Interpersonal conflict resolution among college students at a university in the American South was examined. Situational and cultural factors were investigated in an attempt to explain variations in the use of violence. A factorial survey was used to gauge how students would react to school-related conflict, street crime, confrontation in a leisure setting, and domestic abuse. Results suggested gender differences in participants' likelihood to become upset in disputes; the effects of structural position on aggression were strongest in male-male confrontations. Calls to the police were more likely from male-female confrontations. The results highlight the importance of situational analysis for an improved understanding of violence and the role of formal agencies in dispute processes.

Research on aggression and violence has focused on predictors of why certain individuals are more disposed to violence than others (Baron & Richardson, 1994). The literature consistently shows that most people in the United States who are arrested for murder or aggravated assault are male, that most violent criminal offenders are under 30 years of age, and that more violent crimes are committed by 18-year-old men than by any other group (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). A consequence of this research is that theory and policy have treated violent acts as homogeneous behaviors, thereby overlooking important situational variations in pathways to violence (Kennedy & Forde, 1996).

Tedeschi and Felson (1994) formulated an interactionist theory of aggression, suggesting that people, especially young men, learn the values of toughness and excitement through deviant groups. Violence can be understood as instrumental behavior. Criminological theory suggests that a subculture of honor makes people desire to handle disputes privately, without help from authorities (Katz, 1988). In particular, routine acts bring together potential adversaries, which may lead to increased rates of violence (Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

In a different approach, blocked opportunity theory reveals that violence is used when legitimate means of obtaining goals are limited. Black (1993) argued that people commit crimes in an attempt to achieve informal social control. He suggested that people of low socioeconomic status avoid using the criminal justice system because they do not trust authorities and think they are not believed by them. Therefore, because lower class individuals feel the legal system is unavailable to them, they are likely to engage in acts of self-help, some of which may be violent.

Few empirical studies have addressed the situational dynamics of interpersonal conflict to assess how a routine event escalates into violence (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Kennedy &
Forde, 1996; Luckenbill, 1977). Nonetheless, a situational approach seems necessary to explain the substantial variation in types of violence across social domains (Miethe & Meier, 1994); researchers on violence have increasingly adopted such an approach in their studies of criminal events (Cornish, 1993; Sacco & Kennedy, 1996).

Luckenbill and Doyle (1989) explicitly challenged researchers to examine the relationship between structural position and violence. They summarized previous causation theories by proposing two general explanations for criminal violence: the cultural explanation, which maintains that conflict in society is created by groups that allow criminal behavior, and the structural explanation, which maintains that the unequal distribution of resources begets feelings of hostility and resentment that manifest themselves as crimes. Luckenbill and Doyle suggested that a factorial survey (Rossi & Nock, 1982) allows for a test of the relationship between culture and structure by using individualized responses to specific conflict scenarios. They listed naming, claiming, and aggression (i.e., the use of force) as steps in the escalation of conflict.

Kennedy and Forde (1996) empirically tested the Luckenbill and Doyle model. Using a factorial survey of 2,052 adults drawn from a general population in western Canada, they found that when Canadians were moderately upset with people potentially looking to do harm (harm doers), claims were made in a majority of situations (65%), and respondents reported that they would use force in approximately 15% of the conflicts. In this general population, women were more likely to be upset than men, although men were more likely to make claims and be aggressive. Surprisingly, age and socioeconomic status had small to weak relationships with being upset and aggressive.

The purpose of our study was to test the Luckenbill and Doyle (1989) model by conducting a factorial survey to determine the influence of naming, aggression, and calls to the police in an American college student population. We expected to see a higher use of aggression among this group because they are younger than the general population and thus would be most directly at risk for violence. The results of our study on pathways to violence are exploratory because few empirical studies have examined situational differences in violence.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 229 undergraduate students from introductory criminal justice classes at a university in the southern United States volunteered to participate in our study. Their ages ranged from 17 to 48 years, with an average age of 21.3 years (SD = 4.6). Respondents came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, as seen by their fathers' occupations, which included managers (23%), professionals (17%), salespeople (9%), and laborers (13%). Mothers' occupations included managers (11%), professionals (25%), clerical workers (15%), and homemakers (13%; Nakao & Treas, 1992). Other questions revealed that most respondents were moderate (49%) or conservative (25%) in their political orientations.
Factorial Survey

Our factorial design used four hypothetical scenarios of conflict. Scenarios incorporated school-related conflict, street crime (i.e., robbery), confrontation in a leisure setting (e.g., a club), and public domestic abuse (see Appendix). We used a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design in which each scenario randomly rotated the presentation of the gender, age, and socioeconomic status of the alleged perpetrator as well as the intensity of the conflict.

