Is Low-Level Conflict Different from Violent Conflict?

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Everyday Troubles is the long-awaited synthesis of several decades of research by Robert Emerson and colleagues. The focus on troubles is a classic one in Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology. Emerson’s design is more in the Goffman and Jack Katz style of microethnography, and Emerson builds his own theoretical frame, driven to a considerable extent by the effort to organize his extensive empirical materials. These include reports and diaries by students on roommate troubles and on neighbor troubles, disputes between intimate couples (married or cohabiting), plus Emerson’s own field work on families with Alzheimer’s patients and on psychiatric emergency teams. These are bolstered by cases from the sociological literature, especially on living with alcoholics.

What sort of troubles are these? The biggest set comes from people sharing a common living space: issues of messiness versus tidiness in the kitchen and bathroom, amount of noise versus quiet (talking, TV and music versus studying and sleeping), hogging the bathroom or the storage space. Neighbors chiefly dispute about noise from music, parties, dogs, and sometimes construction work. Intimate partners have the same issues (plus a few more like how hot or cold their bedroom should be, and how much they hog the blankets), but also their disputes are constrained by their commitment to each other and not just by appeals to politeness or “normal” standards. In a class by themselves are troubles distinctive to roommates, such as using the other roommate’s bed for sex, or exiling the roommate from a shared bedroom while a sexual partner stays over (in today’s parlance, being “sexiled”). Also roommates get into intimate property disputes over wearing the other person’s clothes and jewels, using their cosmetics, eating up their food, and appropriating/stealing their property.

Emerson’s data are heavily weighted toward females and ostensibly middle-class whites. He is not interested in correlations, but he does point out that although the
literature (and his own data) show women are less confrontational and much less violent than men, the same typology of responses to troubles has both male and female examples in every type. The middle-class white female center of attention distinguishes Emerson’s approach from the main literature on disputes and conflicts, which comes from criminology and policing, with a selection bias towards males, violence, the lower classes, and nonwhites.

Emerson theorizes, if not as an ethnomethodologist, at least in the atmosphere of UCLA ethnomethodology. That is, he is concerned with cognitive practices, how situations are framed, interpretations of what is normal and what other people are doing. He focuses on individuals’ cognitions about social interactions and thus tends to defocus the interactional dynamics themselves. Part of this comes from the methodology, relying on reports from one side of a dispute (especially in the roommate data), although some cases give accounts by third-person observers; one really misses here conversation analysis—if such data were available.

Emerson’s main foil tends to be Donald Black’s (1998) theory of the structural conditions for various kinds of responses to troubles and M. P. Baumgartner’s (1988) research on middle-class suburbs, which jointly theorize that in loosely connected, egalitarian situations, people respond to disputes mainly by avoiding them and moving away. Emerson shows that there are many more micro-moves before roommates move out and that some disputes get handled in very different ways. I will return later to the question of how much Black and Emerson’s theories contradict each other. Given their very different theoretical focus (ethno/cognitive versus structural-relational), it is not surprising they are clashing gestalts.

The book is organized as a typology of responses to trouble, once the issue gets framed. These are not really a sequence of moves but ideal types that are conveniently presented as degrees of escalation as troubles persist. 1) Formulating something as a trouble; considering whether it is temporary, exceptional, or has a good reason I am missing; also self-doubt as to whether I am being too picky or sensitive. 2) Unilateral responses: moves to convey to the offender that I am upset by their behavior. The major finding here is that these moves are usually formulated in such a subtle way—to avoid giving offense in return—that they are unnoticed. 3) Remedial complaints: getting explicitly with the offender; or alternatively voicing my complaint to my friends. 4) Complaining to informal third parties, and trying to get them to intervene. This frequently has little effect and contrasts with official interventions, which wield more power. 5) Accusations and extreme responses: generalizing from one incident to a pattern and from condemning the sin to condemning the sinner. This is where angry confrontations happen, along with non-confrontational ways of getting back at the opponent (playing dirty tricks on them) and sometimes violence. 6) Calling in authoritative third parties—the police and agents of mental hospitals.

The typology is not a sequence, Emerson emphasizes, because it can go faster or slower; it can skip moves or telescope them together. And it can go back to “lower” stages and recycle. The literature on commitments to mental hospitals, and on alcoholics, shows that even highly authoritative, escalated responses are often not the end of the story.

