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abstract:

Using the perspectives of microsociology, ethnomethodology and Goffman's sociology, the author analyzes the relationship between artificiality (theatricality) of decision-making, the affective dynamic of a laboratory situation (the theatre stage) and interactions between participants. In order to uncover silent methods of coordinating actions (contrary to overtly adhering to institutional rules), I decide to use an innovative methodology. Together with performance artists, I created a simulation of a research situation (an interactive theatre play), in which six people are faced with a moral dilemma. The interactions were filmed and analysed with the use of a videograph. No person's position was privileged. What happens when two strangers, occupying an equal position, face a moral dilemma? The article focuses on an analysis of violence, which appears in groups or violence which the groups have to face. The author demonstrates how violence is used in social circumstances and rendered relative in order to maintain an interactional order.

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Mobilizing and Relativizing Violence: Interactional Aspects of Violence in Equal Status Groups Facing Moral Dilemma

Introduction

She works in the fashion industry and feminism is close to her heart. At one point, she objects to the idea of someone from the group slapping Sean: "Can any of you just walk up to another person and slap them across the face?" (G4O3).² Along with five others, she chooses tasks for the performer from a list of available options. There are fourteen decisions in total. Together they constitute the script for a theater play (investigative situation)³ that is developed live with audience input. The thirteenth decision involves a choice between three alternatives:

1. Someone from the group slaps Sean hard across the face.
 2. Sean will post on his Facebook something that runs fundamentally contrary to his own beliefs.
 3. Stripped to his underwear, Sean will step outside for a minute.
- The person from the fashion industry explains:



View from camera 1. Performer plays task number 1. Participants chose option 3. Sean will say a few words about the group (audience). A microphone is visible on the left, into which the participants read out their chosen option. The participants sit in a semicircle. Behind the performer sitting in front of them is a brushwood and on top of it is a monkey mask. Behind the brushwood, which cannot be seen in the photo, was the chair on which the performer sat before and after the task. A filter has been applied to the photo to anonymise it.

My mind went to number two, because [on social media] it's easier to just say later: "I'm sorry if I offended someone."

A young sociologist (G4O5) then responds:

G4O3: You can wipe anything from the Internet...

G4O5: Nah, you can't, the Internet remembers. It remembers everything. Everything! [she's shaky, her body is tense]

Then it's gonna drag out to god knows how long, and here we have to violate his [the performer's] intimate zone so harshly.

I don't want to! [in a shrill voice].

"What's going on here?" – this was the question Erving Goffman asked⁴ when he came across an interesting text, or observed the course of interactions at the dinner table, in a line at the airport, or in a psychiatric ward. What's going on in the above-cited exchange between the fashion industry worker and the sociologist (both aged between 27 and 40)?

The answer to Goffman's question requires adopting a dual perspective: on the one hand, it must involve a detailed analysis of a specific face-to-face interaction, while on the other it must look beyond it and compare it with similar interactions.⁵ Adopting the perspective of microsociology, I investigate the relationship between the artifice (theatricality) of the decision-making situation, the affective dynamics generated in the "laboratory" (the theatrical venue), and interactions between individual participants. I analyze the violence that emerges in groups of strangers, where there are no hierarchies and everyone is equal. Finally, I show how violence is socially mobilized and relativized in service of preserving interactional order.

Method

Since its very beginning, and especially from the 1960s onward, the development of microsociology has been tied with the evolution of information technologies: tape recorders,

video cameras, facial expression capture, body sensors used in sports and the military, and facial recognition algorithms.⁶ For research material, Goffman drew, as did classical symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, on “reports from participant observation and audio and video tape recordings, provided that they cover only situations not prompted by the researcher.”⁷ I chose to push beyond this classical approach and prompt or create specific situations along with the artists. These efforts were driven not only by methodological inventiveness, which to some extent is natural for a microsociologist,⁸ but also the need to access recordings of recurring situations regarding the issues I investigate.⁹

I reached out to theater director Wojtek Ziemilski with a proposal to collaborate on the “Moralność milcząca” [Tacit Morality] project. For him, the theater stage is more than we typically believe it to be (a venue for theater performances).¹⁰ In Ziemilski’s works, according to Tomasz Plata,

we usually have just performers active on the stage, sometimes alongside a prop or two. If an object does appear, it rarely functions as a part of conventional set decorations. Rather than an object imitating something else, it is a thing, fleshed out to the full extent of its materiality. A piece of cardboard is a piece of cardboard, rather than a makeshift wall. This is also the approach of Wojtek Pustoła, a very interesting set designer.¹¹

Plata calls Ziemilski’s work “post-theater,”¹² because it is “purposely modest, minimal, and deliberately rejecting traditional assets of the institution of theater, while remaining keenly interested in its fundamental mechanisms.”¹³ A theater so conceived situates itself in line with the assumptions of a project designed to analyze human interactions in their purest possible form – stripped of unnecessary props, symbols, exaggeration, or the performance of roles precisely written in the script.

