THE SITUATIONAL ASPECTS OF CRIME PREVENTION: THE THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

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The differences between the causal models of crime and the situational ones have already been highlighted by Sutherland who said,

"Scientific explanations of criminal behaviour may be stated either in terms of the processes which are operating at the moment of the occurrence of the crime or in terms of the processes operating in the earlier history of the criminal. In the first case, the explanation may be called 'mechanistic', 'situational' or 'dynamic', in the second, 'historical' or 'genetic'... Criminological explanations of the mechanistic type have thus far been notably unsuccessful, perhaps largely because they have been formulated in connection with the attempt to isolate personal and social pathologies among criminals. Work from this point of view has, at best, resulted in the conclusion that the immediate determinants of criminal behaviour lie in the person-situation complex."[1]

In this paper, the interactional model of situational violence will be highlighted and I shall examine how violence may be predicted, and discuss possible modes of its prevention. There is indeed a link between predisposing factors on the biological, personal and social levels and the situational interaction, but the predisposition and situational aspects express themselves in different dynamics.

Predisposition to violence, as gleaned from various studies, may eventually be expressed as probability profiles, which would estimate

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[1] E. H. Sutherland and D. R. Cressey, *Principles of Criminology*, 7th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1966).

the likelihood of an individual, displaying a given set of characteristics, to commit a violent act. However, the actual sequence of events precipitating the violence would in some cases take the form of a causal chain of interaction between criminal and victim. This sequential pattern could be ignited on the spot by exposure to a compromising situation; e.g., the ever-loving wife and her lover in the husband's nuptial bed. Words hurled with obvious intent to offend would have the effect of switching Ego's action (Ego being defined as the acting individual, plus his cognitive perceptions, and Alter as how the other in the dyadic interaction is perceived by Ego) to a different cognitive level, i.e., he would "see red". Other expressions may have this triggering effect on Ego because he defines them subjectively as humiliating, due to peculiarities of his own personality. The word "bugger" thrown at a latent homosexual or an expression questioning the virility of a man who has anxieties about his potency, may have the same effect. The conventional form of an offensive gesture, such as the twisting of a moustache and the emission of a snore in the presence of a devout Moslem, may have an even stronger escalatory effect. Such an exchange of words and gestures would not trigger immediate arousal to another cognitive level, but depending on the reaction, may gradually lead to the "point of no return", the threshold of violence.

The interaction between the perpetrator of violence and the victim operates as sequential cycles, with each situational cycle limiting the rational choice of each actor, so that in the end, the violent act erupts as an almost indeterministic sequence with very little rational choice. This, of course, assumes that each actor in the dyadic interaction picks up the cue which leads him to another limitation of rational choice and of violence-precipitating action. As we shall show, there could be a violence-non-precipitating decision effected by the rational choice of one of the actors so that the *dans macabre* situational sequence would be pushed away from the violent eruption.

1. The Situational Model

The structure of the relationships, which I hypothesise as determining acts of violence, would be as follows:

1. Alter transmits to Ego a pattern of communication, which is overtly or latently provoking;
2. The narrowing of the range of non-violent reaction leads Ego swiftly and inexorably to a limitation of rational choice and

to a point of no return where the violent option becomes highly probable;

3. In the course of the interaction, Ego makes an outward commitment to Alter or a relevant other, to commit the act of violence. This would further accelerate the generation of tension, and rational choice of violence-precipitating actions;
4. The violent act would be the cathartic release of this tension;
5. It would be followed by a sense of fulfilment or homeostatic contentedness.

1.1. The provoking communication

The offender may be exposed to words, gestures or actions, which are culturally defined as provoking; e.g. gestures of obscenity which are performed by different fingers in different cultures. The communication pattern may also be provoking within the specific context of interaction between the offender and the victim, such as reference to some very touchy personal episodes or vulnerable character traits known only or primarily to the partner in the dyad. Finally, there may be words or acts neutral to Alter but **interpreted** as offensive by Ego. This could occur in confrontation of individuals from different cultures. We admit that a violent reaction, or one that may further accelerate the violent interchange, occurs where sublimation has not been possible in a small percentage of cases only; but these are the ones which we are studying. We shall first dwell on the types of non-violent reactions when the rational choice would be of violence-non-precipitating actions.

