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Coenen, Ekkehard; Tuma, René

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# Contextural and Contextual – Introducing a Heuristic of Third Parties in Sequences of Violence

Ekkehard Coenen & René Tuma \*

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**Abstract:** »Kontextural und kontextual – Eine Heuristik der Dritten in Gewaltsequenzen«. This paper highlights the dynamics in sequences of violence using the perspective of communicative constructivism as a theoretical framework. The main focus of this paper is on the role of third parties in violent sequences. Using the example of two smartphone videos that show different types of violence (a brawl in a less institutionalized setting, execution in a military context), the third parties in these violent encounters are analyzed. Considerations from communicative constructivism are pursued to make a distinction between contextural and contextual third parties. The former are physically and performatively involved in the sequences of violence while the latter have consequences for the dynamics of violence due to their semantic and symbolic representation. Contextural and contextual thirds are to be understood not as static roles but as “modes of action” that have a different influence on the sequences of violence and can be better comprehended in their specific temporal-sequential embeddedness into the trajectories of violence. Therefore, the analyses emphasize that violence can be understood as communicative action in which those involved within the “triad of violence” refer to each other in their interactions.

**Keywords:** Violence, third party, bystander, sequences of violence, communicative constructivism, video analysis, street brawl, execution.

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## 1. Introduction

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To what extent are third parties, i.e., bystanders, audiences, actual and possible observers, and witnesses or even imagined communities involved in violent situations? How can they systematically be integrated into an interpretive micro analysis of violent situations? How does a sequential-procedural understanding of third parties enhance the understanding of the polycontextu(r)al complexity of violent events? Our paper is dedicated to these

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\* Ekkehard Coenen, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Fakultät Medien, Bauhausstraße 11, 99423 Weimar, Germany; [ekkehard.coenen@uni-weimar.de](mailto:ekkehard.coenen@uni-weimar.de).  
René Tuma, Technische Universität Berlin, Institut für Soziologie, FH -1, Fraunhoferstraße 33-36, 10587 Berlin, Germany; [rene.tuma@tu-berlin.de](mailto:rene.tuma@tu-berlin.de).

questions. Based on empirical data, we elaborate on the role of these questions in the specific situations, thereby distinguishing different forms of sequential third-party involvement. Our research is based on a framework of communicative construction. First of all, we conceptualize violence as a specific form of communicative action (see Coenen in review; Tuma 2021),<sup>1</sup> in contrast to a pure “meaningless” occurrence (Sofsky 1997). As we will show, acts of violence like a slap in the face and a shooting are always given meaning and interpreted by everyone involved. As a result, they have an impact on social reality. Violent situations, which are therefore understood as meaningful but also contingent sequential developments, consist of turns, adjacency pairs, and sub-sequences. These sequentially unfolding situations should not only include the actions of the main participants, but must also systematically include the turns of relevant third parties and how they are accounted for by “perpetrators” and “victims.” Third parties – of all forms contribute to the event and are accounted for, from intervening bystanders to situative and mediated audiences – must always be considered in order to fully understand the situation, which is characterized by a multitude of relations, i.e., polycontextu(r)ality (see Knoblauch 2021).

To illustrate our argument, we present two smartphone videos that depict different situations. One is a less institutionalized phenomenon of violence, namely a comparatively spontaneous brawl on the street. The other is a public execution, which we consider to be a more institutionalized act of violence embedded in a long-lasting conflictual historical event and constellation. We argue that there are different types of third parties in the situation, each influencing the dynamics of violence in their own way. Our contribution not only focuses on micro-sociological aspects of violent situations, but also builds a bridge to an analytical heuristic that extends the idea of the “consequential third” and highlights the entanglements of participants (Hoebel 2019).

The distinction between contextuRe and context (Knoblauch 2021) is used to highlight two ways in which third parties are communicatively embedded and relevant in trajectories of violence. *ContextuRal third parties* are physically and performatively involved in the sequences of violence. They can participate in the concrete violent sequences in a performative manner, modulate it, or mediate it. In contrast, *contextual third parties* are not necessarily physically co-present in the sequences of violence. Instead, it is their symbolic and semantic representation that affects the dynamic of violence. Even

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<sup>1</sup> Lindemann et al. (in this volume) note that our understanding of violence is to be read as “positive” in this paper. We acknowledge that we do not discuss the specific framing of the events as violent and the discourse as well as societal context, in which the events, that we selected to analyze have been labelled and constructed as violent events, which would be a worthwhile discussion. However, our approach aims at discovering the processes of how participants themselves co-construct violence as a situative as well as situated form, therefore tracing the practices of doing violence as a members’ category.

if connected to specific actors in the examples, we argue that these “thirds” should not be understood as essentialized or predefined actors, but rather as “modes of action” that have a specific and often shifting impact on the unfolding sequences of violence.

