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To cite this article: Daniel J. Boches & Mark Cooney (2022): What Counts as “Violence?” Semantic Divergence in Cultural Conflicts, *Deviant Behavior*, DOI: [10.1080/01639625.2021.2024776](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2021.2024776)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2021.2024776>



Published online: 06 Jan 2022.



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What Counts as “Violence?” Semantic Divergence in Cultural Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

In times of conflict, the meaning of words tends to fluctuate. For example, the word “violence” traditionally refers to physical force against people or property. However, some have expanded the term “violence” to include non-force (e.g., speech). Conversely, others have actively avoided the “violence” label to describe clear instances of force (e.g., property destruction). When the definitions of concepts expand and contract, semantic divergence – the degree of disagreement over the meaning of words – increases. Drawing on the work of Donald Black, we derive a partial explanation for the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts. First, at the macro-level, as social intimacy and inequality have declined over the past few hundred years, violence has become increasingly stigmatized, rendering an allegation of “violence” a potentially powerful weapon for deployment against cultural opponents. Second, at the case-level, social distance and partisanship, fostered by the internet, combine to produce social polarization – factions internally close but externally distant – of which a predictable result is the semantic divergence of “violence.”

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 June 2021
Accepted 28 December 2021

Introduction

The core element of violence is generally agreed to be physical force, actual or threatened, against people or property. To hit someone is violence, to rape someone is violence, to burn down their house is violence, and to slash their tires is violence.¹ However, in contemporary cultural conflicts (i.e., between opposing belief systems) the meaning of the word “violence” has been both stretched and shrunk: on the one hand, some acts not involving physical force (e.g., speech) are said to be “violent” while, on the other hand, some acts involving physical force (e.g., burning down a building) are deemed “nonviolent.”² When the meaning of “violence” expands and contracts, semantic divergence – the degree of disagreement over its meaning – increases.³ This leads to the central question of this paper, what explains the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts?

Drawing on theory developed by Black ([1993] 1998, 2011), we derive a partial explanation for the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling. We argue that the semantic divergence of “violence” is, at least in part, a function of the social polarization of the parties to cultural conflict (e.g., ideological, religious, national, or ethnic groups). And social polarization is itself a product of combining two powerful forces: social distance and partisanship. Greater contact between strangers in cyberspace

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¹Numerous dictionary definitions and surveys support this claim. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines violence as “The deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.” Likewise, Merriam-Webster (2021) defines violence as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.” Also, many surveys about violence ask about physical force, simply taking for granted the public’s definition of the term (see, e.g., Abu Dhabi Gallup Center 2011).

²In this paper, violence refers to physical force and “violence” refers to behavior beyond physical force that is labeled “violent.”

³Similar disagreement can be observed for other concepts, including such words as “racist,” “white supremacist,” “transphobe,” “fascist,” “Nazi,” “misogynist,” “socialist,” and “communist.”

increases the frequency and intensity of disputes into which third parties can easily enter. When conflict erupts, these third parties typically act as supporters or partisans, gravitating toward disputants who are socially close and superior (Black [1993] 1998: 126–127). The coming together of social distance and partisanship yields social polarization – conflict between factions that are socially close internally and socially distant externally. In the wake of social polarization arrives semantic divergence, evident in the parties not applying the “violence” label to their own side, even when they use physical force, and applying it to the other side, even when they do not.

Concepts become especially amenable to semantic divergence when they refer to highly stigmatized behavior. According to Black (2011), changes in the moral standing of conduct are caused by prior changes in social space, including increases and decreases in intimacy, inequality, and diversity. We propose that as social interaction has become more distant and equal over the past several hundred years, the social disruption caused by violence has increased and so has its stigmatization. In today’s world, to label behavior “violent” is to denounce it.

We begin by briefly situating our work within the literature on deviant definitions. Next, we describe the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts, drawing on examples mostly from online sources, especially Twitter, where the term has expanded and contracted in the service of moral causes. Afterward, we develop the two central theoretical claims of the paper. First, at the macro-level, long-term declines in social intimacy and inequality have served to stigmatize violence, rendering an allegation of “violence” a potentially powerful weapon for deployment against cultural opponents. Second, at the case-level, social distance and partisanship combine to increase cultural conflicts and to polarize the parties into contending factions, resulting in sharp disagreements over the meaning of “violence.” We conclude with some reflections on the future of the “violence” label and on semantic divergence more generally.

Defining deviance

How does something come to be defined as deviant? And, once defined, what is it called? Social scientists have addressed these questions from two broad perspectives. Functional accounts emphasize the link between societal values and definitions of deviant behavior: as the boundaries of the former change, so will those of the latter (see, e.g., Durkheim [1895] 1982; Erikson 1966). Conflict accounts emphasize the ability of the powerful to define as deviant any behavior which might undermine their interests (see, e.g., Reiman and Leighton [1979] 2017; Spitzer 1975). Both approaches focus on public definitions of deviance, evident, especially, in criminal codes. Our concern, however, is with unofficial definitions evident in how people employ particular terms as they describe or engage in conflict. Less attention has been paid to such lay definitions of deviance.

