THEORETICAL / PHILOSOPHICAL

Communicative Action, Objectifications, and the Triad of Violence

Ekkehard Coenen[1]

Abstract

This article aims to develop a social theory of violence that emphasizes the role of the third party as well as the communication between the involved subjects. For this Teresa Koloma Beck's essay 'The Eye of the Beholder: Violence as a Social Process' is taken as a starting point, which adopts a social-constructivist perspective. On the one hand, the basic concepts and the benefits of this approach are presented. On the other hand, social-theoretical problems of this approach are revealed. These deficits are counteracted by expanding Koloma Beck's approach with a communicative-constructivist framework. Thus, the role of communicative action and the 'objectification of violence' is emphasized. These aspects impact the perception, judgement and (de-)legitimation of violence phenomena and the emergence of a 'knowledge of violence'. Communicative actions and objectifications form a key to understanding violent interactions and the link between the micro and macro levels. Finally, the methodological consequences for the research of violence and Communicative Constructivism are discussed. Furthermore, possible research fields are outlined, which open up by looking at communicative action and the objectifications within the 'triads of violence'.

Keywords Violence · Communicative action · Social theory · Triad of violence · Knowledge of violence · Communicative constructivism

✉ Ekkehard Coenen
ekkehard.coenen@uni-weimar.de

1   Department of Media Studies, Chair of Media Sociology, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Fakultät Medien, Schwanseestraße 143, 99427 Weimar, Germany

Introduction

At first glance, violence seems to be a phenomenon in which only perpetrators and victims are involved. The juxtaposition of injuring and suffering, superiority and submission, power and impotence suggests thinking in dyadic models. This has also been the case in sociological research on violence over an extended time. The idea that third parties are also involved in the phenomena of violence has long been suppressed by sociology (Reemtsma, 2012: 266–274). In recent years, sociological research has increasingly addressed this narrow view. Meanwhile, numerous authors have turned to triadic structures of violence in which great importance is attached to the 'public' or the 'observer'. It is only through the third party's role that phenomena of violence are taken seriously as social phenomena *that reach beyond the violent situation*. After all, the third needs to be a constituent part of sociological research into violence. At the first glance, it is oftentimes solely the perpetrator who interprets previous actions as unacceptable transgressions of normative claims. But these claims result, among other things, from existing institutions or the socialization of those involved. In addition, the claimed norm can only be approved by third parties and, thus, become a general norm (Lindemann, 2015: 505–508). Perpetrators and victims can therefore not simply be thought of as a dyadic constellation that act in some kind of social 'vacuum'. They are social beings and have therefore always shown references to third parties – even in violent acts. To put it another way: Analyses of violence can be labelled as sociological only when the third party is included.

This article aims to develop a social-phenomenological grounded perspective on violence and *the communication between* those subjects who practice, suffer and observe violence. For understanding violence, I assume that the subjectivity of perpetrators, victims and third parties cannot be considered marginally. Nevertheless, the aim of this article is to develop a social-phenomenological perspective on violence that does not focus on the subject, but still takes it into account. This goal results from the criticism levelled at social-phenomenological and socio-constructivist approaches that would maintain the subject-object division known from classical epistemology (e.g., Latour, 2010). This point overlooks the fact that Berger & Luckmann (1991) understand socialization not merely as an interplay between subjective and objective realities. To counter the accusation of mere subjectivism, a social-theoretical approach is required to drive the subject out of the center and decentralise it. However, to be able to build on existing social-phenomenological theories of violence, the subject should not be dissolved. Instead, a relational approach is required in which subjects still play an important, if not a central, position (Staudigl, 2019; Knoblauch, 2020: 46–53).

In the following, I turn to an approach to violence and third parties that builds on ideas from social constructivism. In her essay 'The Eye of the Beholder: Violence as an Social Process,' Koloma Beck (2011) describes the role of third parties as a *constituent of violence*. In doing so, she does not just stop at showing that violence is being observed. For Koloma Beck, it is just as important how violence is negotiated – i.e., which terms are used to talk about violence. In doing so, she illustrates the possibility of discursively manipulating perceptions of violence. Unfortunately, however, her approach has social-theoretical problems. Her focus is still on the third party's

subjectivity and the verbal (de-)legitimation of violence. Thus, her social theory is based on subjectivism, neglect of materiality and blanking out of the actual imparting process of violence-related knowledge. It does not provide an adequate view *beyond* the triad that shows how violence has a structuring effect on society. These shortcomings lead to methodological and epistemological discrepancies. According to my suggestion, a possible solution is based on the socio-theoretical assumptions of Communicative Constructivism (Knoblauch, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2020; Reichertz, 2018). This approach builds on three central basic terms, through which the *communicative processes* in what I call the *triads of violence* can be better understood, namely: relationality, objectifications and communicative action.

My argumentation follows three steps. First, I discuss the perspective of sociological violence research on third parties. I argue that third parties are oftentimes conceptualized as mere 'additions' to the perpetrator-victim dyad. Also, I turn critically to the ambitious triangular approach by Koloma Beck (2011). While doing so, I trace the central ideas of this social constructivist model and emphasize its theoretical and methodological benefits as well as deficits. Second, I introduce the basics of Communicative Constructivism. Thereby, I illustrate how the triad of violence can be understood through a *relational* social theory that emphasizes objectifications and communicative action. The *objectifications of violence*, in particular, have an impact on the perception, judgement and (de-)legitimation of violence phenomena. They are crucial to the understanding of violent interaction. I show that when analyzing the triad of violence, attention should not only be paid to the content but also the form of communication. Then, I turn to relationality and communicative action within this triadic constellation. With this I argue that interpretations and knowledge of violence can be influenced or even manipulated not only by linguistic but also by bodily, material and performative aspects of action. Third, I conclude with the methodological consequences of my approach. I show that the sociology of violence and Communicative Constructivism can be gainfully interlinked and learn from each other. Also, I outline possible research fields that open up by looking at communicative action and objectifications within the triad of violence.

