



## Is violence natural, unnatural, or rational?

Richard B. Felson

---

Randall Collins – one of Sociology’s leading theorists – has applied his erudition to the study of violence. He is a creative thinker who has brought together interesting material from diverse areas. I particularly appreciate the fact that Professor Collins does not restrict his analysis to violence considered deviant or antisocial. It is important to recognize the similarities between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Elite units of the military are similar to hitmen and gangsters, for example, in that both must be able to handle their fear.

Violence scholars are, unfortunately, moving in the opposite direction: they often focus on particular types of violence (e.g., domestic violence) ignoring what violent acts have in common. Collins’s book is an antidote for those who take, to paraphrase Dennis Wrong, an ‘over-specialized conception of man’. However, he relies too heavily on *anecdotes* to support his arguments, and ignores much of the quantitative literature. I also think he needs to think more carefully about what he is trying to explain, and that is where I begin.

### What is to be explained?

Collins writes about violence, but not much on non-violent forms of aggression. However, violence is just one method that people use to deliberately harm others. He pays too much attention to atrocities and hit men and too little attention to much more frequent behaviour: verbal attacks, punishment, and minor forms of physical violence. I will argue that there are incentives for harming others and that social psychology provides more parsimonious and more straightforward explanations. Collins ignores the social psychological literature on aggression.

Aggression and deviance are overlapping domains: some aggression involves deviance, and some deviance involves aggression. Violent crimes and many property crimes involve deliberate harm doing while victimless crimes

and crimes of negligence do not.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes offenders are indifferent to the harm they do, and sometimes they want the victim to be harmed. Criminological theories focus on crime as deviance and generally ignore whether the crime involves harm-doing or not. Collins, on the other hand, studies violence and ignores whether it is deviant or not. However, many of the causes of legitimate and illegitimate violence are different. The individuals involved tend to be different and the situational factors that affect their behaviour tend to be different. To understand violent crime, we need to know why people break rules *and* why they engage in deliberate harm doing.<sup>2</sup> Collins needs to incorporate the criminological literature.

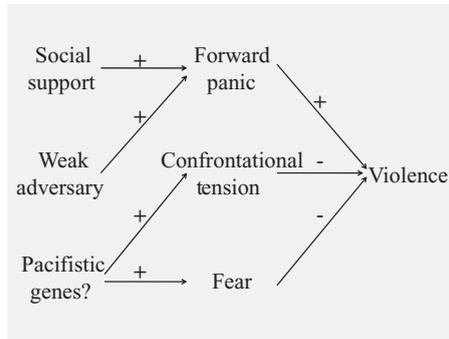
Collins is particularly interested in soldiers in combat whose aggression is considered patriotic and even heroic. Collins does not consider the most common acts of legitimate harm doing. We approve of acts of self-defence and some acts of retaliation. We approve of harm-doing committed by individuals acting as agents of social control, and so we call it punishment not aggression. We believe that parents should punish their children for misbehaviour, that teachers should punish students who exhibit poor performance, and that judges should punish offenders. Justice dictates that the harm done to the deviant should be proportionate to the wrong committed; 'the punishment should fit the crime'. Criminal offenders often over-react to provocations: they commit homicide or assault in response to a trivial insult (e.g., Toch 1969). However, those who fail to harm deviants are also violating our beliefs about justice. Agents who are too lenient are themselves engaged in deviant behaviour, and may even deserve some sort of punishment.

Collins views solidarity as the normal condition of social life and harm-doing as an anomaly. I agree that violence is rare, relative to other forms of aggression and relative to cooperative behaviour. However, harm doing is not so rare: it is an accepted response to deviant behaviour and deviant behaviour is common. It is not as difficult as Collins implies to attack someone when we think they have done something to deserve it. On the other hand, people do have inhibitions about harming others. The questions raised by Collins are: What are their inhibitions and are their inhibitions innate?