1.2. The alternatives to violent reactions

As I have assumed that the point of no return involves the narrowing of the range of reactions to those which lead to a rational choice towards violence, I may proceed by eliminating the non-violent alternative choices. It is evident that the dynamics of the interaction are not one-directional towards violence, and the various forms of perception are not mutually exclusive. One form is the **twisting of the incoming perception** to fit Ego's previously internalised stances, which can be analysed in the following categories:

a) **Selective perception**, which is not a "face-saving" mechanism, as described by Goffman, but a non-awareness of the provoking communication. This may happen when the communication seems so painful that its perception is evaded in self-defence;

b) **The differentiation process** is another technique for utilising some demographic or social stratification characteristics of the provoker so as to avoid taking offence, such as "he is only a child", "what can you expect of a woman?", "these bums just have to be lewd and dirty-mouthed", or "I shall not lower myself to his level by answering him". The best illustration of this premise is in O. Henry's *The Coming-out of Maggie*, where Dempsey Donovan, the Irishman, finds out that his opponent, O Sullivan, is nothing but a Dago, to use O. Henry's terminology, in disguise: "and then Dempsey looked at O Sullivan without anger, as one looks at a stray dog, and nodded his head in the direction of the door. The back stairs, Giuseppi, he said, briefly. Somebody'll pitch your hat down after you". This rational choice process might also guard against taking offence even if the provoker is in a position of authority. Elia Kazan's *America, America* and the numerous instances depicted in the novels of Kazantzakis describe the Greek as disregarding the insults hurled at him, since a barbaric Turk could never hurt the serene inner dignity of a Greek;

c) Finally, there are techniques for **explaining away** provoking behaviour. A prostitute interviewed in one of my previous studies[2] related how her boyfriend had had sexual intercourse with a new girl in her presence. She did not mind, she said, because "The new girl had to be 'broken in' for business", while she herself was her pimp's only true love.

The situational aspects of violence prevention, when applied to provoking communication, may be directed in mass immigration countries towards the media, law enforcement agencies, and social services. This should highlight the facts that provoking communications are culture bound, and that acceptable communication in one culture may be very offensive in another. As for the outward commitment, social services as well as law enforcement officers should be alerted to the fact that any outward commitment in the domestic scene between the members of tension-laden family is bound to exacerbate the possibility of violence; threats, displays of arms, positive verbal undertaking of violence should not be taken lightly, since any outward commitment fixates one of the parties on a violence-precipitating course, which becomes more and

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[2]   Shlomo G. Shoham, *Social Stigma and Prostitution, British Journal of Criminology* (1968).

more difficult to cut. Hence, any threat within the domestic scene should be treated as a violence-escalating outward commitment, which might have fatal consequences, and treated appropriately by the social services and law enforcement agencies.

2. The Cycles of Violence

The various types of interaction described above can be analysed as cycles of stimulus-response. A chain of cycles accelerates towards violence in the form of a positive feedback cycle which culminates in the blowing of a fuse, i.e., the violent act. When the interaction does not end in violence, the interchange may be likened to a negative feedback cycle. It should be pointed out that such acts may be further analysed into meaningful typologies, and the interaction can be related both to the involved and the passive actors. The following paradigm may be a useful framework for a typology of the differential perception of stimuli and the corresponding reactions towards violence, for each given cycle.

