

Chapter 19

Taking a Beating: The Narrative Gratifications of Fighting as an Underdog

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Introduction: culture, criminology, and brawling in Tucson

'How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?', Tyler Durden ponders in the movie *Fight Club*. Persistent, real life fighters also ask themselves this question. From their perspective fights are contexts for deep self-revelation. Two complementary thrills of revelation reward a successful fighter. The first thrill is to discover a charismatic primal self through physical and emotional urgency: fundamentally acute, courageous, and of 'strong character' (Goffman 1967). The second thrill is to realise a storied self: a self that will become publicly and enduringly admired, immortalised in epic fight stories told for years to come. In fact, fighters fantasise as much about telling stories as actually fighting. For example, one of my research subjects, Rick, once told me about a new post in the military: 'Sometimes I want to get in a fight on my new ship ... Like, I think about how it would be cool if I got in a fight with some really big guy and I won. So that people would like talk about me and stuff.'

Goffman noted that fateful forms of action have 'reputational consequences'. For fighting and some other kinds of risk-taking, however, the statement could be made more forcibly. The consequentiality for one's reputation is no accident. In fact, the prospects of narrative risks and appeals – the prospects of generating stories that reflect negatively or positively – powerfully motivate violent conduct at each moment, often more so than the physical risks and appeals. Indeed, narrative consequences are often the *raison d'être* of risk.

Brawls are the most common type of fight enacted by the group of young men from Tucson, Arizona, reported on below. They are typically performed by groups of strangers in front of audiences, arising from verbal character contests, opening and closing in the same scene. The prospect of 'getting stomped' is made palatable to fighters by how they understand fighting. Most importantly, physical risks (which are almost always non-lethal, non-disabling and non-disfiguring) and appeals are used as resources for constructing narrative ones. A fighter's true self, as they see it, can only be apprehended through trial by ordeal. Until a fight happens, fighters cannot be sure if they will be heroes or cowards 'when it comes down to it'. Thus, they measure the value of the violent test as proportionate to its physical fatefulness and urgency. Only by performing with immediate action and composure can they cast the self as brave, loyal and heroic. Recalling Goffman (1967: 216) again: 'the sudden high cost of correct behavior may serve only to confirm his principledness.'

Western scholarly theories treat violence as repellent and horrifying, despite the enormous attractive potential it holds for violent actors themselves, not to mention the broader cultures they live in. Major theories of violence almost always rely on one or more of a very few basic ideas. One holds that violent actors lack psychic 'self-control' (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Another sees violence as simply a way of managing conflicts that exist independently of their climactic end results and could

be counselled away with more civil ways (Black 1983). Yet others maintain that violent people are so frustrated with one thing or another that eruption is all but inevitable (Freud 1930). All patently fail to account for violence looked at in the context of spectatorship, performance, and participatory attractions.

As foreign as brawling as an underdog is to many non-fighters, appreciating the activity is not. In popular narratives – historical and contemporary – numerous glorious underdog characters abound, from the biblical story of David slaying Goliath, to Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky*. Fighters appreciate their own violence in much the same way that witnesses do, appreciating their self-as-object, admiring themselves as if observing from a distance. Fighters intend their brawls to make good stories that reveal themselves as charismatic. And so they enact storylines that they expect will both test their character and be applauded by audiences.

From the field to a theory of brawling

As Morrison and others note, much criminology lacks sensitivity to motivation, desire, and actors' own understandings of what they are doing (1995; Hayward 2004). In my research I drew from symbolic interactionist and phenomenological sociologies – descriptive approaches that, along with a comparative perspective, lend themselves to situated explanations of why people do crime, act violently, or take risks (eg Katz 1988, 2002; Luckenbill 1977; Lyng 1990; Marsh *et al* 1978).

In December 1999 I returned to my home city of Tucson in the southwestern United States. I rekindled old friendships with young men from one of its more affluent neighbourhoods who I knew 'liked to party' and who would sometimes get into fights; they had other friends with tough reputations. Tape-recorder in hand, I constructed my sample by following the lines of acquaintanceship in the network of friends, interviewing whoever was regularly hanging out in the group. The sample includes 85 members. They are mostly white, though a few define themselves as Latino, Mexican, Native American, or Indian. The majority grew up in economically comfortable families. Some lead criminal lifestyles, others are college students, and still others are skilled labourers or unskilled office workers.

The network is organised primarily around male friendships. The women who regularly hang out are current and former girlfriends and their friends. Most of the women in the network have been in one or more physical fights, including one brawl involving six women and two men that I observed to be as violent as many all-male brawls. Unlike the men, however, the women invest much less of their sense of self in their fighting histories. The men's fighting histories are often central to how they define each other and their peer group. Performing well in a brawl is a sure way to construct themselves as 'men of action' in each other's minds. The rare male members of the network without fighting histories are considered either partially deficient or untested.

