Chapter 6
Patterns of Aggressive Social Interaction

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This paper has two purposes. First, I discuss three interactionist approaches to aggression that can be found in the literature. Most attention is given to an approach that interprets aggression as punishment for perceived wrongdoing, since that approach has never been fully explained. I argue that each approach is useful but limited in its ability to account for how aggressive encounters develop. Then, using some of the ideas developed in the theoretical section, I analyze self-reports of aggressive encounters of different levels of severity. An attempt is made to describe in a theoretically informed way what occurs in interactions that culminate in an aggressive attack.

Aggression is defined here as an act in which a person attempts or threatens to harm another person, regardless of the ultimate goal of the act. Thus, it is assumed that aggression (including "angry aggression") is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, and that persons use harm for a variety of purposes. For example, aggression may be used to save face, to teach someone a lesson, to defend oneself, or even to ultimately benefit the target. The definition includes behavior that is sometimes described as punishment, since punishment involves an attempt to harm another person. Harm-doing is often labeled as punishment, rather than aggression, when it is perceived as legitimate, but value judgments should be avoided in defining a phenomenon. And, as we shall see below, interpreting aggression and punishment as the same type of behavior (and showing the legitimacy of many aggressive acts) has significant implications for explaining how many aggressive interactions begin.
Theoretical Approaches

Aggression as Impression Management

The first approach is based on symbolic interactionism and a derivative of that approach, impression management theory. It focuses on the role of the self in aggressive situations, interpreting aggression as face-saving behavior that occurs when one perceives oneself as having been intentionally attacked. For example, in a previous paper (Felson, 1978) I suggested that when persons have been cast into negative situational identities (by insults, for example), they retaliate in order to resist those identities (see also, e.g., Hepburn, 1973; Luckenbill, 1977; Athens, 1980). By casting the original attacker into a negative identity, the identity implied by the original attack is negated, and the person’s honor or public image is restored. Retaliation is particularly likely if third parties are present, since face-saving concerns are exaggerated. However, if third parties mediate, the conflict is likely to be less serious, since both sides can back down without losing face (Rubin, 1980; Felson, Ribner & Siegel, in press).

This approach is limited in two important respects. First, it does not explain aggression that is used strategically to produce tangible rewards and to avoid costs. For example, force is used in robberies primarily for strategic purposes (Luckenbill, 1980). Second, the approach is limited in that it explains retaliatory aggression, but not the initial attack. Face-saving and maintaining honor are only relevant once persons think they have been attacked. With some notable exceptions (e.g., violence by youthful gangs against outsiders), unprovoked attacks are viewed negatively. In fact, the approach suggests that persons avoid unprovoked attacks on others because of rules of deference (Goffman, 1956), which protect identities in interaction, and because of the embarrassment that ensues when someone’s identity has been threatened. In some instances the original attack may be inadvertent; all that is necessary is that persons believe that they have been attacked and an aggressive conflict is likely to begin. However, it seems unlikely that in most instances the initial attack is inadvertent.

Aggression as Coercive Power

A second interactionist theory of aggression has been suggested by Tedeschi and his associates (e.g., Tedeschi, 1970; Tedeschi, Smith & Brown, 1974; Tedeschi, Gaes & Rivera, 1977). Tedeschi’s theory of coercive power suggests that harming – the concept of “aggression” is avoided because of its value connotations – is simply one technique used to influence people when other methods fail. Harm and the threat of harm (“punishment and threats”), whether provoked or not, are used to influence others to provide rewards. The decision to attack an antagonist depends on a calculation of the rewards and costs that would result from such an attack.

Unlike the impression management approach, Tedeschi’s scheme can explain initial attacks as well as retaliation. Further, it handles strategic factors and can
explain why the target of an attack might choose to submit, rather than retaliate. It is also limited, however, in two important ways. First, harmful acts that involve face-saving are not necessarily coercive, i.e., they are not necessarily used to force others to comply. For example, a young male who fights to avoid losing face in front of his girlfriend is not attempting to force anyone to change their behavior, since one cannot usually coerce an audience to give its approval. Rather, he is behaving in a way that he thinks will bring him approval from someone whose opinion he values. Only if he fights to display his power to his adversary or other would-be adversaries, or to maintain the credibility of his threats, could it be said that he was engaging in coercive power. Thus some, but not all, impression management is coercive.

Second, not all harmful acts are designed to influence others. For example, harm that is used to maintain equity or promote justice is not an attempt at social influence. In other words, some harm-doing is perceived as legitimate or just when someone has done something that deserves punishment. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

Aggression as Punishment

Aggression can also be conceptualized as punishment — either actual or threatened (Felson, 1981; 1982). Such an approach implies that the harmful act is in response to some offense or misbehavior. It also suggests the possibility that harm-doing can be legitimate when it is identified as punishment for a wrongful act. Aggression is more easily understood if it can be shown to be perceived as legitimate or socially desirable in certain instances.

