

ABSTRACT \* \* \*

*This article examines the interactive process leading to criminal violence. Official data from 159 incidents of homicide and assault that were not committed in conjunction with other crimes and that resulted in incarceration were examined with respect to the actions of offenders, victims, and third parties. These incidents tended to follow systematic patterns. They began with identity attacks, followed by attempts and failures to influence the antagonist. Threats were made and finally the verbal conflict ended in physical attack. It appears that retaliation is a key principle in the escalation of these incidents in that aggressive actions by the victim were associated with aggressive actions by the offender and the likelihood that the victim would be killed. The importance of situational identities for retaliating was suggested by the moderately strong relationship observed between identity attack and counterattack. Retaliation also occurred for strategic reasons, in that offenders were more likely to kill aggressive victims when those victims used weapons.*

## **Situational Factors in Disputes Leading to Criminal Violence**

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A number of scholars have suggested the need for research on the processual development and interactional dynamics of violent situations (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Athens, 1977; Hepburn, 1973; Stark et al., 1974; Luckenbill, 1977). Such suggestions are based on the assumption that the outcomes of an aggressive interaction are not predetermined by either the characteristics or the initial goals of participants; rather, they

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are at least partly a function of events that occur during the incident. In other words, violence is, in part, situationally determined—the result of events and circumstances that cause a conflict to escalate.

The major substantive approach that has guided investigations of processes leading to violence comes out of symbolic interactionism. This approach stresses the role of situational identities or self-images in interaction (e.g., Becker, 1962; Toch, 1969; Hepburn, 1973; Felson, 1978, Athens, 1977; Luckenbill, 1977). Luckenbill, for example, analyzes homicides as “character contests” in which each participant attempts to save face at the other’s expense. Felson (1978) discusses the importance of retaliation in aggressive incidents for maintaining a favorable situational identity. Insults, threats, physical attacks, and other actions may “altercast” or place the target into an unfavorable situational identity (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963), while a successful counterattack may nullify the imputed identity. There is a considerable amount of evidence indicating that retaliation reflects face-saving concerns (Felson, 1982; see Felson, 1978, for a review of the experimental evidence). Evidence on the importance of retaliation in natural settings comes from observational studies of aggression by children (Rausch, 1965), from participant observation of gang violence (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974), and from studies of police reports of incidents resulting in homicide (Hepburn, 1973; Athens, 1977; Luckenbill, 1977).

Physical retaliation may also occur for strategic reasons. When a person is threatened with violence or is actually physically attacked, a physical counterattack may be an attempt to defend one’s physical well-being rather than one’s honor. This factor should be particularly important in extremely violent situations, in which a person’s life may depend on the ability to incapacitate the antagonist. Luckenbill (1980) has shown dramatically the role of strategic factors in the choice of modes of force in robbery. However, the role of strategic factors in what are considered “crimes of passion,” (i.e., crimes not committed in conjunction with other crimes) has received much less attention.

If retaliation is a key principle in violence, then the behavior of one antagonist is crucial in determining the behavior of the other. The more aggressive a participant, the more aggression one expects from his or her adversary. In the case of criminal violence, verbal and physical attacks by the victim should be correlated with verbal and physical attacks by the offender. One might also hypothesize that the more aggressive the victim, the more likely it is that he or she will be killed. While previous studies have found that the characteristics of homicides and assaults are generally similar (Pokorny, 1965; Pittman and Handy, 1964; Curtis, 1974), none of these studies compares the behavior of victims in these incidents.

If retaliation reflects face-saving concerns, then attacks on identity by an antagonist should be associated with attacks on identity by the

other (Felson, 1978; 1982). The degree of physical retaliation, including killing versus injuring the antagonist, may be attributable to either face-saving or strategic concerns. However, if retaliation for an attack is stronger when an antagonist has a weapon, then strategic concerns are suggested. An aggressive opponent with a weapon represents a threat to life rather than a threat to identity, relative to an aggressive opponent without a weapon.

These approaches suggest that third parties, as well as antagonists, may affect the outcome of violent incidents. Third parties may engage in at least three types of actions. First, they may engage in physical or verbal attacks themselves, and in such a case they act as an ally of one of the antagonists. Second, they may instigate the conflict if they encourage an antagonist to fight on their behalf, or if they define the situation as one in which violence is appropriate. Finally, they may attempt to mediate the conflict. Mediators may constrain the antagonists and allow the conflict to deescalate with neither side appearing to back down. For example, Short and Strodbeck (1965) report that mediators commonly intervene in gang violence, allowing both sides to back down without losing face.

