

## Chapter 1



# Violence in Everyday Life

**J**effery Farina, when asked why he shot three people and stabbed another in a fast food store in 1992, replied that he had had a boring day. Farina, on death row in Florida for the murder of one of the persons who died as a result of the wounds he inflicted that day, has been described as a typical “stone killer.” Stone killers murder with no apparent motive. The crimes they commit are preceded by what appear as trivial events (an insult or accidental nudge), or by no apparent stimulus at all. The unimportant nature of the interaction preceding the attacks is further underlined by the explanations for their behavior, offered by offenders such as Farina. When asked why he acted in such a violent way, the stone killer responded with shrugs or laughter, suggesting that the fatal event served up a moment of entertainment in his otherwise uneventful life (Sataline 1994).

Stone killers frighten us. They epitomize the central reason why people are so fearful of crime, that is, the threat of random violence at the hands of strangers, who act for no apparent reason other than for kicks. Society looks on these individuals with particular horror, despite the fact that stone killers seem to be rare and their murders no more or less grizzly than those of others. Their lack of rationale, their inability to point to any specific cause (or they suggest a cause that appears trivial) for becoming violent, makes them appear more dangerous and threatening than those who can offer specific reasons why they act this way. The media ask, “What makes cold-blooded killers do what they do?” This question itself suggests that despite the caricature of these individuals operating without feeling or motive, reinforced by vacant stares and mindless shrugs when asked to answer this question, we find it hard

to believe that there is no reason for them to act violently. Further, the stone killer scares us in part in that it challenges our belief that there should be something we can do to stop people from acting in such destructive ways. We expect that people will conform and follow orderly and nonharmful behavior because they value other peoples' lives. But, if not, we would like to believe that others' actions can deter potential offenders from committing their fatal acts.

Are stone killers real? Stone killers may, in fact, be more realistically viewed as a construction of an overly excitable media that hangs on the words of barely articulate juveniles, as though these are a true expression of their innermost feelings. James Gilligan, a psychiatrist who has worked extensively with violent offenders, questions the assumption that many people kill for no reason. As he explains, much criminal violence derives from a desire on the part of offenders for justice or revenge (Gilligan 1992). Gilligan begins his analysis with the assumption that in their efforts to reduce shame or humiliation, individuals become violent as a way of projecting their own selves and promoting their own self-esteem. As he states, ". . . a man only kills another when he is, as he sees it, fighting to save himself, his own self. . . murderers see themselves as having no other choice; to them, 'it's him or me' (or 'her or me')." This reduction of choices, Gilligan argues, should not be confused with the triviality of the incident that provokes or precipitates the efforts to reduce shame. While the incident that triggers the violence may seem unimportant or mundane, it may be the last straw for individuals who feel that they have suffered a long series of insults.

This view of violence suggests that there are reasons for violence that go beyond the poorly articulated explanations of specific events. Beyond the reactions to shame, individuals also may use violence to control or punish others—to coerce them to act in certain ways. But, again, the "motive" for this violence may not be clearly understood if we look only at the explanations offered by the offender.

Gilligan points out that most people do not commit any acts of significant violence in their entire lives. He suggests that most people have available to them a nonviolent means to protect or restore their wounded self-esteem, or else the circumstances in which they find themselves make it difficult for them to accomplish, through violence, their needs. Beyond that, Gilligan suggests, most people possess the capacity for guilt and empathy for others that will not permit them to engage in lethal violence, except under extraordinary conditions (p. 114). Gilligan also points out that even the most violent people on earth, those who assault and kill, are not violent most of the time. They are violent in brief, acute crises.

Gilligan draws upon the literature from the medical and biological sciences to formulate explanations for these crises and the violence. Yet the con-

cepts he defines as being important for explaining violence—shame, self-esteem, social circumstance, guilt, and choice—are more a product of social interaction than of disease. Injustice and revenge evolve from social learning and community values. Gilligan works in a clinical setting that demands the assessment and treatment of individual offenders to deter their antisocial behavior. Also, he has as his focus the most violent of offenders, those who are incarcerated for murder and serious assault. But what about violence in the general population, where treatment does not consist of drug therapy or conditioning programs but of parental guidance and socialization in school? The broad-based occurrence of violence in society suggests that we need to go beyond the offender for our explanations and look at violence as it viewed by the total population. We must look for resolution in low-intensity situations, as these events may socialize or resocialize individuals in developing alternative ways to deal with their problems.

