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Abstract

In this paper it is proposed that one way of integrating what we know of the sociology of violence into a framework of individual action is to consider violent behaviour from a rational choice perspective. It is argued that conceptualising violence as the outcome of a rational choice or a decision on the part of the offender illuminates the goal directed, instrumental character of violence. A number of studies and perspectives that focus on the rewards of violence are discussed. It is argued that cultural beliefs about anger as well as the instrumentality and acceptability of violence are seen as relevant to explanations of violence at both the aggregate and individual levels. Offenders’ accounts of their use of violence are interpreted in terms of the rational choice approach and the paper concludes with a discussion of historical trends in violence.
Introduction

Violent behaviour reflects not only the individual disposition of the offender but also social and cultural attitudes toward violence. Cross cultural studies show wide variation in levels of criminal violence suggesting the importance of broad cultural variables in explanations of violence\(^1\). Within a particular society violent crime is perpetrated, more often than not, by males from marginalised groups, suggesting the relevance of sub-cultural beliefs and social structure\(^2\). How do cultural and social factors translate to action at the individual level? In this article it is argued that the effect of these factors can best be seen when we start from the position that violence is the outcome of a decision made by an individual. By focusing on the functions of violence (as seen and experienced by the offender) it may be possible to see more clearly how cultural factors, including beliefs about violence, are processed by the offender. This approach can be applied to give a broader perspective to individual acts of violence and also to understanding cultural and historical patterns in violence.

Although many aspects of culture are relevant to violence the focus here will be on attitudes to violence and, in particular, the acceptability of violent acts. An attempt will be made to show how beliefs derived from the dominant culture are integrated into decisions made by individuals to use violence. Offenders’ accounts will be used to illustrate this process. In the final section long term changes in the prevalence of violence will be described and it will be argued that these reflect changes in beliefs held in mainstream society about the utility of violence.

Social and emotional components of violence

A major challenge for those theorising on violence has been to try and integrate into explanations of violence what we know of the distribution of violence within a society (more common in males and in lower social classes) and the “...immense and enduring differences among societies in their levels and types of violence” (Gartner, 1995, p.16). Throughout the criminological literature there has also been an attempt to show how various sociological elements affect individual acts of violence\(^3\). The emphasis on cross level (society-individual) integration in regard to violence is often associated with Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s (1967) attempt at an integrated theory in “The subculture of violence” which covered analyses of violence from the biological and psychiatric to the anthropological. Continuing this tradition, Bernard (1990) developed an application of Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s theory to account for the high
perceptions of violence amongst the “truly disadvantaged”⁴. The key, according to Bernard (drawing on the work of Averill, 1982), is how the “rules of anger” are formed in the group. These rules instruct group members that in certain situations or interactions they “should” be angry. Anger, in this view, is largely a product of cultural beliefs and has meaning only within its particular social context. Rules developed in a specific group or culture also instruct members as to the appropriate response to an experience of anger.

Anger contains within it, as Bernard argues, the belief that someone else has done something wrong in terms of the person getting angry and that this person is to blame and should be punished. The degree to which not only cognition, but also emotion, is influenced by culture is central to Bernard’s explanation of how marginalised groups produce higher levels of violence⁵. In addition to determining anger, cultural rules also dictate the level and type of “punishment”, or violence, that must be delivered to the target to satisfy the needs of the person who is angered.

Given the relationship between culture and emotion it is possible that differences between cultures in levels of violence may reflect cultural differences in the acceptability of anger which may be indicated by the prevalence of attitudes of generalised hostility and defensiveness. These attitudes lead to, and are exacerbated by, social isolation. For example, as Bernard (1990) points out, a common view in the south of the United States is to see the social and political world as hostile and the individual as a passive victim of sinister forces⁶.

A similar attitude of defensiveness is also commonly observed in violent offenders. For example, Katz (1988), Athens (1980) and Toch (1969), amongst others, note that violence is usually preceded by the offender’s perception of a significant and immediate threat. Similarly, Felson and colleagues (Felson, 1978; Felson, 1982; Felson & Steadman, 1983) argue that violence is often preceded by a perceived slight or attack on character. This leads to an interaction characterised by attempts to maintain a favourable image (or “face”) in the situation. In this attempt to maintain a positive image, retaliation in the form of violence is often judged as necessary. For both violent offenders and violent cultures, therefore, it seems that a central issue is the management of the social self, and the need to defend honour or reputation through the use of violence⁷.

