

Understanding Youth Violence: Rationality and its Limits

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Abstract

Many child welfare interventions are precipitated by acts of violence and disrespect against children: various forms of child abuse, humiliation, and life-endangering neglect. Also, those who have been victimized by violence and who become child welfare clients, all too often, come into conflict with the law because of their own violent behavior. Accordingly, understanding acts of violence is an important subject for child welfare. Yet, when sociological research looks beyond the structural or cultural background factors that influence rates of youth violence and examines the violent acts themselves, it finds that many aspects cannot be grasped using models of rational action. The main categories of these models—"means" and "ends"—cannot sufficiently explain the behavior of young offenders; often they cannot explain it at all because these youths remain marked by their early experiences of victimization and their subsequent life paths. This article attempts to illuminate the complexities of violent victimization and behavior using examples taken from the author's study on "violent careers," which has been grounded in intensive interviews with young repeat offenders.

Introduction

For practitioners, program managers, and policymakers in the field of child welfare, it is of utmost importance to be well-informed about the effects of child maltreatment and disrespect on future life courses. Hence, this article focuses on situations of youth violence and shows that the perpetrators often are driven by interpretive patterns that stem from their previous experiences as victims of domestic child abuse. Because of these patterns, which I call "interpretive regimes," they are unable to behave rationally. Furthermore, they commit violent acts through which they have ecstatic experiences that lead to "intrinsic motives" for violence. These motives stimulate violent acts that lack

both external goals and almost all additional traits of rational behavior. Before addressing these long-term effects of child maltreatment and disrespect, I should like to make some preliminary remarks to shed light on the dominant sociological approaches to the analysis of violence from the perspective of action theory.

Sociological research has had a great deal more to say about the social structures and culturally conditioned orientations that produce violence than about violence itself. The most important explanatory models center on the structural deprivation and disintegration of violent individuals or groups and on the cultural or subcultural orientations determining their acceptance and glorification of violence. Yet these models have one common weakness: they cannot explain the interactive processes that are key to understanding the occasions and internal course of violent incidents. The violent acts do not fit into their analytic framework. In other words, the explanations fail to deal with important traits of violence, specifically the interpretive patterns that are applied to violent situations and the self-reinforcing processes that can determine their course (see Katz, 1988; Birkbeck & LaFree, 1993; Joas, 2003a; Trotha, 1997).

The following reflections seek to explain why research on violence should incorporate the level of immediate action. They are also meant to present my fundamental thesis: that narrow rationalist theories of action are incapable of grasping all the motives and types of behavior that come into play when violence is used. Nevertheless, I do not wish to claim that violent acts are simply irrational or that individuals do not derive a subjective "meaning" from them (Weber, 1968, p. 4). Rather, the following objections to rationalist models of action take aim at approaches that, as a matter of principle,

interpret violence as rational action—that is, using categories of “means” and “ends.”

Talk of “rational action” and “rational actors” might create the impression that this article is above all a critique of rational choice approaches (cf. Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Matsueda, Kreager, & Huizinga, 2006). But this is not the case. Instead, it attempts to identify those aspects of violent phenomena whose analysis must transcend the notion that criminals always use violence to achieve a specific goal. This notion can be found, explicitly or implicitly, in vastly different theories of violence. Insofar as rational choice theories are addressed here at all, my argument is based solely on their action-theoretical core, which states that people use violence because they believe they can achieve the greatest subjective gain from it. Thus, the objective of this article is not to offer a differentiated treatment of the various types of rational choice theories. Nor, for that matter, does it seek to examine the additional assumptions borrowed from alternative sociological paradigms and the subtle constructs that rational choice theoreticians use in an attempt to compensate for the empirical divergences from the premises of their models (for a more detailed discussion, see Karstedt & Greve, 1996; Short, 1997).

Instead, the arguments herein are built on a wider, Weberian and Habermasian notion of rationality (Weber, 1949, 1968; Habermas, 1984). This notion not only refers to the instrumental practices to which rational choice theories are restricted, but also includes normative and expressive ways of acting. Applied to the topic of this article, rational violence can be instrumentally motivated or, in Weber’s term, goal-oriented (*zweckrational*); that is, it is used strategically as a means to obtain material goods and social benefits. Violence can just as well be rational if it is norm-driven or value-oriented (*wertrational*); that is, if the perpetrator attempts to realize normative ideals and conform to specific values, such as the defense of honor. Finally, violent action can be rational in the

sense that it is perceived by the actor as an authentic self-expression, which Habermas would call expressive action (*expressives* or *dramaturgisches Handeln*). In all these cases, violence is a means of achieving an external end, be it an instrumental gain, a value realization, or an expression of the self.

However, theories that try to analyze violence solely in terms of means and ends overlook important, nonrational aspects and, at times, entire types of violent action. Theoretical models that in one way or another adhere to Max Weber’s dictum that all analysis of meaningful human conduct is tied to the categories “end” and “means” (Weber, 1949, p. 52) fail to fully explain violence; they remain incomplete. In other words, even if the concept of rational action is as wide as just outlined, it cannot include or explain all facets and forms of violence— independent of whether rationality is defined in an instrumental, normative, or expressive fashion. This does not at all mean, as I will argue, that the nonrational perpetrator acts unintentionally or that the exercise of violence is subjectively meaningless to the actor and therefore cognitively incomprehensible from an observer’s point of view.

Methodology

In the following sections I will first describe the two above-mentioned concepts—“interpretive regimes” with an affinity for violence and “intrinsic motives” for violence—and then show in what respects they contradict models of rational action. The examples and empirical descriptions used are aimed at illustrating the relevance of these concepts; these are based on and drawn from my study on “violent careers” (Sutterlüty, 2002). This study, carried out in the German capital Berlin, used the method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and was based on two qualitative interviews with 18 youths aged 15 to 21. The core section of these in-depth interviews was narratively structured and

sought to document the violent experiences the young people had had in the course of their lives. Each of the youths was asked to tell about the incidents in which they had come into contact with violence, either as observers, victims, or perpetrators.