## **Human nature**

Professor Collins's basic argument is that human beings are reluctant to use violence because they experience 'confrontational tension'. It is well-known that learned moral inhibitions and the fear of getting hurt can inhibit violent behaviour. Collins, however, emphasizes the role of an innate tendency toward interactional solidarity. He claims that because of strong innate inhibitions about disturbing face-to-face social interaction, violence usually requires a forward panic. The nature of this panic is not clear, but it seems to be similar

**Figure I:** *Determinants of violence*



to rage or losing one’s temper. People have tunnel vision when they go into attack mode and they do terrible things. He identifies only two causes of forward panic: weak adversaries and social support for the attack.

I depict the main causal argument for my fellow positivists in Figure I. I might have also included direct paths from social support and weak adversaries to violence, but Collins’ is not clear about what leads to violence when there is no panic. I have left out some of the concepts that I find vague such as ‘entrainment’ and ‘emotional energy’. Psychologists abandoned energy models long ago. Psychotherapists are likely to be cognitively-oriented these days, not Freudians. Finally, I assume that Collins’s model is probabilistic and that he would not predict perfect relationships between these variables. I am not sure about this, however, since he describes his relationships in very strong terms while dismissing competing theories by noting exceptions. For example, he argues that because some people who have been abused do not commit violence, abuse is not a causal factor. In addition, he questions the importance of alcohol intoxication, since most people who are drunk do not commit violence. If he is right, then it is safe to drink and drive, since most drunk drivers don’t have accidents.

Confrontational tension seems to be related to empathy, although Collins never draws the connection. His approach is based on Erving Goffman’s ideas about cooperative face-work in face-to-face interaction. According to Goffman, people attempt to protect each other’s identities in polite conversation, and they experience embarrassment when anyone’s identity is threatened. The reluctance to express grievances when there is interpersonal conflict lowers the incidence of verbal aggression, and therefore indirectly leads to less violence (Felson, Ackerman and Yeon 2003).<sup>3</sup> Collins extends Goffman’s ideas, by suggesting that interactional solidarity also inhibits violence or serious violence during aggressive interactions already in progress. After someone has already created a ‘scene’ by an attack, there is an innate reluctance to escalate. Perhaps this is true, but evidence that two-year olds may be our most violent citizens

(e.g., Tremblay 2006) and the fact that young children tend to be blunt suggests that politeness and other inhibitions are to some extent learned. On the other hand, research on infants, twin studies, and brain scans suggest that empathy has a biological component (see, e.g., Preston and de Waal 2002).

Key evidence for Collins is the reluctance of many soldiers to fire their guns on the battlefield, particularly at close range, and their inaccuracy when they do fire. He claims that their incompetence is primarily due to confrontational tension. Those who do actually kill enemy soldiers at close range are the most likely to suffer emotional trauma. On the other hand, those who are in similar danger but do not kill (medics), and those who kill from a distance (e.g., sailors) are not likely to suffer emotional trauma.

It is interesting to compare Collins's approach to the frustration aggression approach, the most influential theory of aggression. Sociologists use the frustration-aggression approach, sometimes implicitly, to explain the effects of stressful life events, inequality, poverty, and discrimination. According to the most recent version the experience of aversive stimuli leads to negative affect and negative affect is likely to lead to aggression (Berkowitz 1989). The connection between negative affect and aggression is innate and shared with other animals. Moral qualms and perceived costs may inhibit those who are upset from attacking others, but in a rage, they may attack in spite of these inhibitions.<sup>4</sup> From a frustration-aggression perspective, people have an innate tendency to attack when they feel bad, and they inhibit themselves because of morals and fear of negative consequences. From Collins's perspective, people have an innate tendency for solidarity, but they can be overwhelmed by social pressures to attack, or the effects of weak adversaries. While the frustration aggression approaches treat humans as naturally bad, unless constrained by social forces, Collins treats humans as naturally good, unless social forces lead them astray. He doesn't talk about the other animals.