This study examines developmental processes in criminal homicides and assaults that are not committed in conjunction with other offenses (e.g., robbery, rape). The purpose of the study is twofold. First, we wish to describe statistically what occurs in incidents involving criminal violence. A procedure is presented for analyzing official reports of these events that identifies actors, actions, and targets of these actions in the sequence in which they occur. From these data it is possible to examine the types of actions engaged in by offenders, victims, and third parties and the order in which they occur. Second, we wish to examine the role of retaliation in these incidents. We expect that attacks on identity by the offender are associated with identity attacks by the victim, based on concerns of participants for face-saving. In addition, we expect that aggressive actions by the victim are more likely to result in his or her death at the hands of the offender, i.e., in a homicide, rather than simply an assault. If physical retaliation reflects strategic concerns, then this relationship should be stronger when victims display weapons.

## METHODS

### SAMPLE AND DATA SOURCE

The sample was obtained from a population of males incarcerated in New York State correctional facilities in 1977 and during a few months of 1978. We made a list of offenders who had been convicted of felonious assault, manslaughter, or murder, omitting offenders who had committed other crimes during their offenses (e.g., felony murders) because we felt that the dynamics in those crimes would be different. We then

examined the case files of these offenders ( $N = 500$ ) to see whether there was a detailed description of the offense available. This was the case in only 159 incidents, which constitutes the final sample. This sample includes 84 adults and 75 youths (16-20 years of age). The two groups are not distinguished in our analyses since the interactional dynamics were similar for both groups. Characteristics of the sample are listed in Table 1.

We recognize the sample limitations of this study. Unfortunately, it was necessary to make a compromise here in order to obtain the type of detailed information that was needed. We can, however, consider the implications of the two major sampling limitations. The first is that only incidents resulting in incarcerations are included. As a result, one can assume that these are homicides and assaults in which a plea of self-defense was not believed, since the acceptance of this account would preclude incarceration. Therefore, the degree of aggression engaged in by the victim is probably underestimated in this study, since instances in which victims were thought to have provoked the incident by their own physical attack would not be included in the sample. In addition, these are quite serious (first- and second-degree) assaults, since less serious assaults did not result in incarceration in a state institution. Thus, the range of outcomes in these incidents is quite limited. The second major limitation of the sample is that it includes only incidents for which there is a detailed description of the crime. Therefore, incidents in which there is no interaction immediately prior to the physical attack (e.g., a poisoning), while rare, are likely to be excluded. Additionally, homicides in which there are no third parties present may be underrepresented, because investigators would be less able to reconstruct the event without witnesses. We can think of no reason why these factors should affect our main conclusions, however, since they involve a comparison of homicide and assault and an examination of the relationship between the offender's and victim's actions.

Finally, while the sample is not a large one, 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. Of course, statistical tests take sample size into account, although one does have to be cautious in interpreting the size of coefficients as accurate estimates of actual effects.

### CLASSIFICATION SCHEME AND CODING PROCEDURES

In order to analyze these violent interactions it was necessary to develop a classificatory scheme. Our scheme was developed from descriptions of homicides provided by Luckenbill (1977) and Wolfgang (1958). Different actions were identified and then classified into eight more general categories, which are used for analysis. These included the

following: (1) physical attack; (2) influence attempts (requests and commands by which an antagonist attempted to influence a target to do something or refrain from doing something); (3) noncompliance (refusals to comply, as well as giving excuses and justifications for not complying); (4) explicit identity attacks (actions that had this explicit focus—insults, rejections, accusations, complaints, and physical violations that did not involve physical harm, e.g., pushing); (5) threats, including verbal threats and brandishing a weapon without using it; (6) evasive actions (e.g., leaving the scene, fleeing, pleading for help, and apologizing); (7) mediation (i.e., someone present attempted to reconcile the conflicting parties); and (8) instigation (actions that incited other participants; e.g., asking another to intercede on one's behalf, giving a weapon to one of the antagonists, or urging him on).