In the discussion that follows, we will pursue an explanation of the social roots of violence by using an approach that attends both to low-intensity and high-intensity conflict originating from social interaction. We begin with similar assumptions to those of Gilligan's. If people act violently, we believe that this can be explained by circumstances surrounding the event; previous relationships; and/or the presence of drugs or alcohol. Violent offenses may emerge from interactions gone sour, may develop from a desire to coerce others or punish them. Violence may be due to anger or frustration. These outcomes derive from the constant ongoing interaction in which people involve themselves on a daily basis. The rules or conventions that govern these interactions may include choices that preclude violent or aggressive action. Alternatively, the choices people exercise may be so limited that violence seems to be a reasonable option in resolving certain types of conflict.

## The Routinized Nature of Violence

The everyday aspects of daily life that offer constraints and choice related to aggression and violence are a major focus of the discussion in this book. An important element of our approach to violence is the view that these actions emerge from normal nonviolent interaction. Given this view, it should not be surprising that we would argue that this interaction is based on basic routines people use to help them navigate through daily living. It is clear that we do not go through life making up new forms of interaction with each person we encounter. These conventions and rules are offered to us in socialization and are tried out over time. Mostly, the successful conventions are retained and routinized, and the less successful conventions are discarded. Sometimes, though, people retain destructive routines or are faced with situ-

ations in which the only options they see available are routines that are harmful to others.

For example, there has been a great deal of attention focused on recent judicial decisions concerning the culpability of women who have killed their husbands after a long history of victimization from spousal violence. In many cases, women who have acted in this way have struck out at their husbands in what appears to be a nonprovoked fashion, sometimes shooting them in the back or while they were asleep (Silverman and Kennedy 1993). The justice system has previously treated this as evidence not of self-defense but of premeditated murder. Recently, though, there have been major changes in the way in which courts have come to look at these murders. Rather than accepting a limited definition of self-defense, there have been cases in which the courts have ruled that the homicidal act cannot be considered outside of the total interaction that occurred between the couple over some period of time.

In accepting the idea of the "battered women defense," courts have said that the ongoing battering a woman has experienced can have the effect of creating in her mind a sense of danger, even when she is not imminently being provoked or threatened by her partner. This perception of the battered woman can lead to intense fear and to the conclusion that the only option available to save her own life is to kill her antagonist. In accepting this claim, the courts have acknowledged a broader definition of what constitutes the definition of culpability. They have accepted a wider time frame in which social interaction that leads to violent outcomes can be considered, and they have accepted that individuals who choose to be violent may do so only because they feel they have no other recourse.

Choices may be based on lessons learned from watching others deal with stressful situations, as in cases of children who witness family violence and then exercise the same harmful actions on their spouses or children (Widom 1989, 1995). This link between seeing others resolve disputes in a violent way and the use of these techniques in resolving one's own conflicts seems fairly obvious. But recent research on the cycle of violence provides a more ominous perspective on this problem. Of children who had histories of abuse and neglect, tracked over a twenty-five-year period, almost half had been arrested for some type of nontraffic offense and 18 percent had been arrested for a violent crime (National Institute of Justice 1996).

The high arrest rate among neglected children alerts us to the importance of not only the learning of poor conflict resolution tactics from experience with abuse but also the improper learning of nonviolent tactics through poor socialization that comes from neglect. There is increasing evidence that physically aggressive young children must be taught to learn other tactics to deal with their frustrations as they age (Tremblay et al. 1996). Through tactics that increase prosocial behavior and offer children ways in which they can

channel aggression, we find that children's aggressive behavior can desist. These findings point to the importance of learning in the reduction of violent behavior.

Equally important to this equation is the extent to which children confront situations in which they feel threatened and expect little help from others. Highly oppressive environments, "oppositional cultures," promote aggressive responses and offer limited choices of how to resolve conflict. These environments have been described in field studies of inner-city gangs (Hagedorn 1994); street life of African Americans (Anderson 1994); the experiences of the poor (W.J. Wilson 1991) and the homeless (Jencks 1994).

Put together, children and adolescents who have experienced abuse and/or neglect and who live in oppositional environments have higher levels of aggression and use violence to a greater degree to solve their problems. Increases in violent behavior that we have witnessed in the past decade center on groups that fit this profile. It is the violence among young, dispossessed males that has become of greatest concern in our society. Crime committed by this group climbs inexorably, as crime for other groups begins to drop. There are predictions that this crime pattern will simply get worse as these young people increase in numbers, an inevitable consequence of the population explosion that is occurring in these disadvantaged populations (J.Q. Wilson 1994).

