Violence as Situational Action

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Violence comes in many forms and occurs in many different circumstances for many different reasons. Is it really possible to develop a single theory that can explain all these disparate acts? In this paper, we argue it is. We make the case that acts of violence are essentially *moral actions* and therefore can, and should, be analysed and explained as such. We maintain that *all* acts of violence can be explained within the general framework of a theory of moral action. We present just such a theory – *Situational Action Theory* – and demonstrate how it can be applied to the explanation and study of violence.

People get into bar fights because someone spills beer on them. Police officers beat up suspects who insult them. Terrorists blow up planes and vehicles to achieve political goals. Mothers hit their children because they misbehave. Youth gangs attack members of other gangs to defend their turf. Soldiers shoot enemies to stop them advancing. Husbands hit their spouses because they disagree about family finances. State officials execute offenders as a form of punishment. Adolescents get into schoolyard fights over rude remarks. Drug-dealers kill rivals to protect their businesses. Disgruntled employees go on shooting sprees in their workplaces because they are made redundant.

Violence comes in many forms and occurs in many different circumstances (see McClintock 1963; McClintock and Wikström 1992; Wikström 1985, 1991) for many different reasons (see Curtis 1974; Wolfgang 1958). Is it really possible

to develop a single theory that can explain all these disparate acts? We will argue it is.

In this paper we will make the case that acts of violence are essentially moral actions and therefore can, and should, be analysed and explained as such.[1] We will maintain that *all* acts of violence can be explained within the general framework of a theory of moral action. We will present just such a theory – *Situational Action Theory* (e.g., Wikström 2006, forthcoming) – and demonstrate how it can be applied to the explanation and study of violence.[2]

1. Situational Action Theory
Situational Action Theory (SAT) was originally developed to overcome key problems identified in prominent criminological theories (Wikström 2004, 2005), including the problem of the definition of crime (theories are often unclear about what it is they aim to explain); the problem

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[1] Morality is often discussed in terms of whether particular actions are good or bad (virtuous or reprehensible), or whether or not they are justified in relation to some superior moral principle. It is important to stress that we do not use and discuss morality in these terms but rather focus on understanding how people's actions are guided by rules about what actions are right or wrong under particular circumstances; we classify these rules

as *moral rules*. We do not make any judgements about whether existing rules are justified or not. Consequently, we also avoid terminology like "inappropriate", "antisocial" or "immoral". Our aim here is to explore how human action is guided by moral rules, not why we have the moral rules we have. We recognise that this is a very important question, but not one we address in this paper.

[2] SAT has already been applied to other forms of moral action, including acts of terrorism (Bouhana and Wikström 2008).

of distinguishing between causes and correlates and the consequently poor understanding of causal mechanisms (theories often fail to distinguish between attributes and markers and actual causes because they lack an accurate understanding of relevant causal processes); the problem of integrating levels of explanation (theories often lack a proper theory of action through which individual and environmental levels of explanation can be integrated);[3] and the problem of explaining development and change (theories often fail to adequately explain relevant processes of development and change).[4]

Subsequently, SAT has developed into a more general theory of moral action which aims to explain why people follow and break moral rules, in which crime is regarded as a subclass of a more general category of acts of moral rule-breaking (Wikström 2006, forthcoming; Wikström and Treiber 2009). The chief rationale for expanding the scope of the theory is that there is no fundamental difference between explaining why people (follow or) break moral rules in general (for example, informal rules about talking in a library, drinking alcohol before noon or skipping ahead in a queue) and why they (follow or) break moral rules *defined by law*. The basic causal processes are the same; hence the basic explanation is the same.

1.1. A Brief Summary of the Foundations and Key Propositions of SAT

Situational Action Theory aims to overcome the enduring (but unfruitful) divide between individual and environmental explanations of moral action, such as acts of violence. It achieves this by proposing a *situational mechanism* (a perception–choice process), which links a person and his/her environment to his/her action. It postulates that all actions (including acts of crime and violence) may be seen as the outcome of (i) what action alternatives a person perceives, and (ii) what action choices he/she then makes.

Situational Action Theory is based on explicit assumptions about human nature and its relation to social order. Humans are viewed as essentially rule-guided actors and social order as fundamentally based on adherence to common rules of conduct (i.e., the social order is essentially a moral order). Explaining human moral action such as acts of violence ultimately has to do with understanding the *interplay* between common moral rules of conduct and a person's own moral rules in shaping his/her moral development and providing grounds for his/her moral actions.

SAT also aims to reconcile the role of deterministic and voluntaristic forces in the explanation of human action. SAT integrates deterministic approaches (behaviouristic) and voluntaristic approaches (free will) to the explanation of moral action and crime. It does so by recognizing that human action (including law abidance and acts of crime) may be caused either by *habit* or more rational *deliberation*. It argues that people exercise free will and self-control (internal controls) and respond to deterrence cues (external controls) only when they deliberate. Whether a choice of action is deliberate or habitual depends on the actor's familiarity with the circumstances in which he/she operates; repeated exposure to particular circumstances leads to action becoming automated (habitual), rather than deliberate, in those and similar circumstances (Wikström 2006, forthcoming; Wikström and Treiber 2009).

The fundamental arguments of Situational Action Theory concerning the explanation of violence are (Wikström forthcoming):

i. Acts of violence are *moral actions* (i.e., actions guided by what it is right or wrong to do, or not to do, in a particular circumstance) and therefore need to be explained as such.

ii. People engage in acts of violence because they (i) come to see such acts as viable *action alternatives* and (ii) *choose* (habitually or deliberately) to carry them out.

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3 The perspective we propose is neither individualistic nor collectivistic, but *situational*; rather than explaining how individual or environmental factors lead to action, it focuses on how their *interaction* leads to action.

4 Not all criminological theories fail on all these fronts, but we argue that the vast majority fail on at least one, and often several.

iii. The likelihood that a person will come to see an act of violence as an action alternative and choose to carry it out ultimately depends on his/her *propensity* to engage in violence (grounded in his/her action-relevant moral rules and emotions and ability to exercise self-control) and its *interplay* with his/her *exposure* to settings conducive to violence (defined by their action-relevant moral rules and level of enforcement).

iv. The role of *broader social conditions* and their changes (such as social integration and segregation), and the role of *individual development and change* (life histories), should be analysed as the causes of the causes of acts of violence.

v. Relevant *causes of the causes* of acts of violence are *only* those social conditions and life events that can be demonstrated to influence the development of people's propensity to engage in acts of violence (their action-relevant morality and ability to exercise self-control) and the emergence of, and people's differential exposure to, settings with features pertinent to acts of violence (settings whose moral context and deterrent qualities may encourage or discourage violence).

1.2. Defining Acts of Violence

Concepts like aggression and violence are used and defined in many different ways (e.g., Baron 1977; Brenner 1971; Buss 1961; Cahoon 1972).[5] We define violence as *acts intended to bring about physical harm to other beings*. What we aim to explain, then, is a type of action. *Acts* are bodily movements under the guidance of a person (e.g., speaking or hitting). We only consider acts *intended* to cause harm, because excluding intention from the definition would mean accidents which (unintentionally) cause harm would classify as acts of violence (for example, accidentally shooting someone when cleaning a gun) while unsuccessful attempts to harm someone would not (for example, shooting to kill someone, but missing). We have also restricted the concept of violence to acts intended to bring about *physical* harm, that is, acts intended to cause pain, bodily injury or death. However,

our explanation applies equally well to intentional acts which cause emotional harm (for example, verbal abuse) and material damage (vandalism).[6]

Harming another being can be a *goal in itself* (sometimes referred to as "expressive" violence) or a *means to another goal* (sometimes referred to as "instrumental" violence). SAT applies equally well to expressive or instrumental acts of violence, thus there is no need for separate explanations. We will, however, discuss some of the differences in circumstances which lead to expressive and instrumental violence.