Details of the incident were obtained from presentencing reports, which are based on accounts from police, eyewitnesses, offender, and victims. An example of such a report follows:

According to the District Attorney's Office, police reports indicated that the defendant did come by the apartment of Kathy L. and invited himself in for a drink. He was refused a drink but went over and helped himself to one. Mr. Joseph C. was in the apartment and pursued a discussion with the defendant about his wishes of not having the defendant involved in seeing his girlfriend. The defendant got irate over the incident and broke a wooden chair, took the arm and proceeded to assault the complainant Joseph C. He repeatedly struck the complainant several times. Mr. C. attempted to get away and the incident moved towards outside of the apartment. The co-complainant Kathy L. attempted to intercede and not having any success went to call the police. The defendant ripped the phone out of the wall prohibiting her from calling for help. He further assaulted her with the wooden chair arm causing lacerations about the head.

Each situation was coded as a sequence of unit-actions in which the actor(s) engaged in a particular behavior toward a target according to this format: actor-action-target. The scheme allowed for from zero to two actors (and targets) per action. Three types of actors (and targets) were identified—the offender, the victim, and third parties. The offender refers to the person convicted of the crime (not necessarily the aggressor), and the victim refers to the major deceased or injured party. Third parties refer to anyone else present during the incident who engaged in some action.

Four coding conventions ought to be mentioned. First, these events were coded according to the ostensible nature of the action, not the underlying purpose or effect of the action. Thus, influence attempts, noncompliance, threats, and physical attack may also involve an attack on the target's identity, but we did not make this inference in the description of the event. Second, the coding began with the first interaction between the participants recorded in the report and ended with the offender's physical attack on the victim. Thus, in the above example, we did not code "the defendant coming by the apartment," but

we did code "invited himself in for a drink." Third, only specific actions, and not attitudes or emotions, were coded. Thus, in the above example, we did not code "the defendant got irate." Finally, rare actions (e.g., compliance) are omitted from analysis. The category "argument" occurred frequently, but it is omitted due to its vagueness.

The incident presented above was coded in the following way: (1) offender attempts to influence third party; (2) third party does not comply with offender; (3) offender attacks third party's identity; (4) victim attempts to influence offender; (5) offender physically attacks victim; (6) victim evades conflict with the offender; (7) third party mediates between offender and victim; and (8) offender physically attacks third party.

Each incident was coded independently by two coders. After independently coding the events, the coders compared results and reconciled their differences. The interrater agreement using the detailed coding scheme was 76%. The agreement would have been slightly higher if the more general coding scheme had been used in the reliability check. In addition, some of the mismatches were due to the inclusion or omission of actions by one coder, but not by the other.

It is, of course, true that these are reports about violent interactions and not observations of the actual events. We are aware of the criticisms that have been made of information obtained from criminal records (e.g., Cicourel, 1968). However, there appears to be nothing inherent in the reports used here that would systematically bias them for our purposes. Clearly work beyond ours, employing other types of data sources, is required to confirm any findings. However, the wholesale rejection of the data reported herein simply because it is based on an investigative report would seem inappropriate.

We begin by comparing homicides and assaults in terms of the characteristics of offenders and victims. Second, we present the frequencies of the various types of actions, as well as an identification of which actor performed them. Third, some log-linear analyses are undertaken primarily to examine why retaliation occurs. Fourth, we present correlations among the frequencies of each type of action. Finally, the order of events is examined.

## RESULTS

### CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

Characteristics of offenders and victims for homicides and assaults are presented in Table 1. For offenders, there were no significant differences between homicides and assaults. Homicide and assault offenders were of similar age, race, and education, and they had similar prior-arrest records for violent offenses. Situational factors associated with the offender were also similar for homicide and assault. There was no difference in the number of blows delivered by the offender nor in

TABLE 1  
 Characteristics of Offenders and Victims in Homicide  
 and Assault Incidents (N = 159)

	Crime	
	Homicide	Assault
Offenders		
mean prior violent arrests	0.9	1.2
mean age	26.6	26.0
mean education	10.7	12.3
percentage nonwhite	73.4	83.1
percentage who displayed or used gun	46.8	44.6
percentage who had used alcohol or drugs	35.2	28.8
mean number of blows delivered	2.1	2.2
Victim		
percentage male	86.2	84.4
mean age (N = 99)	27.5	27.0
percentage who displayed or used weapon *	21.2	9.4
percentage who had used alcohol or drugs *	30.8	11.7

NOTE: It was assumed that the offender and victim were sober and that the victim had no weapon unless it was otherwise stated in the reports.