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## 2. State of Research on Third Parties and Violence

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The theoretical discourse on violence is vast, sometimes incoherent, and cannot be covered in all its aspects. Therefore, we focus on some critical lines of argument that can be combined in a productive manner. To start with, we draw on interpretive stances in-between sociology and criminology. Connected to interactionist concepts, important contributions started to reconstruct how “trivial” occasions can lead to (lethal) violence, as both parties develop a step-by-step “working agreement” (Luckenbill 1977) in which violence becomes an appropriate and plausible outcome for settling the conflict, especially when encouraging third parties are present. This line of research is often connected to questions of emotions (Felson 1982; Felson and Steadman 1983) and to concepts of character contests (Goffman 1966), honor and masculinity (Luckenbill 1977; Polk 1999), or dominance (Athens 2005) as framing and explanation (see also Jackson-Jacobs 2013). Oftentimes, these studies have a general understanding of the embeddedness into social relations and the relevance of observing audiences that play a role in situational paths to violence, as these concepts of identity always include the notion of a generalized other.

Collins’s micro-sociological contribution (2008) focuses on the model of “confrontational tension and fear” to explain violent situations. The role of bystanders is addressed in his work, e.g., in his study of the Palestine riots (2008, 413), demonstrating the role of the audience in the back rows, a middle mass of the crowd, and support clusters. Orientation to the audience is one way to get participants to overcome the barrier of confrontational tension and fear and enter the tunnel of violence (Collins 2012, 136). Collins, and in a similar manner Nassauer (2019), draw on this tradition to show, based on codings of events and semi-standardized interpretation of emotional expressions, how violence emerges in situ. Micro-sociological studies have shown these emotional dynamics at work in various forms of violence (for an overview, see Collins 2019; Klusemann 2012; Mosselman, Weenink, and Lindegaard 2018). Furthermore, micro-sociological approaches often focus on how situational dynamics (i.e., emergent situational asymmetries) affect emotional dominance. With this kind of emotion-based theory, studies still see violence as an outburst or a “tunnel” that participants enter, rather than a specific form of communication. However, absent third parties are hardly accounted for.

Alongside this international discourse, there is quite a lively theoretical discussion about “the third” in the German-speaking sociology of violence. Koloma Beck (2011) makes a noteworthy contribution from a social constructivist perspective by linking the definition of violence to the observer. She emphasizes that third parties are constitutive for violence. For Koloma Beck (2011, 347), “violence is defined as a correlation between inflicting and suffering as observed by a third party.” This triangular reconstruction reveals that violence must be understood not according to objective criteria, but from the different perspectives of the involved and observing actors. In contrast, Lindemann and her colleagues (Barth et al. 2021; Lindemann 2017) discuss the third from a social theoretical perspective. They emphasize the “procedural orders of violence,” by which violence is communicatively framed and institutionally mediated in a specific societal context. Procedural orders are “third-mediated institutional rationalizations of violence” (Lindemann 2018, 70, our translation). They stipulate what is considered violence, who is legitimized to practice violence, how legitimate and illegitimate violence is distinguished, and how a corresponding norm explanation and its legal representation are intricately interconnected. Third parties therefore play a central role, as they observe, interpret, legitimize, and sanction violence.

While the aforementioned studies do not address the extent to which the presence or absence of third parties affects the sequence of violence, Hoebel (2019) emphasizes the essential role of third parties in the unfolding of violent situations. With the concept of “extra-local entanglements” (our translation), he shows that both specific and abstract third parties are essential to explain violence and its course in a particular situation. Interactions with co-present persons as well as social relationships with absent persons impact the motivations and actions of perpetrators, victims, and others involved. In this way, Hoebel opens the analysis of violence to procedural, organizational, and institutional models of explanation. He also prepares, at a theoretical level, the distinction we wish to accentuate in the present text: between contextual and contextual third persons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the mediatization of violence, there is an abundance of studies devoted to depictions of violence in mass media and on social media (e.g., Boyle 2005; Carter and Weaver 2003; Potter 1999; Sparks, Sparks, and Sparks, 2008). The influence of mediatization on violent situations is another important topic; research on terrorism, in particular, highlights the central role of mass media, which is essential for understanding the dynamics of terrorist attacks (e.g., Nacos 2000; Vertigans 2011; Wieviorka 1993).

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### 3. Violence – A Communicative Constructivist's Perspective

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Regarding the third party in violent situations, the empirical access in the international discourse and the social-theoretical debates in German-speaking countries currently form two different approaches within the sociology of violence. In the following, we would like to build a bridge between these two highly different lines of research. Communicative constructivism seems to be a suitable basis for this (e.g., Keller 2013; Knoblauch 2020; Reichertz and Tuma 2017), as it represents a further development of social constructivism and is characterized by a significant reorientation.

Communicative constructivism highlights the relational dimension of social phenomena. Strictly speaking, the approach emphasizes that all actions are performed in a triangular relationship (Knoblauch 2020, 55-72). At this point we do not mean the specific triad of perpetrator, victim, and third party, as introduced above, but rather the triangularity of “communicative action” on a more basic theoretical level. To understand communicative action, it is necessary to acknowledge that it always relates to others, the embodied self, and the objectifications attached to it. This aspect is covered with the concept of objectivation. Objectivations are, as Berger and Luckmann (1991, 94) state, “products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world.” Violence is thus observable and understandable for third parties as communication that includes the body, performativity, and objectifications (Coenen 2021; Tuma 2021). A communication constructivist perspective shows that the reality of violence is not only the result of subjective consciousness but also lies in the communicative processes. Perpetrators, victims, and third parties are thus always linked to the material aspects of their interactions and their mutual observations.