“Our mission in this project was to use a theater performance to generate a moral dilemma in a social interaction situation,”¹⁴ said sculptor Wojtek Pustola, whom Ziemilski brought in as a collaborator.¹⁵ Designing the moral dilemma itself, however, proved a difficult task. At a rehearsal, one of the artists said:

We believed it would be a simple solution, that we’ll come up with something because we were familiar with many works [concerning morality in art], but that proved quite the challenge, because that feeling of reality was difficult, the moment of transition to reality was difficult.

After much trial and error, a formula was finally developed which proved so interesting to most testers that they wanted to see the performance until the end, while framing the central question in a manner that forced the subjects to define whether they were actually dealing with a moral dilemma or not.

Six people enter the theater. They sit down on chairs arranged in a semi-circle. On one side there’s a TV, and on the other a microphone on a stand.

Across from them, on an empty stage, sits a bundle of brushwood with a monkey mask placed on top of it. Behind the brushwood is a chair, and the performer sits on it. His name is Sean. Next to him is a bucket filled with ice water and a table; on the table there’s money, a smartphone, some adhesive tape, a microphone, and a horse mask. All of these props are used by the performer during the play. The performer himself is sitting some five or six meters away from the audience. They pick tasks for him (usually three options for each decision) and he carries them out. The participants get two to three minutes to make each decision.



View from camera 2. A female participant reads out the chosen option for the performer into the microphone. A filter has been applied to the photo to anonymise it.

After the performance is over, I step onstage, sit down in front of the group and ask: "What did that feel like? Who was Sean to you? Were the decisions in any way moral?" Each investigative situation was filmed by three separate cameras arranged in different locations, to enable me to follow the interactions and the behavior of each participant.

While it is a recurring situation, a theater play offers no guarantee of running the exact same course every time. In the words of Wojtek Ziemilski: "You can never be sure with the theater, that's where its power comes from, that it messes with our heads and pushes beyond how we think it's going to mess with our heads." Thanks to this peculiar attribute of theater performance – repetition, but also stripped of any certainty about what will happen – I was able to systematically observe human interaction and compare how specific elements of the play's design, architecture, and interactional dynamics elicit moral reactions in the audience.

As with other studies on the interactional or cognitive fundamentals of making meaning, the participants here were not representative of any specific population.¹⁶ Instead, the sample was selected to create conditions conducive to unrestrained discussion between participants.¹⁷ For this reason, I did not use the recommendations of academics and theater staff to invite participants from radically different social backgrounds (young women from juvenile detention facilities, for example). It was suggested to me that people who might not be interested in the theater but ready to "go all out," so to speak, would introduce interesting dynamics into the group. I rejected this idea, because the primary objective of the study was to observe the *in situ* development of interactions and the interactional formation of meaning, not conflict. I aimed to ensure that no participant was in a privileged position, no participant had knowledge about the theater, and all participants had similar cultural capital.¹⁸

The people involved in the study were not frequent theatergoers and not actively interested in this field of art.¹⁹

In this essay, I will draw on the concept of violence²⁰ to retrace and analyze the interactions prompted by the structure of the performance. In the play, the actor performs behaviors that can be associated with violence: slapping, giving orders, telling intimate stories from one's own life to strangers, deliberate insulting, or publicly expressing views fundamentally opposite to one's own values. Discussing the choice of tasks for Sean, the participants said that "violence on stage is not fun," and mentioned their dislike for "hurting" someone or causing someone "pain." Video footage of the investigative situation (performance) offers insight into the situational process that shapes reactions to potential violence, which is something that retrospective interviews, police records, and surveys are unable to do.

Violence is a diverse phenomenon, sometimes dense and full of symbolism, as with ritual violence, and at other times profoundly boring, as with bureaucratic violence.²¹ Too narrow a definition will not grasp its invisible forms, including structural, symbolic, and soft violence.²² For Western countries, from the mid-twentieth century on, the nature of violence began to shift: ritualized, intergroup conflicts reinforcing group identity gave way to "chronic violence without closure."²³ The definition of violence ought to be flexible enough to capture its chronic manifestations, its processual character (rather than just its effects: a smashed window or a dead body in the street) and randomness (rather than just the intentions, aims, and other mental states of its perpetrators or victims). We know that "verbal aggression can be just as traumatizing as physical violence; that sexual assault is about dominating and overpowering, not about sexuality."²⁴ In this essay, I also draw on the concept of "soft violence."²⁵ It is paradoxical, as it conceals relations of domination under the veneer of law, institutional rules, customs, morals, and good manners. Soft violence is

ambiguous and difficult to notice, but simultaneously makes the person affected by it feel helpless. I will identify its manifestations and demonstrate how behaviors and reactions in the course of interaction prompt its emergence.