This approach can be applied to both the legal system and to more informal acts of punishment. In the case of the legal system, the state specifies penalties for various criminal offenses in the form of fines or prison sentences and aggression is institutionalized. In the case of noncriminal offenses, the punishment may range from reproaches for wrongful behaviors to verbal and physical attacks focused directly on the offender. Persons who observe an offense are usually entitled to at least reproach an offender, and persons in special roles, e.g., parents and teachers, have the specific authority to punish. In fact, for more serious offenses, observers may be expected to punish the offender.

Black (1983) has made a similar argument in his interpretation of some types of crime as social control:

"Far from being an intentional violation of a prohibition, much crime is moralistic and involves the pursuit of justice. It is a mode of conflict management, possibly a form of punishment, even capital punishment. Viewed in relation to..."

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1 Tedeschi also discusses threats and punishments, but coercive power appears to be his central focus. He recognizes the limitations of the coercive power approach and is attempting to develop a more comprehensive theory (personal communication).

2 Aggression is often elicited in experimental situations by legitimating it as punishment for wrong-doing (e.g., the teacher-luncher paradigm).
law, it is self-help. To the degree that it defines or responds to the conduct of someone else – the victim – as deviant, crime is social control.” (Black, 1983, p. 34)

For Black, self-help is an expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression that was more common before the advent of law and formal legal systems, but that continues to exist.

The rationale or explanation for legal punishment and informal punishment are the same. Using the language of legal theory, two explanations are generally given: deterrence and retribution. Deterrence refers to the use of punishment to deter future offenses and directly corresponds to the notion of coercive power discussed by Tedeschi. It includes specific deterrence (the threat of punishment to the offender for future violations), general deterrence (the threat to third parties who might consider engaging in such violations), and incapacitation (rendering the offender unable to commit another offense). From the perspective of the group, then, aggression is an important mechanism of social control. Groups encourage harm-doing in certain instances to discourage and control deviance.

Retribution refers to the desire of persons to see misbehavior punished, even when deterrence is not an issue. It is sometimes described in terms of a norm of justice or distributive justice or equity. The norm can be used to explain why people want to harm, or see others harm, persons who are guilty of some wrongful act, even if they are not the victim of that act. Everyday observation suggests that persons can become quite angry about an injustice, i.e., an offense that goes unpunished, even when they are personally unaffected. Further, the norm explains a basic fact about punishment: the severity of punishment is strongly related to the severity of the offense (Durkheim, 1947).\(^3\)

Unfortunately, this interactionist approach to aggression is also limited. First, it may be stretching it a bit to consider harm-doing during robberies and rapes as punishment. True, violence is used primarily during these crimes in response to, or in anticipation of, noncompliance and thus is used to deter resistance. However, this noncompliance may or may not be viewed by the offender as an offense. The question is whether the robber or rapist views his own behavior or his target’s behavior as legitimate. Second, the approach does not account for all instances in which aggression is used to save face. When persons are victims of a personal attack, as opposed to some other type of offense or as opposed to an offense against some other party, they are particularly likely to harm the perpetrator. In other words, retaliation is likely because the target’s identity is involved. And, in contrast to retribution, the victim of an attack on identity seeks victory in the aggressive encounter, not a fair exchange where the punishment and the offense are proportionate. Both face-saving and retribution may play a role in retaliation for a personal attack, since this behavior is both an attack on identity and a wrongful act. Targets want to retaliate in order to save face and are justifi-

\(^3\) Durkheim (1947) explained punishment by reference to a “collective conscience” rather than a norm of retribution and he rejected the deterrence argument as an explanation of punishment. Goode (1973) argues that most punishment at the interpersonal level is not consciously intended as a deterrence strategy.
ed in doing so because the aggressor has violated a norm and deserves punishment. Thus the norm of justice serves the motive for revenge.

The punishment approach suggests that a social control process occurs in the early stages of an aggressive encounter. This process culminates in a punishment response in the form of a reproach or an insult. I now describe the actions that are likely to precede the punishment.

1. Type of Offense. There are two types of offenses that may result in punishment: violations of norms and violations of orders. In the case of norm violations, offenders are punished for something they have already done. In the case of violation of orders, punishment occurs when a person will not comply with a request or command. Similarly, Schelling (1960; 1966) distinguishes compliance from deterrence, the former referring to actions designed to get persons do what they would otherwise not do, rather than to cease what they are already doing.

Violations of norms and orders are similar conceptually. As Homans (1950) suggests: “Orders are not different in kind from norms. Both norms and orders . . . specify what the behavior of the members of a certain group ought to be rather than what it really is. The only difference between the two is that norms apply to the maintenance of established behavior, orders to future changes in behavior . . . “(p. 416). In addition, violations of norms may result in orders to cease the offensive behavior. Continuation of that behavior would then involve noncompliance with both norms and orders.