Averill (1982) also found in his study that a perception that the insult or status challenge is unjustified is a central part of the process of developing anger and angry thoughts. A tendency to perceive oneself as being the victim of injustice and others as malevolent is often noted as a characteristic of violent offenders (e.g. Toch, 1969; Athens, 1980; Dodge et. al. 1990)⁸. This perception is reflected in a sensitivity to social challenges (e.g. “What are you looking at!?”). In this self-
sensitive state any comment, action or omission may then be construed as an attempt to humiliate. A number of writers (e.g. Bernard, 1990; Katz, 1988) have attributed this hyper-sensitivity to slights as reflective of the perpetrator’s vulnerable state of self esteem. As Katz (1988) notes, such challenges are sometimes sought out to provide a means of enhancing self esteem. Self esteem may be related to social structure in a number of ways. An experience of marginalisation, losing or exclusion may lead to responses to gain status in non-legitimate ways, one of which is through the use of violence. If this is true one of the prime predictors of the level of violence should be economic inequality, and this is precisely what is observed in many studies of cross national comparisons of violence.9

The focus on self esteem brings the analysis closer to the point made by psychoanalytic writers, such as Zulueta (1993), and others that violence represents a defensive reaction to hurt. For example, Scheff and Retzinger (1991), argue that destructive aggression is an expression of rage which in turn represents a defensive reaction to the shame. Support for this view can be found in studies which document the violence enhancing effect of an audience10. For example, Gilbert (1994, p. 36) notes:

This shame induced rage seems to be increased if a put-down or loss of status occurs in front of an audience, with consequent damage to the person’s reputation, and also if strong needs for closeness are at stake. Psychoanalysts call such experiences narcissistic rage because of the effects of the loss on self-esteem... In my clinical experience there is nearly always a ruminative component to such violence, with preoccupation of injury done to the self, injustice and fantasies of revenge. These are also the hallmarks of shame.

Oliver (1994, p. 102) agrees that the role of the audience is crucial in elevating status concerns and making violence more likely even though the perpetrators themselves may be oblivious of the influence of the crowd:

One of the major questions that I wanted to answer in the study was, How do face-saving or self-image defending concerns influence decision-making in interpersonal transactions leading to violent confrontations between black males in bars and bar settings? Nearly all of the respondents reported that when the various incidents in which they were involved were unfolding, they were aware of “the crowd” observing them. Most of them, however, denied that their actions in the situation were motivated by a desire to look good in front of the crowd.
As noted earlier, violence is often preceded by the experience of a threat to status in the perpetrator and the belief that violence is not only justified but necessary. Authors in this area (e.g. Katz, 1988; Howells, 1987; Toch, 1969) describe offenders’ accounts which reflect the belief that unless a forceful rebuttal is given to perceived affronts the process of humiliation will be complete and it will be harder in the future to maintain the respect of others.

Given the centrality of social status issues it is not possible to provide a socio-emotional account of violence without also looking at how the social self is constructed. The individual’s construction of the self emerges as a key psychological component mediating social and emotional realities and action (such as violence). The position of the self in society is determined to a large extent by the social bond and power relations in society. It is necessary, therefore, to examine how social power relations relate to the self and to violence.

In the west, vertical power structures award some men status at the cost of others. As Gilbert (1994) argues, most males can claim some rank by virtue of those below them and this is sufficient to ensure that they have some “stake in conformity” and therefore that violence is perceived as non-functional. At the lower levels of the social structure the costs of conformity may be seen as excessively high compared to the rewards. Further, the personal rewards of violence, especially reputation enhancement, would appear to be most powerful at adolescence and become less profitable as the individual gets older.\(^\text{11}\)

The issue of power is inextricably linked to that of violence. However, contrary to some popular views, violence is not an expression of the existence of power but its absence. A person who experiences actual power presumably would not feel a need to use physical force against another. Campbell (1993, p. 141) expresses this view when she argues that “.. actual violence by men against women is a line of last resort used only when power is under threat”. This also is Machiavelli’s understanding of the relationship between power and violence. Machiavelli argued that power was indicated more by an ability to secure consent rather than through any direct use of force. However, for those at the margins of society, lack of social power may be resolved to some extent through direct displays of forceful coercion (violence).