A Critical Look at Triangular Social Theories of Violence and 'The Eye of the Beholder'

The Problem of the Third Party in the Sociology of Violence

In his essay 'Trust and Violence,' Reemtsma criticizes that sociology has long hidden the third.[1] But the consideration of the third party, as Reemtsma (2012: 266) argues, is imperative to understand violence *sociologically*: 'Violence cannot be understood as social action unless understood in a triadic construction with communication. For it is through communication that violence constitutes itself as social action in the first place'. For Reemtsma, it needs a real or imagined third party for violence to

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[1] Reemtsma's book was originally published in German in 2008. At that time, the social theories that treat the third party as a constituent of violence had not yet been published.

have communicative aspects. Through violence, messages can be conveyed to third parties, just as viewers can interpret acts of violence and allow them or intervene in them. Of course, not every act of violence needs a third party, e.g., domestic violence and rape. Nevertheless, only within a triadic constellation, an act of violence has a social meaning. Violence can also take place between two actors, but even then, always *with reference to third parties* (Lindemann, 2015: 505–508). These third parties do not necessarily have to be present in the situation, but they can also be represented in different ways in the violent situation, e.g., as a generalized third party or an imagined community, which in future will perceive photographs, videos or reports of the violent acts (Coenen & Tuma, in press). Regarding this, Hoebel (2019) also introduced the concept of the 'consequential third'. Even if no other people are present, the 'extra-local entanglements' of the perpetrators and victims influence the acts of violence. Consequently, even hidden violence contains references to an imagined third party through which it is interpreted as legitimate or illegitimate. Furthermore, in order to be communicatively connectable and to become a relevant discursive event, there is no necessary need for the physical co-presence of another person. Violence does not have to be seen but only known to be effective beyond the situation. However, in dyadic constellations, violence would be seen as something that either stems from instinct or is not due to the actors. If sociology only looks at the perpetrators and victims, Reemtsmas (2012: 270) criticizes, it 'remains silent about violence'.[2]

But things have changed. The consideration of the third party has currently spread across numerous fields of violence research. The 'audience,' especially the mass media, occupy a prominent position, notably in terrorism research (Vertigans, 2011; Weigert, 2003; Weimann & Winn, 1994; Wieviorka, 1993). Research on civil wars emphasizes that observing third parties enforce armed authority and that violence is normalized in everyday life (Kalyvas, 2006; Koloma Beck, 2012). Besides, the so-called 'bystanders' were discussed in detail as third parties by genocide research (Bajohr & Löw, 2016; Barnett, 1999, 2012; Grünfeld & Huijboom, 2007; Hilberg, 1995; Morina & Thijs, 2018; Vetlesen, 2000; White, 2015).

In many theories of violence, which include third parties, they support the emergence and dynamics of social violence processes (e.g., Blagg 2010; Clarkson, 1987; Cooney, 1998; Parks et al., 2013). These cases conceive violence communicatively because it always imparts something to an observer, and it is promoted or inhibited by the third party. Collins (2008) situationist theory of violence contains numerous references to the third party's roles and functions. The observers are either emotion-

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[2] For Reemtsma, too, the third dominantly serves to emerge and dynamize social violence processes. He also looks at the communicative aspects of violence, through which it can be instrumentalized, interpreted and (de-)legitimized. However, at this point, Reemtsma's analyzes of the communication processes remain superficial. He does not offer a thorough analysis of the communication within the triad of violence, and he does not translate his findings into a sociological vocabulary. On the one hand, this may be because he is not aiming at developing a social theory, but rather a theory of modernity. On the other hand, Reemtsma underpins his remarks social theoretically with the 'phenomenology of violence,' which distances itself from communicative contexts of meaning. Thus, he describes 'only the interpersonal aspect of violence, not its psychology or social context' (Reemtsma, 2012: 322). More precisely: The basis of Reemtsma's theory of violence aims at the interpersonal interaction with the body 'without implying some underlying psychological meaning' (Reemtsma, 2012: 322).

ally moved or distant, and they create inhibitions for those who practice violence or give them emotional support.[3] Nonetheless, for Collins, violence is essentially a situation that arises from the interplay of perpetrators and victims. He is not interested in whether third parties interpret an action as violence or not. Instead, he has a positivist concept of (physical) violence that sees third parties as just an additional element in the dynamics of violence. Imbusch (2017) mentions that the third party is either active or passive. Third parties are not exclusively individuals who attend the violent situation as helpers (active) or spectators (passive). There are also 'abstract third parties' who are indirectly involved in and influence events, such as the 'public' and 'reference groups' (active) or laws and norms (passive). Anyway, Imbusch's heuristic of the third refers to a ready-made interpretation of situations as violence. This interpretation is brought to the field of research from outside and ignores the interpretations of third parties. Here, the third party plays no role in understanding why individual actions are interpreted as violence and others not. Hoebel (2019) points out the importance of 'local' and 'extra-local entanglements'. For him, even absent persons can be 'consequential third parties'. They can influence the dynamics of violence, for example, by only taking them into account during a violent situation. However, Hoebel's analysis ultimately aims at the perpetrator's actions, attitudes, and relationship with third parties. Whether present and absent third parties interpret an action as violence and how they judge it is irrelevant to him. He, too, assumes a positivistic understanding of violence.

These are a few examples that conceptualize third parties as a kind of 'addition' that influences the violent process within the dyad of perpetrator and victim. Here, they are not treated as a necessary part of an analysis of violence and to understand interpretations of actions as violence. The core of these models is still a dyad of violence. Behind this lies a sharply reducing situationism, which, of course, can contribute a lot to an understanding of violent interaction. Nevertheless, it is difficult to look beyond the violent situation with these approaches. They, therefore, do not offer any explanations for the societal structuring effect that is based on violence (Popitz, 2017: 32–36) and that forms a common ground in the sociology of violence. In short, this 'additive' understanding of the third party does not contribute to an understanding of the micro-macro link.