The sample comprised 15 young men and 3 young women of different ethnic backgrounds and group affiliations. Measured against the statistical distribution of violent crimes among the sexes in the corresponding age group in Germany, there is a slight overrepresentation of female interviewees in the sample (cf. Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1999, p. 14). Nine youths were of German descent, and the other nine came from immigrant families: six were Turkish, two were of Arab descent, and one interviewee came from Poland but was a member of a Turkish gang. Four of the interviewees were in the skinhead scene, and five were members of a violent Turkish or Arab gang. The others were on the fringes of these groups, had been members of such groups for a short time, had shifted between different groups, or had never been members of a violent group. Contact with the young people was arranged by a Berlin secondary school and by several facilities that had been charged by a juvenile court with carrying out "educational measures" under Section 10 of Germany's *Jugendgerichtsgesetz* (the penal code for young offenders). With the exception of three participants, who were included for comparative purposes, all the youths had repeatedly committed serious violent crimes.

Exposure to Violence and Disrespect: The Genesis of Interpretive Regimes

It is by no means the case that physical maltreatment in families inevitably generates violence in adolescence and young adulthood (Laub & Sampson, 2003), yet there is overwhelming empirical evidence that a significantly large percentage of adolescents and young adults who physically abuse others have themselves been victims of family violence (Alfaro,

1981; Lewis, Mallouh, & Webb, 1989; Dornes, 2004). These findings are consistent with the interviews in my study: the young people who became repeat offenders were, almost without exception, victims of violence for longer periods of time in the early phases of family socialization. For these youths, childhood can be described as a trajectory of violence in which the characteristic feature is powerlessness.

Insofar as there was no person of importance in their lives who could offer effective protection or represent their rights, abuse in the family, according to the interviewees, went hand in hand with the feeling of being physically threatened and defenseless. A similar process can be observed among youths who were forced to witness their mothers being battered by their fathers, or a sibling being beaten by one of their parents. They, too, said that they regarded themselves as helpless witnesses who were condemned to powerlessness (see also Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Osofsky, 1995). "I couldn't do anything, I was just a child," is the phrase that several interviewees used, in nearly identical fashion, to describe the experience of being physically abused and of witnessing family violence.

If children are direct victims of violence, an experience of powerlessness arises out of their physical defenselessness. They learn that they are at the mercy of their parents' or their siblings' blows. In the case of indirect victimization caused by observing scenes of family violence, the experience of physical defenselessness results from the children's inability to protect an important figure from the violence of a more powerful abuser. These children internalize their powerless position within the context of family violence. It occupies a great deal of their thoughts, and at some point the experience of powerlessness turns into fantasies of counterviolence. This is a consequence of family abuse observable throughout the sample, and it adds the characteristics of a violent action pattern to the trajectory of victimization. The "trajectory projection"

(Strauss, 1993, p. 55)—that is, the vision of continued violent interaction within the family—is shaped by the idea of violently seizing power.

Young people who repeatedly commit violent crimes have usually not only been victims of violence, but also targets of massive disrespect within their families. Whereas a sense of powerlessness may result from experiencing physical vulnerability in violent situations, disrespect represents a nonviolent violation of the need for, and the claim to, recognition. Experiences of powerlessness and disrespect can empirically mesh, as is vividly captured in the phrase “pain of the soul” which Bebek, a 16-year-old Kurdish girl born in Berlin, used to describe the wounds inflicted by the brutal, humiliating blows of her elder brother.

Even so, one must conceptually differentiate between these two types of experiences, which are attributable to various types of interaction and characterized by a different physical proximity: experiences of powerlessness are directly related to the body insofar as the individuals in question, if they do indeed become victims of violence, have an immediate physical experience of their inability to act, escape, or protect themselves. Or, if they are forced to witness violence, these individuals are confronted with the fact that they are incapable of a physical response that suits their affective and moral impulses. Experiences of disrespect are based on family interactions that nonviolently violate the children’s need for recognition and claim to attention, respect, and appreciation. In this sense, experiences of disrespect can damage the trust that young people place in themselves and the world, which has bearing not only on their physical, but also on their emotional and social integrity (cf. Honneth, 1996; Todorov, 2001).

From the interviewees’ narratives, we see that experiences of disrespect emerge from a variety of interactions that have often hardened into entrenched

forms in family life and decisively affected the youths’ socialization. They range from the privileging of siblings to intrafamily marginalization, from negative classifications to true humiliation rituals, from parental neglect to a fundamental rejection by other family members. Experiences of disrespect can thus be rooted in active humiliation, that is, in actions by other family members that aim to humiliate the children and injure their feelings of self-worth; or they can be caused by a passive refusal to grant recognition, including not only a failure by other family members to acknowledge and support a child, but also neglect or a lack of attention, which need not be deliberate to be perceived as extremely degrading by the neglected child. In most cases, a dynamic of disrespect inheres from the start in the family socialization of young people with violent careers.

Both types of disrespect—active humiliation and passive refusal to grant recognition—produce negative self-images. At a very early age, the children’s identities are destabilized, and their self-image is shaped by humiliation in the family. Children whose worth is constantly being questioned are given the impression that they do not deserve the affection and kindness of others and that the contempt with which they are treated is justified. As an effect of the degradation and disdain, they lose trust in their own abilities and their own value. They inherit a specific problem: that of intersubjective recognition and—the reverse side of the coin—intrasubjective self-respect. Trajectories of disrespect and the resulting negative self-images play just as important a role in the subsequent use of violence in adolescence and young adulthood as do the trajectories of powerlessness in violent family contexts (for more details, see Sutterlüty, 2002, pp. 147 ff.; Sutterlüty, 2007). They both give rise to interpretive regimes that bring forth violence.