I analyzed the recorded interactions, looking for manifestations of violence: gestures, words, or bodily reactions. Ten research demonstrations were carried out, all of them following this script: 1) Get to know each other! (five minutes for icebreakers; participants did not know one another); 2) Presentation of performance rules ("You decide what happens by choosing one of the available options. You make decisions as a group, which means that you will have to be unanimous"; each group had the option to "pass," i.e. bypassing questions without consequences; should a group refuse to make a decision, it will be made for them); 3) The performance itself – fourteen decisions, with the group picking one option per decision, and the actor performing the task; 4) Group discussion (after the actor left the stage, we held a discussion, around 30 minutes long, with each group). The shows lasted 90 minutes on average. I sat down with each of the 60 participants for an in-depth interview a couple of days after the show. The video footage was then analyzed according to ethnomethodology and videography principles.²⁶ The resulting essay was penned in the style of understanding sociology.²⁷

Analysis

1. Group obligation – decision process – moral dilemma
– relativization of violence

The guidelines assumed that the performance / investigative situation would escalate. The sequence was designed to have each consecutive decision focus increasingly explicitly on moral

issues. We started with a simple choice:

- a) Sean says something about himself;
- b) Everyone (including Sean) says something about themselves;
- c) Sean says something about the group (the audience).

From there, decisions would move on to Sean's favorite music, him doing as many push-ups as possible, his re-enacting a scene from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, having either him or the audience put their hands in a bucket of ice water, slapping him across the face, and sending him outside in just his underwear in sub-zero temperatures. In the investigative situation (performance), the central dilemma revolved around the tension between, as one participant put it, "playing by the rules" and, to quote another, "following one's conscience." Playing by the rules involved following group norms communicated at the beginning of the investigative situation (performance), including: "You must be unanimous." The norm of "joint decision-making" would prove increasingly difficult to achieve when participants could not agree on whether a given option would actually harm someone – other participants or the performer.

Let's go back now to the interaction mentioned at the opening of this essay. The group chooses to pass on the thirteenth decision, because the available options (slapping the performer, the performer making a post on Facebook that goes against his values, sending the performer out into the freezing cold in just his underwear) were unacceptable to at least one participant. In other words, the choice could not be relativized or justified



View from camera 3. Decision number 10: 'There is a bucket of ice water next to Sean.'

1. The one in the group whose name is the earliest in the alphabet will dip their foot in the bucket for 40 seconds.
2. The whole group will dip both hands for 40 seconds.
3. Sean will put (his) head in the bucket."

The participants chose option number 2. A filter was applied to the photo to anonymise it.

with pragmatic arguments (such as posting a subsequent “I’m sorry if I offended someone” apology or claiming the ephemeral nature of online communications: “You can wipe anything from the Internet”). The computer then chooses for the group: “Someone from the group slaps Sean hard across the face.”

The actor is approached by a young man, a drummer who also mixes music. He delicately strokes the face of the performer. Earlier, he argues: “number one [slapping] and number three [sending Sean outside in his underwear] seem an insult to his dignity, and the purpose is similar” (G4O6). Choosing between “one” and “three,” which he considers qualitatively similar (“the purpose is similar”), the young man instead embraces the quantitative criterion: “number three hurts for a minute, and number one just for a couple of seconds.” In other words, he is driven by moral intuition (both tasks have a similar effect, resulting in an “insult to dignity”), but at the same time he calculates which is “more difficult” and which “easier” for the performer to carry out. Slapping does not cause him to react emotionally. However, the person from the fashion industry, whose remarks I quoted at the opening of the essay, views the scene instead through a lens of the deontological principle of individual autonomy, bodily integrity, and the “moral minimum,” i.e. the idea that moral consideration should respect the autonomy of each individual.²⁸ Still, she does not interrupt the investigative situation (performance), nor does she leave the venue; instead, she tries to identify the lesser evil, one possible to neutralize with just a few simple actions – allowed, she believes, by the very architecture of the Internet (an online post can be easily deleted).

The play ends. The performer leaves the stage, while I take his place and ask: "How did you feel about Sean?":

4: This really violates some limits [uses a sharp hand gesture to imitate the motion of a falling guillotine].

3: Yeah. And I can't come to terms with it internally that, yeah, I know it's his job, I know he signed up for it, that his body is the instrument of his work, and you slapped him so gently that your hand didn't even run across his jawline, but for me it's still a total transgression and manipulation of us that reached the point where we felt...

4: ...imperious.

3: No – nice, pleasant, empathetic: Sean will eat chocolates...

2: Since we couldn't decide, because some of us didn't want him to go out [in the cold in his underwear], we left it to...

4: But you know what? [leans toward 2]

3: [points at the control room over their heads] It all flowed from there, we could all just have left.

4: These were all choices – whether it's bad, whether it's worse, whether it's a little worse, whether it's going outside or staying with us, just like a reality show, where you either exclude someone, whether someone will shit on their head.

2: We didn't want him to post online or go outside, but hitting him inside was fine! Because nobody else would see.

Let's ask Goffman's question now: "What's going on here?"