Third parties observe the communicative action between perpetrator and victim and can only intervene in sequences of violence through communication. In this reciprocal action within the triad of violence, knowledge about violence and its formal realization are of great importance (Coenen 2021). This means that violence can not only be understood in a situative indexical and sequential unfolding but also takes meaningful forms of communication into account that are often institutionalized as “genres” (see Günthner and Knoblauch 1994; Luckmann 1986). Applying this perspective on violence, complexes of violent actions can be based on socially shared knowledge about violence, which is expressed in action and thus fulfils a practical function addressing communicative “problems.” Therefore, they can be understood as “communicative forms” (Knoblauch 2020, 155-69) that involve specific temporal, physical, and material aspects, as well as participants’ (practical) and discursive knowledge. The specific communicative form of

violence – e.g., if a conflict is resolved in a “fair fight,” in a “humiliation,” or another manner – depends on how it is framed by audiences and what specific and imagined third parties are addressed, or in other words, on how it is embedded into social context(ure). An execution thus represents a communicative form precisely because it is recognized as such by third parties, i.e., audiences, witnesses, etc. and perceived as a known form of violent conduct (Coenen 2022). Its “moral” evaluation plays a role in defining the situation, of course, however there is often disagreement, with this being a key problem for participants to negotiate in a number of different “arenas.” Forms of violence are carried out in a certain way for specific third parties to be recognized as such (or in some cases disguised). This, in turn, means that perpetrators and victims take “consequential thirds” into account when carrying out the violence sequence.

In relation to the performance of forms of violence for third parties, the mediatization of social life plays an elevated role. For the understanding of violence, it is significant that conflictual encounters are the content of numerous mediums, be it paintings, novels, photographs, movies, or smartphone videos. In addition, the corresponding “discourse networks” (Kittler 1990) and recording devices are also crucial for the analysis of violence if they are explicitly relevant to the situation, for example, when fights, executions, or terrorist attacks are recorded on video. In these cases, violence can be carried out in such a way that it is mediatized and can be observed by third parties beyond the situation. Any violence staged for the camera or other recording media is directed at third parties and takes them into account in its action sequence.

Communicative constructivism highlights that the mediatization of violence is based on objectivations that have a symbolic character but are nonetheless materially anchored (Knoblauch 2020, 220-9). Those people who are involved in violent situations align their actions with the media. One example is the development of so-called “snuff films.” Snuff, as Mark Astely (2016, 153) emphasizes, “is simply a premeditated human death that would not exist without the intention of pointing a camera and capturing the event for a variety of sexual, political, and financial purposes.” This shows that the technical conditions also change communicative action in violent and violence-related situations, mainly since these records are aimed at third parties.

More recent developments in the tradition of communicative constructivism emphasize a spatial perspective (Knoblauch 2021). They introduce a distinction between context and contextuRe that is helpful for our analysis. Context refers to the symbolic and semantic relationships of a particular action. “Contextualization” in sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1992) describes the reference to certain contexts of action and production through linguistic or paralinguistic communication. Contextualizations can refer to functional codes, but they can also indicate class or ethnic (and linguistic) affiliation. Context

is formed from the meaning conveyed through objectified signs in action. In the following, we define consequential third parties who are only symbolically and semantically woven into the violence sequences as *contextual third parties*.

In contrast to the symbolic dimension of the context, the *contextuRe* emphasizes direct material relationships. So, it is not just about symbolic and semantic mediation processes, but about things and people that are materially present. Therefore, *contextuRalizations* contain the corresponding sensual (and thus meaningful) effect of the objectifications, which are also necessary for the generation of contexts. In analogy to the linguistically implemented contextualizations, we can then understand *contextuRalizations* as material references that are generated in action. Based on this difference, we designate those consequential third parties who are physically co-present in violent situations as *contextuRal thirds*.

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## 4. Violence and the Third

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In the following, by taking up the distinction between context and *contextuRe* as well as Hoebel's (2019) considerations on the consequential third, we would like to develop a heuristic of the third in violent situations. Our goal is to disentangle the various relations, that are not only abstract, but interactionally and therefore sequentially relevant.<sup>3</sup> By a heuristic, we understand, as John Levi Martin (2011, 18) puts it, "a rule that could be induced by an observer as a guiding principle of action on the basis of observed regularities in this action." Heuristics are "ecologically rational" because they use predictable characteristics in situations to understand and support the way thinking works. We aim to reveal regularities to the third party in sequences of violence, which contribute to orientation and a deeper understanding of the dynamics of violence.

### 4.1 Case One: A Street Brawl and Its Third Parties

The first case<sup>4</sup> can be considered a typical example of a communicative form of a violent encounter that can be described as "street violence." The case description analyzed below is based on a video produced by a passer-by on a street in Austin, Texas (USA). This street apparently already has a notorious reputation due to its party crowd and frequent incidences. First, in the video,

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<sup>3</sup> Reichertz (Reichertz 2020; c.f. Reichertz 2022, in this special issue), albeit with a slightly different method, has presented research that aims at similar questions in following the trajectories of violent escalation.

<sup>4</sup> This data stems from research that has been pursued in cooperation with Don Weenink and Marly van Bruchem, further publications elaborating on such cases are currently in preparation.



we see two main groups around the protagonists facing each other. On one side is a man named Ford, who will strike later, his companion Ron, and their circle of other companions, including a woman named Brook who tries to calm him down and pull him away at the beginning. On the other side are Glenn (grey shirt), who later falls to the ground, and his friend Parker.

