

# **Analyzing school violence in the United States: a symbolic interactionist approach**

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## **Abstract**

School violence is a significant issue in the United States as well as in many other countries. Past research often focused on the individual characteristics of the perpetrators such as their personality or behavior patterns. Less attention is paid to the interactive nature and symbolic meaning of those aggressive acts. This article utilized a symbolic interactionist approach, especially Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, in understanding the causes and functions of interpersonal violence at school. From this perspective, students' aggression can be viewed as a form of social interaction in which the offenders attempt to gain social status by manipulating the definition of situation both physically and symbolically. These violent incidents can serve as interpersonal rituals or scripted performances in which the offenders, victims, and bystanders all play a role. On the other hand, youths do not invent those "performances" all by themselves. Instead, they pick up elements in their cultures and largely follow certain existing scripts in corresponding to their social positions such as race, class, and gender. Implications for practice were discussed.

**Keywords: School violence, symbolic interactionism, Youth**

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## Background

School violence has become a public concern in the United States during the past decade. Although it was once viewed as a safe haven, more and more parents now perceive school as a dangerous zone in which their children can be easily harmed. A Gallup poll in 1999 found nearly half of all parents (47%) in the United States fearing for their children's safety at school (Gillespie, 1999). Serious offenses such as mass shootings in schools have captured wide media attention, which in turn has raised the public's anxiety about school safety issues. Students also seem to feel less safe at school now than a few years ago. According to U.S. Departments of Education and Justice's annual report, the percentages of students ages 12-19 who sometimes or most of the time feared they would be attacked at school increased from 6 to 9 percent between 1989 and 1995 (Kaufman et al., 1999).

There are disputes regarding the prevalence and seriousness of school violence problems. Some researchers have suggested that schools are still relatively safe places compared to children's homes and neighborhoods (Maguire & Pastore, 1996). Governmental reports also showed an extremely rare chance of serious violent offenses at school. Less than one percent of children nationwide who were murdered or committed suicide occurred at school (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 1999). Actually, students are less likely to be victimized at school than away from school. They are also less likely to be victimized now than in previous years (Kaufman et al., 1999). On the other hand, violent incidents such as bullying and physical fights are quite prevalent in school settings. In a 1997 survey, 15 percent of students in grades 9-12 said that they had been in a physical fight on school property in the last 12 months. In another survey, 8 percent of all students in grades 6-12 reported that they had been bullied at school during the 1992-93 school

year (Kaufman et al., 1999).

Researchers' disputes concerning the prevalence of school violence seem to result from their different definitions of the issue. Historically, bullying as a school violence problem has largely been ignored by American professionals. Until recently, most studies on this issue have been done in Europe, especially Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom. In a study of 700 Norwegian schools, Olweus (1992) found that 15 percent of the students were involved in bully/victim problems. A recent survey of over 4000 students in British secondary schools showed that 75 percent of the students have experienced verbal or physical bullying per year and 7 percent suffered severe and repeated bullying. (Glover et al., 2000). At the same time, another type of school violence that is often ignored is violence towards teachers and school staff by students. A national survey in the US found that during the 1991 school year, 28 percent of public high school teachers experienced verbal abuse, another 15 percent were threatened, and 3 percent were physically attacked by students (Johnson et al., 1993).

Victimization by peers at school has long-term impacts on students' mental health. Olweus (1993) showed that students who had been victims of bullying at age 13-16 had higher levels of depression and a more negative view of themselves than non-victims at age 23. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) examined peer victimization among kindergarten children and found that it was related to children's loneliness in school and their expressed desire to avoid that environment. Besides psychological harm, this anxiety and fear of school can disrupt children's educational process and keep them from fulfilling their learning potential. A safe environment is a necessity for children to study and learn. Although students may rarely suffer serious physical injury in school violence incidents, we can not ignore the huge social costs regarding children's psychological well-being and developmental progress.

