To Strike Together: Conflict Rituals and the Situational Power of Nonviolence

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Abstract

What is conflictual interaction? How does it differ from domination? And how can domination and violence be disrupted by nonviolent direct action? In this article, I will theorize conflictual and violent interaction as interaction rituals and discuss how nonviolence can disrupt these rituals or change the dynamics hereof. Hence, I show how resistance studies and activists can benefit from understanding the situational power of nonviolence. Having described Randall Collins' notion of interaction rituals, I proceed to theorize domination and conflict interaction rituals, the ingredients and outcomes hereof, and how conflict rituals can vary in intensity. I challenge Collins' argument that violence and conflict go against the tendency to become entrained with others and argue that violence and conflict actually characterize a new pattern of interaction in which the parties mirror each other's actions. Subsequently, using cases from the Arab Spring as examples, I argue that violence can be a form of both conflictual and domination interaction rituals. Finally, I show how nonviolence can be used to alter the rhythm of interaction in domination rituals and potentially reinforce a new rhythm both through actions of fraternization and more direct acts of resistance and noncompliance. In so doing, I engage with Evelin Lindner's concept of Mandela-like qualities as the ability to resist domination and analyze situations from Bahrain, where activists have disrupted domination rituals nonviolently. I conclude by emphasizing the added value of the micro-sociological perspective for challenging structural and direct violence manifested in particular situations.

Introduction

When immersed in conflict, we rarely realize that we are in fact in conflict; what we often realize is that 'the other' is being aggressive, unjust or simply evil. We are seldom aware of the reciprocal nature of conflict—that our own actions affect 'the other' in a cycle of counter moves. One of the great

contributions of peace and conflict research is exactly to reveal this reciprocity and the interactional dynamics of conflict. Therefore, there is good reason to investigate conflictual interaction. Likewise, domination is a form of interaction implying the actions or inaction of at least two parties: the basic insight in nonviolent theory is, that power, suppression and domination imply subordination and consent by the dominated (Sharp 1973; Vinthagen 2015). Nonviolence, then, is the rejection of this consent; the disruption of domination rituals (Bramsen 2018b).

In this article, I conceptualize conflictual interaction and domination as different forms of interaction rituals and explore how nonviolence can disrupt them—or change the dynamics hereof. Here, I focus on the very micro-situations of conflict as opposed to the larger patterns of action–reaction or domination. I thus theorize and exemplify the *situational power of nonviolence*—how domination and violence may be disrupted in situ—that may be of relevance for activists as well as for resistance studies and beyond.

I take the notion of interaction rituals from Randall Collins, who has theorized how gatherings of people who focus on the same object or event, with a barrier to outsiders, shared emotion and rhythmic entrainment and produce emotional energy (EE) and solidarity. Collins argues that conflict is a broken ritual or an asymmetric constellation of one party gaining and the other losing energy. For Collins, conflicts go against the human tendency to become entrained in each other's rhythms. On the contrary, I argue that conflict interaction can be meaningfully described as interaction rituals similar to what Collins theorizes in terms of mutual focus of attention and entrainment. Instead of positive emotional energy and solidarity, however, it can also generate negative emotional energy and tension. I argue that *conflictual interaction rituals* imply some form of attack against the other, which is responded to with a similar counterattack mirroring the first act (although often (perceived as) disproportionate). *Domination interaction rituals*, on the other hand, do not imply retaliation but rather submission. Domination is characterized by one party being the oppressor and another adopting a subject position as 'victim.' In other words, I argue that conflict and domination rituals involve pairs of subject positions with oppressors and victims (domination rituals) or two 'counter strikers' (conflict rituals).[1]

1 Even in multi-party conflicts, specific domination rituals and conflict rituals like a demonstration will have this binary structure of repressors and victims or 'counter strikers.'

Domination implies submission, whereas conflict in the Luhmanian sense is a 'no' that follows another 'no' (Luhmann 1995; Stetter 2014; Wæver and Bramsen 2019). Violence, then, can be a *form* of both conflictual and domination interaction ritual, as the counteract (or lack hereof) determines the nature of the interaction or subject relationship. Nonviolence too can be a response; that is, a 'no' to domination. Here, I theorize nonviolence as a rejection of domination and potential disruption of domination rituals. A counterstrike—but a nonviolent one. By responding to domination with neither submission nor retaliation, nonviolence can be used to change the rhythm of interaction in domination rituals and potentially reinforce a new rhythm. The argument is exemplified throughout with concrete situations of violence and nonviolence. Here, I draw upon a video dataset of 59 videos from the Arab Spring conflicts in Bahrain, Tunisia and Syria[2] and 52 interviews[3] with activists and journalists from the respective countries. The videos gives a direct insight in the dynamics of concrete situations in the streets of the three Arab Uprisings.

Several scholars have investigated the causes and conditions of the Arab uprisings (Haas & Lesch 2012; Hansen & Jensen 2012; Lynch 2013; Sadiki 2015). In this article, I propose a micro-sociological framework rather than focusing on structural route causes. The intension is not to substitute but rather to supplement and substantiate existing, structural accounts of the Arab Uprising, to add how even micro-situations in the streets can be crucial for the dynamics and development of the respective practices of resistance.

