Open Peer Commentary

Violence is not a monolith: Ecologies of threat and their psychological signatures

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Abstract

Violence is not a uniform ecological input. This commentary argues that distinguishing between violent ecologies – diffuse crime, instrumental intergroup, and existential – clarifies why threat produces contradictory shifts in preferences foundational to human decision-making. This framework extends affordance-management theory by introducing moral affordances: opportunities to defend the group's identity and survival that can override concerns for personal safety.

Ko & Neuberg (2025) provide a valuable and generative framework by integrating affordance-management with life-history theory. However, the core principle of behavioral ecology – that psychological and behavioral shifts are adaptive responses to specific contexts (Nettle et al., 2013; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2019, 2020) – invites a more precise analysis of threatening ecologies. While their framework powerfully models how priorities shift as perceivers change, this commentary extends it by disaggregating the violent ecology itself, distinguishing between the atomized threat of diffuse criminal violence and the collective threat of intergroup conflict – and further, between instrumental and existential forms of that conflict. This refinement helps resolve apparent contradictions in the literature regarding violence's effects on the fundamental dimensions of time, risk, and social preferences, and extends their framework into political psychology by introducing the moral affordances that emerge from existential conflict.

An ecology of diffuse criminal violence is defined by unpredictable, atomized threats that foster a psychology of defensive self-preservation. This environment directly erodes social capital and attacks the foundations of community life, fostering social atomization as individuals withdraw from public spaces and narrow their circles of trust in response to an ambient threat that can emerge from anywhere (Blume, 1996; Salmi, Smolej, & Kivivuori, 2007; Zanin, Radice, & Marra, 2013). The adaptive response is similarly defensive regarding risk: the literature consistently shows that individuals become more risk-averse, a strategy of reducing exposure to risks within one's control (Brown et al., 2019; Padilla, 2012). This stands in contrast to the risk tolerance often observed in perpetrators themselves, for whom risk-seeking is theorized to be a predisposing factor (Epper et al., 2022). Finally, the sense of "futurelessness" fostered by violent environments shortens perceived temporal horizons, leading to a present bias that favors immediate over long-term concerns (De Courson et al., 2023). This suite of adaptations – narrowed social trust, defensive risk aversion, and a present focus – provides a precise psychological signature for the "community violence" Ko & Neuberg describe, revealing an ecology that primarily affords threats to survival, which are managed through individual preservation rather than collective action.

An ecology of instrumental intergroup conflict, driven by competition over resources, shifts the primary unit of survival from the individual to the group. Unlike the atomizing effect of criminal violence, this collective threat is a catalyst for parochial altruism – cooperation and benevolence confined to the ingroup (Bauer et al., 2014; Werner & Skali, 2025). This restructured social logic is accompanied by a complex approach to risk, which has yielded seemingly contradictory effects in the literature. The resolution to this paradox lies in the specific nature of an individual's exposure to violence.

The evidence suggests a fundamental distinction: suffering violence appears to increase risk-seeking, while witnessing violence fosters risk aversion (Rockmore & Barrett, 2022). Studies of civilian victims in the protracted civil conflicts of Burundi (Voors et al., 2012) and Colombia (Fatas et al., 2021) link direct victimization with greater risk-seeking. Conversely, witnessing the lethality

of the environment – such as Turkish conscripts seeing another soldier injured or killed (Kibris & Uler, 2023) or civilians living amidst the ambient threat of civil unrest in Kenya (Jakiela & Ozier, 2019) – increases risk aversion.

The acute, self-preservational response to witnessing a lethal threat is to become more cautious. In contrast, suffering violence may recalibrate one's risk calculus to facilitate retaliatory or status-recovering behaviors, which are inherently high-risk. This risk-taking calibration is functionally prosocial, underpinning the high-stakes cooperation seen in costly group contributions (Snijder et al., 2024; Wang, Heine, & van Witteloostuijn, 2023) and increased post-conflict political engagement (Bellows & Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). Finally, the acute mortality threats of this environment consistently shorten temporal horizons (Imas, Kuhn, & Mironova, 2022; Lahav, Benzion, & Shavit, 2011; Voors et al., 2012). This psychological signature – of a coalitional, present-focused actor whose risk calculus distinguishes between personal victimization and witnessed threat – provides a richer, evidence-based extension of the functional "gang" member Ko & Neuberg describe.

The third and most psychologically transformative ecology is that of existential intergroup conflict, defined by perceived threats to a group's core identity, values, or survival. While frequently fought over tangible stakes, this ecology is distinct because those stakes often become fused with the group's fundamental meaning, rendering them non-negotiable. Here, the instrumental logic of costs and benefits can be subordinated to a deontic logic of sacred commitments (Ginges & Atran, 2009), giving rise to a unique psychological signature. The foundational social adaptation is an intense ingroup solidarity, constituting the psychological basis of collective resolve (Falk, 2014). This moralized solidarity is accompanied by a recalibrated approach to risk: exposure to violence has been shown to increase ingroup cooperation and risk-taking in post-genocide Rwanda (Coutts, 2024) and was linked with ingroup prosociality and risky defense of collective rights among Palestinians (Shackleford, forthcoming). The final component is a lengthened temporal horizon, in contrast to the present focus fostered by other violent ecologies. For example, exposure to bombings in Ukraine increased patience and future-orientation (Yudenko, 2023), a key component of resolve in protracted struggles (Kertzer, 2017). This psychological signature thus points to a novel class of moral affordances, where opportunities to defend the group's existence and its core commitments can become so salient that they rival or even supplant the more fundamental affordances for personal safety and material gain.

Disaggregating the ecology of violence offers a more precise and generative extension of the affordance-management framework. By distinguishing between diffuse, instrumental, and existential conflict, we can resolve contradictory findings in the literature and identify the specific psychological signature – in social, risk, and time preferences – that each structure of threat predictably generates. This ecological precision reveals that human adaptation is not to violence as a monolithic category, but to the particular affordances, instrumental or moral, that an environment presents. Understanding this distinction is fundamental for explaining the deep foundations of human conflict and cooperation.

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