Dependent Measures

A set of standardized questions repeated after each scenario measured how upset respondents were, whether or not they would legitimate aggression against a potential harmdoer, and whether they would call the police for assistance in dealing with the conflicts. Level of upset ranged from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely upset). Responses to questions regarding the likelihood of the use of aggression and calls to the police were 1 (yes) or 0 (no). Respondents also answered a number of open-ended questions exploring why they would or would not use aggression and why they would or would not call on formal agencies (e.g., the police and lawyers) for assistance in a dispute. These open-ended questions were coded using 12 categories (e.g., the police could do nothing, the incident was too minor, respondents feared retaliation from the offender) taken from the U.S. National Crime Surveys (see Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

Analytic and Control Variables

The survey also included sociodemographic questions about age (measured in years), gender (male = 1; female = 2), and year in college (first-year student to fifth-year student) as well as standardized questions about political orientation and opinions of the criminal justice system. Two additional variables were computed to compare the gender and age of the respondent with the potential harm doer. Same gender was coded as 1 and different gender was coded as 2. Participants were placed into two groups according to age (25 years old or younger and 26 years old or older) for comparison with the descriptors of the age of the potential harm doer (18 vs. 50) in the school, robbery, and club scenarios. Ages of the respondents and harm doers were coded as 1 in the domestic dispute scenario because we assumed that few college students would have large differences in age in comparison with their boyfriends or girlfriends. Same age was coded as 1 and different age was coded as 2.

The participants were tested during a regularly scheduled class meeting. Surveys were distributed to the students, and they took approximately 15 min to complete them. When they completed the surveys, they were debriefed as to the nature and purpose of the study.

We used a pooled regression analysis to estimate the variables that best explained variation in upset, aggression, and calls to police (e.g., if intensity of conflict and gender of perpetrator may be examined as predictors of aggression). Ordinary least squares regression analysis was used for level of upset. We used logistic regression to examine aggression and calls to the police. Deviation coding was used rather than dummy variable
coding in examining situational differences in which codes of 1 and 2 were converted to 1 and -1 (Menard, 1995).

Results

The majority of the participants reported that they would be highly upset if they were placed in a situation of conflict. Analysis revealed that 45% of the respondents would use physical force against a potential harm doer and that 30% would call the police. To check the success of the intensity of conflict, we performed a t test, t(906) = 7.9, p [less than] .001. Results showed that the students were significantly more upset in the high-intensity situation. Chi-squared tests revealed that they would more often use force, $\chi^2(N = 897) = 101.0, p [less than] .001$, and make calls to the police, $\chi^2(1, N = 885) = 26.5, p [less than] .001$, in high-intensity situations. The average level of upset, use of aggression, and calls to police were higher than we expected to find in an American population because the factorial design presented far more high-intensity situations than people would face in everyday life.

Table 1 shows the results of pooled regression and logistic regression analyses in which the independent, analytic, and control variables were entered simultaneously to assess the factors that best explained the reasons why students got upset, when they would legitimate aggression, and when they would call the police. Alpha levels of .05 and .01 were used for significance tests.

The level of upset data were analyzed using regression analysis. Respondents were significantly more likely to be upset when the intensity of the scenario was high, [Beta] = .26, p [less than] .01. The level of upset was significantly higher when the perpetrator was a man, [Beta] = .38, p [less than] .01, and when the perpetrator was of a different gender, [Beta] = -.12, p [less than] .01. There were also situational differences in level of upset; students were significantly less likely to be upset in the school-related scenario, [Beta] = -.34, p [less than] .03, and more likely to be upset in the street-crime scenario, [Beta] = .63, p [less than] .03. Overall, the model explains approximately 20% of the variation in level of upset.