The *intentions of the object of the violence* are not part of our definition. Acts are regarded as violent regardless of whether the object of the intended harm explicitly or implicitly agrees to be subjected to pain or injury (for example, as they may in certain sports and sexual activities). There is no need to construct different explanations for cases in which the victim does and does not agree to be subjected to physical harm. They can all be explained as moral actions.

1.3. Violence as Moral Action

When explaining acts of violence, the most important fact is *not* that they intend to bring about physical harm but that they are *moral actions* guided by rules about what it is right or wrong to do in a particular circumstance. There is principally no difference in explaining the causal processes that make a person hit someone, lie to someone or steal someone's belongings. What differs are the *moral rules* that guide particular kinds of action (the action-relevant moral rules). What differentiates acts of violence from other moral actions is therefore not the basic *processes* which make people engage in violence (versus another moral action) but the *input* (action-relevant moral rules) which guides the perception of violence as an action alternative and the choice between violence and other alternatives in a particular circumstance. To fully understand why people engage in

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6 We regard violence as a subclass of the more inclusive concept of *aggression*, defined as *acts intended to bring about harm to other beings*. Aggression so defined includes acts intended to cause

physical as well as *emotional* harm (e.g., feelings of distress). We reserve the term *vandalism* for actions intended to damage or destroy others' material possessions without the owner's express permission.

a *particular* kind of moral action, one needs to comprehend the particular moral rules which regulate that action.

Because violence takes many forms – one of the reasons it has proven difficult to develop an effective general theory – there is considerable variation in the moral rules which regulate different kinds of violence in different settings. Moral rules regulate not only whether the use of violence is right or wrong in a particular circumstance, but also what kinds and levels of violence are permitted. For example, the use of violence in a boxing ring is permitted *if* boxing is legal, *if* the person hitting is a boxer, *if* the person being hit is his opponent, *if* that opponent is wearing the right equipment, *if* the referee has indicated the match is underway, and so forth. What is common to all cases of violence is the fact that there are *always* moral rules guiding its use, and a particularly important form of moral rules which regulate violence is the law.

1.4. The Law as Moral Rules
The use of violence is generally regulated by law. Violence is illegal in some circumstances, but far from all. The circumstances in which violence is legal vary between countries and have changed within countries over the course of history. A good example is the use of violence in domestic circumstances (e.g., a husband's right to use violence against his wife, a parent's right to use violence against his/her child and a teacher's right to use violence against his/her pupils).

Laws are rules of conduct that tell people what they are allowed or not allowed to do (Ehrlich 2008). Hence laws are moral rules. They are not the only set of moral rules in a given country, but are usually the most important (with the possible exception of religion in some countries).[7] There are, of course, other sets of moral rules outside the law (and religion), which are more or less generalized, more or less formalised, and which guide people's use of violence in dif-

ferent circumstances. The law and other sets of moral rules may conflict in the form and degree of violence they permit in particular circumstances. The extent to which particular laws are effectively normative (homogeneously internalised) may vary within a jurisdiction. Changes in law can be used to try to change people's moral rules (as a tool of social engineering). Criminalising the use of violence in domestic circumstances is a good example. The fact that many special interest groups (such as environmentalists) campaign to have their agendas recognized by law is another good illustration of the perceived power of the law (i.e., its rules of conduct) as a major force influencing human action.

1.5. Moral Rules as Causal Powers
The reason why moral rules are important in the explanation of human action is that they have *causal powers* (powers to bring about certain actions).[8] They influence people to act in certain ways. They influence people to see certain action alternatives and to make certain choices in response to particular circumstances. In fact, we would argue that moral rules are *key* causal powers in explaining moral actions such as acts of violence. One main reason why people engage in acts of violence is because moral rules allow them to see and choose violence as a viable action alternative in response to a particular circumstance. However, moral rules are not the only relevant causal powers in the explanation of human actions such as violence. Another main kind of causal power affecting moral action is what may be referred to as controls.

1.6. The Role of Controls in Moral Action
We submit that it is analytically advantageous to conceptually distinguish "moral rules" and "controls" in the explanation of moral action. Moral rules convey to people what actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances. People do not always follow moral rules. Controls kick in as an additional causal power when people deliberate over

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7 One of the essential elements of a religion is a code of conduct which applies to its adherents (e.g., the Ten Commandments). The overlap between legal and religious rules may be substantial in some jurisdictions.

8 The idea that rules have the power to guide human action has been forcefully argued by Harré and Secord (1972, 12): "It is the self-monitored following of rules and plans that we believe to be the social science analogue of the working of generative causal mechanisms in the processes which produce the non-random patterns studied by natural scientists."

Durkheim (2002, 41) refers to rules as being what he calls "genuine forces" that influence human action: "Thanks to the authority vested in them, moral rules are genuine forces, which confront our desires and needs, our appetites of all sorts, when they promise to become immoderate."

whether or not to follow a moral rule. We define *controls* as "enforcements of moral rules". They are processes that support adherence to moral rules, such as those regulating the use of violence. Effective controls are enforcements that make people act in accordance with moral rules they consider breaking. These can be moral rules that promote or prohibit a moral action. Controls are only activated when people *deliberate* over action alternatives. Controls do not play a major role in *habitual* action in which the action is an "automated" response to a repeated exposure to the particular circumstance (see below and Wikström 2006).

There are two main types of enforcements of moral rules: those originating from inside the person (self-control) and those originating from outside the person (deterrence). Self-control comes into play when there is a conflict between a person's motivation to act and his/her morality. For example, if a person is provoked by someone and motivated to hit him/her, but thinks and feels that hitting someone is wrong, the outcome will depend on the strength of the factors influencing the actor's ability to exercise self-control. We define *self-control* as "the inhibition of perceived action alternatives or the interruption of a course of action, which conflicts with the agent's own morality" (Wikström and Treiber 2007). A person's ability to exercise self-control will depend on factors such as his/her ability to process information or suppress emotion, but also momentary influences such as his/her level of stress or intoxication (for further details see Wikström and Treiber 2007).

Deterrence is the main causal mechanism through which formal and informal social controls (external interventions) influence a person's moral actions. *Deterrence* is defined as "the felt worry about or fear of consequences when considering breaking a moral rule or committing an act of crime" (for further details see Wikström 2007). Deterrence comes into play as a causal force when there is a conflict between the moral rules that apply to a setting and a person's own

morality. For example, if a person has no problem hitting someone who makes a rude remark but the moral rules of the setting (e.g., laws) prohibit such an action, the outcome will depend on the strength of deterrence originating from the conditions of the setting (i.e., the perceived likelihood of effective intervention and seriousness of potential consequences).

Controls are *only* relevant when there is a discrepancy or conflict involving the application of moral rules. In cases where the person's own morality and the moral rules of the setting tell him/her not to use violence, violence will be unlikely. On the other hand, in settings where the person's morality and the moral rules of the setting tell him/her that violence is permitted, violence will be likely. In all other cases, the strength of the controls (self-control or deterrence) will play a role in whether violence is the outcome.

1.7. The Role of Motivation in Moral Action

Motivation (defined as goal-directed attention) is a situational concept. People have particular *desires* (wants, needs) and *commitments* and when they encounter an *opportunity* to fulfil a desire or honour a commitment they are likely to be *tempted* to do so (i.e., to focus their attention on the possibility of acting to satisfy a desire or honour a commitment). Temptation may be regarded as one major class of motivators.

People also face *frictions* (unwanted interferences) which, depending on a person's *sensitivity*, may cause a *provocation* (feelings of upset or anger directed towards the perceived source of the friction).[9] Interferences can be physical (e.g., standing in someone's way) or verbal (e.g., insulting someone). Provocations may be regarded as another major class of motivators.

