

**Researching Violence: Power, Social Relations and the  
Virtues of the Experimental Method**

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to reclaim and rehabilitate the experimental method as a useful tool for those engaged in violence research. This is no easy task, not least because it will be extremely difficult to persuade violence researchers from across the social sciences to read beyond the opening sentence. Most social scientists see ‘the experiment’ as embracing both an outdated positivism and a naïve realism – stripping away what is important about social relations under the guise of experimental ‘control’. Of course, there is a level at which they are absolutely right. Some experimentalists are clearly unreflexive about their practice. They impose their own categories or assumptions upon data and assume these are shared by research participants. They control the context in which information is generated and then imagine that their findings are universal rather than context specific. Finally, they treat research participants in a manner which fails to respect their experience or contribution to the research process. However, these are not charges which only apply to those who use the experimental method. Social scientists who employ questionnaire or survey methods, or those who conduct interviews or ethnographic studies, or even those whose data comprise of official or historical records, are not immune from such criticism. They are all open to accusations of decontextualisation, reification or ‘imperialism’. In other words, all methods (including the experimental method) are theory in disguise. They contain assumptions (both implicit and explicit) and practices which are instrumental in creating the object of enquiry. There is nothing intrinsically evil about the experimental method. Researchers (including experimentalists) can be more or less reflexive about

the degree to which their methods play a role in ‘producing’ knowledge. Just as good social science research is predicated on the reflexive examination of the researchers own practice (see the other chapters in this collection) so good experimental work (shorn of the non-reflexive tendencies of some experimentalists) can contribute to knowledge in the violence research tradition.

That is not to say that experiments do not have their limitations. Like any method, the experiment can help in answering some questions and not others. However, this chapter will suggest that the experimental method has particular advantages for the study of violence. In particular, the chapter will suggest that the experiment is an excellent arena for the study of inequality, oppression and power, and that a concern with these dimensions is central to research on violence. For example, almost all violence research begins with the question of definition. In order to be able to study violence, researchers need to make decisions about what constitutes violence and how a violent act can be identified. While the specifics of this debate are complex, there is general agreement that violence involves the operation of power. Violence can appear in iniquitous social relations as well as in acts of physical force. The experiment, properly understood, is a domain which allows for the exploration of power in such social relations. It has a structure which allows some people (the experimenters) the power to constrain, coerce and observe, while others (the ‘subjects’) are constrained, coerced and observed. In an experiment (as in life) there is always space for resistance to power – but more usually (as in life), the ‘subjects’ work within the constraints imposed upon them by powerful others. It is by making the social relations of the experiment explicit – rather than

treating the experiment as some kind of value free or neutral context – that the relevance of the experimental method to violence research becomes apparent

### **Experimental Methods and Violence Research – the ‘bystander’ paradigm**

In the hope of demonstrating some of the virtues of the experimental method for violence research, the remainder of the chapter will focus on some examples of our work in the Violence Research Project (VRP). Our project was concerned with the role of the bystander in respect of violent crime. We began with the insight that most research on violence ignores the role of bystanders. It concentrates instead on exploring the characteristics of the perpetrator or the characteristics of the victim, or more dynamically, the relationship between perpetrator and victim. While there is clearly much to be learnt from such approaches, we argue that the neglect of the role of the bystander is a crucial omission. Nearly all violence has an audience who either witness the violence directly, or who know about it indirectly. How such bystanders behave will affect, in large measure, whether violence is stopped, is allowed to continue, or is even escalated. For example, a number of theorists have pointed to the role played by bystanders during the Holocaust. There are accounts of individual rescuers of Jewish men, women and children (Oliner and Oliner 1988). There are carefully documented descriptions of the failure of entire societies to intervene against the systematic persecution of the Jews (Staub 1989, Hilberg 1992). Equally importantly, there are stories of collective resistance of societies against the Nazi attempts at Genocide (see Toderov (2001) on the way Bulgarian polity and society prevented the elimination of Bulgarian Jews).