Compared with this, there are a few authors who see the role of the third party as central to the dynamics of certain forms of violence. They also understand the third party as a *constituent* of any social dynamic of violence (Koloma Beck, 2011; Linde-

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[3] Collin's (2008) micro-sociological analysis of violence, however, insists on thinking of third parties merely as additive elements in situations of violence. He systematically excludes the context of violence. In addition, Collin's study is reductionistic. He shows no interest in meanings, and he just deals with interactions (see also Wieviorka, 2014: 57). Accordingly, he does not go very much into how violence is legitimized and assessed by third parties. This may also be due to the fact that Collins does not focus on the events that take place *after* a violent situation. For this reason, this approach remains blind to the constitutive role of the third.

mann, 2017, 2018: 353–409, 2021: 231–274).[4] Thus, sociological violence analysis is no longer restricted to the interactions of perpetrators and victims.[5]

Gesa Lindemann presents a theoretically highly differentiated and methodologically very instructive perspective on the triad of violence (Lindemann, 2017, 2021; Barth et al., 2021). Her reflexive-anthropological perspective makes a triadic structure the starting point for understanding violence. Her approach supplements the communication within the triad with material and symbolic aspects.[6] For her, however, the third is dominant to be understood as its institutionalized rule; in their words: as a 'procedural order of violence,' i.e., the 'total of communicative-institutional mediations' (Lindemann, 2017: 84, my translation). These procedural orders determine how the circle of legitimate persons is limited, how violence can be identified and how the validity of normative expectations is to be shown. For Lindemann, violence 'can only be understood in the context of the analysis of communicatively rationalizing procedural orders' (Lindemann, 2017: 71, my translation). She describes the importance of the third party in the constitution of violence and emphasizes that violence is always communicated and institutionalized. In doing so, she not only draws attention to the fact that violence is observed, but also that it does so in a certain way.

But even if Lindemann's considerations can sharpen the view on the importance of the third party, her approach is not a suitable starting point for my further remarks. As already stated, the aim of this article is to develop a social-phenomenological founded perspective on violence that takes the subject into account. In Lindemann's theory, however, the subject is a mere blank space. Lindemann turns away from understanding the human individual as a social-theoretical premise. Building on Plessner's (2019: 34–74) theory of excentric positionality, she instead assumes a 'social undecidedness relation' (Lindemann, 2019). She emphasizes the distinction between 'individualization' and 'dividualization'. The former refers to a subject experiencing itself as an enduring self. The latter accentuates the relationships in which selves stand, which, however, are interchangeable as actually executing operators. Since Lindemann thus conceives subjectivities as downstream, she offers only a few connections to established theories that emphasize the subject (Staudigl, 2014; Wieviorka, 2009, 2014) and provide relevant insights into violence phenomena. In addition, Lindemann's

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[4] The constitutive meaning of third parties for phenomena of violence can be found in an early form in Walter (1969). Relevant and from an anthropological perspective, Riches (1986) also developed a triadic institutional structure of violence.

[5] Of course, some theories deal with the third party's constituent role in violence (e.g., Reemtsma, 2012). However, these additionally aim at a theory of modernity. Comparing these respective theories may be beneficial precisely because there are huge differences between them, especially with a view of the authors' theoretical understanding. But this discussion has to be made elsewhere to sharpen my explicitly socio-theoretical argument on the 'triad of violence'.

[6] Hartmann (2019) links Reemtsma's (2012: 103–106) remarks on zones of violence with Lindemann's (2017) considerations on the 'procedural orders of violence'. In doing so, he succeeds in demonstrating that procedural orders create the possibility of 'legitimizing violence in societies in certain places and at certain times and delegitimizing it in other places and at another time' (Hartmann, 2019: 81; my translation). Zones of violence result from the fact that social actors interpret bodily interactions as violence and, thus, provide a normative framework. In my opinion, it would be interesting to open up this theoretical perspective to the objectivations of violence and to empirically examine the relationship in which procedural orders, objectivations and zones of permitted, prohibited and mandated violence stand. However, this must be done elsewhere.

approach operates primarily on the level of a sociological theory (Lindemann, 2021: 310–314; Lindemann et al., in press), from which violence is always morally charged. In contrast, my approach aims at a social theory[7] that separates phenomena of violence and morality on a theoretical level and only – if necessary – brings them together empirically. For this reason, I will initially ignore Lindemann's valuable perspective on violence to be able to focus more strongly on a social-phenomenological theory of violence. An in-depth comparison between her theory of violence from the perspectives of reflexive anthropology and communicative-constructivist approach is undoubtly profitable. However, it must be done elsewhere.

A Social-Constructivist Approach to Violence: 'The Eye of the Beholder' by Teresa Koloma Beck

In the following, I discuss the essay 'The Eye of the Beholder: Violence as a Social Process' by Koloma Beck (2011). This triadic approach to violence emphasizes the interaction between perpetrators, victims and third parties. This essay is essential for my further remarks because, on the one hand, it focuses on a social constructivist perspective on violence. It has a phenomenological foundation that connects to those theories of violence dealing with subjectivity (Staudigl, 2014; Wieviorka, 2009, 2014). Besides, Koloma Beck's approach becomes highly compatible with Communicative Constructivism's perspective that underlies my approach. On the other hand, Koloma Beck accentuates the meaningfulness of violent action and thus also raises awareness for the perceptions of the actors involved. For her, '"violence" is no longer conceived as an *empirically evident* phenomenon' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 350). Consequently, research on violence must analyze how an empirical event is interpreted as violence within the research field. Therefore, as I emphasize, it is necessary to consider the communicative processes within the triad of violence.

Koloma Beck's (2011) essay represents an ambitious attempt to reconstruct the social dynamics of violence triangularly. Her starting point is the finding that the so-called 'phenomenology of violence', which emerged in the 1990s on the initiative of Sofsky (1996, 1997a, 1997b) and von Trotha (1997), has not yet succeeded in connecting a phenomenological analysis of violence with social theory. While it can be argued that Koloma Beck just refers in a more or less consistent way to different social theories, it is her explicit aim 'to outline a social theory of violence by reconceptualizing central arguments of phenomenological violence research in the framework of a school of social thought: constructivism' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 347). In doing so, she combines the dynamics of violent interactions at the micro and meso level with theories of power and authority. It is about the production and reproduction of social order through violence.

