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Settler-on-Settler Violence: Ritual Protocols in YouTube Street Fight Videos - Part Two

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Title

Settler-on-Settler Violence: Ritual Protocols in YouTube Street Fight Videos - Part Two

Abstract

This is part two of a series of two papers exploring a project was conducted by two Australian Aboriginal researchers, one male and one female, and might be described as ‘reverse anthropology’, in the same way that people sometimes refer to positive discrimination as ‘reverse racism’. But we would just call it anthropology; a tidal river is still a river when it flows back the other way. The project could hardly be acknowledged as anthropology though, as it was based on Indigenous methods of inquiry that do not yet belong to a formal discipline. Initially the goal was to disrupt Australian colonial narratives of ‘black-on-black violence’ and hold up a mirror to the occupying culture, by applying customary Indigenous conflict protocols to an analysis of online street fight videos featuring settlers from various colonies. However, our early encounters with the field revealed that public violence in settler communities is a lot more rule-governed than we had expected, inspiring us to a deeper investigation that went beyond critique and culture jamming. While we found a lot of common ground with settler public violence rituals, the code of chivalry we observed was unfamiliar and drew the focus of our inquiry, leading to some interesting findings about the gendered nature of non-Indigenous public violence.

Keywords

Public violence, Indigenous, rules-governed violence, YouTube, settlers, Indigenous methodology

The Protocol Story

From the literature and our own deep yarns together and with our community peers (Menzel & Yunkaporta 2022) we concluded that most contemporary violence is probably dysfunctional, resulting in damage to relatedness. There is public violence and private violence. Private violence (domestic abuse, family violence, punitive beatings, sexual assault) results in the most horrific damage, is not transparent and is not rule-governed. Public violence (sporting events, street fights) is transparent but is likely to cause damage when it is not rule-governed. Healthy public violence that is rule-governed may play a vital role in increasing relatedness in communities.

We discerned four Indigenous boundary protocols and four Indigenous cohesion protocols for healthy public violence:

Boundary Protocols:

- No hair pulling, kicking, continuing on the ground, and no use of weapons
- No serious physical harm – have to be able to walk away
- No collateral damage to non-combatants
- No unfair fights – must be consenting agents reasonably matched

Cohesion Protocols:

- Maintain dignity of everyone present
- Seek resolution/co-existence
- Relational accountability beyond the interaction
- Group governance – adherence to a code

The Number Story

Videos were viewed (n=100) from six different settler states, Australia (n=30), Canada (n=20), Israel (n=15), New Zealand (n=5), Taiwan (n=5), US (n=25). The variations in quantity from state to state were due to limited availability of videos that matched our sampling criteria. There were a lot of ‘butt-crack rule’ eliminations for the US data set (a criterion showing respect for video subjects enduring a loss of dignity, such as involuntary partial nudity). In New Zealand it was difficult to find videos without at least one Māori participant and in Taiwan there were mostly videos of unilateral attacks rather than mutually consensual street fights. As a result we were unable to differentiate meaningfully between the states in the quantitative analysis, although variation did emerge in the qualitative data, for example most of the Canadian fights were associated with sporting events and were characterized by a more light-hearted, role-playing approach to violence.

The first category of Indigenous protocol violation was dirty fighting. Dirty fighting was categorized by actions such as hair-pulling, ripping clothes, striking a fallen opponent, and so forth – basically any violent act that did not involve standing and striking an aware opponent. We relaxed the Indigenous protocol against kicking as we recognized this as a cultural difference in fighting styles that deserved our respect and tolerance. Also, most kicks were eastern martial arts style strikes from people with limited training, so were largely ineffective and mostly for show. However, kicks to the head and groin were classified as dirty. 76% of the observed street fights contained elements of dirty fighting.

The second category was intentional harm, which consisted of any act that was clearly intended to damage participants in a way that would require more than an overnight stay in hospital. 73% of the videos contained acts intended to significantly harm or maim combatants.

The third category was collateral damage, involving instances of combatants losing control of the fighting space and either intentionally or unintentionally harming onlookers or passers-by. 55% of the fights contained incidents of non-combatants being harmed or assaulted.

