

4-2008

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Christopher W. Mullins

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, mullinsc@siu.edu

Jody Miller

University of Missouri - St Louis

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Published in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 41 No. 1 (April 2008) at doi:

[10.1375/acri.41.1.36](https://doi.org/10.1375/acri.41.1.36)

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**Progressions of Gendered Violence:
Temporal, Situational and Interactional Features of Women's Violent Conflicts**

Christopher W. Mullins
University of Northern Iowa

Jody Miller
University of Missouri-St. Louis

The authors would like to thank Paul Mazerolle and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on a prior draft of this article. Please direct all correspondence to Christopher W. Mullins, Baker Hall 319, Mail Code 0513 University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls IA 50604-0513. christopher.mullins@uni.edu

Progressions of Gendered Violence: Temporal, Situational and Interactional Features of Women's Violent Conflicts

Criminologists have long recognized the importance of situational context for understanding criminal events, especially violence. Research in this tradition attempts to “specify the situational conditions that might channel violent dispositions into action” (Baron, Kennedy and Forde, 2001: 760; see also Luckenbill, 1977). Much of this work has focused on identifying the stages of violent incidents, examining as well how other situational factors, such as the presence of third parties or weapons, the disputants' relationship, and the physical location of the event, affect the likelihood of a violent resolution (Baron et al., 2001; Deibert and Meithe, 2003; Felson and Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989).

Such research has been limited, however, in three important ways. First, situational factors have garnered much more attention than interactional processes within violent events. As Short (1998: 12) points out, a focus on interactional processes—including “ongoing interaction among event participants [and] the moral and emotional transformations that enable and motivate criminal acts”—can provide a much richer contextual understanding of “decisions made and actions taken during those events.” Given the dominance of opportunity approaches for studying criminal situations, emphasis has been on discrete, measurable behaviors, with limited concern for participants' subjective interpretations and motivations, including how these emerge processually (see Birkbeck and Lafree, 1993 for a discussion; but see Katz, 1988).

Second, a related problem is that many investigations are truncated temporally. They focus on the unfolding of immediate events leading up to a violent outcome, with limited

attention to the long term social processes and interactions between dispute participants that contextualize the incident. When considered, context is typically conceptualized in terms of particular subcultural values (including those emerging from structural dislocations) that may predispose individuals towards violence (see, for example, Anderson, 1999; Bernard, 1990). Yet, the interpretations have been overly mechanistic. They look at how such contexts produce violence, but not how similar situations may be resolved without violence. Further, scholars rarely consider the ongoing contexts of participants' relationships and interactions with one another.¹

Finally, while some research has examined the impact of masculinity constructions on men's interpersonal violence (see Messerschmidt 1993; Mullins, 2006; Oliver 1994; Polk, 1994; Winlow, 2001), relatively few studies have considered how gender shapes the situational contexts of violent disputes for women (but see Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Maher, 1997; Miller and Mullins, 2006a; Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, 2004). As Daly (1998) argues, and much feminist research has demonstrated, gender organizes the daily lives of women and men, and structures both individuals' identities and their available courses of action. Thus, important questions include how situational and interactional processes associated with women's violent conflicts are gendered, and how examination of these processes can enrich our understanding of the social contexts and circumstances that surround the use of violence.

To examine these questions, we describe and analyze the evolution of interpersonal disputes among women. Specifically, we provide a detailed examination of three cases of violence escalation. In depth case research is a means of providing a relatively holistic and

¹ Research on intimate partner violence is a notable exception to this trend. In fact, part of the tendency to truncate analyses and focus only on the situational context of violent events may reflect many criminologists primary concern with male violence, which is much more likely than women's violence to involve participants who are strangers.

contextually embedded understanding of individuals' actions and interactions as they unfold in time and space (see Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991; Verschuren, 2003). Here, they provide a means of exploring temporal features of women's conflicts, located in the contexts of their ongoing relationships with disputants and others, as well as the specific situational features and interactional processes that shape the nature and outcomes of disputes.

Conceptual Context

Since the 1980s, some criminologists have pointed to the need for close examination of criminal events and situations. Alternatively influenced by symbolic interactionism and opportunity theories, such approaches begin with the understanding that crime, as social behavior, emerges from specific behavioral contexts and situations. Event-focused studies have taken several approaches. Some seek to identify stages of violence escalation, for example, Luckenbill and Doyle's (1989) conceptualization of naming, claiming, and aggressiveness, also described as "character contests" (see also Baron et al., 2001; Deibert and Meithe, 2003), or Felson and Steadman's (1983) typological sequence: verbal conflicts, threats and evasive action, followed by physical attack.

Others have examined the role that situational factors play in aiding or hampering the likelihood of violence, including during these stages. This approach to situational context has evolved most visibly into the routine activities tradition, which focuses on the convergence in time and space of a motivated offender, suitable target, and absence of capable guardians (see Felson and Steadman 1983, Clarke and Felson 1993). In addition, some social situations are more criminogenic than others. Most attention to these aspects of criminal events on the individual level has focused on the role of subcultural values in predisposing individuals towards violent conflict resolution strategies, and has examined the role of structural dislocations in

producing these “aggressive regulative rules” (Baron et al., 2001: 762; see also Anderson, 1999; Baumer et al., 2003; Bernard, 1990; Stewart, Schreck and Simons, 2006). However, as a recent paper suggests, these attitudes can exist without associated violence (see Stewart and Simons 2006).

Such research has yielded important information about the nature and contexts of criminal events. However, as Short (1998) laments, in microsocial studies of violence, situational characteristics are often the primary focus of analyses, to the exclusion of interactional processes. Unlike symbolic interactionist approaches, which recognize that “situations are given meaning only through the subjective experiences of actors” (Birkbeck and LaFree, 1993: 119), most criminological research brings a narrow behavioral focus to the investigation. In part, this is because the study of interactional processes “does not submit easily to traditional ‘variables’ analysis” (Short, 1998: 10), which is the linchpin of mainstream research in the field.

Symbolic interactionism is particularly important for investigating the relationship between gender and violence. Taken for granted ideologies about gender are profoundly embedded in social life, and are fundamental interpretive frameworks women and men bring to their daily lives. Research readily documents that it is through the enactment of these gendered meaning systems that the most persistent yet often invisible facets of gender and gender inequality are reproduced (see Connell, 2002; Fenstermaker and West, 2002)². The elucidation of the relationship between ideological features of gender and gendered practice is thus a key

² Within these dynamics race and class are also central. However, since the samples we draw from have essentially no variation on race (all interviewees are African American) or class (all come from neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage) we cannot fully explore these influences. Further, especially in the literature on street violence and retaliation, there is no extant literature drawing upon a racially diverse sample to use as a basis for comparison.

facet of feminist criminological research, offering important insight into the gendering of violence.

This is why Daly (1998) calls for “middle range” theoretical approaches: research that seeks primarily to explore how broader structural forces are realized within particular social contexts and the micro-level interactions of social actors within these contexts. For example, careful examination of gendered meaning systems and behavioral demands provides a means of understanding how gender frames criminal events, including the questions of how and when gender is most salient (see Miller, 2002). Thus, feminist criminologists have also paid increasing attention to the importance of situation and context for understanding the intersections of gender, crime, and victimization (for an overview, see Miller and Mullins, 2006b). Given the “significant differences in the ways women experience society compared with men” (Daly 1998: 98), research on violence that is embedded within context and situation allows scholars to ascertain the nuances of the interaction of gender with violence (see Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Maher, 1997; Miller, 1998, 2001).

