



Frenzied attacks. A micro-sociological analysis of the emotional dynamics of extreme youth violence¹

Don Weenink

Abstract

Inspired by phenomenological and interactionist studies of youth violence, this article offers an empirical evaluation of Collins's micro-sociological theory of violence. The main question is whether situations of extreme violence have distinct situational dynamics. Based on analyses of 159 interactions taken from judicial case files, situations of extreme youth violence, here called frenzied attacks, were identified on the basis of the state of encapsulation of the attackers (absorbed in the violence, their sole focus is the destruction of the victim) and the disproportionateness of the violence (the attackers continue to hurt the victims even though they do not pose a threat or a challenge to them). Qualitative and statistical analyses revealed that this emotional state results from a social figuration in which the emotional balance shifts toward complete dominance of the attackers. Thus, the occurrence of frenzied attacks is associated with the moment victims hit the ground, paralyse and start to apologize, with the numerical dominance of the attackers' supportive group and with feelings of group membership, in the form of solidarity excitement and family ties in the attackers' group. Alcohol intoxication is of influence as well, but contrary to the expectation, this effect was independent from solidarity excitement. The article concludes that Collins's theory on the emotional dynamics of violence adds a new dimension to the phenomenological and interactionist traditions of research.

Keywords: Violence; youth violence; micro-sociology; sociology of emotions

Introduction

Following up on the review symposium on Collins's (2008) micro-sociological theory of violence in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Collins 2009; Cooney 2009; Felson 2009), this article offers an empirical evaluation of the theory as

applied to youth violence. More specifically, the research reported here explores how and to what extent central concepts in Collins's theory – forward panics (here called frenzied attacks), weak victims, supportive audiences and rapid shifts in the emotional balances – appear in youth violence. The main question is whether situations of extreme youth violence have distinct properties that sets them apart from other forms of youth violence. This question is investigated through qualitative and quantitative analyses of 159 detailed descriptions of violent interactions among Dutch youth, taken from judicial case files. Inspired by a rich tradition of phenomenological and interactionist studies, this article wishes to contribute to this knowledge by focusing on the emotional dynamics of violence – an issue that has not been taken up explicitly in this tradition so far (but see Luckenbill 1977).

The study at hand analyses violence in a narrow sense, as interactions in which the physical damaging of human bodies by other human bodies is the predominant focus of the action and attention. Narrowing the scope further, the analyses are restricted to youth violence in public space. The plan is first to explain Collins's theory of the situational dynamics of violence, followed by a summary of Cooney's (2009) and Felson's (2009) critical reviews and a discussion of how the theory relates to prior phenomenological and interactionist analyses of youth violence. The next section describes the data, the sample and the analytical procedures. Subsequent sections present the results of qualitative analyses, followed by a statistical assessment of the likelihood for violent situations to turn extreme. Finally, the article highlights the main results and offers new questions for future micro-sociological research on youth violence.

Collins's micro-sociological theory of violence: concepts, critiques and contextualization

In *Violence. A Micro-sociological Theory*, Collins (2008) lays out the emotional dynamics of violence. Following Collins (2009: 569), the focus of attention on the other that produces emotional attunement in normal interactions, is sustained in antagonistic confrontations, but instead of attunement, now it results in confrontational tension and fear (*ct/f*). As *ct/f* forms a barrier that inhibits people from using violence, the overwhelming majority of confrontations result in bluster and stalemates or people relieve *ct/f* by giving in, backing up or leaving the scene (for more on *ct/f*, see Collins 2008 chapter 2). Violence does occur when people circumvent the barrier of *ct/f*. This happens when weak, passive victims give in to emotional dominance and/or when supportive audiences help to build up emotional dominance. Collins's (2008: chapter 3) most pregnant explanation of the emotional dynamics of violence concerns his conceptualization of forward panics. In these situations, attackers enter a state of aggressive frenzy. Two features of forward panics are highlighted here. This

is first encapsulation: absorbed in the violent action, the destruction of the opponents becomes the attackers' sole focus of attention. Second, this form of violence is disproportionate in the sense that the attackers seem unable to stop: they continue to hurt the victims even though they do not pose a threat or challenge to the attackers' dominance anymore. Forward panics occur when the emotional balance between two opponents suddenly and rapidly shifts, so that the situation presents opportunities for total, uncontested domination by one party. Collins regards these situations as panics, as they originate from rapidly circumvented fear and confrontational anxiety.

The critical reviews by Cooney (2009) and Felson (2009) may help to specify Collins's conceptual model further. Note that the following discussion does not provide a representative summary of their reviews, but only considers the points that are relevant for the topic at hand.

First, Cooney and Felson do not agree with the idea that the occurrence of violence is conditional on the presence of either weak victims or supportive audiences alone. Cooney (2009: 588) argues that many antagonistic situations in which these two conditions are met do not result in violence, and he raises the question of how weak adversaries can be identified other than that they are the defeated party. Felson (2009: 582–3) indicates that attacking others depends on the rewards and costs involved. For instance, Jackson-Jacobs (2004) shows that taking a beating as the underdog may result in 'narrative gratifications': the construction of a story in which a lost fight evidences all group members' worthiness, as they dared to take on stronger opponents. Furthermore, Felson (2009: 579, 584) touches upon the main question of this article by asking whether and how forward panics can be distinguished from other forms of violence. To summarize the argument so far, questions revolve around the empirical appearances of forward panics and *ct/f*, weak victims and supportive audiences, as well as with regard to the causal relationships between them.

Relating these concepts to prior analyses of (youth) violence may help to understand how they appear empirically. Consider first the role of *ct/f*. The literature on gang violence indicates that in some deprived neighbourhoods, 'respect' (Anderson 1999: 10, 72; Jankowski 1991: 140) and 'reputation' (Sanders 1994: 71–5) based on instant aggressive responsiveness are part of pre-emptive strategies to attain deference and personal safety (see also Horowitz 1983: chapter 5; Jacobs and Wright 2006: 32–6; 41–2; 123–4). The chronic threat of violence in these environments results into anxiety and fear, an 'ecology of danger' where social interactions are perceived as threatening or lethal (Wilkinson and Fagan 2001: 178), also among the 'tough' youth (Trickett 2011). Jankowski (1991: 169) observed that as the level of fear and anxiety rises among gang members, the severity and the scope of the violence increases, which suggests that prolonged *ct/f* forms the emotional grounding of extreme violence under these conditions.