First, two moral approaches clash. One centers on bodily integrity (Kantian autonomy of the individual); in the other, utilitarian calculation prevails, and a quantitative assessment of which task will be less painful. Second, both positions – let's call them the "bodily integrity imperative" and the "lesser evil choice" – relativize other options. The woman from the fashion industry will not abide slapping but fails to see the violence in the other option: the actor writing something contrary to his own beliefs on social media seems to her the lesser evil – an evil that can be explained away, justified in the name of following the norm she found herself bound by ("joint decision-making").

The person next to her, the young sociologist, comes out strongly against this option: “the Internet remembers. It remembers everything.” (G4O5). The drummer, meanwhile, refuses to send the performer out for a minute in the freezing cold, and claims that slapping is less severe. Third, all the participants focus on and, as it were, lock themselves²⁹ in this specific social situation. None of them comes up with the idea to either interrupt it or distance themselves from it. On the contrary, one of them later says that their motivation for choosing the slapping option was the desire for “no one else to see” (G4O2). Creating a microworld inside the theater walls, behind closed doors, limited only to a few people, enables the relativization of violence.³⁰ Fourth, the group is guided by the norm of the situation: the decision must be unanimous. And because none of the available options can be relativized, the group finds itself at an impasse and unable to make a decision.

2. Mobilization – plurality of moral parameters
– confrontational tension – rejection

Moving beyond group four, which serves to illustrate the results of my analyses, in post-performance conversations the subjects said that, on the one hand, the investigative situation (performance) was uncomfortable, especially when they had to make a decision they could not agree on, but on the other it was artificial, ephemeral, situated within theatrical conventions or the framework of the scientific method which, according to one participant, has a clear set of ethical guidelines. The sentiments were similar in group four. To quote the fashion industry employee: “I feel this total dissonance and I’ve already said a couple of times that this is just a stage, just a performance, that it’s not the truth, and he’s told me something deeply intimate. I don’t know whether it’s the truth or just made up for the purpose of the situation, and the slap issue is for me a hu... a question of humanity.” (G4O3). When making the ninth decision, she relativizes the choice by pointing out

that Sean is an actor: "It's not him telling us about his actual life. He's an actor, he can make something up!" Throughout much of the play she felt comfortable; in her own words, we're: "nice, pleasant, empathetic" (G4O3).

Curiosity pushed the participants to continue with the performance, and its artifice and fictional character were used as justifications for their continued consent to making choices in uncomfortable conditions. The fashion industry employee, for instance, argued that a social media post deliberately running against the poster's beliefs has no real-life consequences, because you can always write an apology; another participant from group four, meanwhile, asserted that the face-slapping was not violence, because "we agreed to participate in a game and consented to its rules" (G4O2).

I bring up the examples of the fashion industry worker, the drummer, and the sociologist because they're accurate illustrations of a pattern that was repeated across all ten groups. At its core, it is a collective pattern of behavior, because the dissonance that the fashion worker speaks of occurred because other participants did not agree to pick the option she believed to be the lesser evil (i.e. violence that can be retracted, justified, or seen as quantitatively smaller, shorter in time). It turned out that the moral dilemma emerged not so much in the mechanic of the performance, but in the interaction between participants.

The interactional aspect of making moral decisions and reacting to the suffering of others was examined by scholars from the so-called "second wave of critical engagement with Stanley Milgram's 'obedience to authority' experiments."³¹ The recordings of interviews archived at Yale³² suggest that in Milgram's experiments, participants felt tension when faced with choosing whether to follow their conscience or submit to the authority of science.³³ Those who obeyed looked anguished, and their stress and reluctance to continue turned, under the relentless insistence of the experimenter (one of the four

commands used throughout was: “the experiment requires you to continue”), into obedience.³⁴ Stephen Gibson, meanwhile, painted Milgram’s world as a verbal confrontation: with some (the disobedient) emerging victorious, and others (the obedient) defeated by the experimenter.³⁵ Combining the approach of emphasizing the emotional turmoil in the Milgram laboratory and drawing on the conversations between participants and the experimenter’s assistant, David Kaposi stresses that the Milgram experiments present an intriguing situation, in which some argue (and refuse to obey) while other simply eschew disagreement almost entirely (and remain obedient). In this reality, success – i.e. manufacturing obedience – depends on stopping participants from starting arguments, which usually means persuading them to accept the experimenter’s directives.

In 1974, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson³⁶ presented the principle of “turn taking” as the basis of the interpersonal conversation process. It could be argued that speaking in turn is the ideal form of conversation: with no silences, awkward pauses, and negligible overlap between talking parties, it is an example of a rhythmically attuned and harmonious conversation in a small, temporary group. One telltale sign of brewing conflict or a struggle for domination is the “overlap” of words, gestures, and statements.

