

AGE AND THE EFFECT OF THIRD PARTIES  
DURING CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the behavior of third parties in incidents of homicide and assault and their effect on the behavior of offenders and victims. It was hypothesized that violence would be more intense when third parties who were present during the incident are supportive of violence. Further, it was hypothesized that conflicts involving youth are likely to be more intense because significant others who were present during incidents involving youth are more likely to be supportive of violence. These hypotheses were supported. For example, offenders delivered more blows in situations where their family or friends were also aggressive and they struck fewer blows when third parties attempted to mediate the conflict. The results are consistent with the notion that position in the social structure can affect behavior because it affects the situations and the types of persons with whom one interacts. In addition, it is noteworthy that a behavior that one might have assumed is the result of an uncontrollable outburst, is socially influenced.

Explanations of the effects of social-demographic variables on violence and other behaviors generally focus on differences in socialization and differences in attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Wolfgang and Ferracutti, 1967). Less frequent are explanations that focus on the way status or position in the social structure affects the types of situations in which persons are likely to be involved. Given the importance of situational variables in the determination of behavior, it seems important to investigate whether

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these variables mediate the effect of social structure on individual behavior. Of particular importance are the behavior and perceived values of others who are present in a particular situation. If persons in different groups or positions are more likely to interact with persons who are similar to them, then small initial differences between individuals in different groups may multiply into larger differences because of situational social influence. In other words, homogamous interaction results in a greater diversity in behavior. Felson and Liska (forthcoming), for example, found that boys (grades 6-8) engaged in more school misconduct than girls, in part, because both boys and girls were influenced by same-sexed classmates. Since the boys in the class engaged in more deviance as a group than the girls, this influence resulted in stronger individual differences in deviance than there otherwise might have been.

The present paper looks at the role of third parties in the effect of age on the behavior of offenders and victims during incidents of criminal violence. Past research clearly shows that youth are much more likely to engage in criminal violence than adults. (See Wolfgang and Ferracutti, 1967, for a review). At least one of the reasons for greater violence among youth may be that third parties who are present in conflicts involving youth are more likely to be sympathetic with violence. Thus, age differences in violence may be exaggerated due to age segregation, i.e., the tendency of persons to interact with others of similar age. For example, when young males are involved in conflicts, it may be more likely that there are other young males present who are favorable toward violence, and this may increase the probability of violence. Furthermore, youth violence may become more intense because of the support of others who are present during the conflict.

There is an experimental literature which suggests that antagonists are likely to be more aggressive when third parties are favorable to aggression. Thus, third parties can pressure subjects to deliver shock (e.g., Milgram, 1965) or they can inhibit aggression by attempting to mediate the conflict (see Rubin and Brown, 1975, for a review). Third party influence may also be more subtle. For example, subjects deliver more shock when they are observed by males than when they are observed by females, presumably because males are assumed by subjects to be more favorable to aggression (Borden, 1975). And Zimbardo (1970) finds that anonymity increases the delivery of shock in an experimental setting. However, there are reasons to be suspicious about the generalizability or external validity of these studies. First, it is difficult if not impossible to get subjects to engage in aggressive behavior in experiments without making it appropriate through some instructional set. For example, subjects are told that the delivery of shock is part of a game or that they should use shock as punishment to promote learning. In fact, virtually all experimental studies of aggression involve the presence and influence of a third party, the experimenter, who legitimates aggressive behavior. Second, it has been demonstrated that subjects are extremely vulnerable to social influence in experimental situations. This may be due to the fact that these situations are ambiguous and novel and it may also be due to apprehensiveness on the part of subjects about being evaluated by a psychologist (Rosenberg, 1965). Third, experiments may use extreme stimulus values in their manipulations that rarely if ever occur in natural settings (Borgatta and Bohrnstedt, 1974). For example, the type of social pressure applied to subjects in Milgram's

well-known study of obedient aggression is probably quite rare. Thus, it is important to know what types of behaviors third parties actually engage in and the effects they have in naturally occurring circumstances.