\*Difference between homicides and assaults significant at the .05 level.

the likelihood that the offender was intoxicated with alcohol or drugs during the incident. In contrast to previous research (Pittman and Handy, 1964), there were no differences between these homicides and assaults in the propensity of the offender to use a gun. The discrepancy may be due to the fact that only serious assaults are included in the present sample; less serious assaults, one expects, are less likely to involve guns.

While there is less information available about characteristics of victims, we do have evidence that victims of homicide and assault were of similar age and sex. The only significant differences (according to tests of differences in proportions) were in variables associated with the victim's behavior during the incident. Victims of homicide were more likely to have displayed (i.e., actually drew, threatened, or used) some type of weapon (gun, knife, or other object) than were victims of assault ( $Z = 1.98$ ;  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that offenders were more likely to kill the victim if the latter had a weapon. In addition, victims of homicide were significantly more likely to have been intoxicated with drugs or alcohol ( $Z = 2.80$ ;  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that offenders were more likely to kill intoxicated victims. The evidence then, is consistent with an interactionist viewpoint, in that the behavior of the victim appears to have affected the behavior of the offender in these incidents. These relationships will be examined in more detail later.

### FREQUENCY OF ACTIONS

A frequency distribution for the different types of actions is presented in Table 2. The table suggests a number of similarities between homicides and assaults. First, while offenders were more likely than victims to engage in aggressive actions (i.e., physical attack and threat), victims were more likely to engage in evasive actions. Second, while offenders engaged in more influence attempts, victims engaged in more noncompliance. Instances of compliance, on the other hand, were extremely rare ( $N = 4$ ). These data, similar to Luckenbill's (1977), suggest that criminal violence often occurs when the victim will not comply with the offender's wishes.

As predicted, victims were more aggressive in homicides than in assaults. That is, victims of homicide were more likely to engage in identity attacks ( $p < .06$ ), physical attacks ( $p < .05$ ), and threats ( $p < .05$ ) than were victims of assault. Offenders were less likely to threaten the victim ( $p < .02$ ) in homicides than in assaults. Otherwise, the types of actions engaged in by offenders were similar for both offenses. Finally, third-party mediation appears to have had no effect on the outcome. For both homicide and assaults, third parties attempted to mediate in only about 10% of the incidents. In fact, third parties were more likely to engage in aggressive acts or to instigate the conflict than to attempt to mediate it. Third parties engaged in physical attacks in about one-quarter of the incidents.

### WHY PARTICIPANTS RETALIATE

The results presented above suggest that victims are more likely to be killed if they are aggressive, if they display a weapon, and if they have been drinking. While these data suggest that retaliation is important in these incidents, it is unclear whether retaliation occurs for strategic reasons or for the purpose of saving face. The evidence on the weapons effect suggests that strategic factors were involved, at least to some extent, but it is unclear why aggressive victims were more likely to be killed. Further, it may be that victims who were intoxicated were more likely to be killed because they were more likely to be aggressive than victims who were not intoxicated.

If offenders kill aggressive victims for strategic reasons, then they should be particularly likely to do so when victims display weapons during the attack. To examine the effect of the interaction between weapon use and aggression by the victim on the outcome, a log-linear analysis was undertaken, which examined the relationship between the following dichotomous variables: severity of outcome (homicide versus assault); weapon use (yes; no); aggression by the victim (yes; no). The latter variable is coded yes if the victim engaged in any verbal or physically aggressive act during the incident. These analyses were



TABLE 2  
 Percentage of Incidents in which Offenders, Victims, or  
 Third Parties Engaged in Particular Unit Actions

UNIT ACT	Initiator of Action					
	Homicides (N = 94)			Assaults (N = 65)		
	Offender	Victim	3rd Party	Offender	Victim	3rd Party
Identity attacks	37.2	41.5	13.8	38.5	29.2	24.6
Influence attempts	25.5	16.0	12.8	33.8	18.5	4.6
Noncompliance	5.3	9.6	3.2	3.1	18.5	3.1
Instigation	2.1	1.1	13.8	3.1	0.0	12.3
Mediation	3.2	2.1	10.6	0.0	6.2	10.8
Threats	13.8	9.6	6.4	27.7	3.1	1.5
Evasive actions	12.8	24.5	13.8	12.3	32.3	21.5
Physical attacks	100.0	38.3	21.3	100.0	24.6	27.5

restricted to incidents in which there were at least four unit acts, since it was felt that incidents with fewer than four acts recorded did not contain enough detail. A value of .5 was added to each cell in order to eliminate the only zero cell.