In this chapter, I focus mainly on one character, Rick (all names fictional), in order to trace the experience of participation in a brawl as it progresses. Rick, 20 years old at the time, is tall and athletically built – six-foot-three, 200 pounds. He competed in martial arts tournaments regularly as a youth. Waist-high trophies and a black belt adorn his bedroom. He is well liked for his frequent and hearty laughter, quick sense of humour, and knack for putting anyone at ease. Though he joined the military and moved to California at the age of 18, he returned to Tucson at least once a month. Brian was one of several military buddies that would listen with envy as Rick related

fight stories from Tucson. He was less experienced than the Tucsonans but visited partly to gain experience. TJ grew up in the same neighbourhood as most of the friendship network, but attended a private school rather than the public high school. Of above-average height and lanky, he looks somewhat athletic, neatly dressing in fashionable, youthful styles. TJ is strikingly intelligent and good humoured. Although less outgoing than Rick, TJ wins acquaintances over with a cheerful openness. Socially skilful young men, they can also be equally offensive when motivated.

The description of the brawl below is based on interviews with TJ and Rick, a written account by James – all shortly after the fight – and brief conversations with Joe, Brian, Bob, and Aaron. To corroborate some details and fine-tune the description I took Rick back to the location of the brawl in March 2004, tape-recording as we walked through the scene. Credibility is a concern worth comment; the potential for embellishment or misremembering cannot be totally eliminated. Though I did not experience the fight firsthand, the process described seems strikingly similar to many other incidents I have witnessed whilst undertaking my research. Both the fight and this writing are public, discouraging the respondents from explicit deception. The accounts are similar enough on all important details that intentional or inadvertent misrepresentation is minimal.

The March 2000 brawl

All brawls done by the Tucson friends proceed through four stages. First, the key actors set the scene by going out into a public leisure place occupied by diverse strangers. Second, at least two strangers use situational resources to construct a character contest. Third, one or (usually) both sides violently attack the other. Fourth, each side re-groups and talks about the fight. What distinguished this as a specifically ‘underdog brawl’ was that Rick’s group knew they would be beaten yet committed to testing their character through violence anyway.

Setting the scene: ‘going out’

By far the modal setting for a brawl is the nighttime, weekend, drinking outing with a group of friends. Weekends are reserved for large outings of up to a dozen or more friends to a bar or to a house where someone is throwing a large party. The more people present, the better the chance that one or more of them will get into a fight with some stranger. Group outings of any size often begin with unspoken agreements that, as Leigh, a young woman put it, ‘we were gonna go out and get in a fight’. What kind of fight they will get into and what kind of story the fight may tell about the self (and about the group) remain unclear in important ways until the violence has been done. Those uncertainties, though, represent pervasive thrills in their leisure outings and during their attempts to stir up trouble.

The night in March 2000 started in the usual way. James, a friend from high school, had ‘heard about a party’ from ‘some girls’ he knew that lived near the university campus in Tucson. The announcement that ‘there’s a party’ usually comes only that evening. These young Tucsonans, and the local party culture at large, take this announcement as implicit permission to then invite anyone they know, in turn giving them the same permission. By 9 or 10 pm a hundred or more people, many of them complete strangers to each other, arrive at the house of someone they don’t

know, not quite sure what the party will be like, but hoping for excitement and action.

'James called us and told us there was a bunch of hot chicks ... So we were real happy about that,' Rick recalled. James didn't tell anyone much more than that, though. TJ remembered feeling 'unsure what it was going to be like ... The possibilities are that it could be just a few people hanging out, or it could be a huge party. Hopefully as many girls as possible'. Unlike many outings, Rick and TJ claimed that at first they weren't hoping for a fight, but for another type of action – casual sex. Brian, though, had violent trouble at the front of his mind, as soon became clear.

It was the kind of place where 'parties' used to go on every weekend when I was in my late teens and early twenties. Indeed, I had been to parties at that exact house before. Interestingly, it was not the kind of setting for violence usually written about in American studies. This was not 'The Ghetto' – there were no outward signs of social deprivation and certainly no apparent 'broken windows'! Instead, this was a well-kept college student neighbourhood, filled with the kind of one-storey, single-family brick homes, surrounded by front and back yards, typical of Tucson.

Rick recounted that, upon arrival:

I saw a bunch of people in the courtyard right there of that house ... It was just like, there was – they were playing music and stuff. And dude, there was like girls everywhere ... We paid for our cups. We were hittin' the keg ... And most of the time we were just out here at the courtyard just like drinking and stuff ... It was a great time. We were talking to girls and stuff. Just like shooting the shit with everybody.

