

Introduction to:

Collins, R. (2008). Violence: A Micro-Sociological Approach. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Situationist or interactionist view vs. “standard” approaches to violence

Currently within criminological theory, two closely related but distinct alternatives to explaining violence are emerging. These are both more “micro level” than many other intellectual traditions within the field. They are also somewhat different.

One of these is the situationist approach, as exemplified in the work of P-O Wikstrom on situational action theory (SAT).<sup>1</sup> SAT fits within a broader intellectual approach to social behavior called person X environment **interactionism**, a long-standing tradition in personality and social psychology.<sup>2</sup> The key idea here is that behavior seen in a particular situation is a function of the **interaction** between personal characteristics and situational characteristics. If stores are burning down and people are throwing rocks at the police in an urban neighborhood, not everyone is going to be throwing rocks, and not everyone is going to be looting. Using P for person and E for environment or situation this idea can be expressed with the equation:

$$B = f(P \times E)$$

As opposed to

$$B = f(P)$$

Or

$$B = f(E)$$

As you study criminal behavior one thing to **ponder deeply on** is a) as you read each theory where is it coming from on this broad classification issue and b) which types of theory are you most comfortable with and why?

---

<sup>1</sup> Wikstrom, P.-O. (in press). Situational action theory. In B. C. Fisher, F. (Ed.), Encyclopedia of Victimology and Crime Prevention. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This reading is available on the Bb site. You also can see: Lynam, D. R., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E., Wikstrom, P. O. H., Loeber, R., & Novak, S. (2000). The interaction between impulsivity and neighborhood context on offending: The effects of impulsivity are stronger in poorer neighborhoods. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 109(4), 563-574; Wikstrom, P.-O. H., & Butterworth, D. A. (2006). *Adolescent Crime: Individual Differences and Lifestyles*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Endler, N. S., & Magnusson, D. (1976). Toward an Interactional Psychology of Personality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 83(5), 956-974.

The interactionist view, as exemplified by Collins' book, is called interactionist rather than situationist because it is more **temporally dependent**. This means that **the complex and contingent ways that person and environment factors combine to influence behavior unfold in complex ways over time.**<sup>3</sup>

What Collins is doing is suggesting that the influences on behavior combine and alter in complex ways as situations unfold. In short:

$$B = f(P \times E) \dots \Delta \dots \Delta \dots \Delta \dots \Delta \dots \Delta$$

time  $\xrightarrow{\hspace{10em}}$

where  $\Delta$  [greek symbol for "delta"] = a change is taking place

**In short time and how things can shift over time are both critical.**

You also can ask: how *predictable* are these changes over time?

Stated alternatively: if from a theory point of view you say whether or not person A is going to shoot person B five or ten or 15 minutes from now depends on what happened between A & B in the last five minutes or half hour or day, how useful a theory is that?

*You want to pay very close attention to the issue of prediction with Collins' theory.*

Why do we need Collins' theory?

*You also want to pay close attention to his critiques of more standard violence theories.*

We are going to spend a lot of this semester on some of these more "traditional" theories and you want to have a clear understanding of the limits of those theories as he sees them.

You want to be very clear about Collins' critiques of standard violence theory. In what ways, either at the individual or the ecological level, does he find the standard approaches insufficient?

***Make yourself a careful and detailed list of his critiques, and the degree to which you do or do not find each of these critiques compelling.*** Moreover, you want to think about the *general* features of violent situations which Collins' approach can explain but the more traditional ones cannot.

What makes it sociological?

Collins' approach is micro-sociological. You can see why it is micro.

---

<sup>3</sup> For an example of Some interactionist studies around gun incidents see: Wilkinson, D. L., & Fagan, J. (1996). The role of firearms in violence "scripts": The dynamics of gun events among adolescent males. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 59(1), 55-89; Wilkinson, D. L., & Fagan, J. (2001). What we know about gun use among adolescents. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 4(2), 109-132.

Why is it sociological?

To help you out here: one of the broadest and longest running interests of sociologists is in stratification: how are people or places<sup>4</sup> or jobs<sup>5</sup> or institutions ordered relative to one another on status- or prestige-related matters? They have shown conclusively that prestige or socioeconomic status (SES) affects a wide variety of outcomes including health,<sup>6</sup> and many aspects of criminal behavior and how the criminal justice system treats criminals.<sup>7</sup> Donald Black views status asymmetries between offender and victim as a paramount determinant of how criminal justice agencies respond.<sup>8</sup>

What Collins is interested in is how status plays out in interactions – how is it maintained or reversed? When he talks about “*dominating the interaction space*” this is what he is asking about.

