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Examining Workplace Violence as it Unfolds: Toward a Video-Based Microsociological Approach

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Abstract

Purpose. Research on workplace violence has predominantly focused on individual, organizational, and situational risk factors associated with employee victimization. However, limited attention has been paid to the interactional processes that shape workplace violence events despite microsociological theories and evidence underscoring the critical role of face-to-face interactions in conflict situations. This paper proposes a microsociological approach to better understand how workplace encounters escalate into acts of victimization.

Methodology. To exemplify the value of a microsociological approach, we analyze body-worn camera footage of a work situation that escalates into aggression between a ticket inspector and a bus passenger without a valid ticket. Using qualitative process analysis, we examine how interactional dynamics involving status and emotions shape the step-by-step progression of this high-risk encounter. **Findings.** We demonstrate how the imposition of a fine transforms the inspector-passenger interaction into a status negotiation, with passenger aggression emerging in response to the inspector's exercise of authority. Moreover, the inspector's emotion management plays a key role in preventing the situation from escalating further into mutual displays of anger and aggression. This case illustrates how a micro-interactional analysis of risky work situations can reveal the mechanisms of violence and inform situational prevention strategies. **Implications.** We provide methodological and theoretical guidance for incorporating microsociological analysis into workplace violence research. **Originality.** This study demonstrates how a microsociological approach, grounded in a novel video-observational method, yields unique insights into the interactional dynamics that causally shape incidents of workplace violence.

Introduction

Employee exposure to threats and violence in the workplace is a significant concern across numerous occupations (Eurofound, 2023; Nyberg et al., 2021). Victimization at work can result in physical, emotional, and psychological distress, including increased sick leave and reduced organizational commitment (Andersen et al., 2021; Nyberg et al., 2021). Consequently, work-related violence imposes substantial costs on individuals, workplaces, and society as a whole.

Extensive research has provided valuable insights into the correlates of workplace violence, identifying it as a complex phenomenon shaped by multiple factors, including individual characteristics, organizational structures, and situational contexts (Pagnucci et al., 2022; Sheppard et al., 2022). For instance, younger employees are at an elevated risk of victimization, while the effect of staff experience varies depending on the work setting (Sheppard et al., 2022). Employees in client-facing roles or those working under time pressure face heightened risks (Piquero et al., 2013). Poor supervisor support and low quality leadership are further associated with increased risk (Andersen et al., 2019). A substantial body of research has also addressed situational risk factors, such as specific work locations (Camus et al., 2021) and work hours, with evening shifts posing particular risks in some settings (Burgel et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2017).

While this latter situational line of research identifies where, when, and under what conditions violence is more likely, it offers little insight into how and why such incidents actually unfold face-to-face—since risky situations are typically analyzed as mere "external conditions or circumstances in a work context" (Hogh & Viitasara, 2005, p. 292). In other words, the situational perspective found in the workplace violence literature generally overlooks the interactional dynamics of conflicts that may shape the course of events (exceptions include e.g., Mullen & Kevin Kelloway, 2013). At this point, the field mirrors a

broader limitation in the general study of violence, which has only recently begun to examine the micro-interactional nature of violence on a systematic and large scale. This gap leaves significant potential for gaining deeper knowledge of how violent interactions actually unfold, moment by moment—knowledge that could inform more effective preventive measures (Collins, 2008, 2019).

In this article, we propose a microsociological approach to studying how and why certain work situations escalate into violence. We argue that this perspective requires close attention to how victimization events unfold, through detailed analyses of action sequences. As such, a microsociology of workplace violence entails both a theoretical and methodological orientation. Theoretically, we argue that understanding why work-related violence occurs—and how it might be prevented—requires close attention to the interactional dynamics of face-to-face encounters. This reflects an explanatory ambition to conceptualize how key social forces—such as status and emotion—influence human interaction and the risk of escalation (Turner, 2010).

Methodologically, we argue for the use of specialized approaches that enable detailed sequential and causal analysis of real-life work events. Specifically, we propose employing video observation of work situations—a method that has recently gained traction due to the increasing availability of high-quality recordings of real-life violent incidents. For the first time, such footage makes it possible to conduct fine-grained analyses of how violence unfolds, second by second. As Collins (2008, p. 5) highlights, "the video revolution has made available much more information about what happens in violent situations than ever before." We argue that this video-driven advancement in the microsociology of violence has not yet been systematically applied or critically reflected upon in the study of workplace violence.