Tedeschi and Felson (1994), Felson (1994) and Gilbert (1994) further develop the view that violence best be understood as a means of coercion. This view emphasises that violence is used to exert control or achieve some goal. In explaining their own use of violence offenders may choose to focus on these goals and dismiss the violence used as a “detail”. In this way the usefulness of the act of violence is forgotten but the goals are achieved. For this reason
offenders may have an interest in depicting their violence as a natural, expressive, inevitable, spontaneous or automatic ("It just happens!").

Although social structure may influence the value of rewards of violence it may also lead to an increased propensity to violence in another way. Bernard (1990) argues that individuals who are truly disadvantaged in social power relations are likely to experience frequent intense arousal increases (frustration) leading to a generalised tendency to "angry" aggression. Bernard argues that social disadvantage maximises the tendency amongst individuals to "over-perceive" threats and conclude that a violent response is needed. Bernard draws on the work of Averill (1982) who has shown that angry people are more likely to perceive others’ actions as threatening. Anger, therefore, may increase the likelihood of violence in two ways: firstly by increasing the excitation necessary for action, and secondly by expanding the tendency to see aggression in others. The predominance of intra-class and intra-racial violence amongst the truly disadvantaged is seen by Bernard (1990) to be the result of indiscriminate means of dealing with generalised frustration experienced by members of this group.

It is important to clarify that Bernard’s thesis depends on the notion of relative disadvantage and not some notion of “absolute” poverty; obviously people can function harmoniously and peacefully in very adverse physical conditions. However, within any system, those who are “marginalised” or seen as “unimportant” and “failing” will have their aspiration for status and meaning thwarted and it is this factor that is most relevant to theories of violence.

Although general cultural and social factors affect the prevalence of violence most individuals in poor marginalised areas, even within violence-prone cultures, do not display criminal violence. A number of studies have shown how individual variables can influence the likelihood of violence although most of these factors are also influenced by culture in a number of ways, particularly through early family socialisation (Blackburn, 1993a; Widom, 1995).12

When we turn to demographic differences in violence the single most important variable is gender. Not only are males within western society much more likely to engage in violence, but the degree of patriarchy of a society has also been shown to be related to the level of violence.13 One reason for this, Gilbert (1994) argues, is that male dominated social structures trivialise and devalue pro-social sentiments and judge activities such as caring, nurturing and empathy as antithetical to the main (masculine) interests in competition, exploitation and "winning". Campbell (1993), Messerschmidt (1987) and others discuss how masculinity and patriarchy influence individual and group values and decisions, for example, by endorsing beliefs in competition and the naturalness of aggression. However, perhaps most importantly in terms of the prevalence of
violence, culture establishes expectations about the use and acceptability of violence.

**Culture and the acceptability of violence**

Averill (1982) has argued that cultural imperatives dictate not only when it is appropriate to be angry but also how to act when one is angry. Some cultures endorse violence as an understandable, if not appropriate, response to anger while others do not. Violence as a normal, legitimate or understandable response to an experience of anger is firstly and most importantly learned in family. Other environments, particularly early peer groups and the culture the child grows up in, also have a large influence. Once established in a vocabulary of expression violence can be applied in a more dispassionate way to serve other purposes.

Attitudes to displays of violence may help explain cross cultural and gender differences in levels of violence. In regard to gender, explanations of violence that rely too heavily on the effect of emotions like shame, anger and humiliation ignore the fact that these emotions are also experienced by women. Frost and Averill (1982) found (on the basis of diary accounts) that women experience anger as frequently and as intensively as men do. Gender differences in violence, therefore, likely reflect differences in socialisation and cultural expectations.\(^{14}\)

Campbell (1993) argues that the central dynamic in understanding the higher prevalence of male violence is that men use violence to take control, while women’s use of violence is characterised by a loss of control. For Campbell, explanations that stress the functionality or instrumentality of aggression and violence (because they achieve either material or social goals), reflect characteristically male beliefs about violence. Acceptance of this belief then permits, and to some extent excuses, the use of violence (because it is then “reasonable”, “rational” or “understandable”). Campbell argues that in traditionally female worlds, where the tasks are centred around support and caring, violence and aggression are non-functional and thus women develop a belief that violence is non-productive. To support this view, Campbell and Muncer (1994) report on the findings of a study they conducted which indicated that male and female nurses and males in other “caring” occupations viewed violence as non-functional and both men and women in the army held more instrumental views of aggression.