Interpretive regimes of this kind are perceptual patterns acquired in family socialization. They render the youths

particularly vulnerable in situations that evoke their early experiences of powerlessness and disrespect. The youths are quick to recognize, in the behavior of their interaction partners, an intention to humiliate or attack them. This perception determines the way they define a situation that leads to violence. Often all that is required to cause this perception is a glance that they interpret as being contemptuous or aggressive; a single false word suffices to trigger their violent “defense.” Here we see an internal connection to their experience of victimization within the family, one that can be traced into the subtle twists and turns of their narratives. In the practice of violence, dichotomous interpretations are at work that, like the complementary negative experiences within the family, circle around the semantics and relational dynamics of power and powerlessness, of recognition and disrespect.

We are justified in speaking of interpretive regimes in this case because the perception of an interactive situation that generates violence is an interpretation—just as every action is based on an interpretive definition of the given situation, and just as individuals always act based on the meaning that objects possess for them (Blumer, 1969). These interpretations can be characterized as being guided by mental regimes because they do not spring from the youths’ conscious decision to process interactive situations in any particular way. Rather, the young people interpret the situations in light of paradigmatic events in the past without being able to explain this to themselves or to others. They are under the sway of their experiences as victims; they are subject to the regime and, to use Sigmund Freud’s (1925) metaphor, their egos are not masters in their own houses. For biographical reasons, the corresponding situations are overdetermined—not only in terms of the way they are interpreted, but also in terms of the way they are responded to. Interpretive regimes in this sense have an affinity for violence because the young people view situations through the lens of

interpretative patterns that make a violent response seem the most logical. They do not want to remain the victims of violence and humiliation, and since they project their family’s hostile world onto other social contexts, they believe they must constantly defend themselves in order to preempt attacks by others. Finally, although these interpretations have an affinity for violence, they need not always or invariably lead to the use of violence. Even if they provide an impetus for violent action, there is no automatic mechanism. At issue are proclivities for action whose fulfillment depends on the most diverse situational conditions and on existing opportunity structures.

An incident from the interview with Bebek, the 16-year-old Kurdish girl mentioned earlier, shows how interpretive regimes with an affinity for violence work. It begins when she tries to enter a room in her youth club to talk to a few friends who are dancing. At the door, there is a verbal exchange between Bebek and an Iranian girl of her own age who does not want to let her in, as the dance exercise is already underway. The girl first claims to have this authority herself, then refers to instructions from the social worker. After a short argument, Bebek hits her opponent so hard that the girl is taken to the hospital with a skull trauma and broken ribs; Bebek will later have to answer in court for her actions. The escalating tension between Bebek and the girl draws its force from the theme of exclusion. Bebek, who at the start of the narrative emphasized that she had previously gone to the youth center “almost every day” and enjoyed “privileged status” there, sees her membership challenged by her opponent. If one recalls Bebek’s experience as a victim, it becomes clear that there are antecedents to this conflict in the family, where Bebek always had the role of outcast and was forced to knuckle under to the male family members’ violent patriarchal regime.

The theme of exclusion has a powerful

presence in an interview passage in which Bebek describes how her family used to try to convince her she was a foundling whom her parents had discovered in a “garbage can.” Despite her tears and obvious distress, family members would confirm this story, pointing to her “white skin,” which differed from their own brown complexions, as proof. The theme of skin color is also present in the interview when Bebek, in response to a question by the interviewer, briefly describes her Iranian opponent in the youth center, saying: “She has brown skin herself.” It is indeed striking that this detail should recur in an incident that centers on exclusion; it was, after all, the dark skin color of her family members that provided a clear sign of affiliation with the family.

Prior to Bebek’s violent outburst, one question became increasingly important in the dialogue between the two girls: whether Bebek’s opponent was entitled to determine who would be allowed in. Before striking the victim, Bebek exclaimed, “You don’t have any say here!”—another telling statement, as Bebek herself was forbidden to speak in the family, and this ban plays a central role in her descriptions of its interactive structures. For instance, when she wanted to voice her opinion at the table, Bebek was either not listened to or silenced by her father or older brother, who said, “You’re too small, shut up!” Whereas in her family any protests she dared to make remained ineffectual, her newly acquired ability to defend herself broke new ground in her violent response. The semantic horizons are the same in both cases: what is at stake are special forms of exclusion and affiliation. The interpretive pattern that informed Bebek’s definition of the situation in the youth center had been in place for quite some time. She perceived her opponent’s behavior in light of old problems whose semantic and relational traces are clearly visible in the interview: the problem of intrafamily marginalization, of her treatment as a stranger on her home turf, and of her constant sense of subjugation.

Another factor determines Bebek’s violent behavior: namely, her female

identity. In this case, too, the semantic subtleties of Bebek’s descriptions shed light on the evolution, within the family, of her situational definitions. A pertinent example was a story she tells of punching a boy in the face for calling her girlfriend a “whore” in a subway station. This situation turns on the issue of honor, that is, on her friend’s virginity and good reputation. On several occasions, this issue provided grounds for her father and brother to beat or humiliate her. When she entered into friendly relations with boys or talked to a female neighbor of ill sexual repute, she was even forced to submit to a true humiliation ritual: her brother made her lie on the ground before him, and he beat her legs with a wooden stick. As Bebek’s description of the subway incident makes clear, she felt implicated in the label applied to her friend, as if this label were aimed at her and she were the one called upon to defend her own identity. Reflecting on the blow she gave the boy, she remarks that, in contrast to other girls, it is not enough for her to know what kind of person she is. She won’t put up with being called a “whore.” She often displayed this defiant attitude of “not putting up with anything”—which can only be understood as an inversion of her experiences within the family—in situations where an external observer would fail to see any challenge, threat, or intended injury on the part of another person.