TJ added that he and Rick soon started to hope for trouble (by Rick's account about an hour into the party): 'And – I'm not sure at what point – Brian said he wanted to get into a fight. He just said, "I want to get into a fight". And Rick was like, "Yeah, I kinda want to get in a fight too" ... So I was like, "Yeah I want to get in a fight too".'

Why the shift in sentiment? What about the party makes it seem like a viable place to pick a fight? What about it entices violent intentions?

The social organisational conditions are ripe for public troublemaking. Parties are understood to be moments of freedom from usual constraint, encouraging revelry, presenting a landscape of free-moving bodies and the pursuit of action. Parties provide a prospective audience and numerous strangers as potential opponents. In this culture at least, the brawl is intended to be a one-time affair, settled 'then and there' in a single course of (inter)action. By contrast, fights with friends and intimates often result in prolonged conflicts that damage relationships, or end in a series of apologies. Strangers entice by promising a non-committal relationship.

Invitations to action: situational disputes, rumblings of trouble

Once in the mindset to 'get in a fight', the would-be brawler must still find a willing opponent and initiate a dispute. But how does one go about finding an opponent amongst strangers? And, having picked one out, how does one go about getting into some kind of dispute, especially the kind that would lead to violence?

I asked TJ, 'What were you thinking about your prospects?':

Probably pretty likely given the attitude of Brian. I figured he'd probably start something. And he was making a good effort. He made some good tries. A couple times some people would be leaving, and so he'd just go stand in front of them and just stare at them. And they would just have to squeeze by him. That was the most subtle thing he did.

Hopeful brawlers tend also to wait for opportunities to present themselves. They hope someone will bump into them or insult them, meaning that fights happen much less frequently than they would like. TJ reported that 'these other guys were leaving. And as they were leaving, Brian just started throwing rocks at them ... But they just ignored him'. The success rate is low. If like-minded people happen to receive the invitation, then a brawl is a strong possibility, and this does work on occasion. But most people, themselves not so interested in fighting, simply dismiss these tactics.

As TJ went on to describe, certain people seem to almost call out to be challenged to a fight. People who would make good characters in a fight story especially attract attention. He recalled that 'a group of enormous people showed up. I don't think they were the group we got in a fight with. Maybe they were. They said they were University of Arizona football players. And Joe said he was trying to start a fight with them'.

Their attempts to start a fight – to put on a show for the party and create a narratively rich event to remember – were going nowhere. A couple of hours later TJ was feeling let down as the party dwindled. 'I was starting to think, you know, nothing's going to happen. It was past one [after which commercial sales of alcohol become illegal] ... And all the girls were leaving. It was mostly just guys. It was a lot of people. But there was no beer.' There would be no show, no self-revelations, and no fight story through which to proclaim spectacular identities.

Rick, though, saw the dwindling party in a different light. Just as two sources of action vanished another appeared:

And the keg was running out. And the girls started leaving. And I remember saying, 'Oh man, it's just us and those really big dudes!' I remember thinking that ... cause you know how like that's when always the trouble starts. Like I know there's gonna be trouble when the hot girls are leaving ... and all the beer's gone ... You know? And these guys looked like a bunch of steroid monsters anyway, though, so I knew it was only a matter of time before they started to get angry.

Then a sudden clamour came, the rumblings of a fight. TJ realised, 'suddenly there was this commotion outside the house down by the corner. So everyone runs out there. A bunch of random people. Like 20 or something'. He is drawn along with the other bodies in motion, intent on getting a glimpse of or getting involved in violence. For most of TJ's group it was pure spectatorship – for the moment at least. Rick, however, was keen to participate. As audience members vie for position, prospective fighters recognise without pause that if they 'jump in' there will be an attentive crowd watching. Rick gave me a 'show and tell' demonstration:

Well, we were out here in the courtyard, and Dukey [a former high school classmate] like ran back here or something. And then a whole bunch of people were talking like, 'Oh, there's gonna be a fight! They're gonna kick his ass! They're gonna kick his ass! Blah blah blah'. You know? So we we're like, 'Oh, sweet!' [With enthusiasm.] 'They're gonna beat up that guy!' Or we thought – I thought possibly, maybe, I'll try and like jump in since I know him, you know, and maybe defend him.

Note the indeterminacy in what exactly Rick expects to happen. From his account, Rick was excited that either Dukey will get beat up and he can watch, or, preferably, Dukey will get beat up and he can try to 'maybe defend him'.