If violence is seen as unacceptable in a particular culture or group (as for example, in certain religious or pacifist groups) then the use of violence to
achieve any goal (except perhaps physical self defence) is offensive. In contrast, the tendency of perpetrators to focus on the complaint which led to them getting angry, rather than the violence itself can be, as noted earlier, a way of denying responsibility for the use of violence. Offenders may find more or less support in the courts and mainstream society in such attempts to justify or excuse the violence.\textsuperscript{15}

The value of a decision making model

The preceding discussion considered how a number of factors operating at the sociological level may translate to the individual level. It has been suggested that violence can be viewed as “rational” behaviour in the sense that some calculation about costs and benefits is being made and it has been adopted as a solution to a problem by the perpetrator.\textsuperscript{16} It is important to note here that the notion of rationality does not imply any value in regard to the quality or objectivity of the decision making. Because of the misunderstandings often associated with the term “rationality” some authors (e.g Shover and Honaker, 1992) talk of “bounded” rationality implying that decision making needs to be considered very much in terms of the offender’s world view.\textsuperscript{17}

The notion of violence as being the result of a rational choice may seem wrong to those who see violence as the result of a spontaneous emotion or “impulse”. The idea of impulsive violence is reflected in the popular distinction between expressive (hostile) violence and instrumental violence. The notion of expressive violence suggests that this type of violence represents an explosion of internal feelings. However, we have already noted that there are many functions that violence may serve for the perpetrator, principally in relation to self esteem and social status. It is not surprising, therefore, that the notion of expressive violence has been questioned. Indeed problems with this view of violence were raised more than 20 years ago when Bandura (1973) noted that the distinction between instrumental and expressive violence is concerned only with the nature of the goals of the offender and not the instrumentality of the aggression. Furthermore, Campbell and Muncer (1994) point out that rather than being senseless much of what appears to be “gratuitous” violence is, in fact, highly functional.\textsuperscript{18}

Those studying the phenomenology of violence usually seek to describe the rationale or the understanding that the offender employs to guide the violent action, and the specific point in their thinking where the decision to attack is taken. For example, Oliver (1994, p. 105), notes “the decision to use violence against another individual is a significant juncture of the violence process”. Other analyses of violence are similarly drawn to understand violence in terms
of a decision making process. For example, Blackburn (1993b, p. 99) describes aggression as problem solving behaviour. This position is put succinctly by Felson (1994, p. 104):

> In contrast to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, people only get angry when they blame someone for frustrating or aversive events. While they may behave impulsively in the sense that they fail to consider long-range consequences (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), their behaviour is still the consequence of a decision-making process.

Given the personal benefits of violence described earlier, it is useful to consider the decision to use violence as the result of an assessment by the perpetrator that the costs of the violence are outweighed by the benefits. In this calculation dominant cultural attitudes about violence may play a significant role. For example, cultures which judge violence as a powerful and definitive response to “insult” and as a good way of restoring “honour” will support individual decisions to use violence. What is conveyed by the mainstream belief is the base premise that violence is acceptable under “intolerable” circumstances. Once again it is important to stress that the decision making process is not assumed to be necessarily logical, linear or accompanied by any degree of consciousness on the part of the decision maker. However, it is assumed to be rational in terms of making sense within the actor’s own set of values and perspectives.

Three aspects of belief and perception emerge as relevant to understanding the perpetration of violence. First, there is a belief system that sets up conditions for the experience of threat to the self. This belief system, it is argued, is associated with individualism, competitiveness and social isolation. Second, there is the perception that one is under pressure to meet the expectations of the group or larger society regarding dominance or ascendancy. This is an important point because, as Gilbert (1994) notes, it is not necessarily the social goals or interests of violent men (e.g. for ascendancy) that are at issue, it is their inability to meet their goals in culturally acceptable ways. This helps explain why, even within a culture that has high levels of violence, most men are not violent. Third, independent of the previous two beliefs, is an assessment that violence is an appropriate, or necessary, means of achieving the required dominance. Obviously such a decision would typically be made at a pre-conscious level. However, it is important to acknowledge that this decision precedes the violent act.