Temptations and provocations may not be the only motivators, but they are some of the most, if not *the* most, impor-

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9 Perhaps the most famous motivational theory of aggression is Dollard and colleagues' *frustration-aggression hypothesis* (1944), which claims that "aggression is always a consequence of frustration" and "the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression" (1). In this theory, aggression is

defined as "a sequence of behavior, the goal-response to which is injury to the person towards whom it is directed" (7) and frustration as "an interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response" (5). Although we accept that frustration may be a major motivator of violent action, we stress there

are many others. We also prefer the conceptual pairing of frictions and provocations, which underlines the situational nature of motivation.

tant classes of motivators in moral action. While temptations originate from within (being initiated when a person's desires and commitments connect to an opportunity), provocations originate from without (being initiated by unwanted external interferences). Acts of violence may be motivated by temptations or provocations. A person may hit a stranger to obtain a CD he/she desires, a member of a rival gang to honour a commitment (not necessarily because he/she wants to) or a peer who insults his/her partner (an interference). However, people may and commonly do use alternatives other than violence to deal with their motivations. The crucial question is *why* some people respond violently to a motivation, while others do not.

There are no particular motivations that (always) cause people to act violently. People turn to violence for all sorts of motives (they may or may not use violence as part of dealing with particular desires, commitments or frictions). Motivation exerts a *general directional influence* on the kinds of action in which a person may engage. People *vary* in individual factors influencing their motivations (e.g., their particular desires and commitments and sensitivity to frictions) and therefore in the kinds of action in which they may be motivated to engage.

Whether or not a particular motivation results in an act of violence crucially depends on the interplay between a person's morality and the moral rules of the setting, which acts as a *moral filter* for the kinds of action he/she considers, and, when relevant (i.e., when a person deliberates over the application of moral rules to a choice of action), is influenced by the strength of the controls operating in the particular circumstance. Motivation is therefore a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in the explanation of moral actions such as acts of violence.

1.8. Moral Choices
When a person is motivated (has goal-directed attention) he/she will, depending on the moral filter, perceive certain action alternatives in relation to the motivation and, based

upon that, make certain moral choices. This *perception–choice process* can be either (predominantly) habitual or deliberate. In a process characterized by moral habit, the person sees only one causally effective action alternative, while in a deliberate process, when the person makes a moral judgement, he/she has to decide which is the best of several perceived alternatives.

1.8.1. Moral Habits
Habitual action choices occur when people perceive only one alternative for action; the choice of action is then automatic.[10] The actor does not exhibit free will or self-control because he/she allows the setting to determine the action by complying with the first alternative which that setting (or a factor in that setting) causes to "spring to mind" (Wikström 2006; Wikström and Treiber 2007).

Habits are acquired when a person learns to act in a particular way in a particular setting after being repeatedly exposed to that setting and responding to it with a particular action (which obtains a desire, fulfils a commitment, or addresses a source of friction). Through repetition that action may become *prepotent*, i.e., the first alternative he/she perceives upon entering the setting, and subsequently habitual, the *only* alternative he/she perceives.

Habits may be very specific or generalized. Just as perceiving an action as an alternative in one setting may increase the likelihood one will perceive it as an alternative in other settings, habitually choosing an alternative in one setting may increase the likelihood that one may habitually choose that alternative in other settings as well (Huesmann 1997).

The acquisition of habits is supported by the *somatic marker system*, by which the brain summates information about the somatic outcomes of each instance of an action into an intuitive "marker" which signifies the action's significance (Damasio 1994, 1996). This marker is activated by action-relevant contexts and helps to steer goal-directed

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10 Note that "doing x" and "not doing x" are two alternatives and therefore do not lead to an automatic choice. An automatic choice occurs when a person perceives the option of "doing x" but not the option of "not doing x".

attention. Most of the information these markers convey is emotional. Emotions can benefit perception by redirecting attention to unremarkable action-relevant factors, or impair it by redirecting attention to action-irrelevant ones (Bechara, Tranel, and Damasio 2000; Damasio 1994, 1996; Hinson, Jameson, and Whitney 2002; Huesmann 1997; Lösel and Schmucker 2004; Turnbull et al. 2005). Very strong emotions may lead an actor to see only one alternative and act habitually.

Although under-researched, habits have important implications, especially for our understanding of persistent patterns of behaviour, such as how they arise, why they persist and, potentially, how they may be disrupted.

1.8.2. Moral Judgement
Moral judgements occur when actors *deliberately* consider more than one alternative for action. Deliberation involves gathering and analyzing information relevant to different alternatives, and using that information to determine which alternative is preferred (Fuster 1997; Goldman-Rakic 1987). This process is facilitated by areas of the brain which store, retrieve and manipulate sensory information from the environment and internalized knowledge (Adcock et al. 2000; Best, Williams, and Coccaro 2002; Cohen et al. 1997; Prabhakaran et al. 2000; Schoenbaum and Setlow 2001; Smith and Jonides 1997).

Deliberation allows people to internalize control of an action. Self-control is important for moral action because it allows people to act in accordance with their personal moral rules even when they are motivated to break them (Wikström and Treiber 2007). This process is supported by brain areas which suppress emotions and habits and redirect attention from salient motivators (opportunities and sources of friction) to less salient deterrents (e.g., moral rules and consequences) (Best, Williams, and Coccaro 2002; Nobre et al. 1999).

Although the ability to exercise self-control is influenced by relatively stable personal characteristics (*executive capabilities*), it is also susceptible to transient influences, such as intoxication, emotional volatility and levels of stress (Wikström and Treiber 2007). Thus it is not a material or personal factor, but a *situational* factor which characterizes a person's engagement with a particular setting – i.e., an action process.

Self-control requires something *to* control, and therefore will only play a role in action processes in which the actor deliberates because he/she perceives conflict between his/her (externally driven) motivation to act and his/her personal moral rules. His/her ability to exercise self-control will determine if he/she successfully controls the action and acts in accordance with those rules.

1.8.3. Real-life Moral Choices
Although most choices are predominantly habitual or deliberative, many *choice processes* may involve elements of both habituation and deliberation (Damasio 1994; Kahneman 2003; Sloman 1996). To understand action, and how to prevent certain kinds of action, we need to understand these disparate types of choice and what kinds of actions they help explain.

2. Applying Situational Action Theory to Violence
We have argued that the Situational Action Theory provides a framework for explaining all acts of violence because acts of violence represent a type of moral action guided by rules about intentionally harming others, and all moral actions can be explained by understanding why certain people perceive those actions as alternatives they choose to pursue (the perception–choice process). Different types of moral action *will* differ, however, in the *content* which feeds this process. That content includes the moral context (action-relevant moral rules and their enforcement in the setting) and the actor's personal morality (internalized action-relevant moral rules and emotions) and ability to exercise self-control.

Acts of violence differ from other types of moral action because they occur when people with weak personal moral rules and emotions *opposing* the intentional harming of others (people who do not think intentionally harming others is wrong in a given circumstance, or do not care much about doing so even if they think it is), or strong personal moral rules and emotions *supporting* the intentional harming of others (people who think intentionally harming others is the right thing to do in a given circumstance and

would feel justified in doing so) encounter opportunities or frictions which may tempt or provoke them to act violently in settings which have a violence-conducive moral context (settings in which rules promote violence or in which rules prohibiting violence are weakly enforced). The intersection of such people and such settings may lead those people to perceive intentionally harming others as an alternative (and possibly *the only* alternative) which they choose to pursue.