A saturated model best fit the data; omission of the three-term interaction significantly decreases the adequacy of the fit (likelihood ratio chi-square = 6.64 with one degree of freedom;  $p < .01$ ). Victims who used a weapon and engaged in an actual attack were killed 87% of the time, while victims who engaged in an attack without a weapon were killed 63% of the time. In contrast, nonaggressive victims without weapons were killed 51% of the time, while none of the victims (0%) who displayed a weapon but did not engage in an actual attack were killed. The finding that offenders were more likely to kill the victim if the victim displays a weapon and also engaged in an attack supports the strategic explanation of retaliation. However, the limited number of cases in which victims displayed a weapon but did not engage in an aggressive act ( $N = 4$ ) makes these results tentative.

It was suggested above that the effect of victim intoxication on the severity of the outcome could be due to the greater aggressiveness of these victims. A log-linear analysis was undertaken to examine whether the victim's intoxication (yes; no) was related to the victim's aggression (yes; no), and whether controlling for the victim's aggression eliminated the relationship between victim intoxication and severity of outcome. The analysis revealed significant main effects of both victim aggression and victim intoxication on severity of outcome, but no relationship between victim aggression and intoxication, and no higher-order interaction. Thus, we conclude that intoxicated victims were no more aggressive than other victims and that their greater probability of being killed must have been due to some other factor.

Log-linear analyses were also undertaken to examine the effect of several other variables on the relationship between victim aggression and severity of outcome. Three variable models were examined in which the following dichotomies were incorporated, one at a time: role-relationship of the antagonists (primary versus nonprimary), sex of the victim, use of weapon by the offender, intoxication of the offender, age of the offender (in which those 21 or under are classified as young). In each instance the relationship between severity of outcome and victim aggression was observed with no interaction.

The interaction observed between weapon use, victim aggression, and severity of outcome cannot be taken as evidence against the identity explanation. Victims who were aggressive were more likely to be killed even when they did not use a weapon, and this could be the result of either strategic or identity concerns. A more direct test of the identity explanation focuses on retaliation for identity attacks with counteridentity attacks. Identity attacks have no direct strategic purpose, in the sense in which we have defined it. It may be that the identity that one establishes by such an attack can be put to practical use, but the immediate purpose is the establishment of an identity. To examine whether offenders and victims reciprocated for identity attacks, each incident was coded for the presence or absence of an identity attack by the offender and victim resulting in a  $2 \times 2$  table. The hypothesis was confirmed; offenders engaged in identity attack 55% of the time when the victim had engaged in an identity attack, but only 37% of the time when the victim had not done so. This relationship was examined using log-linear analysis involving three variable models in which the third variable was one of the following: sex of victim, age of offender (classified as before), presence of alcohol in the victim, primary versus non-primary relationship, use of weapon by offender, or use of weapon by victim. The relationship was observed under all conditions and no interactions were observed.

#### RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ACTIONS OF OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

Correlations among different types of actions by offenders and victims are presented in Table 3 for incidents involving at least four unit acts. The results suggest that a reciprocity or matching principle was operating; i.e., antagonists appear to have responded in kind for particular types of aggressive acts. Thus, (as the earlier results showed) identity attacks led to identity counterattacks ( $r = .38$ ), and physical attacks led to physical counterattacks ( $r = .30$ ). On the one hand, there was little or no relationship between different types of aggressive acts by different antagonists. Second, the evasive actions of the victim were associated with the verbal and physical attacks of the offender ( $r = .18$

TABLE 3  
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Major  
Unit Actions and Actors (N = 127)\*\*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Offender physical attack	—					
2. Victim physical attack	.30*					
3. Offender identity attack	.10	.09				
4. Victim identity attack	.09	.04	.38*			
5. Victim evasion	.17	-.19*	.18*	.09		
6. Offender threat	.05	.06	.06	-.03	.19*	
$\bar{X}$	1.94	.47	.63	.50	.43	.26
SD	1.13	.60	.86	.71	.66	.49

\* $p < .05$

\*\*Includes only those incidents with at least four unit acts.

and .17). These evasive actions represent, of course, strategic behavior. When one party attacks, the other party engages in evasive acts to defend himself, even though these actions may be costly in terms of identity; i.e., they may involve a loss of face. Third, there was not much consistency in the aggressive behavior of offenders or in the aggressive behavior of victims. The correlations between the aggressive actions of each were small and statistically insignificant.