Informal punishment for norm violations has been observed in a number of field studies. For example, in his study of the bank wiring observation room, Homans (1950) found that ridicule and “binging” – punching in the arm – were used against rate-busters. Miller, Geerz, and Cutter (1961) found that most of the aggressive acts of the boys’ group they observed were directed against group members for “failure to contribute toward group ends, disruption of concerted activities, or failure to maintain expected relations of reciprocity and equality” (p. 296). Punishment for noncompliance with orders has been observed in studies of criminal violence. The frequent occurrence of requests, commands, threats, and noncompliance in homicides and assaults (not involving robbery and rape), and the infrequency of compliant actions, have been reported by Luckenbill (1971) and Felson and Steadman (1983). For example, Felson and Steadman found that homicides and assaults began with verbal conflict in which identities were attacked and attempts to influence the victim failed. These were followed by threats and evasive actions and, finally, physical attack.

2. Accounts. Punishment may not occur immediately after the audience perceives a violation. According to the literature on accounts, the audience may respond with a challenge or query as to why the offender has engaged in such an action. Either in response to these challenges or in anticipation of them, offenders may provide accounts. An account is an excuse or justification for some potentially deviant act (Scott & Lyman, 1968). By giving accounts, offenders attempt to align themselves with the normative order and divorce themselves from their actions (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). When accounts are successful, offenders can avoid
sanctions from the audience, or at least reduce their severity. Thus, Felson (1982) found that if either antagonist in an aggressive situation provided an account of his actions, the verbal conflict was less likely to become physically violent.

Accounts may occur in three possible positions during a social control sequence: (1) before the rule violation (see Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, on “disclaimers”), (2) immediately following rule violations, or (3) after the reproach. In the first two instances the actor anticipates reproaches and other negative reactions from the audience and attempts to avoid them. One suspects that many aggressive interactions are avoided in this way. If the actor fails to anticipate the negative reaction and is openly reproached by the other, an aggressive interaction is likely, since that reproach may be perceived as an attack. Thus, in most aggressive interactions we would expect that persons have failed to give accounts until they have been reproached. As a result, one would expect accounts to occur following reproaches, rather than before or immediately after rule violations.

A Comparison of the Approaches

I have reviewed three interactionist approaches to aggression. The first emphasizes identities and face-saving, the second emphasizes coercion to produce compliance, and the third emphasizes punishment for perceived wrongdoing. All three are limited in the types of behaviors they can explain. Impression management theory is limited because it cannot account for the first attack or for strategic factors. For example, it cannot explain why persons sometimes do not retaliate against a more powerful opponent, even if it means a loss of face. Tedeschi’s theory of coercive power is limited because it cannot account for impression management behavior (unless it involves a display of power) or for legitimate retribution. Finally, the interpretation of aggression as punishment is limited because it cannot handle face-saving behavior or coercion where the targets’ noncompliance is viewed as legitimate. Unfortunately, there is no single scheme that can account for every instance of aggression, and therefore a more parsimonious theory is unavailable. However, integration may be possible, since the three schemes are similar in a number of ways. First, all three are interactionist theories in that they emphasize situational factors and the importance of the interaction preceding the attack. Second, all three interpret aggression as social influence behavior, although the punishment approach emphasizes the normative aspect of this behavior as well. Finally, the coercive power approach and the punishment approach both emphasize the role of aggression in producing compliance.

Perhaps an integration would be possible if either the pursuit of favorable identities or the desire for tangible rewards is identified as more basic. From a symbolic interactionist point of view, for example, persons may pursue rewards and avoid costs (through force and other means), and follow the norm of retribution (and other norms), in their pursuit of favorable identities. On the other hand, a reinforcement position would suggest that pursuit of identities and conformity to norms are attributable to the desire for tangible benefits. One’s choice
in these matters is largely a function of one's philosophical predilections and I will not pursue the argument here. Instead, I borrow from all three approaches (although not equally) to suggest the following scenario. Aggressive encounters generally begin when persons violate norms or orders. The audience responds to these violations with an attack or a threat to attack, either because they wish to produce compliance (by the target or third parties) or because they believe wrongdoing deserves to be punished. This initial attack can be described, then, as social control behavior. Once an attack of any kind occurs, identities and facesaving become involved and the likelihood of further attack is increased. However, the target of an attack may submit if he believes the costs of retaliation are too high. 

4 An interactionist approach also has implications for the types of individual variables that are likely to be associated with aggression. The following variables are likely to be important: the propensity to break rules (and thus become a target of punishment); the ability and willingness to provide accounts, particularly before one has been reproached; the tendency to accept or believe the accounts of others (i.e., trust); the ability to use other techniques to influence others effectively; an aversion to creating "scenes" or embarrassment; harshness in the evaluation of various offenses; judgments of appropriate punishment, in particular, the willingness to use corporal punishment; the importance of maintaining one's honor; and the tendency to perceive reproaches or other behavior as an attack on the self.

A Description of Aggressive Incidents

Introduction

In the empirical portion of this paper, I attempt to describe what occurs in episodes culminating in intentional attacks. I shall use the theoretical scheme just described to analyze these episodes, but by no means do I view these analyses as a test of this perspective. Incidents of four different levels of severity are examined: incidents in which the respondent was angry, but did nothing about it; incidents involving verbal aggression only; incidents involving physical violence, but no weapons; and incidents involving weapons.