Despite the crucial role played by bystanders in the trajectory of violence, the bystander is largely absent in traditional social science research on violence. However, in social psychology, there is a body of literature which attempts to explain the behaviour of bystanders in emergencies. This literature traces its origins to the brutal rape and murder of a woman called Kitty Genovese, in New York in 1964. Genovese was attacked on her way home from work and, over a period of 30 minutes, was raped and then murdered. Horrifying as this was, what shocked people even more was the fact that 38 witnesses (all located in the surrounding buildings) failed to intervene. It was the inaction of the bystanders that prompted two social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latané (1968, Latané and Darley 1970) to explore the behaviour of bystanders in emergency settings. They conducted a number of elegant and carefully choreographed field experiments which placed people in emergency settings. This included hearing someone apparently having an epileptic seizure, or someone falling off a ladder, or sitting in a room which begins to fill with smoke. The findings of experiments such as these (and a whole raft of similar studies reviewed in Latané and Nida, 1982) was that, the more people who witness an emergency event, the less likely each individual is to help. This became known as ‘the bystander effect’.

The experimental work in support of traditional bystander theory has much to commend it. Its strength lies primarily in the fact that it deals with real intervention behaviour, as opposed to professed intention to act or post-hoc rationalisations of (in)action. If you ask people about the likelihood of intervention, they usually say that they will help – however, when actually confronted by an emergency situation, people tend to help

much less than they think. For this reason alone, experimental work can add value to the violence research paradigm. However, there are also important limitations in traditional bystander experimental work. Despite the volume of evidence for the ‘bystander effect’, the whole research tradition appears to lack utility. It has never been used successfully to increase the likelihood of intervention in violent attacks. As Latané and Nida (1982) so eloquently put it, “none of us has been able to mobilise the increasing store of social psychological understanding accumulated over the last decade to ensure that future Kitty Genoveses will receive help” (p322). Part of the reason for this can be traced, Cherry (1994) argues, to the way the original experiments were devised. Cherry points out that, in trying to create experimental analogues of the Genovese murder, Darley and Latané stripped out the two most important components of the original act. They neglected the social relations which were central to the event (this was an attack by a man on a woman) and removed the focus on violence. Instead, the experiments focussed on emergency helping situations which had neither a perpetrator nor violence. Cherry suggests that this was a result of what she calls ‘culturally embedded theorising’- a kind of theoretical myopia (when it came to male violence towards women) in pre-feminist 1960’s America. Add to this the difficulties of simulating violence experimentally, and it becomes easier to explain why the experiments focus on helping rather than intervention in violence.

Our research work (see Levine et al. in press) revisits this paradigm, but attempts to reintroduce the concern both with social relations and with violence. The former is much easier than the latter. Where Darley and Latané focus only on the presence or absence of bystanders, we have explored the meanings of social relationships between

bystanders and fellow bystanders, between bystanders and victims and between bystanders and perpetrators of violence. However, putting violence back into the experimental method is a much more difficult task. For a variety of ethical, logistic and pragmatic reasons, simulating violence in laboratory conditions has become extremely problematic. Social psychologists have not felt able to attempt such work since the seminal obedience to authority experiments of Stanley Milgram (1974)<sup>1</sup>. This inability to deal with violence at first hand however, is not something which is confined to experimental work alone. Researchers who carry out non-experimental work are seldom in a position to deal with violence directly. Their data usually comprises of 'second hand' accounts of violent events (interviews, questionnaires, media reports, legal papers, official records etc). This 'distance' from the original violent act can have consequences for violence research. We have already seen the slip between words and deeds in the study of bystander behaviour. Similar concerns can be raised whenever research relies on texts (of all kinds) which by definition (re)present violence. The violent act is not accessed directly but read through the filter of intervening 'stakes'. For both experimental and non-experimental work on violence, there is always the question of how this gap between violence and its representation should be negotiated and understood.