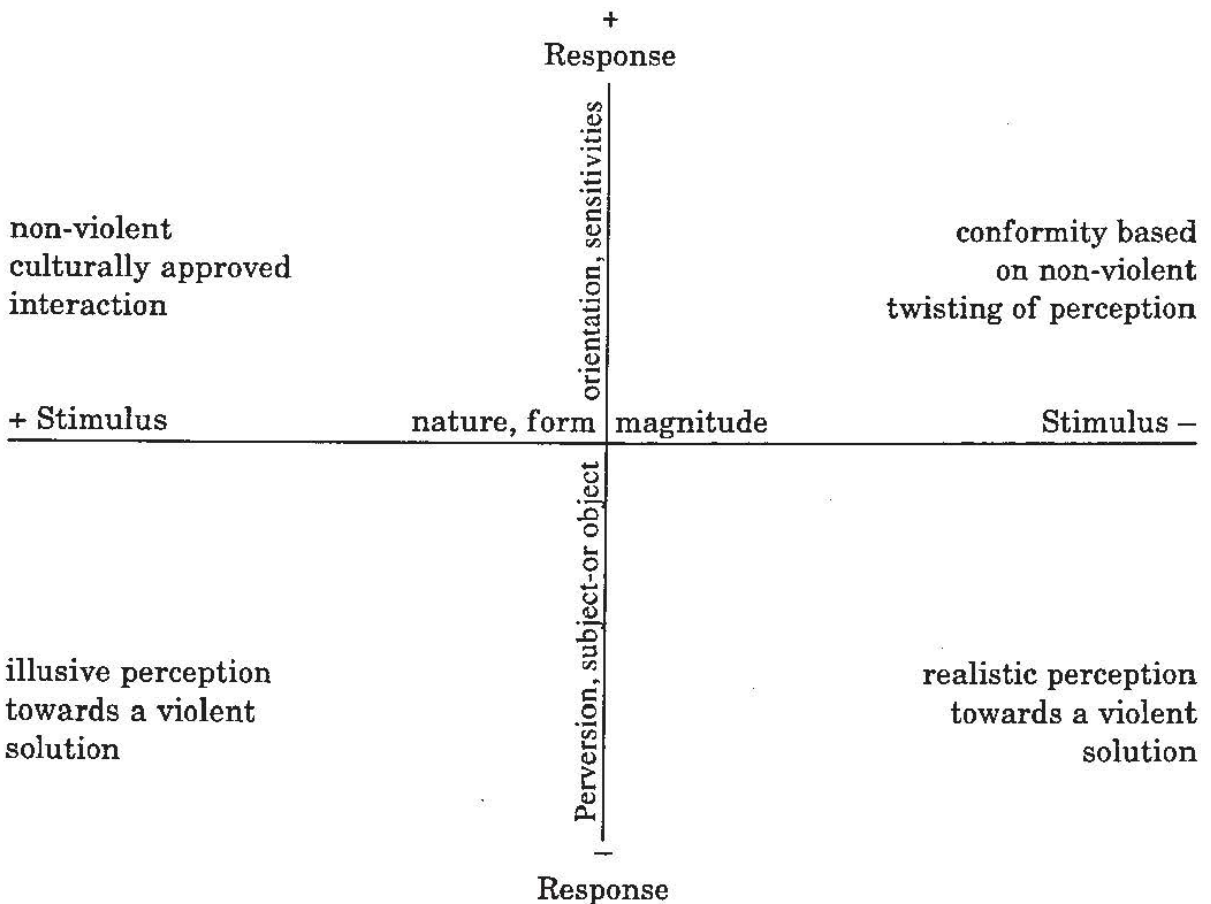The axes of the paradigm represent the classical stimulus-response

Figure 1. Differential perceptions and reactions towards violence or non-violence for each cycle of interaction.

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relationship. Stimuli may be either neutral or intentional. It may be pointed out that even at this stage the neutral stimulus is not detached from the probable reaction. The fact that a neutral stimulus appears in our paradigm of violence suggests the possibility that the perception of this stimulus might not be at all neutral. In other words, the stimulus specified as neutral is expected not to be perceived as such by the violence-prone, reacting Alter.

The interrelationship between the stimulus and its perception by Alter may be described by the four property spaces around the intersection of the axes. Of these, only two are relevant to our present context. These are the violent-realistic perception of the stimulus and the illusive-violent one. These may be arranged at the extreme planes of a space in a scalogram, utilising the Guttman-Lingol technique.

The main vectors portray the nature of stimuli as related to the perception of these stimuli. A positive stimulus would mean that Alter relates to Ego in a cordial or any other culturally approved manner. The positive perception of these positive stimuli would not, of course, result in violence, e.g., neighbourly exchanges of "good morning" and ritualistic predictions of the weather. If the stimulus is negative and the perception of it by Alter is either neutral or positive, Alter performs some perceptual juggling, which amounts to explaining away the offensive nature of the stimulus, e.g., when a gracious lady mutters to herself that this coarse and vulgar type cannot possibly hurt her feelings. A positive stimulus when perceived as violent, would be related to an illusive perception by Ego of Alter's intention, e.g., a benign smile by a lad at a passing girl may be perceived by her as an offensive leer which calls for a violent reaction.