So what would Darwin say? Unless one is a creationist, one evaluates the merits of arguments about human nature by considering evolutionary theory: did a particular characteristic contribute to selection in our evolutionary history? A frustration-aggression link seem unlikely, since it is doubtful that humans who became aggressive after stubbing their toe would be more likely to survive. It seems more likely that toe-stubbing would select for humans who watched out where they were going. Perhaps natural selection produced a tendency toward solidarity, a trait possibly related to the evolutionary psychologist's concept of reciprocal altruism. Like sociologists who use frustration-aggression arguments, Collins does not discuss the biological or evolutionary aspects of this process. He dips his toe in the biology pool but he won't jump in. Perhaps to do so would threaten his own survival as a leading sociological theorist!

Evidence from studies based on game theory suggests that neither an aggressive nor a pacifistic nature would contribute to selection. It would

suggest that those who use a tit-for-tat strategy would have been more likely to survive and reproduce. Act tough if others are tough, but be nice when others are nice. Perhaps the most violent *and* the most pacifistic individuals (or men) tended to die off before they had chances to mate. Perhaps evolutionary history selected for moderation.

It seems unlikely that violence or pacifism are encoded in our genes. It seems more reasonable to think that specific violence-producing and violence-inhibiting traits were inherited. This is not my area, but I would think that before talking about human nature, we should identify specific biological characteristics that are associated with violence or nonviolence and then determine their presence in the population. Perhaps selection on the violence-producing side involved tendencies toward emotional arousal, sensation seeking, and preoccupation with negative information. Perhaps selection on the violence-inhibiting side involved self-control, embarrassment, and empathy (or interactional solidarity). Perhaps traits related to deviance were also inherited and therefore affect the likelihood of criminal violence. For example, testosterone and pubertal development are just as strongly related to non-violent crime as they are to violent crime (Booth and Osgood 1993). Hairy underarms are a strong predictor of juvenile delinquency among young adolescents (Felson and Haynie 2002).

### **Violence as instrumental behaviour**

I am skeptical that we need a special theory to explain either aggression or non-aggression. I have suggested that all aggression is instrumental behaviour, even when it involves anger (e.g., Tedeschi and Felson 1994). In other words there are payoffs for harming others. The motive to harm others is related to basic human desires. People attempt to influence others, since many of our rewards are provided by other people. They can use persuasion, offer rewards, or threaten harm. In addition, people want to be treated fairly and they think those who fail to do so should be punished. When they blame others – and they can be very quick to do so – they want to punish the culprit. People almost always target the person who has offended them, not innocent third parties. They also want the esteem of others and to think favourably of themselves, so they sometimes bully others to show their toughness, and retaliate when attacked to avoid a loss of face. Finally, as Collins point out, some people engage in risky activities because they enjoy the thrills. Violence, and to a lesser extent, deviant behaviour, are exciting.

Aggression and violence, then, are based on basic social psychological processes. Harming others can be a method for social influence, a method of getting retribution when one has a grievance, a method of impressing others, and a form of thrill-seeking. By forcing compliance, the actor can get money,

sex, and other rewards. We, therefore, do not need a special theory to explain it. We do not even need a general theory of aggression; rather, we can use the most widely accepted theory of human behaviour, one that emphasizes rewards and costs. The fact that psychologists and economists use it should not bother us. We better hope the theory has validity since the policies being used to save our pensions are based on it!

Treating violence as instrumental behaviour is sometimes described as taking a rational-choice approach. Rational-choice theorists use the name reluctantly because of the excess baggage it carries with it. They know that rationality is 'bounded', i.e., that behaviour reflects subjective judgments about payoffs based on limited information, and that individuals often make careless decisions that can have disastrous outcomes. Many aggressive acts are performed impulsively, with great emotion, and under the influence of alcohol. Collins would call their condition a forward panic while Berkowitz might say they are in a rage. However, while angry offenders may not consider costs and the moral aspects of their behaviour, they are still making decisions and they are still pursuing something they value, whether it be retribution or a better image. The batter who charges the pitcher after a bean ball may have tunnel vision but he still must make decisions about how to best attack (and he must remember to drop his bat). The fact that the incentives for violence are often symbolic – e.g., status, retribution – and the fact that people can get very angry when they think have been wronged does not negate the instrumentality of their subsequent behaviour.