For Koloma Beck, in a social constructivist framework, violence must be understood as a triangular dynamic. Her central point is to understand the third party not only as essential for the emergence of certain forms of violence but as 'a *constitutive*

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[7] This is an essential conceptual difference: Lindemann's approach is primarily at the level of *sociological theory* (Lindemann, 2021: 310–314), while Communicative Constructivism begins at the level of *social theory* (Knoblauch, 2020: 7–10).

third element in the social dynamics of violence' (Koloma Beck, 2011, 250, emphasis in original). Here, she differentiates between the 'performer,' the 'target' and the 'observer'. These are not fixed roles in violent conflicts but contingent and reversible 'modes of experiencing violent interaction' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 349–351). Consequently, violence is defined by Koloma Beck (2011: 347) as 'a correlation between inflicting and suffering as observed by a third party'. The inclusion of the third party enables the somatic and the social to be untangled. Because for Koloma Beck, the perception of violence by the 'observer' is not tied to his body. The 'observer' 'is associated instead with consideration and decision'. As already mentioned, violence is not empirically evident but socially constructed and must, therefore, be understood in perspective (Koloma Beck, 2011: 350). The (de-)legitimization of violence is highly subjective and depends on the third party and its perception of violent action.

Koloma Beck's social theory of violence is very instructive for the dynamics within the triads of violence. Her work leads to interesting empirical insights. However, her explanations are based on some theoretical inconsistencies representing the current perspective on the triad of violence. Due to the theoretical heterogeneity in Koloma Beck's approach, it would not be possible to integrate the respective insights into a consistent theory of violence. At this point, I would like to emphasize a total of six social-theoretical problems:

First, Koloma Beck takes on the considerations of 'phenomenology of violence,' which initially spoke out against a socio-constructivist view of violence and focused on the body of those involved. While Koloma Beck depicts violence as a social construct, she ignores the social-theoretical tensions that this creates with the 'phenomenology of violence'. As already mentioned, this research programme was initiated in the 1990s by the German sociologists von Trotha (1997) and Sofsky (1996, 1997a, 1997b).[8] The starting point of this approach was the finding that the sociology of violence has so far neglected a phenomenological analysis of violence. As a result, little was known about the social dynamics of the actual violent situations. To develop a social theory of violence, the phenomenology of violence focused on the body and radically rejected the terms 'meaning,' 'action,' and 'consciousness'.[9] Von Trotha (1997: 13–14) reduced symbolic interactionism, social phenomenology and social constructivism to the fact that they were exclusively concerned with processes of definition and negotiation. For him, these theoretical traditions could therefore say nothing about phenomena in which people hit and kill each other. An extreme position was taken by Sofsky (1997b), who postulated that violence per se is meaningless.[10] Correspondingly, symbolic interactionism, social phenomenology and social constructivism were constituted as sociological lines of thought from which the 'phenomenologists of violence' could not gain anything (see Nedelmann, 1997).

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[8] A brief overview of the emergence of modern sociology of violence can be found in Koloma Beck & Schlichte (2014: 84–90).

[9] As is well known, Husserl (1931) describes phenomenology as 'the science of consciousness'. In this sense, a theory that ignores intentionality and consciousness cannot be understood as phenomenology.

[10] Although Nedelmann and Trotha appreciated Sofsky's work on the sociology of violence, they criticized it emphatically because of this orientation (Nedelmann, 1997; Trotha & Schwab-Trapp, 1996).

This social-theoretical perspective may be somewhat conclusive if one only looks at the perpetrator-victim dyad. After all, here, the interplay between the involved has a crucial role. However, within a triadic understanding of violence, the focus on the body creates theoretical and methodological problems. The third party is often not physically involved in the violence. Its relationship to the perpetrator and victim is not primarily physical but intentional. For judging and to (de-)legitimizing violence, the third party must interpret the violent action meaningfully. Incidentally, this applies not only to those observers in the research field but also to the researchers themselves. Only in rare cases, sociologists of violence are also physically involved in violent situations. Accordingly, the analysis of the triad of violence should also focus on the communicative processes and the emergence of a violence-related meaning.[11]

Secondly, Koloma Beck's argument builds on different, sometimes challenging to reconcile definitions of violence. In part, it takes on Popitz' understanding of violence as a 'sheer power of action' (Popitz, 2017: 25), in part it is a social process, in part a social technique, and in part depending on the observations of a third party. These definitions sometimes seem to overlap. In contrast, however, they each refer to a different socio-theoretical foundation for the sociological analysis of violence. Sometimes violence is anchored in the individual based on action theory, sometimes violence seems to be negotiated between all actors involved, sometimes violence is an instrument that can form the social structure, and sometimes violence seems utterly dependent on the observer. In total, these definitions are incompatible with each other.

Third, Koloma Beck leaves open on which social constructivist theory her arguments are based on, 'so as to maintain the general potential of such an approach' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 348). For her, violence is shaped only by interactions and, thus, it is socially situated. However, this view ignores the diversity of the sometimes contradictory approaches of social constructivism and the current social theoretical debates and innovations. For example, discourse analysis, system theory, pragmatic approaches, the social construction of technology, and the 'classic' sociology of knowledge each have different conceptions of the social and, as a result, different perspectives on violence. Against this background, it is not sufficient to simply refer to a 'social-constructivist framework' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 347).

Fourth, Koloma Beck conceives the 'performer' and the 'target' as highly physical, while the 'observer' seems almost disembodied. This disbalance can already be found on a conceptual level. According to Koloma Beck, the terms 'perpetrator' and 'victim' are associated with strong value judgments and emotions. They also arouse the idea of being related to definite roles. With the terms 'performer' and 'target,' Koloma Beck distances herself from these assumptions. In my opinion, however, these terms are chosen unfavourably. Violent situations are not only characterized by performance on the part of those who practice violence. The 'targets' also perform well, a point that Koloma Beck herself discusses under the term 'staging suffering' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 353). The same applies to the 'observer,' who has to perform

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[11] Interestingly, Nedelmann (1997) argues that the sociology of violence should open up to the subjective meaning. However, her objection is hardly taken into account in the debate about the 'phenomenology of violence'.

his or her judgments and (de-)legitimations of violence so that they are communicatively connectable. The observations of the 'observer' are detached from the somatic. The fact that third parties can also feel nausea, disgust and an increase in adrenaline when considering violent acts is left out.