The predisposition towards violence can be measured by some standard instruments for perceptual twisting, e.g. the Petrie Augmentor and Reducer.[3] Another possibility may be the negative perception of a negative, i.e. offensive stimulus. This is, of course, the realistic perception of a fist in the eye as what it is meant to be. It should be stressed that the decision on the nature of a stimulus, as well as on the nature of a response to a stimulus, with a positive, neutral or negative grading, permits a wide range of stimuli-ranking vis-à-vis perceptual ranking. The dichotomy of violent and non-violent

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[3] A. Petrie, *Individuality in Pain and Suffering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
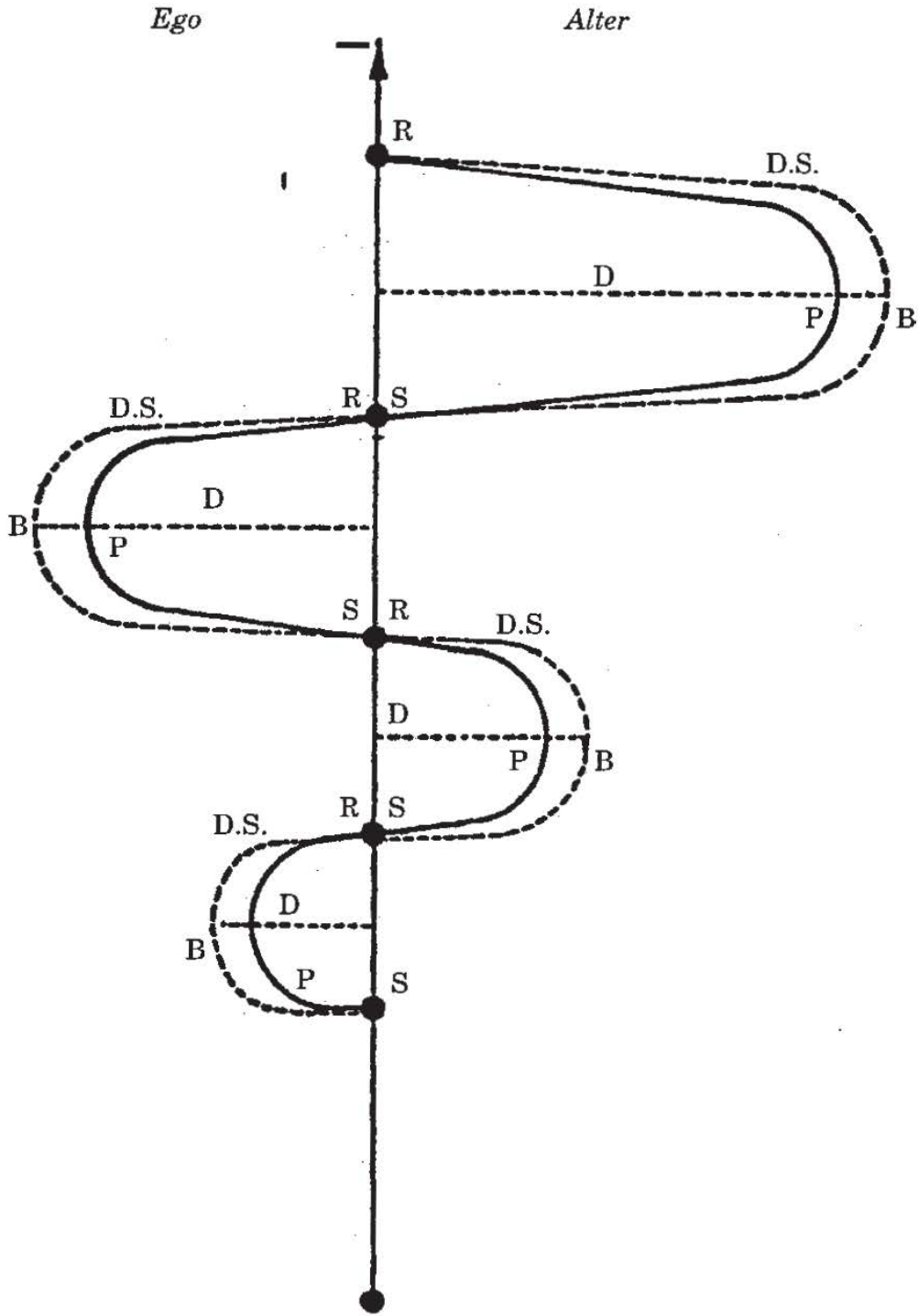
Figure 2. The dyadic interaction process, analyzed in terms of stimulus, perception, definition of the situation and response.

solutions is clearly apparent in our scheme, so that the cycle of interaction which constitutes an acceleration towards a violent solution is only displayed in the lower half of our paradigm.