Conceived as an interactional achievement, authority constitutes the capacity to enforce the alternation of statements (turn taking) when a flashpoint appears that might lead to disagreement. The earlier this happens, the greater the likelihood of ultimately averting conflict. In Milgram’s experiments, the longer the participants’ resistance was allowed to continue, the greater the likelihood that the experiment would be stopped.³⁷ In my study, the group had no authority figure above them, wearing a white coat and ordering the experiment to continue. The participants had to decide themselves what task to give

Sean and whether to continue the performance. Research tells us that strangers tend to avoid violence in face-to-face situations.³⁸ To resort to violence, they must first be mobilized to do so, as in the case of the Milgram experiment, where the experimenter provided the necessary push, or they must believe themselves superior, situated higher in the social hierarchy, dominant, powerful enough to use violence with impunity.³⁹ Where there is a balance of power, conflicts tend to peter out. According to one of the participants:

Although [Sean] was a stranger, and I'll say that on behalf of the group, but correct me if I'm wrong, we didn't want to do him any harm (G9O2).

The participants did not want to hurt Sean, and at the same time wanted to continue the investigative situation (performance). They tried to tackle the resulting cognitive dissonance in two ways – in other words, violence prompted the emergence of two specific behavior patterns. First, the participants relativized those tasks that did not require their active involvement (slapping or listening to intimate stories). These seemed the most difficult and were rejected first by participants.⁴⁰ Second, the participants relativized their decisions by referring to the artificial, fictional, or fabricated character of the tasks. These behavior patterns offered a way to relieve the tension generated by situational norms (“joint decision-making”), curiosity, the desire to continue the performance, and increasingly morally challenging tasks. We can see this in the conversation that group eight had when discussing whether to tell the actor an intimate story from their lives:

2: I'm not telling him anything!

4: Is anyone?

1: [Shaking head “no”] We would all have to agree for him to pick. Maybe make him step out?

4: Okay, which is it, then? But if we make him step out, this will end...

2: I'd [say] pass.

1: What? You like it? You don't want to end now, right?

2: No.

3: No, I'd like to go all the way.

4: I'm very interested where this will go, there's three questions left.

The tension between the refusal to carry out the task – which essentially frames one of the options as violent (“I’m not telling him anything!”), or transgressing boundaries – and curiosity (“I’m very interested where this will go”), i.e. the desire to continue the situation (performance), ultimately brought about attempts to relativize the moral imperative and look for the lesser evil. In every group, at least one person claimed to have found themselves in an artificial situation; as one participant said:

it was a game to me, and Sean is absolutely human, but for me it was a convention we all adopted and [...] a sort of game (G903).

When none of the options could be relativized, as in the example of group four, the participants refused to make a decision. This interrupts the interactional order and generates “confrontational tension,”⁴¹ which manifests itself in a variety of bodily reactions (elevated heart rate, increased adrenaline and cortisol secretion) and in angry words and gestures.

In group four, the sociologist feels helpless when the computer picks the slap option. She feels angry. She says: “Alright, boys, which one of you is going? You wanted this!” When one of the young men gently touches Sean’s face, she grows even more agitated. Her loud “NO!” and her angry outburst stem from the fact that she has no way of persuading the group not to go through with the slapping task. However, she neither interrupts

the situation nor leaves the theater, because she feels part of the group – and thus attempts to simultaneously abide by the collective obligation (“joint decision-making”) and her personal beliefs (she does not approve of any of the options in decision thirteen).

The sociologist experiences what Randal Collins calls “confrontational tension.” She is upset, raises her voice, and grows irritated. Collins emphasizes that violence is emotionally difficult, and motivation alone is not enough to bring about its use – mobilization is necessary.⁴² The young man relativizes the slapping, and considers it a game. He has grounds for this – after all, he’s in the theater and Sean is a professional actor who agreed to perform any given task. After agreeing to slap him, the young man gets up, approaches Sean, and hesitates. The sociologist mobilizes him to do so, with a hint of angry irony – since he chose to slap him, let him deal with the situation now. The rest of the participants tensely look on at the young man. He gently strokes Sean’s face and returns to his chair.

Several days after the investigative situation (performance), during the individual longform interview, the fashion industry person will say: “I never want to meet him [the drummer] again.” She doesn’t mention his arguments, and doesn’t remember that the slap was just a brush. Her simmering outrage is driven by his decision to do it in the first place. The drummer, meanwhile, cannot understand the radical opposition of the fashion industry employee, and brings up that she opted for the actor to make an online post that went against his beliefs – which could also be considered violence or, in the drummer’s words, an “insult to dignity.” Resistance to violence itself became violent: although the sociologist and the fashion industry employee mobilized

the young man to fulfill the obligation (if a decision is made, it needs to be carried out), his action ended up drawing open hostility ("I never want to meet him again").

Every situation carries a variety of obligations and moral parameters. Violence can appear when we narrow down our perception to just one moral duty. It is also possible when we lock ourselves into a situation and rigidly follow its rules, even if we believe it is marked by violence (the sociologist stresses that every option in decision thirteen was somehow violent). The fashion industry employee and the sociologist find themselves in conflict with the men who don't consider slapping the actor to be a violent gesture. The contents of the tasks mean little here, because only in a confrontation that generates tension does the possibility of violence emerge. Duty toward the social norm and mobilization toward fulfilling it prompt the young man to slap Sean. The lack of resolution within the group – the young man believes that the situation was merely a game, whereas the fashion industry employee stresses that the rules of the game have been broken – prompts the latter to reaffirm her hostility toward the former in the individual interview.

