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VIOLENT ENCOUNTERS
Violent Engagements, Skirmishes, and Tiffs

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From the author's study of violent and nonviolent offenders and non-offenders' accounts, he drew two main conclusions about the interaction that takes place between the perpetrator and victim when violent crimes are committed. First, these crimes are committed during violent encounters *that encompass five stages: (1)* role claiming, *(2)* role rejection, *(3)* role sparring, *(4)* role enforcement, *and (5)* role determination. *Second, based on how many of these stages are completed, violent encounters can be divided into three subtypes: (1)* engagements, *(2)* skirmishes, *and (3)* tiffs. *Violent dominance encounters that go through all five stages constitute engagements, those that enter only four of the stages constitute skirmishes, and those that enter only three of the stages constitute tiffs. Thus, for any theory to provide a complete explanation of violent crimes, it must be able to account for not only violent engagements but also violent skirmishes and tiffs.*

Keywords: *dominance; encounters; skirmishes; violent interaction; violent situations; violent social action*

INTRODUCTION

As anybody with the slightest knowledge of criminology knows, there is no shortage of violent crime theories. In the mind-boggling landscape of criminology, almost every imaginable explanation of violent crime has been proffered at one time or another (see Rhodes 2000; Mulvihill, Tumin, and Curtis 1969, 416-521; Vold, Bernard, and Snipes 2002). Nevertheless, it has always been rare to find theories that explain the actual interaction that takes place between the perpetrator and victim when violent crimes are attempted and completed.

The vast majority of violent crime theories divert attention away from this important problem and focus instead on the makeup of the perpetrator or the community in which the violent crime was committed (Blumer 1997, 3-6; Clarke and Cornish 1985, 148-49, 164, 167, 174). Admittedly, factors that lie outside the confines of the interaction between the perpetrator and victim are of undeniable importance and thereby must be taken into account to provide a complete explanation of the violent crime problem (see, for example, Athens 1998; 2003, 19-39; Bernard 1990). However, social scientists can never rely entirely on antecedent factors or conditions alone to explain violent crimes because the interaction that takes place between the perpetrator and

victim before their commission is always a formative process in its own right (Athens 1993, 174-75; Blumer 1966, 537-39; 1969, 7-8, 56-57; 2004, 29-38). Before we can consider any theory of violent crime to be relatively complete, it must adequately explain what actually takes place during the interaction between the perpetrator and victim not only when these violent criminal acts are committed but also when they are *nearly* committed. The relative scarcity of such explanations puts us in dire need of theories that can explain the interaction between the perpetrator and victim when criminal homicides, forcible rapes, robberies, and aggravated and simple assaults and batteries are completed and attempted.

In this article, I will propose a new grounded theory of the interaction that occurs between the perpetrator and victim during violent crimes. Drawing on Mead (1932, 180-82; 1934, 6-8), I will view this interaction as taking place during "social acts" that people construct from performing separate roles, communicating with each other through vocal and manual gestures, assuming each others' attitudes, and working out, by whatever means possible, including physical force, a plan of action for executing the prospective social action in which they are jointly implicated (see Blumer 1969, 8-10; 1981, 148-52; 2004, 95-102; Shibutani 1986, 4-9). By viewing violent crimes as occurrences of social acts that are constructed in this manner, I hope to move our understanding of the interaction that takes place between the perpetrator and victim of violent crimes considerably beyond what is now provided in our few extant theories.

In seeking to achieve this goal, I will proceed as follows. First, I will evaluate the three extant theories of the interaction that takes place between victim and perpetrator during the commission of violent crimes that have sparked the most research interest: (1) character contest (Goffman 1967; Luckenbill 1977; Polk 1999), (2) instrumental (Felson 1993, 1996, 2002), and (3) "doing gender" (Messerschmidt 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004). In evaluating these three theories, I will briefly describe each theory, identify its individual weaknesses and strengths, and then identify the theories' common strengths and weaknesses to provide a backdrop for my later development of an alternative theory of this interaction. Second, I will describe the theoretical framework and research methodology that guided the development of my theory of the interaction that transpires between the offender and victim when violent crimes are committed. Third and finally, I will describe

my theory of this interaction in terms of the stages that violent criminal social acts unfold and nearly unfold. Unlike the extant theories, my theory will be based not on the ideas of character contests, rational choice matrices, or masculine or feminine identities but instead on the more encompassing notion of dominance. To me, dominance refers to people's performance of the superordinate role in social act and, thereby, their ability to sway its subsequent development in line with their preferences (Athens 1998, 675). In developing my alternative theory, I will not only build directly on but also significantly extend the previous research on violence that I (Athens 1974, 1977, 1980, 1985, [1989] 1992, 1997, 1998, 2003) have been conducting on and off for more than thirty years.[1]

EXTANT THEORIES OF VIOLENT CRIMINAL ACTION

The Character Contest Theory

By filling in the missing lines between the dots in Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical model of violent criminal action, David Luckenbill (1977) developed the most widely cited and examined explanation of it.[2] According to Luckenbill, violent criminal acts are products of what Goffman (1967, 239-40) describes as "character contests," a special form of social action in which people's separate individual acts become directed at the common goal of demonstrating whose character is the strongest (Athens 1985, 420-22). "Each person will be at least incidentally concerned with establishing evidence of strong character, and conditions will be such as to allow this only at the expense of the character of the other participants. The very field that one uses to express character may be the other's character expression. And at times the primary properties at play may themselves be openly made a convenience, pointedly serving merely as an occasion for doing *battle by* and *for character*. A character contest result as special kind of moral *game*" (Goffman 1967, 240, emphasis added).

For Goffman (1967, 216-18), character is an enduring quality that stems from how people conduct themselves during fateful events. An event is fateful only if it is both consequential and problematic: the consequences of the event must reverberate in the larger community, and there must be some doubt as to its ultimate outcome. People demonstrate

"strong" character when they stand "correct" or "steady" in the face of perceived fateful events, and they show "weak" character when they do not. On one hand, if contestants demonstrate a strong character and, thereby, win a character contest, then they maintain their honor and "face"—a positive self-image. On the other hand, if contestants demonstrate a weak character and, thereby, lose a character contest, then they lose their honor and face. Thus, depending on the outcome of a character contest, the contestants can feel intense emotions of pride or shame.

Goffman (1967), however, does not believe that all character contests inevitably end in violence. Before this rare occurrence can happen, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the contestants must outright refuse to back down and lose face, even given the perceived risk that violence will be the end result. Second, once this critical point has been reached, then they must agree to continue the contest and, thereby, use violence as the means of determining whose character is the strongest. Thus, if the contestants do not mutually agree to use violence to determine the winner and loser of the contest, then it will end before violence breaks out.

According to Luckenbill (1977), character contests come about in a five-stage process. In the first stage, person A decides to make an opening move that threatens the honor and face of person B, setting into motion a character contest between them. During stage two, B decides to take offense at A's move after concluding that it was a deliberate insult. In stage three, B decides to challenge A either verbally or physically to regain the honor and face lost earlier when A insulted him. During stage four, A and B agree to settle the issue of whose character is stronger by violent means. The agreement is signaled when A accepts B's challenge, rather than backing down to avoid losing honor and face. Finally, in stage five, A decides to physically attack B, B decides to physically attack A, or A and B simultaneously decide to physically attack each other. The battle's outcome determines who wins or loses the character contest.

Now let us evaluate the character contest theory.[3] On one hand, the theory of character contest has certain strengths. Although the theory is ill conceived (see Polk 1994, 86-88; 1999, 16), Luckenbill (1977) lays out a general sequential process by which completed and nearly completed violent criminal acts occur during social interaction. The proper analytical form in which to place an explanation of any form of social interaction is as an ordered process or sequence of stages in which the

actions of the respective participants are interdependent. Thus, to his great credit, he did at least construct the theory of character contest in terms of a series of unfolding stages.

The character contest theory also has a second strength: it does not overlook the parts that gender, race, social class, or age can play in the construction of violent criminal actions. If minorities and the poor are considered "outsiders," then Goffman (1967, 211-12) definitely believes these factors affect people's participation in character contests. "To find those who indulge in this sport we are likely to look to 'outsiders;' who, like adolescents, have not been tightly woven into organizational structures . . . among them these fateful activities will be least disruptive and the most tolerable; it is a case of having little to lose, or little to lose yet; a case of being well organized for disorganization." Although Goffman is referring here to the background of people who display a penchant for participating in character contests, this antecedent factor can be transformed into a situational factor. During an unfolding character contest, people without a high stake in conformity presumably realize that they always have available to them the relatively cost-free option of violence. Thus, if violence becomes necessary for them to win the contest, then they can always opt to use it (but see Athens 1985, 427-28).

On the other hand, the character contest theory suffers from four major shortcomings. First, this theory rests on the assumption of consensus. Following Goffman's (1967) train of thought, Luckenbill (1977) presumes that before violence can break out during face-to-face interactions, the participants must all agree to use physical force to resolve the issue of whose character is the strongest. Unfortunately, this critical assumption is false because the participants in most violent criminal action do not mutually agree to use violence to settle their disputes (Athens 1985, 423-25; Dobash and Dobash 1984, 286; Felson and Steadman 1983, 71). Of course, the irony of constructing a theory of conflict on the assumption of consensus must be underscored. If everybody agreed on everything, including who should be dominant, then there would not be a need for anyone to resort to violence. Thus, this theory collapses ultimately upon itself.

Second, like Goffman (1967), Luckenbill (1977) misidentifies the real issue that is being disputed during violent criminal acts. It is not whose character is the strongest but rather who is superior and thereby

who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in a developing social act (Oliver 1994, 149-50, 156). When people resort to physical force to prove their dominance, they may demonstrate either a strong or weak character rather than always a stronger one. For example, when a large adult male physically attacks a smaller adult female, young child, or frail senior citizen, he can prove his sheer physical superiority over them but at the risk of demonstrating a weaker, more twisted character (Athens 1985, 423; 2003, 16-17). Thus, dominance disputes can account for all violent criminal acts in which character contests appear to occur, but character contests cannot account for all the violent criminal acts in which dominance disputes take place (see Athens 1985; Dobash and Dobash 1984, 282-86; Levi 1980, 288, 302; Oliver 1994, 155-56; Polk 1999, 19; Ray and Simons 1987, 1, 67; Savitz, Kumar, and Zahn 1991, 27-29).