Fifth, Koloma Beck's social theory involves a veiled subjectivism. She assumes that the evaluation of violence depends on how it is presented. Ultimately, however, it is always the observing subject that makes decisions and judges violence. Koloma Beck admits that the perception of the 'observer' and thus his or her (de-)legitimizing judgment are open to manipulation. The 'performer' can conceal the violence using appropriate terminology, e.g., with the use of 'enhanced interrogation methods' instead of 'torture'. Likewise, the 'target' can overstate the suffering inflicted on it by 'staging suffering'. Nevertheless, here materiality and communicative processes are not taken into account. Koloma Beck remains on the linguistic level. The bodily and material aspects of action, however, are left out.

Sixth, the centring of the subject is accompanied by less attention to the context of violent interactions. In her latest work, Koloma Beck has turned to an ethnomethodological approach in this regard. Using the concept of 'indexicality' (e.g., Garfinkel and Sacks 1986), she and Thomas Hoebel make it clear that the analysis of violence has to be context-sensitive to gain in-depth insights. Violence does include not only categories and descriptions but also facial expressions and gestures. Furthermore, the meaning of violence is reflective in two respects. On the one hand, the indexical particulars are the mainstay of so-called accounts. On the other hand, by speaking and acting, the actors continually change the circumstances and the horizon of meaning in their interaction. Finally, the context of the violent interaction itself is also indexical. It is not stable but changes continuously with the course of events (Hoebel & Koloma Beck, 2019). This context-sensitive approach promises a gainful analysis of the dynamics of violence. So far, however, Koloma Beck and Thomas Hoebel have not worked out the role that indexicality plays within the triad of violence. How the third party influences the context of violent situations remains mostly unexplained. But it is precisely this connection between a triangular theory of violence and a context-sensitive research attitude that can turn out to be very fruitful for empirical research.

This brief outline of Koloma Beck's essay 'The Eye of the Beholder' as an example of an approach that emphasizes the function of the third party should be sufficient to illustrate the 'state of the art' of the triangular conceptualizations of violence. With the strong accentuation of the third party, much has been done to open up a genuinely sociological perspective on the phenomena of violence. By now, there should be no doubt about the effectiveness of observers and interpreters of violence. Nevertheless, it can be summarized that the most of the existing models for the triads of violence harbour problems that undermine a deeper understanding of violence. Situationism, body-centring, subjectivism, missing context-sensitivity and a lack of interest in violence-related communication, as well as its material aspects, are social-theoretical pitfalls that triangular-arguing sociologies of violence must avoid.

Consequently, analysis of violence must consider the verbal and bodily dimension and the material and performative aspects. Only in this way can a better context-sensitive theory of violence be developed; in two perspectives. Firstly, the context of the violent situation can be emphasized; secondly, how the violent situation itself

becomes the context of other violence-related interactions can also be analyzed. Both are sides of the same coin to understand the intersituativity of violence and the micro-macro link.

Since the publication of 'The Eye of the Beholder,' the theoretical discussion about the triad of violence has hardly developed. Instead, only long-known questions about the role of third parties were discussed, e.g., the third as merely an additive element to an existing violent dyad (e.g., Imbusch, 2017). To further develop Koloma Beck's social-theoretical assumptions profitably, it is worth looking at a subsequent development of social constructivism, namely the Communicative Constructivism. By suggesting this approach as a possible starting point for analyzing violence in the next section, I hope to counteract the previously mentioned problems.

Communicative Action, Objectifications, and the Relationality of Violence

As I will show, Communicative Constructivism offers the opportunity to address the socio-theoretical problems identified regarding the triads of violence. It is a comparatively young approach to theory building in communication and media studies and sociology, which was first mentioned in the 1990s (Knoblauch, 1995: 21–56). Today, it has been discussed primarily in German-speaking countries in numerous debates and publications, systematically examined and further expanded (e.g., Hepp and Hasebrink, 2016; Keller et al., 2013; Knoblauch, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2020; Reichertz, 2018; Reichertz & Bettmann, 2018; Reichertz & Tuma, 2017). Its theoretical origins include theories of discourse and practical theory, pragmatism, post-structuralism, the hermeneutical sociology of knowledge, social phenomenology, interaction analysis, and ethnographic and ethnomethodological considerations. Also, experience from empirical research influenced the development of Communicative Constructivism.

Mainly, Communicative Constructivism aims to question how meaning and social knowledge can be constituted by acting. As a few authors show, this approach can be made fruitful to analyze violence (Coenen, 2021, 2022; Reichertz & Keysers, 2018; Tuma 2021). It highlights the meaning formed by (violence-related) action and the knowledge of violence that builds on it. Hence, this approach is suitable for tackling the problems of the sociology of violence that were described in the recent section. It allows insights into how violence becomes observable and communicative, the interplay between violence-related actions and their context, and how interpretations related to the phenomenon of violence gradually sediment and stabilize or change institutions and structures. Communicative Constructivism highlights the communicative processes in the triad of violence. It also offers the opportunity to analyze how violence goes beyond this triangular relationship to structure society.

In the following, I will first address the objectifications of violence. In doing so, I show that when analyzing the triad of violence, attention should not only be paid to the content but also the form of communication. I then turn to relationality and communicative action within this triadic constellation. With this I argue that interpretations and knowledge of violence can be influenced or even manipulated not only by linguistic but also by bodily, material and performative aspects of action.

Objectification of Violence

Within Communicative Constructivism, objectifications are an essential part. Schütz & Luckmann (1973: 264) put it, these are 'the embodiment of subjective processes in the objects and events of the everyday life-world'. They are generated in communicative situations by the actors in verbal or physical expressions and are thus experienced by other subjects. As Berger & Luckmann (1991: 49) note, they are 'products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world' and thus 'more or less enduring indices of the subjective processes of their producers'. The *objectifications of violence* can take many forms, be it a slap in the face, a scar left behind, a handgun, protective equipment, an extensive defence system or a detailed war plan. All of these are externalizations of violence-related subjective meaning, which are interpreted by other people and reproduce a social knowledge of violence and, due to their materiality, can even be permanent.[12] The objectifications need not originally be intended for the use of violence. Instead, they can get their violence-related meaning performatively. For example, a car designed to transport people and objects can take on a violent meaning if it drives into a crowd at high speed or if the plan is made to carry out such an attack. Objectifications of violence do not exist independently of a violent situation but always result from an action, such as planning, executing and evaluating acts of violence.