Conclusions

Social research using artificial situations created expressly for investigative purposes allows us to isolate certain social mechanisms and analyze them away from the noise of chaotic and complex life. Robb Willer emphasizes⁴³ that placing strangers together in an anonymous lab setting, stripped of the relationships and norms that drive their everyday lives, creates a social vacuum, but one that tells us something about interpersonal relationships. At the most basic level, the results of studies held in deliberately anonymized laboratory settings indicate that we need more than a high level of individual altruism and general trust to sustain cooperation and social order in the long run. For manifestations of social order at

the microlevel – including collaboration, trust, and prosocial attitudes – to persist, they need mechanisms embedded in a social environment.

The case is similar with violence.

The slap was considered a moral violation by the majority of people participating in the study. Although arguments surfaced in all of the groups about how it was all just a theater performance, fiction did not preclude moral sentiment – at least not for everyone. It transpires

that without additional social mechanisms – including the presence of an experimenter who, in the case of the Milgram study, pushed for the experiment to continue – strangers in face-to-face situations are still driven by the fundamental moral principle of not hurting others. Without an authority figure to mobilize the application of ever stronger shocks to the “student” in Milgram’s experiments, the participants never actually reached the end of the scale on the electrical generator. In my study, I noticed that violence is not only relational, but mobilized by the moral demands of a situation and the specific interactions between participants. Here, tasks were relativized and hierarchized in a manner that enabled the study to continue without overturning the interactional order.

The success or failure of social interactions generates emotions focused on shared experience. Whenever a group is presented with a moral dilemma, the emotional rhythm (we feel nice and pleasant) is interrupted (discomfort appears), leading to either the embrace of others’ moral arguments at the expense of breaking the collective obligation (here: “joint decision-making”), i.e. making no decision or withdrawing from the situation, or sustaining the interactional order at the cost of relativizing the decision (looking for the lesser evil). It turns out that a moral



View from camera 1. A sociologist conducts a group interview (so-called post-factum interview) after the performance. A filter has been applied to the photo for anonymisation.

dilemma is an interactional accomplishment, rather than a ready-made artifact waiting to be discovered. If everyone in the group relativizes an option, task, or decision – because they either don't care or consider them artificial or lacking real-life consequences – the tension typical of moral dilemmas will not appear at all. However, if no option is relativized, each task that Sean can receive is considered a violent act by at least one participant, leading to the rupture of the group's shared emotional rhythm and the emergence of cognitive dissonance. It is in precisely these moments of confrontational tension that violence arises.

So far, violence researchers have mostly focused on asymmetries of power and status, social injustice, and various forms of systematic domination.⁴⁴ In my research, I centered the idea of violence within groups where no single participant has a privileged position. The investigative situation (performance) constitutes a classic example of Simmel's sociability, i.e. a form of association that has no material purpose, in which status markers have little significance, and which prizes interpersonal relationships and being together. When a group, with all members being equal, finds itself unable to effectively make a decision, as was the case with the fourth group, it begins to relativize tasks. Should the relativization be considered wrong or unfair, an impasse occurs, breeding tension, which opens the way to violence. Situations like these typically generate emotions. Neil Levy notes: "Human beings are a punitive species. Perhaps because we are social animals, and require the cooperation of others to achieve our goals, we are strongly disposed to punish those who take advantage of us."⁴⁵ Group four was faced with a crucial problem: what to do when tension and acts of violence appear inside a group where no one has a privileged position?

Analyzing the interactional situation and subsequent interviews raises further questions. How can we forgive ourselves? Victims of violence need support. Can they be asked

for forgiveness? Are they able to forgive themselves? What must happen for forgiveness, for reconciliation to occur? Legal institutions often make forgiveness difficult. even an apology can be considered evidence in the process of forgiving; safety considerations often preclude any communication between victim and perpetrator. How do we foster conditions for the expression of contrition, regret, remorse, or pleas for forgiveness from people who have been wronged?

Outrage and indignation preclude nuance, as in the case of the fashion industry employee. She fails to see the drummer's arguments, and rejects him because he ultimately resorted to slapping the actor. We rarely ask about the aftermath of an attack, of scapegoating, mobbing, rape, an act of violence, mental, emotional, or physical assault, or the threat of violence. We lack the necessary language to talk about what happens in the life of a victim after their painful past is revealed. While we are interested in the future of the perpetrators (will they go to prison? will they be allowed to continue their careers?), it is the past of victims that draws our focus (what was she wearing? was her skirt too short?).⁴⁶

Confrontational tension can be controlled in at least two ways. First, the rules of the situation may be designed with safeguards to eliminate tension should conflict grow increasingly likely. In the case of our investigative situation (performance), these safeguards included the "pass" option; the ability to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence; a group interview following the performance; the option to have follow-up conversations with the situation supervisors in the Theater Institute hallways; and individual interviews with each of the 60 participants. The other way to control confrontational tension involves keeping a cool head. Collins emphasizes that people

capable of controlling their emotional state may manipulate situations and others, as stress often leaves people vulnerable to suggestion.