As this example indicates, the concept of interpretive regimes on the one hand points to a special sensitivity in situations in which experiences that the youths know from their homes threaten to recur. On the other hand, it is linked to their willingness to use violence in such situations. These interpretive regimes make violence a likely option, because the young people project the adversity they have experienced in their homes onto other social spheres. As their web of social relations widens, so too does the space in which they again and again “discover” the aggressive rejection and ignorance that they have known in their families since their childhood. The concept

of violent interpretive regimes is thus able to address the long-unanswered question of how violence is transferred from the youths' homes to their life-worlds outside the family. The line of research dealing with the "cycle of violence" has repeatedly demonstrated a statistical link between domestic violence and violent crime in adolescence and young adulthood, but it has not been able to specify the mechanism by which violence is transmitted from one area of life to the other (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990, pp. 60 ff.). The notion of interpretive regimes posits a biographical continuity that permits one not only to speak of "violent careers," but also to see their beginnings in trajectories of physical abuse and disrespect. Simultaneously, the resulting acts of violence uncover two flaws of rationalist theories: first, they do not account adequately for biographical determinants of violence; second, they are mostly blind to the highly divergent consequences that limit the rationality of using force.

Biographic Determinants of Violent Action

Because theories of rational action isolate individuals from their previous biographies, the genesis of violent inclinations often remains mysterious to theory adherents. The rational individual who, before committing violence, weighs the desired benefits against possible risks and unwanted side effects is seen as a blank slate with no prehistory. The fact is that, for biographical reasons, perpetrators are not as free to define situations and make decisions as theories of rational action assume. Although such theories would have us believe that perpetrators are always able to weigh benefits and costs with a cool head, an analysis of interpretive regimes presents an entirely different picture of violent criminals. They are incapable of acting rationally because "trajectories of suffering" (Riemann & Schütze, 1991), which they have only seemingly overcome, continue to exert a profound influence on their perceptual patterns and modes of reaction (for similar findings, see Gilligan,

2000, 2003).

As has been demonstrated, the young perpetrators interpret certain situations in light of past events. But they generally do not know that they are misconceiving the present based on past experiences; they are not aware of any alternative ways of making sense of others' behavior, and also lack reflective awareness of differing modes of response. Accordingly, they cannot give an account of this habitualized process of interpreting and acting, to themselves or others. They are subject to a regime of sedimented interpretations that stems from their experiences as victims. They do not want to be the objects of violence or humiliation any longer, and because they project the hostile world of their families onto other social spheres, they believe they must constantly defend themselves and preempt attacks by others.

In such situations, young people are a long way from being able to coolly weigh the advantages and risks of violence and to choose from alternative actions based on the foreseeable subjective benefits. Rather, their idiosyncratic perceptual patterns and negative expectations of the social environment color their interpretations of their partners' gestures and words, even when a neutral observer can make out no threat, insult, or challenge. They are not aware that they project family-related socialization experiences onto youth-specific contexts of interaction, nor do they consider nonviolent alternatives. They have only a limited capacity to adequately interpret the intentions and actions of others, and they lack the ability to make a rational choice among different options (cf. Turner, 1991, pp. 89 ff.)—two indispensable preconditions for rational action.

By the way, rationalist theories with a utilitarian bent can hardly account for the fact that violence is often an attempt to solve a biographically acquired problem of recognition. Young people who use violence to obtain or coerce the recognition of others are obliquely expressing what amounts to a

normative claim. Theories that in principle attribute to these individuals action goals dictated by self-interest are unsuited for explaining such claims.

Divergent Consequences of Violence

Furthermore, deeds whose consequences are highly divergent confront models of rational action with irresolvable conceptual problems. This can be demonstrated using Albert Bandura's (1973) social learning theory of aggression. His analysis and its critique can also help us evaluate the contribution that theories of rational action make to explaining how patterns of violent behavior become accepted and habitualized. Bandura distinguishes between two types of learning that allow individuals to acquire violent forms of action: "learning through modeling" and "learning through practice." According to the concept of learning through modeling, violent behavioral modes are acquired by observing role models, particularly parents, when they carry out aggressive action and use force. In contrast, the concept of learning through practice states that children appropriate violent behavior on a trial-and-error basis. According to Bandura, the question of whether learned behavioral patterns will become ingrained in children depends on whether they lead to "successes" and are "positively reinforced" (Bandura, 1973, pp. 68 ff.). In a similar fashion, Edwin M. Lemert (1972, p. 83) speaks of a "law of effect" that must be taken into account when explaining deviant behavior (see also Akers, 1977; Akers & Jensen, 2003).

Following this theoretical line, whose influence within the field of criminology can hardly be overstated, violence becomes a stable behavioral pattern if the individual has learned from past experiences that it guarantees praise, power, status, or material gains. Bandura assumes that violence is always based on rewards (of whatever sort) and that its use is determined by the anticipation of the attained benefits or satisfactions. By reducing the norms and values in the social environment to "external conditions" that reinforce the violent

behavior of children or youth, Bandura (1973, pp. 184 ff.) also subordinates them to this action-theory bias, which states that all forms and aspects of violent acts are rooted in the instrumental pursuit of utilitarian goals. In and of themselves, values and norms appear to have no motivating or restrictive effects on aggressive action in Bandura's model. Rather, they figure in his theory only as a context for praise and reproaches, for rewards and punishment—that is, to a certain extent, as an opportunity structure for the goal-oriented use of violence.