## **The symbolic interactionism tradition**

From the interactionism perspective, individuals in society are constantly communicate and negotiate with each others, and one's sense of self is also largely based on his/her interaction with others. For example, in his analysis of "self", William James (1890) proposed three different kinds of self: "material self", "spiritual self", and "social self". According to James, the social self is individuals' feelings about themselves, which arise from interaction with others. Charles Horton Cooley (1922) also suggested that one's self emerges from interpreting others' views about him/herself, and he termed this process as the "looking glass self." In school settings, students may form beliefs about themselves through interaction with teachers and peers. Research has shown that students' achievement and behavior can be significantly influenced by teacher's expectation, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy even when the expectation is inaccurate (Jussim, 1989).

The interpersonal nature of one's self was also emphasized by George Herbert Mead. According to Mead (1934), the distinctiveness of human mind is its ability to understand conventional gestures and to employ them to take the role of others. In other words, as human beings we are able to capture the meaning of gestures and use them for communication. At the same time, Mead suggested three stages for the development of self, which are differentiated by children's growing ability to take the roles of others. In the final stage of self development, children learn to assume the overall perspective of a community, which Mead termed the "generalized other."

The symbolic interactionist perspective helps us to recognize the meaning of student's aggressive behavior as communicative gestures. Psychological theories often conceptualize youth's aggression as an individual behavioral pattern or personality trait and thus fail to recognize

the interpersonal nature in those incidents (Pierce & Cohen, 1995). In fact, school violence is often a group process in which the offender, victim, and bystanders all play a role (Sutton & Smith, 1999). By viewing school violence as interpersonal process, we are also able to appreciate the importance of social contexts in those incidents. Violence tends to happen in certain situations but not others, and people may behave differently corresponding to different social contexts. For example, children who have problem behavior at home do not necessarily generalize that behavior to school, while children in problematic school environments may develop a “school-only” pattern of conduct problems (Hope & Bierman, 1998). Therefore, in order to have a better understanding on the dynamics of school violence, we need to examine both the interaction process and the symbolic meaning of the aggressive behavior in school violence incidents.

### **Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory**

Erving Goffman’s work on self-presentation provides much insight into the dynamics of school violence. According to Goffman (1959), individuals intentionally or unintentionally give out signs during social interaction that provide information about whom they are and how they should be treated. By engaging in such “performances,” they attempt to create and maintain a definition of the situation so that they can control others’ conduct for their own interests. It is a mutual process that may lead to a working consensus of participants’ differential statuses and their appropriate manners. Those principles can be applied to school violence incidents. Student’s aggression can be regarded as a performance in which the offender tries to present himself as someone who is powerful and deserves status and respect. On the other hand, one can be quite aggressive as a response to perceived threats to one’s face or selfhood.

Therefore, face-to-face violent encounters in school are essentially interpersonal negotiations in which the participants attempt to either enhance or restore their identity and status.

Goffman (1959) regarded people as role-taking actors whose behaviors to some extent follow certain social and cultural scripts. He describes human interactions as dramatic plays and provides a systematic framework to interpret the symbolic exchanges in social process. One common aim for participants in social occasions is to maintain identity and save/promote face. This does not only apply to ordinary social interactions but also more deviant ones such as interpersonal violence. From this point of view, violence does not necessarily result from an individual's anger control problem but may be actually an adaptive and functional action in particular circumstances. Sutton et al. (1999) proposed that sometimes the bully's aggression does not result from his deficit in social skills but rather reflects his competence to manipulate the social situation for his own interest. Students' aggression can bring them social status and a positive reputation. Rodkin and others (2000) differentiated two types of popular children among boys grade 4-6. Model boys were viewed as cool, athletic, leaders, cooperative, studious, not shy, and non-aggressive. Tough boys, on the other hand, were perceived as cool, athletic, and antisocial. This indicated that some aggressive children and bullies were socially active and accepted by peers.