Three types of samples are studied: the general population, ex-mental patients, and ex-offenders. One would expect that the differences among these populations are extreme in terms of a variety of individual characteristics. Therefore, findings of similar relationships between variables for all three populations would provide evidence for the generality of the processes involved.

I begin by examining the frequencies of different actions that the respondents attribute to their antagonists and to themselves in these incidents. The discussion above and our earlier work with crime data suggest that the following types of actions are likely to occur during an aggressive encounter: orders, noncompliance, rule violations, reproaches, accounts, insults, threats, submission, and physical attacks. Log linear analysis is used to examine whether the frequencies of these actions are associated with the severity of the incident, with controls for the type of sample and the sex of the actor. I also discuss sex differences in these
behaviors. One expects that males are more aggressive than females, since most studies find evidence of sex differences in aggressive behavior (see Frodi, Macaulay & Thome, 1977, for a review). Second, I examine the ordering or position of actions during these incidents to determine whether social control behavior occurs early and verbal and physical attacks occur later in the incident. Third, I attempt to determine the position of accounts in the social control sequence by examining the sequencing of accounts, rule violations, and reproaches. I expect that accounts will tend to occur after reproaches because persons do not anticipate (sometimes by choice) negative reactions from the audience to their rule violations. Finally, I examine whether the agent of control or the target is the first to attack. If the initial attack is punishment for some violation, then the social control agent should be the first to attack. However, in some instances it may be that the control agent responds to the offense with a reproach and that the target is the first to attack, in retaliation for the reproach.

Samples

The analyses are based on interviews of persons aged 18-65 from the general population (N = 245), ex-mental patients (N = 148), and ex-criminal offenders (N = 141) in Albany County, New York. A representative sample from the general population was obtained through a multistage process in which street names were randomly chosen from each of 35 census tracts based on the percentage of population in that tract. A sample of dwellings on each street was then randomly selected, and a determination was made as to whether a male or female was to be interviewed, in order to achieve an equal sex distribution.

The sample of ex-mental patients included persons who had been living in the community for at least 6 months in the year preceding the interview. Respondents were contacted either through the mail or through visits to social clubs in the area for ex-mental patients.

The ex-offenders included parolees and local offenders who were contacted by mail. In addition, contact was made through a community day program for women who had been released from the state prison or from a local jail. All respondents had been living in the community for at least 6 months in the year preceding the interview.

Measurement

Respondents were asked to describe in detail four incidents of varying severity. They were told that this part of the interview would be recorded so that no information would be lost, but that their responses were confidential and that the tapes would be erased in a few days. Then they were asked to "recall the last dispute that you can remember clearly, that you were involved in, where a gun or knife was drawn or used." Later on they were asked a similar question about a dispute where there was "slapping or hitting with a fist, but no gun or other
weapon was involved.” The third incident they were asked to describe involved a “bad argument with someone which involved screaming, shouting, or name-calling, but not slapping or hitting — in other words, just a dispute where there was a bad argument, but nothing physical.” Finally, they were asked to recall a dispute in which they were “really angry at another person, but said nothing about it. In other words, we mean you kept your anger inside.”

Each description was coded as a sequence of unit-actions with an actor identified for each action. Three types of actors were identified: the respondent, the main antagonist, and third parties, i.e., anyone else present during the incident who engaged in some action. The actions were classified according to a scheme developed in earlier work on homicide and assault (Felson & Steadman, 1983). After coding the actions in detail, we classified them into ten general categories:

1. **Physical attacks**, including physical violations, pursuing for physical attack, and drawing and struggling for a weapon.
2. **Insults** or direct attacks on identity, including instances of yelling.
3. **Threats**, including challenges and dares and nonverbal threatening gestures. Here the actor indicates that harm is forthcoming; some but not all of these are contingent threats, i.e., communications of impending harm unless the target complies.
4. **Rule violations**, including annoying behavior, failure to discharge an obligation, ignoring, causing another’s loss inadvertently, boasting, inappropriate demeanor, infidelity, taking someone’s property, or violating that property.
5. **Reproaches**, including accusations, complaints, protests, commands to cease some offensive action or to leave, chastisement, and asking for accounts or redress. These are social control actions that focus on the behavior of their target, although they have implications for identities.
6. **Accounts**, or explanations of conduct.
7. **Submission**, including apologies, compliance, crying, pleas not to attack, and fleeing.
8. **Orders**, including requests and commands, except commands to cease offensive actions, since the latter respond to previous wrongful action. These are competent or persuasive actions, i.e., actions designed to produce compliance. However, this is not an ideal label, since orders imply that compliance is obligatory, while at least some (but not all) requests imply that compliance is optional. That is, in some contexts, actions that appear on the surface to be requests are actually commands.
9. **Noncompliance**, including refusal to comply and doing nothing when the antagonist has called for compliance.
10. **Mediation**, or actions that attempt to reconcile the opposing parties.