However, there are exceptions. For example, Horwitz (1982: 34) theorized, among other things, that “mental illness” labeling is a function of social distance, “the degree of familiarity an observer has with an actor.” Specifically, holding behavior constant, the definition of “mentally ill” (as determined by the lay use of the term) tends to contract as the labeler and labeled become more intimate and culturally similar. Building on Horwitz, Boches (2020) proposed that social distance and other social structural variables (e.g., organizational direction) influence “terrorism” labeling by news outlets in response to violence. Instead of developing an explanation of deviant definitions, Brennan (2016) sought to empirically examine how the intimacy between the parties involved in violent attacks influences its moral labeling. Brennan (2016: 15) finds that “Victims were twice as likely to regard violence by a non-acquaintance as a crime compared to violence by a family member or partner.” Likewise, in an analysis of rape victims, Koss et al. (1988: 13) found that “While 55.0% of women assaulted by strangers considered their experience rape, only 23.1% of women assaulted by someone they knew did so.”

We believe one reason for the paucity of scholarship on lay definitions of deviance is that divergent labeling for the same behavior was not highly visible until relatively recently. The internet has increased the visibility of varying definitions of deviance by providing ordinary people a platform to

express support for, and opposition to, moral causes. As a result, there is a need for more scholarship on deviant definitions, especially how they manifest online. Seeking to contribute to this literature, we outline a partial explanation for the semantic divergence of “violence.”

Describing the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts

Before we can offer our explanation, we must first describe the semantic divergence of “violence.” Semantic divergence refers to the degree of disagreement over the meaning of words. Thus, as consensus over the definition of concepts erodes, semantic divergence increases. To illustrate the semantic divergence of “violence,” we gathered examples, mostly from Twitter and other online sources, where people used the term “violence” in a way that deviated from its traditional meaning as physical force against people or property. The cases we gathered are not representative of all “violence” labeling. Nor were they intended to be. Rather, our goal was to gather a diverse array of examples that would allow us to demonstrate how the meaning of “violence” is contested in cultural conflicts. The meaning of “violence” diverges from its traditional definition in two ways: by expansion and contraction. First, consider the expansion of “violence” labeling.

The expansion of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts

“Violence” expands in meaning when it is used to describe behavior beyond physical force. Expanded definitions appear to occur with greater regularity than contracted definitions. This is especially true in academic scholarship. “Structural violence” (Galtung 1969), “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu [1998] 2001), “curriculum violence” (Ighodaro and Wiggan 2011), and “epistemological violence” (Teo 2010) are just a few examples of academics expanding the concept beyond physical force. “Violence” then can be added to the list of other concepts, such as “abuse,” “addiction,” “bullying,” “prejudice,” and “trauma,” that have recently undergone definitional expansion (Haslam 2016). The expanded use of “violence,” however, is not isolated to theoretical discussions between academics. In recent years, it has jumped the walls of the academy, permeating the public discourse similarly to other ideas such as critical race theory and intersectionality. In this paper, we are specifically interested in how “violence” is used in cultural conflicts, not academic scholarship. As a result, consider some examples where “violence” has been used in disputes to label non-force.

In recent years, the “violence” label has been used to describe academia. #AcademiaSoViolent is a phrase used on social media websites, such as Twitter, to describe some people’s experiences in higher education. As the phrase suggests, colleges and universities are said to be rife with violence. Certainly, violence occurs on campus. For example, much has been written about intra-student sexual assault (Khan et al. 2020). But #AcademiaSoViolent is less focused on describing interactions between undergraduate students than it is detailing grievances against faculty, administration, and the academy itself. This depiction of academia as a violent milieu, however, does not square with reality. Empirical research shows that conflicts in institutions of higher education are extremely peaceful, much better characterized by a tendency to rely on avoidance and toleration than on physical force (Cooney and Phillips 2017). And even a cursory look at some examples of #AcademiaSoViolent shows that a lot of the “violence” diverges markedly from physical force. For example, in a 2019 blogpost, a sociologist argued that “academic hazing,” an example of which is being assigned a large amount of reading in graduate level sociology courses, is a common form of “violence” perpetrated against young scholars in graduate school.

“Academic hazing” refers to the use of rituals that trigger feelings of imposter syndrome and humiliation, encourage overwork and burn out, and lead to physical and mental health decline in an academic setting. Under the guise of “this is what we’ve always done” or “this is what I had to do in graduate school,” these practices produce unreasonable expectations on which graduate students gauge their performance, which can lead to feeling like a failure or a fraud, overworking to try to meet expectations, and eventually suffering the consequences both physically and emotionally. In this way, academic hazing is violent (#academiasoviolent) ...

While you might first think of hazing as acts of verbal abuse, it comes up again and again in more subtle ways in every aspect of the PhD process. To illustrate this point, let me take one example that a group of folks have been discussing on Twitter: the amount of reading assigned in graduate courses. (Rucks-Ahidiana 2019)

Other examples of #AcademiaSoViolent include being emailed “some remedial reading” a month before graduate school by a professor so the student can “keep up in class” (Twitter, April 12, 2019, 12:35 am) and White academics saying, “revitalizing neighborhoods” instead of “gentrified neighborhoods” (Twitter, April 25, 2019, 8:46 pm).