The Studies

To analyze the complex temporal, situational, and interactional features of women’s violent conflicts, we examine three detailed case studies drawn from two previous investigations. These include an investigation of the proximate triggers for adolescent girls’ violence against other young women (Miller and Mullins, 2006a) and an examination of gender and retaliatory violence among adult offenders (Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, 2004). A striking feature of girls’ and women’s accounts in both data sets was their depiction of conflicts as ongoing series of events that escalated over time; often involved multiple origins and triggers; typically were tied to their broader family, friendship, and/or criminal networks; and were shaped by the

organizational contexts of school, family life, and/or the streets. However, the scope of our earlier works did not provide the opportunity to examine these features of violent conflicts in this holistic manner.

To contextualize the analyses that follow, here we provide a brief overview of the key patterns that emerged in the previous investigations. In the first, we examined the array of proximate triggers for conflicts among urban adolescent girls, including “he say/she say,” style and reputational challenges, and boyfriends (Miller and Mullins, 2006a). Each was associated with girls’ concerns about their place within social hierarchies. Conflicts resulting from “he say/she say” were distinguished by their original occurrence behind an individual’s back, and included several types of events, including spreading rumors, making up lies, telling “your business,” and name calling. Style and reputational challenges, on the other hand, were status challenges that originally occurred face-to-face. Style challenges concerned personal style, and involved comments or put downs about girl’s clothing or hair. Girls linked these to jealousy, and also described that a powerful means of disrespecting a young woman was to imply that her clothing or hairstyle was inexpensive, in poor taste, or not well tended to.

Reputational challenges were tied to girls’ desires to project images of toughness and of the ability to stand up for themselves. These resulted in conflicts when young women read the actions of other girls as disrespectful, or were repeatedly provoked when their own actions were perceived as disrespectful by others. They involved a variety of potentially “disrespectful” acts, including staring, eye rolling, making inappropriate comments, and generally “getting an attitude.” Finally, an additional source of conflict for young women was their interactions with one another’s boyfriends. Ostensibly, these were fights about maintaining the integrity of

boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, but in fact they were much more complex events, very much tied to perceptions of disrespect and contests over girls' status hierarchies.

The second study was an investigation of the impact of gender on retaliation among adult offenders (Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, 2004). Comparative analyses revealed that female-on-female conflicts were more likely than male-on-male conflicts to be resolved without the use of violence. In addition, unlike with men, violence among women rarely involved the use of a firearm, only occasionally involved other weapons, and often involved multiple participants including family, friends, and street associates. In addition, women were far more likely than men to describe incidents that resulted from domestically oriented disputes, in addition to or instead of street-based conflicts.

These variations allowed us to select case studies of violent conflict that typified important contextual distinctions. Specifically, the three cases were selected to represent variations in the situational contexts and gendered life worlds of participants across the two investigations. They include a conflict among adolescent delinquent girls that carries over between school and neighborhood settings; a conflict that emerged in the context of domestic concerns among a woman only peripherally involved in street networks through her associations with male friends and family; and street-based retaliatory violence tied to drug dealing and other criminal endeavors. Our aim in this article is to explore how these three disputes emerged, intensified and evolved over time. Through close examination of temporal, situational and interactional facets, we examine how gender intersects with these contextual features to shape the nature of women's violent conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

In this investigation, we analyze three cases of violent conflicts among women. Case study research emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. This approach is “especially suitable for studying phenomena that are highly complex and/or embedded in their cultural context” (Verschuren, 2003: 137). Our analysis here includes both within-case analyses utilizing process-tracing techniques, as well as analytic comparisons across cases. Process-tracing, which involves “thick description of the sequence of events of a single case to identify the causal mechanisms at work in the sequence” (Harding, Fox and Mehta, 2002: 182) is a particularly useful approach when “temporal sequencing, particular events, and path dependence must be taken into account” (Mahoney, 1999: 1164). Analytic comparisons across cases allow for the examination of “how different causal configurations can lead to the same outcome” (Harding et al., 2002: 184; see also Ragin, 1987), and strengthen analytic insight through the examination of continuities and discontinuities across contexts (see Sullivan, 2002; Verschuren, 2003).

Thus, our goal here is not merely to produce a narrative description of women’s conflicts, but to examine: how they emerge and evolve over time, are embedded in immediate and ongoing situations, interactions, and relationships, and are interpreted and responded to through contextually specific meaning systems. In the process, we give careful consideration to gendered features of these phenomena. This approach allows for both theoretical generation and refinement (see Harding et al., 2002), which is strengthened further through our strategic selection of cases, each with a similar outcome (i.e., a violent altercation between women) but embedded within distinct social contexts (see Ragin, 1987; Verschuren, 2003).

Our three cases were drawn from qualitative in-depth interview data collected at approximately the same time from two separate projects in St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis is a

moderately sized Midwestern city, which is highly racially segregated, was hard hit by deindustrialization, and has experienced substantial white flight since the 1960s (see Baybeck and Jones, 2004). These forces have generated neighborhoods burdened with conditions of concentrated poverty and disadvantage known to produce strong street-based social networks and elevated violence. In fact, the city has been a productive site for a number of ethnographically-inclined studies of crime and violence (see, for example, Jacobs, 1999; Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Miller, 1998, 2001; Mullins, 2006; Wright and Decker, 1994, 1997). Although collected by different research teams, in different locations, and with different sampling strategies, both of the samples drawn from here were from the same socio-geographic region: African American neighborhoods in north St. Louis characterized by significant concentrations of economic disadvantage.

In both cases, the interviews followed an open-ended protocol designed to elicit thick descriptions of the events of interest, with interviewers using follow-up probes in order to obtain a fuller depiction of the contexts in which conflicts and/or violence emerged, situational and interactional features of the events (for instance, what happened, where it happened, who else was present and the role they played), as well as proximate and distant motivations and the interpretive meanings research participants brought to these events and processes. These discussions were embedded, as well, in broader discussions of neighborhood processes in interviewees' communities. Research participants were promised strict confidentiality and were provided economic remuneration for their participation. Interviews lasted from one to two hours, were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim (see Jacobs and Wright, 2006; and Miller, forthcoming for detailed descriptions of the research processes).

As noted, the three cases were selected to represent variations in the situational contexts and gendered life worlds of participants across the two investigations. Lisa was interviewed in a broader study of gender and adolescent violence. Her account of a violent conflict provides a case in which age-specific concerns in adolescence and the organizational context of school are of particular relevance. Further, within this larger data set, Lisa's account provided an on-going conflict particularly suitable to the they of analysis we are engaged in here. Pumpkin and Sugar were interviewed for a study of criminal retaliation in adult streetlife social networks. The interview protocol in this study focused specifically on the use of violence as payback for perceived wrongdoings. Pumpkin reported tangential relations with criminal networks situated within her family relations, and her own involvement in offending was thin and episodic. Thus, she was selected as a potentially comparative case, representing more marginal participation in streetlife social networks. Sugar, on the other hand, was a deeply embedded offender. She reported engaging in a wide variety of violent, property and drug crimes with a high frequency. She was selected to represent the small portion of female offenders who are deeply embedded in streetlife and criminal networks. Thus, they provide a useful comparison of violent conflicts among adult women—one embedded in domestic concerns, and the other in the “code” of the streets.