Reading this book is somewhat of a tantalizing experience (in the precise sense of the legend of Tantalus being tortured). The relationship between the text and the reader generates its own sequence of troubles. How do the troubles he recounts in his case studies get resolved, or not? That is not Emerson’s main interest. Nevertheless, by the later chapters, we see that troubles sometimes get resolved by mutual understanding; sometimes they are resolved by one side dominating and the other side acquiescing; sometimes by separation, including moving out of the relationship, but also by living together in pointedly cold obliviousness to each other; and sometimes by external authority exerting its power. Emerson is not interested in the conditions under which one or another of these “resolutions” occurs, or even in showing why some troubles recycle or escalate upwards and downwards; he just comments that all of these things happen. The reader may feel at the end of the book that it has collected good material and organized it into useful slices; but you as
a social theorist will have to provide the causal-
ity and the dynamics.

Toward the end of the book, the author appears to be aware that these disputes are two-sided and that both players are making moves; some of these moves even turn the tables, casting the offended party as the offender. But Emerson’s approach tends to defocus this dynamism. The book repeatedly refers to the “troubled party” and the “troubling party,” which obscures the fact that often from the other’s point of view the roles are reversed. The person who formulates a trouble and makes the complaint can be perceived by the other as picky, intrusive, or domineering, or even crazy and megalomanic. The situation typically is a two-sided conflict, including a conflict of rival constructions of reality. In this respect, Emerson’s analysis would benefit from what Jack Katz stresses in his famous “Pissed Off in L.A.” (in Katz 1998). Maybe I am just being impatient to get to the punch line, while Emerson denies the real world has a punch line. This is sort of like roommate troubles, both of us trying to live in this apartment called sociology.

Let us go back to Emerson’s most striking empirical patterns and try to theorize them further. Early moves tend to be so subtle that the offender does not appear to see them at all. The offended party introduces the topic (like not letting dirty dishes pile up in the kitchen) into the conversation in a roundabout way, without saying “you did it,” trying to keep things pleasant, or expresses distaste for the mess by body language. One reason the other person doesn’t get it is that the message is too subtle. Similarly, in a later round of escalation, a direct complaint or heart-to-heart talk can result in ostensible acquiescence, a superficial verbal agreement while not paying much attention or even briefly mending one’s ways before resuming the offense. Emerson highlights the case of a male roommate who finally figures out his counterpart is deliberately leaving annoying things in their bedroom; but he still doesn’t realize the other is responding to his own ways of signaling complaints.

Can we explain sociologically why the other person blows it off? One principle is that in a situation of equal status, the person with the neater standard generally loses to the person with the messier standard; the quieter loses to the noisier. This is a variant on the long-recognized pattern (noted by both Stendhal and Peter Blau) that in love affairs, the person who loves less has power over the person who loves more. The impatient person tends to lose any particular dispute to the procrastinating or lackadaisical one, because impatience drives one to do the work oneself. The outcome can happen both consciously and unconsciously; in some of Emerson’s cases, it comes out that the troubling person thinks they are being imposed upon, since they just have a different view of how long to wait before cleaning things up.

Another explanatory principle comes from the theory of interaction ritual (IR) chains (Collins 2004). The person who carries out a high-intensity IR is pumped up with high emotional energy (EE), and this generates a strong belief in one’s own construction of reality. In one of Emerson’s most egregious cases, a roommate and her boyfriend leave a real mess in the kitchen, leave the oven on all night, and take over the shared bedroom, completely oblivious to her other roommates. One could call this situational obliviousness, their love-making raised to the point of a religious trance. Generalizing this, we could say that persons with high EE tend to be wrapped in a cocoon of their own doings; persons with lower EE get shut out, and the messages they send complaining about the former barely register in their consciousness, or not for long.

In folk concepts, this may eventually become formulated as being selfish and self-centered. The IR chain argument turns these static personality concepts into dynamic processes. Freud’s term for narcissistic persons was oral personalities; babied and spoiled in their upbringing, they are self-centered but often well-liked by others for their spontaneity and happy dispositions. This is another dynamic that makes roommates or spouses reluctant to get angry with them; liking the troubling person is built into their obliviousness to being corrected. The more considerate person—often the neater and quieter—fits Freud’s anal personality, who has a stricter upbringing, with more control and less spontaneity, as well as more will power. So Emerson’s troubles may be
embedded, all the way through their history, in different ways of being conscious of one’s environment. When the issue is raised to an explicit remedial complaint or accusation, the alter can turn the tables; the “oblivious” person can become equally aggrieved at the “conscientious” person’s domineering behavior.