Beyond #AcademiaSoViolent, various denizens of the academy have argued that speech and intellectual inquiry can be “violent” (see Campbell and Manning 2018: 225–227). For example, the Georgetown University Lecture Fund, a nonpartisan student led group that invites speakers to campus, quoted novelist Toni Morrison in their June 2020 statement in support of Black Lives Matter saying, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence” (Facebook, June 15, 2020, 10:30 am). In an opinion piece about the violent protests in opposition to Milo Yiannopoulos speaking at the University of California, Berkeley, alumna Nisa Dang (2017) wrote that “asking people to maintain peaceful dialogue with those who legitimately do not think their lives matter is a violent act.” In another op-ed, this one in the *New York Times*, psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) reasoned that “If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech – at least certain types of speech – can be a form of violence. . . . That’s why it’s reasonable, scientifically speaking, not to allow a provocateur and hatemonger like Milo Yiannopoulos to speak at your school. He is part of . . . a campaign of abuse.” A lack of nuance when using identity labels, such as “BIPOC,” which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, may also be deemed “violence.” For example, a graduate student in linguistics told *Vox* that “People tune in to this, ‘What is the word? Do I call you African American? Do I call you Black? What is the word that people are preferring these days? I know I can’t call you Negro anymore! So just tell me the word so I can use it and we can go on from there,’ they say. But that lacks in nuance. And that lack of nuance is a violence” (as quoted in Grady 2020). In an October 2020 article, Shaun Ossei-Owusu, a legal scholar at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, reflected on the relationship between inequality in the U.S. criminal justice system and legal education. He concluded that “the learning of law – particularly for racial minorities – can be intellectually violent” (Ossei-Owusu 2020).

The labeling of non-force as “violence” is not isolated to social media posts, blogs, and articles by scholars and students on college campuses. For example, in the aftermath of the highly publicized killing of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police in May 2020, Cherry Steinwender from the Center for the Healing of Racism argued that White silence in response to racism is “violence” (Sewing 2020).⁴ Variations of the slogan “silence is violence” also became popular among protesters after Floyd’s death, not just in the United States but around the world (see, e.g., Farooqi 2020). Protesters held signs saying, “White silence is violence” and attended demonstrations such as the “White Silence is Violence Allies Only” march in Indianapolis (IndyStar 2020) and the “Silence is Violence” rally in Winston-Salem (WFMY News 2, 2020). A mural was also painted on the side of a clothing store in Kansas City; under a portrait of George Floyd reads the message “silence is violence” (Honeycutt 2020).

The use of “violence” to describe non-force can also be observed in current political struggles at both the national and local level. For example, in a tweet that garnered over 12,000 “likes,” an emergency room physician said that Vice President Mike Pence was “violent” toward then Senator Kamala Harris during the October 7, 2020 vice presidential debate because he lied, evaded, and interrupted (Twitter, October 8, 2020, 8:52 am). While activists and politicians have recently argued that eviction (Associated Press 2020) and poverty are “violence” (Twitter, August 12, 2020, 12:46 pm),

⁴Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter for the death of George Floyd. In June 2021, he was sentenced to twenty-two and a half years in prison. At the time of this writing, reports indicate that Chauvin plans to appeal his conviction. The state trial for the three other former officers involved in Floyd’s death is scheduled for March 2022.

some libertarians consider voting to be an act of “violence” (Gornoski 2016). The use of “violence” to describe non-force can also be seen in recent conflicts about transgender policies and publications. For example, lesbian activist Julia Beck was accused of “violence against the transgender community” for recommending that gender identity not replace sex in official Baltimore City Police Department policies (Murphy 2019). In July 2021, the American Booksellers Association (ABA) sent copies of Abigail Shrier’s (2020) book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, to its 750 member stores. The book has been derided as “anti-trans” by its critics, a claim Shrier has denied (Italie 2021). On July 14, the ABA apologized on Twitter saying that the inclusion of Shrier’s book in their mailing to members amounted to “a serious, violent incident” (Twitter, July 14, 2021, 3:45 pm). Both sides of the political struggle over abortion have also used the “violence” label. For example, in response to a proposed abortion clinic in New Orleans in 2018, a member of the pro-life organization Louisiana Right to Life told local news that “Abortion takes a human life. Abortion is violence” (as quoted in Roberts 2018). Others have argued that abortion bans are an act of “violence” (Rushforth 2020). In an October 2020 interview on MSNBC, famed documentary filmmaker Michael Moore agreed that restricting access to abortion is “violence.” However, he also went beyond abortion, saying that it is an “act of violence” to pay workers the current federal minimum wage and seek the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (as quoted in Key 2020).