The fourth category of violation involved the Indigenous protocol of 'fair fight'. This is difficult to define but involves mutual consent, cohesion of intent for both combatants and onlookers, and a general adherence to most of the other protocols being measured. Fair Fight is more than the sum of these parts, ensuring that all participants will derive some kind of benefit collectively and individually from the shared experience, not at the expense of a victimized and alienated participant. Combatants don't need to be evenly matched, but there must be a reasonable chance of a fighter being able to give a good account of themselves. The relative size and skill of combatants can't be too asymmetrical and there must be a sense that justice is being served in a way that will at least preserve the dignity of the aggrieved party. One third of all the fights viewed were classified as fair fights. Although this vague protocol is more prone to confirmation bias, it should be noted that we were pleasantly surprised by how many of the fights were fair from our cultural point of view, as we had extremely low expectations in this category and had to revise our assumptions about the lawlessness of settler violence.

Dignity was the fifth category, a protocol ensuring the autonomy, reputation and spirit of all participants (including onlookers) is not damaged by the violation of social norms or the loss of control and integrity. There is a sense in this protocol of a person retaining their self-

determination and awareness while also fully expressing their passions. 68% percent of the fights contained violations of the dignity protocol, with participants compromising their own dignity or diminishing the dignity of another.

The sixth protocol of responsibility and co-existence was measurably present if participants demonstrated a sense of belonging within a culture or community and adherence to the values of their culture, specifically that participants were ‘fighting for’ the maintenance of their collective value system rather than simply ‘fighting against’ individuals in response to personal slights, or attempting to avoid responsibility for a transgression by ‘kicking up the dust’ through the unnecessary escalation of a conflict. This protocol was demonstrably absent in 58% percent of the fights.

The seventh protocol, closely aligned with the sixth, was about relationality and accountability. The main difference between this and the previous protocol was time – not just a sense of responsibility during the fight but that there would be accountability for transgressions following the fight. Accountability to state institutions (such as police or mental health services) did not count for this protocol. There had to be evidence that the participants existed within some kind of relational network together in their community and would be held accountable within these relationships following the fight. In 57% of the fights this protocol was very clearly absent.

The eighth protocol was governance, which was deemed to be present if there were any attempts made to establish or enforce rules, or if any participants took on the role of adjudicating or attempting to break up a fight. The majority of the fights contained evidence of this protocol being upheld to a greater or lesser extent, with 38% of fights being deemed completely lawless. There is a potential flaw here however, in that five of these fights were melees (free-for-all, non-

stop group brawls). All of the melees were conducted by Asian, South Asian or Middle Eastern settlers who may have been participating in the clan-based punitive governance often observed in intensive kin-based cultures (Henrich, 2020). This would mean there were elements of governance beyond the fight itself that were culturally invisible to us. If this were the case, then only a third of all the fights could be considered to be lacking in governance.

There were three pairs of the protocols that demonstrated a relational alignment in the Thought Ritual analysis, including the Number Story (notches made on a woman's fighting stick corresponding with violations in each category) as a data set, however statistically this is somewhat invalid as it merely represents similar numerical values between protocols and there are limits to the math's a person can do with notches on a stick. However, in thought experiments seeking causal relationships between protocol violations, and in peer review (which in our community occurs before the paper is written and while analysis is still underway) we found that protocols we identified as interrelated all had similar numerical values. Most of these seem like common sense, for example dirty fighting (n=76) is likely to result in significant harm (n=73). We found that adherence to responsible co-existence protocols (n=42) during the fight were usually indicators of likely follow-up with relational accountability protocols (n=43) in the aftermath of the fight. A commitment to fair fight protocols (n=33) would usually ensure the maintenance of dignity (n=32). The conclusion we arrived at through pre-print peer review (not only with Aboriginal community peers, but with settler martial artists, economists, computer scientists and a peak performance expert) was that the Indigenous 'fair fight' protocol may be considered a kind of social technology common to diverse human cultures, that assists with the maintenance of self-determination at the level of individuals and collectives, creating a generative tension and balance between autonomy and relationality.