### **Social Relations and Bystander Behaviour: some experimental work**

Our experimental work began with an attempt to explore the social relationships between all those present at a violent incident. This included the perpetrator and the

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<sup>1</sup> In a series of experiments, Milgram asked people to give (what they thought were) electric shocks to a 'learner' in a memory experiment. The shocks increased in severity

victim as well as the bystander. Our aim was to examine both the differential and the combined effects of these (inter)relationships on the behaviour of bystanders in the context of violence. In order to be able to do so, we utilised the structure of the experimental format to shape how people viewed themselves and their relations to others. By availing ourselves of the power of the experimenter to define and prescribe social relations, respondents were sometimes directed to pay attention to their relationships to other bystanders, sometimes directed to their relationship to victims, and at other times directed to their relationship to perpetrators.

While we could not present our respondents with ‘real life’ violence, we attempted to create conditions which approximated to the kinds of violent incidents where intervention decisions would need to be made. Thus, the focal point of the experiments comprised of a 3-minute video of a violent incident in a car park. The video appeared to be footage captured on a CCTV camera (although in reality was a simulation made by the research team as data protection legislation prevents the use of genuine CCTV footage). The footage, which showed an attack by two men on a third man, was deliberately grainy and indistinct. This provided a degree of ambiguity in the action and a lack of distinguishing features on the individuals in the footage, which allowed us to tell different stories about what might be seen in the video. It also fitted with respondents’ stereotypes of how CCTV footage looks (an important consideration in the face validity of the experiment), although in fact, current technology means that real CCTV footage is clear and distinct<sup>2</sup>

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from 15 volts to 450 volts (labelled XXX and described as lethal). In the baseline experiment, 60% of subjects gave the maximum voltage.

All our experiments used students as respondents. While this is sometimes seen as a weakness of experimental work (some experimentalists have a tendency to make universal claims based on specific student populations), in violence research, using a student population can be a strength. Students belong to the strata of young people most at risk from violent assault, spend much time and money in the 'night-time' economy where they are likely to witness violence, and share a social group membership which can be meaningful at particular times and/or places. In other words, students have experience of, and exposure to, the kinds of phenomena which are of interest to violence researchers.

We carried out three sets of experiments using the video. In the first we explored the importance of relationships between bystanders and fellow bystanders. Students watched the video in groups of four. However, two of the four were confederates of the experimenters. In different experimental conditions, the confederates were asked to present themselves as ingroup members (students from the same university as the naive subjects) or as outgroup members (students from a local college). They were also asked to indicate that they felt the violence was serious and worthy of intervention, or that the violence was not serious and unworthy of intervention. In our experiment, it was only when the confederates presented as ingroup members that their opinion and willingness to intervene (or not to intervene) influenced the naive subjects. In this way we were able to demonstrate that it is only when people think that fellow bystanders are ingroup members, that what they say or do will be influencing.

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<sup>2</sup> We made several pilot videos for the experiment. When we shot the videos with clarity and detail people tended to be more suspicious of their provenance. In order for the CCTV footage to be convincing, we had to shoot it not as it is, but as how our respondents believed it to be!

In the second experiment we explored the relationship between bystanders and victims of violence. In this experiment students watched the video in large groups. Some of the groups were told that the video captured an attack on a student, other groups were told that the video captured an attack on a local youth. This experiment allowed us to argue that people are more likely to (express the intention to) intervene when they believe the victim is an ingroup rather than an outgroup member.

In the third experiment we explored the relationship between bystanders and perpetrators. Once again, students watched the video in groups. Some groups were told that this was an attack carried out by students, other groups were told that this was an attack carried out by local youths. The findings of this study were more ambiguous. Sharing group membership with a perpetrator of violence could just as easily result in intervention on the side of the perpetrator as it could in intervention to stop the perpetrator carrying out the violence. What seemed most likely to persuade bystanders to stop violence from ingroup perpetrators was when that violence might damage the reputation of the group as a whole.