“Violence” is only an example of a larger phenomenon where words expand beyond their traditional meaning during disputes. “Terrorism” is another word prone to expansion. While no one definition of terrorism is universally accepted, the single most important characteristic of terrorism for scholars working on the topic is physical force (Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler 2004). Despite the high level of agreement that terrorism requires force, the “terrorism” label has been used to describe non-force. For example, sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom has written on Twitter that being around a “group of white students, about half in MAGA hats . . . felt like terrorism” (Twitter, January 19, 2019, 12:57 pm). Another sociologist has argued that “whiteness is terrorism” (Williams 2020). In 2016, psychologist Susan Fiske accused “those who dissect questionable [psychological] research online, bypassing the traditional channels of academic discourse,” of engaging in “methodological terrorism” (Bartlett 2018). Legal scholar Tom Baker (2005: 111–112) recounts hearing the “terrorism” label used to describe lawsuits. “The 1619 Project” published by the *New York Times*, which highlights America’s history of racism, has even been referred to as “a terrorist project” (Twitter, June 27, 2020, 1:21 pm).

The contraction of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts

Not only can the definition of “violence” expand during disputes to encompass non-forcible behavior, but it can also contract – narrowing in meaning so that clear instances of force evade being described as “violence.” For example, referring to the killing of George Floyd and the widespread public disturbances that followed in its wake, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones said that “Violence is when an agent of the state kneels on a man’s neck until all of the life is leached out of his body. Destroying property, which can be replaced, is not violence. To use the same language to describe those two things is not moral” (as quoted in Lowry 2020). Likewise, journalist Nathan J. Robinson (2020) wrote that “Actual violence leaves people with brain damage, nightmares, disability, and trauma. The destruction of human bodies is a moral horror that simply cannot exist in the same category as the breaking of objects. Using the word ‘violence’ to describe the smashing of a window . . . diminishes the term.” Writing in *The Guardian*, Rebecca Solnit (2020) reminded readers that “‘violence’ is going to be used a lot to describe the events in US cities [after George Floyd’s killing] . . . So it’s going to be important to be clear about who is violent and what violence is. Property destruction and harming human beings are profoundly different actions, and with a few exceptions . . . virtually all the violence visited on human beings during this round of civil unrest across the US has been inflicted by police.” Echoing this sentiment, sociologist Matthew Clair argued on Twitter that “violence” “should be reserved for talking about harm against people not property” (Twitter, July 17, 2020, 10:55 am).

The lack of “violence” labeling to describe clear instances of force is also evident in the responses to police violence by law enforcement and their allies. For example, a video posted online shows members of the U.S. Park Police striking two Australian journalists with a shield and baton during a protest in Washington D.C. on June 1, 2020. Days later, the U.S. Park Police Fraternal Order of Police Labor Committee released a statement admitting that the journalists “may have fallen” while “violent protesters . . . were in the process of being cleared out” by law enforcement (Salazar 2020). In this case, police violence against journalists was erased, but the actions of protesters were amplified as “violent.”

Consider another example. In late August 2020, protests and civil unrest broke out in Kenosha, Wisconsin after 29-year-old Jacob Blake, an African American man, was shot multiple times by law enforcement, resulting in paralysis. During a dispute on the night of August 25, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse shot and killed two individuals and injured another with an AR-15-style rifle. In response to the shootings by Rittenhouse, Pam Bondi, a surrogate of President Donald Trump and former Florida attorney general, downplayed Rittenhouse’s violence. In an interview on Fox News on September 22, 2020, Bondi came to the defense of Rittenhouse, saying that he was “a little boy out there trying to protect his community” (as quoted in King 2020). Rittenhouse was later found not guilty, arguing that the shootings were in self-defense.

“Violence” is not the only concept whose definition contracts during conflict. This can also be seen in the case of “rioting.” In June 2020, there was much discussion about how to label some of the theft and property destruction perpetrated across the United States that followed in the wake of George Floyd’s killing. Journalist Alia E. Dastagir (2020) used the word “rioting” to describe what happened, pointing out that “Dictionaries define ‘riots’ as ‘a violent public disorder, specifically: a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent.’” However, others refused to use the “rioting” label and contracted its definition by arguing that “rioting” refers to “senseless” violence, which they deemed did not accurately describe what occurred (Dastagir 2020; Steinmetz 2020). “‘Riot suggests pandemonium,’ says John A. Powell, a professor of law and African American studies at the University of California, Berkeley . . . ‘What’s happening across the country and across the world is a call for justice . . . Rioting detracts from all of that’” (Steinmetz 2020).

When, as in these instances, people are using “violence” to describe non-force and refusing to use “violence” to describe definite episodes of force they are typically advancing a moral cause, pressing language into its service. In many cases, the expansion and contraction of the term is a plea, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, for social action. “Academic hazing,” for example, is not “violence” in the typical sense of the word. Being assigned a considerable amount of reading in graduate level sociology courses is not physical force, actual or threatened. Rather, when the writer labels it as such, she is declaring the requirements of graduate education morally wrong and in need of humane change. For some activists, to criticize someone’s speech as “violence” is to denounce it strongly such that it can be ignored and perhaps even censored. To assert that White silence in the face of the killing of an unarmed Black man is “violence” is to condemn non-condemnation, to imply that there can be no middle position: by not actively supporting the cause of anti-racism you are rejecting it. Others still may seek to avoid using the “violence” label to describe clear instances of force, such as the police violence against journalists and protesters after the killing of George Floyd, because they deem the perpetrators or their goals to be morally righteous. To claim, as some have done, that Kyle Rittenhouse was a hero trying to protect his community, thus downplaying his violence, is to elevate the carrying of guns and the protection of business property to a supreme value that takes precedence over the right to protest or even to life itself.