However, there are also indications that youth seek to experience violence for the thrill of it, for instance among football hooligans (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 1988: 209–10; Spaaij 2008) and in night life or leisure time (Graham and Wells 2003; Katz 1988: chapter 3; Tomsen 1997). In these instances of ‘recreational’ violence, prior building up of *ct/f* does not seem to take place. Collins indicates that some situations of frenzied violence resemble forward panics in form, although they have a different emotional grounding. These pseudo forward panics – here called frenzied attacks – are driven by intense feelings of group membership: ‘outbursts into collective violence, and especially in the rhythmic, repetitive pattern that constitutes the overkill and the atrocity, is so compelling to its participants because it constitutes an extremely high degree of solidarity’ (Collins 2008: 130). Jankowski (1991: 171–2) explicitly notes the link between feelings of group membership and violence that turns extreme:

when members [of a gang] act as part of a collective, they frequently go too far, becoming caught up in the dynamics of group action rather than considering the consequences of that action. Sometimes individual members and the group find it difficult to determine when enough force has been used, that is, when to quit. (See also Decker and Van Winkle 1996: 24)

To conclude: intense feelings of group membership, solidarity excitement, may offer the alternative emotional pathway to frenzied attacks in youth violence.²

Feelings of group membership result from a shared focus of attention and the experience of emotional attunement (cf. Collins 2004: chapter 2). To investigate the relationship between the prior building up of solidarity excitement and frenzied attacks, Hochstetler’s (2001) study of how robbery and burglary groups develop a shared focus of attention is useful. Hochstetler (2001: 748–52) identifies three ways of group alignment: ‘incremental signalling’ (the use of small bodily or verbal moves to check whether the others are receptive to the idea), ‘target convergence’ (mutual and instantaneous recognition of an appealing target) and ‘establishing identity’ (recognizing and appealing to group members’ reputations of criminal capability, thus turning past experiences into expectations of upcoming action). In addition to developing a shared focus of attention, the group members must also be emotionally attuned to build up solidarity excitement. This happens when group members start to express similar emotions, for instance humiliation or anger, or perhaps joyous enthusiasm for violence as a possible line of action.

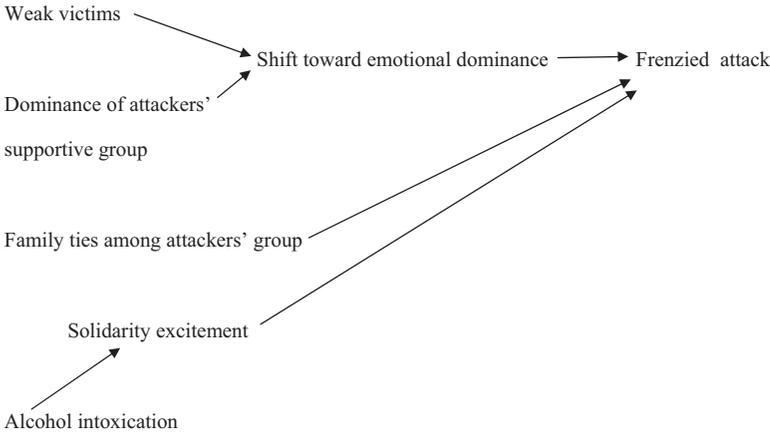
Turning now to how supportive audiences appear in prior studies of youth violence. Studies of youth street violence (Jankowski 1991: chapter 5; Sanders 1994: 19, 56), research into violent football hooliganism and riots (Adang 1998: 18, 40, 66) and analyses of violence during night life (Tomsen 1997: 98) indicate that the violence is often committed by smaller subgroups of changing composition, in the co-presence of the rest of their group, the audience. The

audience creates a stage by focusing the attention to the violence, by watching it happen, or more intensively, by scolding and yelling or joining in (Felson 1982; Sanders 1994: 88–92; Tomsen 1997: 98). Felson (1982: 249, 52) found that the presence of third parties alone, and also their encouragement, results into more severe conflicts. In addition, third parties are more likely to take sides when the opponents are younger (Felson, Ribner and Siegel 1984). Black (1998: 125–43) argued that one important dimension that determines the intensity of partisanship (taking sides) is the unequal relational distance of the third parties vis-à-vis both opposing sides; the social closeness to one side and the social remoteness from the other (Black 1998: 126; see also Cooney 1998: 69–70). Furthermore, unequal group ties (gangs or lineage), are associated with stronger partisanship and more intense conflict as compared to unequal individual ties (friends) (Cooney 1998: 132–4; Phillips and Cooney 2005: 351). Considering group ties, Decker and Van Winkle (1996: 250–1, 255) reported that most gang members found ‘blood’ (kinship) relations more important and stronger than gang affiliations. Thus, it can be expected that family ties in particular play a role in the occurrence of extreme violence. As the focus is here on the role of third parties in gaining emotional dominance, this article considers the dominance of the attackers’ supportive group versus that of the victims. The supportive group consists of persons who are physically present at the violent situation and who are members of the same group to which one of the principals belongs. They do not engage in the physical violent action itself but they may take sides verbally, as partisans, or they may watch and yell, as a supportive audience that provides a stage.

As for weak victims, studies of violent football hooligans and street violence demonstrate that youth seek to arrange situations in which they outnumber or surprise the rival ‘firm’ or ‘gang’ (Jankowski 1991: chapter 5; Sanders 1994: chapter 4 on drive-by shootings; Spaaij 2008). In addition, these literatures suggest that beating up lonely or otherwise vulnerable victims by a small group of attackers – ‘wolf packing’ (Keiser 1969: 50) – provides a way to attain a reputation of toughness or ‘badness’ (Adang 1998 42–3; Katz 1988: chapter 3). Jacobs and Wright (2006: 54) note that in ‘calculated retaliation’, the attackers plan their moments of revenge when the victims are likely to be in a weaker position, so that the duration and intensity of the violent punishment may be extended.