The article proceeds as follows. Having described Collins' notion of interaction rituals in further detail, I proceed to theorize conflict as an interaction ritual, the ingredients and outcomes hereof, as well as how it can be more or less intense. Secondly, I use examples from the Arab Spring to

2 The video dataset of nonviolent and violent interaction are available online. Videos of violence (V): http://violence.ogtal.dk/. Videos of nonviolence (NV): https://violence.ogtal.dk/index2.php. For more information on how the datasets was compiled, please see Bramsen (2018b).

3 The interviews were conducted at visits to Bahrain, Tunisia and the Turkish border to Syria (Gaziantep) with activists, opposition politicians and journalists. In the interviews, I among other things asked informants about situations where violence was prevented or where they were able to resist or counter direct domination in the streets. The interviews were conducted in English, French or Arabic (with the help of a translator).

argue and exemplify how violence can assume the form of both conflictual and domination interaction rituals. Thirdly, I argue that violence and conflict are difficult, not because they go against ordinary entrainment, as Collins would argue, but rather because they imply uncomfortable emotions and because it is difficult to shift between types of interaction rituals. Once violence or conflict gains momentum, they might be equally difficult to stop. Finally, I discuss how nonviolent direct action can disturb or disrupt violence and domination, leaving e.g. security forces in positions where they are uncertain as to how to react, as described by some of the activists interviewed for this study.

Interaction rituals

To unfold the potential of micro-sociology to contribute to resistance studies, I will firstly unpack and develop the American Sociologist, Randall Collins' micro-sociological theory. The Basic unit in the theory is *interaction rituals*. The concept derives from Durkheim's theorizations of religious gatherings and Goffmann's dramaturgical theory of interaction rituals. Collins conceptualizes interaction rituals in terms of ingredients and outcomes. As illustrated in the figure below, ingredients are: group assembly (with bodily co-presence), barriers to outsiders, mutual focus on attention on a common action or event, and shared mood. The two latter reinforce each other through rhythmic entrainment, such as conversational turn-taking. If these ritual ingredients come together, they can produce certain ritual outcomes, namely group solidarity, emotional energy, symbols of social relationship and standards of morality.

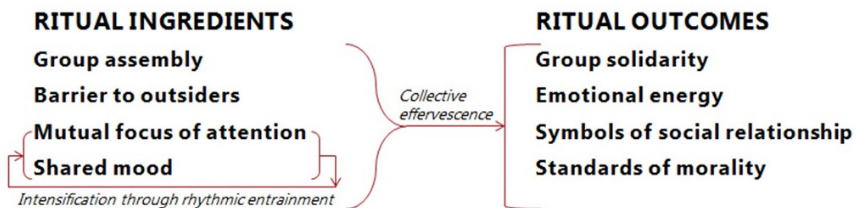

Figure 1. Collins' model of interaction rituals

Interaction rituals charge individuals and give them the energy to act and take decisions. Emotional energy amounts to 'feelings of strength, confidence, and enthusiasm' (Collins 2008, 19), and Collins argues that individuals are

driven to maximize and obtain this emotional energy. If interaction rituals are unsuccessful, that is, if participants for example have their attention anywhere else than the common event or activity, it will fail to produce solidarity, and participants will instead lose emotional energy and 'come away feeling depressed, lacking in initiative, and alienated from the group's concerns' (Collins 2008, 20). As I will describe in the following, I will add a third possibility: conflict interaction rituals that energize individuals with what Boyns and Leury (2015) have coined *negative emotional energy*.

Conflict and domination interaction rituals

Collins has several different conceptions of conflict rituals. In his theorization of rhythmic entrainment, he describes how conflicts obstruct this rhythm when parties interrupt each other and/or the pauses between utterances indicate a strained relationship (2004, 71). In another section in his book, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), under the heading 'Conflict and contest rituals,' Collins (2004, 121–4) lumps together conflict rituals and contest rituals. He understands conflict as a situation of asymmetric distribution of emotional energy:

> Consider the micro-mechanisms of an interaction ritual: the common focus of attention, the rhythmic coordination that intensifies emotions. Persons who control the situation can frustrate this process. They can break the micro-rhythm, by not responding to the signals the other person is putting out. (Collins 2004, 121)

Collins analyses a picture of two runners from the Olympics, where the runner-up has her eyes focused on the winner, whereas the winning runner is focused on the goal. This imagery exemplifies situations where one party gains emotional energy whereas the other loses it. Likewise, regarding violence, Collins writes that 'violence is an extremely asymmetrical interaction ritual, with strong common focus of attention by both sides, attackers and victim, and tight rhythmic coordination; but the rhythm is set entirely by one side, and the other side is forced to accede to it' (2004, 111–38).

While violence can certainly be used to dominate a helpless victim, this is not always so; neither conflict rituals nor violence rituals are always asymmetrical. Rather, I would characterize situations where one person/group gains emotional energy and another person/group loses emotional

energy as *domination interaction.*[4] Domination interaction implies that one party dominates another in words, actions and/or body posture[5]. A video with several scenarios from checkpoints in Palestine exemplifies such domination interaction. In one situation (Video 61), a soldier for example speaks to the Palestinian pedestrian in a loud and direct voice, asking him where he has come from and corrects his pronunciation of Tekoa. The soldier also asks where he is going and when the pedestrian does not answer right away, the soldier asks louder and more forceful. The pedestrian is clearly de-energized and humiliated as he looks down, mumbles and maintains a succumbing body posture.