It is important to once again stress that distortions and other aspects of underlying belief system may result in decisions to use of violence which may appear to an outside observer to be quite dysfunctional and thus irrational. A good example of this relates to domestic homicide. Katz (1988) explains how
many cases of domestic homicide build on certain beliefs that develop within the perpetrator (or the couple) and often terminate a series of confrontation spirals building over many years. Katz describes some of the common thought patterns developed by offenders that guide their action in killing their partner. These include the idea that the principle being defended is greater than the consequences to either party. The killer may be guided by beliefs (usually unarticulated) that in serving this principle the killing is "righteous" and thus represents a form of "sacrifice". The killer may also see the confrontation in such a highly charged way that it comes to represent for him a "last stand" in terms of his "honour" or self respect. These common "scripts" help explain the personal underlying beliefs of offenders that are used to justify the killing. Against these highly personal rationales, the prospect of detection, imprisonment or even execution, are weighed as less important.

**Offenders' views of violence**

From the previous discussion the question is not how offenders "excuse" violence, but rather how violence comes to be seen as the right response in a particular circumstance. The decision to use violence must be seen as incorporating the values, perceptions and judgements of the offender at the moment of the violence. The term "violence" itself contains within it an approbation of unacceptability and is, therefore, a value laden term. Depending on how a perpetrator perceives the situation, he or she may not even classify his or her actions as "violent". At the time it is perpetrated, the offender usually does not see his or her behaviour as "wrong" or "bad" but as the best or, most appropriate, response possible. To understand how this decision is arrived at we need to consider the belief structure of the individual and the culture.

Offenders justify or explain their use of violence in many ways. Mostly these relate to circumstances or conditions which, in the offender's view, justify or even demand, the use of violence. Offenders' own accounts of violence can be studied to discover how they perceived and/or represent the situation in which they became violent. Some of the common themes to emerge in these accounts are that violence is necessary to achieve justice, material goals, status, or to support a friend. The decision to be violent may not be experienced by perpetrators as a choice but as a "compulsion" or requirement given their commitment to certain values and principles. For example, Black (1983) has pointed out that offenders sometimes feel compelled to use violence to achieve what they perceive as justice.

In the discussion below I will draw on interviews with offenders concerning the use of violence in the course of a property crime (Indermaur, 1995a). In most of
the 123 accounts studied the violence used was considered reasonable, necessary or justified by the offenders. Offenders largely understood, justified and/or explained their own use of violence in terms of the instrumental functions of the violence. The following examples illustrate this explanation. In all cases cited in this section the offenders considered that the violence used was necessary or justified.

I told the bloke to get on the floor. But he wouldn't listen and he was trying to cover up the cash box that was underneath the counter and so he got down on his knees and he wouldn’t lie face down on the floor with his hands behind his back. So I got him up and I just hit him around the jaw and throat area, and got him down and once he was down I just took the money away.

When I was about 13 or 14 a couple of mates and myself were at a pub and we were trying to steal a car. The bloke come out and he wouldn’t give us his car so we battered him and put him in the boot of his car.

The instrumental use of force was often not considered by offenders to be “violence”, that is, to fall within their definition of what constitutes violent behaviour. The term “violence” was generally reserved for those cases of physical attack that were very severe, sustained and mounted without provocation or motive. While the term “violence” has a universal pejorative connotation the more important issue is whether certain types of behaviour in certain circumstances are classified as “violence”. As suggested above, many offenders may agree that violence is wrong, but they also argue that their behaviour was not violence or was “excusable”, “understandable” or “permissible” violence.

Once learned as a functional response, violence can easily be seen as appropriate in meeting the perpetrator’s social (power) goals. The role of honour and status in understanding male violence emerges frequently. For example, it is often noted as a major factor contributing to inter-male violence, which is the major category of homicide in Australia, and also plays a major role in violence against women (see Wilson, Johnson and Daly, 1995). Even in the course of a property crime where one might expect offenders to see clearly that they are in the position of abusing the rights of the victim, it appeared that much violence is actually precipitated by a feeling of anger towards the victim. This “righteous violence” can be precipitated in a number of ways. For example, in the following case the fact that the offender was in a gang gave him a sense of omnipotence and the actions of a lone victim (car owner) in confronting the gang was not seen as a foolish and desperate act by the victim, but rather as an act of defiance - as a direct affront to the gang’s power, and by association, its honour:
It made us angry that he thought he could stop us - he came up to us - but he could see there was a big mob of us.