Finally, one last aspect that should be taken into account in youth violence is the role that alcohol plays.³ In their review of the literature on the relationship between alcohol and violence (and drugs, but the former relationship is much stronger), Parker and Auerhahn (1998: 303) indicate that, particularly with regard to youth violence, the disinhibiting effects of alcohol are strongly related to the places where alcohol is consumed (see also Graham, et al. 2006; Graham and Wells 2001). Thus, the relationship between alcohol and youth violence is particularly likely to appear in special zones – a time out, or moral

Figure I: Expected causal relationships between situational properties and the likelihood for youth violence to turn into a frenzied attack, all relationships are positive



holiday – in which conventional norms are suspended. Tomsen’s (1997) account of a ‘top night’ highlights that in these zones of transgression, cultural expectations link collective drinking to the experience of violence (see also Graham and Wells 2003; Lister, Hobbs, Hall and Winlow 2000). Thus, the relationship between alcohol intoxication and the occurrence of frenzied attacks is here regarded as part of a collective ‘quest for solidarity excitement’, to paraphrase Elias and Dunning (1986).

To conclude, prior work suggests that in areas where violence is not endemic, youth violence is more likely to arise from solidarity excitement rather than from circumvention of *ct/f*. Furthermore, the literature on youth violence suggests that the other components of Collins’s theory – weak victims and supportive groups – may turn out to be factors that contribute to the shift toward emotional dominance that may result in the occurrence of frenzied attacks. The effect of alcohol intoxication is expected to interact with that of solidarity excitement. The argument is summarized in Figure I.

The following research questions attempt to evaluate Collins’s conceptual framework, taking the above considerations into account. In the remainder of this article, violent situations other than frenzied attacks are referred to as controlled forms of youth violence. The term controlled here means that in these types of violence, attackers are aware of their environment during the attack and stop hurting the victim when they do not pose a threat to their dominance any more.

1. How, and to what extent do frenzied attacks (as indicated by the attackers’ encapsulation and the disproportionateness of the violence) appear in youth violence?

2. What makes for weak victims in youth violence and to what extent do they increase the likelihood of frenzied attacks?
3. What makes for the dominance of supportive groups in youth violence and to what extent does it increase the likelihood of frenzied attacks?
4. What makes for rapid shifts in the emotional balances in youth violence and to what extent do they increase the likelihood of frenzied attacks?
5. What makes for solidarity excitement prior to the attack (as indicated by the attackers' shared focus of attention and emotional attunement) and to what extent does it increase the likelihood of frenzied attacks?
6. To what extent does the relationship between the attackers' alcohol intoxication and the likelihood of frenzied attacks interact with solidarity excitement prior to the violence?

Data, sampling and analytical procedures

The data consist of judicial files of Dutch juvenile courts. Hence, the maximum age of the attackers was 18 years at the time the violence was committed. The files comprise interrogation reports of witnesses, offenders, victims and reports of the courts and the public prosecutor. Furthermore, reports of the Council for Child Protection provide additional information on the violent interactions, including interviews with parents, teachers and the youth themselves. Based on these files, a textual database was set up, with cases containing detailed descriptions of the violent interaction. The names reported in this article are fictitious.

The sampling of case files was based on a series of sections of Dutch penal law considering violent offenses: public bodily harm (*openlijke geweldpleging tegen personen*), battery or bodily harm (*mishandeling*, considered more severe than *openlijke geweldpleging*), grievous bodily harm (*zware mishandeling*), (attempt to) manslaughter, (attempt to) murder. Forms of violence that are linked to economic (e.g. robbing) or 'sexual' (e.g. rape) exploitation were excluded. Complexity was further reduced by restricting the analyses to violence performed by small groups of about ten attackers at most. Case files were drawn from archives of four judicial districts. Each archive provided a list of cases settled by the juvenile court of that district in the years 1995 and 2005. The sampling comprised an interval selection of all the cases referring to one or more of the above sections of Dutch penal law, taking each second, third or fourth case on the list, depending on the total number of cases. In sum, the sample consists of 159 violent interactions.

The aim of the qualitative analyses was to reveal how, in what forms, the concepts discussed above appeared empirically and these were later coded as numerical variables. The identification of frenzied attacks was grounded on two sensitizing concepts: the state of encapsulation of the attackers (absorbed

in the action, their sole focus being the destruction of the victims) and the disproportionateness of the violence (the attackers continue to hurt the victims even though they do not pose a threat or a challenge to the attackers' dominance anymore). The following section demonstrates how these two sensitizing concepts were identified in the data. The cases that met both criteria of encapsulation and disproportionateness were coded as a binary variable (0 = no, 1 = yes) that captures the concept of frenzied attacks.

As for weak victims, the qualitative analyses indicated that attackers predominantly arranged the weakness of the victims by outnumbering them. For all cases, it was noted how many attackers and how many victims were actually involved in the violence. The latter number was subtracted from the former to indicate the extent of outnumbering (ranging from -2 to 4). Considering the dominance of the attackers' supportive group, it was coded how many members of the attackers' group were present (excluding the ones who were actually involved in committing the violence), and the same was done for the victims' group. To indicate the extent to which the attackers' supportive group outnumbered that of the victims, the latter number was subtracted from the former (ranging from -6 to 9). Shifts in the emotional balances were identified as the moments at which victims who had been trying to resist or counter attack their opponent, gave up fighting, became paralysed or started to apologize. It emerged from the qualitative analyses that a crucial tipping point in this respect was when victims hit the ground. Thus, for all cases it was coded whether the victim hit the ground or not (0 = no; 1 = yes).