FINDINGS

Here we draw from three case studies from two research projects to trace some of the gendered contours in women's conflicts. As noted, a striking feature of such disputes was research participants' descriptions of them as ongoing series of interactions that had the potential to both ebb and escalate over time. In each case examined here, the dispute resulted in a violent altercation. Yet, each took a different path to that result. Moreover, these incidents were not

settled once and for all when a violent incident occurred. Instead, each was ongoing in some capacity, with the potential for continued verbal altercations as well as renewed violence. Our goal here is to examine and compare how these disputes evolved over time and were embedded in broader gendered contexts that included relationships with family, friends, and associates across the organizational settings of school, family and the streets. We examine why conflicts emerged, how sustained conflicts continued without violent altercation, and the circumstances that culminated in violence.

LISA'S ACCOUNT

Lisa was 17 years old when we interviewed her, and attended an alternative high school in St. Louis for youths expelled from mainstream schools. She said her expulsion was the result of numerous conflicts with young women at her old school, and reported involvement in serious delinquency, primarily in the form of assaults. Nonetheless, speaking in general terms, she noted, "you can argue all [the] way up to three or four months before a fight break out. Sometimes it be a year before a fight break out." She characterized girls' conflicts, including her own, as ongoing and routine, in which tensions remained high for months and were slow to escalate into a violent altercation.

To further examine this process, we draw here from Lisa's detailed description of her longstanding feud with Shantay, a girl who both attended her school and was her boyfriend's neighbor. Asked to describe a recent fight, she explained:

I had an argument Friday 'cause...my boyfriend, he know the lil' girl [Shantay] up here [at the school] 'cause, you know, he was out there [last summer] when they all jumped on me or whatever....She [kept telling me that my boyfriend] like her and this and this and that. [On Friday], he came and picked me up from school, and me and my lil' sister in the car with him....She at the bus stop [so] we goes up to her [and my boyfriend] fronted her out or whatever. And she like

[telling him] she didn't say all that. But she did say it. So he tellin' me to beat her...I'm like, I'm not fina [going to] beat her up 'cause we right...across the street from the school and they gon' lock us up. And then we can still get put outta school, 'cause we still on the school premises.

A striking feature of Lisa's account is her reference to this argument as one facet of an ongoing feud involving multiple participants. It originated with Lisa's fights with young women in Shantay's social network, all of whom lived in Shantay's and Lisa's boyfriend's neighborhood. It began in "the summertime," culminating in Lisa getting "jumped" by Shantay's friends, including her best friend Regina, and Lisa and her sister retaliating and "jump[ing] on her friend."

In fact, Lisa's earlier fights with Regina had parallels with her Friday afternoon confrontation with Shantay. They originated with what Lisa read as Regina's disrespectful behavior and taunts towards her about her boyfriend. Lisa explained:

See, he stay two doors down from [Shantay's] best friend [Regina]. Her best friend is the girl that I had the fight with [last summer], because Regina, she like, gon' be mad because I told her that that's disrespectful how she be tryin' to play with [my boyfriend] in my face....She gon' say, "when he had his other girlfriend, she wasn't like that [i.e., she didn't mind Regina's interactions with him]." So I said, "well, I'm not his other girlfriend, and I'm not fina [going to] let you disrespect me like that."

Lisa said her boyfriend "know [the girls in his neighborhood] don't like me, he know that they be tryin' to jump on me or whatever. He always try to keep me away from 'em." The girls also talked bad about her to her boyfriend: "They told him [that] I think I'm all that, and they want to show me that I'm not all that....She curses me out, he comes back and told me."

Lisa was particularly angered when Regina and her friends "try to get him to go ride with them or whatever." Their ongoing feud culminated in a loud argument when the girls came to Lisa's house. She explained:

She talkin' 'bout some, "come here Lisa." I said, "no, you come here." She comes over there, "you told this and this and this." "Naw." She said, "what did you say?" I said, "what did you say?" She talkin' 'bout, "you told such and such this and this." I said, "no, I didn't tell nobody nothin'." I said, "if you wanna know something," I said, "you come ask me right. You don't come to me like that." I said that "you not fina be disrespectin' my house. You not fina come in front of my house blowin' [the horn] for [my boyfriend] like that. You not fina come knockin' on my door for him when he in here with me." That's what I said. So she talkin' 'bout some, "yeah, alright, yeah alright."

At some point during the altercation, Lisa's older sister intervened and tried to get Lisa and her younger sister to "go'on in the house. I'm like, 'we ain't got to go in no house! 'Cause we was sittin' on the porch before they came and we gon' sit out here 'til after they leave. You ain't gotta go nowhere, they ain't scarin' nobody.'" Regina and her friends eventually left, but Lisa said that "for like a long time, about two months straight, they'll come down there everyday, tryin' to jump on me. And I was still sittin' outside and they ain't touch me, not one time. I'm sittin' outside ignorin' 'em, laughin' or whatever."

Finally, the conflict turned violent. Regina again heard that Lisa had said something about her. Lisa denied it, but "she and her sisters came down there...[and] wanna...fight me anyway." She explained:

So my boyfriend, it just so happened [that he was there]. If they was gon' come across the street, my boyfriend was gon' get out the car. So everybody was like, it was just gon' be a one-on-one fight. So I came out and she swung on me, got to beatin' her up. [Then] her sister got mad, came throwin' bricks at me. And then my boyfriend jumps in it or whatever....[We] fell somehow, I don't know, I tripped over his feet or something, and we fell and she came kickin' me in my face. And then when I got up, he like, "go'on in the house." He kept pushin' me in the house, "go'on in the house, go'on in the house." So she threw the brick at me and it hit me in the arm. Had my whole arm swoll[en] and stuff.

Lisa's conflict with Shantay thus began not from a personal dispute, but from both young women's ties to and disputes with other youths. To clarify, the interviewer asked: "So this

whole thing [with Shantay] sprung from...[when] you all jumped on her friend [Regina], and so she had this problem with you because you jumped on her friend?" Lisa responded:

[Shantay] said she ain't have no problem with me at first. But I don't know what her problem is. *[Laughs]*...I think [pause] you know what her problem is? When I first...come to this school...my boyfriend told her I was comin' up here. And she was like [told him], she was gon' beat me up, wootie woo. But he was like, "if I was you I wouldn't do that 'cause all her people [friends] go here." And so when she seen me I guess she thought that I was lying [about having friends at the school]...When I started] she didn't even see me [before] she heard everybody saying "what's up Lisa."...They was like, "what's up," givin' me hugs and whatever....She hurried up and ran over there to me...she came to me and she was tryin' to talk to me. But she knew I wasn't even feelin' her like that. 'Cause I ain't feelin' nobody that try to come down there and fight me.