How did this point arrive? How does a word become a weapon used to advance moral claims? How does “violence” come to be divorced from violence?

Explaining the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts

Certainly, using force increases the chances of being accused of “violence.” But, as Manning (2020: 15) observes, “if conditions are otherwise right for labelling someone deviant, a label will be found, regardless of the alleged deviant’s conduct.” Drawing on several strands of Black’s ([1993] 1998,

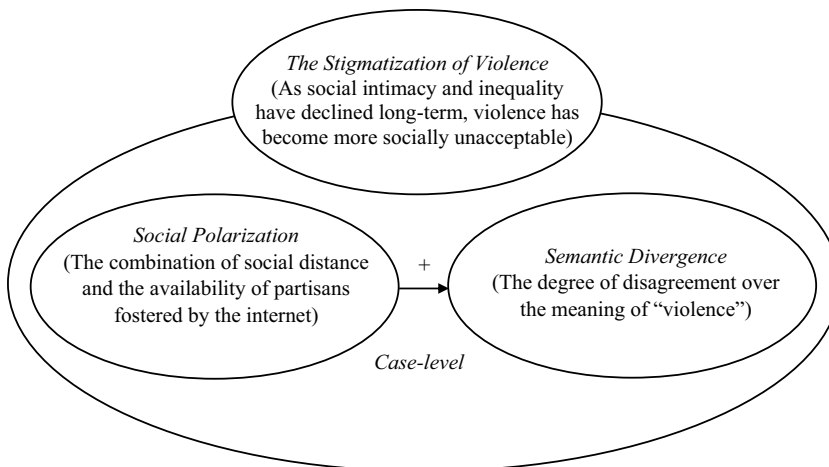


Figure 1. Model of the semantic divergence of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts.

2011) theoretical work, we propose that the definitional expansion and contraction of “violence” in contemporary cultural disputes is partially explained by the growing stigmatization of physical force and social polarization (see Figure 1). At the macro-level, as social intimacy and inequality has declined over the past few hundred years, violence has become more socially unacceptable. At the case-level, the growth of cyberspace in recent decades has intensified conflict by increasing stranger disputes and by promoting partisan support for others embroiled in conflict. When cultural disputes inevitably arise, allies or partisans come to support those who are socially close and superior. The result is social polarization – separate and warring camps each advancing its own conception of “violence.”

Macro-level: the stigmatization of violence

Violence has become more socially unacceptable over time. People throughout history have always decried violence against their own families and communities. But violence against others – outsiders and lower status insiders – was a different matter. Such violence was often tolerated (e.g., spanking disobedient children) or even glorified (e.g., public military statuary) (Pinker 2011). Today, however, violence has been demoted to a last resort – only legitimate when responding to prior violence and even then, in moderation. Once admired and acclaimed, physical force has gone down in the moral world and become largely stigmatized and sanctioned. As historian Richard Bessel (2015: 10) notes, “people in many western societies have become increasingly and acutely sensitive to violence, refusing to accept or condone behavior that in earlier times had been widely tolerated.” What accounts for the growing stigmatization of physical force?

The answer to this question can be found in how violence changes social space. Changes in social space, which Black (2011) calls “movements of social time,” refer to increases or decreases in intimacy, inequality, and diversity. The larger and faster these changes the more socially unacceptable the behavior is considered. Violence is considered deviant because it is a large and multidimensional movement of social time: it increases physical intimacy (violates bodily integrity), increases inequality (causes loss due to injury and death), and may decrease diversity (when it crosses cultural lines). However, the degree to which violence is deviant depends on where it occurs in social space (Black 2011: 138–140). The same act of violence between people who are socially close (e.g., family members) is a smaller increase in intimacy than violence between complete strangers. This helps to explain why intimate violence is less stigmatized, in the sense of attracting less severe punishment, than stranger violence (unless special efforts are made, as for domestic violence in recent years). For instance, in

arguably the most rigorous study ever conducted on the criminal justice system, Baldus, Woodworth, and Pulaski (1990: 319–320) found that even controlling for some forty other variables the odds of a defendant indicted for murder in Georgia in the 1970s being sentenced to death were over two and half times greater when the victim was a stranger versus a non-stranger.⁵

As social space changes, then, the amount of conflict that any particular behavior causes – the degree to which it is deviant – should change as well. The modernization that human societies have undergone over the past several centuries has brought an overall decrease in social closeness and a concomitant increase in social distance. Where we were once surrounded by family members and neighbors we knew intimately, we now grow up in smaller, more fragile, and time-limited families (e.g., children move out at 18). We live among neighbors we may or may not know and we circulate among total strangers. The close-knit villages in which we once resided have given way to more loosely connected cities and suburbs (see, e.g., Baumgartner 1988). As social distance has increased, we have become less tolerant of violations of that distance (Black 2011: 139). Violence is more deviant today because it is usually a greater violation of intimacy than in many times past.