Even if, contrary to fact, we accept Bandura's implicit assumption that violent perpetrators are instrumentally bent on receiving diverse types of satisfaction and that achieving their goal reinforces their behavioral tendencies, we are still left with the question of what "success" means. After all, violence provokes a variety of reactions from different persons and in different social contexts, meaning that both positive and negative consequences can be associated with a single action. Further, the consequences are normally marked by an inescapable ambiguity: violent acts create situations in which the perpetrator is superior to the victim, yet they destroy social relations; they bring recognition from some peer groups, yet they elicit the disapproval of other peer groups, parents, and teachers; they ensure a material gain, yet the perpetrator pays for this by sacrificing moral scruples; and so on. Sadly, those who resort to violence all too often call down upon their heads the very punitiveness and humiliation they believe they are trying to avoid.

The instrumental success of past assaults alone cannot offer a comprehensive explanation of how individuals acquire the proclivity to violent behavior. In need of more explanation is the question of why children and young people become and remain violent even though they constantly observe the destructive effects of violence and suffer it themselves within the family, which represents the most important

incubator for a disposition to violence (see, in particular, Denzin, 1984; Kavemann, 2001). The transfer of violence from the family to youth-specific social contexts can to a large extent be explained by interpretive regimes, which are far more the unconscious heredity of victimization experiences than the outcome of learned expectations that link the use of violence with some kind of advantage or gain.

Beyond Rational Calculation: Intrinsic Motives for Violence

As violent careers progress, new types of motives come into play that can no longer be reduced to the situational definitions shaped by the interpretive patterns described in the previous section. The violence becomes excessively cruel and takes on a dynamic of its own, one that is not sufficiently accounted for by a dispositional explanation based on the offenders' biographically determined behavioral tendencies. In this case, any explanation for the violence and its motives must be supplemented by a purely situational analysis (Birkbeck & LaFree, 1993). After all, the descriptions in the interviews repeatedly showed that the young people associated a direct subjective gain with their violent acts—a gain that consists of an especially intense experience. In one form or another, the youths describe the use of violence as a fascinating experience that not only creates a disinhibitory dynamic, but also becomes a motive for additional violent acts. The violence becomes an end in itself and builds intrinsic motives; that is, motives that emanate from the experience of using violence and do not require any objectives or purposes external to the situation. We can identify three aspects of the violent experience that lead to such intrinsic motives: the triumph of physical superiority, the victim's pain, and the break with the daily routine (Sutterlüty, 2002, pp. 41 ff.).

The young perpetrators associate with victorious violence the intoxicating experience of triumph, of being stronger than and having power over others. This can become an independent motive for

violence and in extreme cases can develop a dynamic of its own, one that breeds a desire to bring others to the brink of death and sit in judgment over their lives. No matter how cruel the violence is in individual cases, perpetrators with such motives are aiming for much more than self-assertion. They desire the physical subjugation of others, they want to see their victims literally beneath them in order to feel powerful and important. When the youths emphasize that their opponents are below them and they stand above, when they stress their own lack of injury and the others' wounds, when they mention their own freedom to act and the others' inability to move, they demonstrate how closely the feelings of strength and omnipotence are linked to the coordinates of bodily experience. These feelings draw on the direct physical presence of the victim and the sensory evidence of his being broken. When the youths say that violence yields an "incredible feeling of power" and "the thrill of victory," they are describing what drives them to their acts and what they see as the source of the intrinsic attraction of violence. In this context, the motive for action is based on what occurs in the perpetrators' relationships to themselves when they use violence. What is at stake is a sense of the self, even if this is based on a specific, extremely asymmetric relationship to another person; it is an exhilarating self-perception that feeds on the irrefutable certainty of one's own grandeur, power, and strength.

This point is illustrated in an incident related by 16-year-old Murat, a member of a mostly Turkish gang. It begins at Murat's school in West Berlin, when an Arab youth spreads the news that, at his school in East Berlin, he and a black friend were cursed out as "shitty foreigners" and beaten by a group of skinheads. After emphasizing that the "Nazis" challenged them to a fight, the youth was ultimately successful in persuading Murat and a few Turkish classmates to avenge the skinheads' crime. The group of 16, armed with clubs, set out in search of the skinheads, and after a

verbal exchange, a pitched battle ensued during which two Turks in Murat's group drew their knives and stabbed one of the skinheads several times, causing life-threatening injuries.

Murat's description at first appears to leave little doubt as to the purpose of the fight: to call the skinheads to account for their racist words and actions and, beyond this, to take up the challenge to fight. However, as the dynamics of the situation unfold, an additional motive for action surfaces that subsequently pushes aside the theme of revenge for the perceived threat. Murat commented on this as follows: "We really wanted to beat them to a pulp. We wanted them to grovel on the ground before us, saying: 'Stop, please! We're sorry for what we said.' We wanted to beat them to a pulp." According to this description, Murat and his fellow combatants finally sought to create a situation in which the skinheads were completely subjugated and Murat's group could gloat over their horror. The violence aimed not only at the physical subjugation of the opponents, but also at a verbal apology, concession of their inferiority, and the perpetrators' malicious pleasure in their terror: Murat and his companions wanted the skinheads to tremble with fear and beg for mercy. They were supposed to fall to their knees and confirm the power of Murat's group in a formal act of submission. Here, the triumphant experience of proving oneself superior by physically subjugating an opponent in a violent undertaking became the decisive motive for action.