Thus, Lisa and Shantay were acquainted with one another through Lisa's boyfriend and Lisa's fight with Shantay's best friend Regina. Their own conflict came to the surface when Shantay made a status challenge (e.g., threatened to beat Lisa up) via Lisa's boyfriend, which he shared with Lisa. When Shantay tried to befriend Lisa on her arrival at their school, Lisa purposely disrespected her in response to the earlier threat. Lisa said Shantay then:

Started talkin' about [me]. I guess she thought we was gon' try to jump on her, but we don't even get down like that...we don't even got time for that, 'cause all my friends are older. And so [that's when] she like, start tellin' me...tryin' to throw me off by talkin' [to] me about my boyfriend, talkin' 'bout my boyfriend all up in her face and stuff, which I know is a lie.

She continued:

They try to say I'm fightin' over him. Why am I fightin' over him for, and I got him? Then just like, [Shantay] be tellin' me, "he come over to my house, he do this and he do that." I don't care. 'Cause he always up in my face every day, he give me what I want, take me where I need to go, he let me [take his] car and I can go do whatever I wanna do....So I don't care. I don't wanna hear what he doin'....All of...the stuff that she come back and tell me...is irrelevant. 'Cause why you gon' keep on tellin' me stuff when you know he gon' be over my house every day? And then she say he come over [to her house] every day all day. And I know that's a lie, 'cause he always at my house. He even there when I'm not there. I know he there, so I don't even have to worry about it.

In fact, however, Lisa's confidence that Shantay's stories were lies was not as strong as she tried to suggest. She had a black eye the day she was interviewed that was a result of a fight she started with her boyfriend the day prior to her Friday confrontation with Shantay. It began when she accused him of cheating on her with Shantay:

I got this [black eye] 'cause [pause] I didn't come to school Wednesday so Thursday when I came to school, [Shantay] tellin' me that my boyfriend be comin' over to they house, this, this, this and that. So me bein' stupid, knowing the girl didn't like me anyway I shouldn't have listened to her. Me bein' stupid, went home tryin' to fight him. He blockin' the punches or whatever like, "go'n, get off of me, go'n, stop, stop." He kept on tellin' me to stop, stop, go'n, go'n. So I'm steady hittin' him, steady hittin' him. I had on some sandals, I'm hittin' him with the sandals. I run outside, I'm hittin' him, I'm hittin' his car or whatever and so he said something to me as he was closin' his door and I punched him in his eye and he pushed the car up in park, he got out the car and smacked me and got back in the car and left. He just kept ridin' up and down my street all day....He kept on comin' back and then my momma talkin' 'bout I'm not suppose to listen to what other girls tell me about my boyfriend. And [my boyfriend] was like, "she was just tellin' you that to throw you off, 'cause all y'all was up there. She thought all y'all was gon' jump on her."

Lisa felt reassured when she and her boyfriend confronted Shantay at the bus stop, "he fronted her out, and she lied and said she ain't say none of that [stuff about what he did with her], which she did." From now on, she insisted, "the stuff that she say he said I won't believe anymore. 'Cause when she lied and said he said all that stuff, she took it all back at the bus stop."

One final facet of the Friday afternoon altercation is notable. Despite her boyfriend's encouragement, Lisa described opting out of a physical altercation, using her proximity to the school as justification. In fact, in our broader investigation, we found that the school setting often functioned to contain girls' conflicts. Young women knew that fights in and around the school were likely to be broken up by teachers or security guards, and that sanctions would

follow.³ Lisa said when she refused to fight Shantay, “she threatened to come over to my house....She talkin’ ‘bout, she know where I stay. But she didn’t come over on the weekend.”

Thus the school setting allowed girls to make threats against one another, but with the caveat that they could use the school—and their desire to stay out of trouble—as a face-saving means of avoiding violence. Our interview with Lisa took place just days after the Friday afternoon confrontation. We cannot say what happened after the interview. But it is notable that Lisa suggested most girls preferred not to get into physical altercations, except when circumstances necessitated it:

Listen. The only way a fight gon’ break out [is] if you arguin’ with this girl and a student step in the middle of the fight, and that’s really gon’ make the girl amped...you gon’ keep on goin’ on, louder and louder...‘cause they gon’ think, “well, hey. She holdin’ her back, and she holdin’ me back. So I’m gon’ get amped, ‘cause I know we ain’t gon’ fight anyway.” [The problem is] if the student move, then it’s gon’ be a fight. But they only get real amped if a teacher come [so] you can show these people that you tough [knowing the teacher will disrupt the conflict before it turns violent].

The escalation of her dispute shows the halting and delayed nature of the evolution of disagreements and status challenges into physical violence. As the above narrative highlights, there were several international events where the dispute was engaged, defined and escalated before the actual assault took place. In some interactions, violence was deferred due to situational aspects (e.g., being in school where there were high levels of surveillance and serious consequences or the presence of Lisa’s sister as an additional potential combatant).

PUMPKIN’S ACCOUNT

Pumpkin was 22 years old when she was interviewed, had two children, and was steadily employed. She described her own criminal involvement as minimal, aside from recreational

³ Because most of the girls we interviewed were in alternative schools, the import of school was likely intensified: it was the last resort before expulsion from St. Louis city schools.

marijuana use and occasional fights. Numerous of her male relatives and friends, however, were criminally involved. Asked whether she had ever retaliated against someone who had done her some wrong, Pumpkin said, “I just got my brother’s girlfriend. ‘Cause they staying with me. I had told her on several occasions—constantly—‘Don’t call the police to my house.’ I don’t like the police, I don’t want them in my house, I don’t want them nowhere near me.” Asked why her brother’s girlfriend had called the police, she explained:

He found out that she was having an affair with somebody else and he got all upset about it. But he didn’t hit her. ‘Cause I told him, “don’t hit her, don’t put your hands on her. ‘Cause I don’t need the police to my house.” I told him that. So he didn’t put his hands on her. But she knew that I didn’t want the police at my house. I had told her on several occasions. ‘Cause my brother done kicked her ass a couple of times....She called the police anyway. So me and my cousin whipped her ass like two days ago. That’s why I got all these broke nails here.

Though Pumpkin admitted that her brother was physically abusive, she routinely forbade his girlfriend from calling the police. She also said that brother routinely tried to draw her into their conflicts, telling his girlfriend, “‘you better shut the fuck up talking to me like that, or I’ll get my sister [to] kick your ass.’...But I wasn’t gonna get in nobody’s problems that wasn’t mine.”

The immediate incident that resulted in Pumpkin’s violent retaliation was one she felt *was* her problem. She was particularly angry because she believed his girlfriend called the police out of spite and did so without concern for the wellbeing of Pumpkin and her children:

I just felt like she disrespected me when she brought the police to my house when I asked her not to. Now, if he would have kicked her ass and she called the police, I still would have been upset, but I would have understood....But she called the police just ‘cause she was mad, just ‘cause he put her out. And I asked her [not to]. I live in Section 8 housing, and all I need is for the police to keep coming to my house. And [then] me and my kids are in the same predicament that she is—homeless. I can’t have that, I can’t have that.

The conversation continued:

Interviewer: So the police come to your house so many times, they kick you out?

Pumpkin: Yeah. Oh yeah. They don't play that.

Interviewer: So that's why you got so mad?

Pumpkin: Damn right! Me and my kids, that's our place to live. That's where we lay our heads. And her son is living there too with my brother. They have a kid together....Then my cousin and his girlfriend and they baby live with me too. 'Cause all of them are homeless....I was just extremely upset because she called the police to my house....That was it for me, because like I said, if Section 8 decide that I'm causing too much trouble, then I'm in the same position that she is....I got to make sure [my kids] got a place to lay they head.

