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Violence in Action: What We Know and What We See

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Violence in Action: What We Know and What We See

Inaugural lecture

Special Chair on Dynamics of Crime and Violence

Department of Sociology

University of Amsterdam

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by

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Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, Geacht curatorium van de leerstoel, Geacht bestuur van het NSCR, Geachte directie van het NSCR, dear colleagues, friends and family,

My interest in violence started twenty years ago when I was robbed at knifepoint in Cape Town. I was there to follow an anthropology course on the truth and reconciliation process. In the student community I was a part of, violent crime was the topic of the day. My view on the topic was that fear of crime was used by white South Africans as justification for a racist fear of "the other." Since I considered myself a different kind of white, I refused to adjust my behavior to prevent victimization. Therefore, I decided to live in an area designated for coloreds during apartheid, in a house without private security measures. After a few weeks, a group of five men broke in while my roommate was at home. They tightened her up and stole our laptops and valuables. After that, I had to admit that crime felt very real. I moved into another house, this time with private security measures.

Six months later, I was robbed at the gate of this new house. I had bought groceries a few blocks away, and when I was about to close the gate, a man pushed himself in between me and the gate, with a big knife in his hand, which he pushed towards my belly. In a split second, I thought I knew him. In fact, I thought he might be the boyfriend of my roommate. However, by the sight of the knife, I realized something else was going on. Looking down while grabbing my arm and pushing the knife towards my belly, he asked for my phone. I lied and said I had no phone, holding my phone in my hand inside my bag. He then asked for my wallet. I pulled out my wallet from the bag while saying that I was just a student. I repeated that a few times: "I am just a student." He then asked for my rings. While I took off my two rings—including one from my grandmother who died a few years before—I felt the warmth of piss streaming down my legs. He then said "outside" while pushing me softly in the direction of the gate. I knew from all the crime stories I had heard from friends that going somewhere with the person robbing you was a bad idea because, usually, it implied rape and, in the worst case, murder. I quickly grabbed the phone out of my bag, gave it to him, and he rushed out of the gate alone.

This experience changed the way I looked at crime and violence. Today, I have the privilege to share with you what I learned from 16 years of studying violence. Let me clarify from the beginning that I understand violence as intentional behavior aimed at causing either physical or psychological harm to another person[1]. Social scientists sometimes use violence as a metaphor for morally wrong forms of oppression such as sexism, colonialism, and poverty[2–4]. In my view, however, such dilution of concepts is potentially threatening for scientific rigor. I would even argue that it could be seen as a way of trivializing the first-hand experience with violence, which is anything but metaphorical. The tangible and potentially traumatic kind of violence I talk about today happens in a split second in everyday face-to-face encounters[5].

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It is this here-and-now unfolding of violence that I seek to capture with the terms in the title, "violence in action."

Now some of you might think that my talk is going to be depressing because I guess we are all familiar with the harmful impact violence can have on people and how difficult it is to prevent. However, to the contrary, I can reassure you that my key message today is surprisingly optimistic: It may even help you to feel safer when you move around public places. From our studies of violence in real-life interactions, we— and I am here referring to a "dream team" of scholars who are all present in the room today—see that bystanders witnessing violent events, take an active role in de-escalating violence and consoling the victims afterward. These active bystander roles reject the long-standing assumption within the social sciences that bystanders are passive and apathetic when witnessing people in need of help. This rests on the old but outdated idea that we humans lose our "moral compass" and become irrational and irresponsible when present in a crowded group[6]. This scholarly view has also found its way to layperson understandings of crowded groups, with widespread concerns of "stranger danger" and ideas about crowded public places as unsafe. However, in fearful situations, whether we are in groups or alone, we are not just irrational beings but use fear and other emotions to figure out how to navigate the situation—like I did in the robbery. And often, you are not alone in navigating, as our results show: When there is a crowd of people around, there are many potential bystander help-givers, and in most cases, someone will take an active role in de-escalating the events and regulating unruly group members. So, when you go home tonight after the party, choose a busy street with lots of potential bystanders around because if something happens, there will be people who will help you!