Taken together, these experimental studies paint a complex picture of some of the factors which are important in bystander behaviour. They provide a challenge to traditional social psychological theories which are more concerned with the presence or absence of others in an emergency situation, rather than the meaning of social relations between them. They point to the importance of group membership for explaining the

behaviour of all those present during a violent episode. Finally, they challenge the pessimism which surrounds previous public policy interventions designed to increase a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. However, despite their strengths, they are still experiments which demonstrate intention to act rather than actual intervention behaviour itself. As we have already seen, intention and action in emergency situations is not always the same. The importance of social group memberships for intervention behaviour in 'real life' remains to be demonstrated. Thus, the final phase of our experimental work on bystander behaviour moved from laboratory based experiments to field experiments which measured actual intervention, rather than intention to act.

### **Exploring Intervention in 'Real Life' Settings: some field experiments**

In designing field experiments to explore bystander behaviour, the difficulties presented by the simulation of violence are particularly apparent. It is extremely difficult to create a simulation of a violent event which has the kind of face validity required to make it believable. It is almost impossible to reproduce the simulated 'real life' violent event from trial to trial in order to ensure reliability. Finally, the intention to expose people to a violent event (even in simulation) raises ethical problems which are extremely difficult (although not impossible) to address. Our field experiments therefore stepped back from attempting violence simulations and addressed instead the general issue of the importance of perceived social relations for helping in emergencies. We felt it was a necessary first step to demonstrate the role played by social group memberships in 'real life' bystander intervention and that the issues raised by the inclusion of violence could be addressed at a later stage.

Our field experiments therefore concentrated on creating an environment in which we would examine the actual behaviour of those exposed to a potential emergency – and yet be able to control experimentally the nature of the social relations that bystander believed existed between them and the ‘victim’. To do so we took advantage of the current British fashion for wearing football (soccer) team shirts as casual wear (as opposed to wearing team colours to the stadium only). These shirts signify potential group membership and are a clear demonstration of potential relations to others. The fact that people are used to seeing these shirts in a variety of different (and non-football related) contexts, and can easily ‘read’ the group affiliation of the wearer, were turned to experimental advantage.

Before the experiment is described in detail, it is important to know more about the place of football (soccer) in an English social context and importance of different kinds of football related social categories (and the nature of their intergroup relationship). In terms of popularity and appeal, Manchester United are currently the most famous and high profile team in England. In addition to their widespread popularity they have, in the past 10 years, been the dominant team in English football. At the same time, and perhaps as a result of this success, fans of all other football clubs treat Manchester United fans as potentially inauthentic (not ‘real’ fans) who are just attracted by glamour and success. Moreover, fans of Manchester United have a longstanding rivalry with supporters of Liverpool Football Club. Liverpool and Manchester are competing regional cities in the North West of England. Although the cities are only 30 miles apart, people born in the respective cities have different accents, different self images,

and draw on different historical and industrial traditions. Moreover, where Manchester United currently dominate English football, Liverpool FC were the dominant team of the 1980's. The history of animosity between some of the fans of the teams is played out in communal chants which are directed at opposition fans inside football grounds as well as occasional violent skirmishes outside football grounds. Attachment to group identities and the intergroup rivalry between Manchester United and Liverpool fans is therefore deeply held and extremely meaningful.

The field experiment began with the recruitment of people to take part in study of football fans. For several weeks prior to the experiment, recruitment posters inviting people to take part in a study of football fans, were posted around the university. Those interested in signing up were asked for their names, a contact number, and the team they supported. Only those who indicated that they supported Manchester United were then recruited to take part in the study (the others were contacted, thanked for volunteering and told that we had sufficient people for the study). The Manchester United fans were thus unaware that they had been chosen for their particular group affiliation. Each volunteer was asked to come to the psychology department at an appointed time, and upon arrival, taken to a small research cubicle. There they were asked to write a short essay about their team, and to fill in a short questionnaire about their team. This was designed to make them feel strongly identified with their Manchester United group membership. When they had completed this task, they were told that they needed to go to another building to watch a video about football (the cubicle was too small for this purpose) and then answer some more questions. They were escorted out of the building