The video begins with Ford and Glenn confronting each other head-on, with Parker intervening. Glenn is repeatedly and loudly asked by Ford to apologize. In the process, Ford's circle of friends, as well as Parker, try to keep the two opposing main antagonists from each other. The female friend (Brook) of Ford tries at the beginning to pull him back, or along, here he allows himself to be touched (Figure 1a).<sup>5</sup> So, we see from such "markers of belonging" how the relationship between the Ford and Brook is communicated physically. While Ford does not respond to Brook's efforts, the group of his companions – consisting of a few other people, presumably his friends – leave the scene of the confrontation without the leading actors Ford and Ron.

**Figure 1a/b** Body Formation in the Beginning of the Street Fight



Meanwhile, Ford continues to focus on Glenn. Glenn is actively ignoring the intervening Parker and pushes him aside with his front body while he continues to demand that Glenn apologizes. The demands are intensified with legitimations of the escalation of the conflict and moral rebukes ("she deserves an apology"; "you don't go disrespecting women, where I'm from"), increasing insults ("you fucking pussy"), and other responses incomprehensible in the recording, as well as by Parker's demands to walk away proudly or sensibly ("walk away like a man"), with further verbal increases in volume.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the transcript at hand, see <https://dx.doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-15974>.

Parker is distracted in the meantime in a short side conversation with Ron. He then goes between the two opponents again, stands in front of his friend Glenn and tries again to push Ford back with defensive body movements. At the same time, he raises his arms as if in an embrace, Ford initially allows these touches, still focused on Glenn, but then turns to Parker and says, “don’t touch me,” whereupon a brief reference to social status as a policeman’s son (Parker) or firefighter (Ford) is inserted in an interpolated discussion (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Parker Intervening, Brook and Group Leaving, Glenn Addressing Audience



P: My dad’s a cop  
 F: I’m a fucking firefighter (.) ((putting hand on his chest))  
 Congratulations

Glenn uses this moment to turn around and face an audience (also Figure 2). In the conflict over the legitimacy of his position, he thus tries to establish communicative power by physically positioning himself in the foregrounding, by not backing down, by asserting his space in front of the participants. These physical communication moves are linked to the verbal expressions through which Ford constantly demands an apology or submissive action from Glenn, by means of which the latter would accept the moral superiority of Ford. A constant game of alternately approaching body formations follows in which the parties move closer and closer to each other. It should nevertheless be remarked that both sides hold back and always give the other side a chance to end the situation. The situation is determined by balancing on this line, whether a transition to a violent struggle will take place or whether the situation will be ended in some other way. All parties are involved in this. A negotiation takes place in which mode the communication sequence is to be continued or ended. One motive is to provoke the other person into the first attack (see below).<sup>6</sup>

A central turning point is found in the next episode. Glenn puts his arm over Parker’s shoulder and points his finger directly in Ford’s face. The latter grabs

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account on the idea of provocation, see Paris (2015).

the finger with a quick but powerful movement and twists the arm downwards, creating a scuffle. Here a first small fight situation occurs, fought out by means of physical, powerful “violence,” although this is resolved again by Parker and Ron drifting in-between and intervening. Now, however, Glenn also signals his readiness to fight with insults and a chin thrust forward.

After that, repeated staccato statements by both (“you are not fighting”) initiate a new phase, and the bodies bring each other into a tighter formation in quick movements. Parker continues to try to hold Ford back, but he is distracted by Ron. Ford now threatens physical violence several times (“you want me to fucking do it, do it”). He thus makes the threatening escalation – the trajectory into a fight – visible and legitimizes his violent action. At the same time, he signals that he only wants to start fighting properly when the other (i.e., Glenn) does not follow the instructions and continues to maintain his adversary role.

Things now move very quickly, and Ford strikes with his fist, between Glenn’s “cover” and Parker’s last attempt to stop the blow, thereby hitting Glenn (Figure 3a), who immediately goes down. The camera goes shaky, and there are some screams in “uuuhs” from the audience.

**Figure 3a/b** Punch/ Bystanders Helping



Parker bends down to Glenn (Figure 3b). One bystander approaches him, but Parker swiftly turns around to Ford (Figure 4a), who has moved a few steps away, and charges towards him, and a fistfight starts (Figure 4b) where Ford has the upper hand (Figure 4b/c).

**Figure 4a-f** Retaliation by Parker, Ambiguous Role of Ron, Police Approaching



Parker also falls down (Figure 4d), and Ford comments with “Good night, good night” (Figure 4e). He turns around and walks away calmly, but Parker gets up, follows him and says “my dad’s on his way.” Ford responds with “your dads on his way? Congratulations pussy” in a high-pitched voice while he is going towards Parker, who is retreating. A loud voice can be heard from the side “it’s the police, stop” and Ford runs away (Figure 4f), while Parker says “he fucking hit me in the face, he fucking hit me in the face.”

#### 4.2 Case Two: An Execution and Its Third Parties

The second case study is based on a video published by a journalistic website in 2018 documenting a straightforward staging of an execution. You can see how two women and two children – an infant bound on one of the women’s backs and a seven- to eight-year-old girl – are led by soldiers and some other men next to a street, blindfolded on the ground and then executed by gunfire.