These were coded according to the ostensible nature of the action; no attempt was made to determine the underlying purpose or effect of the action. Further, only specific actions, and not emotions, were coded. Each tape-recorded event was independently coded by the interviewer and the project director. The coders agreed on the actions and their order approximately 78% of the time. The coders met afterward to resolve their differences and to agree to a final code.
While I recognize the limitations of self-report data, I would argue that these data are adequate for our purposes. Although respondents may forget some actions that occurred during the conflict and although they may attribute more negative actions to the antagonist and acknowledge fewer themselves, these biases should not affect the major conclusions. It is doubtful that such reporting biases can readily explain the relationships observed among various actions, sex, and severity. It is also unlikely that the order of events or the relationship between committing the first attack and engaging in rule violations or orders is affected by such biases. It is probable, however, that the patterns observed would have been more clear-cut if there were no measurement error. Moreover, there is reason to believe that the absolute frequencies of actions are underestimated due to memory loss. In sum, while self-report data are imperfect, they are the best available for describing what occurs in conflicts of these types among adults. Thus, I believe that an examination of individual findings, with an eye to alternative artifactual explanations, is more appropriate than a total rejection of the method.

*Action Frequencies by Sex and Type of Incident*

The actions of the respondent and antagonist are presented for each type of incident for the general population in Table 6.1. Since these absolute frequencies are probably underestimated, it is better to consider the relative frequencies of different actions to determine their role. According to these results, rule violations, reproaches, accounts, orders, and noncompliances occur frequently, suggesting that the social control process is playing an important role in many of these incidents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Respondents situations</th>
<th>Antagonists</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Only anger</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Hitting</td>
<td>Weapon</td>
<td>Only anger</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Hitting</td>
<td>Weapon</td>
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<td>13.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>25.2</td>
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<td>19.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reproaches</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>41.9</td>
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<td>16.1</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accounts</td>
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<td>44.3</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>25.6</td>
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<td>28.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
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<td>22.4</td>
<td>18.6</td>
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<td>33.5</td>
<td>39.9</td>
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<td>14.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>23.3</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>27.9</td>
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<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
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Note that respondents attribute more aggressive actions and rule violations and fewer accounts to the antagonists than they acknowledge themselves. There are two explanations for these differences. First, respondents may be biased either in their perception of the incident as
Log linear analyses were performed to determine whether either the respondent's or the antagonist's actions varied by population, sex, or type of incident. The data set was rearranged so that the incident was the unit of analysis. Each model involved five variables: Type or severity of incident (S) × sample or population (P) × sex of respondent (R) × sex of the antagonist (A) × action (V). The first four variables are the same in all models; the fifth (V) involves one of the nine actions of either the respondent or antagonist, producing a total of $9 \times 2 = 18$ models. Most analyses are based on a 4 (angry, but did nothing; argument; hitting; weapon) × 3 (general population, offenders, ex-patients) × 2 (male, female) × 2 (no, yes) table with 96 cells and an $N$ of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Respondent's action</th>
<th>Antagonist's action</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Request/orders</td>
<td>PRA, SRA, PS, V</td>
<td>49.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reproaches</td>
<td>PRA, SRA, PS, PV, SV, RV</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncompliance</td>
<td>PRA, SRA, PS, SV</td>
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<td>Threats</td>
<td>PRA, SRA, PS, PV, SV, AV</td>
<td>48.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical attack</td>
<td>PRA, PSV, SAV, SA</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>PRA, SRA, PS, SV</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* P, sample; R, respondent's sex; A, antagonist's sex; S, severity of incident; V, the action in the left-hand column, committed by either respondent or antagonist, as described by the caption.

It occurred, in their recall of it, or in their willingness to report what they remember to the interviewer. Thus, they may attribute more negatively valued actions (aggression and rule violations) to the antagonist and claim more positively valued actions (accounts) to themselves. Note that respondents attribute similar frequencies of neutral valued actions to themselves and the antagonist. Second, antagonists in these incidents may actually be more aggressive than the respondents. This is likely because the sample of antagonists was chosen because of their participation in aggressive incidents, while the respondents were not. This is supported by the finding that differences in aggression between respondents and antagonist are most notable in the weapons incidents, and these incidents are more likely to sample aggressive antagonists. We suspect that both of these processes are operating. In subsequent analyses we shall have to assume that the motivational bias is not altering our results in a systematic way.

6 While this is a large sample, it is not large enough to incorporate more than one action in a single model. Also, since these analyses focus on the actions of respondents and antagonists, mediation, which is performed primarily by third parties, is not included.
The large $N$ is due to the fact that most respondents described multiple incidents. Since the analysis of physical attacks by the respondent and antagonist are only performed on the incidents involving physical violence, these analyses are based on a $2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ table with 48 cells and an $N$ of 551. A value of $0.5$ is added to each cell because a few of the cells had zero entries (Goodman, 1970).

The final log linear models are presented in Table 6.2. While the fit of the model for respondent's physical attacks is only adequate, the rest of the fits are excellent. Each model includes a saturated term for the independent variables (PRA) as is customary. In the models involving all four types of incidents, there is a sex of respondent $\times$ sex of antagonist $\times$ severity interaction (SRA: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 29.4$ (3); $p < 0.0000$). This is due to the fact that conflicts are more likely to involve physical violence when males are in conflicts with other males. There is also a sample $\times$ severity interaction, reflecting the fact that incidents involving ex-offenders tend to be more severe (PS: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 40.7$ (6); $p < .0000$). We now describe, in turn, the interactions involving different actions and the severity of the incident (S), and the sex of the respondent (R) and antagonist (A).