While this extreme violence is of concern to us here (and will be explored in our study of street youth, presented in chapter 7), there are elements in this picture that we can use to understand violence that occurs not only among the disadvantaged but also as it occurs in other sectors of society. We can see the genesis of elements of violence coming from the same roots, that is, the types of choices people make in the way they confront others in social interaction. We observe this while acknowledging that these choices come to be limited or altered by disadvantage, through neglect, or by abuse. It may be that individuals belong to a group in which violence is an acceptable (and possibly an encouraged) form of managing conflict. Street kids will express the opinion that violence is a normal part of life on the street, and they use it to get things they want or to protect themselves with great regularity (Kennedy and Baron 1993). Male batterers, on the other hand, can come from a broad spectrum of socioeconomic strata. Understanding how men use violence to exert power in relationships may be more important in these cases than knowing about the frustrations of poverty and disadvantage.

Whatever their origins, violent routines are more or less available to people based on what they have learned and on what they expect to happen in different situations. This is not to argue that violence is routine, but that it is routinized, following certain patterns that are common to particular groups of individuals, certain situations, and specific circumstances. The response sets

that people develop, then, are viewed in the context of the point at which an interaction escalates from a simple disagreement to a violent encounter. Put another way, violence is a choice most people can consider but many do not exercise because of learning or external constraints.

## Social Construction, Coercion, and the Criminal Event

There are times in which violence appears to be the preferred, or only, option for satisfactorily dealing with the other person with whom one is interacting, although in most cases in our society we would like to believe that we can deal with problems without having to use violence. In pushing people toward violence, there are three different aspects of the interaction that must be considered: the structure, process, and content of social events. Structure is addressed through a social constructionist approach. Process looks at the evolution of social events over time, and includes relationships between major parties involved, social circumstances, and the aftermath of the act. Content includes a consideration of the aspects of coercion that are included in violent acts.

First, in the social construction of behavior, individuals learn, in general terms, to structure what is acceptable and what is not in social interaction. We can see this construction operating at the level where rules and regulations are developed; norms are articulated and individuals are socialized; and punishments and restraints are developed in a set of guidelines that are used to control or constrain violent behavior. While this construction may not directly influence violent events, it has the effect of stating the terms under which interaction takes place and of determining what the consequences of certain types of actions will be. We cannot understand how people make choices unless we understand what these choices are and how they come to be defined in the society. This approach draws from literature on the sociology of law (Black 1983; Silbey and Sarat 1987), including the use of alternative justice approaches to react to and remediate conflict situations, even those that involve violence (Kennedy 1990; Merry and Silbey 1984).

Second, to understand violence, we need to see it as only one of a number of likely outcomes in social interaction. Erving Goffman (1974), in his book *Frame Analysis*, theorizes that conflict develops through the frame of experience, with individuals anticipating certain consequences from their actions based on previous contacts with others and with the cues gained from situational factors that surround interaction. Luckenbill and Doyle (1989) extend this theme in their discussion of the "situated transaction." They suggest that transactions are predictable, based on a convergence of structural conditions driving people to escalate conflicts toward aggression. Adding to

the debate, Bernard (1990) offers the concept of "angry aggression," underlining the role of predisposition that people bring to interaction based on past experience and expectations in raising levels of interpersonal aggressiveness.

We need to address not only the act of violence itself but also what precedes and follows this violence (Miethe and Meier 1994; Sacco and Kennedy 1996). The precursors of the violent event include, among other things, the previous relationship of the combatants; whether the interaction is public or private; and the routines people have learned in handling social conflict. The transaction itself includes the actual act that takes place, including the action that leads to harm, the reactions to avoid this harm, and the behavior of other people who are present. The aftermath involves the reaction of others to the action; the intervention of authorities (sometimes involving arrest); the long-term harm; and the punishment of the offender. This approach assumes that all violent offenses, to be properly understood, must be looked at as a process that evolves over time and contains separate stages in this evolution.

The third component of our analysis, content, suggests that there are times in which violent action may be seen as a necessary response by an individual in social interaction. This action can be viewed as coercive, an act that is used by one person in an instrumental fashion toward another. Reasons to use coercion include saving face; retaliating for some other person's violence; punishing the other person; or trying to get someone else to do something for you (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). This perspective allows us to consider the content of the social interaction. Rather than looking only at the harm done or considering the impulsive nature of violent offenders, considering coercion forces us to look at the whole interaction. The relationship between offender and victim plays a decisive role in pressuring individuals to act in a certain way, depending on their interpretation of the situation and their views of how the others in the interaction are responding to their demands. Violence is one way of influencing others and getting one's way.