Third, the character contest theory of violent criminal action directs attention to the wrong emotions. According to Goffman (1967), character contests generate two main thoughts and emotions among their participants: maintaining one's pride and avoiding shame. On one hand, if people win a character contest, then they demonstrate a strong character, prove their honor, and save face. The principal thought and emotion that arises in them is self-pride. On the other hand, if people lose a character contest, then they demonstrate a weak character and lose face and their honor, so the principal thought and emotion that arises in them is personal shame. During dominance disputes, however, people's fundamental presumptions about their presumed superiority or inferiority are directly challenged, generating within them thoughts about how to gain the upper hand and feelings of anger and frustration, thoughts about how to protect oneself from harm and feelings of fear, and thoughts about annihilating antagonists and feelings of hatred, all of which the theory of character contests diverts attention away from (Athens 1985, 425-26; see also Athens 1997, 32-41; Bernard 1990, 76-78).

Finally, in Luckenbill's (1977) explanation, the author completely omits the part that the human body plays in violent criminal action. Although it would be impossible for human beings to engage in violent or any other types of social acts without bodies, Luckenbill never explicates the part that the human body plays in the arising and subsequent execution of character contests. Thus, his notion of character contest presents a disembodied theory of violent criminal action.

The Instrumental Theory of Aggression

Drawing on a strategic calculation model for inspiration (Tedeschi and Felson 1994), Richard Felson (1993; 1996, 433; 2002, 11-28) puts forth what he calls "an instrumental theory of aggression."[4] He contends that violent criminal conduct constitutes purposive actions that result from the critical choices that a person makes when things go awry while interacting with other people. Felson (2002, 18-19) believes that violent criminal acts are purposive because people invariably seek to achieve certain readily identifiable goals when they take violent courses of action. Because people are conscious of these goals, the goals simultaneously operate as motives for their commission of violent criminal acts. The first possible goal or motive for people committing a violent criminal act is control. They may want to dictate not only what other people say and do but when and how they say and do it. A second possible goal or motive for committing a violent criminal act is retribution. People may want to balance the scale of justice by punishing someone who has said or done the wrong thing at the wrong place and time. Deterrence is a third possible goal or motive. People may also want to punish someone who has said or done the wrong thing, not to balance the scales of justice but to prevent him from saying or doing it again in the future. The fourth and final possible goal or motive for perpetrating a violent criminal act is to protect oneself from personal affronts or to enhance one's self-importance in the eyes of others. It is obvious that neither the achievement of these goals nor the operation of these motives is mutually exclusive. Felson (2002, 25-26) acknowledges that a violent criminal act can accomplish a multiplicity of goals and that there can be multiple motives rather than a single motive for their perpetration.

Before any of these goals can be achieved or these motives put into operation, however, people must make certain critical decisions. In fact, Felson (2002, 17) contends that "all acts of aggression, no matter how impulsive or spontaneous they appear, involve a string of decisions." As far as violent criminal acts are concerned, the first critical decision that people must presumably make is whether to use physical or nonphysical force to achieve one or more of these four goals. If the decision is ultimately made to use physical force to achieve one or more of them, then their second and third critical decisions apparently center on how much physical force should be used and exactly when it should be exerted. In making these three critical decisions, people must, at the

very least, assess the costs and benefits of using physical versus non-physical force, using different degrees of physical force, and using physical force at the very outset of the face-to-face interaction or waiting to use it later. On one hand, if they conclude that the anticipated benefits outweigh the anticipated costs of using physical rather than non-physical force to accomplish these goals, then at some point during the face-to-face interaction, they will resort to some degree of physical force. On the other hand, if they conclude that the anticipated costs outweigh the anticipated benefits of using physical rather than nonphysical force to accomplish these goals, then they will not resort to violence at any time during the face-to-face interaction (Felson 2002, 16). Thus, before a violent criminal act can ever occur, participants must make multiple decisions regarding their use of violence as the means to achieve their particular ends.

Now, we can take a critical look at the instrumental theory of violent criminal action. It has an important strength that cannot be overemphasized. Unlike the character contest theory, the instrumental theory is not based on the fatal assumption of consensus. Felson recognizes that for a violent criminal act to be committed, people do not need to agree on the use of violence as the means for settling a dispute. Because his instrumental theory of aggression is not based on the false assumption of consensus, he can explain violent criminal acts in which the participants sharply disagree over, rather than mutually agree on, resorting to violence to settle their conflict.

The instrumental theory of aggression, however, suffers from five shortcomings; three are the same as for the dramaturgical model, and two are different. Unlike the theory of character contest, the instrumental theory of aggression cannot, by its very design, account adequately for the interaction or interplay of action that takes place between the perpetrator and victim during violent criminal action. There are two reasons for this.

First, Felson (2002, 212-14) cannot adequately account for the interaction that takes place during violent criminal acts because he explains their formation from the perpetrator's perspective rather than from *both* the perpetrator's *and* the victim's viewpoints. According to him (Felson 2002, 213), "to understand why people use violence, it is necessary to examine their perceptions, judgments, expectations, emotions, and values." He adds that "the perspective of the victim, on the other hand, is not very informative about the offender's motive." Thus, Felson makes

the critical mistake of reducing violent criminal action to a single- rather than a double-sided decision-making process that explains the perpetrator's actions but not the victim's (see Mills 2003, 75-78). Both Tedeschi and Felson (1994, 159) and Felson (2002, 211) alone have ironically characterized this theory as one that provides a "social interactionist's" explanation. In fact, they (Tedeschi and Felson 1994, 159) claim that their "central concern is with social interaction," adding that "the statues and relationships *between* people, *their* perceptions of *each* other, *their* social goals . . . define the social context of behavior" (Tedeschi and Felson 1994, 370, emphasis added). The irony of their characterization is that Felson's theory can clearly explain the specific contribution of the perpetrator, but not the victim, to the social interaction that transpires between them during a violent criminal act.

The second reason that Felson cannot explain the interaction between the perpetrator and victim is that he fails to identify the sequential process through which completed and nearly completed violent criminal acts pass. Unfortunately, he cannot claim ignorance of the logical necessity for identifying the stages in this process. In a publication eight years earlier with Tedeschi, Felson plainly acknowledges that "an adequate theory must include the *interaction sequence* between the actor, target, and audience" (Tedeschi and Felson 1994, 369-70, emphasis added).

The second major shortcoming of the instrumental theory is that it fails to focus attention on all the major paths of thought and streams of emotions that are generated during violent crimes. By making the protection of oneself from personal affronts and the promotion of oneself as a worthy person the possible goals of or motives for violent interpersonal action, Felson (2002, 23-25; see also Tedeschi and Felson 1994, 249-81), like Goffman (1967) and Luckenbill (1977), stresses the thoughts and emotions associated with protecting one's honor and avoiding shame. In discussing the other possible goals and motives for violent interpersonal actions, however, he also stresses certain thoughts and emotions, such as overcoming frustration and expressing anger (see Tedeschi and Felson 1994, 232-35). Thus, unlike Goffman and, in turn, Luckenbill, Felson deserves credit for emphasizing other paths of thought and streams of emotions besides pride and shame. Nevertheless, he does not focus attention on the *full* range of thoughts and emotions generated during violent criminal action because of his failure to stress the desire to overcome shock and feelings of outrage, the desire to

annihilate opponents and feelings of hatred, and the desire to protect oneself or others from physical harm and feelings of dread or fear (Athens 1985, 425-26; 1997, 32-41, part II; Boudon 1998, 821-27).

A third shortcoming of Felson's instrumental theory of aggression is that unlike Goffman (1967), Felson (2002, 64-65) primarily limits the part that gender plays in his explanation of how violent criminal acts put women at a physical disadvantage. As far as the intersection of race, social class, and gender are concerned, Felson (2002, 203-19) forcibly argues that there is little need for him or anyone else to specify the part that these combined factors play in the situational construction of violent criminal acts: "Higher rates of violence among poor people and among African Americans are typically attributed to discrimination and lack of economic opportunity. It is therefore interesting that this same treatment does not lead women to have higher rates of violence than men—the gender difference is strong and in the opposite direction. This pattern suggests that either women are not subject to much discrimination or that discrimination does not lead to violent crime or that discrimination leads to violent crime only under as yet unspecified conditions" (pp. 218-19). To support his position, Felson quotes an anonymous sociological acquaintance: "I have been to the corner of class, race, and gender, and I can tell you that the bus does not stop there" (p. 218).

A fourth shortcoming of Felson's theory is that like Goffman (1967) (and Luckenbill 1977), Felson is oblivious to the larger, underlying reason that people commit violent criminal acts. Although Felson deserves great credit for recognizing that violent criminal acts are goal directed, he can be faulted for not recognizing that all the four goals of violent criminal action he identifies can be easily subsumed under the more general goal of people's desire for dominance. As Samuel Johnson quips, "No two people can be a half hour together, but one shall acquire an evident superiority over the other." Thus, there is always the potential for people to become embroiled in dominance disputes.

The last shortcoming of Felson's instrumental theory is that unlike Luckenbill's (1977) character contest theory, Felson's does not provide a completely disembodied explanation of violent criminal action. As far as the part the body plays in violence is concerned, however, there are two reasons that prevent Felson's theory from providing a significant improvement over Luckenbill's earlier theory. First, Felson's (2002, 56-57) conception of the human body is almost oxymoronic. On

one hand, he contends that "the higher frequency of male violence is probably due to both gender roles and innate sex differences" (p. 58). On the other hand, he later contends that "women are just as likely as men to engage in this non injurious violence and they are just as likely to be the first one to strike" (p. 216). If men are no more apt to engage in or initiate unsubstantial acts of violence than women, however, then this undermines to some degree his earlier contention that men perform their "gender roles" in social acts in a more aggressive manner than their female counterparts. Second, Felson (2002, 56-57) states, "When violence is a possibility, physical power is a critical resource," adding that "the importance of size and strength should not be under estimated." According to him, because of men's size, weight, and strength advantage, they usually are able to inflict more serious injuries and, thereby, prevail in their physical conflicts with women (and presumably smaller men). Thus, ultimately for Felson, women are generally no less aggressive than men, and the human body is little more than a potential physical instrument for mounting or staving off violent attacks from other people.