Other components which may be correlated with our main axes are as follows: the magnitude of the stimuli would be ranked on the stimuli axis, according to an objective violence prone stimuli typology.

The form of the stimulus could be physical (i.e., actual assault or other physical contact performed by Alter on Ego), gesture, mimicry, or other stances which are culturally defined as offensive, and verbal insults or provocation. These forms of stimuli cannot be ranked, because the magnitude for the first form might be the amount of force used as related to the physical perception of pain by Ego. The second may be related to a typology of gestures as related to the magnitude of obscenity or offensiveness as defined in a given culture. The third, verbal provocation, could be ranked not only by the offensive content of the words, but also by their pitch and volume.

The variables which relate to the perception axis are linked to the twisting of incoming perception, so that it better fits Ego's previous normative internalisation.[4] This involves the various defence mechanisms, differentiation techniques and other processes of "explaining-away", which would influence Ego's rational choice.

3. The Escalation

The research model proposes to analyse the different steps of the rational choice of violence-precipitating actions within the context of the interrelationships among the stimuli by Ego, the perception of it by Alter, and Ego's reaction. This model synchronises the various cycles into a continuous chain.

The vertical line represents the objective ranking of stimuli and responses (from neutral to negative) according to the average severity of the provocation they present to individuals in a given representative sample of the population. On this line, the first stimulus at the bottom of the line will be the trigger, and the last response at the top, the violent outbreak.

The model represents the interaction between Ego and Alter. The spiral curve delineates the dyadic process of interaction. Each loop stands for one cycle. Ego perceives the stimulus by Alter, and Ego's response becomes the stimulus for Alter's rational choice in the second cycle, which Alter is supposed to perceive and to which he is supposed to react in turn. In the case of escalation towards violence, the distance between the subjective perception and the objectively ranked stimulus increases with each cycle. For analytical purposes the process should

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[4] Shlomo G. Shoham, *Society and the Absurd* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.; New York: Springers, 1974).

be differentiated into two dimensions, represented in our model by the spiral curve and its shadow. The first dimension, the spiral line itself, is the process of perception of the stimulus. This perception is deepened, interwoven with, and at times is perverted by, the person's background and personality, which constitute the second dimension – the shadow of the line. The outcome of these two dimensions is the definition of the situation which comprises the actor's perception of the stimulus, the various factors which tend to augment or reduce the provocative meaning of the stimulus, and the sensitivities described previously when the actor relates the stimuli to himself. This definition of the situation includes also the individual propensity to react violently as measured by some biological factors, e.g., the amount of alcohol in the individual's blood or a hypoglycemic condition, the degree of anxiety, fear and central nervous system excitation, or other aggressive traits which may be measured by various personality inventories and projective techniques.

The definition, as used here, of the situation is described by MacIver[5] as a process of "dynamic assessment" which includes three stages:

a. A choice between alternatives which is made by the actor, based on his salient values and psychological needs in the given situation;

b. With the decision, certain external factors are selectively rearranged and given subjective significance. This dynamic assessment brings the external world selectively into the subjective realm;

c. Finally all the factors which belong to different orders of reality are determining conscious behaviour and are brought into a single order. The single order is the definition of the situation directing and determining the response of the actor, which closes the cycle.

The responses are also scaled objectively for severity in the same manner in which we have ranked the stimuli. The responses may also be physical, verbal or gesticulative. Their ranking is carried out in relation to their cultural significance and legal severity as determined by the courts. It may be assumed that the stimulus-response relationship could be predicted. Deviations from this

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[5] R. MacIver, *Subjective Meaning in Social Situations*, in: *Sociological Theory*, 2nd ed. L. Coser & B. Rosenberg, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 252-7.

prediction may then be used as a hypothetical indicator for distorted perception and an illusory definition of the situation by the *dramatis personae* of the situational dyad of violence.

4. The Cycles of Interaction in Violence

In this section I shall deal with the situational aspects of violence, suggesting that a violent act may be best explained and understood by regarding the act as an escalating series of stimulus-response interactions between two persons. The basic unit of such a series is the cycle which is described and explained. A scale for measuring the intensity of the cycle may be constructed, and it could be adapted to different cultures. The scale is used to verify the suggested hypotheses that the intensity of stimulus decides the form taken by the interaction, and that the escalation towards violence occurs more rapidly when the provocative intensity is high.