Although violence can be seen as functional or rational, many offenders reported experiencing anger, even when engaging in what would be traditionally classed as instrumental violence. The question arises as to whether any violence is “anger free” and also whether anger provides the emotional basis for violence and thus “enables” it. As Averill (1982) pointed out, aggressive responses are often interpreted by their authors as resulting from anger, which can then be used as a justification for immediate and later aggression.

It is important to remain critical of first person accounts, particularly concerning explanations of socially disapproved behaviour. However, when offenders are asked to explain their violence the way the violence is justified and described may itself serve as a useful subject for analysis in understanding how decisions to use violence are made. It is reasonable to suspect that there will be some relation between the explanations chosen or favoured by offenders in accounting for the violence after the event and the kind of rationale that excuses it before the event.

It may be that initially the offender is unaware of what thoughts and feelings preceded the violence and post hoc rationalisations help in building up a script for the use of violence in the future. Offenders’ explanations of violence can, therefore, themselves become the focus of legitimate study as they point to the belief structure that underlies violent action. This then takes us back to the relation between mainstream attitudes and the actions of the violent offender, because, as Matza (1964) argues, offenders generally explain their behaviour in terms of conventional value structures wherever possible.

**Historical changes in attitudes to violence**

The central argument of this article is that violence should be considered to be the outcome of a decision made by an individual that incorporates dominant cultural beliefs. In this last section it will be argued that this approach also helps in understanding historical patterns of violence. In particular, it is argued that how acts of violence are depicted, regarded and dealt with in a society is relevant to subsequent decisions by individuals to use violence. Thus where violence is regarded as a necessary means to an end, this belief in the instrumentality of violence will be adopted into the thinking of individuals. This position is reflected in those theories that focus on the way society legitimises violence. For example, Straus (1991), relates the use of corporal punishment by
parents to violence in society in his “cultural spillover” theory. Similarly, Gartner (1990) relies on cultural differences in cultural legitimisation of violence to explain cross national differences in levels of violence.

Historical analyses complement the earlier discussion on the relationship between social attitudes to violence and violent crime. Although there is a widespread belief that violence in society is increasing it is now well established from a number of authoritative reviews of the evidence that this is largely untrue (e.g. Gurr, 1989; Franke, 1994; Beattie, 1984; Zehr, 1976). According to a number of historians the greater prevalence in past centuries of acts that we now label “violence” was accompanied (and presumably facilitated) by the widespread acceptance of the use of violence in interpersonal relations.

The following quotations from Garland (1991) illustrate the now widely accepted understanding of the history of violence and attitudes to violence:

The argument is that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in a society where the level of public safety was low, where individuals were usually armed and quick to anger, and where traces of feudal warrior-ethos and codes of honour still held sway, there was no general or deep seated repugnance in the face of violence. (p. 226)

From the early seventeenth century onwards, in a process that would last for several centuries, the sensibilities and social relations tolerating violence began to slowly change. A fundamental change of attitudes seems to have occurred in The Netherlands and elsewhere by about the middle of the eighteenth century, and after 1800 the shift accelerated to form what is recognisably our own sensibility towards violence, suffering and the fate of others. (p. 227)

The major writer who theorised on changing sensitivities to violence in Western Europe was Norbet Elias (1978) who described changes in tolerance of violence and aggressiveness since the middle ages. Elias argued that as a growing sensitivity to violence in the courtly classes spread to mainstream society it resulted in less tolerance for violence whether committed between individuals or by the state in the form of torture and physical punishments.

It is this growing sensitisation to violence, according to Gurr (1989), one of the leading scholars on long term crime rates, that explains the long term decline in the level of violence in Western Europe. The desensitisation thesis has also been
used to explain the observation that violent crime is higher in the period just following a war (Archer and Gartner, 1984).

There have been a number of explanations of why and how sensibility to violence developed since the middle ages (the most notable being Elias's). It is likely that aspects of the changing social structure, the development of state power and increasing population and urbanisation made older patterns of interpersonal behaviour, including the frequent use of violence, untenable. Social attitudes and prohibitions on the use of violence, therefore, needed to develop for quite practical reasons, apart from any possible evolution of consciousness.

An increasing sensitisation toward violence is reflected to some extent in an examination of changes in crime seriousness ratings in the United States. An analysis of changing crime seriousness judgements over 50 years by Krus, Sherman and Krus (1977) revealed that some offences involving violence were judged more serious in 1976 than in 1966 or 1927\textsuperscript{23}. For example, rape was judged as more serious than homicide in 1926 but not in 1966 or 1976. The most common violent offence, assault, increased its seriousness ranking from 1927 to 1966 and then again between 1966 and 1976. The offence occupied the 11th place in 1926 (judged as less serious than counterfeiting). By 1966 assault had moved up to fifth place (now more serious than abortion) and by 1976 it had assumed the fourth position, only homicide, rape and kidnapping being judged as more serious.

