

Book Proposal

Seeking Safety: The Cognitive Foundations of Civilian Behavior during Violence

Aidan Milliff

Assistant Professor of Political Science
Florida State University

The Argument

Seeking Safety explains how individuals react to situations of emerging and ongoing violence. The manuscript is framed by two broad questions: When confronted with violence, why do some people choose to flee their homes, while others find a place to hide and wait, and still others ingratiate themselves with armed actors or even join violent groups? In conflicts around the world, why do similar-seeming people often pursue different strategies in response to violence? I argue that civilians' decisions during violence are based, to a large and under-appreciated degree, on individual perceptions and interpretations of a violent environment, which I call *situational appraisals*. Existing social science theories do not give us a clear understanding of whether and how individual appraisals matter. I show that they matter greatly for our ability to explain and predict civilian's responses to violence.

To ground this argument, I develop a new typology characterizing the strategies civilians can choose when responding to violence. Grouping civilians' options into strategy categories and examining contrasts between them provides clues about how different individuals might come to perceive one or the other as "the best bad option" when facing violence. Surveying the literature, I posit that civilians' strategies for surviving violence belong to one of four categories—fighting, fleeing, hiding, or adapting—and that we can contrast these categories based on whether they involve approaching or withdrawing from the source of a threat, and whether they are highly or moderately disruptive compared to an individual's normal patterns of life.

I argue that individually-varying interpretations of violent environments are fundamental to the way civilians decide which strategy will keep them safe. I theorize that two particular dimensions of interpretation—two different situational appraisals—explain how people weigh survival strategies that vary along the dimensions of approach/avoid and disruptiveness. Appraisals of predictability influence how people judge strategies that are highly vs. moderately disruptive to their daily lives, and appraisals of control or agency influence how people judge strategies that involve approaching vs. withdrawing from threats. People who appraise themselves as "in control" against violent threats should be likelier to approach those threats. People who feel like the future evolution of violence is highly predictable should be likelier to make modest changes to their behavior, rather than massively disrupting their lives to increase their safety. The interaction of these two simultaneous appraisals, I argue, explains what category of strategy people will find most attractive: a disruptive and drastic approach strategy like fighting is most attractive to individuals who feel in control, but also feel a sense of un-predictability, and so on.

The Evidence

I test the argument that appraisals of control and predictability shape civilians' decisions about how to respond to violence using a wide range of methods and data sources—interviews, machine learning text

and video analysis, statistical analyses, and qualitative case study—focused primarily on important conflicts in South Asia. One of the manuscript’s marquee contributions in this realm is a new method for combining machine learning tools and qualitative analysis to learn from oral histories and other testimonial data. Oral histories are a time honored and widely used method for recording the testimony of ordinary people. For many important conflicts in the 20th Century, oral histories are the only large-scale systematic record of ordinary people’s perspectives and interpretations, which are unlikely to appear in elite-focused documentary or news archives. Oral histories are also uniquely suited for studying emotions, perceptions, and other psychological processes that are not reflected in sources typically used by scholars of political violence, like administrative data or surveys.

The first source of evidence I use to test *situational appraisal theory* is an archive of over 500 oral history interviews that document the exposure of Sikh civilians to two episodes of violence in the 1980s in India—the “Punjab Crisis” and a series of urban pogroms in 1984. I analyze these testimonies as qualitative evidence, and also use cutting-edge machine learning tools to detect and label expressions of situational appraisals in the interview transcripts. Combining these tools allows me to answer questions that often elude researchers using traditional evidence and methods: What emotions, thoughts, and reactions do people report experiencing during violence? Of all the available information in a violent environment, what do people focus on, and how do they ascribe meaning to it? Mixing qualitative and machine learning methods makes it possible to answer these questions at unprecedented scale, and provides high-quality evidence showing the importance of situational appraisals to civilians’ decision-making.

I complement the findings from this oral history archive with a series of my own original interviews with survivors of the Punjab Crisis, fine-grained administrative data from the U.S. War in Afghanistan, and descriptive data drawn from surveys in the United States and Kenya. I select these sources of evidence to first go deeper and then to go broader. Long, in-depth interviews with people from the same population as the oral history archive (including two overlapping individuals!) provides crucial evidence about mechanisms and the limits of the theory. Interviews show how people *use* situational appraisals to make decisions, and when/how those appraisals are overwhelmed by other considerations. Evidence from Afghanistan first shows that situational appraisal theory is capturing a fundamental human phenomenon, not a conflict-specific fluke, and, second, that appraisals can be used to form and test hypotheses in near-real time, and in settings where in-depth psychological interviews and testimony are not available. Finally, survey evidence from over 4,500 experiment participants in the United States and Kenya helps address important questions about where situational appraisals come from—I show that demographic and contextual variables help explain *some* variation in individual appraisals, but also that they emphatically do not provide the same predictive or explanatory power as individual interpretations.