The situation also shows how even abstract phenomena like structural violence, that analysts argues should be addressed at a structural level, manifest in concrete situations. This opens up the space for resistance, as I will come back to, where domination can be challenged at the level of interaction.

Conflict interaction, on the other hand, implies that both parties attempt to dominate each other or resist. They can take the form of a failed domination ritual where one party attempts to dominate the other in one way or another and the other party resists the role of the follower. In a Luhmanian conception, conflict is a 'no that follows another no' (1995); that is, it is not an asymmetrical situation where one party gains and the other loses energy but rather a rejection of an attempted power manifestation (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). In Collins' words, when it comes to blustering, conflicts can be seen as attempts at dominating the 'attention space' (2001, 38). People attempt to dominate others/the situation in all kinds of ways, ranging from subtle criticism to direct manipulation, orders or violence. In the subtle end, Collins describes middle class situations where a party indirectly criticizes the other 'while keeping up a nonverbal aura of politeness and friendliness (…) the aggressive game can be two-sided, when the victim of a putdown

4 Collins (2004, 112) has a similar concept of power rituals where an order-giver dominates an order-taker. I use the concept of domination rituals as a broader concept describing all rituals where one party gains and the other party loses emotional energy (i.e. also the situations that Collins describes as contest or conflict rituals).

5 Elsewhere, I have developed how to understand authoritarian regimes in terms of interaction rituals energizing the regime and de-energizing the general population (Bramsen 2018c).

manages to mount a clever and opposite comeback' (2004, 340). Goffmann describes such polite, indirect 'aggressive use of face-work' and argues that the parties attempt to score 'as many points against one's adversary and making as many gains as possible for oneself' ([1967]2005, 24), which, in Collins' terminology, would be translated into gaining emotional energy.

A situation is only a conflict if one party counters the other party's act or utterance (Wæver and Bramsen 2019). If the 'victim' of domination is either submissive, ignores the attack or instead answers with e.g. a compliment, the situation is not one of conflict. Conflict originally comes from Latin, *con-fligere*, to strike together, which thus implies the Luhmanian no–no construction.

Collins' conception of conflict as an asymmetrical ritual, where one party dominates the other, does not imply a mechanism of escalation. If conflicts are situations in which one party already dominates the other, the situation is not a process of escalation. Moreover, Collins' (2001) point that conflicts are won when one party sufficiently dominates the other is incompatible with seeing conflict as a situation where one party already dominates. Seeing conflicts as situations where parties resist the domination or utterance of the other implies both escalation (continuous no's from both sides) and the logical termination hereof, if one party establishes all-out domination.[6] Thus, theorizing conflict as a reciprocal interaction ritual is arguably more consistent with Collins' theory.

To argue that conflict rituals are different than domination rituals may upset many conflict theorists who insist on labeling inequality, structural violence and oppressive relations as 'latent conflict' (e.g. Galtung 1996). True, these are 'latent conflict' in the sense that every oppressive act or domination ritual potentially could turn into a conflict due to the ever-present, immanent possibility that domination is followed by a 'no.' However, the fact that oppression, inequality and suppression are normatively 'bad' does not in and of itself qualify it as 'conflict.'

A picture from Collins' (2008: 365) book on violence (Originally from Reuters, October 2000, Jerusalem). He uses the picture to exemplify a situation where intense conflict does not lead to violence. In the picture, the two men, an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian civilian, are clearly

6 If the parties in a conflict do not try to overpower each other but simply reject each other's 'no's' a situation can also end in a standoff or stalemate.

expressing immense anger and are in fact mirroring each other in terms of facial expressions, shouting and body posture. Collins theorizes that such a situation would not turn violent because neither party dominates the other, and both men become tired or bored after a while and disengage. Unlike the running contest that Collins used to exemplify conflict, this situation resembles an actual conflict situation where both parties stand up to each other's actions.

Whereas Collins theorizes conflict as a broken interaction ritual or status interaction ritual where only one party is energized, I would argue that conflict is a social interaction ritual resembling successful solidarity interaction. In conflict rituals, as exemplified in the picture above, parties have bodily co-presence, a barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention (each other and/or the object of contention), a shared mood and often rhythmic entrainment (which is not visible from the picture apart from both of them shouting at the same time). As illustrated in the figure below, intense conflict interaction rituals produce tension, negative emotional energy, symbols of enmity and standards of morality.

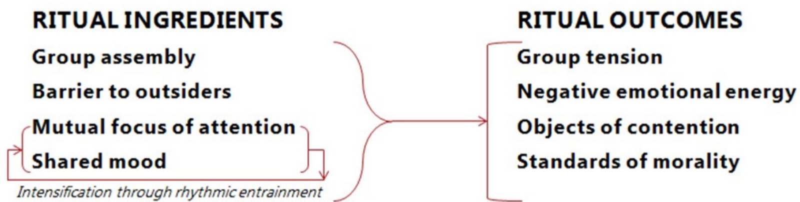

Figure 2. Conflictual interaction ritual

In what follows, I will describe each ingredient and outcome in the proposed model of conflict interaction ritual.