To this end, the article first outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of our microsociological approach to studying workplace violence, emphasizing an explanatory

ambition rooted in the sequential analysis of video data. We then present an empirical case drawn from a research project on work-related violence on public buses, illustrating the application and advantages of this approach. Specifically, the case demonstrates how a risky work situation involves a process of status negotiation that escalates into passenger aggression, while the inspector's emotion management functions as a de-escalating force. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of the proposed microsociological approach, arguing that it provides detailed insights into how and why workplace violence unfolds, and can inform the development of behavioral interventions aimed at reducing high-risk interactions.

A Microsociological Approach to Workplace Violence

A microsociological perspective highlights the importance of examining social life within the interactional domain of individuals co-present in time and space (Goffman, 1983), viewing these encounters as "arenas of action in their own right" (Fine & Fields, 2008, p. 131). The relevance of this perspective to workplace violence lies in the recognition that even the most influential macro-structural forces cannot fully explain why violence is triggered. Instead, research increasingly shows that specific micro-level interactions often act as immediate triggers for violent behavior, making it essential to analyze such incidents within their real-time, situational context (Collins, 2008; Nassauer, 2022). For example, while young men are statistically more likely to commit acts of violence, it is only through the presence of interactional triggers—such as an insult that provokes anger and subsequently aggression—that we can understand why and when they act violently (Felson, 1982). Microsociology draws theoretical attention to these interactional dynamics, while also recognizing that they are shaped and constrained by individual characteristics and organizational contexts (Fine, 1991).

Thus, a microsociological perspective complements—rather than conflicts with—macro-structural explanations, suggesting that we can examine how large-scale phenomena manifest, are perceived, and are reproduced at the micro-level. This includes analyzing how key social forces such as status and emotions shape human interaction (Turner, 2010). For example, working in a service role aimed at pleasing customers is associated with unequal status dynamics in service encounters, potentially increasing the risk of abusive customer behavior (Yagil, 2008). Moreover, the relatively low status of service work is tied to macro-structural inequalities. To understand how these status inequalities contribute to assaults, microsociological research is needed to identify the interactional processes through which societal status hierarchies are translated into unequal risks of victimization (Collins, 2000). Consequently, the microsociological approach enriches theoretical explanations of structural influence by offering insights into the mechanisms that actualize these forces in the tangible behaviors observed in face-to-face interactions (Bowman et al., 2018; Nassauer, 2022).

In the present study, we conceptualize verbal and bodily behaviors as expressions of status and emotion, drawing on a growing body of microsociological theory and evidence indicating that status negotiation and emotion management are fundamental components of face-to-face encounters and their potential for escalation. A key insight regarding status negotiation is that individuals actively claim, offer, or reject status in the course of interaction (Kemper, 2017). When expected status is not acknowledged, it tends to trigger anger and prompt attempts to assert power in order to enforce one's status claim. Thus, when one party challenges another's status, this may elicit a counterattack aimed at defending that status—potentially provoking a further countermove that escalates into violence (Felson, 1982).

Furthermore, a core insight regarding emotions is that individuals engage in emotion management to regulate their own emotions and influence others' emotions during interactions (Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1996; Turner, 2009). Such management seeks to align

emotional expressions with situational expectations. Emotion management can also be employed strategically to prevent potentially conflictual encounters from escalating into hotheaded aggression (Ward & McMurray, 2016). By closely examining how employees and citizens behave in real-life situations, we can identify and theorize how dynamics of status, emotion, and related face-to-face interactional forces shape the risk of employee victimization.

Our microsociological approach aligns with a growing body of literature on violence that emphasizes the importance of examining the inherent features of interactions to explain why violence occurs (Bowman et al., 2018; Collins, 2008; Felson, 1982). In line with this perspective, we argue that a detailed analysis of the concrete situations in which victimization takes place is essential for understanding how risk factors unfold into acts of violence. This involves examining the patterns and sequences of action that lead to—or set the stage for—violent outcomes (Friis et al., 2020; Nassauer & Legewie, 2018).