and to the start of a car park which separated the psychology department from the building housing the screening room. At this point, the experimenter made an excuse about meeting the next participant, and asked to go to the screening room on their own (where they were told they would be met by another experimenter). As they began to cross the car park, an accident was staged in front of them. A person came into view running towards the car park. When they reached the top of a grass bank on the edge of the car park, they slipped and fell, grabbing hold of their ankle and shouting out in pain. The only difference was, in some trials the 'victim' of the accident was wearing a Manchester United football shirt, in other trials he was wearing a Liverpool Football Club shirt (Manchester United and Liverpool are arch rivals), and in other trials he was wearing an ordinary (not football related) sweatshirt.

The results from this field experiment were clear. In almost 75% of the trials when the 'victim' was wearing the Manchester United shirt, the bystander stopped to help. However, when the 'victim' was wearing the Liverpool or the 'ordinary' sportshirt, help was only offered on about 35% of occasions. It seems from this that, recognising signs of common group membership in a stranger in distress, will lead to an increase in the likelihood of bystander intervention.

A second field experiment further reinforced the importance of perceived group membership for bystander intervention. We ran the study in the same way as before – participants were recruited in the same way, were all Manchester United fans, and came to the psychology department as before. However, this time participants were asked to write essays about being a football fan (as opposed to a Manchester United fan) and to

fill in a questionnaire about being a football fan. The aim of this procedure was to make them feel strongly identified with a group membership which included all other football fans (not simply their team identity). It was hoped that this more inclusive, or higher order categorisation, would mean that they would identify with all other fans (including Liverpool fans) and therefore be more prepared to offer them help in an emergency. The experiment then proceeded in the same way as the first study, with participants exposed to the injured victim who was wearing either a Manchester United, Liverpool, or 'ordinary' sweatshirt. This time however, participants were equally likely to help the victim in the Manchester United or Liverpool shirt, but not if he was wearing the ordinary sweatshirt. This field experiment therefore provides strong support (given the antipathy that exist between supporters of Manchester United and Liverpool at a club level) for the importance of making social categories as inclusive as possible in order to promote more widespread feelings of responsibility for the welfare of others.

The strength of field experiments such as this is their graphic demonstration of the importance of social group membership for bystander behaviour. Moreover, the field studies provide evidence of actual behaviour rather than intention to act. They also identify the importance of the boundaries of social categories for increasing the likelihood of bystander intervention. The more inclusive the social category, the more likely we are to feel the kinds of social solidarity which is important for ensuring the welfare of others (especially when those others are 'strangers'). These are the kinds of themes which are important for tackling societies in which feelings of communal responsibility seem to have been eroded and where so called fear-of-crime runs rampant.

### **From Experiments to Qualitative Work – and back again**

Although the aim of this chapter has been to argue for the rehabilitation of experimental methods in violence research, it has not been our intention to claim some kind of superiority for experimental work over other methodological approaches. On the contrary, we are arguing against the kind of fetishisation of methods which can sometimes be read in the work of those who advocate qualitative or quantitative methods exclusively. Our research in the VRP was concerned more with the kinds of questions that needed to be asked, and only then with the kinds of methods which were most suited to answering those questions. The field experiments outlined in this chapter allowed us to look at the consequences of imposing certain kinds of social relations on others and to examine the behavioural consequences which flowed from these different relationships. However, they tell us very little about why people are behaving in the way that they are, or how they account for their behaviour. The experiments allow us to argue that social group memberships are important, but we can only speculate about whether people act because of feelings of responsibility, notions of common fate, ideas about obligation, diffusion of responsibility, analysis of costs and benefits and so on. Moreover, while experiments are useful for looking at what happens when particular social group relationships are held constant, in real life, group relationships are much more fluid, dynamic, and subject to moment-by moment change. People constantly negotiate, justify and contest not only the nature their social relationships, but also the meaning of their behaviour. In order to know more about the experience of intervention (or non-intervention), and to know about these in the context of violence, we needed a different set of methodological tools.