The historical analyses suggest that sensitisation to violence and a reduced tolerance for violence in the mainstream has resulted in a reduced prevalence of interpersonal violence. Sensitisation may affect actual prevalence by affecting the implicit calculation of costs and benefits made by the potential perpetrator. The relative costs of violence in war or in a society where violence is widespread, tolerated and unsanctioned will necessarily be lower than one where this is not the case. Violence also becomes less likely as inhibitions to violence affect the decision making of parents and teachers in regard to their use of violence against children. In this way reduced acceptance of corporal punishment over the last two or three decades in countries such as Australia should lead to the further erosion of the legitimacy of violence as should reforms to sentencing that reinforce the seriousness of violence as compared to other offences. These reforms in sentencing appear to largely follow, rather than lead, public opinion (Indermaur, 1987) suggesting a deepening sensitisation to violence in the community.

Attempts to reduce the acceptability of violence can be seen as part of a process to excise violent actions from both private and public life. For example,
campaigns on domestic violence which encourage more women to define the use of physical force as violence and as a crime can be seen as part of this effort. However, displays of male violence remain widely accepted and, one must assume, attractive as they form a large part of our entertainment. What is perhaps most contentious is the question of how physical violence reflects the implicit values embraced by a society. For example, according our social values it is not the goal of the offender (the desire for ascendancy) that is the problem but the means by which that goal is achieved. It could be argued that instances where ascendancy is achieved by breaking or bending the rules or by exploiting others conveys a message to potential offenders that it is the ends, and not the means, that are important.

This article has touched on some of the issues that are of concern to those seeking to explain violence in our society today. The approach taken has sought to bring together what we know of violence at broad national and cross cultural levels with how violence actually occurs in the street or in the home. The two central factors related to the facilitation of violence are the acceptability of violence (both in general terms and as a means of resolving interpersonal problems) and social structure, particularly inequality. It is suggested that the effect of these factors is manifest in the decision of the offender to use violence. Attitudes toward violence and its acceptability help explain gender differences, historical trends and the intergenerational transmission of violence. Social structures and policies that marginalise and exclude are seen as providing fertile ground for aggression and violence. This is because individuals in the marginalised groups will experience the hurt associated with social rejection and will respond in an undifferentiated ways in their struggle to reclaim status. The social structures we accept and endorse profoundly reflects our beliefs about human nature. In particular, acceptance of social inequality may be an expression of a belief in the value or necessity of coercion, which, some would argue is a form of violence.

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1 Some recent summaries of the findings of cross cultural studies are contained in Ember and Ember (1993), Gartner (1995) and Archer and Mc Daniel (1995).

2 The higher prevalence of violence amongst disadvantaged groups is well documented in criminology. Recent Australian studies include Devery (1991) and Ferrante et al. (1996).

3 For a full discussion of the split between explanations that focus on broad social and cultural factors (macro level) and those that focus on the individual, psychological factors (micro level) and the attempts to integrate these levels see Alexander et al. (1987).

4 The term “truly disadvantaged” derives from Wilson’s (1987) analysis of the underclass in the United States. The “truly disadvantaged” are considered to be a specific group suffering multiple social and economic deprivations and restraints.

5 The relationship between social structures and emotion is discussed in a number of theories. For example, Scheff and Retzinger (1991) note: “... pride and shame are intimately connected with the structure and process of social bonds. We propose that these emotions are facets of social relationships. This proposal, we argue, provides a way of integrating psychological and sociological analysis, of connecting momentary personal events with social structure” (p. 19). See also Harre (1986) on the social construction of emotions.

6 The particular violence enhancing quality of the “southern culture of honour” is discussed by Cohen and Nisbett (1994), Cohen et al. (1996) and Nisbett and Cohen (1996).

7 The “self” as a social construction is a central variable in symbolic interactionist accounts of violence (see especially, Athens, 1980) and derives from earlier articulations of Mead (1934). The presentation of the self and problems
associated with this as they relate to shame and anger are discussed by Scheff (1988).