Contents

I organize the manuscript as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the scope of the book and previews the main argument. Chapter 2 develops the typology of strategies and the situational appraisal theory framework in more detail. Chapter 3 introduces a new method (and justification) for analyzing oral histories as testimony, text, and video data, and then Chapter 4 applies that new method to test situational appraisal theory using the oral history archive described above. Chapter 5 builds on the oral history results, drawing on dozens of original interviews to provide process evidence about how situational appraisals work. Chapter 6 then turns to Afghanistan, and shows further evidence that situational appraisal theory helps explain patterns of civilian behavior in the waning days of the U.S. war. Chapter 7 examines the origins of appraisals, using data from thousands of survey participants in the United States and Kenya to show how appraisals relate to identity, context, and culture. Chapter 8 concludes, considering what implications situational appraisal theory has for humanitarian and conflict

stabilization policies in ongoing conflicts like the Russian war in Ukraine.

Chapter 1: Making “Bad” Decisions

I open the manuscript with the main puzzle—how do civilians make decisions between objectionable options when facing violence?—which I illustrate with a series of short anecdotes that present “puzzling” civilian decisions in ongoing and historical conflicts in India, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Israel. I then lay out a conceptual model for thinking about civilians make *choices* when all the options seem bad or risky, and present my typology for organizing the choices they can make. I use ideas from the cutting edge of research in political violence to try and answer the manuscript’s main puzzle, and show that existing answers fall short because they overwhelmingly focus on the objective structure of a conflict environment and assume that variation in the way individuals interpret that structure is mainly noise. I then preview my core argument that perceptions and interpretations are core to civilians’ decision-making processes in the chaos of political violence, and that focusing on individual-level perceptions helps us account for puzzling variation in the choices that people make. I conclude with a plan for the book.

Chapter 2: Situational Appraisals and Decisions about Safety

In Chapter 2, I begin by asking: what is special about decision-making during violence? I observe that violent environments have four characteristics that upset the routines that we normally use to make choices: Time pressure, existential consequences, unusually poor access to information, and inapplicability of precedents for decision-making. I argue that these characteristics are likely to lead to an unusually high amount of *divergence* in the way people interpret their environments. I then turn to a new typology of survival strategies—fighting, fleeing, hiding, and adapting. I use this typology to draw contrasts with the existing literature on civilian behavior during violence. I then introduce situational appraisal theory as an idea to resolve the puzzle of variation in civilian decision-making despite similar backgrounds, similar violent environments, and similar resources. I discuss the factors that might shape appraisals, and conclude the chapter with a “roadmap” for testing the theory.

Chapter 3: Analyzing Oral Histories as Testimony, Text, and Video Data

I begin Chapter 3 with a research design conundrum. Investigators who want to understand how people make choices can either design studies in which they create a contrived, un-realistic decision-making environment and are able measure the causes of different choices very precisely, or they can observe choices made *in vivo*, and deal with messy proxy measurement of individual motivations. I propose triangulating across a number of sources of evidence—pairing retrospective accounts of real-world violence with data from artificial but carefully controlled surveys and laboratory studies. I then turn to a new method for using machine learning and qualitative analysis in tandem to test social science hypotheses on testimonial data like oral histories. I present the new method, detailing its strengths and weaknesses, and then conclude the chapter with a “roadmap” describing how I will pair my new oral history analysis method with traditional tools to test situational appraisal theory.