The "Doing Gender" Theory of Violence

Using structured action theory (Giddens 1976) as a starting point, James Messerschmidt (1993, 1997, 2000, 2004) constructs a provocative theory of violent criminal acts that he dubs "doing gender." According to Messerschmidt (1993, 79-85), gender is a critical concern in the interaction not only between people of different sexes but also among those of the same sex. Drawing on West and Zimmerman (1987), Messerschmidt (1993, 121; 2000, 9) originally defined gender as a "situated accomplishment in which we produce forms of behavior seen by others in the same immediate situation as masculine or feminine." He later amended this definition to incorporate the important contribution that our corporeal bodies make to our construction of gender: "doing gender is a continuing process in which individuals construct patterns of *embodied* presentations and practices that suggest masculinity or femininity in particular settings" (Messerschmidt 2004, 37, emphasis added).

Thus, Messerschmidt (1993, 85; 2000, 1-2, 6-7; 2004, 36-39) argues that the notion of gender is far more subtle and complex than "sex roles" or similar notions. First, unlike sex roles, the notion of gender can

incorporate distinct forms of masculinity and femininity rather than only a single one (Messerschmidt 1993, 81; 1997, 4-6, 12, 118; 2000, 8). Second, "although sex category defines social identification as 'male' or 'female,' 'doing gender' systematically corroborates that identification through embodied social interaction" (Messerschmidt 2004, 36). Finally, in contrast to sex roles, people also must continually "do gender"—that is, they must constantly engage in embodied practices while in the presence of others that not only create but also sustain some specific form of masculine or feminine identity (Messerschmidt 1993, 80; 1997, 55; 2000, 7-8; 2004, 12, 37).

Because Messerschmidt (1993, 2000) directs most of his attention toward males, it is appropriate to limit our discussion to them. Although men and boys are constantly doing gender by engaging in embodied practices that demonstrate their "manliness" to others, this seldom leads them to commit violent criminal acts. On the contrary, it is only when someone challenges their particular form of masculinity that their commission of a violent crime usually becomes a distinct possibility (Messerschmidt 2000, 13, 98). According to Messerschmidt (2004, 49), masculinity challenges "are contextually embodied interactions that result in gender degradation." He later adds that masculinity challenges "motivate social action toward specific situationally embodied gender practices (i.e., bullying and/or fighting) that *correct* the subordinating social situation and various forms of crime and violence can be the result" (Messerschmidt 2004, 50).

Moreover, Messerschmidt (1993, 79-80; 1997, 3-8; 2000, 9-10; 2004, 35-50) sees doing gender as a "structured social action." He argues that men's and boys' positions in their society affect the embodied practices that they have at their disposal not only to demonstrate their masculinity but also to restore their masculinity after it has been called into question. No matter what position in society men or boys occupy, however, one potential embodied practice that they can use to regain their masculinity is violent criminal acts (Messerschmidt 1993, 84-85; 2000, 12-13, 98; 2002; 2004, 50). Thus, according to Messerschmidt, violent criminal acts are a direct byproduct of the embodied practices that men and boys have at their disposal for regaining their spoiled masculinity.

Depending on their race, social class, and age, however, men and boys can commit different kinds of violent crimes to restore the distinctive embodied forms of masculinity that they project to others

(Messerschmidt 1993, 153; 1997, 12-13, 113-19; 2000, 12-14; Copes and Hochstetler 2003). If the distinctive embodied form of masculinity displayed by black lower-class boys is challenged, then they can commit robberies and gang rapes to prove that they are "hard men" (Messerschmidt 1993, 105-107), whereas if the distinctive embodied form of masculinity displayed by white working-class boys is cast into doubt, then they can commit assault and batteries on other heterosexual boys and homosexual men as well as sex crimes to prove that they are not "sissies" and thereby reestablish their "masculine eminence" (Messerschmidt 1993, 97-102; 2000, 105-106). Conversely, if the distinctive embodied form of masculinity displayed by black and white lower- and working-class men is challenged, then they can commit batteries and "battering rapes" on their wives to prove that they are still "real men" (Messerschmidt 1993, 150), whereas if the distinctive form of masculinity displayed by middle-class white men is cast into doubt, then they can commit "force only" wife rapes to regain a sliver of their lost manhood (Messerschmidt 1993, 150-52).[5]

We can now assess the doing gender theory of violent criminal action. This theory has some important strengths. Unlike the character contest theory, but like the instrumental theory of violent criminal action, the doing gender theory is not based on the false assumption of consensus. Men can agree or disagree over whether violence should be used to demonstrate masculinity. The doing gender theory also comes closer than any of the other theories in making dominance encounters the central issue of disputes in violent criminal action. Thus, unlike Goffman and Felson, Messerschmidt (1993, 145, 150; 1997, 6-7; 2000, 9-14) deserves great credit for at least recognizing that issues related to dominance always underlie the commission of these acts. Finally, the doing gender theory also deserves credit for bringing the body into the violent criminal act; the other models of violent criminal action either ignore the role of the body or trivialize its importance.

The "doing gender" theory of violent criminal action, however, has more weaknesses than strengths. First, Messerschmidt (1993, 1997, 2000) conflates people's selves with their social identities and, thereby, misconceives the part that identity and, in turn, gender play in the situational construction of violent social acts. If a self is defined as a soliloquy that we primarily carry on with an "*other*" (Athens 1994, 525-26; 2005, 180-82; see also Glaser 1956; Hughes [1962] 1984; Shibutani 1986, 113-14), then people do not construct their other from the

viewpoint of their social identities but, instead, construct their social identities from the viewpoint of their other. Thus, people's social identities, including their genders, are byproducts of their ongoing soliloquies with phantom others rather than vice versa (Athens 1994, 523-24, 527-28; Wiley 1994, 2). If, as Messerschmidt argues, people can construct different kinds of masculine and feminine identities, and people with certain feminine or masculine identities are violent, then their commission of violent criminal acts is not a product of their gender per se but, instead, the other that imbues their particular conception of themselves, including their sexuality, with its special meaning (Athens 1997, especially 58-59, 64-66; Wiley 1994, 1-17).[6] Thus, violent criminal acts cannot be accurately portrayed as conscious or even unconscious attempts on the part of the perpetrators to demonstrate simply their preferred form of masculinity or femininity either before or after it has been called into question (see Blumer 1972).[7]

The doing gender theory suffers from a second weakness. Unlike the character contest theory, but like the instrumental theory, the doing gender theory views the construction of violent criminal acts as a *single-* rather than a *double-sided* decision-making process. Like Felson, Messerschmidt emphasizes the decisions made by the eventual perpetrator of the violent criminal act at the expense of ignoring or at least downplaying the decisions made by the victim (see Mills 2003, 75-78). It is wrong, however, to conclude merely on the basis that victims make decisions in general that they necessarily cause the violent criminal acts that are committed against them (Athens 1997, 32-36). Thus, although victims always make decisions as they interact with their subsequent attackers, most of the attacks on them would not qualify as bona fide "victim-precipitated" violent criminal acts (Athens 1997, 33-35).

A third weakness in the doing gender theory is that like in the character contest and instrumental theories, the different sequential processes through which completed and nearly completed violent criminal acts become constructed are never identified. To his credit, Messerschmidt (2000, 14) acknowledges that it is necessary to identify these processes before violent criminal action can be explained. "Not all predisposed individuals are motivated toward violence, especially if they do not experience masculinity challenges," he says, adding that "those predisposed individuals who do experience masculinity challenges may nevertheless not engage in violence; that is, the situational opportunities may disallow the possibility of violence as a resource for responding to

the masculinity challenge." According to Messerschmidt (2000, 14, 98), the single most important situational opportunity is the "access to an appropriate victim." However, as far as providing a situational explanation of any form of criminal action is concerned, Sutherland ([1947] 1973, 8), unlike Messerschmidt, recognized the folly of relying on the notion of situational opportunity: "the situation operates in many ways, of which perhaps the *least important* is the provision of an opportunity for a criminal act" (emphasis added).

Despite all of Messerschmidt's (1993, 76-86; 2000, 6-7) emphasis on the need to view gender as a "situated accomplishment," he identifies neither the specific stages of masculinity challenges nor the order in which they occur when men or boys commit or *do not* commit violent criminal acts to restore their threatened masculinity. No matter what particular social class, race, or age group of the males under consideration, men and boys usually draw on social practices other than the actual commission of violent criminal acts to defend their sense of masculinity, even after someone has challenged it and when the "appropriate victim" is present (Messerschmidt 2000, 14, 98). Thus, most lower-class black boys with "hard bodies" rarely commit robberies and gang rapes to prove they are "hard men." Most white working-class boys with hard bodies rarely commit assault and battery on other heterosexual boys and homosexual men. Most white and black working-class boys with "soft bodies" rarely commit sex crimes against weaker girls or younger boys to prove that they are not "sissies," and most black and white and lower- and working-class men with soft or hard bodies rarely commit assault and batteries and "battering rapes" on their wives to prove that they are "real men." If most of these different men and boys with hard and soft bodies did routinely commit violent criminal acts every time their manhood needed to be demonstrated and the appropriate victim was present, then our violent crime problem would be many times greater than it already is (see Miller 2002, 441-45; Hood-Williams 2001, 40-47).

Finally, although Messerschmidt (2000, 2004) deserves more credit than Felson and Luckenbill for stressing the part that the body plays in violent criminal action, his conception of this role is seriously flawed. Like Felson, Messerschmidt (2000, 101-106) makes the mistake of seeing the body as primarily a physical resource. Unlike Felson, however, Messerschmidt does not see the body as simply a physical resource for mounting and staving off violent attacks but also as a physical resource

for constructing and maintaining particular forms of masculine or feminine identities. Contrary to Messerschmidt's view, the body is not only a means to an end but an end onto itself. Satisfying the impulses originating from our bodies, such as hunger, lust, warmth, and shelter, can be the ends of our action (Mead 1938, 3-25; also see Blumer 2004, 69-102; Shibutani 1961, 64-70). Thus, our bodies not only are a resource for creating and maintaining our identities but can be the original, unadulterated ends of our actions, including actions whose sole end is usually neither the creation nor the maintenance of gender identities (see Athens 1994, 523-28; Wiley 1994, 2). For example, people seek shelter from the cold to keep from freezing to death rather than to prove that they are a "man" or "woman."

Conclusion

In light of our evaluation of the individual strengths and weaknesses of Luckenbill's, Felson's, and Messerschmidt's explanations of the interaction that transpires between victim and perpetrator when a violent crime is committed, we can take stock of their common weaknesses and strengths. On one hand, they all view violent crimes as always taking place during "encounters," a social act in which at least one of the participants seeks to accomplish some goal by influencing inappropriately the actions of another one (see Goffman 1961). Thus, all these theorists view violent crime as a product of conscious decisions on the part of perpetrators to satisfy certain goals by swaying others' actions in particular ways rather than as a product of the mindless actions that perpetrators take against random people for no apparent reason. Thus, in my opinion, the main common strength of these theories, for which they deserve great credit, is that they all envision violent criminal acts as genuine encounters taking place between people—a perpetrator and a victim.