The reason that previous research was so wrong about the role of bystanders has to do with the fact that scholars, until recently, have had a hard time observing violence close up as it actually unfolds[7]. For example, they had to rely on participant observations of only a few events, retrospective accounts known for their unreliability[8], or experimental studies far removed from real-life violent interactions[9]. However, with the current omnipresence of high-quality video cameras, social scientists can now go back to the basics and observe real-life violence—and potentially many other kinds of behaviors— in more detail than ever before[10]. Our studies of violence, and recently of COVID-19 related rule compliance, serve as a "reality check" of the social scientific knowledge about those topics, but the impact of this video technological development has just started in the social sciences. A particularly good illustration of a much needed reality check is our research that challenges the ingrained scholary understanding that bystanders to public emergencies are apathetic and remain non-involved.

What we know about bystanders

The scholarly narrative about bystander apathy emerged in the aftermath of the rape and murder of a young woman, Kitty Genovese, in New York 53 years ago. The crime took place in a residential area where 38 witnessing neighbors all remained passive, according to a local news article in *The New York Times*. The case of Kitty Genovese caused a moral outrage and extensive debate about why people do not take responsibility for each other in public spaces. As such, this case was not only the start of half a century of bystander research, it also confirmed the idea that public places and their crowds are areas of unsafety[11].

Instead of studying violence in real-life interactions, the two social psychologists Darley and Latané pioneered this field of study using laboratory methods to examine why people tend to do nothing in the presence of others when they watch someone in need of help[12]. Even though the most relevant question to address from a victim's perspective would be whether *someone* would intervene, this question never became the key question in the bystander literature. That is, while the Kitty Genovese case was clearly a story about *group* responses, the experimental studies focused on *individual* likelihood of intervention[13]. They referred to the tendency that individuals in groups would do nothing as the "bystander effect," and ascribed this to a decision-making process that yields passivity: "Why should I take responsibility for the situation, now that somebody else could do it as well?" The bystander effect became one of the most replicated findings of social psychology—taught as part of any introductory course and covered in all standard textbooks.

The major problem with the experimental studies was that they said very little about responses in actual violent situations. In experimental settings, scholars cannot expose test subjects to aggression and violence for obvious practical and ethical reasons. Instead of studying what the Kitty Genovese case was actually about—namely brutal violence against a woman in public—they studied bystander responses in what they referred to as "emergencies." These so-called emergencies were often trivial and always non-violent in nature, such as someone dropping coins in an elevator. Under such controlled emergency conditions, the researchers recorded the response of bystanders. Further, while the Kitty Genovese incident involved 38 people watching, the researchers simplified the laboratory studies to involve a handful of bystanders unable to see each other or the victim during the emergency and, as such, unable to use emotional cues to interpret the situation[14]. Under these artificial circumstances, the researchers found evidence for the bystander effect. That is, the individual likelihood of intervention is lower when in the presence of others than when alone. A paradigmatic theory was born.

However, decades later, cracks started to appear. First, one historical study analyzed the Kitty Genovese case and found that the 38 bystanders watching the crime were far from passive[15]. For example, one shouted and tried to distract the perpetrator, while another phoned the police. Even though

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the perpetrator did not get arrested directly after the murder, he was also later arrested thanks to the intervention of bystanders! Secondly, on-site observational studies of night-time drinking settings emphasized the active and de-escalatory role taken by bystanders[16]. Thirdly, a pioneering video-based study by Mark Levine and colleagues showed that bystanders took an active part in de-escalating conflicts in public settings[17]. Finally, a meta-analysis synthesizing the laboratory evidence found that the bystander effect does not generalize to more "dangerous" emergency settings[18]. When facing potential danger and violence, the bystander effect either disappears or reverses, suggesting that the presence of others makes the individual intervention likelihood *more* likely. This indicated that danger makes it clear that help is needed and that the presence of others makes intervention feel safer.

How videos change what we see

While Darley and Latané responded to the violent case against Kitty Genovese by going into the laboratory, my response as an anthropologist was to study violence in its unstructured, real-life contexts. I soon encountered, however, that I missed fundamental insights into violence by doing ethnography: In my 14 months of full-time fieldwork in Cape Town, I observed hundreds of conflict interactions but only six that turned out violently. Often, my own and others' recollections were biased by a selective focus during the event, and interviews with participants were likely to suffer from memory failures, neutralizations, and social desirability bias.