These results suggest that the successive behaviors of a participant are more a function of the antagonist's behaviors than they are of his or her own earlier actions, demonstrating again the importance of interaction in these incidents. While the reciprocal attacks were not highly correlated, it should be kept in mind that an antagonist may respond to an attack with either a counterattack or an evasive action. Thus, the correlation between attack and counterattack (and between attack and evasion) is likely to be reduced. In addition, an attack by one antagonist may be a response to a third party's action, and this will also reduce the

correspondence between the actions of offender and victim. Finally, one can expect a fair amount of random measurement error in these variables, due to coding difficulties and errors and omissions in the investigative report.

#### THE ORDER OF EVENTS

In order to examine the order of events it was necessary to take into account the varying lengths of different incidents. Accordingly, each event was coded as a proportion of the total number of events in the incident. For example, if there were ten actions recorded, the first act was coded .1, the second act .2, and so on. Thus, the final act in each incident was coded as 1.0. The mean and standard deviation for each type of action were computed. The results are presented in Table 4 for homicide and assault combined, since there were no differences expected or observed between these crimes. The table does not distinguish between offenders and victims because our analyses showed no significant differences between them in the position of their actions.

The results suggest that identity attacks tended to occur early in the incident, followed by influence attempts and noncompliance. The difference in mean position between identity attacks and influence attempts was marginally significant, according to a two-tailed t-test that assumes unequal variances ( $t = 1.88$ ;  $p < .06$ ). It appears that participants attempted to influence their antagonists to cease their offensive actions and that these attempts failed. Efforts at mediation and instigation tended to occur at this point. Threats were made subsequently—at a significantly later point than identity attacks ( $t = 3.22$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and influence attempts ( $t = 2.30$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In some instances these threats may represent final attempts to influence the antagonist. Evasive actions tended to occur at this late period, apparently too late to have any effect. Finally, the incidents became physically violent.

#### DISCUSSION

These findings suggest three stages in homicides and assaults (not committed in conjunction with other crimes). The first stage involves verbal conflict, in which identities are attacked and attempts to influence an antagonist fail. The second stage involves threats and evasive action. Mediation, when it occurs, tends to occur at this point. Instigation of the conflict tends to occur during either the first or second stage. The third and final stage involves physical attack. In comparison, Luckenbill (1977) identified six stages in the development of a homicide: (1) The victim affronts the offender with insults or noncompliance; (2) the offender interprets these as personally offensive and (3) retaliates with a challenge or an actual physical attack; (4) the victim does not

TABLE 4  
Position of Actions in Homicides and Assaults Combined

Action	Mean Position	SD	N	Confidence Interval
Identity attacks	.379	.232	155	.037
Influence attempts	.424	.172	114	.032
Noncompliance	.455	.207	41	.063
Instigation	.516	.265	30	.095
Mediation	.596	.234	29	.085
Threats	.603	.212	48	.060
Evasive actions	.623	.192	85	.041
Physical attack	.845	.143	356	.015

NOTE: It was assumed that the offender and victim were sober and that the victim had no weapon unless it was otherwise stated in the reports.

\*Difference between homicides and assaults significant at the .05 level.

comply with the offender's challenge or command or else physically retaliates; (5) a commitment to battle or a working agreement is forged; (6) the aftermath. In general, Luckenbill's stages are similar to ours with three exceptions. He includes cognitive stages (2 and 5), while our stages are strictly behavioral; he includes an aftermath to the physical attack, whereas we do not; we include mediating and evasive actions, while he does not. The occurrence of these evasive actions in our data cast doubt on Luckenbill's major conclusion that there is a working agreement among participants that violence is appropriate. Otherwise, these quantitative data are consistent with his more qualitative results.