Likewise, as traditional hierarchies (e.g., aristocrat and commoner, master and servant, sovereign and subject) have weakened or disappeared over the centuries, violence that upholds inequality has become much more suspect (Black 2011: 139). Violence by police against civilians, Whites against Blacks, men against women, parents against children are the subject of myriad research studies, applied interventions, official policies, and social movements. Violence in the other direction, on the other hand – violence directed upward – generates considerably less scrutiny and is more often depicted as an understandable response to intolerable conditions.

Violence, then, has become more socially unacceptable because its disruption of social space tends to be greater now than centuries ago. Consequently, a charge of “violence” has become a particularly potent weapon to be deployed against enemies. But why has the meaning of “violence” become so contested in recent times? One contributing factor is that the internet has increased our access to strangers, subsequently raising the risk of moral hostilities.

Case-level: social distance and the rise of moral hostilities

Cultural conflicts, clashes between cultural groups with different systems of belief, are moral conflicts – disputes about right and wrong. These disputes have become predominately verbal, seldom involving physical force against people or property (though it is not unknown). Even so, they are often quite intense with many exchanges backward and forward, often of increasing hostility. Today, they are often conducted online, especially on social media websites such as Twitter. Few of these disputes involve people who are socially close because intimates are more likely than strangers to share moral beliefs; people can often argue with their intimates face to face, obviating the need to go online; and going online is generally not considered an appropriate way of handling a conflict with a spouse, sibling, or child: it is too public. Intense conflicts over values more often occur between strangers. But disputing with strangers requires having access to them. If strangers cannot be reached, they cannot be engaged. For most of human history, strangers were not very strange. Strangers were those in the next village or county over. Consequently, there were no conflicts between individuals (as distinct from groups such as nations) in different corners of the globe. But there are now. Although most Twitter disputes are probably between members of the same society, they can, and sometimes do, span larger distances. English people can spar with Australians; Americans with Turks; South Africans with

⁵The amount of conflict that nonviolent behavior causes also depends on where it occurs in social space. For example, sexual harassment is deviant primarily because it is an increase in intimacy. With that said, sexual harassment between strangers tends to be more offensive than sexual harassment between acquaintances because the former is a greater increase in intimacy (Barlow 2019: 629–630).

Japanese. Linking users together in cyberspace, the internet creates the infrastructure for nonviolent stranger conflict, allowing people – for the first time in history – to do simultaneous verbal battle with multiple opponents in faraway places.

If reaching numerous strangers was never possible for the ordinary individual before, then the internet has likely changed the landscape of moral conflict. Assuming that the percentage of interactions among strangers becoming conflictual is a rough constant, the result of their increased online contact is presumably a greater number of stranger conflicts. Could this new class of conflicts have simply replaced conflicts among people socially closer to one another – family member, friends, neighbors, acquaintances? In other words, has the overall amount of conflict remained about the same despite the birth of cyberspace? That is possible. But conflicts between closer actors typically evoke a greater measure of restraint than those between strangers (Black [1976] 2010: 40–48, 55–58; see also Campbell and Manning 2019). Of course, overt hostilities can erupt between socially close people, but they generally do so after a longer buildup of escalating conflict. Stranger conflict can go from zero to sixty in a much shorter time. So, it is likely that, whatever else it has done, the internet has increased overt conflict between individuals.

Online conflict takes place over significant expanses of relational distance, then. This is often accentuated by the anonymity of much online interaction. By using fictitious usernames and avatars, people can hide their true identities from those they are communicating with. This distance helps to explain one of the defining characteristics of online disputes: its hostility.⁶ On social media, people are not physically violent toward one another, but neither are they restrained by the etiquette of face-to-face interaction. Twitter conflicts are often harshly worded; they may involve personal attacks on people's integrity, resulting in the targets being shunned by their neighbors and being laid off from work. People who get attacked on social media often are the targets of social shaming; they, and perhaps their family members, may find themselves avoided, criticized, derided, and the objects of pejorative gossip (see Ronson 2015).

This combination of the increasingly stigmatized nature of violence coupled with access to strangers creates the initial conditions for the divergence of the concept. People encounter other people online with whose statements they profoundly disagree. They may even disagree with their entire moral outlook. Among the worst charges they can levy against their opponent is that they are “violent.” Among the worst charges they must deny is that their own side is “violent” – even if it is violent. When will the meaning of “violence” diverge thus? Most likely, when the stakes are high, in the most intense conflicts. And conflict is most intense when it is collective, when it draws in supporters or partisans.