On the whole, we were unable to prove our original hypothesis (expressed informally as “Settler violence is lawless and unaccountable”), finding instead that there was a strong moral code clearly present, although this was frequently violated when individual and social pathologies arose, indicated by disruptions to relatedness (such as overconsumption of alcohol, extreme narcissism, group hysteria, white supremacy.) However, while our hypothesis was disproven, there were unexpected and interesting findings that emerged with regard to the gendered nature of roles in the expression of settler violence and chivalry.

The Picto-story

As Indigenous researchers, we both found ‘oral culture’ to be a limiting description of our cultural modalities, one which we felt in the past had limited us to ‘yarning’ or verbal cultural expression in both data collection and analysis. While our traditional cultures are not print-based, they find expression through far more than the spoken word - images, movement, gesture, relationships, ritual, shared context and crafted objects. In our Thought Ritual process of data analysis, we utilized all of these modalities, and the Picto-story method of qualitative data collection formed the foundation of our analysis (symbols carved on a fighting club). It also resulted in an overlap between the data collection and analysis, which is a feature of Thought Ritual - an analytical process running throughout every stage of the research project and potentially continuing for years afterward in ongoing research translation activities in the community. We were not satisfied the process was complete enough to report on in print form until two years after the project had finished.

Picto-story data was collected as symbols drawn from our responses to the videos, as well as expressions of categories, themes, variables and data points as they emerged. The strange carved

fighting club made from English walnut was created as part of the Thought Ritual process in analyzing the symbols and stories arising from the data. There were symbols for each of the Indigenous conflict protocols, for each settler state and for the patterning of themes encountered.

For example, a swastika was used to mark instances when overt white supremacy was expressed through racial slurs (we encountered no examples of non-white supremacy); Mickey Mouse ears marked the rare occurrence of family violence (once, at Disneyland, a family street fight which was the only example we saw of physical violence towards women or the elderly); a phallus image was used to mark the instances when violence was aligned with language that used sexually degrading analogies or promoted an image of manhood as being sexually violent; a coat of arms represented very frequent acts of restraint or avoidance on behalf of men towards women, which we classified as chivalry; a flashing light symbol indicated police involvement; and male and female symbols were used to demonstrate the roles men and women played or were allowed to play during acts of violence. Also, we recorded pictographs of a football to represent violence after sporting events. Other marks and symbols assisted with the analytical process, for example a pictograph representing indications of overt self-consciousness about being filmed - we felt performativity might be a confounding variable in those instances and controlled for this in our analysis.

We found that expressions of white supremacy intersected with expressions of hyper-masculinity. When this nexus occurred, there were at least twice as many protocol violations as the average, and the likelihood increased of an out-of-control melee breaking out, as well as the outsourcing of governance to institutions such as the police. The relationship of these themes to the chivalry symbol was indirect, in that chivalry was absent when women as regulators were absent, and the nexus of racism and hyper-masculinity only occurred in exclusively male contexts.

Racism was notably present during the single instance of family violence, which occurred at Disneyland, but not from the combatants. It was perceived in the failure of onlookers, bystanders and security personnel to intervene or even express interest beyond the excitement of the spectacle. In this instance, the rules of chivalry did not apply to women of colour being beaten severely by a male relative. Part of this may also have been reluctance to intervene in a family dispute. We almost did not include this in the data as it blurred the lines between street fight and domestic violence, but the incident made us intensely uncomfortable and disrupted our expectations so much that once we saw it, we couldn't unsee it. It affected the way we framed our analysis so completely that it had to be declared and etched into the wood of our picto-story as a deeply disturbing set of Mickey Mouse ears.

The Meaning

While we acknowledged our bias at the beginning of the project and approached the field fully believing that settler-on-settler violence would lack any governance, protocol or relationality, we were surprised to find that behaviors emerged that echoed most of our own cohesion rules, with significant frequency. While we saw that these behaviors were patterned on different cultural norms from our own (chivalry, gender identity expression, domination) we respected them as enactments of valid customary law in settler communities. This respect enabled us to take note of the instances when those demotic structures were absent and find variables in common across those events.