In the following sections, we will discuss in detail the content which distinguishes violence as a moral action and the unique implications for its explanation and prevention. We will also consider the content which distinguishes different types of violence, particularly instrumental and expressive violence, which are often treated as separate categories of action. We will conclude by discussing the antecedent factors (the *causes of the causes*) which influence the acquisition of and changes in personal characteristics conducive to violence (relevant personal moral rules and emotions and the ability to exercise self-control) and the emergence of and changes in settings conducive to violence (relevant moral contexts) (Wikström 2005; Wikström and Treiber 2009). In doing so, it is our intention to show how violence, which is often treated as a special class of action requiring a special explanation, is explicable within the framework of Situational Action Theory, like any other moral action.

2.1. Perception of Violence as an Alternative

Most explanations of action focus on how people choose amongst (predetermined) alternatives, as if those alternatives were plain to everyone (see, for example, Clarke and Felson 1993; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). SAT, alternately, argues that before the process of choice a person engages in a *process of perception* by which he/she identifies viable alternatives for responding to a temptation or provocation.

To perceive violence as a viable alternative a person needs to be willing to intentionally harm others – he/she must not think intentionally harming others is wrong in the particular setting, or care very strongly about doing so even if it is. That setting must present factors which tempt or provoke

him/her to intentionally harm others. The interaction between such an actor and setting will determine whether that actor is *motivated* to commit an act of violence.

2.1.1. Action-relevant Moral Rules and Values

Acts of violence are generally regulated (rule-bound) to some extent; even in circumstances where violence is permitted it is typically limited to certain actors and certain actions. We previously gave the example of sporting events such as boxing; other circumstances in which intentionally causing physical harm to others may be permitted include war, medical procedures and self-defence. To avoid misunderstanding, we reiterate that we do not make assertions about whether intentionally causing physical harm to others should or should not be permitted in these (or any other) circumstances; we regard any action which follows or breaks the rules which regulate that action as moral action, regardless of whether those rules are defined by law or other codes of conduct, such as rules of professional practice (see footnote 1).

In circumstances in which violence is permitted, rules typically regulate who is allowed to intentionally harm whom. This is true in the boxing arena, where the boxers are permitted to intentionally harm each other (but not the referee, trainers, spectators, etc.); in war, where soldiers are only permitted to harm enemy soldiers (but not one another, or aid workers, or civilians);[11] in certain medical procedures, where a doctor is permitted to intentionally harm only legitimate patients (according to strict legal and professional rules); and in cases of self-defence, where a victim can intentionally harm his/her assailant (but not bystanders). At the same time, during a boxing match referees, trainers and spectators are not permitted to hit each other or either boxer; aid workers and civilians are not permitted to harm each other; patients are not permitted to intentionally harm their doctors; and, of course, assailants are not supposed to harm their victims.

An interesting and relevant phenomenon is the *monopoly of violence*, which generally refers to the fact that an authority figure or group is permitted to use violence more freely

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11 This is regulated, for example, by international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions.

than subordinate figures or groups. Governments often have a monopoly on violence in their power to regulate military activities, police conduct and the use of violence by the criminal justice system (e.g., capital and corporal punishment). In most western societies, governments are endowed with this power in order to protect their citizens. In some societies, however, it is assumed by the government (or a dictator) in order to control its citizens. In these contrasting cultures, rules about the use of violence in different settings will differ significantly, and have very different implications for its expression.

Alongside rules regulating who may intentionally harm whom are rules regulating what forms of violence may be used and what degree of each form is permissible. In boxing, only certain blows are permitted to certain parts of the body; in fencing one can be banned from a competition for hitting an opponent too hard or engaging in impermissible violent actions like throwing one's weapon or one's mask. In war the degree of violence is regulated by rules of engagement, while the form of violence is regulated by the kinds of weapons and assault tactics which soldiers are trained and allowed to use (this is regulated, for example, by treaties such as the Hague Conventions and the Geneva Protocols, although not all regimes accept or apply these rules). In medical practice one can intentionally harm someone to the degree that it will ultimately help him/her, and this will take the form of specific (highly regulated) procedures. Finally, in the case of self-defence the form and degree of violence permitted is determined by need; one is generally expected to inflict intentional harm only to the extent necessary to protect oneself.

It is possible that this differential permissibility may impact people's general violence-relevant moral rules (internalized rules guiding their use of violence in certain circumstances) and emotions (their emotional response to following or breaking rules about the use of violence), their tendency to perceive violence as an alternative across many settings, and the consequent spread of violent behaviour between settings (contagion effects). This may be counterbalanced, however, by the fact that there are almost always rules regulating who, what, when and where as far as violent behaviour is concerned. Whether or not one follows those rules will first

and foremost depend on whether a person agrees with them (his/her personal moral rules) and cares about following them (his/her moral emotions).

2.1.2. Personal Moral Rules and Violence

People's personal morality may be conducive to violence if they do not think acting violently in a setting is wrong, even if it is regulated, and if their moral emotions do not deter violence (they do not feel shame or guilt for acting violently) or even support it (they feel righteous or virtuous for acting violently).

Many people, for instance, will accept that hitting someone is wrong (because it breaks a rule or has significantly negative outcomes), but some will experience shame and guilt if they hit someone (or even think about doing so) and therefore feel particularly strongly that they (and others) should not do so. Others will not experience shame and guilt and will therefore attach less importance to hitting someone even if it breaks a moral rule and they think doing so is wrong, making them more likely to do so. Some people in some circumstances may even experience a feeling of self-righteousness – for instance, when they intentionally harm someone who has insulted them, their partner, mother, sibling, etc. – which will increase their tendency to see hitting someone as an alternative under those circumstances. Others, of course, may feel self-righteous when they *do not* hit someone who, for example, insulted them (etc.), strengthening their tendency to perceive *not* doing so as an alternative; many religions rely on this process to regulate their followers' moral behaviour.

To perceive violence as an alternative, a person must not only have personal moral rules and emotions conducive to violence, he/she must also take part in settings which lead him/her not only to see violence as possible, but also propitious.

2.1.3. Factors which Motivate Acts of Violence

For a person to undertake an act of violence he/she needs to perceive violence as an alternative *which he/she is motivated to pursue*. SAT suggests that once an individual perceives an alternative, he/she will be motivated to pursue it *if* he/she believes that action will satisfy a desire or fulfil a com-

mitment *or* address a source of friction. In the former case, he/she is *tempted* by an opportunity; in the latter he/she is *provoked* by an interference.

A person will be motivated to pursue an act of violence if he/she believes that he/she can acquire desired outcomes or fulfil commitments by intentionally harming others, and consequently sees opportunities to intentionally harm others as *tempting*; or if he/she sees intentionally harming others as a way of addressing a source of friction and consequently is *provoked* to commit an act of violence.

2.1.3.1. Opportunities and Temptation

Certain people may have certain characteristics which lead them to (1) desire the outcomes of acts which intentionally harm others, or form commitments which can be fulfilled through intentionally harming others, and/or (2) see intentionally harming others as an acceptable method for obtaining those outcomes or fulfilling those commitments. Arguably, only these people will perceive opportunities to intentionally harm others as tempting. The outcomes of acts of violence which people may desire include a range of feelings, such as power and dominance, physical prowess, justness or righteousness, daring, and legitimacy (having proved oneself); and the acquisition of desired effects, such as material possessions, vengeance, justice, the esteem of others, or the "right" to others ("winning" the girl or access to a group or gang), or safety or security (for oneself or one's family, friends, gang members, etc.). Commitments which may be fulfilled through acts of violence include defending or establishing one's group (for example, one's family, one's country, or one's gang); upholding the honour of one's group; or performing one's duties to one's group. Some people will perceive acts of violence as acceptable means for acquiring these outcomes or fulfilling these commitments; others will not, depending on their personal moral rules and emotions and the current circumstances.