A key motivation of the current paper is our belief that existing efforts to apply a microsociological approach to risky work situations have yet to fully realize the potential of microsociology. Most commonly, microsociology has offered an *interpretive* lens, focusing on reconstructing what workers know, perceive, or understand about violence at work. For example, social workers report that physical restraint is used in situations where there is a risk of violent escalation (Steckley & Kendrick, 2008), and bouncers describe their physical appearance and emotional displays as tools to defuse or manage aggressive confrontations (Ward & McMurray, 2016; Winlow et al., 2001). Such insights are undoubtedly valuable. However, a less acknowledged development is that recent microsociological theory incorporates these interpretive accounts not as an endpoint, but as a means to *causally explain* how and why violence unfolds (Collins, 2008). By interpreting subjectively meaningful motivations and emotions, we gain insight into *why* individuals act as they do (Kaas et al.,

2024; Weber, 1978). To adequately explain human action, we must engage with the subjective meanings that drive it (Maxwell, 2021). For instance, studying the anger an employee experiences during an intense, status-challenging encounter may help explain why the employee responds in an escalatory rather than a placatory manner (Liebst, Ejbye-Ernst, et al., 2019). In this light, we propose a microsociology of workplace violence that integrates interpretive insight with explanatory ambition.

Causal explanation hinges on accurately establishing the sequence of events, ensuring that the order of causes and effects is correctly identified (Kaas et al., 2024). While this is less central in interpretative microsociology, it is methodologically critical to the explanatory approach we advocate. Specifically, this entails a micro-detailed mapping of the sequential steps through which face-to-face interactions unfold, culminating in either violent or nonviolent outcomes (Weenink et al., 2022). To advance our understanding of the interactional dynamics that shape the risk of workplace violence, we propose that the microsociological approach should include an explicit ambition to conduct sequential and explanatory analyses of work situations, thereby enhancing knowledge of the causal risk factors involved. This ambition does not negate the value of existing microsociological studies that adopt an interpretative perspective on risky work situations. Rather, we argue that insights into meaning and motivation generated by such analyses could—and should—serve as a foundation for developing explanatory accounts of the interactional forces that shape employee victimization. In the following, we outline how such explanatory analysis can be conducted using a video-based methodology.

Video Observation of Workplace Violence

Microsociological research requires specialized methods that can capture social situations with enough detail to analyze sequences of interaction (Collins, 1983). Since the early 2000s, the widespread use of cameras in public, private, and professional settings has

made video observation the preferred method for microsociologists studying violence (Collins, 2008; Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2018). This is due to how videos enable direct observations of violent interaction sequences as they actually unfold, thus providing "researchers with the opportunity to examine the essence of social situations and study if there is causality at the microlevel" (Nassauer & Legewie, 2018, p. 163). Because of its high ecological validity and finely detailed capture of interaction sequences, video data is increasingly regarded as the 'gold standard' for microsociological studies of violent encounters (Pallante et al., 2024; Philpot et al., 2019).

By comparison, other social science methods offer a more coarse-grained view of violent events as they unfold. Onsite observations conducted through ethnographic or systematic observation approaches can yield ecologically valid data, but they often miss the fine-grained sequential details of interactions (Morrison et al., 2016) and can be practically infeasible for observing a sufficient number of violent events (Lindegaard, 2017). Furthermore, self-reported accounts—such as interviews or surveys—often cannot accurately reconstruct what occurred, due to factors such as memory errors, social desirability bias (Vrij et al., 2014), and the general difficulty people have in recalling and describing complex situations in micro-level detail (Baumeister et al., 2007). This limitation is particularly pronounced in the case of violent events, which are often messy and confusing, with numerous actions occurring simultaneously. Video observation allows researchers to break these interactions down into discrete sequences and to repeatedly view the same moments in slow motion (Philpot et al., 2019). The potential of video data to revolutionize our understanding of interpersonal violence has recently been recognized in a *PNAS* review, which described video-based violence research as exemplifying the "golden age of social science" (Buyalskaya et al., 2021).

The rise of video observational studies has also extended to research on violence in occupational settings. For instance, a video-based study of bouncers in nightlife conflicts found that bouncer aggression was more likely when they were directly involved as a party to the conflict, compared to situations in which they intervened as neutral third parties (Liebst, Ejbye-Ernst, et al., 2019). Studies using CCTV footage have examined store robberies, revealing that such incidents follow a scripted ritual involving all participants (Nassauer, 2018), and that robbers are more likely to use violence when victims resist (Liebst, Lindegaard, et al., 2019). Research on law enforcement has explored how officers' use of force is associated with their personal characteristics and behavior (Broussard et al., 2018). For example, a study using body-worn cameras found that police-citizen encounters with the lowest risk of force escalation involve greater use of persistent calm commands and procedurally just behavior (Sytsma et al., 2021).