Chapter 4: Surviving the Punjab Crisis and 1984 Pogroms

Chapter 4 turns to the first major source of evidence: hundreds of oral history testimonies describing victimization and survival during “1984” a metonym encompassing Indian Army operations in Punjab in June as well as pogroms across India after the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31. After briefly narrating the pre-1984 political history of the crisis, I turn to multi-method analysis of oral histories from survivors of the summer army operations and the autumn pogroms. I describe the oral history collection—the 1984 Living History Archive—discuss the strengths and weaknesses of retrospective accounts of the Punjab Crisis as social science evidence, and then present results from two types of analysis. First, I treat oral histories as “observations” for quantitative analysis, and

show that situational appraisals measured by human coders, by large language model classification, and by image analysis of facial expressions all supports hypotheses about the connection between situational appraisals and chosen survival strategies. Second, I use the results of the quantitative analyses to identify individual oral histories for further analyses as qualitative sources, and present case studies of those individual testimonies to show *how* situational appraisals produce the patterns found in quantitative analysis.

Chapter 5: How Civilians Use and Ignore their Perceptions

One of the key weaknesses of oral histories as a data source is that the researcher exerts no control over what topics are discussed and how theoretically important variables are measured. I overcome this challenge in Chapter 5 by using a collection of original interviews to answer the same questions that oral histories answer in Chapter 4. Through dozens of interviews with survivors of the Punjab Crisis and 1984 pogroms, conducted both with individuals in Delhi who remained after experiencing violence, and with individuals in California who fled India in the 1980s, I provide even more direct evidence about *how* situational appraisals factor into decision making. Interview testimony also yields important insights about how social hierarchy—especially power relations within extended families—can limit the explanatory power of situational appraisals. I use these nuanced insights to further specify *whose* situational appraisals are most likely to matter for explaining behavior during conflict.

Chapter 6: Uncertainty, Violence, and Displacement in Afghanistan

Chapter 6 looks west to Afghanistan. In this chapter, I apply situational appraisal theory to a markedly different conflict, the multi-party struggle for control of Afghanistan after the security transition from the U.S.-led coalition to the Government of Afghanistan in 2014. Drawing on evidence from Chapters 4 and 5, as well as a wealth of qualitative research and journalistic reporting in Afghanistan, I argue that certain types of violence in the post-2014 conflict should be far more uncertainty provoking for civilians. I argue that the U.S. and Afghan government strategy of “Counterterrorism plus” that leaned heavily on precision-targeted surprise raids against suspected militants *may* have increased disruption in the lives of civilians even as it decreased civilian victimization and collateral damage from military operations. Using a dataset of U.S. and Afghan government “night raids” combined with village-level data on internal displacement and nationally-representative opinion surveys from 2017–2021, I show that a strategic shift meant to reduce negative impacts on civilians was a major driver of uncertainty, and thus provoked substantial civilian displacement. Results in this chapter not only provide a new perspective on the downsides of a U.S. strategy of “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism, but also show that situational appraisal theory can be used to formulate and test policy-relevant hypotheses even in the absence of rich, retrospective testimonial evidence

Chapter 7: Searching for the Origins of Appraisals

In Chapters 1–6, I argue that situational appraisals are an important variable for explaining civilian behavior during political violence. In Chapter 7, I turn to the origins of those important perceptions and ask: where do situational appraisals come from? I use evidence from survey experiments conducted with 4,500 participants in the United States, Kenya, and India to explore the demographic, social, cultural, and environmental factors that shape appraisals. I show that appraisals are not random—if they were, then situational appraisal theory would have little relevance for policy makers—but that the drivers of appraisals vary substantially across violence types, cultures, and social contexts. I also argue that some of the more robust correlations between appraisals and identity can explain interesting patterns identified observed other studies; for example, showing that women often have lower control appraisals than men (likely due to gendered socialization) provides a non-essentialist explanation for often-observed gender differences in support for aggressive foreign policies.

Chapter 8: *Situational Appraisals are a Humanitarian Force Multiplier*

I close the book with an argument about the practical implications of *situational appraisal theory* for academic research, and for conflict stabilization and humanitarian policy-making in the 21st Century. I argue that situational appraisal theory introduces a set of mechanisms that intercede between the conflict environment civilians face, and the preferences they form. I argue that these mechanisms provide a new way to explain within-group variation and variation over time, both of which are important frontiers in academic research on civilians enduring conflict. The book, I posit, also highlights interesting future directions for research on when appraisals are socially transmitted and widely shared, and when they are not. The bulk of the chapter, though, argues that policymakers interested in conflict stabilization and humanitarian relief should focus far more on perceptions and appraisals. Inattention to perceptions helps explain why costly, high-effort policies to “stabilize” conflict-affected countries often fail to produce results. One of the major implications of situational appraisal theory for policy-makers, I argue, is that “self-evident” good things like helping people meet basic needs, providing infrastructure, and building public services are not automatically going to support civilian cooperation and stability. I end the manuscript by arguing that policymakers and academics alike are going to be well-served by starting to think about varying perceptions as *inevitable* and useful human tendency in the extreme chaos of violence, not as a deviation from some mythical *rational* response to existential threat. Appreciating the adaptive value of perception and sense-making in future policy-making and research should help us make better sense of the way civilians navigate danger.