The study of violence as a situational phenomenon contained in an interactional matrix of Alter and Ego has several important connotations. The first, obviously, is to add a new dimension to our understanding of violent acts. Second, it has important legal connotations. If a violent act is accepted as the inevitable result of a series of escalating stimulus-response cycles leading to a "point of no return", the overall importance of *mens rea* and criminal responsibility, as conceived by the criminal law, may be left open to doubt, as the question whether it is Ego or Alter who inflicts the final (legally-defined) violent blow is seen to be solely a result of the structure of the situation. Third, there are preventive connotations. Once the perspective is placed on the situational aspect, the position of contributory factors (such as availability of weapons, use of alcohol, etc.) becomes clear, and preventive policies with regard to these factors may be implemented.

The main hypotheses are that the outbreak of violence is the result of a series of interactions, called cycles, between Ego and Alter. Each cycle consists of stimulus and response, and given favourable circumstances, will effect a new cycle with a higher level of provocation and consequent reaction, until a "point of no return" is reached, after which the eventual eruption of violence is inevitable.

The following points are relevant to the primary description of our premise:

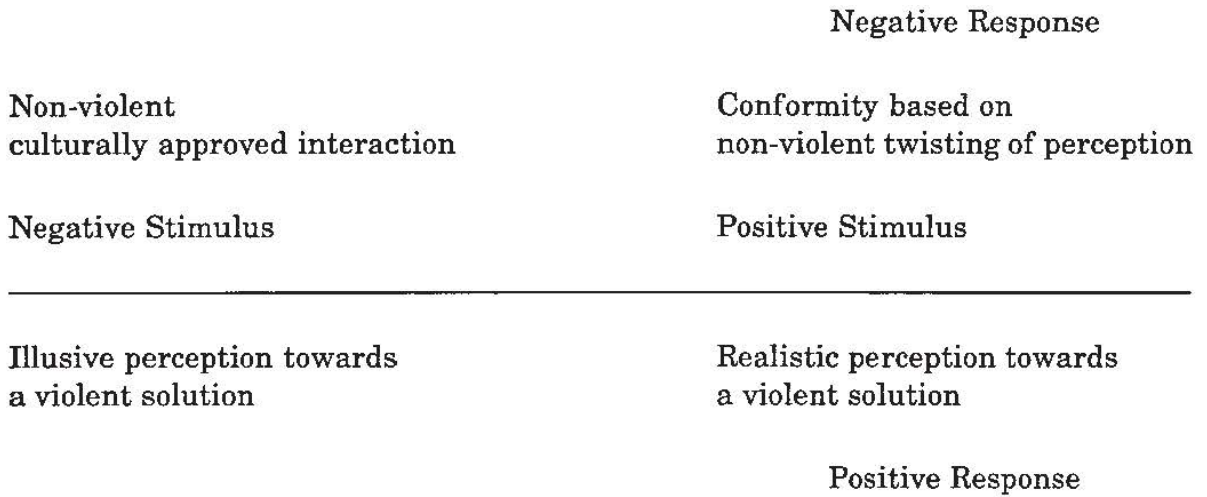   a.   Subjective perception of stimulus: the stimulus may be either

Negative Response

Non-violent
culturally approved interaction

Conformity based on
non-violent twisting of perception

Negative Stimulus

Positive Stimulus

Illusive perception towards
a violent solution

Realistic perception towards
a violent solution

Positive Response

Figure 3

positive (provocative) or negative (non-provocative). The perception may be either realistic or non-realistic.

The manner of perception of the stimulus may affect:

b. corrective techniques, leading either to escalation of violence (in the case where a stimulus is perceived, realistically or non-realistically, as provocative) or away from violence (in the case where the stimulus is perceived, realistically or non-realistically, as non-provocative)[6];

c. form taken by the cycles: in the event of violence, this is seen as a causal chain of interaction between Ego and Alter.

The form of the cycles will be effected to varying degrees by:

d. Content of the cycle: this involves the degree of provocation, objective and perceived, contained in the stimulus. The provocation may take the form of an action, gesture or verbal expression, and may have varying degrees of effect, in the light of specific cultural or personal connotations.

The interactional nature of these four factors, and their mutual effect on the nature of the cycle, can be represented diagramatically, as in figure 3 above.

The study of the actual process of eruption of the violent act does not take into consideration the predisposition to violence as measured

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[6] E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behaviour* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

by biological and personality variables. We feel that the interactional dynamics of violence have sufficient independent processes to warrant their separate treatment.