The video begins with the group going to the execution site. An unlocatable voice – most likely from the cameraman – says that the arrival of the “BH” (short for Boko Haram), who were arrested during an attack, can be seen here. You can see a man in military clothing and with a rifle on his back running along the dirt road. He raises his arm holding a smartphone in his hand, which he points at the camera. A group of people follow him. The group moves in a relatively stable formation on the dirt road (see figure 5). Occasionally, however, people can be seen along the way who are not part of the procession but rather bystanders.

**Figure 5** Body Formation During the Procession



While the group is walking down the path, one soldier hits the woman twice in the face. The off-screen voice says between the two punches: “Et c’est sanglant.” (“And it’s bloody.”) While the group is walking on, they pass another soldier who almost casually stretches his arm and slaps the other woman in her face as she walks past him. One soldier tells the woman he is leading across the street to raise her head to be seen. He tugs her neck to turn her face up and into the camera. Then he says: “BH. Tu vas mourir.” (“BH. You’re going to die.”) (see figure 6).

**Figure 6** Humiliation and Beating of the Women



The group can be seen passing some civilian-dressed people who are observing the scene. The soldier who was leading the group has joined the civilians at the side of the road. He holds a smartphone in both hands and points it at the soldiers and the prisoners passing by (see figure 3). He then approaches a civilian-dressed man who is following the procession and asks this civilian to film him. He hands him the smartphone. Shortly after, the soldier asks the

civilian: “Tu me filmes? Tu me filmes?” (“Are you filming me? Are you filming me?”)

The group turns off the dirt road. When the group stops, the soldiers blindfold both the woman and the girl he has previously grabbed by the neck. These actions continue to be filmed by the civilian-dressed man who had been given the smartphone by the soldier (see figure 7).

**Figure 7** Videographic Recordings in the Violent Situation



The prisoners are ordered to kneel on the floor. They receive the instructions in a harsh voice. Meanwhile, the cameraman speaks slowly, clearly, and in a calm tone to the baby while focusing the camera on him: “Mon petit, ça fait mal, mais tes parents nous ont mis dans” (“My little boy, this hurts, but your parents made us do it”).

A short time later, you can see the soldiers aiming their rifles and shooting. Several people stand in the background watching the execution. A group of six people stand in the distance on the dirt road, while six other people have left the path and are closer to the scene; among them is the civilian-dressed person who continues to film the situation with the soldier’s smartphone.

After the woman fell to the floor with the baby on her back, the situation becomes more hectic. The soldiers disagree on whether the baby is dead. An act of overkill ensues in which a soldier shoots the baby’s head several times. The other soldiers tell him to stop because the boy is already dead. But he continues to shoot. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers discover that the girl is still alive too. She is killed at close range with a single headshot. The soldier who shot the infant is walking away from the other two bodies. The cameraman says to him: “Oh, [Name]. Si tu as peur, tu pars là-bas. Vous ne pouvez pas visionner notre vidéo ici.” (“Oh! [Name], if you are scared, just go over there. You can’t screw our video here.”)

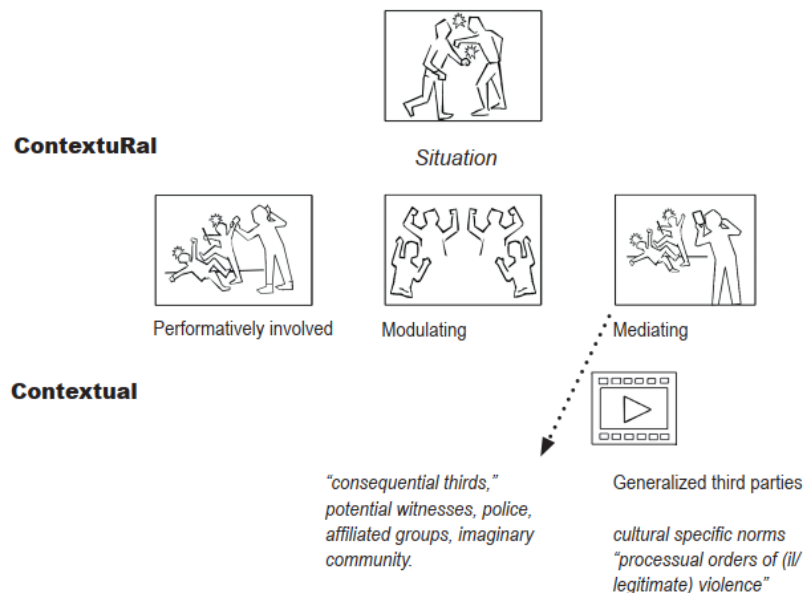
#### 4.3 A Heuristic of Third Parties in Sequences of Violence

Based on the videos just presented, we have developed a heuristic of third parties in sequences of violence. In addition to the principal “main

participants,” these can be divided into two types: (1) contextuRal and (2) contextual third parties. ContextuRal third parties are physically and materially involved in the sequences of violence. In this regard, a distinction can also be made between performatively involved, modulating, and mediating third parties. In contrast, contextual third parties are semantically and symbolically represented within the sequences of violence. They can be observers concerned with the situation or legitimizing third parties. This also includes generalized third parties, which are abstract third parties. Here, the imaginary video community occupies an important position. Our video examples set different priorities in this heuristic. While the brawl emphasizes the role of the contextual third party, the shooting emphasizes the contextual third party.