Clearly, the stakes were higher for Pumpkin than a mere dislike of the woman or run-of-the-mill reputational challenge. Pumpkin herself was nearly arrested when the police arrived. Her brother had warrants out for his arrest, and she attempted to keep them from searching the house to find him. She explained:

They threatened to lock me up because they said that I was, what is it, harboring a fugitive....When they came to the door the first time, they said "we had a call for an assault, and we need to know if this certain person is here." I said, "I don't know if he's in here." They said, "is this your house?" I said yes. So they said, "can we search your house?" I'm like, "don't you supposed to have a search warrant to do that?" And they was like, "well, this is an assault call, so we don't need a search warrant." And I didn't know if that was right or if it was wrong. All I know is I got warned, and I wasn't gonna argue with them too much....I didn't want to cooperate but I didn't have a choice. So I let them in, they searched my house, and they saw my cousin and my brother laying on the floor. 'Cause when the police knocked, they ran to the back room and laid on the floor....They both got warrants. My brother knew they was after him and he definitely don't want to go back to jail.

Pumpkin's brother gave the police a false name when they questioned him, "and so they left out of the house. And then here [his girlfriend] come walking up, and she said, 'oh hell no! He's in there!'" Pumpkin continued:

So [the police] came back to my door and knocked. They said, "we need those two guys to come out here." And then when they took them outside, she said, "it's that one right there." The whole time I'm standing in the door, I'm like, "I'm gonna kill this bitch! I'm gonna kill her!" I was mad, I was heated. I was ready to kick her ass right there in front of the police but I couldn't do that. They

knew she was lying. She wasn't hurt, she wasn't crying, there wasn't a string of her hair on her head out of place.

When probed, Pumpkin conceded that her brother had "thumped her upside her head" that night, but she insisted that his girlfriend called the police because "she was just mad because he put her out and she didn't have nowhere to go." She explained:

When we picked her up from work, he asked her, had she been having sex with this guy? Of course she denied it. And so he told her, "you need to leave." And she said, "well I'm not leaving." Until I told her she had to leave. I said, "I'm not gonna make you leave, but you know how ignorant my brother is, and if you don't want him to kick...your ass, then maybe you should leave." So she packed her little shit up and she left. When she realized that she didn't have nowhere to go and she was mad, [that's when] she called the police.

In addition to describing her brother and his girlfriend's relationship as volatile, Pumpkin also said she herself was routinely unhappy with his girlfriend's behavior around her home. This particular incident was thus the immediate trigger she believed justified retaliatory violence, though she admitted, "I wanted to kick her ass anyway. I just needed a reason." She explained:

She was trashing me, she would not clean my house up. Every time I would go to work and come home, she would have sat her funky ass down on the couch where she was at when I left. The kids running around in nasty diapers....She didn't help me, she didn't give me no money on my bills. I mean, my bills are my bills and I'm gonna have to pay them regardless of if I've got somebody living with me or not. But if you grown and you working and I'm taking care of you and your kids, you gonna help me....I mean, she was tolerable. Tolerable because she was my brother's girlfriend. She stayed at my house and we got along as well as we needed to be living in the same house. But she done pissed me off many times before that. She done hurt my brother. She got my brother locked up that night, and she got him locked up once before that. He had to spend Christmas and everything in jail because she got him locked up.

When the incident with the police happened, Pumpkin "told her [brother's girlfriend] that she can't come back to my house." And she was glad the woman left at the same time the police did, "because I would have been in jail [too]....I knew she would have called them back [if I attacked her that night], and I'm surprised she didn't call them back when we whupped her ass, when we

finally did.” Here it is clear that the only reason the woman avoided being assaulted is the fact that she extricated herself from the situation.

Pumpkin became even angrier the next night. After bailing her brother out of jail, to her surprise the police returned a second time. She was sure the call had been placed by her brother’s girlfriend, and because “she didn’t know that my brother was out of jail, that means she wasn’t only fucking with *him*. (emphasis authors’)” She explained:

She wasn’t even in the complex, she was...at her auntie’s house. But she made a 911 call and told them it was a big fight at such and such address. So they came back to my house. I mean, when they came to the house the second time, nobody was expecting that. So we was in my house, we smoking weed and getting drunk and I just got a house full of people, and here come the police knocking on my door.

Pumpkin believed this second call to the police was her brother’s girlfriend “just being ignorant, she was fucking with us....My house ain’t just a rowdy place or no dope house or nothing like that, but she knows that my house is the place to be...Everybody comes over to my house.”

Asking why she was convinced her brother’s girlfriend had made the second call, she explained:

Because my brother told me that before, when they were living with my aunt, she would call the police one night, two or three nights in a row....He knows that she does this, this was a pattern for her. So I’m not just assuming. And the police never come to my house, because I don’t give them a reason to come to my house. For them to come two nights in a row, and this a pattern of hers, I knew that it was her. I *knew* that it was her. I didn’t have no choice but to kick her ass. I bet she won’t call the police no more.

From the time these incidents happened, Pumpkin began keeping an eye out for her brother’s girlfriend. The decision to respond to the slights violently has been cemented at this juncture; Pumpkin is merely awaiting an opportunity. Further, she didn’t make a concerted effort to search for her, “‘cause I knew I would see her again, her son lives at my house.” Though the woman “left for a while, for a couple of days and went I guess to her aunt’s house...she came back to the complex and was staying with one of my neighbors.” Nonetheless,

Pumpkin believed the woman was avoiding her, “‘cause when I caught her [she was] coming back from the store, and she was going the long way around....She could have come my way and it would have been quicker.” When Pumpkin spotted her, “I was in my car and I was coming out of the complex....Me and my cousin was in the car. And so I saw her, but I drove past her and went and parked my car...down the street...and I walked back up there.” She continued:

When I walked up behind her, she didn't know I was behind her. And my cousin just grabbed her hair and I just started hitting her...and I didn't leave her alone until she was bloody....[My cousin] grabbed her and then I hit her, and then we both hit her. We just kept hitting her and she fell on the ground. She was kicking. She was on her back, but she was kicking. But it was two of us. Wasn't nothing she could do. We just beat her up....When she was at the point that she couldn't get up no more, I just kicked her until I got tired.

Pumpkin said that during the altercation, she told her brother's girlfriend, “bitch, didn't I tell you not to call the police to my house? Now I'm gonna kick your ass for all the times I been wanting to kick your ass in the past!” Asked how she felt while beating her up, Pumpkin said “I had an adrenaline rush,” and felt:

Like I was the shit. Like I was in control. Like I could get her ass back for every time she ever made me mad, every time she ever made my son cry, every time she ever pissed my brother off, every time she ever hurt my brother's feelings, every time she would hit her own son the way that I didn't like it. 'Cause she would punch him in the chest. He's two [years old, and she would] slap him on his back. And I would tell her ass all the time, “don't hit him like that, don't hit him like that, he's a baby!” [She would say,] “well this is *my* son.” “I don't give a damn, you hit him like that again I'm gonna kick your ass.”