Opportunities to obtain desired outcomes or fulfil commitments through acts of violence need to be present in order to tempt people. Such opportunities require a potential victim and factors which suggest that harming him/her may achieve desired outcomes or fulfil commitments. Such factors will include characteristics of the victim which suggest

that harming him/her may lead to feelings of dominance, legitimacy, etc.; characteristics of the circumstance which suggest that harming the victim is the right thing to do; the presence (or knowledge) of others who approve of actions which harm the victim, and the absence of those who might disapprove or interfere; and the presence of desirable objects which may be obtained by harming the victim.

2.1.3.2. Frictions and Provocation

Certain people may have certain characteristics which lead them to (1) perceive other people as sources of friction, (2) experience negative affect in response to sources of friction, and/or (3) see intentionally harming people who represent sources of friction as a viable alternative. Arguably, only these people will be *provoked* to intentionally harm others.

People become sources of friction when they interfere with another person or that person's course of action, for example, when a police officer stops a burglar from escaping the scene, or a drunk hassles a couple on a train. The degree to which a person will be provoked by an interference will depend on his/her *sensitivity* (the negative affect he/she experiences). Strong affect may reduce the perception of other alternatives by focusing goal-directed energies on addressing the source of friction directly.

The perception of other people as sources of friction may also be influenced by a person's *perceptual biases*, i.e., his/her tendency to interpret the actions and motives of others in a particular way. One of the most popular and relevant perceptual biases is the *hostile attribution bias*, which leads a person to interpret the actions and motives of others as inherently antagonistic (Dodge and Crick 1990). A person with this bias may be more likely to perceive the actions of others as intentional interferences.

The negative affect associated with friction is consistent with the concept of *frustration* within the familiar "frustration-aggression hypothesis" (Dollard et al. 1944). However, not all aggressive, or violent, actions are motivated by friction (provoked) Some people have weak enough violence-relevant morality that they see nothing wrong with acting violently in a given setting, and therefore do not need strong emotions to motivate them to do so. In this case, it may be

a *lack* of strong emotions (i.e., guilt and shame) which leads to aggression.

2.1.4. Motivation and Instrumental vs. Expressive Acts of Violence

The motivation to commit either expressive or instrumental acts of violence is explicable within this framework. People may be tempted or provoked to use violence expressively, i.e., with the *express* desire to harm someone, or instrumentally, i.e., as a tool to obtain outcomes other than the harm itself (for example, material items, group access, etc.).

People may be motivated to exhibit instrumental violence when they are tempted by opportunities to gain desired outcomes or fulfil commitments, or provoked to address sources of friction, through the use of violence. For example, a person might be motivated to kill someone to obtain an inheritance, or to fulfil a commitment to his/her partner (who desires the inheritance). People may be motivated to exhibit expressive violence when they perceive opportunities to cause intentional harm to others as tempting or when a source of friction provokes them to see harming someone as desirable. For example, a man might hit his wife to feel in control, or his daughter to punish her because she knocks over his beer.

Most provocations which lead to violence lead to expressive violence, because harming the source of friction becomes the desired outcome. Greater sensitivity to friction increases the desire to cause harm to its source. Provocations will lead to instrumental violence when a person responds violently to someone who obstructs a course of action only if harming him/her is incidental to removing him/her as an obstacle to action. Greater sensitivity to reward, in this case, and insensitivity to the suffering of others (lack of empathy), may maintain goal-directed attention upon the original course of action.

2.1.5. Emotions and the Motivation to Act Violently

Emotions are how people experience motivation, i.e., how people interpret the sensation of physically "gearing up" for action (the increase in heart rate, respiration, perspira-

tion, etc.). Emotions supplement motivation by signalling whether a situational factor should be approached or avoided, how significant it is to action, and what responses to it may be promising, risky or perilous. People will differ in their emotional response to the same opportunities and frictions because they will differ in the strength of their desires, sensitivity and moral emotions.

Emotion plays a particularly important role in violence. Those who commit acts of violence are typically very sensitive to conducive temptations and/or provocations, and/or very insensitive to the consequences of their actions and relevant moral rules. Strong emotions evoked by an opportunity or source of friction may compel immediate action, encouraging a violent response and potentially affecting the perception of other alternatives by monopolizing attention; especially weak emotions (e.g., a lack of guilt or shame) may lead a person to neglect or disregard relevant moral rules and foreseeable consequences.

Intentionally harming others may present a fast and effective way of addressing sources of friction, which may be appealing to people who are sensitive to friction and experience strong negative affect. People may become sensitive to friction if they have experiences which lead them to see frictions as significant, or perceptual biases which lead them to misinterpret frictions as significant, and consequently experience strong emotions when faced with interferences. Such strong emotions may lead some people to break personal moral rules which oppose violence, or others to follow personal moral rules which support violence. Some people in some settings will see violence as the right way to deal with a particular opportunity or source of friction, and this may be supported by strong moral emotions (feelings of righteousness).

People who have weak moral emotions opposing violence may simply see violence as a useful tool for dealing with interferences, and no reason not to use it. Many political and social authorities, for example, utilize violence as a tool for dealing with the friction caused by people denying their

authority. Such violence may take the form of torture and/or execution and will not necessary have a significantly emotional component.[12]

Emotions play a role in the process of choice as well as the motivation to act by providing information which can help a person identify a preferred alternative or deal with conflict between his/her motivation to act and his/her personal moral rules. Motivation, however, will determine the nature of the choice process; if one's motivation to pursue one action occludes the perception of other alternatives, a person will not need to deal with conflict and the initial motivation (and relevant emotions) will prevail. Only if a person is motivated by more than one alternative will he/she need to take affective information into account in a more reasoned, conscious fashion.

2.2. Choice of Violence as *the* Alternative

Perceiving intentionally harming others as a viable alternative for action and being motivated to do so are necessary but not sufficient elements of the explanation of violence; once a person perceives the opportunity and is motivated to intentionally harm another, he/she must then *choose* to do so.

Situational Action Theory argues that two types of moral choice – habitual and deliberate – characterize all types of moral action. Arguably, then, acts of violence should be explained by either habitual or deliberate moral choices. People will habitually choose to harm someone (or not harm someone) if they see doing so (or not doing so) as the only action alternative. People will see violence as the only alternative when they do not see violence as wrong (i.e., when they have weak violence-relevant moral rules) and their motivation to harm someone is supported by strong conducive emotions (e.g., anger, righteousness) and/or not opposed by strong deterrent emotions (e.g., shame or

guilt), and is not qualified by attention to other factors and alternatives.

People act deliberately when they consider more than one alternative for action; that deliberation takes the form of moral judgement when at least one alternative conflicts with their own morality (motivates them to act in a way which they think and/or feel is wrong). People will choose violence as the preferred alternative if they judge harming others to be the most effective, expedient and attractive method for satisfying their desires or addressing a source of friction, or if they are unable to inhibit a violent response even when they deem it wrong.

The *content* of a choice process leading to violence will differ from the content of choice processes which lead to other actions mostly in the degree to which emotions and inhibition play contrasting roles. Because of the many formal and informal rules about the use of violence and their typically high degree of monitoring and enforcement, strong emotional incentives are often needed to motivate a person to see violence as an alternative in the face of external controls (deterrents). Alternatively, very weak emotional commitment to moral rules which oppose the use of violence can also lead to violent moral rule-breaking if a person fails to experience any conflict between those rules and his/her motivation to harm someone. This kind of violence may be referred to as *psychopathic*, because it is characterized by a *lack* of strong emotions (e.g., feelings of guilt and shame).[13]

Strong emotional incentives can be counteracted by strong internal controls (inhibition, i.e., self-control); here self-control will play an important role in whether a person motivated to intentionally harm someone ultimately chooses to do so. A lack of emotional deterrence can also be counteracted by cognitive self-controls. Hence the choice to intentionally harm someone, whether habitual or deliberate, depends substantially upon a person's emotional

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12 Those who carry out the act of violence may have a stake in the authority being denied, but are often not the authority itself. Their actions, consequently, represent the fulfillment of a commitment to that authority, rather than a direct response to a source of friction. Violent actions which fulfill commit-

ments may also lack a strong emotional component, as the motivation to act is instrumental and not driven by an actual desire to cause harm.