1. **Severity of the Incident.** The antagonist was most likely to engage in a rule violation in incidents where the respondent was angry, but did nothing. This suggests that rule violations by the antagonist often do not elicit an overt response from the respondent. If the antagonist engages in a reproach, on the other hand, the respondent is unlikely to withhold his anger (SV: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 93.9$ (3); $p < .0000$). One suspects that reproaches are more likely to be perceived as attacks on identity than are rule violations, and thus retaliation is more likely.

Insults and threats also appear to lead to an escalation of the incident. As the severity of the incident increases, the frequency of threats from the respondent increases (SV: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 50.4$; $p < .0000$). Severity is also strongly associated with antagonist's threats, particularly for females (SAV: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 10.3$; $p = 0.02$). Insults from the antagonist are positively related to severity, but the effect is masked by some marginally significant ($p = 0.05$ and $p = 0.06$) interactions involving sample (SVP) and respondent's sex (SVR). The omission of the severity X insult from the antagonist (SV) term from a full two-order model is highly significant ($\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 57.0$; $p < .0000$). The pattern for respondent's insults is not as clear-cut, since these insults are most frequent in verbal disputes and least frequent in incidents involving unexpressed anger (SV: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 66.7$; $p < 0.0000$).

Accounts from either party appear to reduce the probability of physical violence. Accounts from the respondent (SV: $\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 70.2$; $p < 0.0000$) and from

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7 Unless otherwise noted, significance tests are based on the significance of differences in likelihood-ratio chi squares when the term is omitted from the final model.

8 This effect is masked by an SVA term which results because males engage in more rule violations than females in arguments and fewer rule violations than females in hitting incidents. The relationship between unexpressed anger and rule violations is unaffected by sex. The omission of the SV term from a full two-order model significantly decreases the adequacy of the fit ($\text{LR}_{\chi^2} = 29.7$, $p < 0.0000$).
the antagonist (SV: $\chi^2 (3) = 61.1; p < 0.0000$) were more frequent in incidents involving verbal disputes and unexpressed anger than in incidents involving physical violence.

Finally, the greater the severity of the incident, the greater the likelihood of a submissive action. Thus, the number of submissive actions by the respondent is positively associated with the severity of the incident (SV: $\chi^2 (3) = 30.0; p < 0.0000$). A similar pattern is observed for antagonist's submission, although it appears to vary slightly across populations (PSV: $\chi^2 (6) = 13.3; p = .04$). The omission of the SV term from a full two-order model is highly significant ($\chi^2 (3) = 16.8, p = 0.0008$).

In sum, the evidence suggests that rule violations are a source of many of these conflicts, but that rule violations can be ignored and open conflict avoided. Once one party reproaches or insults the other a verbal conflict is likely, since the other party is likely to retaliate. If the initial rule violator gives an account for his actions, the conflict is unlikely to become more serious, i.e., become physical. But if threats are made, physical violence and escalation (more generally) are likely. Finally, as escalation and the potential costs of the conflict increase, so does submission.  

2. Sex effects. In general there are no sex differences in verbal aggression (insults and threats), but there are strong differences in physical aggression. Male respondents are more likely to engage in physical attacks in hitting incidents (SRV: $\chi^2 (1) = 8.4; p = 0.004$), and male antagonists are more likely than female antagonists to engage in physical attack when the respondent is male (RAV: $\chi^2 (1) = 9.8; p = 0.002$). This is consistent with the interaction noted earlier among severity, sex of respondent, and sex of antagonist.

There are also sex differences in social control behavior. Female respondents are more likely to engage in reproaches (RV: $\chi^2 (1) = 8.6; p = 0.003$), and female antagonists are more likely to reproach males than male antagonists (RAV: $\chi^2 (1) = 8.6; p = 0.003$). Also, while male respondents are slightly more likely to engage in rule violations than female respondents (RV: $\chi^2 (1) = 3.7; p = 0.056$), the pattern for antagonist's rule violations is unclear.

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9 Ex-offenders engage in the most verbally aggressive actions of the three populations in that they are most likely to engage in threats (PV: $\chi^2 (2) = 13.6; p = 0.001$) and insults (PV: $\chi^2 (2) = 8.8; p = 0.01$). Ex-patients and the general population, on the other hand, are similar in the frequency with which they engage in verbal aggression. Ex-offenders also engage in more physical attacks than the other groups. Ex-patients are less likely to give accounts (PV: $\chi^2 (2) = 10.3; p = 0.006$) or to reproach (PV: $\chi^2 (2) = 10.8; p = 0.005$) their antagonist than the other groups. This suggest that they sometimes lack the social skills necessary to engage in social control behavior. They also receive fewer accounts (PV: $\chi^2 (2) = 7.0; p = 0.03$) probably because they are less likely to reproach the antagonist.
The Order of Events

This section focuses on the position and order of actions during these incidents. Since the incidents vary in length, we coded the position of each action as a proportion of the total number of actions in the incident. For example, if there were ten actions recorded, the first act was coded 0.1, the second act 0.2, and the final act was coded as 1.0. The mean positions and standard deviations for the ten general categories of actions are presented in Table 6.3 for the four types of incidents. The actions of respondents and antagonists were not distinguished, since there was no reason to expect the position of their actions to differ.