And though neighborhood residents were present, no one intervened on the beating. Instead, Pumpkin said “they was watching the fight. I mean, she don't really have a lot of friends over there. I mean, she don't have a lot of enemies, but she don't really have no friends. And ain't nobody just gonna come and jump in a fight unless it's they friend, they partner, or somebody like that.” Moreover, she said “people knew that I was mad, people knew that I was pissed. The people that knew her and knew me knew that whenever I saw her I was going to kick her ass.”

In part, Pumpkin's confidence comes from the general tendency in disadvantaged neighborhoods for people to not call police to intervene in disputes, but it is also rooted in more personal knowledge that the neighbors know her and know of her dispute with the woman in question, thereby further reducing the likelihood of someone altering law enforcement.

And though Pumpkin said "I usually try to be a lot more ladylike about the way I handle things, I just felt like I had to kick her ass....I mean, I never felt like two wrongs make a right, but at the same time, I'm not gonna keep on letting nobody fuck with me." Asked whether she felt a sense of closure or satisfaction afterwards, Pumpkin said:

Yeah, I did. I did. I felt like I had done something. I felt like I had got my point across and that she wouldn't fuck with me no more. And when she didn't call the police after [we beat her up], I knew that I got my point across. So I was satisfied. I don't want to fight with her no more. I wasn't even mad no more.

Finally, asked whether she was concerned that her brother's girlfriend might counter-retaliate, Pumpkin explained, "no. I mean, it's a thought of mine, but I can't say that I'm worried. 'Cause I done had my ass beat before, it ain't no biggie....I know she ain't gonna do nothing to hurt me too bad because her son lives with me. I take care of her son [and] I take care of my brother."

This provides the interactional sequence with an odd sense of closure. Clearly, the dispute is not fully resolved; there will also be future interactions between Pumpkin and the woman in the future (she still cares for the woman's son). Yet, apparently, Pumpkin feels that she has responded adequately to the slight and, since the woman in question did not alert the police after the last violent encounter, that future violence is not likely. **SUGAR'S ACCOUNT**

While Pumpkin was only peripherally involved in offender networks through her male kin and friends, Sugar described herself as an active offender who supported herself and her two children by selling drugs and "hustling." She was 26 years old when she was interviewed. The retaliatory violence Sugar spoke of was directly connected to her participation in street crime.

She believed it was likely to be ongoing, and remained unresolved, explaining: “This bitch I know named Chi-Chi, me and her, we’re into it.”

The violence began about a month prior to Sugar’s interview, when Chi-Chi and an accomplice robbed her. She explained, “Chi-Chi and her partner caught me over at my friend’s house one night, about twelve, one o’clock in the morning, straight robbed me. Robbed, took my motherfucking ID, took all my motherfucking money and everything...took my weed...and took my motherfucking food stamp card.” Asked to describe how it happened, Sugar continued:

I was outside. She seen me....She was on this side of the street and her friend was on [the other] side of the street, and was running down the street....They was like down running on the side of the cars ‘til they reached me....When they came close to me, they came together....That’s when they rushed up on me, because I didn’t see them coming....My partner, who was *supposed* to be my partner, the bitch ran on me. So it left me there [alone], and they kind of, we got into a [fight]. I got a little bruise, a bump, my lip busted, whatever, [and] they robbed me....We was rumbling and fighting and stuff like that, and I was determined to see who it was....She had this scarf going across her face...and I got a chance to snatch it off her face. So that’s how I knew who it was.

In fact, Sugar said the conflict actually began earlier than the robbery:

You see, she used to come and buy weed from me every now and then. She used to be trying to get over on me too....The bitch didn’t like me....We already had words with each other, before she told me she was gonna get me....She had told me she was gonna get me, ‘cause she heard [that] I got money, got niggas, and got all that shit....This bitch was hating on me, you know, because I was [taking] in a little money and she wanted a part of it....she know I had a little pocket full of money...because she know I sling.

Sugar purposely waited before attempting to retaliate against Chi-Chi: “What I did—I ain’t gonna go get them the next day—I waited a week and let it die down...to let them whores think that they got me and this and that...and I wasn’t gonna come back on [them].” Asked why she waited, Sugar explained:

‘Cause that’s how you do on the street....You know, ‘cause see, a motherfucker whooped your ass and robbed you, they gonna know off the top that you gonna try to come back. They gonna have something waiting for you, you know what

I'm saying. So you never know what they have waiting for you. They might have something powerful that'd fuck you up and it might backfire on you. So that's why you let days and shit go past before you do your thing....You know, they're gonna forget about it or never trip off of it eventually.

About a week later, Sugar "was riding with my partners and we was listening to music. We drove past and I just happened to glance and look back and I seen her. It was like eight or nine o'clock. She was waiting on the bus." Sugar and her friends pulled back around and parked near the bus stop to "keep an eye on her, where she's going....So she got on a bus and we kind of followed the bus all the way down to [near where she lived]." Once they saw Chi-Chi exit:

She started walking to her home. And I told my partner to let me out on the corner. So I walked around the corner. I was on one side and she was still walking ahead of me. She didn't know I was coming. So I kind of like picked up my speed [and] ran up on her. I had a bottle and I hit the bitch in the back of the head. She fell and turned over. I held my pocket knife up to her motherfucking neck. I told her to give me my shit back right now, and then my partner parked her car and she had her knife....So we had the bitch by her arm, and we told her to take us to her house, where she was going to give my shit back.

Asked whether she wasn't concerned that others could be inside the house, Sugar noted, "shit, I didn't give a fuck really, to tell you the truth. I wanted my shit back." In addition, unlike Chi-Chi's robbery of Sugar, Sugar "didn't have my scarf. I let the bitch see my face: 'You remember me, bitch? When you took my stuff?'" This was important, she noted, because otherwise "anybody can just walk up and take my shit. Come and punch me and take my dope and take my motherfucking weed, they'll think I ain't shit, [that] I ain't standing up on mine....And I ain't going for that. I stood out there and worked for that shit, and not them."

Once Sugar and her partner got to Chi-Chi's house, they took many of her valuables, including her cash and drugs. Sugar continued, "I know the bitch got something because she over there slinging too....She had these big rings on—big diamonds. We took them. She had this nice little chain that come down to her chest, we took that too. We took her earrings. We

took every motherfucking thing....I took her beeper back 'cause she took mine [but] I didn't fuck [with] her ID 'cause I didn't need all that shit. All I wanted was the cash and [drugs] that she had....Whooped her ass and then left her there." Sugar insisted that the point she was trying to make was that "I ain't the bitch to play with."

In addition, Sugar and her partner gave Chi-Chi a much more severe beating than she herself had sustained. She justified this as part and parcel of street retaliation:

I love retaliation. I love to see the motherfuckers done like they did me. But this time, when you get they ass, give them harder than what they gave you. Sometimes it will make the motherfucker think twice not to fuck with you no more. Or motherfuckers try to be tough and try to come back on you.

In Chi-Chi's case, Sugar believed it was probably just a matter of time before she counter-retaliated. Asked whether she felt a sense of closure after the attack on Chi-Chi, she explained:

No, 'cause I knew she was gonna come back....This little bitch here, she wanna be hard and shit like that. She think she shit. She might try to come back because she probably don't want to feel like she a punk or something. So I know the bitch coming. But I'm waiting on her....She might be getting well and trying to calm down and get on me....She is gonna come. I mean, if that was me and somebody beat me down like that, damn right I'll go back and I'll go back harder this time and have a pistol.