Specifically, the bias of retrospective accounts was painfully highlighted when I finished an extensive study of armed robberies in the Netherlands that involved a hundred interviews with people who had committed a robbery. We found that offenders' use of violence took place in response to the resistance of the victims[19]. I realized that this result—along with other findings within the field of offender-based research—was contradictory to findings of victim-based studies. Offender-based studies suggested that victim resistance caused the violence, while victim-based studies proposed that victim behavior played no role for the violence used by offenders. Without unbiased perspectives, we would never find out what was going on in those robbery interactions, and that conclusion applied to studies of other types of crimes and violence too. In fact, almost everything we know about crime and violence is based on retrospective studies of either offenders or victims. This made me realize that the field was in need of a serious reality check and that this had to involve a more objective view of what is actually going on in real-life encounters.

The current availability of video footage was the perfect solution to this problem[20]. With such recordings, we would be able to measure and analyze behavior in an unobtrusive, systematic, and more objective manner, closer to the action itself, and free from the subjective biases that I had experienced as an ethnographer and interviewer[21]. Furthermore, with recordings of conflicts in public, we

were able to scale up the number of events analyzed, far beyond the handful of cases I managed to sample throughout a year's fieldwork. The level and nature of detail that we could capture about real-life behavior was, however, unfamiliar for the social sciences and posed a methodological challenge for how we should approach data. With the videos, we could see changes in expressions of emotions, bodily postures, movements, touching, gazing, and actions, and in the beginning, we thought we could capture and code it all if we spent enough time on it. However, we soon realized that we needed a stricter analytical strategy for dealing with all of this information, and we learned those strategies primarily from biological studies of animal behavior[22].

This sounds perhaps like a weird bedfellow for a social scientist, but behavioral biologists have a long tradition of highly detailed naturalistic observation, far more advanced than their social science counterparts. Erving Goffman, one of the key figures in the study of interactions in sociology, already figured this out half a decade ago in his *Relations in Public*[23]. Only now, however, with video observations, his ideas of integrating observational methods from behavioral biology become possible in the social sciences. With these methods, for example, primatologists have shown that chimpanzee bystanders console victims of aggression and that former conflict parties reconcile. However, the lack of similar observational studies of human primates has led to the remarkable conclusion of the sociologist John Levi Martin[24]: "probably more is known about interactions between chimpanzees than interactions between humans." In other words, the lack of insights that we encountered in studies of violence may point towards a broader issue of the social sciences: Because we are often busy exploring the macro-structure of social life, the continent of the micro-social world remains comparatively unmapped[25].

Figure 1. Video observed peaceful gesturing (a), blocking (b), and grabbing (c)

Following the methodological tradition of behavioral biology, we started by inductively describing the various types of public conflict behavior. Figure 1 illustrates some of the behavioral types that we observed. Typically, this inductive phase takes months of full-time work, as the level of detail and complexity of the interactions require countless revisions and discussions of the measurement instrument. We then moved on to a quantitative analysis of the observed behaviors, involving systematic coding of all relevant behaviors sequentially, in addition to various situational and personal characteristics such as the number of people involved, the locality, cues about gender, age, and group memberships. The coding of behaviors on this micro-detailed level of resolution is only feasible because of the video technology: the footage is observed numerous times, in slow-motion, and cross-validated by several independent observers. This is not to say that there are no disadvantages to this method. For example, video

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data offers limited insights into the meaning-making and motivations of the people interacting[26], so if that is one's research interest, video data is perhaps not ideal. However, within the field of violence, the key debates are concerning what people are *doing*, and video data offers the most fine-grained method available to study precisely that.

What we see bystanders doing

After these methodological details of how to study violence in action, let me further elaborate on what insights this conveyed with regard to how people act in public space conflicts and assaults[27]. In one of our most important studies, we used CCTV footage from Lancaster in the UK that my colleague Mark Levine collected and added new footage from Amsterdam and Cape Town. With attention to how bystanders might prevent escalation, we sampled conflicts that involved varying intensities, ranging from agitated gesturing to high-danger events involving kicks to the head of victims lying on the ground. Figure 2 illustrates what we saw: Numerous bystanders are present, watching this conflict, and several of them intervene to stop the violence.

Figure 2. Picture and caption is from Philpot et al. (p. 5):[27] "(a) On the bottom right-hand side, a man dressed in a white shirt assaults another man who is on the ground. Some bystanders observe. (b) To the bottom left-hand side, two bystanders leave their standing positions and approach the conflict parties. (c) The two bystanders are joined by others. A male bystander in a dark shirt and jeans pulls the main aggressor from his target, while a female bystander steps between the conflict parties and extends both arms out in a blocking motion."