Table 6.3. Order of actions for the three samples combined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>Anger</th>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Hitting</th>
<th>Weapons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule violations</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orders</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproaches</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncompliance</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attacks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The actions are presented in the general order in which they occur, an order which is almost identical across types of incidents. The order of incidents involving unexpressed anger was slightly different, with rule violations occurring slightly later. However, in general, the actions occur in the following order: (1) rule violation, (2) orders, (3) reproaches and noncompliance, (4) accounts and insults, (5) threats, (6) physical attacks, (7) submission, and (8) mediation. Thus, as expected, these incidents begin with violations of norms and orders, including orders and noncompliance, rule violations, reproaches, and accounts. Explicit attacks on identities occur later, first as insults, then as threats, and then as physical attacks. Submission and mediation does not occur until late in the series of events.

These results do not show how frequently incidents begin with violations of norms and orders. To give a rough approximation of this frequency we examined the first action in each incident to determine if it was an action related to social control (i.e., a rule violation, order, reproach, or account) or an attack (i.e.,

10 This type of analysis does not reveal sequences of events, that is, whether a given action is likely to follow other actions. Nor does it imply that each of the actions occurs in every incident.
insult, threat, or physical attack). These two categories incorporate virtually all of the codable actions in the first position. For the general population, 89% of the incidents involving unexpressed anger, 90% of the arguments, 64% of the hitting incidents, and 68% of the weapon incidents began with an action related to social control. Thus, one can conclude that about two out of three physically violent incidents and about 90% of verbal incidents begin with violations of norms and orders. The remainder begins with intentional attacks; however, the reason for these initial attacks is unclear. They could be a response to an offense that occurred prior to the incident or they could be unprovoked.

The Position of Accounts in the Social Control Sequence

It was suggested that accounts would be given in response to, rather than in anticipation of, reproaches in aggressive interactions because anticipatory accounts would prevent the conflict from developing. Thus, we expect accounts to occur immediately after reproaches, rather than immediately before or after rule violations. To determine these positions we examined the probabilities of observing the following action sequences in the data: reproach-accounts, rule violations-accounts, and accounts-rule violations. The differences between the observed and expected probabilities (based on a random model) are presented in Table 6.4. For all three samples and for all four incidents, the probability of an account following a reproach is much greater than would be expected by chance. On the other hand, the probability of accounts before and after rule violations are either negative or zero, relative to their expected probabilities. Thus the evidence suggests that accounts tend to be given in response to, rather than in anticipation of, reproaches.

The First Attack

It has been suggested that the initial attack is often an attempt to punish an offender and that subsequent attacks are retaliatory. The evidence so far shows that attempts at social control tend to occur early in the incident, but I have not shown that the person who first attacks is the agent of social control. It is possible that aggression is first used instead by targets who are resisting control or who are retaliating for the control agent’s disapproval or reproach. To examine this question, it was determined whether the first attack (i.e., insult, threat, or physical attack) was carried out by the agent or target of control. Specifically, I determined who engaged in violations of rules and who gave orders during the incident and whether they were first to attack. If the social control agent tends to be the aggressor, then the actor who engaged in a rule violation should be less likely to be the aggressor and the actor who gave orders should be more likely to be the aggressor. The opposite pattern is predicted if the target of control tends to be the aggressor.
Table 6.4. Differences between observed and expected probabilities for selected action sequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial action</th>
<th>Following action</th>
<th>Unexpressed anger</th>
<th>Arguments</th>
<th>Hitting</th>
<th>Weapons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>Offenders</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>Offenders</td>
<td>Patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproach Account</td>
<td>Rule violation</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule violation Account</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.09*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05.
The percentage of incidents in which the respondent engaged in the first attack is presented in Table 6.5. A comparison is made between incidents in which the respondent (columns 3 and 4) and the antagonist (columns 5 and 6) did or did not engage in rule violations and orders.

Table 6.5. Percentage of incidents in which respondent was the first to engage in an aggressive act

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of incident</th>
<th>Action occurred</th>
<th>Respondent Rule violation</th>
<th>Respondent Orders</th>
<th>Antagonist Rule violation</th>
<th>Antagonist Orders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>31.8&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitting</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>32.5&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>25.7&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>22.3&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>44.0&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8.9&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>p < 0.01.

The results suggest that the control agent is most likely to engage in the first attack. For all three types of incidents, respondents who violated a rule are less likely to be the aggressor and respondents who have given orders are more likely to be the aggressor. Similarly, for all three incidents, respondents are more likely to be the aggressor when the antagonist engaged in a rule violation, and they are less likely to be the aggressor when the antagonist gave orders during the incident. While not all of the individual comparisons are statistically significant, the same pattern is observed in every comparison.