In small groups another word for status is dominance, which applies to non-human as well as human groups. We have a lot of studies of the social and spatial tactics that individuals use in groups to maintain a dominant position. This is a huge research tradition spread across work on urban naturally-occurring local groups,<sup>9</sup> human and non-human territorial functioning,<sup>10</sup> and urban sociology broadly.<sup>11</sup>

What Collins is asking us to consider: **in interactions, including things like riots and fights, who comes out on top, and how does this come about, and why?; if violence is part of this process, how is it structured?; and if violence is avoided, how was that possible?**

#### The Dramaturgical perspective<sup>12</sup>

Collins routinely applies a dramaturgical perspective. This draws attention to how people

---

<sup>4</sup> Choldin, H. M., Hanson, C., & Bohrer, R. (1980). Suburban status instability. *American Sociological Review*, 45, 972-983.

<sup>5</sup> Ganzeboom, H. B. G., & Treiman, D. J. (1996). Internationally comparable measures of occupational status for the 1988 International Standard Classification of Occupations. *Social Science Research*, 25, 201-239.

<sup>6</sup> Adler, N. E., Boyce, T., Chesney, M. A., Cohen, S., Folkman, S., Kahn, R. L., et al. (1994). Socioeconomic status and health: The Challenge of the gradient. *American Psychologist*, 49(1), 15-25.

<sup>7</sup> Hagan, J. (1989). *Structural criminology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Black, D. (1980). *The Behavior of Law*. New York: Academic Press.

<sup>9</sup> Suttles, G. D. (1968). *The social order of the slum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, R. B. (1988). *Human territorial functioning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> The “dramaturgical perspective” as defined in Johnson, A.G. (2000) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology : A User's Guide to Sociological Language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Developed primarily by the symbolic INTERACTIONIST Erving GOFFMAN, the dramaturgical perspective is a method that uses a theatrical metaphor of stage, actors, and audience to observe and analyze the intricacies of social INTERACTION. Everyone is at once actor in relation to others as audience and audience in relation to others as actors. Expectations that apply in each situation constitute a social script that actors use to guide or even dictate their performance.

socially construct roles in social situations, the relationships between role playing and status and related outcomes, and distinctions between front stage and back stage behaviors.<sup>13</sup> The dramaturgical perspective is closely linked to another broad framework within sociology called symbolic interactionist theory.<sup>14</sup>

Pay very close attention to his discussion when he gets to domestic violence and he talks about “learning” how to be a victim.

#### Setting the violence problem on its head

Finally, you want to be very clear on how Collins is setting the question of violence on its head.

For him, the fundamental question is “Why is violence so hard?” Be sure you understand how he is separating **violence** from **conflict**.

He is approaching this question given the framework he developed in his previous book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (see “Chronicle” interview on Bboard) where he developed the idea of **psychological entrainment**. People as they interact get “tuned into” each other and by default prefer a solidarity orientation.

---

From the dramaturgical perspective, the SELF is made up of the various parts that people play, and a key goal of social actors is to present their various selves in ways that create and sustain particular impressions, especially favorable ones (known as impression management). This includes protecting the integrity of performances. Since actors and audiences are mutually dependent on one another, it is in everyone's interest to support and protect the performances of all those involved. This is an effort that brings into play various techniques and devices. When we show signs of embarrassment, for example, it serves to remind others that although we may have failed in some aspect of our performance, we are committed to the ROLE and will try to do better in the future.

One of the more interesting questions raised by the dramaturgical perspective is whether the playing of roles implies a lack of authenticity and honesty in social actors. Goffman's position is that there is nothing inherently unreal about the scripts and parts we play, that they in fact reflect real aspects of our complex selves. Roles are real and authentic parts of who we are, not false masks that cover up some deeper self.

<sup>13</sup> The dramaturgical perspective is closely linked with the writings of the late sociologist Erving Goffman Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday; Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. New York: Anchor Doubleday.

<sup>14</sup> The originated with George Herbert Mead *Mind, self, and society*.