Most explanations of violence and conflict in the social sciences presume that a much different causal model is universal. Regardless of the specific theory, they assume that people would fight only in order to resolve an independently existing conflict, either as a practical means of managing conflict or because of unmanageable

rage. For brawling, though, this explanation does not work. Rick was not enraged but, instead, enthused. Nor did he have any deep relationship to whatever conflict Dukey was embroiled in – not even by association. In fact, he hardly knew the man. ‘How well do you even know this guy?’, I asked. Rick explained, ‘I had a couple classes with him when I was like 14 or 15 [six years earlier] ... So for, basically, I don’t know, no real reason’.

Just as things started to ‘get interesting’, though, the trouble with Dukey fizzled out. He escaped the crowd of men pursuing him and sped away in his car. By that time, though, everyone was primed for a fight. TJ, Joe and Brian expected at a minimum to see some action. Rick was hoping to get in on some. Their heart rates and blood pressure still elevated from the excited sprint to the rear of the house, everyone lingered around the front yard and the street.

By then it seemed to TJ and his friends that everyone was ‘set on’ violence in some form. Their definition of the situation, including their perception of everyone present, had changed profoundly. ‘The steroid monsters’ were now proven violent in the eyes of Rick’s crowd. Looking through brawlers’ lenses, the big guys were starting to appear more and more like appealing characters to cast in a scene of dramatic violence.

The kind of fight Rick, TJ, Joe and their group could get into had remained unclear through most of the night: Would someone do something to morally outrage a member of the group, leading them to perform a righteous beating? Would one of them casually strike up a dispute during the night with an opponent, leading to a brawl experienced through the metaphor of a sexual ‘pick up’? The range of possibilities had narrowed. James noted early on that the opponents were ‘about 15–20 guys all over six feet and 200 pounds’. If a fight were to happen with those men, they would fight as underdogs. The only questions would be: how well would they take their beatings, what kind of character would they be able to claim for themselves, and what kind of story would they be able to tell in the future?

In this culture the disputes that constitute what Goffman called ‘character contests’ (Goffman 1967; Luckenbill 1977) are categorised as ‘talking shit’. Such disputes tell a story about two voluntary combatants, each willing to stand up for themselves and brave unpredictable action. The disputes themselves unfold over a number of turns of insult and counter-insult, challenge and counter-challenge. To the extent possible, the actor tries to construct his own participation as either that of someone unjustly affronted, or as an equal participant in a process of escalation. The identity developed is that of an aggrieved party, who is either the victim of unfair persecution or, at worst, no more than an equal participant in a two-way dispute (see also Gulliver 1973).

Playing up to the audience, skilful disputants find opportunities to develop novel variants on the standard script. Proper shit talking gives the fight memorable, ‘quotable’ narrative elements, allowing the fighter to both feel like and present himself as the kind of dramatic character who makes apt or cool remarks under pressure. In every case the fighter knows well that future stories about his fight will focus in detail on how and how well he ‘talked shit’.

Who, exactly, would start talking shit was not yet clear. TJ explained:

... by the time I got out there, there was a crowd of about 20 or 25 people watching ... And all these big guys were angry because they wanted to beat someone up ... They were standing around their car, saying stuff like, ‘That guy better get out of here’. And then they were looking around ...

Enter Brian. I had the chance to speak with him for only a few moments after the fight, but Rick, TJ and James reported that he took the initiative to stand in the street staring back at the 'big guys', one typical way of provoking a bout of shit talking.

TJ: they look over at Brian. And Brian's just standing there staring at them. And this big black guy starts walking toward him and said, 'What's your problem, dude?' And Brian takes a look at him, and takes a drag off his cigarette and flicks it at him ... 'I don't know, man. It looks like you're the one that's trippin'.

Though he had come off as rather juvenile and clearly ineffective in his rock-throwing stunt earlier that night, everyone was struck by his composed bravado in the face of numerous antagonists, many of whom probably outweighed him by close to 100 pounds. Brian's friends were especially impressed by his striking use of the cigarette. Rick made sure to act the scene out for me. Holding back a grin, Rick narrowed his eyes toward an imaginary person and flamboyantly extended his elbow to the side, bringing the cigarette to his lips. He took a drag ceremoniously, drawing hard and loud. 'Took a drag off his cigarette and went – [dramatic pause] – fffffff!' Rick exhaled long and slow, as if savouring what would possibly be his last puff of tobacco, extending his hand a foot in front of his face. As the forceful exhale began to wind down, Rick flicked the burning butt several yards at head-level in a straight line. He concluded the demonstration: 'And then like a whole bunch of them started swarming around Brian.'