Taken together, video-based observational research offers a key methodological advantage: it allows for the direct and sequential observation of naturally occurring events. This makes it possible to conduct fine-grained analyses of action–reaction patterns in violent interactions, thereby strengthening explanations of how and why workplace violence unfolds. In the following sections, we outline how this methodology can be applied, with the aim of inspiring readers to consider the use of video data in their own studies of workplace violence.

Methods

Data

To demonstrate the value of our microsociological approach, we draw on video-recorded work situations from a research project examining violence and threats against ticket inspectors on public buses in Denmark. The project collected 1,292 raw video clips of ticket inspections—recorded using body-worn cameras attached to inspectors' uniforms—along with 11 in-depth interviews with inspectors. The aim was to investigate how routine

ticket-fining encounters can escalate into verbal or physical assaults. The data were gathered in 2018 in collaboration with a public transport company concerned with reducing employee burnout and victimization (for further details on this project, see Friis, 2022, 2024). The project was granted permission to process personal data by the Danish Data Protection Agency through the joint notification of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen (ref. 2015-57-0125).

Given that the purpose of this article is to demonstrate the application of our microsociological approach, we draw on a single video case from the project to illustrate how video recordings can support detailed analysis of interaction—in line with research that conducts in-depth single-case analyses of video-recorded encounters (Weenink et al., 2022). The selected case captures a ticket-fining incident in which a passenger disputes the inspector's announcement of a fine and becomes aggressive. The entire episode is recorded, as the camera automatically preserves one minute of footage leading up to the moment it is activated by the inspector. We selected this incident because it illustrates the level of microsociological detail that can be achieved with this type of video data, and because it represents a typical example of passenger aggression and inspector response. By focusing on an event that escalates to aggression but not to physical violence, the case draws attention to a form of low-intensity victimization that is often overlooked in research on workplace violence, yet is a routine part of inspectors' daily work (Arbejdstilsynet, 2021). Thus, the case demonstrates how video data can also be used to identify and analyze nonviolent forms of victimization.

Analytical Strategy

Informed by microsociological theory on status and emotion management, we analyze the ticket-fining event through a process-analytical lens, focusing on identifying the causal drivers of the incident by mapping how it unfolds step by step within the case (Kaas et al.,

2024; Maxwell, 2004). Specifically, we examine the interactional dynamics of status and emotions as two social forces that shape human interaction (Turner, 2010). This involves analytical attention to how situated verbal and nonverbal actions express emotions and signal claims to, or rejections of, particular status positions during the interaction (Dael et al., 2012). To illustrate the potential of video data for fine-grained interactional analysis, the case is described with attention to the behaviors of the contesting parties, the duration of the encounter, and the number of individuals present.

Results

Status Contest in Work Situations

Ticket inspectors patrol buses to ensure that passengers have valid tickets. When they encounter a ticketless passenger, they need to obtain personal information about the passenger to issue a fine. In the case, two inspectors enter a bus that is about to begin its route and encounter a passenger who says that he has not yet bought a ticket. He explains that he is waiting for the bus driver, who has not yet arrived, in order to buy one. The inspectors accept this explanation, leaves the bus—and shortly afterward, the driver arrives and starts the engine. The inspectors then return and go directly to the passenger to verify that he has bought a ticket:

Video Case, part 1 (lasting 1 minute and 54 seconds)

The male inspector enters through the front door of the bus, which has nine passengers on board, and walks directly toward a man seated at the back of the bus while saying, "Hi [in a friendly voice] ticket inspection [in a neutral tone of voice]." The male passenger maintains a serious expression, removes an earphone from his left ear, and looks directly at the inspector before glancing and pointing toward the bus driver at the front of the bus. He repeats that he has not bought a ticket because the bus driver was not in the seat when he entered the bus, but that he will now purchase a ticket on his phone. The inspector responds that it is too late to buy a ticket now, because he should have done so when the bus driver arrived in the vehicle.

Passenger: Why is that too late now? [he frowns while asking and holds the earphone up to his cheek as if ready to put it back in]

Inspector: It is too late now. Because the driver came in, he was about to drive, and you have not bought a ticket.