13 We use the term *psychopathic* descriptively, as what is known as a psychopathic personality or psychopathic behaviour is characteristically typified by emotional detachment or impairment (Cleckley 1976; Hare 1993; Herpertz et al. 2001).

involvement in the violent course of action and whether or not he/she is capable of inhibiting, or compensating for, that emotional impetus and exhibiting self-control.

2.2.1. Violent Moral Habits and Emotion

An actor will habitually choose to harm others if he/she sees doing so as the only viable alternative for action. He/she will see it as the only alternative if he/she does not happen to, or bother to, recognize other alternatives. A person's emotional response to a source of friction or temptation may be so strong he/she does not attend to other alternatives. This type of violence may be referred to as *reactive*. Alternatively, a person's emotional response may be so weak (because of his/her personal morality) that he/she does not see anything wrong with acting violently in a particular circumstance, and therefore does not look for other alternatives. This is what we have referred to as *psychopathic* violence. Both reactive and psychopathic violence, in these forms, are also *habitual*.

While emotions, whether heightened or diminished, play a critical role in habitual acts of violence, self-control does not. Because habits involve the perception of only one alternative, there are no conflicting motivations, and consequently nothing to control. In habitual acts of violence there is no attempt to counteract strong emotions, or counterbalance a lack of emotion with reason. Any "control" of habitual choices occurs during the process of perception when a person's own moral rules and emotions lead him/her to perceive other alternatives, and/or deterrent factors, which refocus his/her goal-directed attention (the moral filter).

2.2.1.1. Forming Violent Moral Habits

People form habits when they learn to repeat a behaviour in a particular setting (or type of setting) in which they regularly spend time. Acts of violence become habituated if a person regularly spends time in settings which present regular opportunities to act violently or regular sources of friction, and if he/she has weak enough relevant moral values to perceive those opportunities or frictions and find them tempting or provoking enough to disregard or discount other alternatives, in the case of reactive violence, or tempting or provoking and not inconsistent with his/her

personal moral rules and emotions, in the case of psychopathic violence.

Young people, for example, regularly spend time in the schoolyard which, despite the best efforts of school staff, offers regular opportunities to act violently and/or sources of friction which may provoke violence. An adolescent may address the friction caused by being insulted by his classmates by hitting them. As he repeats this behaviour it becomes automated; he stops thinking (deliberating) about what to do when he is insulted and lashes out automatically (see Wikström 2006). He may also begin responding to insults by other people in other settings, or to other sources of friction, in the same way, leading to a contagion effect.

This habituation would be supported by somatic markers; if the adolescent regularly achieves positive outcomes by hitting his classmates when they insult him (for example, a sense of security, self-worth or even self-righteousness), he will develop a somatic marker which signifies that hitting someone who insults him will have positive outcomes. Whenever he is insulted, this marker is activated and directs attention towards hitting someone as a favourable alternative. Because violence often has unpredictable and sometimes conflicting outcomes (e.g., different degrees of victim resistance or retaliation, different levels of physical discomfort, both positive and negative emotions), somatic markers may play an important role in how a person interprets those outcomes as a whole – for example, how he/she deals with strong emotional and somatic information which may indicate stress, fear, anticipation or excitement. How the brain amalgamates this information will influence how a person evaluates, and what he/she expects from, opportunities to act violently in the future.

2.2.1.2. How Violent Moral Habits Spread

The more one experiences opportunities to commit violence and the more one finds that violence satisfies a desire as expected, the more one will recognize opportunities for violence, even in different settings, and the more one will see those opportunities as tempting. This predicts an escalation in the frequency of violence, and the spread of violence to different contexts. Similarly, people who use violence as a means for addressing sources of friction caused by other

people (e.g., for "resolving" interpersonal conflicts) may be more likely to perceive violence as an alternative, and even a preferred alternative, across different interpersonal settings.

Like other habits, violent moral habits may be specific or generalized. Some people might, for example, perceive violence as a viable alternative only when they are insulted by a particular person (a sibling or schoolyard rival), in a particular setting (outside but not inside a pub), or in reference to a particular subject (their appearance, romantic partner or favourite football team). The more they habitually respond violently to these particular circumstances, however, the more likely they may become to do so under other circumstances. Such a scenario requires that they regularly spend time in settings which present regular opportunities for violence or sources of friction, for example, in which they (or their partner or football team, etc.) are regularly insulted. This concentration of and prolonged exposure to opportunities for violence and sources of friction may strengthen the salience and perceived emotional significance of those opportunities and frictions, and potentially other opportunities and frictions, in other settings.

It is also possible for violence to become a habitual response to negative emotions more generally. For example, the negative affect associated with friction helps to drive violent habitual responses. Over time, those violent responses may become primed not only by a particular source of friction, but other sources of friction, and potentially negative emotions in general. This could be linked to more indiscriminate patterns of aggression.

2.2.1.3. Breaking Violent Moral Habits

Habits are broken by a salient change in the action context, such as the appearance of a strong deterrent factor, which refocuses goal-directed attention so that a person perceives, and considers, other alternatives. For example, were a person who habitually responded violently to being insulted to find himself insulted by someone carrying a knife or accompanied by a posse of older friends, he might consider alternatives other than violence. Violent moral habits can also be broken by changes in a person's violence-relevant moral rules and emotions which lead them to conflict with those habits, prompting the perception of other alternatives.

As violent moral habits may arguably facilitate, and perpetuate, some persistent patterns of violence, understanding how to break them can have important implications for intervention, possibly for some of the most serious and prolific offenders.

2.2.1.4. Types of Violence that Might Be Driven by Habit

Certain persistent forms of violence may be driven by habitual processes, which may also have implications for prevention. Types of violence which could be driven by moral habits would be actions which occur in a setting which the actor regularly takes part in and which consistently presents opportunities or frictions conducive to violence, and few deterrents. Examples include domestic violence, which occurs in a specific setting (the home) where the actor regularly spends time, and which presents regular opportunities and frictions (via the presence of certain family members and social contexts) but few deterrents (is private and regulated by informal rules, many of which will be determined by the aggressor); and gang violence, which occurs in specific geographic areas (territories), presents regular opportunities and frictions (via the presence of fellow gang members, rival gang members and those "transgressing" on gang "turf") and few controls (is regulated by the rules of gang membership) (Wikström and Treiber 2009). Understanding the habitual processes and moral contextual features which drive these persistent behaviours may offer new insights into how to prevent them.

2.2.2. Violent Moral Judgments and the Role of Self-Control

Although more conscious and reasoned than habitual choices, deliberate choices may still lead to acts of violence, despite the fact that in most cases violence breaks a moral rule. People deliberately choose to intentionally harm others when they judge doing so to be the best method for satisfying a desire or addressing a friction, or if they are unable to inhibit violent actions when they believe those actions are wrong.

People may judge acts of violence favourably if they lack information about outcomes or other alternatives (e.g., because they lack experience or exhibit failures in perception), fail to reactivate and apply information (e.g., about their personal moral rules and emotions), fail to effectively

value information (e.g., ascribe appropriate emotional significance), or fail to act upon relevant information (such as knowledge about whether an act is right or wrong). These all represent failings in information processing, either during sensation, encoding, retrieval or application. The processing of information relevant to action is a function of *executive capabilities*, one's cognitive ability to assemble action-relevant information so that it can be used to guide action. Executive capabilities support the exhibition of self-control by moderating emotional responses, directing attention, organizing information and delaying impulsive action.