On the other hand, Luckenbill's, Felson's, and Messerschmidt's theories of violent crime suffer from four common weaknesses. First, to one degree or another, they all trivialize the part that the human body plays in violent social interaction. Second, on purely logical grounds, they all offer *incomplete* explanations because their theories fail to explain adequately when violent criminal acts are actually and almost committed during social interaction and, thereby, do not differentiate between *attempted* and *completed* violent crimes. Third, none of these

theories is based on an explanatory idea general enough to incorporate all the different major paths of thought and streams of emotion that people can experience when they commit violent crimes. Finally, all three theorists fail to explain adequately how race, gender, age, and social class become proximate factors that contribute to the commission of violent crimes during the interaction between the perpetrator and victim, although some theories do a better job at this than others. Thus, in my opinion, we need to develop new theories of violent social acts that incorporate the common strengths of these earlier theories while correcting their common weaknesses.

THEORY AND METHOD

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE EMERGENCE OF DOMINANCE ENCOUNTERS

There are two basic kinds of social acts: cooperative and conflictive (Mead 1934, 303-304). They comprise five common components: (1) roles, (2) attitudes, (3) language, (4) attitudinal assumption, and (5) social objects. Roles are the basic parts or building blocks of social acts (Athens 2002, 28-30; Mead 1932, 87, 168, 186; 1934, 6-7, 310, 324-27). They refer to the individual lines of action that are necessary to complete a social act. Attitudes are the physical and mental preparations that we undergo to carry out our particular roles in a social act (Mead 1934, 7-13). They also connect our bodies to our actions. The use of vocal or manual gestures that mean the same thing to the person making them as they do to the person on the receiving end constitutes language (Mead 1932, 167-68; 1934, 45-48, 325; 1982, 159-60). Attitudinal assumption refers to the participants' assuming the attitudes of the other participants in a social act so that they can anticipate each other's separate individual lines of action (Mead 1934, 161, 224, 268, 335). Language makes attitudinal assumption possible because it enables people to tell each other what they plan to do and how and when they plan to do it.

Finally, when people form a plan of action for carrying out a social act from assuming each others' attitudes, they form a social object of it. On one hand, if they develop a common social object and, thereby, a congruent plan of action for carrying out the social act, then it is a

cooperative social act. On the other hand, if they cannot develop a common social object and, thereby, form incongruent plans of action for carrying out the social act, then it is a conflictive social act. People cannot develop common social objects and, thereby, form incongruent plans of action when they cannot agree on who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles when executing a social act (Athens 2002, 30-31).

Dominance encounters always arise during conflictive social acts. Dominance is the ability to sway the plan of action that is used in carrying out a social act according to one's preferences (Athens 1998, 675; 2003, 6). Dominance displays itself not only while forming the plan of action for carrying out a social act but also during the plan of action's subsequent execution. Thus, people dominate social action when they perform the superordinate role rather than the subordinate role in a social act. Within various limits, people who perform the superordinate role can make those who perform the subordinate role say and do what they want at the time and place that they want it said and done (see Simmel 1950, 190-291; 1971, 96-120). A dominance encounter will ensue if at least one of the participants in a conflictive social act threatens to use physical or nonphysical force to determine whose plan of action will be used and who will later supervise its execution, that is, who will perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in a developing social act.

Method: Naturalistic Inquiry

The method that I used in this study to develop a grounded theory of how violent social acts unfold is "naturalistic inquiry" (Athens 1997, 115-20; Blumer 1969; Denzin 1989b, 69-101). According to Herbert Blumer (1969, 39-47; 1979, v-xxviii; Athens 1984), naturalistic inquiry, which combines "constant comparison" (Glaser 1956) and "negative case analysis" (Becker 1998, 194-212) in a single method, comprises two stages. During the first stage, "exploration," researchers collect data on the problem under study through standard ethnographic techniques, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, to refine their conception of it. To explore the problem of violent social interaction, I examined the life histories of 110 male and female, adult and juvenile, violent and nonviolent offenders and nonoffenders, with 98 life histories coming from confirmed violent offenders (see Athens

2003, 6, 38). I constructed my life histories by conducting lengthy in-depth interviews with my subjects and, in the case of offenders, looking at their official files (Denzin 1989a, 35-47). My previous participant observation of several serious violent criminal acts, including having witnessed a criminal homicide, mayhem, and justifiable assault with a dangerous weapon and having been the victim of brutal aggravated assault (Athens 1997, 121-25), also greatly aided my exploration (see Christie 1997; Clinard 1966). Among other things, it alerted me as to what questions to ask my subjects and how and when to ask them the questions while conducting my in-depth interviews (see Cutherbertson and Johnson 1992; Rhodes 2000, 7-140).

During the second stage, "inspection," researchers analyze the data that they collected earlier during the exploration stage in two principal ways. First, by making constant comparisons, a researcher progressively develops and extends his ideas until all his variegated forms of data can be subsumed under them. If he uncovers any data that cannot be subsumed under his extant ideas, however, then he must either enlarge his present notions or invent new ones so that *all* his data can now be subsumed under his ideas. Next, by making further constant comparisons, he progressively develops relationships among the ideas that he had earlier developed until these relationships can cover *all* the concrete instances of those relationships found in his data (Ragin 1994, 120-29; Lindesmith 1981; Znaniecki [1934] 1968, 232-34).[8] If he finds any concrete instances of the relationships among his ideas that contradict their earlier purported relationship, then he must revise that relationship until it can account for this negative instance.

To inspect the data collected during my interviews and participant observation, I made constant comparisons about and searched for negative instances with respect to the different aspects of the process through which completed, nearly completed, and just initiated violent criminal acts unfold. To refine my ideas about the nature of the individual stages in this process, I constantly compared my observations and subjects' accounts of violent criminal acts in varying degrees of completion. To refine my ideas about the number of stages and the order in which they unfold, I compared my observations and subjects' accounts of this process as a whole. If I discovered any negative cases while doing this, then I either refined the nature of my purported stage or the purported order in which it occurred in the process as a whole.

After researchers have finished inspecting their data, however, they can always inspect it again or inspect new data collected in other ethnographic studies to further refine and extend their earlier ideas and the relationships identified among those ideas. No theory, even a grounded one, is ever so perfectly stated that it can never be improved upon. Over the last three decades, I (Athens 1974; 1977; [1989] 1992, 63-71; 1997, 32-53; 2001, 738-39; 2003, 12-17) intermittently refined and extended my grounded theory of violent criminal action not only by re-inspecting my own collected data but now also by inspecting data that others (Denzin 1984a) have published. Although rarely done, the re-inspection of qualitative data for new potential insights is a practice that should be done much more often. During a single study, researchers can seldom fully digest every slice of their data, especially if it is replete with "thick descriptions." The passage of time can often broaden their thinking about a topic. By re-inspecting their data, they can drastically improve upon their earlier conceptualizations.

A GROUNDED THEORY
OF VIOLENT SOCIAL ACTS

An "encounter" may be defined as a social act in which the participants become embroiled in a dominance dispute. I found from my study that to explain violent criminal acts in various degrees of completion, it is necessary to distinguish the three basic types of violent encounters: *violent engagements*, *violent skirmishes*, and *dominance tiffs*.[9] Violent engagements explain the interaction between a perpetrator and a victim when physical force is actually used to settle the issue of dominance, a violent skirmish explains the interaction between them when physical force is almost but not actually used to settle this issue, and a dominance tiff explains the interaction during a conflictive social act that does not reach the point of a violent skirmish. In other words, a violent engagement is a completed violent encounter, a violent skirmish is an uncompleted violent engagement, and a tiff is an uncompleted violent skirmish. Thus, violent skirmishes and dominance tiffs represent inchoate violent encounters, whereas a violent engagement represents a completed one. Despite appearances to the contrary, violent engagements do not occur instantaneously. Instead, they occur over a process that unfolds over a series of stages and, thereby, over time. Of course, the

amount of time needed to complete the stages of this process may range anywhere from a matter of seconds or minutes to weeks or even months (Clarke and Cornish 1985, 152; Levi 1980, 286).

Violent Engagements: A Five-Stage Process

Stage one: Role claiming. During the stage of *role claiming*, a would-be superordinate must decide to place himself into the role of the superordinate and cast someone else into the role of the subordinate. People's decisions to perform superordinate roles in social acts spring from their sense of not only where they fall but also where other people fall into their community's pecking order. Their sense of where people fall into the community's pecking order is based on criteria established within what Robert Park (1952, 181, 196) called their "minor" and "major" communities (see Athens 1998, 676-78). Over time, people's sense of their own and other people's positions in their major and minor communities' pecking orders usually become taken for granted. It is on the basis of such taken-for-granted communal criteria that people decide whether they should perform the superordinate or subordinate role in a social act.

There is no doubt that such factors as race, social class, gender, and age can deeply affect our taken-for-granted assumptions about our own as well as other people's standing in both our minor and major communities (see Blumer 1958, 1965). The extent to which race, social class, gender, and age affect these taken-for-granted assumptions, however, can vary widely not only from one major community to another but also from one minor community to another within the same major community. On the basis of race, social class, gender, and age group alone, people from the same major, much less same minor, community cannot always make fine enough distinctions about their own and other people's relative standing in the community, so other factors in addition to race, gender, social class, and age must be used to decide who occupies the higher or lower positions (see Hughes [1945] 1984). Thus, the taken-for-granted assumptions that people develop about their own and other people's communal statuses cannot be said to be based only on race, gender, social class, or age.

Of course, people can select from dominance-claiming gestures of varying degrees of boldness or, conversely, timidity to communicate their intention to perform the superordinate role in a social act. Ironically,

the most timid gesture that would-be superordinates can make is to announce their intention to perform the superordinate role. The irony is that by announcing your intention to perform the superordinate role, you convey not only the attitude that you believe the other participants in the social act may question your claim to this role but also your own doubts because you feel compelled to announce it. Real bosses do not need to make pronouncements about their superiority; they merely take it for granted. If you are forced to announce to everyone that you are the boss, then you undercut your superiority and, thereby, your claim to perform the superordinate role. A second, less timid gesture that people can make to signal their intention to perform the superordinate role in a social act is for them to issue an order *or* hurl an insult toward a would-be subordinate. In either case, the attitude that is expressed by the would-be superordinate is exactly the same: the individual issuing the order *or* hurling the insult is a bit superior to the one to whom the order or insult was directed and, thereby, deserves to perform the superordinate role. Conversely, the person to whom the order is issued or insult is hurled is a bit inferior to the one who issued the order or hurled the insult and, thereby, does not deserve to perform the superordinate role in the social act, only the subordinate.