The above discussion shows that there are multiple ways for youth to gain popularity. To be sure, not all youth who seek social or material rewards resort to violence. A number of criminologists such as Cloward and Ohlin (1960) have suggested that adolescents from lower class have limited opportunity to achieve success through socially acceptable ways and they tend to engage in delinquency and violence as an alternative. Such theories highlight the symbolic nature and cultural contexts of youth violence. However, it is still unclear exactly how students can manipulate

the social situation and gain status through aggressive performance. In other words, we need to examine in more details the elements that make a violent play successful. By employing Goffman's concepts such as social face, face work, front, audience, and performance team, the present article attempts to analyze the dramaturgical elements of the interpersonal encounters that result in school violence. Recognition of the specific features of such incidents can help us design more effective program for intervention and prevention.

### **The social face**

*A central theme in school violence incidents is the public face or respectability. Goffman (1967) defined one's face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p.5). The maintenance of one's face is an on-going process during every interaction with others. A student who perceives a threat to his face during an interaction may attempt to restore it through aggression. Research on children's social information processing has shown that compared to non-aggressive children, aggressive children are more likely to attribute hostile intent to peer's ambiguous provocations (Guerra & Slaby, 1989). They are also more likely to value the expected outcome of aggression and are more certain about their ability in using violence to obtain desirable rewards. However, as we are going to see, these "cognitive errors" may actually reflect effective strategies in individual's past experience. Some children may be identified as cognitively deficient simply because they choose an aggressive response to hypothetical scenarios (Sutton et al., 1999).*

Psychological research often regards the characteristics of aggressive children as individual bias or deficits and therefore ignores the larger social and cultural contexts. For example, in some inner city neighborhoods, people are supposed to guard themselves on the street by expressing toughness and a willingness to fight. The criminals are assumed to pick out people who appear vulnerable, and the victims may

be blamed for their inability to control the situation. Therefore, the maintenance of one's public face is much more crucial in certain communities where it serves a survival function. Children from those neighborhoods may try to apply their adaptive strategies or "street wisdom" to school settings and get into fights with other students more easily. As Anderson (1990) said, "As indicated above, an aggressive presentation – through certainly not usually so extreme – is often accepted as necessary for black youths to maintain regard with their peers. They must "act right" by the toughest ghetto standards or risk being ridiculed or even victimized by their own peers" (p.181).

### **The willful attack of others' face**

*Impression management strategies can be used not only for protecting one's face but they can be intentionally utilized to gain social status. Goffman (1967) described this aggressive use of face as "making points" in which the individual attempts to "preserve everyone's line from an inexcusable contradiction, while scoring as many points as possible against one's adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself" (p.24). This pattern is often manifested in school violence incidents. A respondent in Glover et al.'s (2000) survey provided a typical scenario of school bullying: "The pupils mostly go around in groups of boys teasing and picking on one person, mostly a boy until he says something or stands up and then they all pile on him" (p.149). To make sure that the victim will follow the desired line, the offenders need to pay attention to the characteristics of their potential targets. It is to their best interest to pick up those students who are likely to submit and not to fight back. Research has shown that, although the majority of children may experience some violence during their school years, a relatively small portion of students who are physically weak and non-assertive constitute the habitual victims of repeated school bullying (Pierce & Cohen, 1995).*

Some students' willful attack of others' face can be regarded as a response to the structural constraints and repressions they perceive in school. In his ethnological study of a group of working class youth in the



UK, Willis (1977) found that those youth believe that they have little chance for upward social mobility, and they use delinquency as a way to display their open opposition to the school. Ethnological studies with inner city youth in the US also showed similar conclusions (e.g., MacLeod, 1995; Ferguson, 2000). These beliefs are not illusions but can be precise perceptions that those youth observe from their families and neighborhoods. Empirical evidence shows that 88 percent of the black males with over 12 years education will still experience poverty at least once in their lifetimes (Rank, personal communication). At the same time, one's likelihood to succeed academically in school is correlated with his/her socioeconomic and racial background. Therefore, those minority students often have little aspiration towards school and future, and they have no faith in the legitimacy of school authority.