Passenger: And then it is too late? [he gives a slight shake of his head while asking]

Inspector: It is, yeah.
Passenger: No it isn't [he shakes his head and looks even more skeptical, still looking directly at the inspector]
Inspector: Yes it is.
Passenger No it isn't.
Inspector: Yes it is.
Passenger: I don't even want to discuss it [he then looks down while placing the earphone back in his ear]
Inspector: Well okay, but I need to have something with your name on it. Or else what we have to do is that we stop the bus and call the police [he speaks in a matter-of-fact way while outlining the procedure]
Passenger: What?
Inspector: We stop the bus. The bus does not run [he continues in a matter-of-fact tone]
Passenger: [makes an dismissive sound, like "and so what"]
Inspector: And then we call the police. And what they do is that they arrive and take something with your name on and then they give it to me. I need something with your name on.
Passenger: Because I can't buy a ticket on my phone, huh? [he frowns even more]
Inspector: That's how it is. You are not allowed to enter the bus without a ticket.

From the outset, both the inspector and the passenger engage in behavior that asserts status, initiating a status negotiation (Goffman, 1967; Kemper, 2017). One of the inspectors walks directly toward the passenger as he re-enters the bus, creating the impression that the passenger is being singled out in a biased manner (Worden & McLean, 2017). This calls into question the fairness and legitimacy of the inspection and sets the status negotiation between the two parties in motion—with neither party willing to concede to the other's status claims. The passenger, for instance, challenges the inspector's authority by stating, "I don't even want to discuss it." This rejection of status prompts the inspector to escalate his display of authority by announcing that he will stop the bus and call the police. In doing so, he demonstrates an exercise of power aimed at overcoming the passenger's resistance to his status and authority (Kemper, 2017). As a consequence, the passenger becomes angry and begins to exhibit aggressive behavior by decreasing the physical distance between them, swearing at the inspector, raising his voice, and making aggressive gestures:

The passenger becomes visibly upset and begins questioning the rules while leaning forward in his seat, physically closing the distance between himself and the inspector standing in front of him. He points toward the bus driver again, raises his voice, interrupts the inspector's explanations, and swears while speaking. Meanwhile, the inspector

maintains an assertive tone, asking why the passenger did not purchase an electronic ticket, noting that it could have been done without the bus driver's presence. Then the passenger presents a new excuse:

Passenger: Because I just came from another bus.
Inspector: No. No, you did not. You have been standing here for a while.
Passenger: What? [he looks at the inspector]
Inspector: And the driver came in and –
Passenger: Have I been standing here for a while? [he looks up at the inspector with an open mouth]
Inspector: You have [he says in an assertive manner].
Passenger: Uh. What the fuck do you mean?
Inspector: And the driver –
Passenger: Shut up man. I came, you do not know shit about that man [he says while looking wronged and upset, staring at the inspector]
Inspector: You don't have to speak like that to me, my friend [he says with a relenting tone]. It does not help if you use that tone against me.
The passenger then shakes his head and lets his upper body lean back towards the seat, increasing the distance between him and the inspector.
Inspector: I just need something with your name on it.
Passenger: No, you are not going to get something with my name on. Try to listen – [he shows the display of his phone]
Inspector: The bus does not drive, and I have to call the police.
Passenger: Fine for me. [he puts his phone away in his pocket]
Inspector: Fine, then the bus won't go further.

This exchange illustrates how the continuous refusal of claimed status can incite anger and lead to physical displays of power, as demonstrated by the passenger's aggressive body language and verbal assaults (Dael et al., 2012). During the first two minutes of the interaction, neither the passenger nor the inspector shows any willingness to accept the other's explanation. Instead, they continue to challenge each other's claims and status, escalating the situation (Felson, 1982). The passenger refuses to comply with the inspector's authority and instead implies that the inspector is not even worthy of his time. This prompts the inspector to increase his display of power, by framing the passenger's behavior as a deliberate attempt to evade the fare. In an effort to save face (Goffman, 1967), the passenger then escalates the situation with aggression and power by saying, "shut up man."

This sequence of events illustrates how the refusal of status claims triggers power actions, thereby escalating the situation. When the inspector enacts his authority with greater

power, it increases the risk of escalation. As such, a microsociological approach helps us understand how the imposition of status and authority contributes to the risk of victimization.