Similar motives led the skinhead Kai, who was 19 years old when he was interviewed, to embark on a nearly routine search for persons to be the target of his violence. When he got up in the morning, Kai explained, he would often have a premonition that "something would happen" that day. The behavior at which he took offense in his randomly chosen victims merely seems to serve the purpose of identifying them as the objects of his violent intentions. Kai's talk of a "feeling of power" reveals the driving force behind his attacks,

which at first glance seem fully irrational. He has this sense of power when he views his victims beaten and often motionless on the ground before him. One incident that occurred after a visit to a disco with a girlfriend and a few male friends provides a gauge of the exact nature of this feeling, which constantly recurs in Kai's stories. When leaving the disco, they met, as Kai put it, a "Yugoslav or a Turk," who made a "funny remark." Kai punched him in the face, kicked him, and threw him in front of an approaching streetcar, which was able to brake in time to avoid running over him. Kai's comment was that his opponent "unfortunately survived" and afterward ran off. Referring to the incident later on, Kai said, "And he was almost run over, and I would have committed my first murder. Not that I wanted to. Then I had this feeling of power again." The ambivalent feelings of regret that Kai expressed over the nonfatal outcome of his violent crime result from his desire to invest himself with godlike powers and ultimately to savor the survivor's triumph over the dead (cf. Canetti, 1962, pp. 227 ff.).

The second aspect of intrinsically motivated violence, the pleasure in inflicting pain, does not aim for a heightened sense of the self. Rather, it is linked to what happens to the victim or inferior opponent. For the young offenders, the physical suffering of another person is often not only an unintended side effect of violence, but the very thing they are striving for (see also Baumeister & Campbell, 1999, pp. 211 ff.). They take pleasure in the pain and injuries of their victims. The direct experience of their victim's vulnerability can exert such an attraction that the offenders cannot cease from their beatings until the victim doubles over in pain. For instance, Kai compared himself to a "pit bull" that must be "whistled back" by others before he will stop pummeling a grievously injured opponent. If the victim's pain is the driving force behind a violent act, it presupposes a certain empathy with the victim on the part of the perpetrator, as was first observed by Georg Simmel (1900) and later emphasized by Hartmann Tyrell (1999, p. 272). The

latent process by which the perpetrator—who enjoys his victim’s suffering—comes to identify with the victim can be seen in the passage of Kai’s interview in which, alluding to a violent act by a friend, he said that, just once, when jumping on a person’s head, he would like to “hear it crack.” Asked by the interviewer what he meant by this, Kai brought the victim into play, saying: “It’s brutal, absolutely brutal. If you do that to a person—it must be brutal for him.”

When offenders like Kai are forced to admit to themselves that, while fully aware of their victim’s vulnerability, they feel pleasure in his pain, their own behavior appears eerie to them. As a result, they occasionally pathologize themselves because they feel the need to exonerate themselves of guilt. One example can be seen in Kai’s description of himself as having a “perverse streak.” Kai does indeed have scruples, and at times he counters these by externalizing moral standards and delegating responsibility for his violent acts to the spectators who in most cases exist but fail to intervene. This “neutralization technique” (Sykes & Matza, 1957) allows the perpetrators to pursue their pleasure in others’ pain, and in their narratives this pleasure is expressed by a symbolism of intoxication. Only this motivational basis can explain the extreme brutality and excessive violence that often mark young offenders’ attacks on victims who are physically inferior to them.

This dimension of the violent experience came to light in a story that Kai told about an extremely cruel beating he gave a man in a fast-food restaurant. In describing his victim, Kai at first said that he was an “awful braggart,” but later admitted that the man had simply had the bad luck of being “at the wrong place at the wrong time.” Kai affirmed that his cruel act gave him “a nice feeling” that was based on “inflicting pain” (cf. Toch, 1992, pp. 157 ff.). Concluding his story, Kai once again offered an explanation of what he feels when he hits and torments his victims: “For me it was awesome to see all the things you could do to a person.”

Kai derives pleasure from making

others the object of an experiment that takes them to their pain barrier. Furthermore, as in Kai’s talk of a “perverse streak,” the attribute that he uses in German to describe this experiment—*geil*—has a double meaning (awesome/horny) that sexualizes his cruelty. In a similar vein, some youths say that they “fucked” somebody, meaning that they beat that person.

Joe, a 17-year-old German youth who committed most of his violent crimes together with his Arab and Turkish friends, is also familiar with such motives, even though his crimes were less serious than those committed by Kai. Joe tells about an incident that centers on a Thai youth who borrowed a video from Joe’s Turkish friend Ural and then gave him back the wrong one. Joe and Ural accosted the Thai in front of his apartment, a scuffle ensued, and finally Joe, joined by Ural, began kicking the boy until his nose started bleeding. He did not stop until the hallway was “full of blood.” Up to a certain point, the progression of this situation can be grasped by the interactive dynamic derived from the need to resolve the conflict over the video cassette. However, the excessive use of force explodes the original scope of the two’s intentions and their desire to put their opponent in his place. The following remark by Joe suggests why the conflict suddenly escalated the way it did: “It’s just so—gratifying. And you’re glad he hurts. He keeps saying: ‘Stop, stop!’, and you keep hitting him.” Here Joe links the positive experience of the violent act with his victim’s cries of pain, which appeared to incite him to additional blows, even though his opponent had admitted defeat and was begging for mercy. The extreme violence of this situation springs from the fact that the objective of Joe’s behavior is his opponent’s pain.

The third dimension of the intrinsic motive for violence—breaking with the everyday routine—results from the relationship between the violent situation and the offenders’ normal lives, which are experienced as a great deal less intense.

The appeal of violence lies in its capacity to produce an exceptional situation that radically differs from the youths' everyday existence. The young people relate that, in the act of violence, they experience moments of great intensity that are focused on the present and the immediacy of the action (cf. Katz, 1988; Buford, 1991). This exceptional state is created both by the tension that grips all their senses the moment they commit violence, and by the fact that violence suspends, even scorns, the usual rules of human coexistence. Thus, the desire to create this exceptional sensory state can be just as strong a motive for violence as the wish to bring about an exceptional normative situation in which the offender deliberately violates the fundamental rules of civil interaction. In both cases, the spell cast on young people in violent moments renders all other motives secondary. In such moments, the reflective distance between the subject and his actions dissolves; the moment is reduced to pure speed and action. The youths lose sight of the possible ramifications of violence for themselves and the physical and mental consequences for their victims. As can often be observed, the offenders are so enthralled by the experience of violence that they act in contravention of their own moral feelings. They reach a state where they are unable to reflect on their action and even temporarily abandon self-control.