Katz’s analysis of road rage combines several of these processes. Drivers get angry with others on the road for doing things like cutting them off, tailgating, shining their brights in their rear-view mirror. But since they cannot communicate with other drivers directly (which in Emerson’s cases is the way people prefer to deal with troubles), they have to send the message by their actions, and the repertoire consists of the same kinds of offenses—cutting the other guy off, and so forth. So in any particular incident, at the moment the offense rises into the perceiver’s consciousness, it may be oneself who was already the offender. On top of this feeling that the other person is being irrational, the driver gets angry from the obliviousness of the other driver, their unresponsiveness to the message. We see this in one of Emerson’s cases that actually escalates to violence: the offended roommate A posts a series of notes, reminding others in general terms to clean up their mess in the kitchen; the offending roommate B tears them down; when A persists in posting them, B invades her bedroom and threatens to push the next note down her throat. A righteously posts another note, whereupon they get into a scuffle over the note itself. This resembles male violence arising from so-called face contests, where verbal complaints turn into disputes over who has the power to say something and violence arises from trying to make the other one shut up. I would add that defending one’s face is not a necessary explanation, since the sequence of escalating anger and self-righteousness on both sides comes increasingly to focus on the act of sending one’s message of complaint. Both Emerson’s cases and Katz’s drivers support this interpretation; if anything, the drivers are pissed off not by loss of face but by an interruption of their flow—getting angry when they have been driving blithely as much as when some extraneous frustration previously happened to them.

Do theories of violent conflict map onto Emerson’s milder disputes? My micro-social theory of violence (Collins 2008) builds from evidence that most threatening confrontations abort, and if violence occurs it is usually short and incompetent. Confrontational tension constitutes a barrier that must be circumvented for violence to happen. One pathway around the emotional barrier is attacking the weak. In violence, this is generally done by a small group attacking an isolated target. Emerson’s cases appear to be almost entirely one on one, which is a configuration in violent disputes that quickly aborts. Emotional domination is more important than physical domination; and Emerson reveals that unassertive (sensitive, conscientious) persons generally lose quarrels, whereas assertive and oblivious ones (not easily dominated emotionally) often get their way. Another pathway around the barrier is audience support, especially institutionalized scripts for fair fights that give honor for fighting, over and above whatever the fight was about. But this is not available in today’s middle class, although it is in the lower-class street code. That leaves the pathway of attacking from a distance or clandestinely, avoiding face confrontation. This is what Emerson’s subjects do—leaving notes or dropping hints; or when it comes to material retaliation, doing it surreptitiously like putting needles in the bed or dye in the complaining neighbor’s pool. Finally, when violent conflicts are stalemate—neither side’s tactics yielding an advantage—it is typical to de-escalate, at least temporarily; and this is Emerson’s recycling process.

Black’s theory of conflict management generalizes from his finding that crime typically has a prehistory before it reaches official legal processing. Most crime starts out as self-help by individuals who are in disputes with persons they know; stealing often starts out as “borrowing” and retaliation for it; vandalism is often payback against an unpopular neighbor (Emerson helps us see this is probably one who persistently complains). What kind of self-help occurs depends on network relationships. Tit-for-tat
sequences occur when autonomous parties are of equal strength and can’t destroy the other so they can only chip away. Vertical differences in power lead to moralistic downward imposition of discipline: strong parties are self-righteous and frame the offense not just as against themselves personally but as offenses against morality (in Emerson, read: against normal human decency). On the flip side, upward rebellion against the strong is muted resistance. Failure of such tactics over time leads to tolerating the trouble or avoiding it by moving away, which happens when the parties are not interdependent and when one has the resources to move. Emerson’s data support rather than contravene these principles, but he does show much more fine-grained sequences in time.

Bottom line: Emerson’s analysis is congruent with more abstract and more macro theories of conflict centered on crime and violence. And that is a good thing. Our field as a whole is making progress, accumulating a solid body of knowledge at all scales of the microscope.

References

Raising the Bar for Scholarship on Protest and Politics

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In the run-up to the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq and during the next few years, there was an outpouring of protest in the United States. The U.S. military is still at war in the Middle East, but protests have long since dissipated. What accounts for this?

Michael T. Heaney and Fabio Rojas’s Party in the Street argues that this decline in protest poses both empirical and theoretical puzzles. The continuation of war in Iraq and Afghanistan without protest defies historical precedent. When Richard Nixon replaced Lyndon Johnson in 1969, anti-Vietnam War protest did not at all slow down. The recent decline of protest also confounds the political opportunity model of social movements, which expects movements to be spurred when their allies are in power and to decline when they are not. In the U.S. setting, Democrats are typically considered allies of left-wing movements and Republicans allies of right-wing ones. Yet antiwar mobilization was spurred by Republican regimes and depressed by Democratic ones.

The authors see the solution to the puzzles in the identities of the protesters. The antiwar protesters were not just against the war, but were also Democratic partisans who opposed many policies of the George W. Bush administration and supported others championed by Democrats. Once the Democratic party captured Congress in the 2006 midterm elections and especially once the antiwar and progressive Democrat Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, the movement stopped protesting—even as war dragged on. Party in the Street is innovative in addressing a question mainly neglected by social movement scholars: why movements decline.