The study may concentrate on a stimulus-response interaction, and examine the nature of the provocation, the nature of the reaction, and the relationship between the two factors. These three components constitute one cycle, and each cycle acts as stimulus to the subsequent one.

A full-scale study of violence should include not only a study of the escalatory processes leading towards an eruption of violence (that is, verbal communication, gestures, and mutually understood symbols), but also a study of the factors which are linked to the avoidance of violence. The non-violent sequel to a tension laden interaction may be explained using the cognitive dissonance and balance models in social psychology.[7] It is feasible that homeostatic and congruity mechanisms may induce the actors to solve their dispute in a non-violent way. The present study, however, confines itself only to those interactions which escalate towards violence.

Similarly, many violent situations involve more than the two principal actors. Observers, both non-participant and participant, often play a part, even to the extent of an all-out brawl. Our theoretical model, however, involves the conception of violence as a dyadic type of interaction between Ego and Alter, or two groups in a dyadic interrelationship. This interaction takes the form of cycles, and our hypotheses are based on the assumption that the interaction towards violence takes the form of an escalating series of stimulus-response cycles as follows:

a. The nature of the response is in direct relation to both the form and content of the nature of the stimulus, so that the possible number of responses, and hence cycles arising from a specific stimulus, is limited;

b. The intensity of the interaction is inversely proportional to the number of cycles leading towards violence: that is, the lower the intensity of the interaction, the greater the number of cycles leading to violence, and the higher the intensity, the lower the number of cycles leading to violence.

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[7] Roger William Brown, *The Principle of Consistency*, in: *Social Psychology* (New York: Free Press, 1965), chapter 12.

Concluding remarks

This study is only the beginning of the empirical verification of the intricate and vast field of the situational aspects of violence. I have established that the situational interaction of violence may indeed be quantified and measured, and have devised a measuring instrument. The cyclic conception of the escalation towards violence has been shown to be tenable, and we have also demonstrated that the escalation towards violence is related to the perceived intensity of the initial provocation. Finally, I have shown that there is a distinct relationship between the number of cycles, the intensity of the interaction, and the escalation towards violence. When the intensity is high, the number of cycles is less and the duration of the interaction is shorter. Per contra, when the intensity is low, the number of cycles is larger and the duration of interaction longer. We realise that our measures may be crude, and that their application to different cultural settings may involve the design of new scales. However, the first step in the investigation of the situational aspects of violence has been made, and any further contemplated research may do well to take our study as stepping-stone.

As I have shown, the situational aspects of violence may be quantified and predicted and situational crime prevention may be geared towards the aggressor-victim relationship when the violent person is a public official, a public servant or a law enforcement officer. In these cases, the public official and officer are, so to speak, captive audiences and we could train them not to react to violence-precipitating cues by the potential victim. Training programmes may be envisaged for police officers and public officials as well as prison officers, labour exchange personnel, health personnel, especially in geriatric and mental hospitals, as well as social workers in underprivileged areas. In Israel, 35% of violence cases occur within the situational interaction of public officer and a client who becomes a potential violence victim or perpetrator.[8]

The essence of situational crime prevention in our context is to stress different aspects than those that have hitherto been highlighted. First, any threats within a domestic arena must be given full attention by law enforcement agencies, since any threat within the context of the pressure cooker of emotions within the family

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[8] Israeli Ministry of Police Reports, 1995-96.

could lead to and accelerate the slide towards violence and murder. A special unit for domestic relationships should be established in conjunction with women's shelters, and any tell-tale signs of violence-escalating and precipitating behaviour within the family should be monitored. The idea is that any violence-precipitating actions which could lead to other cycles of violence-escalating interaction should be cut by police intervention or removal of one of the participants before the escalation leads to violence. As for the services, some training manuals should be structured and tested which show violence-precipitating actions, gestures, and words. Then serious attention should be given to adjust the verbal and action cues to the cycles of violence and to find ways and means to cut the escalation towards violence and to enhance violence-non-precipitating alternatives. The programmes should, of course, be different for police officers, social workers, school officials, mental care facility personnel, retirement institution personnel, and for the staff of all other total institutions in which patient-worker relationships could lead to violence. It is suggested that the various programmes for situational violence prevention should be adapted to various cultures, since cues, interaction, words and gestures have different meanings and connotations in different cultures.

Shlomo Giora Shoham *is specialised in criminology and criminal law and has lectured and published widely in this field at various universities, including Oxford University, Harvard and the University of Leuven, Belgium.*