Conflict ritual ingredients

- *Group assembly:* Collins argues that bodily co-presence increases the intensity of solidarity interaction rituals. Similarly, conflict rituals tend to be more intense in bodily co-presence.
- *Barrier to outsiders:* in conflicts, it is clear to the adversaries who is *part of* the conflict and who is *not.* As Collins (2011, 8) has described, neutrals are often forced to pick a side, excluded or even attacked.

- *Mutual focus of attention*: conflicting parties are often intensely focused on the same object of contention, each other and/or the activity of conflict. If conflicting parties begin to focus primarily on other things, the conflict ritual will fall apart and the conflict is said to de-escalate.
- *Shared mood:* conflicting parties often have a similar if not shared mood (in the picture above this mood is anger). Both negative and positive emotions are contagious (e.g. Barsade 2002) and it is not uncommon e.g. for the fear of one party to infect the other. However, there are also cases or sequences in conflict where one party e.g. feels pride and the other is humiliated, but the central feeling of animosity remains.
- *Rhythmic entrainment:* Collins states that interpersonal conflicts are broken rhythms, as adversaries often interrupt each other and violate good conversational customs. However, I would argue that conflicts can also be seen as enforcing a new rhythm of interaction, where parties are compelled to answer each other's accusations and attacks. Conflict interaction rituals are often characterized by a fast rhythm or high speed, and de-escalate when the tempo of interaction decreases. While Collins insists that violence goes against the tendency for rhythmic entrainment, he adds that:

> The violent situation has its own entrainment and focus: there is focus on the fighting itself, on the situation as a violent one, and sometimes an emotional entrainment in which the hostility, anger, and excitement of each side gets the other more angry and excited. (Collins 2008, 82)

This is compatible with what I am arguing here: as in solidarity interaction, rituals parties in conflicts become entrained in each other's micro-rhythms and emotions. A situation from a Syrian demonstration in 2011 precisely exemplifies this rhythmic entrainment in conflict interaction rituals. An activist that I interviewed describe how he and a group of protesters met a pro-Assad demonstration, which he calls 'Shabiha':[7]

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7 Shabiha is a paramilitary group that took part in repressing demonstrations in the Syrian uprising. In this example, it is unclear and not important for the example whether the pro-Assad demonstrators are actually Shabiha.

> The only slogan we chanted was, 'Allah, Syria, Freedom, Only' in opposition to the Shabiha's chant which was 'Allah, Syria, Bashar, Only.' There were two teams, two team leaders, one was shouting 'Allah, Syria, Freedom, Only' and one was shouting 'Allah, Syria, Bashar, Only' and then it was reduced to 'freedom!'—'Bashar!', 'freedom!'—'Bashar!', 'freedom!'—'Bashar.' (Interview 36)

In this example, the slogans of the anti-Assad and pro-Assad demonstrators mirror and counter each other's slogans rhythmically; as the speed of the rhythm increases, the slogans are reduced to single words that can be shouted to over-power the other.

Conflict ritual output

Tension: is the intersubjective outcome of conflict interaction rituals. As I have described elsewhere (Bramsen and Wæver 2016) tension characterizes the state of the strained relationship between conflicting parties. Whereas solidarity brings people together in a common understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences, the opposite is the case in tense relations. Like solidarity, tension is an intersubjective emotional state that can also be characterized as an emotional 'field' or 'atmosphere.' Tension emerges from conflictual interaction—that is, attempts at domination that are rejected—but it also reinforces and generates conflictual interaction.

Negative emotional energy: Collins argues that conflicts are uncomfortable and preferably avoided (2008, 20). But conflicts do exist, persist and often energize actors to act. How can conflict be uncomfortable—or even unbearable—and at the same time energize actors to engage further? Boyns and Leury have developed Collins' conception of emotional energy (according to themselves, in accordance with his original concept of emotional energy) to answer this question. They argue that situations of humiliation, for example, need not always de-energize actors, but can also energize them; however, not in the positive sense of the word with 'enthusiasm and confidence' but rather, the force driving further action is a 'negative emotional energy' of persisting of emotions such as anger, fear and resentment. Boyns and Leury propose that such energy is 'uncomfortable' and that, just like individuals are driven to obtain positive emotional energy, they are compelled 'to quickly reduce' the negative emotional energy (2015, 160).

Objects of contention: whereas conflicts do not produce symbols of social relationship among the conflicting parties (this would mean the end of conflict), a conflict does produce objects of contention, i.e. objects that the conflict is said to be 'about' and that often come to symbolize or define it. Collins rightly states that 'The fighting and the motive become structured and articulated simultaneously as part of the same process' (2004, 337). Objects of contention grow out of conflict and cause further conflict. Objects that may have been of less importance to the parties prior to a conflict may suddenly become immensely important as they become part of the conflict.

Standards of morality: perhaps paradoxically, similar to solidarity interaction rituals, one could also argue that conflict interaction rituals produce standards of morality. In many conflicts, especially if they are protracted or repeated (i.e. in chains of interaction rituals), parties develop standards of morality about how to behave within the reality of conflict and/or war. In interpersonal conflicts, this might include unspoken or spoken rules about what not to talk about or call the other; in international conflict, this can be either standardized *jus in bellum* or informal rules about who not to target. These rules are sometimes violated, however, which will increase in-group righteous anger.