Projected Audience

(1) Political scientists, especially but not exclusively scholars of political violence, political psychology, South Asian politics and international relations; (2) Scholars and practitioners in fields like humanitarian work, conflict stabilization, counterinsurgency; (3) Scholars of Punjab, Sikh studies scholars, and scholars in South Asian studies across various social science disciplines including Sociology and Anthropology.

Contribution vs. Comparable Books

In the past decade, there has been substantial academic interest in topics like forced migration, participation in violence, and civilian agency during conflict. This book engages these different literatures, but is distinguished by a few important features. First, *Seeking Safety* is among a small number of books that addresses the range of strategies civilians might pursue rather than focusing exclusively on migration, resilience, or fighting. Second, the book introduces a novel theory linking perceptions to behavior during conflict—the first book-length political psychology contribution to the literature on civilian strategies during conflict. Third, *Seeking Safety* improves upon previous historical contributions to this literature with a new method for analyzing oral histories and other testimonial data. Fourth, the book’s focus on South Asia broadens the range of key cases in the literature on civilian behavior, which has focused largely on Europe, Latin America, and select cases in the Levant.

Seeking Safety is most closely comparable to a handful of other political science books on civilian survival strategies during violent conflict. Perhaps the most widely recognized of these books is Evgeny Finkel’s *Ordinary Jews* (Princeton UP, 2017), which focuses on historical legacies of state repression and inter-ethnic ties to explain strategies adopted by Jews in Polish and Belorussian ghettos during the Holocaust. Finkel presents a compelling account of community level variation (and some individual level variation) across different strategies available to Jews in three ghettos, but presents a theory that is focused on community level variation in historical legacies. My theory tackles a similar question at a different level of analysis, showing that conditional on the same community factors and the same historical legacy, civilian behavior varies depending on individual-level psychological processes that Finkel’s theory does not center, and that his evidence does not measure. My oral history analysis

provides an individual-level account that complements the historical political economy approach that Finkel takes.

Oliver Kaplan’s *Resisting War* (Cambridge UP, 2018) touches on a number of the same themes as *Seeking Safety*, and also analyzes civilian behavior during conflict as a choice among many strategies. Kaplan’s primary focus is explaining the conditions for strategies that would fall into the categories that I call, “fleeing,” “hiding,” and “adaptation” in *Seeking Safety*. Kaplan distinguishes the strategies by the level of “contentiousness” vs. armed groups. His account of civilian self-protection focuses largely on community cohesion and local social organization as enabling factors for more contentious strategies, but like me, he also explores why and how strategies vary even within apparently homogeneous communities. Again, my work complements Kaplan’s by focusing on the individual level, which is possible with new techniques for measuring individual perceptions from oral histories.

Finally, Justin Schon’s *Surviving the War in Syria* (Cambridge UP, 2020) addresses similar questions to *Seeking Safety*. Like me, Schon makes an individual level argument about how civilians select from a wide range of available behaviors during conflict (in this case the Syrian civil war). However, Schon’s account focuses on selection between strategies that have different, widely agreed-upon, risk propositions: individual choices depend on civilians’ motivation to pursue risky action (essentially violence exposure) and opportunity to take said action (essentially social capital). I build on Schon’s work but show that perceived motivation and opportunity can vary widely even among people with similar violence exposure and social resources, and I also question whether different strategies can be reliably compared by evaluating risk.

Manuscript Details and Status

The manuscript is 96,000 words (including references) with 36 figures and 28 tables.¹ There are 5 appendices, totaling an additional 7,000 words that report additional results and methodological details that have been excluded from the main text for reasons of readability and clarity. Manuscript chapters 1–5 and 8 are complete with minor revisions ongoing. Chapters 6–7 are in progress, with expected completion early summer 2024. I will hold a book workshop at Florida State University in Fall–Winter 2024, after which I anticipate revising the manuscript and being ready to deliver it for review in early Spring 2025 at the latest.

¹These numbers will shift as I revise