*For students who are marginalized and denied success in school, proving their powerfulness through violence is an alternative way to gain social status and respect. In order to achieve this objective, the symbolic meaning of their aggression becomes far more important than the physical attack. In other words, they must present themselves as honorable fighters rather than brutal aggressors so as to reverse their low position in the school system. A condemnable Other needs to be created for this purpose. Greenblatt (1980) illustrated such pattern in his study on the self-presentation of Renaissance notables: "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other – heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist – must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed" (p.9). Delinquent youth often willfully distinguish themselves from the confirmative students and attribute unfavorable characteristics such as weakness to them (Willis, 1977). However, fellow students are not the only legitimate group to be brought in the show. Delinquent youth also distance themselves from the teaching staff by their social class disjuncture and styles (MacLeod, 1995). By confronting teachers in public, those youth can take the center stage and grasp the audience's admiration. As Ferguson (2000) said: "This performance, like others I witnessed, are strategies for positioning oneself in the center of the*

*room in a face-off with the teacher, the most powerful person up to that moment. Fundamental to the performance is engagement with power; authority is teased, challenged, even occasionally toppled from its secure heights for brief moments” (p.177).*

### **The opening moves of school violence**

Contrary to the common belief, violent incidents in school are not simply random or chaotic encounters between students. Instead, they often start with highly recognizable actions and rapidly progress along a scripted line into violence. In examining the within-incidents chronology of aggression, Goldstein (1999) suggested that the opening moves in such incidents are crucial in determining the trajectory of the interaction. Among the most frequent opening moves are offensive touching, interfering with something owned or being used, backbiting, or requesting to do something (National Institute of Justice, 1997). Some of these actions may lead to direct material loss on the victim's side, while others are harmless themselves but threaten one's social face in a symbolic way. For example, personal distance is regarded as sacred in our society, and penetration into this space violates one's personality. Violation of others' personal space is also a way to show one's superior status over the subordinate. Goffman (1967) observed an asymmetrical exchange of touching between people with different status in a psychiatric ward. People with high rank such as doctors can touch the patients or other staff quite freely, but patients are not supposed to touch the doctor. In the case of school violence, as soon as the respondent perceives himself being trapped in a disadvantaged position by the initiator's move, he may try to repair his face by backbiting and the interaction becomes a “character contest” (Goldstein, 1999) which eventually escalates into violence.

### **The performance team**

*Personal performance often involves several people as a team who*

*cooperate to maintain a particular definition of the situation together. This feature of team work is called “principle of unanimity”(Goffman, 1959). In school violence incidents, a major type of team membership is the peer group to which one belongs. The peer dynamic has been well documented in youth violence research. For example, Glover et al. (2000) found that secondary school boys in groups are three times more likely than a single individual to inflict physical or verbal harm on other students. As a team, individuals are required to sustain and foster a coherent projection that enhances the image of the whole team. Breaches by a single member (e.g., being perceived as weak or coward) may seriously disrupt the performance and cause the whole group to lose their status. In an ethnographic study on one group of adolescent boys (“the mods”), Blackman (1995) illustrated an incident in which a mod boy was hit by a boy from another group and the whole team quickly galvanized into action and initiated a fight with the antagonists. The superior team image fostered by the mods was threatened by the victimization of one member. In this case, the impression repair was accomplished through violence.*

## **The audience**

*The presence of audience is almost a necessity in school violence incidents. Pepler and Craig (1995) found that in about 85 percent of the bullying episodes there are other children who can be regarded as audience. Although the offender can demonstrate his superiority from the submission of the victim directly, his attainment of social status and even popularity largely depends on the response from the bystanders. Their positive feedback is a crucial reinforcement for the offender’s aggressive pattern (Randall, 1997). Even the silence of bystanders can be regarded as an approval for the offender’s violent behavior. The audience can also contribute to school violence by conferring the offender with reputation that locks the offenders and victims into their fixed roles (DeRosier et al., 1994). On the other hand, the fellow students in general may not be as important as the offender’s small group of friends. Although aggressive children are sometimes rejected by conventional peers, they do have considerable friendships which are warm and supportive (Dishion et al., 1995). These friends serve not only as team members but also the audience. A student*