Intensity of conflict interaction rituals

Collins' model of solidarity interaction rituals enables an assessment of the intensity of the ritual and how much energy and solidarity it will generate: 'Randall Collins' synthesis and extension of Durkheim and Goffman provides more specific propositions on when interaction rituals will be more likely to result in collective effervescence' (Holmes & Wheeler 2019). Conflict rituals can vary in intensity, much like solidarity interaction rituals. Could we then say that factors such as a barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention and rhythmic entrainment determine the intensity of conflict?

A barrier to outsiders is an ingredient in conflict rituals which is difficult to intensify, although one could argue that conflict interaction rituals where it is very clear who participates and who does not are more intense, whereas conflicts where participation is more diffuse and undefined are less intense. A better determinant of the intensity of the conflict ritual, however, is the mutual focus of attention, i.e. the focus on the objects of contention. If the parties (individuals or groups) are equally or more focused on other things, such as trade or other problems, the conflict will be less

intense. If the parties are solely focused on the object of contention, however, this will intensify the conflict. The rhythmic entrainment can also be used to assess the intensity of conflict rituals. If the rhythm of interaction is slow, if it e.g. takes a lot of time to react to the others' accusations or attacks, this will produce less tension, whereas a fast rhythm of action–reaction will generate high-intensity conflict rituals.

Regarding bodily co-presence, Collins suggests that bodily-co presence makes violence more difficult because the closer people get, the harder it becomes not to fall into the basic social entrainment of solidarity interaction. On the contrary, I would argue that tension increases when enemies meet/confront, because, much as in solidarity interaction rituals, this increases the intensity of the ritual; not because it will make it harder for the enemies to maintain the hostile relationship and violate the natural tendency of solidarity. Keeping parties separate (e.g. through a buffer zone) is a well-known tension-reduction strategy, both in interpersonal and international conflicts.

Both group and interpersonal conflicts can consist of one conflictual interaction ritual where parties come together, quarrel and resolve the conflict, but group conflict generally consists of numerous interaction rituals, some solidarity interaction rituals, some domination interaction rituals and some conflict interaction rituals (Bramsen and Poder 2014). For example, we can have a civil war where members of the groups encounter each other daily and where the elites representing the groups have several meetings. Some encounters may resemble a domination ritual, where one party is humiliated and de-energized, some encounters might turn into conflict interaction rituals, where the parties counters each other's domination and attacks, while other situations may be solidarity interaction rituals, primarily on each side, such as the celebration of martyrs.

Violence as a form of conflict or domination

Violence and conflict intensity are often conflated but conflict intensity does not necessarily equal violence (Wæver & Bramsen 2019). Does the conceptualization of tension as emerging from and being reinforced by conflictual interaction contradict this statement? No; on the contrary, it implies that violence is a *form,* not a *degree,* of conflict. The reason why violence often grows out of conflict is that it is another mode or form of conflict. Carl von Clausewitz famously stated that 'war is the continuation of

policy by other means' (Clausewitz 1989 [1832], 87). The same could be said regarding violence and conflict—that violence is conflict or domination by other means. But violence does not necessarily grow out of intense conflict (Sørensen and Johansen 2016). A conflict can be very intense and involve daily demonstrations or intense diplomatic meetings but with no violence. Violence can also be applied very early on in conflicts at low intensities or to initiate a conflict in the first place. This is especially so if violence is the default mode or practice familiar to the agents involved, as in the Syrian regime, where part of their *modus operandi* prior to the revolution was violent repression. Violence can also occur in situations where there is not much to fight about but where fighting has become an institutionalized or internalized practice. One example of this would be Guinea-Bissau, where Vigh (2006) on the basis of long fieldwork (2000–2003) argues that armed conflict continues despite low levels of enmity and tension between the fighters and despite there being little to fight for in terms of larger ideological or incompatible goals.

In this article, domination and conflict are theorized as interaction rituals where the latter implies that both parties strike against each other, whereas domination is one-sided and requires some form of submission by the opponent. In this manner, domination and conflict are defined as relational, as the 'subject positions' of the parties involved determining the nature of the interaction; one attempt at domination may be countered and thus turn into a conflict. Violence, I would argue, can take the form of both domination interaction and conflict interaction (Bramsen, 2017).

Examples of one-sided violence as domination might be situations of torture or genocide. To exemplify this, we can take two situations of violence from my video-dataset of violence from the Arab Spring in Syria, Bahrain and Tunisia. Firstly, in a situation where violence is a form of domination, it is one-sided and the victim merely surrenders and aligns to the rhythm put forward by the perpetrator(s).

In video 6, during one-sided violence against demonstrators in Tunisia in 2011, one the protesters adopt the position of victim, running away submissively from the violent domination. Through surrender and alignment in response to violent domination, the protesters' subject position becomes one of victimhood and submission. Secondly, in other situations, protesters fight back with stones or other available objects or weapons. Observing numerous videos of two-sided violence (Bramsen, 2018b), I argue that

violence can resemble a dance-like sequence where both parties respond rhythmically to and mirror each other's actions (Bramsen, 2017). In video 50 and 51, we see two-sided violence in Syria in 2011, a situation where protesters throw stones at the security forces as they are met with violent repression. The situation is one of conflict, as both parties strike against each other, albeit on very unequal and arguably disproportionate terms.

Is violence and conflict difficult?