The concept of objectifications of violence does not focus on the *content* but on the *form* of violence-related communication. In other words, not the 'what,' but the 'how' is at the centre of sociological analysis. The meaning given to actions between subjects cannot be separated from the form of action. Of course, the intended meaning certainly has an influence on the form a communicative act takes. Nevertheless, it is the concrete realization through which an objectification becomes perceptible and can be interpreted. The form organizes the communicative act internally, but at the same time, it can also be recognized externally as a specific form (Baecker, 2005: 55–70; Knoblauch, 2020: 166–170). This takes into account that violence-related communication is never immediately perceptible to perpetrators, victims and third parties. Firearms, for example, are media of violence par excellence because they can bring violent intent to their target over a long distance. Nevertheless, even a slap in the face is mediated between the involved subjects through their bodies. It makes a big difference for the meaningfulness of violence whether the perpetrator and victim face off in a fist duel, in a sword fight or a trench, or whether the communication is made asymmetric through drones, sniper rifles or booby traps.

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[12] Berger & Luckmann (1991: 49–50, emphasis in original), for example, describe the knife used as a weapon as an objectification: 'That night I wake up with a knife embedded in the wall above my bed. The knife *qua* object expresses my adversary's anger. It affords me access to his subjectivity even though I was sleeping when he threw it and never saw him because he fled after his near-hit. Indeed, if I leave the object where it is, I can look at it again the following morning, and again it expresses to me the anger of the man who threw it. What is more, other men can come and look at it and arrive at the same conclusion. In other words, the knife in my wall has become an objectively available constituent of the reality I share with my adversary and with other men'. As long as the knife gets stuck in place, different people can interpret it similarly. The violence-related meaning is thus made permanent.

After all, there is always a medium that lies between the situation of violence and the observer. For example, audiovisual recordings of acts of violence have a completely different influence on the third party than newspaper reports, (historical) novels, art paintings or the sensual perception in physical co-presence. The end device is also crucial for the perception of violence. Watching a fight scene on an old black and white TV leads to entirely different experiences than watching the same scene on an HD screen, on a cinema screen or even on a VR headset. After all, it makes a difference for the recipient whether violence is streamed online, broadcast on radio or circulated on videotapes. Each type of objectification occupies the subject differently – psychologically, physically as well as performatively. The observer is sensual and mentally 'involved' and is accordingly affected to different degrees. Objectifications influence how violence is perceived and, consequently, how it is judged.

A look at the objectification of violence shows that it is not enough to refer to the third party's role in acts of violence. In the triads of violence, there is no immediacy between perpetrators, victims and observers. Instead, these actors only relate to each other through communicative actions and the objectifications involved. The third party may be a constitutive element in the social dynamic for violence. However, its constituent function and how it reacts to the violence observed only emerge based on the objectifications of violence. It enormously matters *how* violence is perceived to understand how it affects society.

Communicative Action and the Relationality of Violence

Communicative Constructivism is a *relational* social theory. This approach's centre is no longer the individual subject. Instead, two subjects are focused, who act, relate and experience through something third. This third are the previous mentioned objectifications. Within this triangular constellation ('subject-objectification-subject'), the subjective meaning is externalized and made perceptible to the other as objectification. This is the characteristic of the core concept in Communicative Constructivism, more precisely: *communicative action*.[13] It is a reciprocal action that involves the materiality of communication. Perpetrators, victims and third parties are always bound to material aspects in their interactions and mutual observations, for example, the construction and weight of a weapon, the toughness of the bulletproof vests, the structure of the torture devices and the existence of possible barricades, houses or objects behind which one can seek refuge from armed opponents. The material aspects thus have an essential influence on phenomena of violence. Communicative action relates to others, to the embodied subject and finally to the objectifications

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[13] The concept of communicative action was largely shaped in sociology by Habermas (1984; 1987). In his remarks, however, communicative action predominantly relates to the speech act, while Communicative Constructivism also considers the material dimension of action. In this way, the term communicative action also relates to "linguistically weak" situations. In contrast to Habermas's theory, this also sheds light on the role of images and diagrams in communicative action. In addition, Habermas differentiates between teleological-instrumental action and communicative action, between system and lifeworld. This distinction cannot be upheld empirically and is resolved within Communicative Constructivism (Knoblauch, 2020: 55–72). The validity claims to which Habermas ties communicative action are carried along in Communicative Constructivism. However, they are not in the focus of this theory.

associated with it, which the participants perceive as part of the common environment (Knoblauch, 2020: 55–72).

In communicative action, it is not only the subjects by whom the world is constructed. Instead, communication is based on objectifications, through which, as Reichertz (2013: 51, my translation) shows, 'people create themselves, others and their world and pass it on to others again and again'. This theoretical structure counteracts subjectivism. As a result, the reality of violence is no longer exclusive 'in the eye of the beholder,' as in the case of the approach by Koloma Beck (2011). It also depends on the communicative actions taking place. This also includes the terms used to describe violence, as Koloma Beck emphasizes, as well as physical, performative and material aspects. For example, loud or suppressed screams, pools of blood, grinning or disgusted facial expressions of the perpetrators, the weapons used, remaining cartridge cases or severed body parts have an influence on how violence is interpreted meaningfully by the third party, but also by the perpetrators and victims; be it in the violent situation or afterwards. The reality of violence is the result of subjective consciousness and lies in the communicative processes within the triad of violence. For this reason, perpetrators, victims and third parties cannot be described as 'modes of experiencing violent interaction' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 349–351), but rather as *modes of action* (Coenen & Tuma, in press).