Emotion Management in Risky Work Situations

Next, we consider the inspector's emotion management during the interaction (Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1996; Turner, 2009). So far, the passenger has expressed anger through both body language and his verbal reaction to the fine announcement. In contrast, the inspector has remained mostly calm in his emotional demeanor, showing no signs of anger. This self-regulation of emotion continues throughout the situation:

Video Case, part 2 (lasting around 10 minutes)

The inspectors inform the other passengers that the bus is not departing, but they are welcome to stay inside while waiting for the next one. For about two minutes, there is no significant interaction between the inspector and the passenger. Then, the passenger looks at the inspector with a slight smile on his face and says:

Passenger: Fucking asshole man, it is fucking stupid.

Inspector: Naah [he says in a low voice], please speak politely to me. I speak politely to you, so I would like that you speak politely to me.

Passenger: Wh-why man? You're just standing there [he points towards the inspector and then at his own forehead]

Inspector: There is no reason –

Passenger: You're just standing there.

Inspector: I am just doing my job [he moves his hands with palms facing upwards]. You just need to have a valid ticket like everyone else.

The passenger starts yelling again while staring upset at the inspector and making aggressive gestures with his hands.

Inspector: It doesn't help that you are talking like that.

Passenger: I don't care! I don't care [looks upset at the inspector]

Inspector: Yes, I know that you don't care. But it doesn't help you that you talk like that. You don't get anything out of it by talking like that.

Over the next seven minutes, the two parties continue to discuss the rules and whether the passenger is required to provide ID to the inspector. During this time, the inspector attempts to explain the rules and persuade the passenger to comply, while the passenger continues to exhibit aggressive behavior and rejects the inspector's authority. The inspector's colleague then intervenes to explain the rules, while the primary inspector leaves the bus for a short time. Eventually, the interaction ceases, and they wait on the bus until the police arrive, 40 minutes after the inspector first announced the fine.

While the passenger continues to verbally assault the inspector, the inspector manages to control his own emotions. This is evident, for example, when the passenger calls him a

"fucking asshole," and the inspector remains calm, responding, "Please speak politely to me." A similar form of emotion management is observed when the passenger escalates his aggressive behavior by yelling, gesturing, and staring angrily at the inspector, who does not mirror the aggression but maintains composure without raising his voice. Although the status contest continues without reconciliation between the parties, the inspector does not become emotionally overinvested. Instead, he attempts to make the passenger aware of his inappropriate and aggressive behavior by saying, for example, "It doesn't help that you are talking like that."

This demonstrates how the passenger and the inspector follow different emotional trajectories. While the passenger's experience of status denial incites anger that leads to aggression, the inspector successfully prevents the rejection of his status and authority from triggering similar displays of anger. Due to this emotion management, it is likely that the interaction does not escalate further, despite the passenger's aggressive behavior. This illustrates how microsociological analysis can deepen our understanding of how employees use emotions to manage conflictual encounters with citizens.

Discussion

In this article, we have proposed an explanatory microsociological approach to advance research on workplace violence. Using a video-based approach and case example, we have demonstrated how the interactional dynamics of status and emotions shape a risky work situation through processes of status negotiation and emotion management. Specifically, the video case illustrates how a status negotiation can lead to acts of power aimed at overcoming resistance to status claims. This dynamic underlies both the passenger's and the inspector's attempts to assert dominance in the situation. However, while the passenger's loss of status leads to anger and an aggressive counterattack, the inspector

succeeds in regulating his emotions, likely preventing the interaction from escalating into a physical altercation.

This analysis sheds light on why employees responsible for enforcing rules face a disproportionately high risk of work-related victimization compared to other occupational groups—by identifying the microsociological dynamics that underpin and help explain this aggregate statistical pattern (Bowers et al., 2009; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Further, our analysis demonstrates how employees can manage emotions to avoid anger contagion and mutual escalation, both of which have been identified as risks for frontline staff facing adversarial citizen behavior (Makin et al., 2019). More broadly, our analysis illustrates how microsociology can help explain how and why workplace victimization unfolds, aligning with the theoretical promise of this perspective (Collins, 2008).