Talking shit is an important moment in the process of brawling for several reasons. First, it restructures the public nature of the event. To begin with, it draws attention. Talking loudly, making threats and issuing challenges, the disputants make an irresistible public display of themselves. Witnesses feel compelled to focus on the argument, lest they miss the action or even receive unwelcome attention themselves. If no one tries to break up the fight, then typically the audience forms a circle or semi-circle, placing the fighters centre stage.

Second, talking shit is a commitment to a fateful gamble. By publicly taking the 'line' (Goffman 1967) of violently arguing, each disputant claims a steadfast character and commits himself to a course of action that will lead to violence. While still talking shit the actor maintains the ability to act reflectively, make decisions, and self-consciously manage his identity. Yet he is at the same time committing to a violent course of action in which he will sacrifice these capacities. The actor is claiming that he can perform not only with verbal composure and speed but also that he will be able to demonstrate strength of character by fighting with honour. The gamble is all the bolder due to the risk that once an opponent actually starts violently attacking he may show himself to be 'all talk' if he does not fight until he either wins or is totally incapacitated.

Strangely enough, although the shit-talker is deeply attentive to and concerned with how present and future audiences will interpret his action, the action itself demands that he become oblivious to the audience and future considerations. Much of the reason to talk shit, especially to add creative details like punctuating a quip by flicking a cigarette, is to impress the audience and to construct a self that will reflect positively in future stories. By making this verbal commitment, though, the shit-talker places himself in a relationship with his audience that becomes increasingly asymmetrical. The more involved one becomes in talking shit the more one must attend specifically to the risk posed by the opponent rather than the gratifications of audience appreciation.

Third, talking shit is social-psychologically essential to consummating violent conflict. To do violence, most people, including people who fight routinely, must

undergo what they experience as 'authentic' transformations to violent emotion. Often the actor 'wants to' get into a fight, but does not have the proper bodily disposition or emotional energy to summon a violent outburst. Gesturing wildly, flicking cigarettes, and often shoving, fighters begin to work their bodies up, feeling increasingly imposing. Simply reciting a script of fighting words often helps to conjure the necessary emotions. By going through the motions of saying 'What the fuck are you looking at?' or 'What's your problem?', fighters can summon a certain amount of rage, even if there is no 'objective', independently existing conflict to get angry about. Furthermore, for the fighter, delivering an insult has the effect of inspiring a self-defensive fear: by provoking the opponent's rage, one provokes in oneself a violent readiness to defend against that rage.

Fourth, talking shit to an opponent may be, counter-intuitively, a way of constructing the self as the victim. One way this can happen is by inspiring the opponent to retaliate with massive verbal escalation. Another is by encouraging the opponent to throw the first punch, thus creating a sense that one is only 'fighting back', potentially absolving one of the moral culpability of an 'attack'. In fact, many fighters prefer to be struck first, for just that reason.

The climax: transforming the event to violent chaos

This was almost certainly going to be a 'losing battle' in the purely physical sense. Yet there was still the potential for a narrative victory.

Rick had borrowed a small knife from Aaron a few minutes earlier when Dukey was being chased, and now was fingering it in his pocket with anticipation. TJ was watching in admiring disbelief as Brian actually stood up to opponents that were 'like three times his size'. For a brief few seconds Brian had become a spectacle, centring attention around himself in the service of his group's project to 'get into a fight' and his project to cast himself as a courageous character. Almost always one member of the group gets himself overwhelmed, sacrificing his body on the faith that the others will also sacrifice themselves attempting to 'save' him. Rick continued, 'they just like rushed at him ... A guy punched him and he went down instantly. Like, he didn't even get one good punch in'.

One of the most pressing narrative risks in this scenario is failing to act quickly, that is, being too cautious of the physical dangers, thus risking cowardice. An intimidating opponent stopped Rick in his tracks for a brief moment before he made it to the crowd piling on Brian. He was confronted with both a physical and a narrative threat. The latter became especially troublesome when he hesitated. After holding his hands up to suggest, 'I come in peace', he strategically was able to rush past the first opponent toward Brian, though someone soon struck him on the head knocking him to the ground. Suddenly he had to worry about himself – abandoning his demonstration of loyalty.

The first few moments of a brawl take on disproportionate magnitude, since the fighters know they may have only seconds to define their own participation. Joe managed the risks well, immediately charging into the midst of the crowd surrounding Brian. For a moment Rick caught a glimpse of him throwing punches wildly at everyone he could. Almost as quickly as Brian, though, Joe was also pounded to the ground and kicked and punched repeatedly as he lay bleeding on the pavement.

Rick regained his footing, but remained in a precarious position. Brian and Joe had committed themselves to violent entanglements with much larger opponents.