Our approach views most violence as being one possible outcome of a normal interaction rather than a product of maladjusted personality bent on wreaking havoc with others' lives. We can even go so far as to say that the actions of the stone killers and young men who assault one another in bars can be analyzed using a similar approach. There is no need to develop a special theory for homicide, for example. It makes more sense to see acts of violence on a continuum, where fatal actions represent an extremely harmful escalation of more mundane disagreements or coercive actions. The fact that one party ends up dead need not make us change our view of why these conflicts occur, although they clearly make our search for answers about how to curtail this escalation to violence much more urgent.

Support for this view comes from the research that confirms that a large majority of murders derive from arguments or disagreements between indi-

viduals who most often know one another prior to their fatal encounter (Silverman and Kennedy 1994). These results show up in official police statistics about victim and offender relationships and are also confirmed in interviews of offenders who report on the circumstances surrounding a killing (Luckenbill 1977). Confrontations between disputants may or may not result in fatal outcomes (and, of course, most do not end as a homicide), but many situations do escalate to violence where someone gets hurt. Assaultive behavior is the most common of all violent crime. The pervasiveness of interaction leads us to search for explanations of violence across the broad range of all conflict. From this we can draw an understanding of how the disruption of orderly interaction leads to aggression and harm.

The outcomes of interaction are not always predictable, however. A clear failure of police, the family, and the victim to anticipate a lethal outcome is evident in the example of the family that sought to sue the police for negligence when they did not arrest a man who had threatened his wife with a gun and later shot her. The police defended their inaction in dealing with the threats by arguing that this type of incident is so commonplace that the likelihood that the husband would kill his wife was negligible. They felt that the woman was safe. The fatal outcome, they suggested, was an unlikely outcome based on this couple's previous interaction and based on what they knew about others in similar circumstances. In retrospect, the police can be shown that the signs were clear that the woman was in danger and that her husband was likely to act in this way. The choices for police are limited, however, in what they can do in these circumstances. They can arrest the husband, and/or they can encourage the wife to seek help. But, they argue, they cannot provide around-the-clock protection to all people who are at risk. They hope that the conflict stays at a nonviolent level, and most of it does.

The point here is not simply that there was a failure to predict fatal outcomes (this seems impossible) but to understand the underlying forces that contribute to interpersonal conflict that may be harmful and then take steps to curtail it. While it is true that the police cannot lock up everyone, nor protect all potential victims of violence, they and other agencies can provide help to people who need to change the ways in which they interact. An important part of this matrix is addressing the social context in which social interaction takes place.

## Social Context and Interaction

People have many different reasons for getting into conflict, as we will see in this book. Conflicts will vary by the nature of the relationship that they share with others; they may be public or private; they may involve a fight over



money, sex, or drugs, or they may involve a trivial disagreement based on a perceived slight or a misunderstanding that leads to hostile gestures and quick anger. Conflicts may lead to threats or physical harm or a quick parting of combatants that cools off the conflict and avoids trouble. Conflicts may have long histories, where the combatants have been feuding for years, or they may spark between strangers who have never before met.

The broad range of possibilities for conflict is complemented by a wide selection of potential solutions to conflict. These vary from vague and messy disentanglements based on emotional responses to involvement of police who have guidelines<sup>1</sup> that they use to determine whether or not the actions require criminal sanction or should be dealt with in an informal manner. It is noteworthy that we know so little about how people actually develop routines to handle conflict or avoid becoming involved (as either an offender or a victim) in violence. Is it because of the infrequent occurrence of these types of encounters or the fact that they develop so quickly that people are slow to respond to them with appropriate action? But is there more to this than slow reactions? The underlying reason for this lacuna in our understanding of this form of human behavior might rest in the aversion that people have in confronting the unsettling nature of conflict. Are we socialized to deal only with a limited number of situations that develop, leaving us unprepared to handle conflict that develops in unfamiliar circumstances under extreme conditions? Alternatively, are people who confront conflict, as prepared as they may be to handle the problems in certain ways, overcome with anger or frustration and act in impulsive ways to threatening situations? Is conflict an extraordinary part of human existence—unanticipated, hard to manage, emotional, and fraught with dangers, including violent outcomes?

While conflict may be all of these things, it seems implausible that this is behavior that is unanticipated in social interaction, particularly if we see it as an escalation from nonaggressive or nonviolent encounters. Also, it is apparent that conflict and violence are the product of people actively using violence against others to control their actions or to dominate them in other ways. The literature on abusive spouses, for example, suggests that the violence that develops is not an uncontrolled use of harm but a strategy to manipulate one's partner and control behavior.