An episode from the life of 17-year-old Cruse, a Lebanese youth born in Berlin, illustrates this point. Cruse, who had been a member of various violent street gangs in the past and at the time of the interview regularly met with a group of young Arabs on the street, describes "a nice fight," yes, "the best fight of all," which occurred when he and several gang members returned from a swimming excursion. After they entered the subway car, two of his friends turned up their ghetto blaster (portable sound system), which led to a skirmish with "four pretty big Germans" and ultimately to a tumultuous brawl that spilled out onto the platform in the next subway station, where several

passers-by intervened. The enthusiasm with which Cruse recounted the incident shows the exhilarating dynamic of his violent outburst, which is not held in check as long as he is protected by his group. He left out no detail of his unrestrained behavior, describing, for instance, how he punched one man "in the face and the nose," drawing both blood and tears, and how he butted his head into another's "Nazi nose" and "kicks him again, again and again." The phrases, which are meant to capture his feeling of euphoria, come thick and fast, culminating in the remark: "Attacking at the same time, that's awesome, really awesome, that's better than any trip." The attack on one of the four men in the subway, to which Cruse was referring, created an ecstatic state that in his eyes was better than any drug-induced high. It is obvious that such violent experiences, which give the youths a taste of the extraordinary, will have an impact on them and motivate additional violence. The fascination of immorality and excesses of cruelty leads precisely to those acts that are often described as blind, as without reason and sense. But the related acts of violence are not completely irrational; rather, they are nonrational in some respects.

Before dealing with this issue, I would like to add a note for clarification: Even if intrinsic motives for violence bring to violent careers a strongly physical dimension that cannot be explained in its entirety solely by the young offenders' family history as victims, such motives remain embedded in biographical processes. Two of the intrinsic motives—the triumph of physical superiority and the pleasure in the victim's pain—can be understood as inversions of previous victimization experiences within the family or, put in Freudian terms, as the outcome of a "repetition compulsion" (for an application of this concept to youth violence, see Dornes, 2004, pp. 83 ff.). Furthermore, the only youths who are able to integrate the euphoria of using violence into their self-image are victimized individuals with a biographically acquired disposition to violence. As is shown by a comparison

with the three interviewees without violent careers, other youths immediately reverse course when they start discovering similar sides to themselves. This is why the thesis of the existence of intrinsic motives for violence has little to do with the theories proposed by Elias Canetti (1962) and Wolfgang Sofsky (1996), who regard the pleasure in violence as an anthropological constant and deny the explanatory power of biographical factors.

Violence Can Become an End in Itself

However, there are aspects of violence that are neither instrumentally nor normatively rational and that also transgress expressive rationality, since they elude the categories of “means” and “ends.” This is the conclusion to which any researcher must come when empirically analyzing situations in which intrinsic motives for violence are a determinant force. Here there is an element of uncontrollability, as the intoxicating experiences underlying these motives can occur spontaneously and are situation-specific (see also Zimbardo, 2007). The means–ends model cannot explain violent acts in which euphoriant experiences take possession of the action. These intrinsically motivated acts merge with the present and suspend the link to the future that is of central importance to rational action (Bataille, 1991). In such cases, the use of violence is not a means to achieve a future goal that lies outside the violent situation.

Such acts go hand in hand with a relative disregard for the possible negative consequences of violence and are marked by a partial loss of control. This is underscored by the perpetrators’ frequent talk of “losing my head” in the violent situation. The tools of rational action theory are unable to account for the fact that in such cases the perpetrator ignores the consequences of violence and gives up reflective control over himself. The experiences associated with violence—the triumph of physical superiority, the pleasure taken in the pain of others, and the transcendence of everyday routines—are the incentives for its use. But these acts of violence are focused on the immediacy of the situation. Means and end

converge and are no longer distinguishable. But, if a violent act cannot be understood as a means to an end, it forfeits the most important definitional feature of any kind of rational action.

Even if young criminals experience the exhilarating dimensions of violence in a spontaneous and new way, these dimensions can initiate a more or less planned search for situations in which violence can occur. This is shown by the example of the skinhead Kai, who combs his neighborhood for victims in an attempt to re-experience the “feeling of power” he once had when beating a man unconscious. Yet in this case, too, the intrinsically motivated crime is not linked to goals beyond the search for a transitory subjective experience of intoxicated power. As in the case of the skinhead, an individual can intentionally create violent situations but not the desired experiences. They are merely a byproduct to which the intrinsically motivated perpetrator has limited access. Yet even if the intended states of exhilaration are a byproduct, they are not states that are “essentially” byproducts in the sense put forth by Jon Elster (1981). So, the issue here is not those states (like a desire to be relaxed or natural) that elude a person when he intentionally tries to achieve them. Nevertheless, planned action that seeks these intense emotional states comes to an end as soon as it enters the phase in which physical violence is used. Planning stops as it is overtaken by intoxication with the act of violence.