Rick, however, was still on the periphery of the brawl. He found a moment, though, to gather his composure when the attention shifted away from him:

And there was like four or five guys behind me. More guys coming out of the house. And probably like ten guys over here [beating up Brian] – ... I pulled out the knife, and I just started *talking shit*, dude, as loud as I could. And screaming and telling them to get off Brian or else I was gonna stab them, you know? ... And they all just started running at me ... And I remember thinking, 'Oh shit, there's no way that I can take on like fifteen guys'.

TJ saw this as reminiscent of another frequently recounted underdog brawl: 'Then Rick ran over and pulled out this knife and started talking shit, just like the time he saved Chad's life.' Though Rick had paused at first, he redeemed himself at least for that moment, leaping into a familiar and deeply storied identity as 'saviour'. If one fails to make the important commitments during a moment of panic, then redemption is possible by re-committing oneself to violence in a later moment of reflective planning.

TJ began running to Rick's aid when the crowd 'readjusted their focus on him instead of Brian'. Whereas Rick felt reluctant at first, TJ felt drawn in by the enormity of the situation. Years of talking and symbolically imbuing brawls with an enticing aura paid off. Rather than experience the flock of violent men as dangerous and repellent, TJ felt their threat and Rick's vulnerability as a siren call to action:

It wasn't that I was afraid ... I think I was actually kind of excited. Like, 'Okay, it's really gonna happen!' I didn't think about the fact that we were probably going to get annihilated. So I started going over. I thought we weren't going to have any chance if we were all split up, so I started going over by Rick.

Indeed, TJ seems to have been so excited that he did not recognise this brawl as an underdog one at that point. The underdog side depends on having at least one or two members who react like TJ did, overjoyed to finally get the opportunity they've been waiting for throughout that night and many others. Before he made it to Rick, though, TJ was also struck from behind. He was stormed over by the mob of pursuing attackers, soon unable to stand up. Even in the midst of the furor, though, he attended to narrative qualities of what was happening. From a purely practical standpoint, it would probably be most wise to simply assume the fetal position from the moment he was knocked down. Yet one risk is to fail to put up some form of violent resistance, or in the extreme, to construct oneself simply as a masochist in it only for the beating. Instead, TJ kicked out wildly for several seconds landing several blows, no doubt with little effect besides furthering his opponents' fury. TJ continued to be kicked in the head and the rest of his body. Having made a respectable effort and beginning to fear for his life he then elected to take the practical course of action: curl up defensively. Preferring not to come off as sadistic, those who share this culture of party fighting tend to stop their beatings soon after establishing clear physical domination (except in cases of deep moral outrage). Having reduced TJ to the fetal position, it would have been sheer perversion to beat him further.

During this Rick was running across the park ahead of TJ, and then down the street 'at a full sprint':

thinking they're right on my heels, you know? And I got to right about here, up here in the middle of the street, past the car. And that's when I noticed that no one was following me anymore. And I turned around and that's when I saw TJ ... Getting kicked. I realised that no one was following me anymore.

Again, Rick found himself in a more threatening position than TJ, Brian or Joe. They had all by that time been overwhelmed and kicked into the fetal position. The

possibility was growing that the 'steroid monsters' would begin to feel satisfied with their victory. If he suffered no injury or saw no real action the shame and disappointment would surely be preserved in his own and the group's memory. His options were narrowing. He would have to get beat up – badly.

Rick made a dash back toward the park where TJ was being stomped, 'screaming and waving my arms' again:

And then probably like four or five guys saw me and turned around and started bolting at me. And then I started running again this way ... There was one who was catching up to me. And he picked up one of these fucking boulders right here [a softball-sized river rock] ... and said he was gonna smash me with it.

Too 'scared' to fight the opponent who was larger than he was and armed with a rock, Rick continued a narratively risky course of action. Sooner or later he was going to have to turn around and take a beating. Finally crouching behind a ten-foot-tall juniper tree, he demonstrated to me what he did when his opponent rounded the corner:

And then he comes running dude, like full force ... I jumped out and I went, 'Ahraaa!' And then I went like this [showing me a continuous series of kicks and punches, the knife protruding from the bottom of one fist, used to slash his opponent's forearms] ... And he goes, 'Naa-aaa-na'. [In a whimpering tone, as he crumples submissively toward the ground.]

Rick had, in that moment, drastically transformed his role in the event. Whether he had run away out of cowardice or to strategise became unimportant. It worked. He had won the only victory in the fight, beating and slashing one opponent to the ground. The fight was about to continue: 'I hear, "Pat-pt-pt-pt-pt" [patting his palms in the air like running feet] ... And coming down the street are all his buddies. So I go, "Oh shit!" And I turn around and I kept on running.'