**Figure 8** Illustrative Overview of the Heuristics of the Third Parties

**Main Participants**



The central reference point for these third parties are the specific performative participants, i.e., opponents or “perpetrators” and “victims” in sequences of violence. We assume that violence is attributed to the interactions that take place between at least two actors. We can identify these main participants based on reports of participation in a “focused” interaction that can be roughly identified by signs, such as physical proximity and body formation,

the sequential conversation addressed to specific interaction partners, in semantic reference and organized alternation, and the sequential organization of non-verbal communication (from provoking gazes to different forms of punches).

However, these references are not only factors, but temporally, i.e., sequentially ordered action references that in their concatenation, in the trajectory of the violent situation, which results from the various individual actions of the participants, produce this event together. The accounts can be found “within” the recorded video and are passed on to each other by the participants. They are often recognized by the camera and are also visible in the transcription, but they cannot be neglected in the systematic communicative accounts of the participants (language, gazes, gestures, and physical formation).

#### 4.3.1 ContextuRal Third Parties

Besides the main participants we do observe, in almost all cases, very concrete others that are more or less participating performatively. *ContextuRal third parties* are those participants of the situation that are on the fringes of becoming main participants. Often, they are, for a limited time span, an integral part of the violent trajectory, without following through it for the whole time. They might lurk at the fringes of the action and encourage or discourage what is going on, sometimes selectively or tacitly intervening, or even following other action projects that overlap with the unfolding trajectory of violence. This category ranges from partially involved actors towards mere bystanders that form what can be understood as the directly present context of the situation by performing as an audience (e.g., forming an observing circle). The contextuRal third parties differ in *how they affect the turns and moves of the violence sequence*. Nevertheless, they have one thing in common: They are *physically and performatively involved in the sequences of violence*. Therefore, in terms of temporality, these third parties are much closer to the violent actions.

Those participants that directly get involved into the ongoing trajectory by supporting or intervening we simply call *performatively involved third parties*. This can be shown in the first case.

In the street brawl case, Ford and Glenn act – and thereby can be interpreted – as the main actors, whereby Ron and Parker are also performatively weaved into the focused interaction. Both play an ambiguous role in this case, being companions of the respective partners, but intervening by calming down and heating up the situation in different sequences of the action. They are co-shaping the trajectory by their actions and involved in it during the whole trajectory, even with Parker attacking Ford in the end as retaliation for his friend.



In the event of the execution, such third parties can also be found who advance the violent trajectory. This concerns, for example, the men who are part of the procession but who cannot be assigned to be military because of their clothing, yet do not engage in physical violence. They are performatively involved third parties because they support the form of the violent trajectory communicatively. It is unclear whether they were asked to do so or whether it was their own decision to follow those involved in the violent trajectory. They go after the soldiers and the prisoners and form the procession as part of the ritual community. By positioning themselves to the soldiers, by following them, as well as by the clubs that some carry with them, they support the trajectory of violence. They represent a community that promotes the intentional killing and, if necessary, could defend it by force.

The second group of third parties impose on the situation to a certain degree but has a more passive role. They modulate the situation by their presence, produce a situative framing, act as witnesses and observers, and form a stage as audience for the event, therefore *modulating* it.

In Example 1, Brook and the group of friends in the initial phase try to calm down Ford and then demonstratively leave the scene. She is addressed by Ford as a relevant person and therefore plays a role, but we consider her to be a good example for a modulating third party. She seems to be aware of the groups power to modulate the trajectory – she has influence on the events, even if not directly intervening in the sequential turn taking, but rather by demonstratively leaving the scene. Our argument for this “in-between” role of third party is that they are forming an audience and therefore being acknowledged as relevant observers by the main participants.

Even less involved and on the boundary to be mere “contextual” thirds, however situative present, are the bystanders. In this case we can identify the person on the right of Figure 1a with the green shirt. Even if they do not actively intervene in the situation, they do play a role that often is tacit-environmental, not directly intervening, but still establishing a spatio-temporal stage, and therefore more than pure context. Such an audience status can be spotted by being indicated by the deliberate creation of distance (typically standing on the other side of the street, which marks “non-participation” and observer status). However, it is noteworthy that when Glenn falls, they enter the scene by checking on his wellbeing while still maintaining bodily distance (Figure 3b). Methodologically we can trace spots of their relevance for the situation by looking for accounts in the primary participants’ activities. A situative audience not only forms the stage but often is very relevant for the trajectory, as it is the target for the demonstration of communication power (Reichertz 2009) and often of legitimacy of (violent) communicative action. Therefore, e.g., in this case, the location, the specific spot plays a crucial role, as the whole conflict seems to connect questions of dominance and legitimacy of a demand (“apologize”) and the being present in the specific spot, as

the discussion about “walking away” (Line 60-86)<sup>7</sup> highlights. Walking away has a spatial dimension as well as a social dimension of staying in the conflict or giving up and thereby possibly losing face.

Modulating third parties can also be observed in the execution case, in particular when the infant is overkilled. After the soldier shot the boy’s head several times, the soldiers standing by intervened. They say that the infant is dead and that the soldier should leave it at that, which he does. In this way, they shape the trajectory of violence.