People who deliberately harm others may do so because they fail to take into account action-relevant information about other alternatives, or adjust misguided goal-directed emotions. For example, a gang member may assault a police officer who is interfering in gang-related activities, even though he knows it is wrong, because he fails to attend to the fact that the cop is armed, bigger than him, that he will feel remorse for his actions, that there are witnesses, etc. By leaving out such action-relevant details, the gang member cannot effectively plan his action and predict its outcomes. Applying this and other information to the action decision could help him reassess his urge to assault the cop and re-direct those energies to other actions with fewer potentially negative consequences. Application of this information to the decision making process represents the exercise of self-control.

2.2.3. Moral Choices and Expressive vs. Instrumental Violence
Expressive acts of violence are those for which causing physical harm to others is the desired outcome. People often see harming (or not harming) others as the only alternative because they have weak (or strong) personal moral rules and emotions deterring violence (respectively), or experience strong emotions which support (or oppose) an act of violence and override their perception of other alternatives. For example, a parent may hit her child because the child regularly makes her angry and she sees nothing wrong with addressing that anger through violence (e.g., feels no guilt or shame), or because she fails to moderate that anger. People often deliberately choose to harm others because they fail to effectively exhibit self-control. For example, a parent

may hit her child deliberately because she fails to take into account relevant information about the moral implications and consequences of her action or to suppress her motivation to act violently.

Deliberate acts of violence in which the actor fails to exhibit self-control (here referred to as *impulsive* acts of violence) may be very similar to *reactive* habitual acts of violence – both are typically driven by strong emotions and lack controls. These types of violence are more likely to be expressive than instrumental, because reactive or impulsive action choices generally fail to take outcomes and consequences into account, and are therefore less likely to be focused on outcomes other than the desire to cause harm.

Instrumental acts of violence are those for which harm to others is a means of obtaining another desired outcome. Instrumental acts may be opportunistic and therefore habitual – a school bully may learn to beat up classmates to get their lunch money and over time cease to consider other alternatives for action. Instrumental acts may also be carefully planned – for example, an heir may murder his/her parents to acquire an inheritance, but undertake a sequence of actions to ensure the deaths appear accidental. This type of action requires substantial information processing as the perpetrator "problem-solves" how best to remove a source of friction or obtain a desired outcome.

Premeditated acts of violence will almost inevitably involve deliberation as they typically entail sequences of actions which must be planned and often carefully considered. They certainly exhibit weak violence-relevant moral rules and emotions, and may exhibit a lack of self-control if the actor perceives conflict between his/her actions, and those rules, but fails to act accordingly. As actions often involve elements of habit and deliberation, it is likely that many such premeditated acts of violence end in habitual violence when the perpetrator becomes so set on his/her course of action that he/she fails to perceive action-relevant deterrents, conflict between his/her actions and moral rules, or other alternatives.

2.2.4. Moral Choices and the Motivation to Act Violently

Opportunities to commit acts of violence to expressly cause harm or instrumentally acquire other outcomes may be limited, as they rely on transient factors like the presence and accessibility of the victim and a dearth of deterrents (which are often significant in the case of violence). For an act of opportunistic violence to be effective it may need to be immediate. This need for immediacy may feed into the action choice process, supporting a habitual and/or impulsive response, and is facilitated by strong emotions.

Opportunities may reoccur or can be recreated; violent responses to these opportunities can be deliberately chosen. These deliberate actions (or action sequences) often require planning and potentially the intentional selection of conducive contexts of action.

Interferences generally cause immediate friction; therefore the motivation to address that friction is also immediate, and only immediately relevant; the emotional impetus will fade over time. This may increase the motivation to act habitually, overriding perception of other alternatives. In some cases, however, the emotional response to an interference can be sustained (for example, by changing one's desires), allowing the response to be delayed until it is more opportune.

Delaying a violent response will always involve deliberation, as it requires goal setting, maintenance and problem solving, such as the location or creation of settings in which the action will be opportune. A person's moral rules and emotions will determine whether each sequential action leading towards a delayed act of violence is perceived as a viable alternative; arguably many such sequences will reach a point where the actor no longer finds them morally viable, for example, at the point of following someone home or voyeurism, or even simply fantasizing about the act. If, however, a person's moral values and emotions do allow him/her to perceive each sequential action as morally viable, his/her moral reasoning and ability to exercise self-control may come into play.

3. Violence and Moral Correspondence

SAT suggests that people's actions (e.g., acts of violence) are ultimately an outcome of the causal interaction between their propensity (to engage in a particular act, such as violence) and their exposure (to a setting conducive to a particular act, such as violence). People's *propensity* to engage in a particular kind of action depends on their morality (action-relevant moral rules and emotions) and their ability to exercise self-control. *Exposure* occurs when a person faces a temptation or provocation to engage in a particular act in a particular moral context. A moral context is defined as the action-relevant moral rules that apply to a setting and their level of enforcement. At any given time, people vary in their propensity and exposure and that interaction largely explains their actions. Thus acts of violence can be seen as an outcome of the causal interaction between a person's *propensity* to engage in acts of violence, and his/her *exposure* to environmental inducements to engage in acts of violence:

Propensity x Exposure = Action

The *principle of moral correspondence* states that the more a person's morality (moral rules and emotions) correspond to the moral context (its moral rules and their enforcement) in which he/she operates, the less likely he/she is to break the moral rules of that context. If a person is exposed to moral contexts which correspond with his/her moral rules (i.e., which uphold and enforce those rules), he/she is likely to abide by those rules, namely because he/she will not see breaking them as a viable alternative, and because he/she is less likely to experience conflict between those rules and his/her motivation to act. In the case of violence, this would, for example, mean that if a person thinks hitting his/her spouse in response to a disagreement is wrong, and lives in a country where hitting one's spouse in these circumstances is against general moral norms and the law, he/she is unlikely to break that law because he/she will not see hitting his/her spouse as an alternative for action in response to a disagreement.

If a person is exposed to a moral context which does not correspond with his/her morality, however, he/she will be more likely to perceive actions which break the rules of that context as viable alternatives, and more likely to experience conflict between those rules and his/her motivations to act.

In this case, he/she is *more* likely to break those rules. Thus if a person thinks hitting his/her spouse is permissible if he/she is provoked, even though it is against the law where he/she lives, he/she may still perceive doing so as a viable alternative for action, making him/her more likely to break that rule. He/she is also more likely to be motivated to break the rule even if there are other alternatives, and therefore may need to rely on his/her self-control to help him/her act in accordance with the moral context. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction for the special case of violent action:

Figure 1: Situational context and violent action

Situational Context		
Propensity	**Exposure to Moral Context**	
	Conducive to violence	Not conducive to violence
Conducive to violence	Violence is likely	Violence will depend on the level of deterrence
Not conducive to violence	Violence will depend on the actor's ability to exercise self-control	Violence is unlikely

When the conduciveness of a person's propensity to intentionally harm others corresponds with the conduciveness of the setting to intentionally harming others, the outcome is predictable; if both are conducive, the person is likely to act violently; if neither are conducive, the person is unlikely to act violently.

When the two do not correspond, the situation is less clear. If a person whose propensity is conducive to intentionally harming others takes part in settings which are not conducive to harming others, the moral context is less likely to activate that propensity, and may in fact suppress it. If that person does intentionally harm someone, his/her action will be driven more from the personal than the contextual level. He/she may, for instance, misinterpret frictions as antagonistic, and provoking, and fail to recognize the cogency of the moral context (the risk of being caught and sanctioned for intentionally harming someone). *Deterrence* will play a key role under these circumstances; the

degree and salience of deterrent factors, and how a person perceives them, will determine whether he/she is externally dissuaded from breaking the violence-relevant moral rules which he/she does not internally perceive as significant to his/her action.