Of course, would-be superordinates can choose to make much bolder dominance-claiming gestures than merely issuing an order *or* hurling an insult toward a would-be subordinate: they can *both* issue a command *and* hurl an insult toward a would-be subordinate, which adds insult to injury. Here, the attitude communicated by the would-be superordinates is not that they are a little better than, but that they are far superior to, the person to whom the order *and* the insult were directed. Conversely, the individual to whom the insult *and* the order were directed is not just a little inferior but greatly inferior to the would-be superordinate. Because these two individuals stand head and shoulders above or below one another, there should be absolutely no question as to who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in the social act.

Finally, would-be superordinates can make an even bolder dominance-claiming gesture than issuing an order and hurling an insult toward a would-be subordinate: they can threaten to or actually physically violate or annihilate a would-be subordinate. Here, the attitude expressed by the would-be superordinates' physically intimidating gestures is that they are members of a much higher stratum of life than their

would-be subordinate or, conversely, that their would-be subordinate is from a much lower stratum of life than they are. In either case, the would-be superordinates deserve not only to perform the superordinate role but also to be totally indifferent to the physical or mental well-being of their would-be subordinate. Thus, here, the would-be superordinate treats would-be subordinates as if they are wild game or farm livestock that can be killed, butchered, and molested without giving a second thought to their desires and feelings (see Shibutani 1970).

Stage two: Role rejection. During the *role-rejection* stage in a violent encounter, would-be subordinates must not only decide whether to resist being placed into the subordinate role but also decide if they should resist *actively* or *passively.* As in the case of the decision to claim the superordinate role, the decision to reject the subordinate role may spring from unstated and correct or incorrect presumptions about superiority or equality based on the perceived age, gender, social class, and race of the other participants (see, for example, Dobash and Dobash 1984, 272-74, 282; Wright and Decker 1997, 84-87).

On one hand, if passive resistance is the course of action chosen by would-be subordinates, then they must make gestures that express neither dominance nor subservience but, instead, merely their intention not to accede to performing the subordinate role in the social act. During passive resistance, something akin to what game theorists call a "relinquishing of the initiative" occurs on the part of would-be subordinates. According to Schelling (1960, 137-38), people relinquish the initiative when, in effect, they make the outcome of a conflict "depend solely on the other party's choices." On the other hand, if they choose active resistance as the course of action, then they must gain the initiative by making their own dominance-claiming gestures. As in the earlier case of the would-be superordinates in stage one, the would-be subordinates here can make anything from the most timid to the boldest dominance-claiming gesture to express their attitude of superiority and intention to perform the superordinate role in the social act.

In case 35 below from my study (Athens 1997, 39-40), a young adult middle-class black man apparently took for granted that he was superior to a group of scruffy, white lower-class males driving through his neighborhood. While turning at an intersection, he not only cut them off but also made an obscene hand gesture at them. Actively resisting being placed by him into a subordinate status, one of white male car passen-

gers later made the boldest dominance-claiming gesture possible by shooting him at point blank range.

> I was just cruising around with some friends of mine, drinking wine, smoking dope, and eating a few reds. We came to an intersection and slowed down to make a turn when this black dude in a Thunderbird coming the other way cut us off in the middle of the intersection while he made a turn. Then he drove by us with a big grin on his face, throwing the bone. The friend of mine who was driving just turned and started going the other way, but I suddenly said to myself, "That dirty jive nigger flipping me off and grinning—now he thinks he's one bad nigger. Well, I'm going to get down with that black mother fucker." Then I grabbed the wheel and said, "Turn around and catch that nigger driving that Thunderbird." We started following him, but after he made a couple of turns, we lost him. He was too far ahead of us. I said, "Well, he's got to be somewhere in this neighborhood, so let's just keep driving around here until we spot that Thunderbird, because I'm out to book that nigger." I could still see his big grin when he shot us the bird, and it was driving me up a wall. There was just no way that I was going to quit looking for that mother fucker. I was outright determined to have his ass one way or another.
>
> Finally I spotted his car in a driveway in front of a house, and I told X, who was driving, to pull over and park in front of the house. Then I snapped my shotgun together and loaded it. One of my friends said, "Hey, Y, what the hell is your trip?" I said, "It's just my trip," and jumped out of the car. I didn't care about anything but having that nigger's ass. All I thought was, "I'm going to kill this punk." I walked up to the house and knocked on the front door. He answered the door, but as soon as he saw it was me, he slammed it shut in my face. Then I kicked the door wide open and saw him making tracks out the back door. I ran through the house after him and jammed him as he was climbing over the back fence. I leveled the barrel of my shotgun at his head and said, "Nigger, get off that fence." After he did, I said, "Head back into that house." I wanted to fuck him up in the house so nobody would see it, but when we got to the back door, he stopped and said, "Man, I haven't done anything to you. Please don't hurt me." His sniveling made me madder. I shoved the barrel into his back and said, "Man, go into that house." He still wouldn't go in but just kept begging me not to shoot him. This pissed me off even more. I lost all my patience and said, "Fuck it," and shot him right where he was standing.

In case 76 from my study (Athens [1989] 1992, 2-3), we have almost the direct counterpart of case 35 above. Here, an elderly middle-class white woman apparently takes for granted that she is superior to two adolescent lower-class black males whom she unexpectedly bumps into at a grocery store parking lot. Actively resisting being placed by her into a subordinate status, one of the black adolescents later made the boldest dominance-claiming gesture possible by beating her and then leaving her for dead in a vacant lot.

> James and I got the munchies and were walking to the grocery store to buy some cupcakes. In the parking lot of the store, we saw a fancy camper. I said, "check out that camper," and we started looking in its windows. James said, "That's a bad truck, man." As we were walking away, an old woman walked by us with a big man pushing her grocery cart. She said, "Keep away from my truck." I said, "We were just looking at it." She said, "Keep you black asses away from my truck." After she told us to keep away from her truck, I got mad. After she added the part about our black asses, I got doubly mad and wanted to kill her old stinking ass on the spot. I said, "Kiss my ass, you old stinking bitch." The big grocery store man said, "Get out of here before I call the police." I said, "Fuck the police, they're not about anything. I'll kill that old bitch for talking about my black ass."
>
> About 10 minutes later we saw her truck again in a parking lot behind a building. I said to James, "Look, there's that same damn truck. Now I can get that old bitch." We ran out to the truck, looked around, and then busted open the back door. I told James, "When that old bitch comes back, let's take her out some place where I can stomp her ass. I'm going to fuck her up bad." James only laughed. I was still hot from her referring to our black asses and acting like we were dirt for her to kick around. I wanted to get her old stinking ass bad for saying that to us. I had hate for that old stinking white bitch. James wasn't as mad about her referring to our black asses as I was.
>
> We sat in her camper, eating the food she had gotten while we waited for her to come back. I couldn't wait till she saw us. When she came back to the camper, we pulled a knife on her and told her to start driving. She said, "I'll do anything you want, but please don't hurt me." As we drove off, she said, "I'm sorry for what I said to you at the grocery store, please let me go." We didn't say a word until we told her to pull the camper into a vacant lot we drove past. After she parked the camper, she started crying and slobbering, "Please don't hurt me, please don't hurt me. I'm sorry, please . . ." I knew the old stinking bitch was only lying. Seeing her slobber like that only made me madder and hate her even more.

I jumped out of the camper, grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her out of the cab. She landed face first on the dirt. She got up on her hands and knees and started yelling, "Help, police, help police, help!" I said, "Shut up you old stinking bitch," and kicked her in the stomach as hard as I could and knocked all the wind out of that old bag. She rolled up in a ball in the mud gasping for her breath, and I kicked her again, which straightened her out like a stick. I tried to lift her up by the clothes, but she was so muddy that she slipped out of my hands, so I grabbed her by the hair. James said, "Would you look at her ugly old face." After I looked at it, I got so mad, I smacked and backhanded her about 20 times. Then I threw her against the camper and she slumped down on the ground. James opened a can of pop and asked her, "Do you want some pop?" She said, "No, I only want you to let me go." I said, "I'm not going to let you go, you stinking old bitch. I'm going to kill you." I grabbed her by the hair again and slammed her head back and forth against the side of the truck until blood started running out from her hair and over her ears. Then I dropped her to the ground, kicked her over into the mud puddle and left her for dead. We got into her camper and drove off.

Stage three: Role sparring. The next stage in a violent encounter is *role sparring*. If the would-be superordinates do not achieve their desired result from their overtures during the role-claiming stage, or if the would-be subordinates do not achieve their desired result from their overtures during the role-rejection stage, then they can make additional gestures for this purpose, setting into motion dominance-claiming or rejection *strategies*. While using these strategies, people make the same basic kinds of gestures that they made during the role-claiming or role-rejection stages, except they make more of these gestures as the part of a larger rationale to communicate more forcefully their intention to perform the superordinate role or not to perform the subordinate role in the social act. Although the disputants make their desires more forcibly known to one another in all these strategies, the amount of physical force used for this purpose always falls short of taking their opponents' life.

The disputants can select from three dominance-claiming or rejecting strategies. First, they can use an escalating dominance-claiming or -rejecting strategy by making progressively bolder dominance-claiming gestures. The unstated rationale is that if a timid gesture does not get your message across, then you should make a bolder one. Alternatively, they can use an abrupt dominance-claiming or -rejecting strategy by making a relatively bold dominance-claiming gesture at the very

outset. The unstated rationale here is that you should not mince words with people, so the best tact is no tact. Finally, people can use an insistent strategy and merely keep making the same dominance-claiming or -rejecting gesture, thereby underscoring their claim or rejection without escalating the boldness with which they make it. The unstated rationale here is that by repeating your claim to the superordinate role or your rejection of the subordinate role, you demonstrate your determination to have your desire honored. To execute these different dominance-claiming or -rejection strategies, however, one of course must be nimble enough to make the nuanced dominance-claiming or -rejection gestures described earlier.