Thus, in response to what she believed was an impending attack, Sugar said she began carrying a gun: "If she gonna get me, I'm gonna get her back. We got to die someday....I'm gonna pull my motherfucking gun out as soon as I see her." We do not know what transpired in this series of events after the interview. Unlike in the prior two cases, in which Lisa and Pumpkin were unsure of what might happen next, Sugar's clear belief was that the fight was not over, and that the next encounter would have more serious consequences than the last.

DISCUSSION

Our case analyses highlight distinct temporal dynamics and paths for the escalation of women's disputes into violence, tied to the situational contexts and settings of these events, and

the relationships between conflict participants and others. The first, seen in Sugar's account, has been identified by other scholars who study street-based offending: criminal retaliation (Anderson, 1999; Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Topalli, Wright and Fornango, 2002). Sugar's dispute with Chi-Chi was a product of frequent neighborhood interactions characterized by competition associated with their drug dealing and the general tension that tends to exist between people in street-based offender networks. Animosity was produced and reinforced by direct and indirect verbal exchanges over time, and culminated with Sugar's drug robbery victimization. Further evolution of the dispute followed the typical pattern identified in the literature on retaliation and we see as a product of the demands of intense participation in streetlife. Sugar waited for an opportune time to exact payback, after which she was biding her time in preparation for Chi-Chi's expected counter-retaliation.

Studies of street offending and offender networks show that while women are far less likely to become deeply embedded in criminal subcultures, those that do often internalize the violent behavioral demands of this social context (see Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006; Miller, 1998; but see Maher, 1997; Miller, 2001). Not surprisingly, many facets of Sugar's account parallel those of male street offenders, who often describe waiting to get the drop on their victimizer/victim to be (see Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Mullins 2006; Topalli et al., 2002). While street norms emphasize that slights must be responded to, doing so immediately can be hazardous, particularly since retaliation is anticipated. In addition, Sugar's account also exhibits the modal form seen in men's descriptions of retaliation: incidents escalate in their severity, and can culminate in potential lethality. When Sugar exacted payback, she purposefully did more harm to Chi-Chi than was done to her, as a message not just to her

victimizer but to other potential street robbers. Sugar described having since procured a firearm, readying herself for the attack she believed was likely imminent.

On the other hand, Sugar's account also highlights important gender variations uncovered in Mullins et al.'s (2004) original investigation and other research on street violence among women. Chi-Chi's initial robbery of Sugar involved multiple female assailants, who did not use a firearm or other weapon to ensure Sugar's compliance. This was the most common woman-initiated form uncovered in Miller's (1998) study of gender and the accomplishment of street robbery. She found that women routinely used violence when robbing other women, frequently did so with female accomplices, and rarely with weapons. Often this was because they believed their female targets were themselves unlikely to be armed. Sugar's retaliation followed a similar, though escalated, pattern. When she and her cousin accosted Chi-Chi, they used knives, but not guns, to subdue Chi-Chi and escort her to the site of their robbery and assault. Despite not using a firearm, Sugar nonetheless highlighted the importance of her retaliation against Chi-Chi for securing her own ongoing safety while working on the streets. Failure to retaliate, she insisted, would open her up for greater vulnerability among street participants likely to define her as weak and readily assailable (see also Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Mullins 2006). Such concerns might have been enhanced for her as women in general all ready face such perceptions, especially in the eyes of street involved men (see Miller 1998; Mullins 2006). Thus, while the overall account would suggest a gender neutral dynamic of payback, there are some clearly gendered elements that structured the series of events.

While Sugar's account was more in keeping with previous research on street-based violence, Lisa's and Pumpkin's accounts allowed us to examine important variations in the contexts of women's violence. The triggers for both disputes were highly gendered. In Lisa's

case, they emerged from what she saw as status challenges from other girls, who she believed used their friendship and neighborhood proximity to her boyfriend to taunt her and undermine her security in the relationship. They did so both by negatively evaluating her against his previous girlfriend, and by routinely insinuating that and behaving as if he was cheating on her. At core, this is a direct challenge of Lisa's ability to enact emphasized femininity as women are largely seen as bearing the responsibility for maintaining a relationship (see below). Lisa described multiple conflicts with two girls, Shantay and Regina, who themselves were friends, and whose ongoing interactions with Lisa were embedded within the overlap of her boyfriend's neighborhood and her school networks.

Lisa's conflicts with these young women progressed and receded over time. She described arguments that were ongoing and routine but were slow to escalate to violent altercations. Her fight with Regina resulted after mounting frustrations from ongoing clashes coalesced with an immediate trigger—Regina heard that Lisa was badmouthing her and came to her house to confront her—and the situational opportunity for violence: Lisa's older sister was not present to diffuse Regina's challenge, as she had been during a previous confrontation. Initially agreed upon as a one-on-one fight, Regina's sister jumped in when Lisa appeared to have the upper hand, and Lisa's boyfriend jumped in once she was outnumbered.

On the other hand, Lisa's ongoing arguments with Shantay had yet to escalate to violence between the two. Though Lisa had physically assaulted her boyfriend in response to Shantay's claim that he was cheating with her⁴, she opted not to fight Shantay when the opportunity presented itself and Shantay was clearly outnumbered. Lisa pointed to their proximity to school,

⁴ It is notable, as well, that Lisa's boyfriend responded with violence, and that she (and others) blamed herself for the situation and outcome. She did not take this position vis-à-vis her violent encounters with young women. Again, we see this as a reflection of gendered responsibilities in romantic relationships. Within the gendered dynamics of her context, it is Lisa's responsibility for maintain the relationship, her boyfriend's potential cheating, as well as his violence, is her fault.

and the trouble that could result, as one reason she chose to avoid violence. In addition, she felt sufficiently satisfied with the outcome of the argument—her boyfriend’s confrontation of Shantay and her retraction of claims about his infidelity—without resorting to violence.

Adolescent girls’ conflicts over boyfriends appear uniquely gendered, as attachments to males continue to be a central aspect of gendered reward systems for young women (Eder and Enke, 1991; Miller and Mullins, 2006; Simon, Eder and Evans, 1992). Ostensibly, these conflicts are about maintaining the integrity of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, but as Lisa’s account demonstrates, such contests were also avenues through which girls established their social status, challenged other girls’ standing, and attempted to put other girls in their place. In contrast, young men rarely report such fights over women. Doing so is perceived as unmanly precisely because it is viewed as prioritizing an emotional attachment to a particular woman, which is in contrast to dominant masculinity norms among adolescents in such settings (see Miller and White, 2003; Mullins, 2006). Further, this is specifically a feminized trigger due to broader social expectations that women bear responsibility for building and maintaining romantic relationships (Cancian 1986)

For Pumpkin, as well, the dispute we examined emerged from a quintessentially feminine concern: maintaining the safety and integrity of domestic space. Like both Sugar and Lisa, she described ongoing tensions with her brother’s girlfriend. In this case, however, the tensions emerged from their living arrangements. Pumpkin and her children lived in Section 8 housing, and also provided residence to her brother, his girlfriend and their son, and her cousin and his children. Pumpkin described doing her best to get along in those circumstances, despite ongoing conflicts and violence between her brother and his girlfriend. The last straw, however, was when her brother’s girlfriend called the police to her residence. She interpreted this action as

imperiling not just her brother's wellbeing, but that of her and her children as well. As she repeatedly pointed out, she depended on Section 8 housing, a public assistance program that is revocable with repeated police contacts. Despite ongoing problems in the household, it was this specific threat that she felt necessitated a violent response.⁵

Pumpkin's focus on taking care of kin is often seen as part and parcel of women's gender identities. In fact, she identified her brother's girlfriend's failure to act as a proper woman as an intensifying factor in the conflict. Pumpkin complained that she failed to take care of the children in the house, did not know how to appropriately discipline children, or to assist with domestic responsibilities. In addition, the woman is accused of repeatedly being unfaithful to Pumpkin's brother. Pumpkin characterized the girlfriend's deviant femininity as providing the backdrop for the eventual violence.