Retaliation appears to be a key principle in these incidents in that particular aggressive actions (identity attacks, physical attacks, threats) on the part of the victim were associated with the same types of aggressive actions by the offender. Aggressive victims and victims who displayed a weapon were more likely to be killed, and there was some evidence that victims who were aggressive and used a weapon were particularly likely to be killed. This suggests that killing the victim was, to some extent, a strategic move by the offender designed to physically defend himself. The means of carrying out the decision to kill the victim did not involve the use of a more lethal weapon or the delivery of more blows; there was no difference between homicides and assaults in these variables. It may be that offenders who attempt to kill the victim do so by aiming at vital organs or by striking with more force.

The importance of identity concerns was suggested by the moderately strong relationship between identity attack and identity counterattack. The relationship supports the notion that altercasting a person into a negative situational identity results in retaliatory actions that attempt to reinstate a favorable identity. The evidence also suggested that the

attacks on identity were often more implicit, i.e., in the case of noncompliance with requests and commands. The relationships observed between threat, on the one hand, and counterthreat and physical attack on the other could be interpreted as the result of either face-saving or strategy. That is, one might counterthreat or counterattack in order to save face or to prevent the other from attacking further.

Offenders were also more likely to kill victims who were intoxicated from drinking or drugs. This relationship remained when the frequency of victim attack was controlled, suggesting that the relationship is not due to greater aggressiveness of intoxicated victims. Perhaps the demeanor of these persons played some role in eliciting aggression from the offender.

While the behaviors of the offender and victim were related, there was a lack of consistency in the behavior of each antagonist. In other words, one could not predict what an offender (or victim) would do by what they had done earlier in the incident. Thus, whether the offender killed the victim was not related to how aggressive he was otherwise during the incident, what type of weapon he used, or whether he was intoxicated. Nor was there a relationship between the different types of aggressive actions engaged in by an antagonist. This inconsistency in behavior again points to the importance of interaction in these incidents.

The picture that emerges from these events is not one of blind irrational behavior. Rather, each participant's actions were a function of the other person's behavior and the implication of that behavior for defending one's well-being as well as one's honor. If anything, the rational character of these events is underestimated in this sample, since violent actions carried out for the purpose of robbery were excluded, and these incidents probably involve more rationality than do homicides and assaults (Luckenbill, 1980).

The victim's role in these incidents is perhaps more complex than previous literature would suggest (e.g., Wolfgang, 1957). It is not easy to classify incidents as victim- or offender-precipitated incidents. In most cases, most of the victim's actions were aggressive, indicating that they at least partially caused the outcome. On the other hand, they were not as aggressive as were the offenders, in that they attacked less and engaged in more evasive actions. Thus, while victims were aggressive, they appeared to be less aggressive than offenders. However, the relative aggressiveness of victims may be underestimated in these data, if cases in which victims are most violent are excluded because offenders avoided incarceration, or if police investigators are biased against offenders so as to build a case against them.

Most of these incidents occurred in the presence of others. However, as stated earlier, the role of third parties may be exaggerated here because incidents in which no witnesses were available were more likely to be excluded. Thus, while third parties were present in 70% of these

incidents, V. Swigert and R. Farrell found that witnesses were present in 54.4% of the homicides that they studied (personal communication).

In both homicides and assaults third parties were more likely to participate as antagonists than as mediators. In a minority of cases these persons engaged in physical attack themselves, but more often they participated in the verbal conflict. When third parties did attempt to mediate, they did not appear to affect whether or not the victim was killed. However, previous research suggests that mediation may make a difference between these types of incidents and much less serious ones (Rubin and Brown, 1975; Luckenbill, 1977). In addition, evidence not presented suggests that mediation reduces the number of blows that an offender delivers.

The unit-act technique was clearly useful for recording and analyzing the detailed actions in these incidents. The advantages of a systematic method for recording these events versus "eye-balling" are obvious. A next step might be to apply the method to other crimes of violence or to incidents that vary more widely in the severity of their outcomes. For example, we are now using interview data to examine situational factors that distinguish violent incidents from verbally aggressive incidents and from instances in which a respondent was angry but did nothing (see Felson, 1982). In the present study, it is noteworthy that effects of victims' behaviors were observed, even though the variation in outcome was quite limited.

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