The emergence of solidarity excitement in the attackers' group (consisting of the attackers themselves as well as their supportive group) was identified by using Hochstetler's (2001) conceptualization of action alignment as a sensitizing concept for how groups try to build up a shared focus of attention (this will be demonstrated below). In addition, expressions were coded that pointed to a common emotional mood, for instance when group members shared feelings of joy, anger, humiliation or anxiety. For each case it was coded whether both a shared emotional mood and a shared focus of attention appeared (0 = no; 1 = yes). Furthermore, the presence of relatives among the attackers' group was coded as a binary variable (0 = no relatives, 1 = relatives present). The degree of alcohol intoxication of the attackers was coded as a scale, consisting of the following items: 0 = attackers had not used alcohol prior to the attack; 1 = attackers had used some alcohol prior to the attack (maximum 5 glasses of alcohol or the witnesses, attackers or police officers reported that the alcohol intake had no tangible impact on the attacker's behaviour); 2 = attackers were visibly under the influence of alcohol (6-15 glasses of alcohol or it was reported they were under the influence of alcohol); 3 = attackers were heavily under influence of alcohol (over 15 glasses of alcohol or it was reported they were 'very', 'completely', or 'heavily' drunk or intoxicated, the alcohol inhibiting normal speech, gait or other movements, or the attackers displayed a

strong inclination to sleep, directly after the attack). Finally, a control variable was constructed that distinguishes male-on-male violence (1) from mixed gender or female violence (0). In line with the argument of this article that frenzied attacks have distinct situational properties that separates them from other forms of violence, logistic regression analyses were used to assess the impact of the above indicators on the likelihood for violence to turn into a frenzied attack. The ordinal variables included in the regression analyses were standardized given their varying scales of measurement. Inspection of VIF values – the highest was 1.585 – indicated that problems of multicollinearity were negligible.

Frenzied attacks in youth violence: the rage takes over

This section identifies how frenzied attacks appear in youth violence, based on the notions of encapsulation and the disproportionateness of the violence. In the first situation, a father and a son had been drinking beer for some time after a football match. When the victim, Harold, bumped into the father by accident, the father became angry and shouted that Harold should get out of the way. The son entered the scene and then both started punching Harold.

Witness 1: They gave Harold a tremendously hard blow in his face. The father hit him first and then the son joined him. Bystanders tried to pull the father away, but Junior just carried on. Harold [fell] down on the ground but Junior kicked him all the time in the face. It was terrible to see, it was bestial, it was not normal how Junior kicked Harold. He kept on kicking him. I have no words for how he kicked him. It would not have surprised me if he would have kicked him to death. (case 57)

Consider first the disproportionateness of the violence. Witnesses frequently report they were shocked at the view of attackers going berserk, seemingly unable to stop ('he kept on kicking him', 'I have no words for how he kicked him'). They find it particularly disturbing and frightening that the attackers engage in ferocious violence while the victim is defenceless and vulnerable. Thus, the witness indicates that even though Harold had already hit the ground, Junior 'kicked him all the time'. However, it will be explained below that it is exactly the vulnerability of the victim that unleashes the fury of the attackers. What frightens witnesses as well is that the attackers are, in the words of another witness in this case, 'out of touch': they have entered a state of encapsulation. For instance, in the fragment above Junior was not concerned about the efforts of the bystanders to separate him and his father from the victim. In fact, the bystanders had difficulty to stop the attackers, the son in particular.

In the following situation, Kevin and Marc were cycling back to their homes after a night in which they had been drinking large quantities of beer. They encountered a boy coming from the opposite direction who commented assertively on their wobbly cycling, as they provocatively made it hard for him to pass them. After an initial phase of mutual scolding, calling names and shoving, the victim stumbled and fell down to the ground. At that point, Kevin and Marc entered a state of frenzy. The witnesses reported:

Witness 1 (acquaintance of the attackers): Kevin and Marc were shouting: ‘We break you, we cut you into pieces’. I ran to Kevin and asked him what he was doing. [. . .] I tried to get between them, but I could not reach them, they went completely berserk. I have seen some brawls, but not like this: they could not stop with it.

Witness 2 (acquaintance of the attackers): It was disgusting. I was scared to death. The boy was bleeding all over. It was so bad, I couldn’t bear it, it was so dirty to look at. Kevin and Marc seemed insane; they kept on shouting ‘we will kill you, we will finish you’, hitting and beating him, everywhere they could. It seemed like it never stopped. (case 54)

The two features of frenzied attacks are clearly discernible in this fragment. First, the witnesses point to the attacker’s disproportionate violence while the victim was already down and unconscious (‘they could not stop with it’; ‘it seemed like it never stopped’) and their encapsulated state (‘they went completely berserk’, ‘I could not reach them’). In this situation, the attempts to intervene failed and the violence stopped only when the attackers became too tired. The fragment emphasizes the feelings of horror and fear that witnesses often experience when they are confronted with a frenzied attack (‘it was disgusting’, ‘dirty to look at’, ‘I was scared to death’). Typically, they use words like ‘bestial’, or ‘insane’ to describe the state attackers are in. The insanity or bestiality not only concerns the berserk violent action, but also the attackers’ imperviousness to communicate. Normal attuned interaction with them is impossible as they seem obsessed, unable to pay attention to anything else than their furious rage. Witnesses report that attackers not just wildly hit or beat but also shouted, cursed and roared at the victim – even in cases where the victims were already down and unconscious. These exclamations may proclaim the nearing destruction of the victim, as in the fragment above: ‘we cut you into pieces’, ‘we will finish you’, or they simply indicate what the attackers are doing: ‘we kick him, we kick him’. Attackers themselves emphasize the feature of encapsulation to describe what happened to them in a frenzied attack and they tend to stress the compulsive nature of their actions (‘I could not stop’). In the following fragment, attacker Nasir describes what happened to him while he was kicking victim Edwin. Before this violent interaction, the two boys had been humiliating and threatening one another for some time. This had culminated in Edwin giving Nasir a head butt. A week later, attacker Nasir

was with his friends and saw that Edwin was alone, and he took his chances. After chasing Edwin, he pulled him off his bike.