Also recall the Pumpkin specifically interjected gender into her account: "I usually try to be a lot more *ladylike* about the way I handle things (emphasis authors')." In recounting the story to the interviewer, she clearly feels the tensions of gendered expectations and the double deviance of female violence. She not only has to provide a general account of her violence contextualized into a moral discourse (protecting her family's dwelling place) but also has to explain why she *as a woman* resorted to violence: "I just felt like I had to kick her ass....I mean, I never felt like two wrongs make a right, but at the same time, I'm not gonna keep on letting nobody fuck with me." Her discourse juxtaposes general demands of emphasized femininity and the push for women to be non-violent, especially in conflict resolution, with the broader demands of the code of the streets which demands that slights be responded to regardless of gender.

⁵ Familial protection is a key component of hegemonic masculinity, but is manifested in different forms in the data Pumpkin's interview is drawn from. When men discuss family protection it tended to take the form of a retaliation for a specifically physically violent victimization experience (see Mullins 2006).

Comparatively, Sugar's narrative did not present these tensions. Little in her interview suggested that she saw a contradiction between gendered demands and streetlife demands.

Additionally, Pumpkin's case serves as a strong illustration of women's enforcement of gender norm expectations. While she acknowledged that her brother was similarly unfaithful and was frequently violent towards his girlfriend, she downplayed and dismissed these factors, refusing to label them as problematic. In addition, during the interview, she never mentioned men in the household having domestic or childcare responsibilities. In fact, she believed her brother's girlfriend was unlikely to retaliate because *she* was looking after the woman's child. The implication is that her brother's actions were acceptable facets of masculine behavioral expectations, and that responsibility for both ongoing problems and the immediate altercation fell squarely on his girlfriend's shoulders. Such an account is typical of a strongly patriarchal social structure which legitimates the behavior of men and denigrates those of women.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decades, criminological research has increasingly investigated the situational dynamics that surround violent events. This work has identified broader subcultural patterns that heighten the use of or need for violent response, and their roots in disadvantaged ecological contexts (Anderson, 1999; Baumer et al., 2003; Bernard, 1990; Stewart, Schreck and Simons, 2006). It has also highlighted the physical and social properties of settings that are productive of violence, including the location of the conflict, presence and behavior of third parties, access to weapons, and relationship between event participants, and has identified stages associated with the culmination of a dispute to violence (Baron et al., 2001; Deibert and Meithe, 2003; Felson and Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989). Much of this research tends to remove the violent event from its broader interactional and relational contexts, and considers

factors immediately relevant to the violent episode, but not what led up to or came after it. In addition to this temporal truncation, which is unable to explore the linked nature of ongoing events and interactions that produce violence, much research is purposely inattentive to the subjective meanings participants bring to their decision-making vis-à-vis violence, focusing only or primarily on quantifiable behavioral sequences.

While the insights to emerge from this research have been significant, such a narrow emphasis may in fact misspecify our understanding of criminal violence. Our research suggests that violence is better understood as the product of a long series of interactional sequences embedded in broader macro and meso social contexts. In each case examined here, disputants described gauging the social situation, deferring or avoiding violence, either altogether or until a more opportune time, and highlighted the significance of emotionally charged states as sometime triggers. These were shaped by gendered meaning systems and their intersection with a disadvantaged neighborhood context, as well as the more immediate settings of the street, school, and households.

While some scholars suggest that personal affronts immediately produce a violent response, and are best characterized as character contests with discrete, immediate stages (see Anderson, 1999; Luckenbill, 1977), our analyses suggest that the evolution of violence is a much more complex and nuanced process, with important continuities and discontinuities across events (see also Sullivan, 2002). Even when motivated toward violence and provided with opportunity, violence is not a necessary conclusion. This challenges the depiction of violence as anonymous and/or spontaneous, a depiction that has emerged through a narrow focus on immediate incidents, exacerbated by scholars' inattention to gender, interaction, and embedded relationships. Specifically, since interaction patterns and networks exhibit gender variation,

interactions evolving toward violence should vary along gender lines. As we have shown, compared to men's disputes, women's tend to take a longer and more circuitous path to the actual violence. This is not surprising as women have to walk a fine line between the more generalized demands of violence and reputation maintenance that are central to life in communities plagued with concentrated disadvantage and the more traditional gendered expectations that coexist with the so-called 'code of the street.'

Of course, there are important limitations to our focus on three cases. The case analysis methods we adopt here afford a contextual process-centered paradigm with significant theoretical import. This approach provides an opportunity for theory building, but not theoretical evaluation (see Harding et al., 2002). Future research will benefit from the process-tracing and comparative techniques adopted here, but with larger comparative samples of violent disputes embedded within their broad social contexts. Ideally, such samples will include multiple perspectives on the same events, rather than the one-sided accounts we rely upon here. Further, hopefully future samples can also draw upon more variation in race and socio-economic class so that the influences of these elements can be more precisely articulated.

In addition, future research will also benefit from greater attention to negative cases—i.e., incidents where similar processes are at play that do not culminate in violence. We have some evidence of this here, including Lisa's conflict with Shantay and Pumpkin's discussion of her previous efforts to avoid being drawn into her brother's and his girlfriends' fights. In addition, Sugar, who was most heavily guided by street-based social norms, provided an interesting counterpoint to her violent encounters with Chi-Chi. Describing an incident in which a woman surreptitiously stole money from her while she was dealing drugs, she "chas[ed] after the bitch, 'cause she ran," but did not retaliate later when the opportunity presented itself. This was both

because the woman “was with her kids” when Sugar saw her again and she didn’t “want to disrespect nobody’s kids,” but also because the children “looked dirty and everything...not clean, hair never combed.” Sugar surmised that the woman “probably did need [the money] for her kids...so that’s why I left her alone....I just thought of it for charity or something.” While men in the retaliation data did suggest they wouldn’t (or didn’t) retaliate when a target was with children, they neither articulated their lack of violence as “charity” nor commented on the appearance of the children and what this might indicate about the nature of their household or life experiences. When men did say they failed to use violence because of the presence of children it was implied that the violence was merely being postponed due to witnesses (the same accounts were given when the target was with another adult). Careful attention to such variations in meanings and outcomes offers further promise for improving our holistic understanding of the nature and progression of conflicts, and their embeddedness in broader social contexts. We believe this approach to the study of disputes and violence can produce important insights. Our analyses here point toward the need for additional research of this type, not only on the escalation of interpersonal disputes, but of the gendered nature of these processes.

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