In my investigative situation (performance), everyone involved was capable of identifying decisions that were unethical or at least called for ethical comment. Making a non-controversial choice was not an option – to continue the performance, participants had to justify their pick and relativize its ethical thrust. Soft violence often appears at precisely such moments: when individuals detect the ethical ambiguity of a situation but still feel obliged to avoid radically upsetting the interactional order.

Anthropologist David Graeber emphasized that violence is “the one form of stupidity to which it is most difficult to come up with an intelligent response.”⁴⁷ Situational and integrative sources of violence indicate that in order to understand and counter it, we must simultaneously focus on a specific interactional case while framing violence as a broader problem – to notice social relationships and the presence or absence of social forces. An intelligent response to violence requires seeing both the perspective of individual biography, typically lost in analyses of cultural systems,⁴⁸ and a more general view, which some postcolonial researchers consider a form of violence;⁴⁹ such a response requires imagination, which will mobilize us to break the confrontational tension.

1 This essay was based on a study conducted for the project “Moralność milcząca: badanie głęboko zakorzenionych w sposobie doświadczania świata elementów tła moralnego” [Tacit Morality: Researching Elements of the Moral Background Deeply Entrenched in the Experience of the World], financed by the Polish National Science Center (2015/19/N/HS6/01682). The text is an edited fragment of the post-grant book: Waldemar Rapior, *Moralność milcząca* (Kraków: Universitas, 2023).

- 2 In the essay, I use a system to identify individual participants, with G followed by a number to denote a group, and O followed by a number to denote a particular participant within that group.
- 3 I use the term “performance (investigative situation),” because from a scholar’s perspective, this was an investigative situation, but from an artist’s perspective, it was a performance. This ambiguity was a key factor driving the interactional dynamics.
- 4 See: Marek Czyżewski, “Framework Analysis, or ‘What’s Going on Here’,” introduction to: Erving Goffman, *Framework Analysis* (Kraków: Nomos, 2010).
- 5 See: Stephen Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, *Data Analysis in Qualitative Research: Theorizing with Abductive Analysis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022).
- 6 Randal Collins, “What has Micro-Sociology Accomplished?,” April 16, 2016, www.drrandallcollins.com/sociological-eye/2016/04/what-has-micro-sociology-accomplished.html (accessed February 3, 2023).
- 7 Marek Czyżewski, “Etnometodologia,” in: *Encyklopedia socjologii* vol. 1, eds. Zbigniew Bokszański and Andrzej Kojder (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1998), 201.
- 8 Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (London–New York City, NY: Routledge, 2012).
- 9 It could be said that fabricated situations are no different than their natural counterparts, because nowadays we’re involved in a variety of situations that are deliberately engineered and separated from everyday life, such as working out in gyms, visiting a therapist, and attending cooking workshops, football games, or webinars. Everyday life, as Iddo Tavory emphasized, contradicting Alfred Schutz, has multiple layers. Tavory argued that cognitive styles typical for a certain domain, like everyday life, but also the economy, work, etc., permeate one another. Engineered situations present a challenge not from the standpoint of social life but in terms of methodology. See: Iddo Tavory, “A Theory of Intersubjectivity: Experience, Interaction and the Anchoring of Meaning,” *Theory and Society* vol. 52, no. 5 (September 2023).
- 10 Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (London–New York City, NY: Routledge, 2016).
- 11 Karolina Plinta, “Post-teatr i okolice. Rozmowa z Tomaszem Platą,” *Szum*, August 30, 2016, <https://magazynszum.pl/post-teatr-i-okolice-rozmowa-z-tomaszem-plata/> (accessed February 3, 2023).
- 12 According to Plata, aside from Ziemiński, key artists active in this field include Anna

- Karasińska, Ania Nowak, Marta Górnicka, and Marta Ziółek, along with a growing number of allies (including Weronika Szczawińska, Agnieszka Jakimiak, Anna Smolar, Grzegorz Laszuk, Justyna Sobczyk, Michał Buszewicz, Paweł Sakowicz, and Romuald Krężel), who “are boldly reshaping the domestic stage”; see: *Post-teatr i jego sojusznicy*, ed. Tomasz Plata (Warsaw: Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theater Academy–Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute, 2016).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 *Bezkarnie. Etyka w teatrze*, ed. Waldemar Rapior (Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Scena Robocza–Stowarzyszenie Czasu Kultury, 2019), 175.
- 15 Together with director Wojtek Ziemilski, invited sculptor Wojtek Pustoła, performer Sean Palmer, and director Ulq Hajdukiewicz, we engineered an investigative situation (theater performance) in which the invited participants were faced with a variety of moral dilemmas. The project was produced by the Theater Institute in Warsaw. The necessary permissions were provided by the Ethics Committee of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Before entering the theater, participants signed a consent form and a contract that stipulated a fee in return for participation (120 PLN per participant). After the performance was concluded, a group conversation was held, during which I answered participant questions. I then held a comprehensive follow-up interview with each participant; during the talk, I outlined the premise of the project, and described how other groups reacted to individual decisions and how the investigative situation (performance) was designed. We also spoke about the emotions that accompanied participants throughout the study, and held four public discussions about the project: at the Theater Institute in Warsaw (on March 28, 2018, and April 17, 2019) and at the Scena Robocza in Poznań (on May 26, 2018, and March 16, 2019).
- 16 Craig M. Rawlings and Clayton Childress, “Schemas, Interactions, and Objects in Meaning-Making,” *Sociological Forum* no. 36 (2021), 1446–1477.
- 17 Phil Macnaghten, “Towards an Anticipatory Public Engagement Methodology: Deliberative Experiments in the Assembly of Possible Worlds Using Focus Groups,” *Qualitative Research* no. 1 (2021), 3–19.
- 18 Vera Zolberg and David Swartz, *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004).