Case 57 from my study (Athens 1997, 63-64) illustrates a dominance engagement that ends in a criminal homicide, in which a middle-aged white husband adopts an escalating dominance-claiming strategy while his younger Asian wife employs an insistent dominance-rejecting strategy.

> I was out of town, and I called my wife one night to check on what was going on at home. She told me that she had seen an attorney and was filing papers to divorce me. I asked her to hold off until I got back home and could sit down and talk it over with her, but she said, "No, this time I really mean it." After she told me that, I blew up and said, "You better not do that to me. If you do, you'll be sorry for it." She said, "I had a restraining order placed on you, so if you come around here bothering me, the police will get you." I said, "If I really want to get you, the police can't save you." I thought that telling her that would scare her, but it didn't. She just acted calm and confident, like she had everything all planned out. That got me madder. I knew then that it was no use raising any more hell over the phone since it wasn't intimidating her. I figured that I had to get home and confront her face to face. I just felt plain mad. I hung up the phone and headed straight for home. I wanted to see if she would talk as bravely about divorce to me when I got home as she did over the phone.
>
>   When I did get home three hours later, she was in bed, asleep. I woke her up and told her to get up, that I wanted to talk. I told her if she stopped with the divorce that I would promise to act better and . . . but she would not buy any of it. I got angrier and angrier. Then she came out and said, "Look, please do me this favor and give me a divorce." At that moment I felt cold hatred for her inside me. I told myself that I better leave before I exploded on her, but then I decided the hell with it, and I looked at her straight in the face and said, "Well, X, you better start thinking about

those poor kids of ours." She said, "I don't care about them, I just want a divorce."

My hate for her exploded then, and I said, "You dirty, no-good bitch," and started pounding her in the face with my fist. She put her arms up and covered her face, so I ran and got my rifle and pointed it at her. I said, "Bitch, you better change your mind fast or I'm going to kill you." She looked up and said in a smart-ass way, "Go ahead, then, shoot me." I got so mad and felt so much hate for her that I just started shooting her again and again.

Stage four: Role enforcement. During the *role-enforcement stage*, at least one of the two disputants must decide to use physical force to settle the issue of who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in the social act in which they are jointly participating. On one hand, the would-be superordinate can decide to use force to overcome the would-be subordinate's actual *or* anticipated resistance to performing the subordinate role in the present social acts in which they are both participants. On the other hand, the would-be subordinate can decide to use force to resist the would-be superordinate's anticipated or actual use of force to make him or her perform the subordinate role in the present or future social acts. Case 55 from my study (Athens 1997, 46-47) illustrates a violent engagement in which a young adult Hispanic man threatens an elderly white woman with lethal violence to force her to accede to performing the subordinate role while robbing the dry cleaning shop where she was a clerk.

I needed to score, but my money wasn't right, so I started thinking about where I could get the coin. I decided that I was going to have to go out and rob some fucking place. Then I started thinking about different places to hit. My mind first turned to this Dairy Queen, but I figured that it wouldn't be worth the trouble since there wouldn't be much money there anyway. Then I started thinking about this small supermarket, but I dropped that idea for the same reason. Finally, a cleaner's flashed in my mind. I figured that it would be the best hit since there would be enough money and only old ladies worked there. I put on my sunglasses, grabbed my .45, took off the safety clip, and headed for the cleaner's. I walked into the place, pulled out my pistol, and pointed it at the old lady behind the counter. I said, "This is a holdup. I don't want to shoot you, so give me all the money out of that cash register fast." She walked over to the cash register but then just stopped and said, "I'm not going to give you this money," and stepped on a button on the floor.

> I told myself I was going to get that money. I leaned over the counter and put the barrel of my pistol in her face and said, "Lady, now I'm going to kill you." But just as I was going to pull the trigger, she opened the cash register drawer and said, "You can get the money yourself." I then told her to get away from the cash register, and she did. After I grabbed all the paper money, she smiled and said, "I guess I don't know much about you youngsters these days." I looked at her for a moment and thought that she was just a nice, old, batty grandmother. Then I split fast.

Of course, because one party's decision to use force can be in anticipation of the other party's actions, *truncated violent engagements* can always occur (Athens 2003, 13). Here, based on past experience, one of the parties anticipates role sparring in the prospective social act involving the other party. Thus, they decide to use physical force before the violent encounter enters the role-sparring or even role-rejection stages, giving these violent engagements a premeditated character that becomes more striking the fewer initial stages that the violent encounter goes through (Wright and Decker 1997, 102-107; Dobash and Dobash 1984, 286). Case 10 from my study (Athens 1997, 38) illustrates a truncated violent engagement that occurs when a young white police officer interrupts a burglary being committed by two young adult white males:

> I was low on cash and had heard about a good place to make a hit. About an hour later my friend and I were punching the safe when a real young cop came in with his gun drawn and said, "You're under arrest, put your hands up." The first thing I thought was, "Here is 10 years, and I don't want to do any more fucking time." I decided then that I wasn't going to give myself up. The cop walked up closer to us, and I thought about getting his gun away from him, but I wondered where his partner was. He looked nervous, scared. I thought in the back of my mind that he would not use the gun, but I didn't care either. Then I figured he didn't have any partner and thought about hitting him. I had to get out of the situation. When he got right up to us, I hit him with the hammer.

Wrong (1994, 204) observes that conflicts among groups are always "a matter of degree." His observation is equally true for conflicts that occur among individuals. Depending on the degree of agreement regarding their use of physical force to settle the issue of who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in a social act, the

three following types of dominance engagements can be distinguished: (1) duel, (2) contest, and (3) clash.

In the case of a violent duel, the disputants agree not only that violence should be used to settle the issue of dominance but also on how violence should be used for this purpose. In fact, the closely related term *duello* refers to what can and cannot be done while dueling. Here, both parties agree not only to participate in a violent engagement but on the rules of the engagement. According to Schelling (1960, 53), "limited wars require limits. . . . But limits require agreements or at least some kind of mutual recognition and acquiescence." A duel is like a "limited war," except that in the former case, the actors are individuals, whereas in the latter case, they are nation-states. Nevertheless, the rationale for entering into limited wars and duels appears to be the same: "the 'rules' may be respected because if they are once broken, there is no assurance that any new ones can be found and jointly recognized in time to check the widening of the conflict" (Schelling 1960, 77). Boxing or wrestling matches provide the best contemporary examples of the limited wars that are fought between individuals.

In the case of a *contest*, the participants agree that violence should be used to settle the issue of dominance but not on how violence may be used for this purpose. Here, the disputants agree to participate in a violent engagement, but not on the rules of that engagement. Unlike a duel, during a contest, "anything goes." The common refrain that "a brawl ain't a boxing match" succinctly expresses the difference between a duel and a contest. Finally, in case of a *clash*, the participants do not agree that violence should be used to settle the issue of dominance, much less on how it can be used for that purpose. Here, the disputants agree neither to participate in a violent engagement nor on the rules of engagement. Although all the cases presented earlier illustrate violent clashes, cases that illustrate violent contests will be presented later.

The emotions that arise among would-be subordinates and superordinates during role enforcement depend partly on the character of the gestures that they make toward one another other and partly on the larger strategy that they employ while making these gestures. First, let's consider the impact of gestures alone. In the case of would-be subordinates, the emotions that they experience depend on the boldness of dominance-claiming gestures that would-be superordinates make toward them during the role-claiming stage. If would-be superordinates make the least bold dominance-claiming gesture by merely proclaim-

ing their intention to perform the superordinate role toward would-be subordinates, then their chief emotion would be outrage. If would-be superordinates make the bolder dominance-claiming gesture by hurling an insult or issuing an order toward the would-be subordinates, then their chief emotion would be pure disgust or anger. If would-be superordinates make the even bolder dominance-claiming gesture of issuing an order and hurling an insult toward the would-be subordinates, then the chief emotions that they would ultimately feel would be extreme hatred and anger. Finally, if would-be superordinates made the boldest dominance-claiming gesture of threatening to or actually physically attacking them, then their chief emotion would be intense fear or dread.

Conversely, in the case of would-be superordinates, the emotions that they experience also hinge on the timidity of the gestures that the would-be subordinates make toward them during the role-rejection stage. On one hand, if the would-be subordinates only passively resist by refusing to perform the subordinate role, then the emotion that arises in the superordinates is only mild anger and contempt. The superordinates' feelings of anger and contempt are blunted because the would-be subordinates' refusal to submit is interpreted as only a denial of the would-be superordinates' presumed superiority, not a statement of their presumed inferiority. The would-be subordinates are only claiming that they are equal rather than superior to the would-be superordinates. On the other hand, if the would-be subordinates resist actively rather than passively to performing the subordinate role by making dominance-claiming gestures of their own, then the would-be superordinates would react more strongly because the would-be subordinates' gesture is interpreted as a claim of presumed superiority rather than as a claim of equality. Exactly how much stronger the emotional reactions of the would-be superordinates is here depends on the boldness of the would-be subordinates' dominance-claiming gesture.

If the would-be subordinates make the most timorous gesture of announcing an intention to perform the superordinate role themselves, then their chief emotion would be bewilderment. If the would-be subordinates make the bolder gesture of delivering a single countermand by way of *either* an insult *or* an order, then their chief emotion would be pure anger *or* hate. If the would-be subordinates make the much bolder gesture of delivering a double countermand by way of *both* an insult *and* an order to the would-be superordinates, then their chief emotion

would be burning hatred and anger. Finally, if the would-be subordinates make the boldest gesture of threatening to or actually physically attacking or violating the would-be superordinates, then their chief emotion would be fear. Thus, during the role enforcement stage, the basic principle of emotionality that the display of negative feelings on one person's part generates the display of negative feelings on the other person's part in a spiraling process is unsurprisingly confirmed (Denzin 1985, 40).

The larger strategy into which these gestures fit also affects significantly the emotions that the respective parties experience. When a party adopts an insistent strategy, the repetition of the gesture would heighten or intensify the emotion already generated, whether the emotion was outrage, anger, hatred, or fear. When a party adopts an escalating strategy, it not only leads to a rapid change in the kind of emotions felt but greatly intensifies the emotions felt by the other party. Their emotions run the whole gamut from outrage, to anger, to hatred, to fear, to all four combined. When a party adopts an abrupt strategy, it initially leaves the other party dumbfounded and, thereby, only delays momentarily their experiencing of the emotion that the gesture in question would normally generate, such as outrage, anger, hatred, or fear.