Another variant of contextual third parties are those mediating people who record the violent situation in some way, be it videographically, photographically, or in the form of a written report. They have two functions for the further course of the violent trajectory. On the one hand, they “preserve” the events and allow them to be connected between and trans-situationally. On the other hand, they are also perceived by those involved and addressed as having that role: being a recorder of the act of violence and mediator to a large audience.

These mediating third parties are mainly to be found in the example of the execution. On the one hand, there is the camera person who describes the scene at the beginning of the video and is addressed by those involved. On the other hand, there is also one observing bystander, who is given a smartphone by a soldier and who is asked to film the situation. In this case, an “articulation work” (Strauss 1985) can be observed that originates from someone involved in the violent trajectory and integrates a third party into it. The man addressed becomes a different type of third-party present. He not only supports the violent trajectory by joining the procession performatively, but also by recording the procession and the execution with the smartphone. He becomes a mediating third party, through whom the violent situation can be made observable for other third parties who are not present. His function in the trajectory of violence is not the application, but the mediation of violence.

This type of contextual third can also be found in the street brawl case. The camera person filming the event is clearly a mediating third party. We do not spot clear accounts by the main participants for them being aware of his filming, therefore the cameraperson seems to play a similar role as a modulating third party or audience (even if not directly observable in the street brawl example). However, often the trajectory and the participants’ actions are designed towards the recording and towards an imagined audience represented by the camera, as becomes very clear in the execution case.

To conclude, “contextual thirds” can be identified by observing their role as participants in the local-spatial interaction not only by focusing on the ongoing action (body formation, gazes, actions, references) but often also by being addressed by the “main performers,” which can be traced in the

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://dx.doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-15974>.

sequential analysis of the turns where they are addressed. Very often, the status of the contextual third also shifts during interaction, e.g., when audience members intervene and become direct performers or targets in the situation themselves.

#### 4.3.2 Contextual Third Parties

On a second level we can find *contextual third parties* that are not a direct part of the situation as it is defined by the spatial temporal ordering, but rather as abstract consequences. They are characterized by the fact that, *due to their semantic and symbolic representation, they influence the sequences of violence*. That is why they need media and symbols that refer to the context and connect it to the situation. A situation is not a closed entity, but entangled into various trajectories, embedded into context as Hoebel (2019) has shown for the Charlie Hebdo Massacre. In our cases, we can see those entanglements directly referred to by symbols that are means to transgress situations (c.f. for an interpretation of Schutz and Luckmann in Dreher 2003), starting from direct references to specific others that are not yet or not anymore part of the situation (e.g., the mentioning that Parkers dad is a policeman, or the reference to the woman that has left the scene). In terms of temporality, they are more closely related to references to the past and the future or to a before and after.

The group around Brook (Figure 1b, see also Figure 2) after they have left the scene of action can be seen as an example again as they are on the fringes (still visible). After they have left, there are still concrete others that are addressed, which the participants consider as directly being entangled with the trajectory, and therefore part of their actions, as being directly relevant. At a later point in time, they likely will acquire knowledge about how the situation evolved, who “won the fight,” etc. They might judge what happened and at a later stage present consequential reactions.

The execution video also shows people standing by the wayside and watching the procession and the killing. They are the ideal-typical passive bystander who do not intervene actively in the violent trajectory, but instead only direct their attention to it. They are the observing third parties of the violent situation who can testify to the violent trajectory and at least orally convey the events to those who are not present. At the same time, they also serve the perpetrators of violence as part of the public for whom the killing is staged.

Others that are not on the scene but that might be relevant in the foreseeable future are also addressed and referenced to as thirds. In the street brawl situation, specific participants are literally mentioned, such as the “Dad” of Parker, who he says is a policeman (Figure 2). In the end of the video, one can hear the approaching sirens of the police (Figure 4e/f), which is a clear sign

of others entering the situation and extending it to possible intervention and even longer-term consequences. For those thirds that are “potentially” present, they are imagined and included in possible trajectories (police might come and arrest the participants, therefore actions are designed towards avoiding or encouraging such an outcome).

“Potential thirds” that are likely to arrive on spot every moment are accounted for: hidden witnesses that might be there, such as people that might hear the sound of a violent action, such as a gunshot and others. This category of the third therefore relates to what Schütz (1974, 198ff) calls “Mitmenschen” and extends what we can call an audience in a concrete sense. Finally, there is another type of contextual third that is relevant to the dynamics of the violence sequence. This can be labelled as legitimizing-mediating third party. For example, shortly before the baby is shot, he is told that his parents convinced the perpetrators to kill him. Although the mother is present in the situation, she is not addressed directly. In addition, the father, although referred to through the use of the term parents, is not even present in the situation. However, it is conveyed on a linguistic level and cited as a reason for legitimizing the act of violence. After all, it was the father’s fault that the child had to die. In the legitimation of violence with reference to mediated third parties, a clear “because motive [*Weil-Motiv*]” (Schütz 1974, 93ff) can be found. The killing takes place *because* the parents made the soldiers do it. Here we are dealing with an asymmetrical mode of legitimation since the absent father cannot confirm that his actions are the starting point for the following execution. And the mother is not given a chance to comment on this claim either.