*may attempt to promote his own rank within the team by proving his powerfulness in front of his friends.*

### **The front**

*A school's physical environment is the stage setting that provides opportunities and constraints for students' violent rituals. Violent incidents seem most likely to happen at places which are crowded and lack adult supervision. Glover et al. (2000) found that playground, corridors, and classroom are among the school locations that have high rates of bullying activities. Students have frequent encounters with each other and are prepared for negotiation or confrontation within these public spaces. The presence of an audience in these places also allows the students to perform their desired lines for status. However, school is not a homogeneous setting and incidents at different locations may have different dynamics and social contexts (Pierce & Cohen, 1995). For example, students are encouraged to engage in more unrestrained activities such as rough-and-tumble play on the playground. These behaviors have a higher chance to be interpreted as offensive and may easily turn into the opening moves for violence. On the other hand, the classroom requires discipline and puts strict restraints on students' behavior. These constraints, plus the presence of an authoritative figure, may trigger some students' oppositional behavior toward the teacher or fellow students as an attempt to counterbalance the repression and incapability they feel. Willis (1977) suggested the function of some working class children's violent behavior as: "It breaks the conventional tyranny of 'the rule'. It opposes it with machismo. It is the ultimate way of breaking a flow of meanings which are unsatisfactory, imposed from above, or limited by circumstances" (p.34).*

### **The scripts**

People do not invent all their acts by themselves. Their behavior patterns are to certain extent based on existing social and cultural guidelines, which are referred to as "scripts" (Goffman, 1959). These scripts are often not particularly rigid and the actors may be able to rewrite and negotiate their roles during social situations. Still, they shape

our identity in a given situation and are important references for individuals who engage in self-fashion efforts. To be sure, aggression does not necessarily bring the actor status and popularity. He needs to conduct “scripted” aggression and ensure that his acts are interpreted in the right way. In other words, the use of violence is legitimate only under certain circumstances. Although Goffman seldom talk specifically about the contents of social scripts, it will be helpful to illustrate the major themes in adolescents’ scripts as providing the cultural contexts for interpreting the violent behavior of those youngsters. A few significant issues are already noted in the previous section, namely masculinity, race and class, which are discussed here in more details.

One major theme in school violence is the offender’s concern in male honor. Students who attempt to gain social status through violence constantly refer to masculinity ideologies as the source of legitimacy. Empirical studies demonstrated that masculinity ideologies play an important role in youth problem behavior such as violence (e.g., Pleck et al., 1994). It does not only provide scripts for the violence ritual but also serves as an interpretive framework for the audience. Masculinity is a major concern for males across classes and races by which the value of a man is judged. The working class culture seems to place even more emphasis on masculine values (Bourdieu, 1984; Willis, 1977). Although the definition of masculinity changes over time, there are certain anchoring elements that consistently appear in modern Western concepts of masculinity such as aggressiveness. Men are supposed to be physically competitive with other men and sexually aggressive towards women. Their aggressive behavior toward others is sometimes even encouraged. It is manifested in many aspects like sports, one way in which masculinity is socially produced and youth can gain status with their peers (Whitson, 1990).

At the same time, masculinity is also a continuous self-monitoring process. As Kimmer (1996) has noted, “ Throughout American history

American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened. And men have been afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man, afraid of failure” (p.6). Under such social pressure for masculinity, men may not only attempt to promote their status through violence but also have to use violence in the presence of any danger to their male honor. Historically speaking, there have been plenty of violent rituals through which men could protect or regain their male honor (Spierenburg, 1998), and those rituals were often viewed as legitimate and the involved person’s duty. Given this cultural context, it is understandable why students who otherwise lack academic and economic resources tend to regard violence as an effective way to gain social status and self-esteem.