Nasir: Edwin fell down on the ground. When he was down, I started to kick him severely. I kicked him everywhere I could. I kicked his ribs and head. I was wearing heavy shoes with metal toe caps. I don't know how often I kicked him. But I kicked him many times. I heard Edwin moaning because of the pain but I just went on with it. I was out of this world at that moment. I was so angry at him. My friends were there, but they had nothing to do with it. One of them said: 'What are you doing, stop it'. But I couldn't. (case 128)

During the beating up of Edwin, Nasir felt 'out of this world', indicating his state of encapsulation. While he noticed the pain Edwin suffered and heard his friend telling him to stop, he could not respond to these appeals. In a few cases, the state of encapsulation is interrupted. In these short moments, attackers suddenly understand what they are doing. These cases are of interest as they illuminate what is not present in most frenzied attacks: a self that monitors the attacker's actions. Take for instance the following situation. The attackers had already delivered some blows to the victim and now one of them (Linda) sat on the victim, so that Sharleena could cut off her hair. Sharleena recalls what happened to her at that moment:

Sharleena: So I took the scissors and cut off that girls' hair. That girl couldn't do anything because Linda sat on top of her. I was going completely berserk. Suddenly I realized I had her hair in my hands and that many people were standing around me. But then I felt I had not duffed her up enough and I wanted to beat her up again, but this time really good. (case 73)

The attacker shortly 'realized' that she actually had cut the hair of the victim and that a crowd was watching her. Apparently, for Sharleena the situation turned into a reality at the moment she could see herself busy. Nevertheless, she soon felt an urge to launch another fierce attack. Also note that she was going berserk *after* the 'girl couldn't do anything because Linda sat on top of her': this points to the importance of emotional asymmetry for the unleashing of violent rage, an issue that will be taken up in the following section. In another situation (case 142), a boy who tried to strangle a girl later reported that 'It was only when I heard her screaming that I saw my hand over her neck. It was a compulsion which I could not resist'. These moments, in which attackers understand what they are doing are, in Meadian terms, re-appearances of 'Me' that suddenly allows them to see what 'I' is doing. But these moments are of short duration only and it may thus be concluded that the monitoring self of the attacker is temporarily overruled by the rage in frenzied attacks. Thus, the point is not so much that the violence is out of control. Instead, the violent rage controls the attackers.

Gaining emotional dominance: weak victims and supportive groups

Consider now how weak victims and supportive groups shift the emotional balance toward the dominance of the attackers. With regard to weak victims, a tipping-point can be discerned that demarcates the leap to a state of encapsulation and disproportionate violence. This is the moment when victims hit the ground. In the following fragment, two boys take revenge on a schoolmate, Pieter, whom they accused of telling filthy stories behind their backs. After chasing the victim by bike, the two attackers made him stop and started to punch him.

Pieter: David came to me, he didn't say anything and I felt [him] hit me hard. I couldn't fight back because they were with two. I fell down on the ground and then the kicking started. Even though I was on the ground, they just continued the beating. They started to kick me fiercely. I could not move, I could not resist them. I felt pain everywhere and I thought they were going to kick me to death. (case 44)

While the victim indicates that the two attackers started to kick him fiercely, 'even though' he was laying on the ground, the general pattern is that the violence gets worse right after the moment the victim is down on the ground. In this situation, the victim had shown a sign of weakness already before he went down to the ground, as he indicated he 'couldn't fight back'. By giving up resistance, the victim widened the emotional asymmetry, that in turn encouraged the attackers to intensify their violence. Later, his state of paralysis ('I could not move, I could not resist them') further increased the emotional asymmetry. Indeed, the accounts of some attackers suggest that their anger flares up when victims hit the ground. Thus, one of the attackers who had beaten up Pieter reported:

David: Carlo joined me and he grabbed Pieter's throat from behind and smashed him to the ground. When he wanted to get up, I kicked him several times. Carlo also kicked him, with a turning kick, that is a kind of karate technique. Pieter then stumbled into a parked car and hit the ground again. At that moment, I went really, really mad and started to kick him wildly. (case 44)

The first phase of the physical violence started with David punching Pieter. Then Carlo joined David, grabbed Pieter's throat and 'smashed' him to the ground. At that point, the victim was not completely defeated yet, as he tried to get up. To prevent him from running away or taking a less vulnerable position, the attackers started to kick Pieter. After the turning kick, at the moment the victim stumbled into a parked car and could not stand on his feet,

his defeat was clear. His apparent weakness then set the rage in motion ('I went really, really mad'). Victims hitting the ground mark a decisive shift in the emotional balance: now it is clear for both parties who will be dominating and who will be dominated. Attackers who know this, purposively try to get victims to the ground for this reason, and because it attracts co-attackers who seize the opportunity for total dominance:

Robin: I saw that that boy was not yet down on the ground. I walked up to him and gave him a punch with my elbow in his face. I did so because we wanted to raise hell with the group. When he was down, I saw that Gradus began to beat him up completely. This was so hard and fast, I was impressed by it. (case 138)

When they are down on the ground, victims often confirm or increase the emotional asymmetry by giving up fighting, by taking a foetal position, paralyzing, apologizing or begging for mercy. However, giving up fighting or apologizing does not stop the attackers. Instead, it fires up the frenzy: when resistance is over and complete dominance is within reach, the victims' submissiveness renders the attackers furious. The fragments discussed above also demonstrate another form of arranging dominance: groups of youth often work together to attack lonely victims or smaller groups. The outnumbering is twofold. First, it concerns the number of group members who actually commit the violence versus the number of victims who are actually attacked, which makes for weak, outnumbered victims. Second, it comprises the size of the supportive group of the attackers' group versus that of victims' group, which makes for the dominance of the supportive group of the attackers. Apart from their size, supportive groups may encourage the attackers by focusing the attention on the violence, by just watching, by making a lot of noise, or by cheering. For instance, they indicate that a humiliating act should be revenged ('are you accepting that?'). Other supportive groups yell and shout to provoke more action ('we want more, we want more!', 'kick him, kick him!', 'let her crawl, let her crawl!'). In a few cases, supportive groups suggested ways to degrade and humiliate the victims: one victim had to kneel down, another had her hair burned, and in some cases, the attackers were asked to rob the victims of their bikes or glasses, which the attackers subsequently offered 'for sale'.

Victims hitting the ground, the presence of weak, outnumbered victims and the dominance of the attackers' supportive group are expected to shift the emotional balance toward the dominance of the attackers. The extent to which these situational features impact the chance that violence turns into a frenzied attack will be evaluated statistically below. But first, the appearances of solidarity excitement among the attackers' group (including both the attackers and their supportive groups) will be discussed.

Forms of solidarity excitement

The analyses presented here consider how groups develop a shared focus of attention on violence and how they display a shared emotional mood. In the following fragment, taken from a voluminous case file on a group of youth who had committed a series of violent attacks during several consecutive nights, two group members explain how the violence offered a way to experience fun and feelings of group membership.