In his 2008 book, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, Collins analyses images and videos of violent situations, unfolding the argument that violence is difficult and goes against the natural tendency of becoming attuned with other people: 'violent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals' (2008, 20). In potentially violent situations, people therefore become tense and/or fearful, in many cases therefore paradoxically ending up not carrying out violent actions or doing so in an incompetent manner. When violence happens, it follows a limited set of pathways where individuals are able to work around this tension/fear. Here, I propose a different argument. In the model of conflict interaction ritual outlined here, tension emerges not from the reluctance to engage in conflict and violence, but from conflictual interactions. Moreover, once violent and conflictual interaction rituals are initiated, they are no longer 'difficult.' Once conflicts begin, the difficulty instead is to go against the momentum of conflict, e.g. by not responding to the other's accusations or violent attacks. At least until the momentum of fighting has run out.

According to Collins, not only violence but also conflict is difficult and goes against the tendency of rhythmic entrainment:

> Antagonistic confrontation itself, as distinct from violence, has its own tension. People tend to avoid confrontation even in merely verbal conflict: people are much more likely to express negative and hostile statements about persons who are not immediately present, than to express such statements to persons who are in conversation with them. (…) Hence, when conflict has to come down to the immediate micro-situation, there are great difficulties in carrying out conflict, and especially violence. (Collins 2008, 79)

If tension is an inherent part of conflict, not because conflict goes against our natural tendency of entrainment but because of contesting wills and actions,

what can then explain why conflict and violence are difficult to initiate, as Collins has argued?

One reason for the reluctance to engage in conflict is that it often implies uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anger and tension. As Boyns and Leury (2015) theorize regarding negative emotional energy, individuals are driven to avoid or get rid of such unpleasant emotions. I would argue that the reluctance to initiate conflicts also stems from the difficulty of changing between and/or initiating interaction rituals. As Collins describes, 'once a conversation takes off, it builds a self-sustaining momentum' (2004, 71). Changing between types and rhythms of interaction—to change the flow of momentum—can therefore be challenging and require plenty of emotional energy. Collins refers to the example of a speaker galvanizing an entire audience with a powerful talk. When the speaker is done, most of the audience will have forgotten all of their questions and be unable to change the interaction ritual from one of speaker–listeners to Q&A. Only individuals with very high emotional energy are able to break through such a wall of silence and pose questions. Once the Q&A gets going and 'momentum flows another way,' others will also be able to engage in the conversation (Collins 2004, 72). Likewise, it is difficult to change between solidarity interaction and conflictual interaction. Collins has described how people are often reluctant to engage in direct conflict: they prefer to complain to others who are not involved in the dispute, thereby avoiding actual confrontation. Rather than being an indication of the difficulty of breaking ordinary entrainment, I interpret this reluctance to engage in conflict as a difficulty of breaking/changing any interaction ritual, which is similar to the example of changing between speaker–audience and Q&A. Indeed, while many individuals hesitate to engage in direct conflict with others, once the conflict gets going it can be very difficult to stop; once a fight begins, all of the accusations that individuals previously held back or complained about to others will often come to the surface, and the conflicting parties may have to invent new ones in order to counter the accusations of the other. This is also why conflicts help to 'clear the air.' As Simmel argued in 1908, conflict is a social endeavour, not merely because it generates in-group solidarity but also because it can contribute to conflicting parties reuniting after a conflict. Conflicts can, however, also become protracted and become a part of everyday life and ordinary interaction.

One of the sub-arguments underscoring Collins' overall argument, i.e. that conflict and violence go against the normal entrainment, is that conflict

and violence often tend to be short or fade away. First of all, this is often not the case; many, particularly international conflicts, stretch over several decades or more, and even if we only look at the micro-conflict interaction rituals involved in this process, they are perfectly comparable to solidarity interactions that also tend to be substituted by new ones. Like solidarity interaction rituals, they can be short or long, and negative emotional energy, like positive emotional energy, decays over time.

To sum up, I do not dispute that tension emerging in conflict situations shapes and in some cases inhibits violence, but I argue that this tension does not derive from the difficulty of going against the entrainment with the victim. Rather, it derives from 1) the difficulty of changing interaction rituals and from 2) the conflictual interaction ritual itself, as conflictual interaction entrains people in an action–reaction rhythm, with continuous 'rejections' of the counterpart's attacks or utterances, which in turn generates tension.

Disrupting violence and domination

How can the micro-sociological theory of conflict and violence be of interest for the study and practice of nonviolent resistance? According to Collins, protesters may take advantage of the micro-sociological difficulties of conducting violence; by avoiding to turn their back, hide their face, fall down or run away in panic, they may be able to avoid violence (Collins 2014). Inspired by Collins' approach, Anne Nassauer (2013; 2016) has developed an interactional theory of violence on the basis of comprehensive visual data analysis of left-wing demonstrations in the US and Germany. Nassauer interestingly describes a situation where protesters avoided violent domination by the police by stating in a loud, clear voice: 'We are peaceful, what about you?' In my own data, I have found similar situations where violence was avoided, e.g. in a situation where a Bahraini man shouts in anger, 'Go on shoot me!' and throws a Koran between his legs and raises his hands in the air. Two policemen attempt to attack him, one raises his stick to hit him, but the man with the Koran's angry and powerful gestures seemingly disable the policeman from following through with his threats (RT 2013 Video 24). Likewise, Bahraini activist Zainap Al-Khawaja has on several occasions stood up to the security forces in Bahrain without being targeted. In one situation, she was protesting with a larger group but decided not to move when the police attacked the demonstration (Mackey 2011, Video 23). The police officer ordered the others not to attack her, but they

threatened her. Zainab describes how, 'One said, "What's wrong with you, are you drunk? You know what we can do to you?" I said, "First, make me fear your masters before trying to make me fear you"' (Zainab in Lucas 2011).