Some violence is predatory but much of it develops out of verbal disputes. Violent fights usually begin when someone complains that they have been wronged and makes an accusation (Luckenbill 1977; Felson 1984). In other words, these disputes begin with an attempt at social control. Sometimes, in order to avoid blame and punishment the accused engages in remedial action, e.g., they apologize or provide an excuse or justification for their behaviour. This research shows that acts of submission help to avoid escalation, contrary to what Collins asserts. On the other hand, when the accused challenges the accuser, and identities are threatened, the conflict is likely to escalate. One of the antagonists engages in a verbal attack and the other retaliates. Then one or both parties may turn to violence.

The instigator for aggression in these encounters is not aversive stimuli, as Berkowitz claimed, or perceived weakness or social support, as Collin asserts. Only certain types of aversive stimuli – perceived wrong-doing and intentional attack – lead to anger and dispute-related aggression. Pain, illness, and death, the most aversive stimuli in the human experience, do not have this effect. On the other hand, calling someone an 'asshole', while less aversive, is sure to provoke an aggressive reaction. A bad mood after an aversive experience may, however, facilitate an aggressive response because it interferes with careful decision-making. Social support and weak adversaries may affect the rewards

and costs of aggression, but they are usually not instigators. The most important instigator of violence is perceived intentional attack. When those attacks are particularly nasty, the violent response may be extreme. It may be that combat soldiers are reluctant to kill enemy soldiers unless one of their buddies is killed and they feel aggrieved. Then they go into what Collins calls a forward panic.

Individual differences as well as situational factors have an impact on whether individuals respond with extreme violence. The type of people who commit violent crime tend to have low self-control, for example (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). The evidence is also clear that mental illness is related to deviant forms of violence (e.g., Silver, Felson and Van Eseltine 2008). Sociologists may reject the concept of anti-social personality as tautological, but that does not mean they should dismiss the entire field of psychology. They should avoid compartmentalization: if they dismiss psychology, they should also stop seeing their psychotherapist and stop taking Prozac, and reduce our health care costs.

## **Power**

The relative power of adversaries is important but its effects are more complex than Collins recognizes, and more easily explained by a rational choice approach. Evidence suggests that 'big people hit little people' in unarmed fights, but not in fights involving guns (Felson 1996). These are rational choices. The evidence does *not* support the idea that people who are big and strong use violence more frequently, however. They may not find it necessary to engage in an overt attack since they are threatening enough to gain compliance and deference without it. For example, robbers with guns are less likely to engage in an overt attack than unarmed robbers (e.g., Conklin 1972). In addition, while it is more costly to attack strong adversaries, the rewards in terms of identity may be greater. A man who hits a woman does not impress. Finally, offenders are more likely to kill their adversaries during an assault when they consider them more dangerous and threatening (Felson and Messner 1996). Better to 'finish them off' if they might retaliate later on. These patterns contradict Collins's argument that actors are more likely to experience forward panic when they confront weaker adversaries.

Collins would imply that sibling violence should be more likely when the age difference is large since the power differential encourages the older one to attack. Evidence shows, however, that violence is more likely when young siblings are closer in age (Felson and Russo 1988). When parents intervene to stop the fighting, the violence actually occurs with greater frequency. Parental protection of the younger sibling reduces the power differential and makes the younger sibling more willing to fight. The relative power of the weaker sibling affects whether violence occurs.