Micha: I was enjoying it at that time. I was acting tough for my friends. After we had beaten up the guy we went back and had a laugh. We also boasted about the fight. We told our friends what we had done. At that moment I was proud of it.

Patrick: We went for the thrill of it and wanted to be tough, that's why we gave him a thrashing. We told our friends about this cool story. After that fight we agreed to beat up someone else. I don't know who started it, but we used words like 'we feel like bashing'. We meant to say that we would beat up someone without a reason. We all knew, that someone would be beaten up at the slightest occasion. We would just look at each other and go for it. I have no idea how this can happen. I think I wanted to act tough. Like I was part of the group. (case 75)

Several cues point to the presence of solidarity excitement, preceding, during and after the violence. Consider first the strong focus of attention in the group: they only needed to look at one another to know what would happen. Apparently, 'target convergence' (Hochstetler 2001: 750–1) was easy for this group. One typical way of target convergence for this and other groups as well is to yell and scold at passers-by. Another form occurs when group members indicate that they had been hit, threatened or scolded at by the potential victim. Most often, this talk is exaggerated or false, and the group knows this. What is actually being communicated is that a suitable victim is found and that the plan is to start a fight. Patrick's reputation ('whenever we fight, Patrick is there') increases the group's awareness that the attack will be a likely course of action. This is what Hochstetler (2001: 751–2) calls 'establishing identity': the recognition of group members' past behaviour is projected upon the upcoming action. The fragment also indicates the group's shared emotional mood. First, there was a joyous spirit ('we had a laugh') and the group members apparently sensed that they shared the same mood, as they used the plural in 'we feel like bashing'. Second, both attackers report they were acting tough for their friends. Micha also indicates that he was proud of beating up the victim and Patrick says he was part of the group. This means that the parts they played in the violent action confirm their status as worthy members of the group. Finally, both attackers indicate that the bashing was talked about later with their friends. In so doing, the violence has turned into a symbol, providing a way to

revive the emotional mood again (Collins 2004: 98–9). Another example that shows how solidarity excitement emerges prior to the attack is provided by the following fragment. Now the collective mood is one of anger and humiliation. After some minor confrontations between Turkish and Moluccan boys in the night life of A. [name of town], the Moluccan boys wanted revenge when one of them, Samuel, was slapped in the face by a Turkish boy, Kemal. The group went to search Kemal, but when they could not find him, they readily agreed on another Turkish victim. Here again, target convergence was easy, given the already strong alignment of the group to commit violence. This is how the group developed emotional attunement:

Samuel: When I got home I told the story [that he was slapped in the face by a Turkish boy] to my nephews. Then Jonathan called. He asked me if I was beaten by a Turk. He was very angry. Jonathan said: ‘Let’s go to A. and show me that Turk’. He also said that we shouldn’t talk to that Turk, but beat him up right away. He said: ‘no talking, just trashing’. When I went to the bus stop, Jonathan was there, and Nahesjon. Later came Ezra and Xander. I heard from the older boys who joined us in A. that it was one Kemal who had hit me. They said they were now forced to beat him up, as a Turk had threatened and hit me. In the bus to A. we spoke about nothing else than that I was beaten up by that Turkish boy. (case 51)

On their way to revenge, the group established a common mood of anger and humiliation, as they kept on ruminating about the Turkish boy who had hit Samuel. Furthermore, the older boys intensified this mood by stating they felt obliged to pay back the insult. Note also that Jonathan, who was considered as someone who easily went berserk in confrontations, took the lead in raising the campaign to vengeance. In Hochstetlers’ terms, his reputation was part of establishing the violent identity of the group. Related to this, the fragment above also points to the presence of relatives among the attackers: not only nephews but also brothers (Ezra and Xander) were joining the fight. In other cases, fathers and sons or brothers explicitly put kinship ties at stake. For instance they challenge the opponent to ‘not ever touch my father’ or they refer to a shared reputation as fighters: ‘show me you are a real Boender’ (referring to the nick name of the family). The degree to which solidarity excitement and the presence of relatives in the attackers’ group impact the chance that frenzied attacks occur will be considered below.

Frenzied attacks versus controlled forms of violence

The results of the above analyses indicate that frenzied attacks are qualitatively different from other forms of youth violence. Moreover, the analyses suggest that there are specific situational properties that increase the

Table I: *Descriptive statistics of the situational properties of frenzied attacks (N = 28) versus controlled forms of violence (N = 131), frequencies (percentages) and means (standard deviations)*

	Frenzied attacks	Controlled violence	Significance of difference
Victims hit ground	18 (64.3%)	20 (15.3%)	P < 0.001
Number of attackers (a1)	2.43 (1.14)	2.01 (1.06)	P = 0.062
Number of victims (b1)	1.21 (0.42)	1.25 (0.63)	P = 0.750
Degree of weak, outnumbered victims (a1 minus b1)	1.21 (1.03)	0.75 (1.05)	P = 0.035
Size of attackers' supportive group (a2)	2.43 (2.46)	1.71 (2.02)	P = 0.102
Size of victims' supportive group (b2)	0.43 (0.79)	1.35 (1.53)	P = 0.000
Dominance of attacker's supportive group (a2 minus b2)	2.00 (2.60)	0.36 (2.36)	P = 0.001
Solidarity excitement prior to the attack	12 (42.9%)	24 (18.3%)	P = 0.007
Relatives in attacker's group	10 (35.7%)	15 (11.5%)	P = 0.003
Alcohol intoxication attackers	1.15 (1.43)	0.49 (0.88)	P = 0.028
Male-on-male	25 (89.3%)	107 (81.7%)	P = 0.251

Note:

To determine significance of differences, one sided Chi-square tests were used for dichotomous variables and T-tests for ordinal variables, using Levene's F-test to determine equality of variances. Due to missing values, the analysis of alcohol intoxication is based on 150 cases, including 27 frenzied attacks.

likelihood for violence to turn into frenzied attacks. These findings will be assessed statistically in this section. Table I compares the situational properties of frenzied attacks versus controlled forms of violence.