Nassauer and Collins would argue that this is emotional equilibrium; i.e., no one dominates the situation. Instead, I would argue that these are cases where demonstrators were actually able to dominate the situation enough to be able to change it and the rhythm of interaction. Domination and violence imply a certain script of victim and perpetrator. When one of the parts refuses to play out that script by neither attacking nor running away, screaming or ducking in fear, it becomes more difficult to act out violently; less due to any moral aversion to attacking or because violence goes against human solidarity entrainment and more because the rhythm and script of violence is disrupted (Bramsen 2017; 2018a). Nonviolence can then represent a means of enforcing a new rhythm of interaction—or at least disrupting the existing one. It can thus potentially disrupt acts of nonviolence by refusing to act submissively and imposing a new rhythm. Disrupting violent action is one of several ways that activists may challenge violent domination. Elsewhere (Bramsen 2019), I have elaborated on the many ways in which activists may try to challenge violence, both amongst themselves and amongst their opponents.

The situational power of nonviolence

The power of nonviolence is usually seen as challenging the legitimacy and pillars of support for a ruling power (Helvey 2004; Sharp 1973). Elsewhere (Bramsen 2018c), I have challenged this metaphor, instead suggesting a musical ensemble as a metaphor for authoritarian regimes i.e. that what ties the regimes together is not solid pillars but rather tight rhythmic coordination and domination interaction rituals. While resistance literature has focused on various aspects of civil resistance such as nonviolent discipline (e.g. Nepstad 2004), mobilization (e.g. Schock 2015) and the moral superiority of nonviolence (e.g. Gier 2014), less attention has been given to the *situational power of nonviolence*; i.e. how certain actions can change the situation from one of confrontation and fighting to one of collaboration and compassion (Bramsen 2018). In this respect, nonviolence is not merely about taking away the pillars of a regime (top-down perspective on power), but also about changing the relationship/situation by doing something different (or

not doing what was previously constituting the power relationship, i.e. civil resistance). Nonviolence thus becomes a way of challenging and disrupting not only direct violence but also structural violence and domination in concrete situations.

One activist explained to me that 'using nonviolence not only puts you on the moral higher ground, it also grants you control over the situation.' She exemplified this statement with a story about her dad, another famous activist, Abdulhadi Al Khawaja:

> When he was being tortured, this guy was with my dad in the military prison during the time they were being severely tortured, and he could hear my dad being tortured, and when the guy stopped torturing my dad, my dad told him: 'I forgive you.' And I asked my mother to ask my dad why he did that (...) his explanation to me was that, when you decide the way you react, basically when you react with violence you react the way they want you to react, and so they control their action and your reaction. When you choose not to use violence you are actually taking that control back into your own hands. (Interview 19)

In this respect, nonviolence can be seen as a deliberate attempt at taking control of the situation and initiating an alternative chain of interaction. If violence is considered an interaction ritual where the parties are mutually entrained in a process of violent action–reaction, nonviolence can cause this violent interaction ritual to 'fail;' that is, it becomes increasingly difficult for the perpetrator to uphold the violent ritual if the supposed victim does not 'play by the rules' of violence, instead initiating solidarity interaction rituals. It is indeed very difficult for nonviolent activists to dominate the situation to the extent that they are able to change the interaction ritual, or even merely to go against the situational pressure to 'act' as victim or perpetrator. In Collins words, it requires abundant emotional energy or that which Lindner in this respect coins 'Mandela-like qualities' to change the rhythm of interaction in violence or conflict interaction rituals (2013). Lindner describes a situation in which Nelson Mandela, upon landing on Robben Island on his way to jail, refused to follow the orders of the prison guards. Mandela describes the situation as follows:

> The guards started screaming, 'Haas! Haas!' The word haas means 'move' in Afrikaans, but it is commonly reserved for cattle. The wardens were

> demanding that we jog, and I turned to Tefu and under my breath said that we must set an example; if we give in now we would be at their mercy (…). I mentioned to Tefu that we should walk in front, and we took the lead. Once in front, we actually decreased the pace, walking slowly and deliberately. The guards were incredulous (…) [and said] 'We will tolerate no insubordination here. Haas! Haas!' But we continued at our stately pace. Kleinhans [The head guard] ordered us to halt and stood in front of us: 'Look, man, we will kill you, we are not fooling around, your children and wives and mothers and fathers will never know what happened to you. This the last warning. Haas! Haas!' To this, I said: 'You have your duty and we have ours.' I was determined that we would not give in, and we did not, for we were already at the cells. (Mandela, 1995, 297–9)

In this situation, Mandela literally refused to follow the rhythm that was imposed upon him (jogging) and imposed his 'own,' slower pace. Not only did he refuse to be humiliated (Lindner's interpretation), he also controlled the situation and disrupted the power ritual that the guards attempted to uphold. Refusing to play neither victim nor perpetrator, and thereby neither retaliating nor being submissive, can have a disarming effect.