There is not much research on the role of third parties outside the experimental laboratory. Luckenbill (1977) reports that third parties frequently define a violent response as appropriate for participants in homicidal situations. Short and Strodbeck (1965) report that third party mediation plays an important role in reducing the gang violence they observed. Finally, Felson (1982) analyzed self-reports of samples of ex-mental patients, ex-offenders and the general population in order to examine the interaction culminating in verbal aggression and physical violence. This study found that incidents were likely to be more severe if third parties engaged in instigating actions during the incident and that actions that followed mediating actions were less likely to be aggressive than actions occurring in random positions during the incident.

The present paper, then, examines three issues regarding the role of third parties in homicides and assaults. First, we examine the types of actions that third parties engage in when they participate in these incidents. Using descriptions of the incident obtained from pre-sentencing reports, we examine the frequency with which third parties mediate, instigate or engage in aggressive actions and we compare their behavior with the behavior of offenders and victims. Second, we examine whether family or friends who are present during the incident influence the offender and the victim. Based on the experimental literature, we expect that violence of offenders and of victims is more intense when third parties who are significant others are aggressive, and that their violence is less intense when third parties attempt to mediate the conflict. Finally, we examine whether third party behavior mediates the relationship between age and violence. It is hypothesized that third parties in conflicts involving youthful offenders are more likely to be supportive of violence, and this increases the intensity with which offenders and victims attack each other.

#### METHODS

The analysis is based on descriptions of incidents for 155 males who were incarcerated in New York State Correctional Facilities in 1977 for felonious assault, manslaughter or murder. Offenses were omitted if they were committed in conjunction with other crimes or if there was insufficient detail in the description of the instant offense. Most of the sample is non-white (79 percent) and of lower socioeconomic status and 47 percent was under 21 years of age. Ages ranged from 16 to 60 with a mean of 26.4.

Detailed descriptions of these violent offenses based on the testimony of eye-witnesses, victims and offenders were obtained from pre-sentencing reports.<sup>1</sup> Actions were identified from these descriptions and classified into the following categories: physical attacks; identity attacks (including insults, rejections, accusal, complaints, boasting, ignoring and physical violations where no physical harm is delivered); threats; mediating actions; and instigating actions (including requesting someone else to settle the dispute, giving a weapon to one of the antagonists or urging him on).

The procedure is described in more detail in Felson and Steadman (1983). Two persons independently coded these actions and then met to resolve their differences. The inter-rater agreement for coding these actions was 76 percent. The relatively low reliability is attributable to the difficulty that coders had coding the exact same action in the exact same order, beginning and ending the incident at the same point. The agreement would have been slightly higher if the more general classification scheme had been used in the reliability check.

A count was made of how often these actions were engaged in by the offender, victim and third parties. The offender refers to the person convicted of the crime (not necessarily the primary aggressor), the victim refers to the major deceased or injured party, and third parties refer to anyone else mentioned in the report as engaging in some action during the incident. It was impossible to study inactive bystanders since they were not likely to be mentioned in the report. At least one third party engaged in some action in 69 percent (107) of the incidents. Most of the analyses are based on these cases. For the path analyses of situational social influence, third parties were classified as to whether they were a significant other, i.e., whether they had some social tie to the offender or the victim. A significant other can involve either a friend, a lover, a relative, or an acquaintance, and in some instances, is in such a relationship with both the offender and the victim.

The number of blows delivered by the offender is based on medical evidence in the pre-sentencing report. The total number of hits, cuts or shots struck by the offender was obtained from this report. This variable ranges from one to four, where several are coded as three, and numerous and multiple are coded as four. We shall use the number of blows by the offender to measure the intensity of his attack. This measure should be reliable because it is based on medical evidence. However, since there was no medical evidence available on the number of blows delivered by the victim we shall have to rely on the number of physical attacks coded from the description of the offense — a less reliable measure — to measure the intensity of the victim's attack. This is for the most part a dichotomous measure since very few victims engaged in more than one physical attack. The age of the offender was obtained from the commitment blotter while the age of the victim was obtained from the description of the incident. The latter variable has a considerable amount of missing data (57 percent).