Collins might argue that these actors are not in a forward panic, and that the effect of power on violence under forward panic is completely different. However, he never gives any clear way to determine whether someone is in a forward panic. He seems to be able to spot it in his photographs of people engaged in intense violence, but I could not. If he were to argue that the actor must be in a panic because they engaged in extreme violence, his argument becomes a tautology.

## Conclusion

I share Collins's interest in situational factors and I agree that fear, power, and third parties have important effects on violent outcomes. I have only a superficial knowledge of the biological literature, but it suggests to me that people may have innate tendencies to be empathic (or show interactional solidarity) and that these tendencies inhibit aggressive behaviour. My criticism of Collins's book is that he ignores the criminological approach to deviance, the social psychological approach to aggression, and the biological literature on human nature. He is a brilliant theorist, but I hope that in his second volume on violence he follows the style of Barack Obama, and reaches across the aisle to other disciplines.

(Date accepted: May 2009)

## Notes

1. Some deviant acts are violations of law and therefore criminal, and some aggressive acts involve violence.

2. Many offenders commit a variety of offences, suggesting common causes. However, recent evidence suggests that violent and non-violent offenders are often different; there is plenty of specialization (e.g., Deane, Armstrong and Felson 2005).

3. On the other hand, when grievances are not expressed, miscreants do not correct their behaviour, and grievances can become more serious.

4. Berkowitz acknowledged that some aggression is a means to an end. The distinction between angry aggression and instrumental aggression is well-known.

## Bibliography

**Berkowitz, L.** 1989 'The Frustration-aggression Hypothesis: An Examination and Reformulation', *Psychological Bulletin* 106: 59–73.

**Booth, A. and Osgood, D.W.** 1993 'The Influence of Testosterone on Deviance in Adulthood', *Criminology* 31: 93–117.

- Conklin, J.E.** 1972 *Robbery and the Criminal Justice System*, New York: Lippincott.
- Deane, G., Armstrong, D. and Felson, R.B.** 2005 'An Examination of Offense Specialization Using a Simultaneous Marginal Logit Model', *Criminology*, November 43 (4): 955–88.
- Felson, R.B.** 1984 'Patterns of Aggressive Social Interaction' in A. Mummendey (ed.) *The Social Psychology of Aggression: From Individual Behaviour to Social Interaction*, New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Felson, R.B.** 1996 'Big People Hit Little People: Sex differences in Physical Power and Interpersonal Violence', *Criminology* 34: 433–452.
- Felson, R.B., Ackerman, J. and Yeon, S.-J.** 2003 'The (In)frequency of Family Violence', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65(3): 622–34.
- Felson, R.B. and Haynie, D.** 2002 'Pubertal Development, Social Factors and Delinquency Among Adolescent Boys', *Criminology* 40: 967–88.
- Felson, R.B. and Russo, N.** 1988 'Parental Punishment and Sibling Aggression', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 51: 11–18.
- Felson, R.B. and Messner, S.F.** 1996 'To Kill or Not to Kill?: Lethal Outcomes in Injurious Attacks', *Criminology* 34: 201–27.
- Gottfredson, M. and Hirschi, T.** 1990 *A General Theory of Crime*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Luckenbill, D.F.** 1977 'Criminal Homicide as a Situated Transaction', *Social Problems* 25: 176–86.
- Preston, S.D. and de Waal, F.B.M.** 2002 'Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases', *Behavioral and Brain Science* 25: 1–72.
- Silver, E., Felson, R.B. and VanEseltine, M.** 2008 'The Relationship Between Mental Health Problems and Violence Among Criminal Offenders', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35: 405–26.
- Tedeschi, J. and Felson, R.B.** 1994 *Violence, Aggression, and Coercive Actions*, American Psychological Association.
- Toch, H.** 1969 *Violent Men: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Violence*, Chicago: Aldine.
- Tremblay, R.E.** 2006 'Prevention of Youth Violence: Why not Start at the Beginning?', *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 34: 481–87.