It may be only after the fact that the victim comes to see the violence that occurs in relationships as being something other than simply mindless hurting and instead as an instrumental act pressuring him or her to act in a particular way. Victims suffer not only from harmful actions but also from a lack of understanding of "why" the other person acted in this way. So much of the aftermath of these events involves explaining to victims of violence why others would want to use violence against them.

Violence is not always either reactive or proactive. It may be used dif-

ferently by individuals, depending on how they interpret social situations or on their view of how interaction should take place. As we have suggested, we believe most people have a point at which they themselves would use violence to solve a problem, if only in response to violent acts directed at them. Further, it is evident that otherwise peaceful individuals may escalate conflict to violence simply as they become impatient or frustrated with less dramatic means to deal with these problems. People talk about such inclinations, although, again, rarely do they act out these strategies unless they see that their choices are limited. Still, we have examples of people who act in violent ways who we would not expect to do this. The bank executive who assaulted an airline hostess on a plane may be as incapable of explaining why he did this (not likely the normal way in which he gets service) as the young tough who complained that he was bored prior to popping an unsuspecting victim. Both individuals appeared to run out of options of how to manage others and to get something they wanted (more booze and more excitement, respectively). Violence becomes an option under these circumstances, surprisingly, even in the face of the not unpredictable consequences of severe sanctions for these actions.

What we might say, then, is that violence is one alternative in dealing with others that, in civil society, is not completely removed from other forms of persuasion or coercion. For example, the parent who loses patience with a recalcitrant child and hits him likely would be upset to see the child do the same with a peer. And yet this action has a desired result—to get the child's attention and compliance. Violence, then, is routinized as an option that some people never use but acknowledge as a possibility if pushed. At the same time, it may be a routine that some use all of the time. Its use is determined by many factors, which we will examine in detail in the following chapters.

## Outline of the Book

The current study explores conflict in society to determine the social roots of violence. In the next chapter we review the literature on criminal offenders and aggressive acts. We summarize how the literature has focused on offenders and how this has negated an integrated view of violence, particularly through a lack of attention to the role of the victim and in circumstances surrounding aggressive acts. We use the criticisms of theories of crime and aggression to set the stage for an integrated approach to the study of violence and aggression. Chapter 3 provides a detailed summary of the theoretical basis for a theory of routine conflict, drawing upon three different approaches to the study of crime and violence. First, a social constructionist approach is used to define the acceptability of violence in society. Second, the criminal

event perspective allows us to explain how crime is a process, including a description of the steps people follow in moving into and out of a violent act. Last, social interactionist theory is used to explain how disputes may be acts of coercion.

Chapter 4 describes the data sources for this study. It outlines the procedures we used in conducting a large-scale survey of conflict and violence in two provinces in Canada. It discusses the methodological assumptions we make about the social roots of violence, and it presents an overview of individuals' experiences with conflict. The chapter seeks to describe the extent of actual conflict in society.

Chapter 5 assesses what social factors may explain the approval of violence and aggression. We present results of our analysis of standardized questions on the societal approval of violence. We present findings from a factorial survey of aggression to demonstrate differences across social groups in their willingness to use aggressive actions in a variety of confrontations. It is in this chapter that we identify the social relationships that we expect to have the greatest impact in creating violent outcomes. These include structural position, gender differences, situational factors, and level of upset. We discuss the mechanisms that people suggest that they would use to manage their social interactions, both in the active application of violence or in avoidance of this violence.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of respondents' accounts of how actual conflicts evolve. We use the criminal event perspective to examine the precursors, transactions, and aftermaths of aggression and violence. We address the role that third parties play in affecting the choices that people make in situations of conflict. We show how third parties may participate in conflict to increase, or decrease, the likelihood of violence. Or, they may act as guardians in situations where they observe, control, document, or punish violent behavior. This chapter also explores the role that coercive actions may play in influencing the directions that people may go in dealing with interpersonal problems.

In chapter 7, Stephen Baron applies our routine conflict theory to a study of street kids to contrast their approval of violence and acts of violence to findings about the general population, as presented in chapters 4 through 6. An analysis of street kids provides important insights into how violence is sanctioned and how it may be considered an important aspect of day-to-day interaction.

Finally, in chapter 8, we summarize the findings of our research, offering some conclusions about what may be done to address interpersonal violence and identifying some unanswered questions. We conclude by addressing some practical issues about violence, particularly in terms of prescribing alternatives to individuals as ways of reducing the use of violence in daily life.