Besides gender norms, race is another theme that is relevant to adolescents’ script of violence. Racial stereotyping by teachers and school staff may make some students resort to violence as both a response to the discrimination and a self-fulfilling prophecy of teachers’ expectation. For example, Black students are often regarded as having fundamentally different characteristics from White students, and they are often portrayed as violent and engaging in risky behavior. In one ethnographic study at an inner city elementary school, Ferguson (2000) found that the delinquency of black students was “adultified” and seen as an inherent characteristic of blacks regardless of their age or developmental stage. They were viewed as dangerous in nature and thus needed strict control. “The body must be taught to endure humiliation in preparation for future enactments of submission” (p.87).

Black youth are not only portrayed by the dominant culture as violent, they themselves are often learned to act aggressively in an attempt to present themselves as untouchable and respectable (Anderson, 1990). Those gestures are regarded as “claiming turf rights” and are highly scripted by the ghetto culture. Such social scripts can make black youth at high risk of violence, both on the street and in school. At the

same time, race and class are often intertwined. Many of these minority youth grow up in disadvantaged neighborhoods with high crime rates and violence. Under such circumstances, a tactful and tough self-presentation is crucial for one's survival. In addition, the norms in these communities may be more tolerant of violence. Cohen (1955) suggested the existence of a "delinquent subculture" among working-class male youth, which provides a script for them to engage in violence and crime.

## **Discussion**

This paper examined the social contexts and the interpersonal factors of school violence by using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to analyze the elements of such encounters. It is suggested that students' aggression is not merely a cognitive or behavioral deficit but can be viewed as an interaction ritual through which the individual manages to gain social status symbolically. Most school violence is not random but is highly ritualized in terms of time, place, roles, and scripts. It results from the interaction between individual agency and structural constraints. Some students, especially those minority students who are disadvantaged financially and socially, may attempt to restore or enhance their status through aggressive face-to-face encounters. Such discussion highlights human agency in social process in the sense that the actors actively negotiate and shape the definition of situation. For example, even there are strong expectations for students to have appropriate manners in school such as to listen to the lecture quietly, some students can still turn the situation into a stage to present themselves as deviant heroes or tough guys. Also, encountering other students in the hallway provides opportunity for some adolescents to demonstrate their superiority and respectability in front of their friends.

On the other hand, we can not ignore the structural constraints which make some students resort to violence as an alternative way to fulfill their

psychological needs. Although schools are supposed to provide equal opportunities for every student to obtain a better future, they may in fact serve the function to maintain and reproduce social inequality. Bowles and Gintis (1976) have argued that there are structural differences among schools for children of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools in working class neighborhoods tend to have less academic resources and experienced staff while more emphasis is placed on discipline and behavior control. They socialize working class children to take similar social positions as their parents. Bourdieu (1984) also suggested that familiarity with the dominant culture is an implicit prerequisite for school success. Upper class students who have obtained such “cultural capital” through their family are more likely to succeed academically. These institutional factors largely limit students’ opportunity for conventional attainments and make them vulnerable for engaging deviant behavior.

In line with the symbolic interactionism perspective, many criminologists have highlighted the importance of approval and status seeking in juvenile delinquency and violence. For example, Cohen (1955) proposed that the educational and economic disadvantages of working-class youth restrain their chance of success, and such status frustrations lead to the emergence of a delinquent subculture. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) also suggested that the limited opportunity of disadvantaged youth results in an alienation from ordinary social norms and the development of subcultures that are characterized by conflict, crime, and retreat. They provide significant complements to the present discussion on Goffman’s theory by linking micro-level social processes to broader social and cultural structures. They do not only deal with “what” the social scripts are but also explain “how” these scripts are developed.