For such microsociological analysis, we need fine-grained, sequential analyses that trace the progression of events from their initiation to their culmination in varying degrees of escalation. The focus of this analysis is the dynamically unfolding interaction itself, rather than the external and static situational conditions surrounding it—such as location, time of day, and the presence of staff—which prior research has identified as risk factors for workplace violence (Landau & Bendalak, 2010). Such situational risk factors should indeed be included in a microsociological analysis but analyzed in terms of how they influence the course of the interaction (Bowman et al., 2018). Ultimately, situational properties do not cause violence on their own; from a causal perspective, violence emerges through human interactions within those situations (Collins, 1983).

By focusing on the interactional manifestation of workplace victimization, it becomes possible to examine how organizational and individual factors shape the risk of victimization. Consider, for example, the organizational insight that occupations with high emotional demands are at increased risk of workplace violence (Barros et al., 2022). While this

correlation is important, it does not clearly explain the interactional processes that link emotional demands to victimization outcomes (Blumer, 1956), such as the dynamics of emotion management illustrated in the video case above. In addition, workplace violence research has shown that work experience correlates with victimization risk (Sheppard et al., 2022). Here, we argue that a strength of microsociological analysis is that it can shed light on how such individual differences manifest—for instance, in more or less competent action strategies in risky work situations (Friis, 2023).

These examples more broadly suggest that a microsociological perspective does not exclude the importance of organizational, external situational, or individual factors (Fine, 1991), as typically examined in the workplace violence literature. Rather, microsociology approaches these factors from an interactional, bottom-up perspective, focusing on how they manifest in face-to-face encounters. In doing so, microsociology addresses a gap in the literature by offering a more microsociologically grounded understanding of how and why various risk factors actually operate and shape the occurrence of victimization across occupational contexts.

As we have emphasized throughout, the gold standard for capturing interactional dynamics is through video observation methods (Pallante et al., 2024; Philpot et al., 2019). This approach can be applied qualitatively, as in the current case, but it also lends itself to large-N studies and the quantification of events—thereby strengthening the robustness and generalizability of findings. Indeed, much recent microsociologically informed research on violence is quantitative in nature and often employs a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative single-case analysis with statistical analysis of larger samples (Friis, 2022; Liebst, Ejbye-Ernst, et al., 2019).

While video observational data should be more widely used in the study of workplace violence, this method is not without its limitations. Critically, video observation

can lead to an overemphasis on the immediate event, potentially downplaying the role of organizational and structural dynamics that precede the incident, as well as the experiences individuals bring into it (Hoebel et al., 2022). Additionally, the thoughts and emotions of those involved can only be indirectly inferred through their behavioral cues displayed in the situation—as we did in the above video example. These limitations can be addressed by triangulating with other data sources, such as self-reports that provide information about prior experiences, organizational cultures, and felt (rather than displayed) emotions that cannot be accessed through direct observation (Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2018).

Another weakness of the method is that it is not always feasible to obtain camera recordings from a given workplace or type of occupation. However, our proposed microsociological approach can still be applied using alternative data sources. One option is to conduct interviews aimed at gathering fine-grained information about situations with and without violence (Friis et al., 2024; Lindegaard et al., 2015). Another option is to analyze formal reports of work-related incidents (Fraser et al., 2016). Public workplaces are routinely required to report and document, in detail, incidents involving harassment, threats, violence, or the use of force (e.g., among social workers). Despite the biases inherent in self-reporting, these data sources can still provide valuable insights into action sequences and the immediate context of work situations. When it comes to understanding and mitigating staff victimization, some situational insight is better than none.

Finally, a microsociological approach holds promise for contributing to preventive measures against violence (Collins, 2019). One advantage of microsociological, video-based analysis is that its conclusions are often tangible, intuitive, and feasible to translate into practical recommendations for improving de-escalation behaviors. For example, one study of ticket inspectors—drawing on the same corpus of video clips from which the present single case is taken—found that physically dominating actions were strongly associated with

conflict escalation and workplace victimization (Friis et al., 2020). This straightforward finding can readily be translated into a recommendation to avoid such actions—such as confining a passenger's physical space—and indeed led the company to reconsider its work routines. In addition to shedding light on how employee victims may attempt to de-escalate incidents, recent video-based research has shown that bystanders often intervene (Philpot et al., 2020), typically face a low risk of victimization when doing so (Liebst et al., 2020), and that their interventions are effective in de-escalating conflict (Ejbye-Ernst, 2022). We suggest that the workplace violence literature could benefit from engaging with this line of research by exploring how bystanders may be conceptualized and mobilized as a resource for violence prevention.

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