Rick's luck soon ran out. The rest of his adversaries gained ground. Finally he found a wall and backed up against it to make his 'last stand'. Rick at last made a commitment that ensured his risky moments of running away would be outweighed by a final beating. They knocked him to the ground, where they kicked him until he was covered in blood, leaving him to crawl along the sidewalk in search of help.

He had encouraged Brian – promising, in effect, to back him up – and drawn TJ in. Yet he had 'run away' several times. Complicating things further, Rick was the largest of the group and a trained fighter. In fact, he was the only one who was even close to the same height and weight as their opponents. The risk had become massive, especially since Rick spent much of the fight running around 'strategising'. Had the strategy failed completely, he would have come out of the fight looking much different. But his strategy seemed up to that point to have worked. Of course, for the final rewards he would have to wait until the chaotic scene was reordered.

The denouement: reordering the chaotic scene

What happens during the fight does not automatically dictate what sense will be made of that fight – what kinds of selves they will be able to construct. The first moments after a fight are always uncertain ones. Would anyone, for example, think Rick acted bravely? Would they chastise him for running away? Given that four members of the group ended up on the ground being kicked repeatedly by groups of much larger men, that each had experienced the violence from a different

perspective, and that they did not completely 'stick together', how would they find gratification in this defeat? How would they reorder the scene?

After a group brawl the participants on each side almost invariably regroup as soon as possible to talk excitedly about what has just happened. Whereas the fighters blur each other's perception of group boundaries and blur the details of the narrative sequence in the swirl of running and punching, they re-establish them in talk, regrouping in a different sense. Once the dust has settled they are able to reflect on what has just happened. If everything has gone well, the fighters begin to realise that the selves they have fantasised about have become a reality. They thrill at what the fight has revealed: that individually and collectively they have acted with courage, daring, and loyalty; and that these characteristics of the self and the group will be public and enduring. If the fight went well, each recognises that all made a personal sacrifice. They quickly become aware that 'this is one for the books'.

After this fight, though, the reordering first meant picking up the wounded, in particular Rick. 'By this time,' James explained, 'all the guys had run away and Rick was missing in action.' Once the remainder of the group had picked themselves up off the ground, they drove around calling out Rick's name. In the meantime he had crawled along a sidewalk about two blocks north of where they had first parked, until he recovered enough to stand. He walked to a house where a 'get-together' was in progress and politely asked to use the telephone.

TJ received the phone call. They drove two blocks to pick up Rick, who was painted in the evidence of a proper performance: 'just covered in blood', TJ described it. 'From his head - Just the whole side of his head, his shirt, the side of his pants. He was just soaked in blood.'

How was everyone reacting, I asked TJ, especially Rick:

He was like euphoric it seemed like. Like silly kind of. Like happy silly ... We get out of the car when we get back to my apartment, and Rick walks up to this car and starts humping it. He just starts grinding his pelvis into it ... He was just like 'Ooh, yeah!' Like that's an expression of how he felt.

By the end of the night they had achieved the final product, the major incentive to fight: a dramatic fight story that will endure for years, retold to impress others of their daring selves, and to conjure both individual accomplishments and a sense of deep solidarity. The fighters walk away with battered bodies. But injuries heal and disputes are forgotten. The stories are not: they will be retold, remembered and cherished for years. The narrative becomes a permanent fixture of the fighter's biography.

Their enthusiasm continued through the next day, as TJ explained. 'The next day was kind of celebratory. We all got together pretty early and had some beers at my apartment in the afternoon ... It wasn't like celebration. But we basically talked about the fight for the next 36 hours.'

Aaron and Bob had failed to participate. They had some excuses: Aaron didn't see it because he was too drunk and Bob was talking to a girl inside. The others gripped once or twice but let it go. James was absolved of any moral failure, simply because he 'does not fight', and also because he did help TJ get off the ground at one point. In any case, TJ, Rick, Joe and Brian spent little time focusing on who failed to participate. From the fighters' perspective it was their loss. Indeed it was: Aaron and Bob missed out on the thrill of having revealed the self as steadfast and heroic, and they were left out of the story that has been told countless times since.

Rick felt that the fight was a victory of sorts.

I figure we kind of won, in a way. Because I fucked one of them up real bad. And I'm pretty sure I broke that other guy's nose. And Joe broke his hand on the big black guy's face. He said he hit him in the mouth, so he probably hurt that guy. We got hurt worse than them, but none of us even had to go to the hospital. And TJ only got black eyes. If our friends had beat people up with those odds they would have been hurt a lot worse. So I figure we won that fight.