We used logistic regression analysis to estimate the likelihood that students would push back (yes = 3; no = 0) against a potential harm doer during interpersonal conflict. The results showed that the strongest predictors of aggression were higher intensity of conflict, R = .24, p [less than] .01, and higher levels of upset, R = .20, p [less than] .01. There were significant effects of gender on interpersonal conflict, with male students more likely to report that they would use force, R = .34, p [less than] .01, if the perpetrator was male, R = .06, p [less than] .01, and in situations in which the respondent and perpetrator were of the same gender, R = .14, p [less than] .01. Additionally, situational differences in aggressive response revealed that the street-crime scenario would produce more legitimization of aggression, R = .18, p [less than] .01, whereas less aggression would be produced in the bar or club scenario, R = -.06, p [less than] .01.
The likelihood that students would call the police about an interpersonal conflict (yes = 1; no = 0) was assessed by using logistic regression analysis. Table 1 shows that there were direct relationships between calls to the police and aspects of the disputes; calls were more likely to be made to the police in high-intensity disputes, $R = .13$, $p < .01$, in situations in which there were higher levels of upset, $R = .11$, $p < .01$, and when students reported that they would use aggression against the harm doer, $R = .10$, $p < .01$. Demographic factors clearly influenced when students would make calls to the police; female students were much more likely to say they would call the police, $R = -.19$, $p < .01$, and calls would more often be made if the perpetrator was male, $R = .05$, $p < .05$. The age of the respondent was also related to calls to the police; older students were more likely to say they would call the police, $R = .06$, $p < .05$. There were situational differences as well; calls to the police were far more likely to occur in the street-crime scenario, $R = -.32$, $p < .01$, and far less likely in the bar scene, $R = -.21$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Luckenbill and Doyle (1989) originally suggested a study of this type to examine the cultural and structural theories of violence. Given the results of the study by Kennedy and Forde (1996) and our study, it is possible to conclude that interpersonal violence is explained better by situational factors than by structural factors. Regression analysis in both factorial studies showed social class was not a significant influence on the legitimization of aggression. We found higher levels of aggression in our study of American college students than Kennedy and Forde found in their study of a Canadian general population. This finding supports the proposition that the use of violence is greater among younger people, particularly for men in high intensity conflicts when the perpetrator is similar in age and gender. Both studies indicate that aggression is most likely to be used in male-male high-intensity conflicts. The similarity of these findings suggests that this pattern is generalizable to the American population.

What stops people from moving to aggression, and why do some people ask for assistance from formal agencies? Although reasons varied, respondents most often answered that they were acting in self-defense against a perpetrator's aggression or that the perpetrator had no right to touch the respondent. More importantly, when respondents were asked if anything would stop them from using violence, many said nothing or did not respond. Others said they would stop only if they feared being caught by the police, although some said they would stop if they believed the perpetrator had a weapon. These responses give even more reason to conclude that violence is more often the result of situational influences as opposed to structural influences.

American college students said they would report high-intensity incidents to the police to help others; most said they would call the police out of a sense of public duty to prevent what they labeled as a crime from reoccurring. On the other hand, in the domestic abuse scenario, many students said they would not call the police, even in situations in which a physical assault took place (i.e., a high-intensity conflict). The most common reason that they would not report these disputes was that these disputes were too personal. Clearly,
even when force is used in relationship situations, people still have difficulty defining domestic abuse as a crime.

Overall, the most common reason that students said they would not report conflict was that the situation was not important enough. This finding is similar to that of the National Crime Victimization Surveys in which people reported on actual crimes (see Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). These results point to the need to determine why some people see high-intensity conflicts and serious crimes as insignificant events.

Kennedy (1988) suggested that many people see some offenses as insignificant because some conflicts are actually better solved by citizens or groups other than the police. He found that people often achieve resolution of conflicts by using their own resources. Yet, as Kennedy points out, it is imperative to distinguish the conflicts that can be properly resolved by self-help from those that necessitate police aid. For example, a neighborhood argument may be either avoided or talked out among the parties, whereas in a domestic abuse case, police intervention may be the best way to stop the power imbalance in a relationship.

In sum, the results of our study suggest that researchers and practitioners (including police and lawyers) need to consider their roles in curbing aggression, intervening in situations, and participating in solving disputes. The factorial model suggests that young people consider aggression to be legitimate in a large number of circumstances, thus providing interesting insights into processes that have not been previously studied because of ethical considerations. Clearly, police must use discretion to determine what is best in specific situations, yet they must recognize that people may not want them to be involved in a dispute. Police may face hostility from both the victim and the offender in these situations. Members of the legal system must also recognize that they are called on in only a small number of disputes. Future research should examine actual disputes to confirm the findings of the factorial model.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Scenarios

Experimental conditions were randomly varied across respondents by using a factorial survey method.

School scenario

Suppose you are walking across a field at a public school in late afternoon. The school yard is (practically empty/very crowded). A (male/female), (lower class/wealthy) looking (18/50) year old (yells insulting comments at you/yells insulting comments at you and pushes you) to get you off the field.

Street crime

Next, suppose you are on your way home from a restaurant. You are walking and the street is (practically empty/very crowded). Suddenly, a (lower class/wealthy) looking, (18/50) year old (man/woman) steps out in front of you. The person (tells you/pushes you and tells you) to hand over your money.

Leisure setting

Let's say you are at a club. It is (practically empty/very crowded). You are sitting at a good table when a (male/female), (18/50) year old, (lower class/wealthy) looking stranger walks up to you and (yells at you/shoves you, then yells at you) to sit somewhere else.

Domestic abuse

In this scenario, suppose you and your boyfriend/girlfriend get into a serious argument while out at a (practically empty/very crowded), (inexpensive/upscale) cafe. He/she yells insults at you, then (gets up to leave/hits you so you are badly bruised).