Case-level: partisanship and the formation of solidary groups

Partisanship – taking sides in a conflict – is a matter of degree, ranging from providing a small amount of help (e.g., a snippet of information) to committing wholeheartedly to a cause (e.g., being prepared to die) (Black and Baumgartner 1983). For a conflict to spread, others must know of it. The public nature of much online communication coupled with the long-term memory of the internet means that there is always conflict information available to spread fast and far. Moreover, disputants will sometimes actively seek partisans by announcing and publicizing their grievances online. Twitter users, for example, can attach hashtags to the content of their tweets. Hashtags can be searched by other users across the globe, enabling groups to assemble around common topics of interest. Some conflicts attract zero partisans while others attract large numbers. Partisans are particularly likely to be attracted to cultural conflicts (Black 2011: 121–122). Because culture is normally shared, an attack on one member of a culture can be seen an attack on all members of that culture. People are naturally drawn to the defense of their cultural group, whether it is a religion, nationality, ethnicity, or political ideology. The

⁶Note, however, that some recent research suggests that one-on-one online conversations conducted anonymously may reduce polarization of opinion (Bail 2021: 122–127).

result may be “collective conflict, perhaps involving entire communities or societies and thousands or millions of people” (Black 2011: 121). We therefore typically find the divergence of “violence” labeling in conflicts between cultural groups, such as between Blacks and Whites or conservatives and progressives.

Once underway, partisanship can snowball. Partisanship increases with a third-party’s social closeness to one side – family members and friends tend to support the same causes, as do those who share a culture (Black [1993] 1998:126). Partisanship is strongest when third parties are close to one side and distant from the other. Conversely, partisanship is weak or nonexistent when third parties are equally distant or equally close to both sides (when equally close, their dual loyalties typically lead them to remain neutral, often by seeking to settle the conflict). Strong partisanship therefore runs in network clusters that are largely distinct from one another, particularly when the clusters are internally close or cohesive (e.g., gangs, police departments). Today, the conditions for strong partisanship are often met online. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allow users to follow others so that the follower sees the other user’s content. Following creates a degree of social closeness between users. Closeness is all the greater when multiple users begin to follow each other in a dense web of links. Closeness, in turn, breeds loyalty and consensus. By facilitating new forms of social closeness, cyberspace creates conditions conducive to the formation of new communities and the spread of new ideas – but also to the growth of partisanship and collective conflict.

Partisanship spreads in another way, too: through social hierarchies. Partisanship tends to flow upward – toward status superiors (Black [1993] 1998: 127). Social media platforms provide excellent conditions for upward partisanship. While most Twitter users, for example, have relatively few followers, some have millions. The more followers that users have, the higher their online status. And the higher their status, the greater their influence – the more successful their ideas (Black 1979). Offline status matters, too: organizations attract more partisanship than individuals, the wealthy more than the poor, the socially prominent more than the marginal. Additionally, “Partisans themselves add social stature to an adversary, and so each partisan increases the likelihood of more partisans in the manner of a bandwagon. Partisanship begets partisanship” (Black [1993] 1998: 127). In this way, new semantic usages can gather rapid momentum. A novel definition adopted by a Twitter user with many followers or by a popular organization can quickly spread downwardly and outwardly. The more support the definition attracts, the more widely the new understanding is diffused. “White silence is violence” goes viral.

Conflict itself accentuates the tendency to divide into partisan factions. Social closeness creates partisanship, and partisanship creates social closeness. Fighting for a common cause brings the participants closer together, creates solidarity (Bail 2021: 62). The more frequent the conflicts, the more solidary the parties become. Thus, while conflicts often start between individuals they can then spread to others, particularly when they occur in public fora, such as online. People come to support those who are close and superior to themselves. If conflict is sufficiently recurrent, ad hoc coalitions begin to coalesce into groups. If conflict continues to erupt, groups may harden into moral tribes, ever ready to spring to the support of fellow members, especially leaders, regardless of their conduct (see Greene 2013).

Case-level: social polarization as a source of semantic divergence

Partisanship plus social distance equals social polarization. Partisanship unites factions of supporters in common cause; social distance divides the factions into separate camps. The practical result is one or more groups that are internally socially close and externally socially distant.⁷ Within the group, there is regular interaction and a high level of agreement. Users tend to agree with and to champion

⁷Polarization is also an important predictor of violent conflict (Black [1993] 1998: 76–77, 2004, Cooney 1998:Ch. 4; Senechal de La Roche 1996, 2001).

the ideas of those to whom they are close by, for example, “liking” or reposting the other user’s content. Ideas then circulate among groups of partisans. Subject to few countervailing influences, beliefs harden and become more extreme (Sunstein 2017). Highly cohesive groups police the utterances of their members and expel those who do not conform (Bail 2021: 64–65, 79). Not adopting the group’s definition is deviant – no matter how far it departs from traditional usage. Adopting it, on the other hand signals commitment to the group cause: with these words, I thee pledge.