Discussion

I have attempted to describe in some detail what occurs in aggressive encounters of different levels of severity. This sort of description is important if an interactionist theory is to be developed. Three interactionist approaches were reviewed and then used to account for the interaction patterns in these incidents. The approach that treated aggression as punishment was most useful for explaining the initial attack. About nine out of ten verbal incidents and two out of three violent incidents began with a social control process in which someone was punished for violating norms or orders. While the coercive power approach could also account for the data, it would not explicitly predict that violations are the driving force in the development of an aggressive encounter, nor does it interpret the initial attack as legitimate in some contexts and this, I believe, is crucial in explaining why it occurs. On the other hand, all three approaches help explain why retaliation occurs. Retaliation saves face, it punishes a rule violation (the original attack), and it can deter a future attack. The decision not to retaliate often reflects strategic calculations of the high cost of such behavior and thus is best
explained by the coercive power approach. Thus, submission was most frequent in the more severe incidents where the costs of retaliation were undoubtedly higher.

The frequency of social control behavior in these incidents is noteworthy. For example, in verbal disputes involving the general population, reproaches and accounts were the most frequent actions. Rule violations also occurred frequently and one suspects that they would have been even more frequent if the events that occurred prior to the incident had been coded. In other words, in some cases one of the antagonists was responding to a rule violation that might have occurred earlier.

Orders also occurred with some frequency in the form of requests and commands, and these tended to result in noncompliance. In addition, evidence not presented suggests that over half of the threats (56%) were contingent threats – a threat of negative consequences if the target did not comply – and thus can be considered as attempts to control the target's behavior. However, it is possible that a contingency was implied even in those threats that were coded as noncontingent.

While rule-breaking is common in everyday life, aggression is relatively infrequent. This may be because many violations go unpunished. Others are disinclined to reproach or otherwise punish a rule breaker because it creates an embarrassing scene and because they risk retaliation. Our findings are consistent with this point of view. The antagonist's rule violations were most common in incidents where the respondent was angry, but did nothing about it. This suggests that rule violations often did not result in open conflict (arguments or physical violence). When an actor did choose to respond with a reproach, open conflict was likely to occur. While reproaches focus on the target's behavior, they have indirect negative implications for the target's identity and thus lead to retaliation.

Accounts tended to be given in response to, rather than in anticipation of, reproaches. That is, accounts were not given either immediately before or after rule violations; rather, the person who violated the rule was not likely to explain his behavior unless he was challenged. It was suggested that the failure to anticipate reproaches may have been one reason that conflicts occurred. If a person offers an account before being reproached, the reproach itself – which has negative identity implications for the person – is often avoided. Unfortunately, we have no data on interactions that do not culminate in anger and aggression and, therefore, we do not know how often disclaimers and other anticipatory accounts occur in nonaggressive interactions. However, everyday observation would suggest that they occur much more frequently than they do in these data.

There were strong sex differences in physical violence, but not in verbal aggression. Thus, males were more likely to use physical violence during a conflict, particularly if the antagonists were also male. This supports Feshbach's (1970)

11 Evidence not presented suggests that noncompliance tends to occur immediately after requests and commands.
12 Zillmann and Cantor (1976) found that accounts given for a provocation only reduced retaliation when they were given prior to the provocation; accounts given after the provocation had no effect.
argument that sex differences in aggression are due to a difference in mode of response, rather than a difference in motivational state.

While there were no sex differences observed in the frequency of verbal attack, females were actually more likely than males to engage in reproaches. Female respondents engaged in more reproaches than male respondents, and female antagonists reproached males more than male antagonists did. This could be attributed to the greater likelihood of males to engage in rule violations, but the evidence for this was inconsistent. It is more likely that reproaches are a more mild type of verbal aggression that is preferred by females. Harris (1974) found that an equal number of males and females were verbally aggressive to a man who cut in front of them in line, but that the verbal behavior of males was more severe.

The variation in the order of events makes it difficult to speak of stages in these incidents. We can identify some general patterns, however, using the data on the order of events and the Markov models. First, the social control process tends to occur early. This process involve rule violations followed by reproaches and accounts, and orders followed by noncompliance. At this point, explicit attacks begin escalating from insults to threats to physical attacks. In other words, the attacks become more serious as the incident progresses. Incidents sometimes end when one of the parties submits to the other or when third parties mediate.

In sum, this research describes the events that occur in aggressive interactions. These events are best understood as developing out of efforts to punish others for violations of norms and orders. Thus, the initial attack is justified because the target deserves punishment. Targets of punishment often retaliate because they are likely to view the attack as illegitimate and thus deserving of punishment and because they wish to save face and deter future attack. These processes explain how aggressive episodes develop naturally out of other interaction processes and how they escalate.

References


13 One might also conceptualize the norm violator's retaliatory attack as a form of secondary deviance (Lemert, 1951) in that his aggression is a response to the social reaction he received for his initial deviant behavior.


Harris, M. B. Mediators between frustration and aggression in a field experiment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1974, 10, 561–571.


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