We recognize that the sample is not a large one. However, it should be kept in mind that the type of detailed coding required to analyze interaction sequences is time-consuming and the expense would be prohibitive for a large sample of cases. In addition, of course, statistical tests take sample size into account. However, one does have to be cautious in interpreting the size of coefficients as accurate estimates of actual effects. In fact, there is reason to believe that we underestimate effects involving third party behavior, since there is probably a considerable amount of random measurement error in these variables. There may be some systematic measurement error as well if, for example, officials attempt to build a case against the offender in the pre-sentencing reports. However, it seems unlikely that such a bias would have much of an effect on the descriptions of the behaviors of third parties. Finally, since the study is limited to crimes resulting in incarceration, more mild

forms of assault and aggression have been omitted. Thus, for example, if mediation had been completely successful, the violence might not have occurred at all. As a result, it is impossible to examine the full role of third parties (and age, for that matter) in aggression using these data. However, if third party effects can be demonstrated even with the limited range of outcomes in this data, the results would be that much more dramatic.

RESULTS

Types of Actions Engaged in by Third Parties

Table 1 presents the types of actions engaged in by offenders, victims and third parties in incidents where there are no accomplices (N=70), but where third parties do participate. By omitting cases in which third parties are legally charged as accomplices, we omit those cases in which third parties could also be classified as offenders. The table indicates that third parties in these interactions are more likely to be aggressive themselves than to serve as mediators. They engage in mediation in 13 percent of the incidents, physical attacks in 20 percent of the incidents, identity attacks in 18.6 percent of the incidents and instigation in 17 percent of the incidents. In 59 percent of the incidents, they engage in some type of aggressive action, either verbal or physical.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1: Percent of Incidents in which Offenders, Victims and Third Parties Engage in Various Actions.

Cases Where Third Parties are Charged as Accomplices are Excluded (N=70).

Actions	Offenders	Victims	Third Parties
Physical Attack	100.0%	31.4%	20.0%
Identity Attack	37.1	34.3	18.6
Threats	24.3	8.6	4.5
Mediation	2.9	7.1	12.9
Instigation	1.4	1.4	17.1

Third parties are legally charged as accomplices in 34 percent of the incidents in which they are active. In about half the cases where third parties are active (48 percent), third parties were originally one of the main antagonists and either the offender or victim interceded. Note that in a few instances (see Table 1) offenders and victims engaged in mediating or instigating actions themselves.

Age, Third Party Behavior, and Violence by the Major Participants

It was hypothesized that aggressive actions on the part of significant others would cause an antagonist to be more violent and that mediating actions would have the opposite effect. Aggressive actions by third parties imply greater favorability towards violence while mediating actions imply a negative response to violence. It was further hypothesized that third parties would be more supportive of violence in incidents involving youthful antagonists, since these third parties were likely to be young themselves. In order to examine these hypotheses, we determined the number of aggressive actions (verbal or physical) engaged in by significant others of the offender (and victim), and the number of third party mediating actions.<sup>3</sup> Because of the small number of mediating actions, they are not coded according to whose significant others performed them. The dependent variables are the number of blows delivered by the offender and the number of physical attacks engaged in by the victim.<sup>4</sup> The means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations (including cases where third parties are charged as accomplices) are presented in Table 2.<sup>5</sup> Path diagrams representing the assumed causal relationships for violence by the offender and victim are presented in Figure 1. The diagrams posit third party actions as mediating variables in the relationship between age and violence. They assume that third parties influence the offender and victim and not the reverse. While reciprocal influence is possible, it seems unlikely, particularly for offenders, since the offenders' physical attacks almost always occur at the end of the incident while third party actions tend to occur earlier. And even if there was some reciprocal influence, it would demonstrate the same social influence process with the same theoretical interpretation.

The hypothesis that the major participants would be more violent if their significant others are aggressive is supported. The path analyses suggest that when significant others of the offender are aggressive offenders deliver more blows (p=.33). Similarly, when the significant others of the victim are aggressive victims engaged in more physical attacks (p=.24).

The hypothesis that mediating actions inhibit violence by the offender and victim receives mixed support. When third parties mediate, offenders deliver fewer blows (p= -.22). However, mediation was not significantly related to physical attacks by the victim.

