Review of *When push comes to shove: A routine conflict approach to violence*

Authors: **Leslie W. Kennedy and David R. Forde**
Publisher: **State University of New York Press**
Year: **1999**

Since the introduction of routine activities theory two decades ago (Cohen and Felson, 1979), this approach to the understanding of criminal activity has gained increasing attention and empirical support. At its head, this is a theory not about criminals but about crimes. It assumes a motivated offender and suggests that a crime will occur when the opportunity presents itself, that is, when the offender comes into contact with a potential victim in the absence of a capable guardian. Thus it provides predictions as to *when* or *where* a crime will occur (with the coincidence of these three elements) or at what times (or in what eras) crime rates will be higher. Other, more qualitative, approaches that also stress the interactional structure of the criminal event—not simply the characteristics of the participants—draw upon a phenomenological understanding of the situation, calling attention to its transactional nature (see for example Goffman, 1959, 1974; Katz, 1988; Luckenbill and Doyle, 1989; Sacco and Kennedy, 1996). In their book, *When push comes to shove: A routine conflict approach to violence*, Kennedy and Forde (1999) attempt to explain everyday conflict, and the violence that may result from it, by integrating the phenomenological approach to conflict with elements of routine activities theory.

More specifically, instead of focusing on the traits of the motivated offender and the potential victim, Kennedy and Forde focus their attention on how conflict may become routinized and, especially, how the characteristics of a conflict situation can influence the outcome. That is, despite the individual attributes and the behavioral repertoire of the participants, the structure of the situation—such as the location or the presence of a third party—is likely to play the most important role in the outcome of the event (violence, non-violence, and/or resolution). The authors suggest that in these situations "meaning is created through the active participation of all parties…[and that] interactions take on additional meaning as a result of the ways in which individuals react to others and the situation" (p. 127). Over time, say Kennedy and Forde, we all experience these conflict situations and we learn to routinize our behavior based upon what has worked (or failed) in the past, building contingency plans for how we will act in a given situation. But these plans can change, of course, depending upon the unique qualities of each conflict situation. Thus, according to the authors, our understanding of violence should be based on our knowledge about daily low-intensity conflicts and the routines we employ to navigate them.

To this end, Kennedy and Forde's book takes the following form. The first chapter discusses "violence in everyday life," introducing the reader to the authors' routine conflict theory and the approaches from which it draws: social construction, the criminal event perspective, and social interactionist theory. The second chapter presents two major theories of aggression, social learning and low self-control, and the authors employ criticisms of these perspectives—mainly that they are offender- and not event-based—as an argument for their routine conflict theory, which is grounded in routinized behavior and in the situational context of each event. In chapter 3, Kennedy and Forde examine more closely what they consider to be the three aspects of violence: social

***Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 7(3): 125-128**

construction, coercion, and the social event, while paying close attention to the cultural construction of normative behavior and the episodic nature of criminal events. This chapter is also where the authors come closest to stating their theory explicitly:

> "We have combined the elements of construction, process, and content into a theory of routine conflict that suggests that individuals come into interactions with certain expectations that are formed by previous experiences, socialization, and the behavior of others. These expectations help determine whether or not individuals will see violence as an option in dealing with conflict or aggressive behavior. While this theory is grounded on a complex array of factors, its basic assumption is that choices are made based upon the constraints of situations and the repertoires learned by the protagonists in these and similar encounters" (p. 22).

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology employed (telephone surveys in Alberta and Manitoba, Canada) to evaluate the authors' theory of routine conflict. This chapter also describes the construction of the survey and presents basic descriptive statistics of respondents' experiences with conflict. The fifth chapter is wide-ranging. It further explains the methodology, especially the factorial survey design of the vignettes employed in order to gain information about respondents' legitimization of violence in different situations, and also provides a description of what the authors believe to be the three stages of a violent event: "naming, claiming, and aggression," which they borrow from the social organization literature and, as it relates to violence, from Luckenbill and Doyle (1989). In this chapter, the authors also construct models that estimate the effects of the features of the scenario, where it takes place, and the characteristics of those involved on each of these three stages. Chapter 6 employs data drawn from actual incidents in which respondents were involved in order to evaluate how situational factors—such as the respondent's lifestyle, the location of the conflict, the presence and role of third parties, the relationship between the offender and victim, and the seriousness of the conflict—will influence the outcome of an event. The seventh chapter is a sidebar, of sorts. It is written by Stephen Baron and describes a field study of street youth conducted by Baron in order to test routine conflict theory and to compare the results from his sample with those of the general population sampled by Kennedy and Forde. In the final chapter, the authors summarize the elements of routine conflict theory, present their "prescriptions for restricting violent routines," and suggest pathways for future research on the topic.