Contextual third parties are not a specific part of the sequence of violence. Instead, they are located on the edges of the situation. They are referenced symbolically – through language, images, or sounds. But although they are not physically co-present, they have a major impact on the trajectory of violence. Their representation can legitimize or delegitimize the violence that takes place, as well as promote or inhibit it. In this regard, the generalized third parties represent a special contextual form. They are also not physically present in the violent situation. Generalized third parties can either be addressed as generalized others or, in presence of mediating devices, as mediated third parties.

A general audience is addressed when the local culture and norms are evoked. Ford explicitly addresses this when he refers to the legitimacy of the claim that Glenn should apologize for his former actions for his act of disrespect that Ford accuses him of. The saying “you don’t go disrespecting women where I am from” (Line 29)<sup>8</sup> can be read as a membership categorization that refers to a shared community and normative dimension. In this utterance

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://dx.doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-15974>.

and in this specific street brawl case, we do not find a specific design towards the actions of the camera (c.f. case three in Weenink, van Bruchem, and Tuma, forthcoming). In our analysis, there are no signs that the actions are designed towards a specific mediated audience, i.e., the camera. However, as smartphones are widely used and available, we can assume that the participants are aware of possible consequences of being filmed. The falling of Glenn and the following fight between Ford and Parker after the punch introduces the legitimacy of violent counteraction. This is accounted for then by Ford running away as soon as Parker addresses the violence as illegitimate, a bystander is shouting something related to the violence and police can be heard can be understood in that regard (Figure 4f).

In the execution case, the introductory contextualizing words from the off-screen voice and the admonition to one of the soldiers that he should not ruin the video with his fearful actions indicate that the violent trajectory was staged for an *imaginary video community*. The initial procession, the statement by the off-screen voice that what follows will be bloody, the humiliating slaps to the woman, and the order that she should raise her head so that “we” can see her as she is pulled towards the camera shows that these mediatized third parties play an essential role in the dynamics of violence that are taking place. Numerous actions within the violent trajectory take place in a form that communicatively aims at these generalized third parties. The influence of these generalized third parties is strictly linked to the contextual, mediatizing third parties that serve as a link between the violent situation and those who are not present. However, this raises the question of how these types of third party are linked to the “procedural orders of violence” (Lindemann 2017), which define what is considered to be violence, how it is exercised, what level of violence is appropriate, and whether violent behavior is considered legitimate at all. This requires further research.

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## 5. Conclusion

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We aimed to classify the statements about third parties in violent situations, which up to now have often been rather general, based on empirical data. Our video analyzes support the position that the role of third parties in sequences of violence should not be underestimated. By adopting a communication constructivist perspective, we showed that numerous types of the “consequential third” (Hoebel 2019) have to be distinguished to be able to understand the dynamics in situations of violence and the communicative realization of forms of violence. We made it clear that the distinction between contextual and contextual (Knoblauch 2021) can be fruitful for the sociology of violence. Our classification of the third can be connected to the distinction between presence and absence (Lindemann 2021, 206 ff).

From a communicative constructivist's perspective, we would like to state that our analyses are not about "modes of experiencing violence" (Koloma Beck 2011, 350). Instead of experiences, video analysis emphasizes the dimension of action. Therefore, "perpetrator," "victim," and the (sub-)types of third parties presented here are instead to be understood as "modes of action." The different types of the third are thus not ontologically fixed but are only realized in communicative action. Contextuality and contextuality are dynamic and fluid concepts. Therefore, it differs from case to case how tight the boundaries are between dyad and triad, between "main performer" and "third parties." The third parties who can exert an influence on the violent situation are multifaceted. At the same time, these categorizations can sometimes not be clearly separated from one another. Individual types of the third can coincide. Therefore, the types of third parties presented here are to be understood as ideal types.

The perspective that we have taken starts from a micro-sociological, situationist standpoint. However, it does not stop there, and therefore overcomes criticism that has been addressed towards other situationist approaches towards violence. The reconstruction refers neither to just subjectivist reconstructions of events nor does it just explain the unfolding of the trajectory just by (structural) factors. An analysis of the sequential unfolding of such events has close relations to ethnomethodological positions (Elsey, Mair, and Kolanoski 2018; Lloyd 2017; Watson and Meehan 2021; Weenink, van Bruchem, and Tuma, forthcoming) and enhances it by the addition of the role of knowledge (see Coenen 2021) and social forms by using the perspective of communicative construction. The analysis of the specific role of third parties that form what can be called the material contexture (Knoblauch 2021) and symbolic context takes the role of bodily communication equally serious to meaning systems and shows their interplay.

This insight leads to a broad field of research that needs to be explored in further studies. The interplay of different contextures comes into focus, as well as the typical roles, norms, and temporalities associated with them. In addition, it can be asked whether certain forms of violence have distinct contextual properties. And finally, a closer look at the interweaving of contextual and contextual third parties would be necessary to analyze the dynamics in situations of violence in more depth. These are some components for a communication constructivist perspective on violence that still needs to be worked out in the future.

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## Data Availability

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Transcripts and video data used in this study are available at aviDa (<https://fdz-avida.tu-berlin.de>), the research data centre for audio-visual data of empirical qualitative social research, hosted by Technische Universität Berlin, and can be accessed here: <https://dx.doi.org/10.14279/depositonnce-15974>.

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