From a different angle, Elkind (1967, 1978) emphasized “imaginary audience” and “personal fable” to explain adolescents’ risk-seeking behavior. Although similar to the interactionist perspective, these concepts have roots in Piagetian tradition and were originally used to



describe the cognitive errors due to egocentrism. Adolescents' behavior is viewed as governed by the status of their internal cognitive development rather than social and cultural influences. It helps to explain the sharp increase of delinquency and violence during adolescence but has difficulty in explain the differential risk of aggression among youth of different genders, races and classes.

Compared to the above theories, a major strength of Goffman's dramaturgical theory is that it allows us with a framework to examine in great detail the actual school encounters during which interpersonal violence happens. Although all agree that the status-seeking motive is often influential in interpersonal violence, few criminologists discuss the exact moves and relevant elements (e.g., the front, the audience, the team, etc.) that are involved in such incidents. If school violence incidents are the results of social interactions in which the participants attempt to negotiate and maintain faces, it will be important to obtain detailed information about the interaction process so to consider potential ways to prevent school encounters escalating into interpersonal aggression. On the other hand, however, the dramaturgical theory may make one overlook the structural factors that contribute to school violence. Economic deprivation and discrimination are significant issues that need to be taken into account when considering school violence problems. Otherwise it will be another example of "blaming the victims".

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this paper shows that the social contexts of school violence are crucial in determining dynamics and trajectories of specific incidents. This proposition has significant implications for intervention design. Many existing violence prevention curriculums focus on teaching students social skills and anger control (Astor et al., 1999). However, without recognizing the importance of the social contexts in those violence incidents, they are not likely to change students' behavior pattern. Students may know the repertoire of non-aggressive social skills but they have good reasons not to use them if

they are “scripted” toward violence. On the other hand, zero tolerance policy can only keep the offenders from school but not eliminate the overall violent offenses. Students who drop out from school may associate with gang members and adapt even more aggressive behavior pattern.

A promising intervention may be to promote a peaceful climate at the school level (Embry et al., 1996). This requires the mobilization and cooperation of the whole school staff. These adults should serve as role models who themselves adapt a prosocial style in interacting with fellow students. In other words, they should pay respect to students equally. On the other hand, all the student body should be involved in the intervention. They should be constantly and publicly rewarded for prosocial behavior, and the encouragements need to be institutionalized and integrated into students’ everyday life. As mentioned earlier, student’s aggression is significantly influenced by the feedback from other students. Only by changing the school climate towards a prosocial direction that values respectfulness and peacefulness can we expect more prosocial interactions among students.

The analysis also implies that relieving the institutional constraints of school can be an effective way to prevent the school violence problem. Research has shown that school violence rate is highly associated with students’ academic failure at school (Hawkins et al., 1998). Administrative decisions and discipline policies also affect student’s perception and affiliation to school. Even the physical environments such as the characteristics of school buildings may contribute to school violence as well. It is suggested that may be the best way to reduce school violence is to promote a good school, a school that dedicates to every student’s academic achievement and individual development. It is hoped that by improving the overall quality of schools, we can reduce the violent incidents in our schools and secure a safe environment for children to develop and fulfill their learning potentials.

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# 美國校園暴力的社會學探討：符號互動論取向的分析

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## 摘要

校園暴力在美國以及其他許多國家已成為一項重要的社會議題。過去研究的焦點往往放在施暴者的個人特質上，例如其人格或行為模式。這些暴力行為中的人際互動與象徵意義則較少受到探究。本文從符號互動論的觀點出發，採用高夫曼的戲劇理論分析校園暴力的成因與功能。學生間的暴力行動可視為一種社會互動的形式，施暴者企圖在現實與符號層面操弄情境定義，以提升自己的社會地位。同時，這些暴力事件亦是一種人際儀式或表演，其中施暴者、受害者和旁觀者都扮演著特定角色。青少年並非自己憑空編造這些表演，而是從文化環境中擷取重要元素，並且遵循著種族、階級或性別方面的既定劇本。本文最後討論了這些分析對於校園暴力防治的意義與啟示。

**關鍵詞：**校園暴力、符號互動論、青少年