Understanding violence as communicative action opens the eye to the reciprocity and performativity of the actors involved. Because, as Schütz (1962) puts it, the 'interchangeability of perspectives' forms the core of the sociality of communicative action (Knoblauch, 2020: 72–84). There is a mutual assumption that perpetrators, victims, and third parties would have the same experience of the common world if they changed places in terms of violence-related communication. This can also be described with Mead's (1934) concept of 'taking the role of the other' or 'taking the attitude of the other'. It is about the actors in the triad of violence anticipating the other participants' actions that form the reaction to their actions. We design our action in such a way that we receive a corresponding, expected reaction. An example is the assumption of roles by terrorist perpetrators who do not merely use violence based on instinct but anticipate different 'reaction types'. In this case, the expected reactions of the victims, the politicians, the mass media and the terrorist's group are thought through by the perpetrator and are reflected in his or her actions.

Due to the reciprocity in communicative action, the objectifications of violence have a special meaning. Because they are necessary for the involved actors to empathize with each other. This applies both to the reciprocal effect between the perpetrator and the victim and communication aimed at a third party. The characteristic of reciprocity in violent situations is that the participants try to build an asymmetry. It should be made difficult for the opponent to empathize with others to gain a *communicative advantage* in a violent situation. Faked punches, snipers and drone strikes are examples of how one party can gain an advantage by preventing their victim from taking their perspective.[14]

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[14] The development of this asymmetry is superfluous within a dispositif of torture in which the victim is handed over to the perpetrator and the 'success' of the violence appears to be assured.

We also come across Koloma Beck's idea that the third party's observation is open to manipulation. However, the focus is less on 'discursive manipulation' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 353), i.e., which terms are used and the intention the manipulation takes place or how the observer receives it. Instead, the focus is on *the precise form of violence-related communication* – not only on a linguistic-discursive level but above all on a physical, material and performative level.

Perpetrators who want to manipulate the perception of their violent actions by third parties can in no way just try to legitimize the violence by using weakening terms. The objectifications of violence can also achieve a manipulating, sometimes obscuring effect through non-verbal, above all physical, material and performative aspects. One example is the use of silencers, which reduce the shot's volume as a signal of an act of violence. Alternatively, when violent criminals hold their hands or a pillow in front of their victims' mouths so that their cries are suppressed; making it difficult to perceive suffering situationally. However, this also includes the subsequent cover-up removal of objectifications of violence, such as burying a killed body, wiping away traces of blood, or destroying entire building complexes in which there was mass murder.

Also, victims not only have language at their disposal to point out or even exaggerate violence in 'staging suffering' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 353). Instead, they can fall back on an extensive physical, material and performative repertoire. Tears, scars and severed limbs are physical objectifications of violence and can indicate the suffering experienced. Grave fields, destroyed homes and hospitals, bomb craters, and torture tools can testify that violence has taken place materially. Screams and lamentations, fearful postures, panicked flight, and the pain-distorted grip on wounded parts of the body and protests can illustrate the extent of the violence. The suffering of Abu Ghraib, for example, could be covered up as long as no objectifications of the violence reached third parties.[15] Nevertheless, the published photo recordings provided strong evidence of the violence through which the violent actions in Abu Ghraib could subsequently be uncovered. In contrast, in other cases, false impressions of the experience of suffering can arise, if supposed evidence is produced that has nothing to do with the situation of violence, or if the victims are 'overacting' by pretending, for example, pain symptoms that they do not have.

Highlighting the communicative action also emphasizes – and this is all too rarely considered in the sociology of violence – that third parties can carry out a sheer mass of 'turns' and 'moves' relevant to discourse. These actions not only (de-)legitimize violence against the perpetrators and victims but also report to fourth and fifth that violence has taken place and provide a corresponding assessment. Examples are war photographers who create objectifications by shooting bombings and killings that vividly document the violence. Nevertheless, they can also be cameramen who belong to the group of perpetrators and, for example, record the executions of IS hostages without carrying out the acts of violence themselves. In both cases, the images

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[15] As already noted, sociological analyzes of violence would have to refer to third parties to be labelled as sociological. However, this does not mean that sociologists cannot understand covert violence. Although this type of violence is not observed by third parties, the perpetrators and victims relate to norms for which, as already explained, the third party is constitutive.

are sent to press agencies and mass media institutions, who evaluate and select them and then pass them on to the public. Only through the third parties' communicative action, it becomes clear what their constitutive function consists of. They not only serve to discursively (de-)legitimize violence against perpetrators and victims but are also mediators to the public. In this way, they enable an institutional and structure-forming effect of violence beyond the situation. Through the communication of violence by third parties, a knowledge of violence is constituted, a socially mediated sense that relates not only to the practice of mediation but also to the solidified and permanent objectifications. The observed phenomenon of violence is translated into conventionalized sign systems and material 'cultural objects' (memorials, protest banners, clothing, barricades, books, etc.). By sedimenting the meaning of violent acts into knowledge, social structures and institutions can also change. For example, since cars are used as terrorist weapons, road barriers are suddenly built at popular festivals based on the knowledge that emerges from the assaults. Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks led to a 'war on terror' and enormous changes in air traffic institutions; from the question of what passengers are allowed to take on board to the extensive security measures at the airport. Thus, the communicative action in which the knowledge of violence is expressed form a key to understanding the connection between micro and macro phenomena of violence, between interactions, institutions and structures. Society consists of the continuation of communication over time and is thus shaped by communicative action and the corresponding externalizations of subjective meaning (Knoblauch, 2020: 134 ff.). Communicative actions and their objectifications can outlast the situation of violence and, therefore, impact the widespread institutions and social structures.

Conclusion: Methodological and Theoretical Implications of a Communicative-Constructivist Approach to Violence

What methodological and research-program-related consequences result from a turn of violence research towards communicative action, objectification, and knowledge of violence? Looking at violence from the perspective of Communicative Constructivism highlights the communicative processes within the situation and the triad of violence. However, it is not just a question of which actions are carried out process-analytically. Instead, the *knowledge of violence* is of interest (Coenen, 2021); more precisely: not the knowledge of individual actors but *how it is constituted by communicative action*. This focus enables a highly context-sensitive analysis of violence and a look at how violence becomes efficacious beyond the situation.