8 This tendency is not restricted to violent offenders. The belief amongst offenders in general, particularly juvenile offenders, in being victimized, and therefore justified to offend, is discussed in Matza (1964), Krohn and Stratton (1980) and Indermaur (1996a).

9 The relationship between inequality and violence is observed in numerous studies (e.g. Archer and Gartner, 1984; Braithwaite and Braithwaite (1980); Gartner, 1990, 1995).

10 For example, Morrison (1993) compared the beliefs of 79 pairs of victims and offenders of (the same) violent incidents regarding the influence of peers on the expression of violence by the offender. Although victims saw the presence of others as very significant, offenders dismissed their importance. Only 26% of the pairs agreed about the influence of peers on the offender’s behaviour. Thus although victims could see how an audience amplifies the status issues offenders could not. As Morrison (1993, p. 28) explains: “The crux of this disagreement lay in the significance attached to the presence of others. Victims attributed a great deal of significance to them whilst offenders disputed their relevance.”

11 The relative value of violence is a function of a number of factors. Some of these have been discussed in the literature, for example, Daly and Wilson (1994) discuss the evolutionary advantages for young men in valuing violence. Other criminological theories take a more conservative view and simply note that as the individual acquires a range of social assets with age the costs of violence increase.

12 Cultural attitudes can have a large affect through child rearing practices, a point often raised by the psychoanalytic writers and also cultural spillover theory (Straus, 1991). Ember and Ember (1993) and Zulueta (1993) provide summaries of the studies that have looked at the links between child raising and patterns of violence. Probably the most relevant individual variable in understanding crime and violence is an individual’s degree of self control. Piquero and Tibbetts (1996) have proposed a model combing this factor into a model of offending based on rational choice.
Some of the studies that point out the relationship between gender inequality and violence are Sanday (1981) and Levinson (1989). Also Otterbein (1979) provides evidence that cultures dominated by "fraternal interest groups" have higher levels of rape. In their important study on rape in the United States, Baron and Straus (1989) present considerable evidence for a model that combines attitudes toward violence (principally measured by the extent of legitimate violence) and gender inequality.

There are also more fundamental differences which facilitate men's choice to use violence (as discussed recently by Felson, 1996): it is much more likely to be successful. In this sense gender socialisation may be the result of, and not the cause of, beliefs regarding the functionality of violence. For example, Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Kaukiainen (1992) show that girls and adults learn strategies to deal with their aggressiveness which are both indirect and non-physical and, therefore, the key difference is not in aggressiveness but in the form that it is expressed.

See Indermaur (1996a) for a discussion of this point.

This is the position put by Felson (1993) and others. For a good discussion of the rational choice position as well as some of the objections to this conceptualisation see Cornish (1994).

Shover and Honaker (1992) argued that the lifestyle lived by many offenders generates a bounded rationality which values the immediate very highly over the distant and this leads to a heavy discounting of the risks of crime.

For a fuller discussion of the problems with the distinction between hostile and instrumental violence and also the concept of "recreational" or "gratuitous" violence see Indermaur, 1995a (chapter 5).

For example Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) present a model for criminal decision making that relies on the development of "templates" or pre-coded action patterns. Social learning theory models would suggest that habitual patterns of response would be relied on in many situations, and this raises the question as to whether a conditioned response can be considered to be a choice or decision (see Akers, 1990). However, the fact that control on the use of violence is routinely exerted when the outcomes are sufficiently noxious again points to an understanding built on decision making or choice.

The justifications are often discussed as techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957) or disengagement of self deterring consequences (Bandura,
but also they can be thought of as positive social goals as described by Felson (1993) and Black (1983).

Wilson, Johnson and Daly (1995) argue that male violence against their female partners is a function of sexual proprietariness and that such violence is used purposefully as a means of coercion. On the dynamics of inter-male conflict see Polk (1994) and Luckenbill (1977).

The studies cited here discuss the historical pattern in Western Europe or North America. For an analysis of the trends in violence in Australia see Grabosky (1977), Lancaster (1964), Krupinski and Emerson (1977) and Indermaur (1995b, 1996b). The Australian studies come to the same conclusion as do those based on the situation in Western Europe and North America: that violence from the nineteenth to the twentieth century has been on the decline.

The technique used in all studies involved presenting university students with paired comparisons of offences and asking them to judge which was the more serious. From these paired comparisons a scale of offence seriousness was constructed.