Instead of focusing on the likelihood of individual intervention, we focused on the question relevant for victims: Does anybody help me? Our study showed that in nine out of ten conflicts, someone would do something to help the victim, and even to a greater extent if more people were present. In other words, we did not see bystander apathy—instead, bystander involvement was the norm. And adding to this conclusion, there was no difference in the intervention likelihood between the included cities, indicating that this is a universal pattern.

In a subsequent study, we examined the role of dangerousness in bystander intervention[28]. Remember, danger level was identified in the meta-analysis of the existing experimental bystander studies

as a factor shaping bystander intervention—but so far, no studies had examined this in high-danger events involving interpersonal violence. In examining this, we tested whether bystanders were more likely to intervene at more explicitly aggressive moments of the conflict compared to less dangerous moments. This is what we saw: Overwhelmingly, bystanders intervened at the moment when someone hit the ground, which is the moment the aggression intensified to a dangerous level. Danger, in other words, triggers bystanders into action.

What we still want to know

Overall, our studies of violence and crime in action highlight that active bystanders are the norm, and they form a resource for public safety. This opened up an unexplored field of research on bystander actions rather than apathy[29]. With video analyzes, we are further exploring a range of questions, such as[30]: Do bystanders do the same things throughout the conflict or do they change their actions, do they do different things depending on the conflict type, do we see differences across cultural contexts, and do bystander actions always help the victims or do they perhaps sometimes increase the severity of the conflict? Our findings fostered extensive collaborations with policymakers that started considering the role of bystanders in public safety. It also inspired researchers working on crimes that rarely get recorded—such as domestic violence, cyber-related crimes, emergencies, terrorist attacks, riots, sexual aggression, and conflicts between citizens and social workers and police—to start considering the role of bystanders in interviews and surveys. In psychology, scholars began to do experiments focused on explaining bystander action and to use video recordings to study real-life expressions of emotions and their role in actions.

In the coming years, I will conduct more video-based studies, going back to the questions that inspired me to start using video observations in the first place, namely the interactions between perpetrators and victims. For example, it is yet unsettled whether victim resistance is a way to *avoid* exposure to violence or perhaps actually to make it *worse*. This question can best be settled through close video observational analysis of how violent events unfold sequentially.

Furthermore, I envision using video observations as a tool to objectively measure questions like ethnic profiling, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination, alongside predatory crimes like shoplifting and pick-pocketing that are currently difficult to measure with traditional social scientific methods. Let me give you two examples of how we will do this. Take ethnic profiling: We know that it happens, but we do not know to what extent and under what conditions. With video observations, we can figure that out. We are currently working on replicating a brilliant video-based study from Paris, video observing who is selected during search actions and who is not, counting the personal characteristics of both groups[31]. These insights can be used to figure out how to profile people who carry illegal weapons

based on behavioral rather than personal cues. Next, regarding shoplifting, we are planning a replication of another brilliant video-based study from the US showing that, unlike what we know from registered police statistics, white women older than 50 are the most common group of shoplifters, not young men of color[32]. White women just do not get arrested for their crimes. This bias is bad for businesses because resources are used to target the wrong people.

Seeing beyond violence

These examples illustrate that video-observational techniques may address uncharted research questions beyond the study of violent events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we thus used video recordings of public place behavior for yet another reality check. Face masks were for a long time believed to increase risk behavior like keeping less distance from others. In the literature, this is referred to as the "risk compensation hypothesis," stating that individuals behave riskier in situations they perceive as safer. Similar to the bystander effect hypothesis, this knowledge was mainly generated in experimental settings. The public health advisory board for the Dutch government translated this to the expectation that if people wore a face mask, they would keep less distance from others because of a feeling of false security. We did video-based reality checks of this hypothesis by studying real-life behavior of people with and without masks and proved the hypothesis wrong[33]. Based on these and related findings, the government changed its policy and installed face masks in indoor public places. We also used video observations to challenge theories about behavioral compliance as driven by individual motivations, which inspired policymakers to assume that, unless controlled and punished, citizens would violate social distancing rules. With the help of an algorithm that we developed with computer vision scientists from the UvA—enabling an automatic coding of an extensive and reliable sample—we found that social distancing violations are a direct function of people crowding levels[34].