The hypothesis that third parties would be more supportive of violence in incidents involving youthful offenders generally received support. The age of the offender had a strong, positive relationship with third party mediation (p=.42) and a negative relationship with aggression by significant others of the offender (p= -.21). The effects of the victim's age on the behavior of his or her significant others are in

Table 2  
Table 2. Zero Order Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations

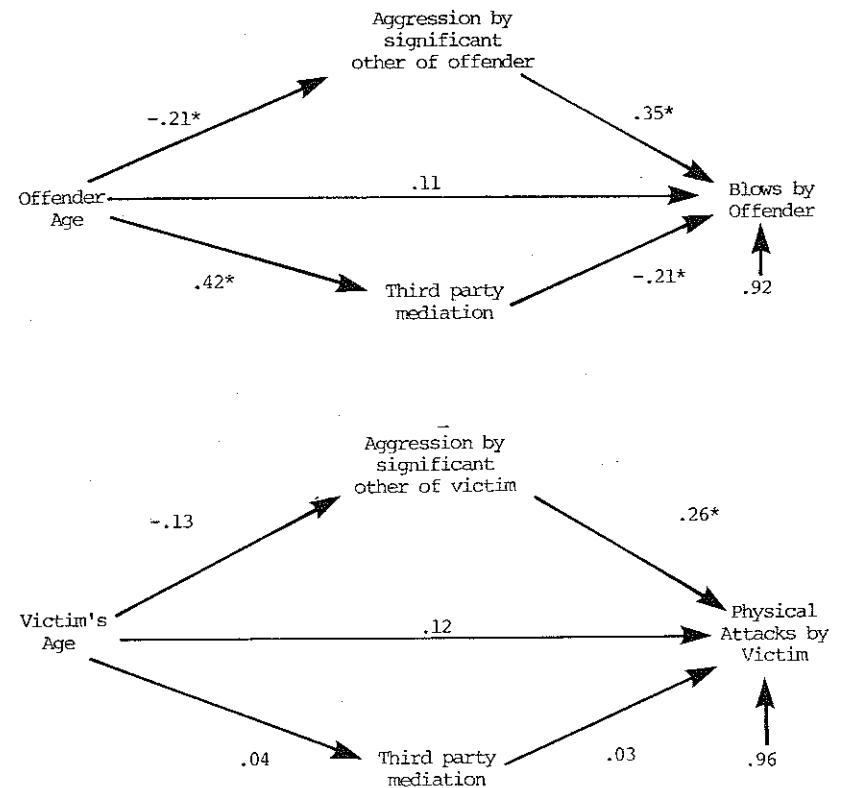
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1) Number of blows by offender	--	.10	-.05	.34**	.12	-.19	.27*
2) Number of physical attacks by victim		--	.02	.05	.25*	.07	.09
3) Age of offender			--	-.21	.05	.42**	.33**
4) Aggression by offenders significant others				--	.13	-.08	-.13
5) Aggression by victims significant others					--	.13	.18
6) Third party mediation						--	.04
7) Age of victim							--
$\bar{X}$	1.5	.45	26.4	.76	.32	.13	27.7
SD	.50	.65	10.6	1.3	.73	.34	11.1
(N)	(101)	(107)	(107)	(107)	(107)	(107)	(67)

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

FIGURE 1

Path analyses representing determinants of the number of blows delivered by the offender and the number of physical attacks by the victim.



\* p < .05

the predicted direction but they are not statistically significant. In addition, the direct effects of age were not statistically significant for either the offender or the victim.