What little interaction occurs across the groups is largely conflictual. In fact, rather than moderating views and humanizing the other side, rapid exposure to members of the opposing group often exacerbates polarization (Bail 2021: 12–40, 107–108). Inhabiting different social worlds, morality diverges. Each side becomes increasingly convinced that it represents the cause of justice and morality. Such is the moral gulf that there can be no agreement even on the basic definition of terms. Semantic divergence widens: meaning no longer varies slightly and subtly but significantly and spectacularly. Moreover, since each side is certain that it is wholly right and the other is wholly wrong, there can be no middle ground. Meaning tends to dichotomize. Conduct is either “violence” or it is not. Largely absent from the conversation are more nuanced positions acknowledging that property destruction is violence even if it is a lesser degree of violence, that the use of force by police is violence even if the legal system often deems it legitimate, and that words can be psychologically hurtful even if they do not directly inflict bodily harm.

Partisanship need not be equal on both sides. One side might have more supporters than the other. If the imbalance of partisanship reaches a certain level, the weaker side will be defeated and the dominant side’s definition will prevail. The winner will write not just history but meaning itself. The semantic divergence of “violence” will decline and consensus will triumph. Yet history does not stand still. What was once a dominant narrative may come to be criticized, even reviled. In the long-run, losers can wind up winners and winners losers. No moral victory is forever secure.

The semantic divergence of “violence” can decline for other reasons. A larger enemy comes along which unites the warring factions. Or ties begin to form and strengthen across the groups, reducing the degree of polarization. Or the cultural conflict exhausts itself, fading into the background to be replaced by new issues in a society that is constantly changing. In short, as social polarization waxes and wanes, so too does the semantic divergence of “violence.”

Discussion and conclusion

Here we explored an aspect of the behavior of language: disagreement over the meaning of “violence” in cultural conflicts. In recent times, the meaning of the word “violence” has escaped its confinement to physical force. Speech can be “violence,” and so can silence. Action can be “violence,” and so can inaction. At the same time, clear instances of force can avoid being labeled as “violence.” The expansion and contraction of “violence” labeling in cultural conflicts is, we argued, a partial function of social polarization and the more deviant nature of physical force. Pulling together several strands of Black’s ([1993] 1998, 2011) theoretical work, we proposed that the long-term decline of social intimacy and inequality helps explain the growing stigmatization of applications of physical force, creating the background conditions for the contestation of the concept.

As social life migrates online, moral conflicts between strangers become more frequent and intense. The public nature of the conflicts allows others to take sides with ease. When the conflicts are cultural (i.e., between competing belief systems), partisans are particularly likely to intervene. Support tends to flow to those who are socially close and superior. When both sides attract partisans, the result is cultural conflict between polarized groups in which each side is liable to define “violence” in the service of its cause. For one side, beatings and killings by police are not violence but “legitimate uses of force,” yet the opponent’s words are “violence.” For the other side, destroying property in anti-police riots is not “violence” but police beatings and killings are, and so too is the failure to denounce them. In short, disagreement about the meaning of “violence” is a product of social polarization.

Whether or not the semantic divergence of “violence” is desirable is for others to debate. Our goal is neither to condemn nor to condone “violence” labeling, but to explain the conditions under which disagreement over its meaning arises and flourishes. With that said, it is essential to stress that our explanation is only partial. While we highlight the importance of stigmatization and social polarization in explaining the semantic divergence of “violence,” we do not claim that these are the only variables at play. Future research and theorizing should explore how other sociological forces shape “violence” labeling. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that our explanation is probabilistic, not deterministic. We do not claim, for example, that polarized conflicts will elicit disagreement in meaning among all disputants. Rather, we argue that polarization increases the likelihood that disputants in cultural conflicts will contest the meaning of “violence.”

If social polarization continues to increase, the “violence” label will likely expand still further, to encompass an ever-greater number of (traditionally nonviolent) phenomena, and agreement over its meaning will continue to abate. But expansion could lead to a loss of moral force: if “violence” can be anything that anybody dislikes, the charge is easily discounted. If so, new words might have to be coined to denote the use of physical force. New words to describe violence have been invented before. Only after World War II, in the wake of the Holocaust, was the concept of “genocide” invented to describe the age-old phenomenon of mass ethnic killing (see, e.g., Campbell 2015: 199). Perhaps some neologism will come to mean what “violence” once clearly meant: assaulting and killing, robbing and raping, burning and destroying.

In this paper, we focused on the semantic divergence of “violence” in disputes between cultural groups, but this is only an example of the more general phenomenon of semantic divergence in conflict. For language plays an important role in private disputes as well. During a custody battle, for example, the wife claims her husband was “abusive” toward their children; he says her failure to discipline the children was “abusive,” so he had to “reprimand” them. As the parties and their partisans move further apart during disputes, whether cultural or private, meaning often splinters along the fault lines of the conflict. Meaning becomes a sword to attack the other group and a shield to defend one’s own. As we noted above, disagreement over the meaning of words beyond “violence,” such as “terrorism” and “rioting,” can also be found. These words deserve investigation and explanation as well, and we encourage social scientists to take up this effort. Furthermore, the analysis of disputed meaning can occur in various institutions, including but not limited to medical, academic, business, and journalistic settings. Conflict is omnipresent in human affairs and as social life continues to migrate online the role language plays in disputes will only grow. How language behaves should thus be one of the major foci of study for scholars interested in social conflict.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Callie Burt, James Tucker, and several anonymous reviewers for their comments on previous drafts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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