Stage five: Role determination. During the role-determination stage, the impact of the dominance engagement on the allocation of roles in the social act is determined. There are several possible outcomes to dominance engagements: a "major" or "minor victory," a "major" or "minor defeat," a "draw," or "no decision." In a major victory, one combatant scores a clear-cut win and in the process inflicts serious injuries upon the other one. A major defeat is simply the reverse. A minor victory or defeat is the same as a major one, except that no one is seriously injured. A "no decision" is where the engagement never progresses to the point that a "winner" or "loser" could be declared; it ends before any of the combatants could inflict serious injuries upon the other. In contrast, a draw is where an engagement does progress beyond that point but still no clear winner or loser can be determined. Here, the combatants inflict equally grievous injuries upon one another. As in the case of all dominance engagements, the most common outcomes of violent dominance engagements are minor victories and defeats, as well as draws and no contests, while the least common are major defeats and victories (Athens [1989] 1992, 63-71).

The impact of violent engagements on the allocation of super-ordinate and subordinate roles, both in the immediate and later social acts, depends on their particular outcome and the larger social context in which they occur. On one hand, major and minor victories and defeats have the most impact on the allocation of superordinate and subordinate roles. The scoring of a major or even minor victory leads to the victor's performing the superordinate role and the loser's perform-ing the subordinate role, at least in the immediate social act. On the other hand, no contests and draws have the least impact on the alloca-tion of the roles in the immediate or future social acts. Because the vio-lent engagements end in a stalemate, no real winners or losers emerge from it. As far as either the immediate social act or future ones are con-cerned, neither party can make a bigger claim to performing the superordinate role or a disclaimer to performing the subordinate role.

Although major and minor victories and defeats have a bigger social impact than draws and no-decisions, it should come as no surprise that major victories and defeats have bigger impact than minor victories and defeats, particularly on the allocation of superordinate and subordinate roles. On one hand, minor victories and defeats usually do not change combatants' positions in their community's pecking order and, thereby, in future social acts, but they do necessarily affect the allotment of com-batants' roles in the immediate social act. On the other hand, major vic-tories and defeats can change the combatants' relative position in the community's pecking order and, thereby, can affect the allotment of the combatants' roles not only in the immediate social act but in future ones as well (see, for example, Shakur 1993, 289-301).

It is much more difficult, however, to gauge the longer-term effects of major victories and defeats on the allocation of superordinate and subordinate roles in the larger community than their shorter-term effects only on the immediate social act itself. If people score a major or even minor victory, then it usually can be taken for granted that they will perform the superordinate role, but if they suffer a major or even minor defeat, then it can be usually taken for granted that they will per-form the subordinate role in the immediate social act during which the violent dominance engagement broke out. However, it cannot be merely taken for granted that our position in the larger community's dominance order will be raised by scoring a major victory or lowered by suffering a major defeat. Exactly how much it raises or lowers our status within the community's dominance order is always problematic.

It depends on at least two interacting factors: (1) the nature of the community in which the dominance engagement takes place and (2) the combatants' relative positions in the particular community's pecking order (Athens 1998; 2003, 19-34).

Case 32 from my study (Athens 1997, 50-51) illustrates a violent engagement in which a young adult Native American woman scores a major victory over an older black man who had earlier rebuffed her attempt to withdraw from a dominance engagement with him. Unlike in the three previous cases presented, this violent engagement takes on the form of a contest rather than a clash.

> We were all drinking wine, taking pills, and having a mellow time when I overheard this dude asking X who I was and saying that I was a bitch. I said, "Hey, who's the bitch you are talking about?" He said, "You're the bitch." I thought to myself, "What does this dude think he's doing, coming to my party uninvited and then calling me a fucking bitch?" I said, "Don't you come to my party and call me a bitch." He said, "You are a bitch. I was high and you shortchanged me out of fucking $20 when I paid you for my room today." I said, "Man, you are crazy." He said, "Don't try to slick me, bitch. I'm hip. I'm an ex-con. I know what's happening, and X knows I'm good people, so don't try to run that game on me."
>
> My friends were having a good time, I felt good, and I didn't want to spoil the mood for any problems behind $20, so I thought that I'd just pacify the chump and give him a lousy $20 and end it. I said, "Look, man, I didn't shortchange you out of any money today, but just to show my good heart, I'll give you $20. How about that?" He said, "Well, since you needed it so fucking bad that you had to try to run a game like that past me, then you can keep it, bitch." Then I thought that motherfucker was just messing with me. He was trying to make me out as a petty hustler and call me a bitch right in front of my friends. I said to myself, "Please, motherfucker, don't mess with me any more." I finally said, "Mister, I'm warning you, don't you fuck with me any more or I'll show you what a fucking bitch is." He just looked at me, laughed, and said, "I haven't seen the bitch yet who could kick my ass."
>
> Then I told myself, "This man has got to go, one way or another. I've just had enough of this mother fucker messing with me. I'm going to cut his dirty, mother-fucking throat." I went into my bedroom, got a $20 bill and my razor. I said to myself, "The mother fucker wouldn't stop fucking with me, and now he's hung himself," and I walked out of the bedroom. I went up to him with a big smile on my face. I held the $20 bill in my hand out in front of me and hid the razor in my other hand. Then I

sat on his lap and said, "Okay, you're a fast dude. Here's your $20 back."
He said, "I'm glad that you are finally admitting it." I looked at him with
a smile and said, "Let me seal it with a kiss." I said to myself, "Mother
fucker, now I'll show you what a fucking bitch is," and then I bent over
like I was going to kiss him and started slicing up his throat.

Inchoate Violent Encounters:
Violent Skirmishes and Dominance Tiffs

Inchoate violent encounters are violent engagements that are started
but never completed. There are two basic types of inchoate violent
encounters: dominance tiffs and violent skirmishes. If a violent en-
counter does not reach at least stage two, role rejection, then unless a
dominance engagement is a "truncated" one, it cannot be said to have
started because the problem of who should perform the superordinate
and subordinate roles in the developing social act has not been made an
issue by any of the participants.

On one hand, a dominance tiff is an encounter that has reached stage
three, role sparring, but has not yet progressed to stage four, role
enforcement. It ends before role sparring is completed. Dominance tiffs
typically end when either one of the disputants backs down or retreats.
On one hand, would-be superordinates back down when they withdraw
their claim to perform the superordinate role in the social act, whereas
would-be subordinates back down when they accede to performing the
subordinate role in the social act that they had earlier rejected. On the
other hand, would-be superordinates retreat when they withdraw alto-
gether from participating in the social act rather than give up their ear-
lier claim to performing the superordinate role, whereas subordinates
retreat from participating in the social act when they withdraw alto-
gether from participating in the social act rather than accede to perform-
ing the subordinate role. Of course, for total withdrawal from participa-
tion in a social act to prevent a violent skirmish or engagement, none of
the participants must challenge the withdrawal, so that dominance does
not once again become an issue of contention. A case taken from
Denzin's (1984a, 74) study aptly illustrates a dominance tiff:

I was stuck in a snow bank. My battery was dead. I was shoveling out my
car. This sonofabitch pulled up behind me and honked. He wanted me to
move my car. I pointed to my car and the hood and the snow bank and
shrugged my shoulders. He leaned on his horn and said, "Move it." As if

he had a right to my parking place! I looked at him. I felt myself getting mad and out of control. I gave him the finger. "Can you start it?" I said, and pointed to my car. "Get the hell out of here if you can't help!" I told him to "go _____ off" and got back in my car and just sat there until he drove off. I was seething. I didn't know what to do. I was losing control. I got out and walked across the street and went into my apartment and tried to calm down [field conversation, 35 year-old engineer].

A violent skirmish is a violent encounter that reaches stage four, role enforcement, but not stage five, role determination. Unlike in the case of dominance tiffs, here, the disputants always enter into stage four but never complete it. During role enforcement, one or both participants begin to second-guess themselves. After deciding to resort to violence to settle the issue of who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in the social act, at least one of them decides to refrain from the use of violence, at least at the present time. They may belatedly accede to performing the subordinate role or only abandon their claim to performing the superordinate role in the social act.

There are at least four reasons why would-be superordinates or subordinates who have become embroiled in violent encounters belatedly conclude that caution is the better part of valor and later choose to abandon their claim to performing the superordinate role or accede to performing the subordinate role in the social act and not carry out their earlier decision to use physical violence to win a violent engagement. First, they may surmise that under the present circumstances, a major or minor defeat is a more likely outcome than a major or even minor victory. Out of fear of losing a violent dominance engagement with their opponent, they conclude that they should abandon their claim to perform the superordinate role or accede to performing the subordinate role in the social act (see Athens 1980, 31-32; Felson 1996, 446-49; Wright and Decker 1997, 84). Case 34 from my study (Athens 1997, 45-46) illustrates a violent skirmish in which a young adult black man accedes to performing the subordinate role in a social act out of a well-founded fear that he would suffer a major defeat at the hands of an older, much larger black man.

I was in jail. I saw a newspaper laying open on a table, so I sat down and started reading it. Then this dude came up out of nowhere and said, "Don't be fucking with anything on my end of that table." I said, "I don't see any name on this table or that paper." He said, "Everything on this

end of the table is mine, and I don't fuck around with niggers or white folks." I thought to myself, "What a sick, stupid Motherfucker." As I got up and walked away from the table, I said to this other dude, "What the fuck is wrong with that crazy SOB?" When he heard me say that, he charged up to me and said, "Motherfucker, you don't have to ask anybody about me." I really didn't want any fight with the dude because he looked pretty bad; he had big old arms and shoulders, and some of his teeth were missing. So I only said, "Man, you must be crazy. What is wrong with your ass?" Then he fired on me. He hit me hard and downed me. Then I saw that he had opened up my fucking nose. I really got hot. I just thought I wanted to kill that dirty SOB. I jumped up to my feet and pulled out a fingernail file that I had on me. But then I thought, "This file won't stop him, and he's too fucking big to fight without something more than this. I better back off . . .

Second, the participants may surmise that they should accede to performing the subordinate role or abandon their claim to performing the superordinate role in the social act not out of fear of their personal safety but rather out of fear that they will destroy their personal relationship with their opponents by resorting to physical violence to win the present dominance engagement against them. Thus, they conclude that their ongoing personal relationship with their opponents is more important to them at the moment than winning the dominance engagement (Athens 1980, 33-34; see also Denzin 1984a, 193-95; 1984b, 490-94). Third, the participants may surmise that they should abandon their claim to performing the superordinate role or accede to performing the subordinate role out of deference to a third party who requests them to back down rather than use violence to win the present dominance engagement against their opponents. They conclude that the well-being of their relationship with this highly respected third party is more important than winning the present dominance engagement (Athens 1980, 34-35; see also Denzin (1984a, 86).