If a person whose propensity is not conducive to intentionally harming others takes part in settings which are, factors in the setting may motivate him/her to do so, in which case his/her violence will be driven more from the contextual than the personal level. He/she may need to exhibit self-control to act in accordance with his/her violence-relevant moral values, which are not reinforced by the setting. However, if he/she has strong moral values, he/she may not perceive intentionally harming others as a viable alternative even if doing so is opportune or he/she encounters a source of friction, and therefore will not perceive violence as tempting or be provoked.

If a person's propensity and exposure, as posited by SAT, interact as shown above in causing him/her to act violently, *changes* in his/her violent actions will stem from changes in his/her propensity to engage in violence and/or his/her exposure to settings conducive to violence (Wikström 2005; Wikström and Treiber 2009).

(Change) Propensity + (Change) Exposure = (Change) Action

This suggests that to change (prevent) violence we need to direct our energies towards changing people's propensity to engage in acts of violence and/or their exposure to moral contexts conducive to acts of violence.

Change in propensity and change in exposure also interact developmentally; changes in exposure may lead to changes in propensity, for example, by changing a person's exposure to relevant moral influences, or his/her habitual behaviour (by creating new or breaking existing habits). At the same time, changes in propensity may lead to changes in exposure by leading people to take part in different settings (i.e., through selection effects). Figure 2 illustrates this developmental relationship:

Figure 2: Developmental context and violent action

Developmental Context		
Propensity	**Exposure to Moral Contexts**	
	Conducive to violence	Not conducive to violence
Conducive to violence	Violence remains stable (person is likely to engage in violence)	Inducement to reduce the propensity to engage in violence
Not conducive to violence	Inducement to enhance the propensity to engage in violence	Violence remains stable (person is unlikely to engage in violence)

One of SAT's most important developmental mechanisms is *moral education*. SAT argues that people acquire their own moral rules (and related emotions) by internalizing wider moral rules and their experiences with those rules (moral experiences), a process of learning which takes into account others' responses to one's actions and one's observations of others' actions, and their positive and negative consequences.

If the conduciveness of a person's propensity to engage in violence corresponds with the conduciveness of the settings in which he/she develops, his/her pattern of violence will remain stable: those whose propensity is conducive to intentionally harming others and who take part in settings conducive to doing so are likely to *continue* doing so; those whose propensity is not conducive to intentionally harming others and who develop in settings which are not conducive to doing so are unlikely to *start* doing so. In neither scenario will a person observe dissonance between his/her own moral rules and the rules of the settings in which he/she takes part, which might trigger a moral "re-education" process.

However, a person whose propensity is conducive to intentionally harming others who spends time in settings which are not will experience pressure to conform his/her propensity to those settings (by readjusting his/her own moral rules) potentially reducing his/her propensity to engage in violence. At the other end of the spectrum, a person whose propensity is not conducive to intentionally harming oth-

ers who spends time in settings which are may experience pressures which *increase* his/her propensity to engage in violence, for instance, temptations or provocations which weaken his/her moral resolve and/or self-control, increasing his/her tendency to perceive violence as a viable alternative, and/or choose it as the preferred alternative.

Just as the contexts in which people take part will influence their propensity to engage in violence, that propensity will influence the settings in which they take part. For example, there may be certain personal characteristics which lead a person to take part in settings conducive to violence or, alternatively, settings which are not conducive to violence. The unique role personal and contextual factors play in causing violence is, consequently, incredibly difficult to disentangle. These *selection effects* are only just beginning to be unravelled. What is plain, however, is that both personal and contextual factors are important, and that they interact in causing acts of violence.

3.1. Causes of the Causes of Violence

Antecedent factors which affect the emergence and continuity of propensity and behaviour settings may be regarded as the *causes of the causes* of action. In the case of moral action, the most pertinent *causes of the causes* are factors which influence the emergence and continuity of certain moral contexts, and factors which influence the acquisition and stability of certain personal moral rules and emotions as well as the ability to exercise self-control. In the case of violence, the causes of the causes are factors which influence the emergence and continuity of moral contexts conducive to violence (those in which rules promote violence or in which rules prohibiting violence are weakly enforced), the acquisition and stability of violence-relevant personal moral rules and emotions, and the ability to exercise self-control.

Social environmental characteristics will affect the emergence and stability of settings conducive (or not conducive) to violence. For instance, societies will vary in their *general moral correspondence*: the degree to which their violence-relevant moral rules (e.g., their laws) correspond with the violence-relevant moral rules of their members; the greater this general moral correspondence, the less likely members

of a society will be to break its violence-relevant moral rules.

Characteristics of the social environment, such as *social cohesion*, may affect the emergence of this correspondence. *Social cohesion* may be seen as the degree to which members of a society have adapted their personal moral rules and emotions to match those of the settings in which they take part. The less people, or groups of people, adjust their moral rules and emotions to match those of the settings in which they live, the less they will become socially (and morally) integrated, and the more likely they will be to break moral rules. Thus if a person emigrating to a new social environment does not value its violence-relevant moral rules (and does not experience shame or guilt when committing actions sanctioned by those rules), he/she will be more likely to perceive violence as an alternative for action, less likely to experience conflict between his/her motivation to act violently and his/her own moral rules, and consequently more likely to commit an act of violence.

Social integration may be seen as the process by which a person adjusts his/her moral rules and emotions to correspond with a moral context. Societies which pose obstacles to this process will display weaker social cohesion and, as a consequence, weaker moral correspondence and more moral rule-breaking. If a person emigrating to a new social environment integrates successfully, he/she will acquire personal moral rules which correspond with the rules of the settings in which he/she now takes part, and will be less likely to break those rules (for example, to commit a prohibited act of violence).

Typically, differences in violence-relevant moral rules between social or cultural groups concern specific acts in specific contexts, such as whether or not one is allowed to hit one's spouse or one's children or one's pets, take part in or watch violent sports (for example, bull fighting, cage fighting), or the extent to which violence can be used instrumentally (as in capital punishment, self-defence and torture). Differences in some of these contexts between cultures may lead to changes in behaviour as a person becomes socially integrated. In contexts which do not differ substantially (for example, the domestic context) changes in behaviour may

depend on more individual-level changes in awareness of and concurrence with violence-relevant moral rules.

This highlights the question of the impact of rules which permit (or even condone) violence in certain contexts on the general acceptance of violence in a society or culture, and the slackening of moral rules restricting violence in other contexts. One might envision a contagion effect whereby acts of violence became less and less supervised across contexts; this is the kind of effect suggested by theories which posit that violent actions may be influenced by violent movies, television programmes, computer games and rock music.

Changes in the social environments to which people are exposed (e.g., political, economic and social changes) may affect the kinds of moral contexts present in a society, the degree to which certain groups of people are exposed to certain moral contexts, their moral correspondence and, consequently, the rate of moral rule-breaking. Changes in the social environment which affect the distribution of settings conducive to violence may affect who encounters those settings, and consequently impact the general moral correspondence and rates of violence. In the short term, changes in the rate of violence may be due to changes in the interactions between certain people and certain moral contexts which lead to changes in their violence-relevant perception–choice processes, such as the breaking of old and the acquisition of new moral habits. In the longer term, change may occur due to changes in moral educational influences which affect people's personal moral rules and emotions, leading to changes in their violence-relevant perception–choice processes, such as their perception of violence as a viable alternative.

Changing levels of violence in a society is ultimately a question of changing the moral contexts (violence-relevant moral rules and their enforcements) which characterise the settings in which people *develop* (propensities) and *act* (encounter exposures).

4. Conclusion
In this paper we have argued that a general theory of violence is indeed possible. Violence, we have submitted,

can be understood as a kind of moral action, and therefore can be explained as such. We presented a general theory of moral action (Situational Action Theory) that integrates individual and environmental individual and environmental influences through the framework of an action theory. We

then applied this theory to the explanation of violence. We suggest that Situational Action Theory provides a general, comprehensive and unified approach to the understanding and study of violence.

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