- 19 To diversify the group, people were selected according to the following criteria: having a child / not having a child; social involvement (they are in trade unions, work for animal rights, etc.); age (each group included two people aged 18–26, 27–40, and 41–60); gender (each group should have at least two men).
- 20 Waldemar Rapior, "Przemoc miękka," *Czas kultury* no. 4 (2021), 52–64.
- 21 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York City–London: Melville House, 2015).
- 22 Rapior, "Przemoc miękka."
- 23 "'Face-to-Face, Humans are Not Good at Violence': Randall Collins in Conversation with Michel Wieviorka," *The Conversation*, June 17, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/face-to-face-humans-are-not-good-at-violence-randall-collins-in-conversation-with-michel-wieviorka-97475> (accessed February 3, 2023).
- 24 Bandy X. Lee, *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 5.
- 25 Rapior, "Przemoc miękka."
- 26 Hubert Knoblauch, Bernt Schnettler, and René Tuma, *Videography: Introduction to Interpretive Videoanalysis of Social Situations* (New York City, NY: Peter Lang, 2014).
- 27 Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'entretien compréhensif* (Paris: Nathan, 1996).
- 28 Thomas Nagel, "Types of Intuition: Thomas Nagel on human rights and moral knowledge," *London Review of Books* no. 11 (2021).
- 29 Gary A. Fine and Iddo Tavory, "Interactionism in the Twenty-First Century: A Letter on Being-in-a-Meaningful-World," *Symbolic Interaction* no. 42 (2019), 457–467.
- 30 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 31 David Kaposi, "The Second Wave of Critical Engagement with Stanley Milgram's 'Obedience to Authority' Experiments: What Did We Learn?," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* no. 6 (2020). Cf. Dariusz Doliński and Tomasz Grzyb, *Posłuszni do bólu* (Sopot: Smak Słowa, 2017).
- 32 Gina Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments* (London: Scribe, 2012).

- 33 Stephen Reicher and Alexander Haslam, "After Shock? Towards a Social Identity Explanation of the Milgram 'Obedience' Studies," *British Journal of Social Psychology* no. 50 (2011), 163–169.
- 34 Matthew Hollander, "The Repertoire of Resistance: Non-Compliance with Directives in Milgram's 'Obedience' Experiments," *British Journal of Social Psychology* no. 54 (2015), 425–444.
- 35 Stephen Gibson, "'The Last Possible Resort': A Forgotten Prod and the In Situ Standardization of Stanley Milgram's Voice-Feedback Condition," *History of Psychology* no. 16 (2013), 177–194.
- 36 Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking for conversation," *Language* vol. 50, no. 4 (1974), 696–735.
- 37 Hollander, "The Repertoire of Resistance."
- 38 Collins, "What has Micro-Sociology Accomplished?"
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Cf. Joshua Greene, "The Cognitive Neuroscience of Moral Judgment," in: *The Cognitive Neurosciences*, ed. Michael Gazzaniga (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
- 41 "'Face-to-face, Humans are Not Good at Violence'." op. cit.
- 42 Matthew Hollander and Jason Turowetz, "Multiple Compliant Processes: A Reply to Haslam and Reicher on the Engaged Followership Explanation of 'Obedience' in Milgram's Experiment," *British Journal of Social Psychology* no. 57 (2018), 301–309.
- 43 See: Robb Willer and Brent Simpson, "Beyond Altruism: Sociological Foundations of Cooperation and Prosocial Behavior," *Annual Review of Sociology* no. 41 (2015), 43–63.
- 44 Lee, *Violence*.
- 45 Neil Levy, "Does the Desire to Punish Have Any Place in Modern Justice?," *Aeon*, February 18, 2016, <https://aeon.co/ideas/does-the-desire-to-punish-have-any-place-in-modern-justice> (accessed February 3, 2023).
- 46 Lili Loofbaourow, "The Post-Traumatic Novel," *The New York Review of Books*, March 12, 2020, www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/12/the-post-traumatic-novel/ (accessed February 3, 2023).

- 47 Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 68.
- 48 See: Rapior, "Przemoc miękka."
- 49 See: Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

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