Finally, the participants may surmise that they should abandon their claim to performing the superordinate role or accede to performing the subordinate role because the risk of legal sanctions under the present circumstances is too grave for them to resort to violence to win the present dominance engagement. Here, they conclude that they should not execute their earlier decision to physically attack their opponent not out of fear of destroying a valued personal relationship with an opponent or third party but out of fear of law enforcement figures (Athens 1980, 35-

36). Case 54 from my study (Athens 1997, 49-50) illustrates a violent skirmish in which a young white man abandons his claim to performing the superordinate role in the social act and ceases his physical attack on a white middle-aged woman out of fear that the police will apprehend him.

> I wanted to find a broad with a nice full ass walking alone to her car. I figured that I'd jump into her car with her and then make her drive out to a deserted area nearby that I knew about. I was watching people going to their cars when I spotted this broad with a nice face and big hips and a fat, round ass walking by herself. She looked like an easy rip-off, so I started following her and snuck up right behind her. When she stuck her keys in her car door, I grabbed her by the arm, flashed my knife in her face, and said, "Get into your car and don't make any noise." She just stood there like she was in a complete daze. So I let go of her arm and grabbed her car keys and opened the car door myself. I told her to get in because we were going for a ride, but she just started screaming her ass off. First I decided to force her into the car, and I grabbed onto her again, but she kept on screaming and started getting away from me. I figured that other people were probably seeing by now what was happening, so I thought I had better get the hell out of there fast before I got busted. Then I booked it, and she ran off toward the stores, screaming.

The importance of dominance tiffs and violent skirmishes is that they underscore that violence encounters rarely end in actual violent engagements. On the contrary, most dominance tiffs end before they become violent skirmishes, and most violent skirmishes end before they become violent engagements, a brute fact that any credible theory of the interaction between perpetrators and victims of violent crime must explain satisfactorily. Thus, violent engagements are never inevitable because the outcome of violent encounters is always contingent upon what happens in the actual situation in which they arise. It is fortunate for us that violent engagements are so problematic; otherwise, our problem of violent crime would be many times greater than it already is (Athens 1997, 53).

CONCLUSION

The interaction between perpetrators and victims when violent crimes are either attempted or completed can be best understood if it is seen as

arising during social acts—activities that require the voluntary or involuntary participation of at least two parties for their completion. With the obvious exception of suicide, all violent crimes constitute social acts because there must be at least two parties for them to be committed—a perpetrator and a victim. Lawful violent acts constitute social acts just as much as unlawful violent acts do. In the cases of excused and justifiable homicides, as well as excused and justifiable batteries, there must also be at least two parties—a perpetrator and a victim. The same is also true in intergroup violent criminal and noncriminal violent action, except that in this case, the victims and perpetrators are collectivities rather than individuals. In collective social acts, it is groups rather than individuals who perform the separate roles, communicate through their spokespersons, assume each others' attitudes, and try to work out a congruent social object or plan of action for carrying out the larger social act in which they are the acting agents (Blumer 1966, 540; 1969, 52, 55-56; 1981, 148).

As in the case of individual social acts, there are two kinds of collective social acts: cooperative and conflictive. Unlike in cooperative social acts, in conflictive ones, the acting agents, no matter whether they are individuals or groups, cannot form a congruent social object or plan of action because they cannot agree on who should perform the superordinate and subordinate roles in carrying out the social act. Unsurprisingly, violent encounters do not arise during individual or collective cooperative social acts but instead during conflictive ones. It may be speculated that the violent encounters that emerge during either individual or collective conflictive social acts fall into the same three basic subtypes that differ in terms of the number of the five stages of a violence encounter that are completed: (1) role claiming, (2) role rejection, (3) role sparring, (4) role enforcement, and (5) role determination. During a violence engagement, all five stages must be completed; during violent skirmishes, only the first four of these stages must be completed; and during violent tiffs, only the first three must be completed. Thus, despite the differences in legal status between lawful and unlawful violence and between individual and collective acting units, the grounded theory of violent criminal social acts that individuals perpetrate described here could be potentially applied to violent social acts that are both lawful and unlawful and that both groups and individuals perpetrate and, thereby, to all violent social action.

Before this extrapolation can be safely made, however, appropriate amendments would undoubtedly have to be made to the theory. Any

general theory of violent social acts would have to take into account the added complexity that an increase in scale in the social act's acting units would introduce into the proposed explanation (Blumer 1981, 148-149). Undoubtedly, the nature and size of the groups involved in a dominance encounter could significantly affect the actual social practices at work during the different stages. As Blumer (1959, 129-30) pointedly observes, large and small groups must utilize different social mechanisms to perform their roles or "mobilize for action" in social acts: "A . . . reflection of the collective factor in the case of large groups is the organization on which they must rely when mobilizing for action. A small group uses confined, simple and direct machinery. Corporate action in a large group requires the articulation of more units which are also likely to be more diverse, more removed from each other, and related through bridging links. . . . The mobilization of this extended, diversified, and indirectly connected organization requires forms of leadership, coordination, and control which again differ from those in small groups." Of course, a general theory of violent social action also could not ignore the state's approval or disapproval of the use of violence. Obviously, this is a factor that could also significantly affect both individual and collective acting units' performance of their roles in violent social acts. Thus, future research would be needed to determine the exact nature of the amendments that would need to be made in each of the stages through which violent engagements, skirmishes, and tiffs pass to accommodate *all* violent social acts rather than only the criminal ones that individuals commit.

I am confident that once these amendments are added, violent encounters will be equally applicable to the lawful and unlawful violent actions that either individuals or groups engage or almost engage in. Until the required research is done, however, the use of violent encounters to explain the lawful violent acts that individuals commit and the lawful and unlawful actions that groups commit or nearly commit will be destined to remain an unproven but highly viable hypothesis. The viability of this hypothesis should not be discounted because, as Nobel Prize–winning Danish physicist Niels Bohr (1938) points out, "the history of science teaches us again and again how the extension of our knowledge may lead to the recognition of *relations between formerly unconnected groups of phenomena*, the harmonious synthesis of which demands *a renewed revision of our presuppositions for the unambiguous application of even our most elementary concepts*" (p. 28, emphasis added). In performing the research necessary to test this or any other

hypothesis, researchers should also consider the possibility of re-analyzing data collected in their past closely related studies, a practice that now is far rarer among qualitative than quantitative researchers. Hopefully, the present study has demonstrated the great potential value of engaging in this practice for qualitative researchers, especially those who, like me, continue to study for years on end different aspects of the same basic problem.

NOTES

1. Unfortunately, over these last thirty years, criminologists in the academic community have generally ignored my work, so there has been little comparison of my point of view with the competing points of view on violence mentioned above (Athens 1997, 113-20; Rhodes 2000; Ulmer 2003a, 2003b). It is my hope that my present article will prove more successful than my earlier body of work in stimulating this dialogue.

2. The reader should examine the following studies: Athens (1985), Dobash and Dobash (1984), Felson (1978), Felson and Steadman (1983), Hepburn (1973), Levi (1980), Oliver (1994), Polk (1994, 1999), Ray and Simons (1987), and Savitz, Kumar, and Zahn (1991).

3. Before Goffman's (1967) introduction of the dramaturgical model, the study of violent interaction was mired in the pretheoretical stage. During this stage, criminologists performed static rather than dynamic analyses of violent social interaction. They also reduced violent social interaction to the relationship between the victim and offender, the motive for, modus operandi used in, and the victim precipitation of the violent offense. Although Marvin Wolfgang (1958) popularized studies of this type, it was actually Howard Harlan (1950) who laid out the basic blueprint for carrying them out (see, for example, Amir 1971; Driver 1961; Hepburn and Voss 1970; Levy, Kunitz, and Everett 1969; Pittman and Handy 1964; Pokorny 1965; Svalastoga 1956, 1962; Voss and Hepburn 1968; Wallace 1964).

4. The neorational choice theorists in criminology, such as Bouffard, Exum, and Paternoster (2000), and Tedeschi and Felson (1994), deserve credit for overcoming most of the difficulties that critics (for example, Boudon 1998) have rightfully claimed plagued earlier rational choice theories of general behavior. Moreover, some critics of the application of rational choice theory to violent crime have wrongly equated rational choice with the instrumental view of social experience (see, for example, De Haan and Vos 2003). Both pragmatists (Dewey 1929, 1948; Mead 1934) and their successors, the interactionists (Blumer 1969, 1981, 2004), however, provide an instrumental view of social experience but are anti-utilitarianism (Blumer 1981, 155), and thereby, they oppose many of the fundamental tenets of rational choice theory. Thus, interactionists who have taken an instrumental view of violent social action (see, for example, Athens [1989] 1992, 1997, 2003) do not subscribe to any form of rational choice theory.

5. The apparent difference between "force only" and "battering" rapes is that in the latter, more physical force than necessary is used to consummate the sex act, whereas in the former, only enough physical force is used to achieve penetration.

6. When I later present my analysis of these acts, however, I will attempt to explain how people's race, gender, social class, and age can enter as proximate factors into the formation of their violent criminal acts. I believe that race and gender can also enter as *distant rather than proximate factors* into this causal process. Unfortunately, an examination of the part that distant factors play in violent events goes beyond the scope of this article.

7. As Hood-Williams (2001; see also Pine 2002) forcefully argues, the term "gender" is far more problematic than most criminologists now realize. Thus, it is advisable for any criminologist using this term to define it. Here, I am defining gender as the sexual component of a person's larger social identity.

8. I need to underscore that the search for concepts under which *all* the data can be subsumed and for universal or, more precisely, invariant relationships among these concepts operates as a *heuristic* rather than *ontological* principle. Thus, this methodological prescription is only an *ideal* that researchers reach for but can never be absolutely certain that they have ever attained (see W. S. Robinson 1951).

9. I am not contending that my notion of a violent encounter and its subsidiary notions of violent engagement, violent skirmish, and dominance tiffs are "first-order" constructs that I took straight from the mouths of my subjects. On the contrary, my contention is that a violence encounter and its three subsidiary ideas are "second-order constructs" that I developed from my study of the words that came out of my subjects' mouths. Thus, my second-order constructs are congruent with, rather than identical to, their first-order ones (see Schutz 1962, 34-46).

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