One might ask if there are any characteristics of significant others of youthful offenders that are related to their tendency to be violent or favor violence. There are at least two possibilities; they may be younger themselves and they may be more likely to be males. Borden (1975) found that subjects tend to deliver more shocks when they were in the presence of males than when they were in the presence of females. We have indirect evidence that third parties of youthful offenders were also likely to be young males. Significant others of the offender who are present are much more likely to be friends for youth (offenders who are under 21) than for adults. Thus, 66.7 percent of the significant others of youth are friends compared to 33.9 percent of the significant others of adults ( $X^2=13.4$ ;  $p < .001$ ). And significant others were much less likely to be spouses or lovers for youths than for adults (4.8 percent versus 27.4 percent;  $X^2=11.9$ ;  $p < .001$ ). One can assume that close friends are more likely to be males, and that spouses and lovers are almost always females. One can also assume that friends, spouses and lovers are likely to be similar in age to the offender. Unfortunately, we did not code third party actions in conjunction with an identification of their exact relationship to the antagonist, so it is impossible to determine the types of actions engaged in by spouses, lovers and friends.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research suggests that third parties play an important role in homicide and assault. Frequently, they served as allies of the offender or victim in these incidents, engaging in physical attacks themselves, and in some instances they were legally charged as accomplices. Third parties sometimes instigated the conflict and sometimes they were the original antagonist for whom either the offender or victim interceded. These results suggest that it may be a mistake to view criminal violence as a function of either the behavior of a single individual or even the interaction of an offender and victim. These incidents appear to often involve multiple parties, many of whom engage in violent, or at least aggressive actions (see Pecar, 1972).

Third parties appear to be influential in these incidents. It appears that aggressive actions by significant others indicate that violence is appropriate for the major antagonists. It may be that these significant others, by behaving aggressively, define the situation as appropriate for violence but it may also be the case that third parties are the audience for whom offenders and victims are managing impressions (Felson, 1978). Offenders and victims may be more violent when they think that their significant others approved of such behavior. Either way, it is interesting to find that a behavior that one might have assumed is the result of an uncontrollable outburst is socially influenced. It is also interesting that third parties had an effect considering the limited variation in the outcome of these incidents. Their effect may have been more dramatic if the range of outcomes was greater.

It could be argued that the actions of the major participants and third parties correspond because both are responding to similar situations. For example, perhaps

an aggressive antagonist causes both the actor and his significant others to be more aggressive. The evidence suggests this is not the case: the degree of violence displayed by the major participants was unrelated to the aggressiveness of their opponent's significant others. Furthermore, the aggressiveness of the offender's significant others was not significantly related to the aggressiveness of the victim's significant others. However, there may be some other aspect of the situation that accounts for why an antagonist and his significant others behaved similarly. However, given experimental and other evidence showing the strength of the situational influence of third parties in aggressive situations, we prefer the explanations noted earlier.

Mediating actions were fairly infrequent but one suspects that this is because our sample included only incidents that result in criminal violence. Previous research based on interview data suggests that mediation occurs much more frequently in less severe incidents (Felson, 1982). When mediation occurred in these incidents, however, it did appear to restrain offenders somewhat.

There appear to be a substantial age effects on the behavior of third parties. The younger the offender the more likely third parties were aggressive and the less likely they were to mediate the conflict. This suggests that violence among youth is likely to be more intense because it involves support and participation from others. The sympathy of these third parties for violence derives from the fact that they also tend to be young (and male). Thus, it may be that age differences in the intensity of violence are exaggerated because of age segregation.<sup>6</sup> More generally, the evidence is consistent with the point of view that social-demographic characteristics of persons may affect violence (and other behaviors) because they affect the types of situations in which a person becomes involved and the types of persons with whom a person interacts.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Pre-sentencing reports may be more biased than police reports but they may also have more information. Police reports were unavailable.

<sup>2</sup>There are no differences between homicide and assault in any of the third party actions.

<sup>3</sup>The effects of verbal and physical attacks by third parties are similar.

<sup>4</sup>The type of weapon used by the offender is not likely to be influenced by third parties since decisions about what weapon to use are not likely to be made during the interaction preceding the attack; these decisions will rest largely on what the offender has available to him. The number of blows given by the offender was unrelated to the type of weapon he used.

<sup>5</sup>It is of no importance for the hypotheses whether third parties have been charged as accomplices; thus their inclusion in the sample is reasonable. The results in Table 2 were similar when analysis was restricted to cases where third parties were not charged as accomplices.

<sup>6</sup>Class and race of the offender were unrelated to third party actions. However, most of our sample is non-white and from the lower class.

## SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

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