In nearly two-thirds of all frenzied attacks, the victims had hit the ground, while this is only slightly over 15 per cent in forms of controlled violence. Concerning the number of attackers, it turns out that in frenzied attacks (2.43), there are more attackers than in controlled forms of violence (2.01), a marginally significant difference only. The number of victims is about the same in the two forms of violence. While weak, outnumbered victims feature in both forms of violence, they are more likely to be found in frenzied attacks; there are on average 1.21 more attackers than victims in the latter form of violence, compared to 0.75 more attackers in controlled forms of violence, a significant difference. While the average size of the attackers' supportive groups does not differ significantly between the two forms of violence, that of the victims' supportive groups is only 0.43 in frenzied attacks and 1.35 in controlled forms of violence. This finding points to the tendency to single out lonely victims in frenzied attacks. As a result, the dominance of the attackers' supportive groups differs significantly between the two forms of violence: in frenzied attacks, the supportive groups of the attackers includes on average two more people, while in controlled forms of violence the difference is only 0.36 on average. Note that the standard deviations are large, indicating substantially dispersed variation within these categories. Both solidarity excitement prior to the violence and the presence of relatives among the attackers' group appear significantly more often in frenzied attacks (respectively 42.9 per cent versus 18.3 per

cent and 35.7 per cent versus 11.5 per cent). Also, attackers had consumed more alcohol in frenzied attacks. Overall, however this indicator scores rather low, a score of one means that only five glasses of alcohol maximum were consumed, or it was reported that the alcohol did not have tangible effects. While the fragments above often suggested a considerable degree of intoxication, a great deal of violence in the sample is not so much related to heavy drinking apparently. Finally, the proportion of male-to-male violence does not differ significantly between the two forms of violence.

Table II displays the relative impact of the situational properties on the odds that violence turns into frenzied attacks. Due to missing information on the alcohol intoxication of the attackers, nine cases were dropped from the sample.⁴ The first model shows that both the alcohol intoxication of the attackers (odds ratio 1.544) and the dominance of the attackers' supportive groups (odds ratio 1.857) significantly increase the likelihood that a frenzied attack occurs. However, the presence of weak, outnumbered victims does not result into significant effects. In model 2, both the solidarity excitement prior to the violence (odds ratio 2.888) and the presence of relatives in the attackers' group (odds ratio 6.808) result in significant and substantial effects. Contrary to the expectation, including solidarity excitement does not alter the effect of alcohol intoxication substantially. To analyse whether it makes a difference if solidarity excitement is fuelled by alcohol or not, model 3 includes an interaction term that combines both indicators. However, it does not result in a significant effect, nor does it contribute to the model's explanatory power ($\chi^2 = 1.620$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.203$). Contrary to what was expected, alcohol intoxication and solidarity excitement do not appear as two interrelated ingredients of a quest for violent excitement. Finally, model 4 supports the idea that victims hitting the ground are a decisive tipping point, as it yields a substantial and highly significant effect (odds ratio 10.631). Including this indicator reduces the effects of alcohol intoxication and solidarity excitement and turns them non-significant. Furthermore, model 4 shows that the impact of the presence of relatives in the attackers' group slightly increases when the moment victims hitting the ground is taken into account.

Although these results should be interpreted with some prudence given the size of the sample and the distribution of the binary variables (see Table I), the statistical analyses support the idea that frenzied attacks have distinct situational properties that sets them apart from controlled forms of violence. Moreover, they suggest that the numerical dominance of the supportive group of the attackers is of greater importance than the presence of weak, outnumbered victims. This result remains throughout the analyses. While solidarity excitement and alcohol intoxication result into significant effects, their impact is reduced when the model includes whether victims fall down to the ground. However, as the qualitative analyses suggested, groups may, perhaps driven by the influence of alcohol and solidarity excitement, try to attain situational

Table II: *Logistic regression analysis of the likelihood for youth violence to turn into a frenzied attack (N = 150)*

	Model 1: alcohol intoxication+ outnumbering + supportive groups			Model 2: model 1 + solidarity excitement + relatives		
	B	Standard error	Odds ratio	B	Standard error	Odds ratio
Constant	-2.158	0.637	0.116**	-2.878	0.718	0.056**
Male-to-male	0.566	0.683	1.761	0.608	0.720	1.836
Alcohol intoxication attackers	0.435	0.208	1.544*	0.455	0.221	1.576*
Degree of weak, outnumbered victims	0.279	0.227	1.322	-0.016	0.264	0.984
Dominance of attackers' supportive group	0.619	0.229	1.857**	0.598	0.244	1.818*
Solidarity excitement prior to the attack				1.061	0.548	2.888~
Relatives in attacker's group				1.918	0.594	6.808**
Solidarity excitement x alcohol intoxication						
Victims hit the ground						
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²		0.195			0.311	

	Model 3: model 2 + interaction solidarity excitement x alcohol			Model 4: model 2 + victims hit the ground		
	B	Standard error	Odds ratio	B	Standard error	Odds ratio
Constant	-2.834	0.719	0.059**	-3.968	0.866	0.019**
Male-to-male	0.585	0.722	1.794	1.080	0.794	2.944
Alcohol intoxication attackers	0.240	0.287	1.271	0.262	0.252	1.300
Degree of weak, outnumbered victims	-0.030	0.264	0.971	-0.372	0.313	0.690
Dominance of attackers' supportive group	0.552	0.248	1.737*	0.646	0.263	1.907*
Solidarity excitement prior to the attack	0.896	0.589	2.451	0.591	0.613	1.805
Relatives in attacker's group	1.954	0.590	7.053**	2.034	0.672	7.642**
Solidarity excitement x alcohol intoxication	0.599	0.484	1.820			
Victims hit the ground				2.364	0.619	10.631**
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²		0.325			0.443	

Note:

~ P = 0.053; * P < 0.05; ** P < 0.01.

dominance exactly by getting the victims to the ground. Finally, the presence of relatives in the attackers' group has marked effects. It may very well be that for the fathers, sons, brothers and nephews in this sample, violent situations are tests of kinship loyalty.

