or enhanced, depending on situational features.

So, if we look at other bar settings we see fewer disputes, especially ones that escalate. Those bars that mix different ages and are close to parity between males and females often have minimal problems, especially if they are not too large and avoid drinking contests or other trouble-enhancers. Bars with regular customers have fewer problems than those with sporadic assemblages. Thus the outcomes are extremely varied from bar to bar and even from night to night. Recent work by Steve Geoffrion illustrates these points very well.

Geoffrion is a graduate student at the University of Montreal who formerly worked in a large bar drawing from two large universities. He arranged for bouncers to write detailed narratives of each incident of aggression and incivility that occurred in the bar. He gathered and analyzed this information
Problem events and escalations were far from random. They shifted over the course of a night and varied by day of week. Tuesday nights offered cheaper drinks and drew large crowds of heavy drinkers from different areas, producing extra problem events. Long weekends also had extra aggression. This confirms what we have been saying, that barroom problems display some systematic variation, while responding to serving policies and supervision by bar personnel.

**The Role of Barroom Staff**

If I am sitting next to you at the bar and accidently knock over your beer, a skilled bartender should quickly replace the beer for free and wipe up the mess. The dispute is quickly contained and the bar remains peaceful. Scott and Dedel (2006) review and detail the evidence that barroom personnel can contain aggressive behavior. Experienced bartenders do better than neophytes, and trained bartenders outperform those who are untrained. Staff can function as guardians (protecting victims), handlers (modifying behavior of offenders, especially regular customers), and place managers (in a way, their main job).

Scott and Dedel compile several strategies by which bar personnel can defuse aggressive incidents, including:

- removing the audience (getting aggressors away from onlookers),
- employing calming strategies (using verbal and nonverbal skills), and
- depersonalizing the encounter or offering face-saving possibilities.

In Chapter 11, which deals with local design, I review quite a number of other tactics and strategies for reducing barroom violence. In Chapter 6, I consider adolescent settings where drinking-related problems may also occur.

**CONCLUSION**

Note how closely the real-life outcomes in barrooms coincide with the artificial laboratory situation. Aggression can escalate or not. People might respond to insults, but can also shrug them off. Other people can fire them up, or else cool them down. Situational factors have considerable impact on whether a dispute will explode or not.
Dispute-related violence is quick and quirky. How ironic that the most serious of crimes requires the least consideration. A shoplifter or burglar needs a minute or two, but someone can punch you in the nose in a flash. As you shall see in later chapters, crime prevention experts have used the situational features of disputes to dampen escalation and keep people from blundering toward violence.

**MAIN POINTS**

1. Violence is not irrational but involves goals and quick calculations, even when the offender is very angry.
2. Small disputes can escalate into something much bigger.
3. Disputes are more likely if young males perceive insults from other young males.
5. Peacemakers and provokers can, respectively, make a situation better or worse.
6. Bars assembling large numbers of young males create extra problems, including clashing groups.

**PROJECTS AND CHALLENGES**

*Interview projects.* (a) During off-duty or slack hours, interview a bartender about specific methods used to prevent conflict from developing and escalating. Ask about shutting off those drinking too much, how to refuse those who are underage, and how to calm people down. What does he or she do when someone spills a drink? (b) Interview anyone with experience in a sport that involves a fair amount of violence. Find out the decision factors and settings that invite violence, as well as those that discourage it.

*Media project.* Find a media account of two conflicts in baseball or some other sport, one that escalated and one that did not. Consider decisions the players or officials might have made and how the escalation might have been avoided.
Map project. Draw the inside of two bars and consider which one is more likely to have people bumping into each other and other conflicts.

Photo project. Take a picture of five crowded settings and discuss which ones would probably generate more conflict and escalation.

Web project. Search the web for sites that discuss conflict. How many of them treat conflict as irrational and how many, in some sense, as rational and/or structured?