By studying something as extraordinary as crime, violence, and pandemic behavior, however, I realized that we know very little about the mundane and often routinized nature of everyday behavior. Sociologists have for decades stressed the need for such research on the mundane[35]. Take, for example, the concept of "civil inattention," which is considered one of the most common everyday behaviors in urban public places[36]. Civil inattention involves that people shortly pay attention to somebody else in public space but not too long, as that would be inappropriate. Despite being a concept that every sociologist knows, surprisingly few studies have actually examined civil inattention, thus leaving it unclear how common it is, how it is performed, and under what conditions. The reason why these questions largely remain unanswered is liked to the fact that it is methodologically difficult, if not even impossible, to systematically

study the micro-detailed behavioral manifestation of civil inattention without the use of video methods. To date, no such video study has been conducted, and we plan to do so I the near future.

Besides being interesting in itself, we should also video observe everyday mundane life because we may only understand the extraordinary on the backdrop of the ordinary. In our case, we need to know what ordinary behavior is in public places if we want to understand extraordinary behavior during crime, violence, and pandemics. For example, to understand the nature of pandemic behavior, we need to know how people usually keep their distance from others: Without that everyday baseline, it is hard to evaluate this type of behavior during extraordinary pandemic times.

Building a social science on what we see

The red thread of my research activities since my training as PhD at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research has been to figure out patterns of face-to-face interactions as the starting point for theorizing crime and violence. I cannot think of a better place to continue this work than the Department of Sociology, with its strong traditions of empirically-driven research and micro-sociological theory-building. In this environment, I hope to contribute to developing a social science—based on what we see rather than on what we hear or simulate in laboratories. This involves integrating human video coding and computer vision tools from artificial intelligence to advance our measurements of human behavior. As I have indicated, this vision for social science research is, in part, a critique of what we, as social scientists, have been busy doing so far.

More broadly, this critique is related to what has been referred to as the "replication crisis" of the social sciences, which is essentially a problem of being unable to see the same thing twice when looking at the same thing independently of each other. A staggering proportion of social science results cannot be replicated by other social scientists, particularly not when the findings are counterintuitive[37]. Such results tend to attract funding, but today, we know that they are very often a product of questionable research practices involving cherry-picking: Noise confused as signal. This might sound like a technicality, but it is a deeply serious problem because how can we convince people that our results are not just another opinion if we cannot replicate our findings. Related to the replication crisis is a validity crisis, namely that most of our knowledge is not generalizable beyond the very context in which it is produced. This problem is related to anthropological studies focusing on a particular context without considering the generalizability to other contexts or psychological studies focusing on laboratory behavior without considering real-life behavior. This crisis also manifests itself in measurement problems, such as inferring what people do from what they say, or the gap between what people do in artificial experiments and actually do in real-life settings, as in the case of the bystander effect.

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A remedy against these crises is that we should go back to the basics, video observe and validate our assumptions about what people do in real-life settings. In doing so, one soon realizes that reality is less counterintuitive than much social science research pretends, including the bystander effect hypothesis, which precisely became famous because it challenged a commonsense understanding by suggesting that the presence of more bystanders leads to less intervention rather than more. If just the bystander field had begun earlier to observe what bystanders actually do, we would not have wasted decades of research and informed the public and policymakers with misleading ideas about public violence. Here, the field may perhaps excuse itself with the fact that the extensive availability of high-quality video data is of relatively recent date—and thus, it has not been practically feasible to validate the bystander effect and similar hypotheses against systematic observational data. However, let me point toward one circumstance that makes this excuse pointless today: In this very room, we have as many high-quality video cameras present as we are persons in the room. Any smartphone includes such a camera, and it is thus no coincidence that the everyday life of today is the most video documented ever: Stop the talking and begin video observing reality!

would ever convince anyone about the importance of video observations. We did all of this together, and I hope our journey will continue. Without the passion for science and the companionship with Lasse Liebst, I would have lost hope at many points of the process. Through the invaluable guidance of Wim Bernasco, a true role model as a scientist, I felt safe enough to explore my own views on science. The privilege to support young scholars like Floris, Joska, Carlijn, Marly, Lenneke, Hans, Virginia, and Lisa is what gives me the energy to get through the day. Also, I would like to thank the Executive Board of the university, the Dean of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, the Board of NWO, and especially the MT of the NSCR for making this professorship possible and for the trust placed in me.

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Ik heb gezegd

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