Conclusion

The most horrendous forms of youth violence are the result of a social figuration that offers opportunities for total, uncontested dominance. When this happens, the rage takes over; the attackers become encapsulated and start to use disproportionate violence. In symbolic interactionist terms, the attackers' capacities for self-monitoring are temporarily shut off, as 'I' is no longer attended to by 'Me'. Three features make up the social figuration in which these emotional dynamics take place. First, the moment victims hit the ground forms a tipping point. Not only are victims less threatening and more vulnerable in such position, often they also become passive and paralysed, start to apologize and beg for mercy, thus contributing to the emotional asymmetry. The second feature concerns the presence of supportive groups who do not engage in physical violence themselves. Earlier studies found that the presence of third parties in general (Felson 1982; Felson and Steadman 1983) and group ties in particular (Phillips and Cooney 2005) increase the intensity of conflicts. The findings reported here are in line with these earlier results as they show that the presence of relatives among the attackers' group strongly contributes to the likelihood for violence to turn extreme. This article also extends these prior findings, as it shows the importance of the numerical dominance of the attackers' supportive group vis-à-vis those of the victims'. The third feature of the social figuration that makes frenzied attacks a more likely outcome concerns the solidarity excitement among the attackers' group. While prior studies of youth street violence and gangs often point to solidarity as a core cultural value, Gould (1999: 376) concluded that solidarity should be evidenced in action instead of relying on the 'rhetoric of kinship' as it is in real confrontations that group members have to live up to their claims of solidarity. Combining Collins's (2004) and Hochstetler's (2001) insights, this article aimed to open up solidarity by analysing it as situationally emergent group feelings that focus on violence as a future line of action.

This study offers empirical support for the central ideas on which Collins's (2008) micro-sociology of violence is based. This is, first, the notion that extreme violence is different from other forms of violence because of the specific emotional state the attackers are in. Second, the idea that this emotional state is the result of a social figuration in which the emotional balances are shifting toward the total dominance of the attackers. Third, the notion that weak victims and supportive groups play a crucial role in the shifting of emotional balances.

Finally, this study raises a series of new questions. First, the finding that the numerical dominance of supportive groups affects the course of violent events offers a starting point for more elaborated analyses of the role of these groups. Such work should also follow up on the earlier work on third parties and partisans mentioned above (see the suggestions made by Phillips and Cooney 2005). In particular, the finding that the dominance of the attackers' supportive group is of greater importance than the outnumbering of victims by attackers themselves needs further unpacking. Close-up analyses of how supportive groups focus the attention on the violence, how they turn it into a stage and how they intervene in the interaction will provide useful insights in this respect.

Second, apart from the distinct focus on the emotional dynamics, the approach followed here offers an alternative view on violence in another respect. Often, it is found that violence follows a strategic or moral logic. Thus, violence as retaliation (Jacobs and Wright 2006), as a way to maintain reputation or respect (Anderson 1999; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Sanders 1994), or to defend honour (Cooney 1998: chapter 5; Horowitz 1983) all follow a survival logic of (pre-emptive) protection, to deter future attacks in unsafe environments. Alternatively, the explanation of violence as a form of social control to settle grievances, to even wrongdoings or to manage conflict (Black 1983) follows a moral logic. Instead, this article departs from the idea that violence follows the logic of dominance. Emotional asymmetry, rather than survival strategy or morality is supposed to rule the interaction. While the focus of this article was not on the meanings of violence, the qualitative analyses do show that at least in some instances, victims are picked opportunistically, and that attackers can do so without or with fake moral justifications (e.g. false accusations) that serve to focus the attention of the group toward violent action. These forms of violence are neither moralistic nor strategic, and they do not seem to involve conflict in the sense that the opponents have antagonistic interests either. In relatively pacified environments where formal law or other adult authority is generally accepted as a means to manage conflicts, youth violence may not be as moralistic or strategic as it is often assumed. Under these conditions, youth may be much more likely to turn to authorities and seek 'legal partisanship' (Black 1998: 139–41) for protection or conflict management, as compared to their counterparts who form gangs in unsafe environments (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). The violence that remains may be of predatory nature more often. Thus, one question for future research is whether the solidarity excitement that is associated with extreme violence, is more often joyous rather than angry. Another question is whether (extreme) youth violence under these conditions is more likely to be part of a quest for excitement (Elias and Dunning 1986), to experience intense emotions and bodily sensations, rather than as part of social conflict.

Third, subsequent work could try to answer questions that relate the meanings of violence to the emotional dynamics. For instance, does it make a difference when victims hit the ground if the violence is a way to express respect or alternatively, if it is a punishment? And how does the meaning of violence relate to the development of solidarity excitement? Felson (2009), in his review of Collins's theory, argues that violence should be explained as instrumental behaviour, driven by (emotionally) weighted costs and rewards. However, perspectives that regard violence as intentional, instrumental and meaningful behaviour do not necessarily exclude approaches that focus on the emotional dynamics of violent situations. So, probably the greatest advantage of Collins's theory is that social-scientific researchers of violence now have a coherent conceptual perspective that allows them to see how violence as meaningful interaction is structured by situational emotional dynamics.

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Notes

1. My thanks to Randall Collins, Ali de Regt and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article. I also thank the Netherlands' Organization for Scientific Research for supporting this research (grant number 016.095.167).

2. The term solidarity excitement is used here instead of Durkheim's (2001 [1912]) 'collective effervescence'. Although describing a similar emotional process of group solidarity, the latter term originally denoted the ecstatic high moments in which groups forge religious, moral or other mental images and representations (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 158, 164) whereas solidarity excitement may not produce such lasting results (see also Collins 2004: chapter 2, on collective effervescence and the creation of group symbols).

3. It can be argued that alcohol consumption makes attackers slow and clumsy, so that the most ferocious attacks are probably not committed by intoxicated attackers (see Collins 2008:268). However, the argument is here that the effect of alcohol consumption is part of a broader social process that builds up to solidarity excitement. On the other hand, alcohol intoxication might make for weak victims (Felson and Steadman 1983: 65, 67, 72). Additional analyses in which the victims' degree of alcohol intoxication was included (measured in the same way as the attackers' intoxication) did not result in a significant effect of this variable.

4. Additional analyses in which these nine missing values were replaced with the mean yielded similar results and explanatory power.

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