TJ provided the moral of the story, in terms of what it revealed about himself in relation to other, imaginary, future brawling scenarios: 'I think it was good that we fought those guys, though. Because now I'm not afraid to fight really big guys anymore, because they didn't really hurt me.'

Conclusion: where to go next?

One of cultural criminology's aims is to understand similarities and differences across motivations to do various kinds of troublemaking, risk-taking, and thrill seeking. So far the field has paid special attention to a few close studies, including Lyng's (1990) research on the thrills of 'edgework' among skydivers and Katz's (1988) descriptions of interaction, emotion and bodily experience in several varieties of crime. Citing those studies, later writing has focused mostly on similarities common to almost all crime: it is organised in interaction; it is marked by intense emotional and bodily sensuality; and it presents fateful threats to the self. It is important, though, also to attend to differences in criminal motivations. Those general findings can also be understood to point out dimensions along which all crime varies, and where to look in order to document varieties of criminal experience (see also Katz 2002). Because the interactional, sensual and fateful dimensions of crime apply so generally, cultural understandings could benefit from using them to guide investigation, document variety, and analyse comparatively. From Lyng we learn that 'edgework' involves tempting fate, defying nature's power, and situating skill in moments of extreme risk; from Katz we see that crime is diversely motivated by 'righteous', 'sneaky' and 'bad' sensualities. The particular social organisation, sensuality, and thrill of brawling are further variations.

Brawls are initiated by a loosely structured *pick-up*. Other common forms of interpersonal violence are specific to domestic settings, involve intimates or acquaintances, and are designedly coercive. In many ways brawls resemble casual sex more than enraged assaults. Brawlers go out and mix in with an anonymous swarm of urban or suburban partygoers, looking hopefully for receptive partners, teasing each other by talking shit, embracing in brawl, and finally separating, never to see each other again. Indeed 'getting in a fight' and 'getting laid' are the reasons these men give for what they hope to get from going to bars and parties.

The sensuality of the event is *ritualised urgency*. Although the pick-up follows certain ritual sequences, the chances of moving from each step to the next are low. Each time the brawler gets a step closer to physical blows his anticipation heightens until his emotion transforms to an authentically violent one. When a crisis point arrives and the brawlers attack each other, the situation begins to resemble non-planned emergencies. The brawler must suddenly deploy his body at pace and with an intensity exceeding anything experienced in ordinary daily routines. Reflective thought becomes difficult or impossible. There are no timeouts, as in 'sneaky thrills' like shoplifting (Katz 1988). Unlike people racing cars or motorcycles, brawlers

expect some degree of non-lethal physical damage in every event – indeed, they often relish it.

Brawlers pursue thrills by managing competing *narrative gratifications and narrative threats*. Physical sensation may be the ultimate aim for skydivers and the like (as Lyng (1990) notes, such protagonists very often actually prefer *not* to describe the feeling), but brawlers use bodily appeals and risks – compelling as they are during battle – as resources for a more enduring project (see Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2001). Sensual urgency in the moment allows the brawler to look back, after the fact, into regions of the self that are ordinarily invisible. Until the fight happens he does not know if he has what it takes to do the right thing. He thrills at having revealed deep strength of character, seeing it in himself and presenting it to others through the narrative structure of a brawl.

Several tentative hypotheses relevant to cultural criminology are worth considering. First, brawls like the one described may happen only in affluent leisure cultures, where population is concentrated enough but also mobile enough to continually bring new batches of strangers together. Second, brawling may depend on notions of masculinity that encourage fleeting, emotionally distant relationships. The pursuit of urgency in leisure may be a way to negate stifling restrictions on bodily conduct and emotionality in contemporary suburban American culture, or perhaps a way to salvage a sense of personal control in a life that makes the individual feel insignificant. Third, brawling as storied action may be explained partly in relation to mass-mediated entertainment. Television and cinema demonstrate generally how to achieve a charismatic self through publicly witnessed narrative events. Further, they provide specific frames of reference to explain and construct behaviour, showing ways to be the kind of character who achieves notoriety and celebrity.

A central argument in cultural criminology's programme is that crime, violence and risk are organised and experienced differently in late-modern consumer cultures than they were before the mid-20th century and in other cultural milieus (see Hayward 2004). Although some of cultural criminology's texts are historically attentive, developing more detailed comparisons of criminality across historical epochs is critical. Ways of fighting certainly vary over time; some kinds of fighting are now lost to history, including, mercifully, the Appalachian-style gouging matches of the 19th century (Gorn 1985). Perhaps the sort of brawling described here retains something of past violence; perhaps it reflects something of consumer culture's odd permutations; and perhaps it too will one day be lost to history. Through further comparative and historical analyses it may be possible to decide exactly what about contemporary crime is new and what is enduring.

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