However, since socio-theoretical assumptions and methods are closely linked, refer to each other and enter into 'elective affinities' (Schütz, 1996; Hirschauer et al., 2008), this knowledge of violence, the objectification of violence and the communicative action associated with it cannot be researched in any way. From this perspective, there are specific methodological consequences. First of all, Communicative Constructivism is connected with the situation; however, not in such a radical step, as Collins (2008) hiding any context and only observing the action sequences. Instead, the situation of violence is still embedded in the common stock of knowledge, insti-

tutions, and discourses, which are efficacious in the situation and the inter- as well as trans-situative integration of violence-related communication. For this reason, a situation analysis in the sense of Clarke (2005; Clarke & Charmaz, 2014) seems more appropriate. This approach links discourse and violence, communicative action and structure, artefacts, images and documents, and the historical dimensions of the violence phenomena.

Also, due to the theoretical de-centring of the subject, those data types that can be used above all to reconstruct the subjectively intended meaning take a back seat. This applies especially to interviews, which cannot provide insight into how the sequence of actions went in a violent situation. Interviews only illustrate how the interviewee reconstructs violent acts in another situation – namely the interview situation – and subsequently charges them with meaning. Data collection through diaries or other instruments, through which violent situations are subsequently meaningfully interpreted, are also less lucrative sources of knowledge.

Instead, the researchers have to look at the types of data that make the precise form of communicative actions in a violent situation and the triad of violence observable. It is about being able to analyze relationality and objectifications in their situation. Thus, the methods of videography (Knoblauch et al., 2015), video hermeneutics (Raab & Tänzler, 2006) and visual sociology (Harper, 2012; Margolis & Zunjarwad, 2017) come into consideration. Because video recordings and photographs can be used to examine the physical processes and the material aspects of violent action sequences in detail. These data types are the least to distort the action that impacted the situation of violence and the triad of violence by a subjectively intended meaning. Besides, there is an analytical work directly on the individual objectifications, which means that the artefact analysis method (Froschauer & Lueger, 2016) also comes into consideration. For example, the materiality of violence can also be used to analyze the knowledge, physical knowledge, and normative value attachments used in the communication of violence. Finally, an ethnographic exploration of the triads of violence is advantageous because it allows the researcher to experience violence-related action in the actual context. Thereby, the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) should focus primarily on the communicative processes.

In terms of research programs, the investigation of communicative acts, objectifications and knowledge of violence aims, roughly divided, at three different types of violence-related situations. First, the communicative action in violent situations themselves comes into focus. Corresponding situation analysis can allow conclusions about the impact of objectifications on the dynamics of violence, the unique features of reciprocity between perpetrators and victims, and to what extent violence can even be understood as communicative action.

Secondly, those objectifications and communicative processes should also be investigated, which make acts of violence inter- and trans-situative observable and impart the knowledge of the violence taking place to a third party. This is about those communicative aspects that open up the triad of violence in the first place and that constitute the phenomenon of violence as a genuinely sociological object. It is of interest how objectifications and communicative actions constitute the perceptions, judgments and (de-)legitimation of a violent situation in the communicatively following situations. It is also decisive here that further objectifications are generated,

which are passed on to other actors and can initiate a change in society's institutions and structures, be it through the Internet, the mass media, orality or any other medium.

Thirdly, those situations should also be examined in which the knowledge of violence that has occurred is (de-)constructed through a strategic approach to the objectifications. On the one hand, this affects the numerous possibilities for concealing an act of violence through the use of specific weapons, by outsourcing fighting to locations that are difficult to access, or by subsequent manipulation or removal of treacherous traces. On the other hand, this also applies to activities from the forensic, journalistic and scientific areas, in which objectifications are sought that can bear witness to an act of violence.

Besides, the relationship between Communicative Constructivism and the sociology of violence should not be a one-way road. After all, Communicative Constructivism is a theory in process and, therefore, open to impulses from other theories, approaches and empirical insights. It can also learn something from the sociology of violence. First of all, this includes the question of the extent to which reality is a construction. Communicative constructivists have shown a concerted effort to illustrate that communicative actions shape reality. Nevertheless, it is precisely the bodily dimension of violence that is a borderline case of construction. The phenomenologists of violence (Nedelmann, 1997; Sofsky, 1996, 1997b, von Trotha, 1997) have shown that violence is highly related to the infliction and suffering of pain. In situations in which people are beaten, shot at or killed, communicative action can influence the meaning of these actions. But for the victims who suffer agony or even die, the violence also remains a bodily experience. Furthermore, the context-sensitivity demanded by the sociology of violence illustrates the constructivist tendency within the triad of violence. But at the same time, it becomes clear that Communicative Constructivism has to turn more to language again. Violence and its legitimation are highly performative. Nonetheless, language plays a crucial role and cannot simply be pushed into the background. Instead, it should be given as much theoretical and empirical attention as physical performance. Also, many acts of violence are meaningful. Nevertheless, there is violence that the victims and the observers experience as senseless (Bonacker, 2002). This dissolution of violence into senselessness is an additional challenge to Communicative Constructivism, which is based on meaningful action. The sociology of violence can, therefore, help to stress the limits of Communicative Constructivism.

Building on the previous considerations on the triad of violence and the additions of Communicative Constructivism, violence can still be described as a developing dynamic in a triangle between perpetrators, victims and third parties. However, it is not enough to determine this constellation to examine violence from a sociological perspective. Instead, the communicative actions between the triangulating actors must be focused. Every phenomenon of violence is characterized by specific physical, material and performative characteristics that have an immense influence on the dynamics of violence-related communication. The objectifications of violence are essentially involved in establishing meaning and judgment. It is only through them that violence can develop its structuring effects on society. Only through them can a political dimension be added to violence. Moreover, only through them can violence

take place at all and become observable for third parties, such as spectators, helpers, judges, journalists, or sociologists. This emphasizes that a context-sensitive social theory of violence should not, as before, focus on the perpetrators, victims and third parties but *the communicative actions and the objectifications within this triad of violence*.

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