We discovered a significant comorbidity involving extreme, lawless violence and settler illegitimacy. The more precarious the state in the international context (e.g. regional hostility/isolation, condemnation over lack of treaties and genocidal policies) the more likely it

was that extreme lawless violence would occur. This was particularly evident in Israel and Australia, which were the only settler states where we observed firearms being deployed during street fights. We had to admit we had expected to see firearms mostly in African American settler communities, due to our lifelong exposure to American films and television. However, we saw no firearms used in these communities (even when visibly present in a losing fighter's waistband) and noted our Indigenous cohesion rules were far more likely to be present there than in other US settler communities. In all settler states observed, except Canada, minority cultures and involuntary settler communities (such as African Americans) were more likely to exhibit rule-governed behaviors in street fights, but that is not to say that whiteness was the common variable in non-rule-governed violence, as the same general patterns were observed in Taiwan as in the other settler states. Every state showed the same pattern of enforced division in gendered roles, however this was most prevalent in Israel and Australia.

In Israel, women were mostly absent, even as onlookers. In Australia women were present in most fights, but their roles as cheerleaders or non-combatant peace-makers were strictly enforced. Australian settler women did on multiple occasions attempt to engage in combat, but in every case the male combatants would immediately stop fighting and work together to prevent female participation. Formerly passionate rivals, even in the midst of extreme rage, would suddenly unite as brothers and move together in ways we observed as almost a singular entity to separate female fighters either physically or through sexualized ridicule. The ridicule usually took the form of violent, sexualized insults and catcalls, which universally seemed to have a chemical effect on the biology of the women, who instantly became slouched, tearful and enervated, when moments before they had been highly motivated, energetic and skilled.

In one instance the women were clearly experienced martial artists (while the male combatants certainly were not) and were instantly separated by a group of over a dozen males who had been fighting each other only seconds before. They deployed jeering insults of “Catfight!” and “Show us your tits!” while moving en masse between the female fighters. They bonded over their collective levity and ceased fighting, passing around beers and shouting jokes. We felt quite upset on behalf of those women, particularly when we realized the hopelessness of their position - that one way or another they would be policed into their designated roles. They could support, spectate, invigilate or intercede, but never participate in violence. We also noted that in the majority of the fights, women were physically excluded from combat by their clothing - high heeled shoes and flimsy, restrictive or delicate garments.

Finally, we found that outsourcing governance to state institutions did not work in any of the street fight videos in our data set. In fact, in every case where police were present, the violence escalated to extreme and lawless behaviour, and community governance ceased. Several of the fights began only after the police arrived. We saw no examples of fights de-escalating with police intervention.

We have drawn no conclusions from this research, other than a certainty that ritualized violence is far more complex than we had previously imagined or encountered in the literature - in both our own communities and settler communities. We are still grappling with a lot of issues from this research project, not the least of which was a desensitization effect we experienced and an ‘unsettling’ of our values that was more than a little discomfiting. While we are still uncertain about what this research means, we do not see publication as the end point of our inquiry and hope to continue making sense of the project with people who read this and are interested in offering new perspectives.

Indigenous inquiry seldom values production of a set of findings, but rather creates a story that can be shared and interpreted from different points of view - and we have shared this story in various communities, conferences and interviews. We also feel that the ongoing sharing and knowledge production involved in Indigenous research translation prevents the performance of discrete research projects with a beginning, middle and end, and so we find that a follow-up hypothesis is unavoidable. Our new hypothesis is as follows: violence is a human behaviour that must be expressed through rule-governed, public rituals that allow equitable participation, distributing conflict evenly throughout social systems to minimize the enormous damage caused by sudden eruptions of mob violence, state violence, hidden violence, and monopolization of violence by a dominant social group. However, to date we can think of no way to conduct an experiment for this, natural or otherwise, that would ever satisfy the requirements of ethical research.

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