To that end, and alongside our experimental work, we carried out a number of non-experimental research projects. The first was a series of 38 face-to-face interviews with a cross section of people in Lancaster, a small city in the North-West of England. In this study, the aim was to sample as heterogeneously as possible to include men and women from a variety of age ranges, social class memberships and employment conditions. Interviews were carried out in the homes of respondents and focused on eliciting personal experiences of intervention (or lack of intervention) as a bystander to violent episodes. The interviews were structured around a scrapbook which contained four newspaper stories of violent incidents (two local stories, two national stories; two which described bystander intervention, two which described bystander inaction). The interviews were used to explore the norms which surround bystander behaviour in the context of violence, to elicit information about social group relations which both inhibited or facilitated intervention, and to weigh the assumptions of theories of bystander behaviour against the experiences of the bystanders themselves.

These individual interviews were then complemented by a group interview phase in which different fractions of the same community were brought together to discuss community relations, violence, and bystander behaviour. In this research, seven groups (12/13 year old youth; 18year old men; women from community centre; members of a residents association; members of the chamber of commerce; homeless men; the elderly) ranging in size from 4 to 8 members, were recruited. The group interviews were focussed around a map of the locality in which all participants lived. Each group was asked to indicate areas on the map they felt were safe or dangerous; places where they

had witnessed violence and intervened (or not); and places where they had been helped by others. The group interviews were then used to collect experiences of intergroup relations, accounts of intervention and feelings of community responsibility (self for others and others for self).

The strength of the face-to-face interview data lay in eliciting not only a set of normative beliefs about intervention, but also a wide variety of (non)intervention stories. These stories were useful not only for providing corroborating evidence for the picture which emerged from the experiments, but also in allowing us to understand more clearly the nature of behaviour in the experimental context. More importantly, the wide range of (non)intervention stories provided a rich source of material for later experimental work. The group interviews allowed us to combine our theoretical interest in intergroup relations with collective experience of violence and bystander behaviour. By allowing different fractions of a community to talk through their relationship not only to each other but also to where they lived, we were able to deepen our understanding of bystander behaviour. These group interviews also served the function of allowing us to reflect back on the experimental work, and to look forward beyond the limits of experimentation.

While there isn't time in this chapter to describe analysis of the face-to-face or the group interviews in detail, what is worth emphasising is the effort to integrate these different methodological approaches in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of bystander behaviour. The experimental work, the face-to-face interviews and the group interviews each play a significant part in the overall story which emerged from

the research. None claims priority nor is any reduced to a purely supporting role. Rather we have attempted to ‘triangulate’ these different methods in a way that allows us to build a more sustained and persuasive argument.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to argue for a rehabilitation of experimental methods in violence research. The experiments described here are offered as an illustration of the kinds of questions which can be addressed in an experimental frame. Of course, the story which has been told about bystander behaviour is by no means complete – but this chapter is not the time or the place to work through all those remaining loose ends. Instead, the chapter will conclude by revisiting its central argument – that violence researchers, be they experimentalists or non-experimentalists, face a common set of problems. They all have to deal with questions of definition in respect of violence. They also have to think about social relations and the dynamics of power which inhabit them. Finally, they are confronted with the problem of (re)representation – the fact that most violence data is ‘second hand’. This chapter has argued that it is how these kinds of questions are dealt with - rather than the faux distinction between experimental and non-experimental methods – that makes for good violence research. In other words, what counts is what Bruno Latour (1988) might describe as an infra-reflexivity in approach to violence research. Latour describes an infra-reflex approach as one in which an account given of an object is applied to the account also. If we take Latour’s injunction seriously we can see that the experimental method can be an exemplary method for violence research. The experimental method, with its instantiation of iniquitous relations of power between experimenter and ‘subject’, provides an analogue of the social relations

of power which enshrine violence in society. By making these explicit in the context of the experiment it becomes possible to actively explore (rather than simply reflect) not just the behaviour of bystanders, but also the relationship between power and violence as a whole.

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