Given this summary of what the authors wish to present and of how it is presented, it is necessary to provide a somewhat unfriendly critique. To the point, the book is chaotic, lacking a clear path to follow from beginning to end. The ideas of the authors may certainly have merit, and the research design may provide support for their hypotheses, but the presentation of the material lacks clarity and does not allow the reader to make a decisive assessment of these issues.

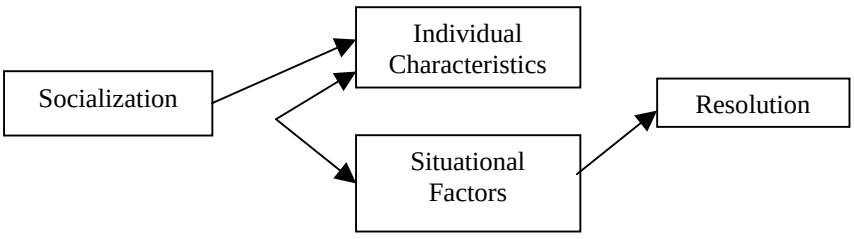
For one, the authors repeatedly exchange their discussion of daily "conflict" situations with their theory of "routine violence," though the vast majority of conflicts discussed by their respondents are minor and of low intensity. It might be the case that there are distinct qualitative differences between situations of low-intensity conflict and violence. The authors do suggest that this is precisely what they are trying to find—that is, the pathway that leads from these daily

low-level conflicts to violence—but beyond their suggestion that daily routines interact with the social context of the situation to create the outcome, this discussion is confusing.

A second issue is related to this confusion around the main issue of discussion. Routine activities theory assumes a motivated offender, making the event and/or opportunity the most important aspect of offending, and in this book Kennedy and Forde seek to elaborate upon the situational factors of the event as it mediates individual characteristics. But learning (in this case, the development of a behavioral repertoire—or routine—that either provides for the use of violence or does not) is clearly key to their theory, suggesting an etiology of offending. This means that the characteristics of offenders do indeed play an important role in the outcome of an event, even if tempered by situational characteristics. The authors are correct, I believe, in their suggestion that both learning and situational context interact to create a final outcome. However, a more careful consideration and discussion of these issues is required in order to contend with the oppositional assumptions of the two theories and in order to more clearly explain how they interact.

Next, much of the confusion of these first two issues could be avoided with a clear specification of the model the authors wish to test. Unfortunately, a model is never truly specified, leading to confusion for the authors and the reader throughout the rest of the book. There is actually a section entitled "Specifying a theory of routine conflict," but it is not exactly consistent with what is said throughout the essay and, in fact, it does not clearly specify a theoretical model to be tested. This lack of specification is both indicative of the chaotic presentation of the material and a main cause of the lack of clarity throughout the rest of the book. Further, even though the theory is not clearly specified for the reader, a model is tested and Kennedy and Forde suggest that the results support their theory. It seems to me that the evidence might, in fact, support the authors' contentions, but it is not clear given the exposition.

From my reading of the book, and the statement of theory quoted above, I believe that Kennedy and Forde's model of routine conflict may look something like this:



According to the authors, the result of daily socialization, such as past experiences and the past behavior of others, results in the development of a routine, or behavioral repertoire, within the individual. One of the most important individual characteristics, say the authors, is whether or not socialization has increased the likelihood that violence is a legitimate option in a conflict situation. This individual characteristic interacts with the situational factors of the conflict situation, such as its location and the presence and the roles of third parties, to create the final outcome of the event. The outcome of

the event is one of either violence or non-violence, and may also include the potential for future conflict if the point of contention is not resolved.

The implications of a model such as this are important to the field of criminology. It moves our understanding of crime forward by potentially integrating two theories with differing assumptions and by revealing how elements from each can interact and result in a criminal offense. This is made all the more critical because we do not have here simply different theoretical elements, but different aspects of crime—antecedents to the event and the phenomenological nature of the event itself—which are often difficult for criminologists to reconcile. So, Kennedy and Forde have potentially enlightening ideas and a research methodology that may provide evidence for these hypotheses. In this particular book, however, this fascinating topic is held in check by a chaotic presentation. The reader is left with a glimpse of the potential of the authors' work, but disappointed with the disorganized construction of the book.

William Alex Pridemore
Department of Sociology
University of Oklahoma

References

Cohen, L, E. & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review, 44:* 588-608.

Goffman, E. (1958). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Services Research Center.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis. An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.

Kennedy, L. W. & Forde, D. R. (1999). *When push comes to shove: A routine conflict approach to violence.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Luckenbill, D. & Doyle, D. P. (1989). Structural position and violence: Developing a cultural explanation. C*riminology, 27:* 419-36.

Sacco, V. F. & Kennedy, L. W. (1996). *The criminal event: An introduction to criminology.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.