Three Bahraini protesters that I interviewed described a situation where a young boy walked out in front of a police car and hit/drummed on the front of the vehicle, which made it stop. One of the protesters reflected: 'When you do something new, something that they don't expect, they never know how to react' (Interview 25). Along the same lines, another Bahraini activist reflected upon the importance of confusing the riot police; 'When you're face to face with them (...) when you're confident, they [the security forces in the Middle East] get confused, because they're used to the fact that they're carrying weapons, which means you run. It means you're not gonna stand up to them. So when someone does stand up to them, they get really confused and don't know how to react' (Interview 19). What activists interpret as the security forces 'not knowing how to react' can be interpreted as a way of challenging the script of domination and violence. When protesters refrain from playing into the theater of domination by neither retaliating nor giving in, they disrupt the interaction ritual of domination. This relates to Popovic's concept of laughtivism, which implies funny acts that can surprise or confuse security forces. He argues that funny actions can

disrupt repression, because 'if you're a cop you spend a lot of time thinking about how to deal with people who are violent. But nothing in your training prepares you for dealing with people who are funny' (Popovic and Miller 2015, 99).

Apart from 'surprising' or non-submissive acts that can disrupt the script of domination, activists can also initiate solidarity-generating, friendly interaction as a way to disrupt domination. These actions are framed as 'fraternization' (Martin and Varney 2003, Ketchley 2014). In line with micro-sociological thinking, Ketchley argues that such types of performances make 'claims on regime agents through stimulating feelings of solidarity and comes to figure as an interaction ritual' (Ketchley 2014, 159). Such acts may include giving roses to security forces, kissing or hugging them, talking in a calm and friendly manner or providing water bottles. Ketchley analyzes the Egyptian Arab Spring and suggest that fraternizing acts was a central component of how the activists won the sympathy and support of the army. He describes a situation where protesters moved towards the security forces but where:

> There was no clash: rather, protestors moved to kiss, hug and embrace individual soldiers, all the while disrupting their formation. While individual troopers attempted to maintain their distance, others were physically encircled, remonstrated and pleaded with. In the video, the effects of these interactions are profound: both protestors and soldiers visibly moved to tears (Ketchley 2014, 160).

Ketchley argues that such fraternizing performances limit 'the opportunities for violence to break out' (Ketchley 2014, 162), again because the performance of violent attacks requires another type of subject positioning of the actors involved and another dynamic. Hence, acts of fraternization can potentially challenge the script of domination and violence. However, this may not always be possible. During the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, activists attempted to approach the riot police in a friendly manner, but this was impeded by the fact that a big part of Bahraini security forces are of a different nationality and in many cases speaks e.g. Urdu instead of Arabic (Bramsen 2018a).

Small acts of surprise, resistance or fraternization may seem insignificant, especially in cases where they perhaps do not even stop the acts of violence or domination in the actual situation. However, even small acts of resistance may have a profound effect on the overall relationship between the ruled and

the ruler. The picture below shows a Bahraini activist, Zainab al-Khawaja, resisting arrest. As is visible from the picture, Zainab raises her clenched fist in the air to symbolize resistance and freedom and shouts powerfully. The police officers arresting her, in contrast, look uncomfortable with the situation, with clenched lips and eyes looking down.

Picture 1. Bahraini activist, Zainab al-Khawaja resisting arrest (reproduced with permission from the photographer)

Despite the performance of resistance, Zainab al-Khawaja is arrested and taken to prison. Hence, one could say that there are limits to micro-sociological dynamics occurring in-situations as opposed to orders and structures shaping a society. However, I would argue that even as Zainab is imprisoned, her acts of resistance and importantly—the sharing of the pictures hereof—are powerful ways of destabilizing acts of domination. Little by little, this can challenge everyday suppression and domination and with enough de-stabilizing actions—challenge the very organizational structure and rhythmic coordination of the regime. As I have shown elsewhere, this however depends on the overall ability of a protest movement to stay

united, gather support by the silent majority and escalate at a time of high momentum (Bramsen, 2018c).

Conclusion

What do we gain from viewing conflicts as interaction rituals apart from further expanding Collins' already inclusive (overly inclusive, according to Kemper 2011) notion of what would count as an interaction ritual? How can the micro-sociological perspective be useful for nonviolent activists and resistance studies? I would argue that such a perspective enables us to do two things: 1) to understand conflict not as an anomaly or anti-social behavior but rather as a form of interaction implies that parties are immersed in each other's bodily rhythms and develop a certain social bond, albeit a hostile one (in line with Simmel 1955[1908]). Whether they like it or not, enemies share a relationship (Bramsen, Nielsen, and Vindeløv 2016; Salice 2014). And 2) By seeing conflicts as interaction rituals (and violence as a form of conflict interaction ritual), we can develop strategies for how to counter or transform such interaction rituals if preferred. One example is to initiate new interaction rituals, either through mediation or trade that can generate solidarity and supplement or eventually substitute conflict interactions. Another option is to disrupt domination rituals with nonviolent direct action, as I have shown in this article. Either through direct resistance and noncompliance or through more solidarity generating actions of fraternization. Rather than considering oppression (merely) an overall, structural phenomena that may be challenged through awareness raising and norm change, understanding how structural and direct violence manifested in concrete situation can be challenged potentially empowers activists to mobilize the situational power of nonviolence.

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