Bearing this in mind, it is worthwhile to examine the approach taken by Heinrich Popitz, which has enjoyed great popularity in recent sociological research on violence in the German-speaking countries. Popitz (1992, p. 48) defines violence as “an act of power that results in the intentional physical injury of others, regardless of whether its meaning for the perpetrators lies in its execution (as a sheer act of power) or whether, taking the form of threats, it is meant to establish a permanent state of submission (as a binding act of power).” There is no denying that violence that is

meant to establish or perpetuate power differences has a goal-oriented character. However, when Popitz describes violence as an “act of power” per se, he ties it to a goal-oriented behavioral pattern: In this case, violence is always a means of exercising power. But instrumental rationality as a definitional feature of violence is too narrow a category for dealing with violent acts that are ends in themselves and desire nothing more from the injured party (see Popitz, 1992, p. 46; similarly Trotha, 2000).

By subsuming such intrinsically motivated deeds under the concept of “acts of power,” Popitz and Trotha attempt to integrate incompatible types of violence into their theoretical framework. If violence is an end in itself, it can no longer be a means to achieve something else. The ecstatic, exhilarating aspects of violence which are responsible for uncontrolled escalatory processes mock any attempt to characterize violence as a goal-oriented act of power. This is not to say that intrinsically motivated violence is unintended by the perpetrator; without an intention we would not call it an action in the full sense, but rather an accident. Nor does it mean that it is impossible to make this kind of violence understandable—as I have tried to show so far. Violent acts that are driven by intense subjective experiences can best be compared with other activities in which people seem to be “overwhelmed” by their sentiments, as we know it from the fields of religious ecstasy or sexuality.

Revising Existing Theories: Rational and Nonrational Facets of Violent Action

Naturally, it would be absurd to claim that there are no motives for violence based on specific objectives or values. Violence cannot be said to be entirely irrational or meaningless. However, one must also examine its nonrational aspects, which cannot be understood using categories of “means” and “ends,” together with the diverse links to other aspects of violence that can indeed be interpreted with the aid of such categories. The idea of intrinsic

motives is conceptually opposed to extrinsic motives for violence—that is, to motives that are attributable to a goal-oriented pursuit of political objectives (such as calling attention to perceived deprivation), self-centered interests (appropriation of goods by force), or motives based on certain norms, values, or ideals (e.g., the promotion of justice or the assertion of manliness). This idea is intended to fill the theoretical gap that has opened in sociological research on violence due to dominant approaches that can only take extrinsic motives into account because of their action-theoretical premises (see Joas, 2003a, 2003b). But it is not simply an alternative to rational models of violent action. After all, very different action rationalities and nonrational facets of violence can coexist in the same individual and even in the same situation.

This is how we must view, for example, the concept of “infra-political violence” that François Dubet applies to marginalized youth in French suburbs. As Dubet (1997, p. 224) writes, “infra-political” means that this “violence has a socio-critical meaning. It is a defense against dominance and exclusion. Yet it is not linked to any political project, discourse or organization.” As Dubet expressly argues, this violence has an important “instrumental side” that is related, among other things, to the young people’s ability to violently restore favorable power relations in their neighborhoods. In addition to its instrumental side, the violence used by suburban youth has an “expressive aspect” because it gives voice to their diffuse rage. “This inclination toward violence,” write Dubet and Lapeyronnie (1994, pp. 117 ff.), “goes beyond the ‘necessity’ of criminal rationality. This is sufficiently proved by the vandalism in schools, by the burglarized apartments and by the fact that mugging victims are not only robbed but beaten.”

These references to violence in French suburbs (see also Castel, 2009) show that instrumental aspects of violence can be combined with noninstrumental elements. However, among disadvantaged youth, the acting-out of a diffuse, “expressive” rage

can be “rational” insofar as it allows them to give authentic expression to their inner experiences and, through this act, to raise a “claim to sincerity” that is constitutive of expressive action (Habermas, 1984). If, through violence, the young people communicate something about themselves to the public, they achieve something similar to what Jürgen Habermas (1984, pp. 286 ff.) calls the “illocutionary success” of expressive speech acts. This is the key difference between expressive and intrinsically motivated violence, which is practiced for its own sake or because of the experiential quality associated with it. Bringing their distress or identity claims to public attention is quite a different motive than following the intrinsic appeal of violence.

Like Dubet and Lapeyronnie, other authors fail to distinguish between these two types of violence. One such is Michael Kohlstruck (1995, p. 128), who examines violent right-wing radical groups in Brandenburg, a region of eastern Germany: “The behavioral style of the male youths can be described as a type of egocentric action that initially may have no other purpose than self-presentation. Its characteristic feature is the lack of an external goal transcending its performance.” For her part, Gertrud Nunner-Winkler (2004) defines the “expressive” mode of violence as being an end in itself: members of a certain subculture work themselves up to a violently produced state of intoxication while at the same time obeying previously defined limits. In such cases the motive for action, she writes, is an “intrinsic desire for violence that is used against the victim’s will” (Nunner-Winkler, 2004, p. 54). For this phenomenon, the concept of “expressive violence” is far too imprecise, because it does not involve expressing emotional states or personal identities. The “intrinsic pleasure in violence” to which Nunner-Winkler explicitly refers is based on the experience a person has while beating and hurting others. For example, if the perpetrator is encouraged by his victim’s screams of pain,

his violence has a different quality than if he is motivated by a desire to show his victim or third parties who he is. This does not rule out the possibility that intrinsic motives for violence can be intertwined with the expressive dimensions of self-presentation, but these two facets should be separated analytically.

Conclusion

In summary, sociological research would do well to consider the fact that different types of actions, motives, rationalities, and nonrational behavioral forms overlap and merge in violent situations. Research on violence requires an action theory that incorporates constellations of motives—constellations in which the desired ends and the selected means often are just a product of the action process. However, the empirical data on juvenile violence also teach us that such a theory should be able to integrate interpretive patterns and motives for violence that do not depend on means–ends relations. Prevention and intervention programs that address young offenders would be well advised to account for these findings, as would professionals in the field of child welfare who are concerned with the early roots of the violent youths’ seemingly meaningless and often terrifying deeds.

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