

Fight or flight? Why individuals react as they do

24 February 2021, by Leda Zimmerman



Murals by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing) cover the outside of the social sciences building at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, India. Credit: Aidan Milliff

Why do some people fight and others flee when confronting violence? "This question has been bothering me for quite some time," says Aidan Milliff, a fifth-year doctoral student who entered political science to explore the strategic choices people make in perilous times.

"We've learned a great deal how economic status, identity, and pressure from community shape decisions people make while under threat," says Milliff. Early in his studies, he took particular interest in scholarship linking economic deprivation to engagement in conflict.

"But I became frustrated by this idea, because even among the poorest of the poor, way more people sit out conflict instead of engaging," he says. "I thought there must be something else going on to explain why people decide to take enormous risks."

A window on this problem suddenly opened for

Milliff with class 17.S950 (Emotions and Politics), taught by Roger Petersen, the Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science. "The course revealed the cognitive processes and emotional experiences that influence how individuals make decisions in the midst of violent conflict," he says. "It was extremely formative in the kinds of research I started to do."

With this lens, Milliff began investigating questions anew, leveraging unusual data sources and novel qualitative and quantitative methods. His doctoral research is yielding fresh perspectives on how civilians experience threats of violence, and, Milliff believes, "providing policy-relevant insights, explaining how individual action contributes to phenomena like conflict escalation and refugee flows."

First-person accounts

At the heart of Milliff's dissertation project, "Seeking Safety: The Cognitive and Social Foundations of Behavior During Violence," are connected episodes of violence in India: an urban pogrom in Delhi in which nearly 3,000 Sikhs died at the hands of Hindus, sparked by the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards; and the bloody, decade-long separatist civil war by Sikh extremists in Punjab that began in the 1980s.

In search of first-person testimony to illuminate people's fight-or-flight choices, Milliff lucked out: He located taped [oral histories](#) for a large population of Sikhs who had experienced violence in the 1980s. "In these 500 taped histories, people described at a granular level whether they organized to defend their neighborhoods, hid in houses, left the city temporarily or permanently, or tried to pass as Hindu." He also pursued field interviews in California and India, but didn't get as far as he'd hoped: "I arrived in India last March, and was there for two weeks of an intended three-month stay when I had to return due to the pandemic."

This setback did not deter Milliff, who managed to convert the oral histories into text and video data that he's already begun to plumb, with the help of natural language processing to code people's decision-making processes. Among his preliminary findings: "People typically appraise their situations in terms of their sense of control and of predictability," he says.

"When people feel they have a high degree of control but feel that violence is unpredictable, they are more likely to fight back, and when they sense they have neither control nor predictability, and more easily imagine being victims, they flee."

A Chicago launchpad

Milliff drew inspiration for his doctoral research directly from an earlier graduate project in Chicago with the families of homicide victims.

"I wanted to learn whether people who become angry in response to violence are more likely to seek retribution," he says. After taping 90 hours of interviews with 31 people, primarily mothers, Milliff shifted his focus. "My initial assumption that everyone would get angry was wrong," he says. "I found that when people suffer these losses, they might get sad instead, or become fearful." In unsolved homicides, family members have no perpetrator to target, but instead turn their anger at government that's let them down, or worry for the safety of surviving family members.

From this project, Milliff took away a crucial insight: "People respond differently to their tragedies, even when their experiences look similar on paper."

Political violence and its consequences seized Milliff's interest early on. For his University of Chicago master's thesis, he sought to understand how many long-running, brutal independence movements fizzle out. "I came away from this program believing that I'd enjoy the day-to-day work of being a professional political scientist," he says.

Two research experiences propelled him toward that goal. While in college, Milliff assisted in the National Science Foundation-sponsored General Social Survey, a national social survey

headquartered in Chicago, where he learned "how a big quantitative data collection exercise works," he says. Following graduation, a fellowship at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace immersed him in South Asian military conflict and Indian domestic politics. "I really enjoyed working on these issues and became greatly interested in focusing on the political situation there," he says.

Attracted by MIT's security studies community, especially its commitment to research with real-world impact, Milliff came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, primed to delve deeper into the subject of political violence. He first had to navigate the graduate program's thorough quantitative sequence. "I came to MIT without having taken math after calculus, and I honestly feel fortunate I ended up somewhere that takes the classroom portion of training seriously," he says. "It has given me new tools I didn't even know existed."

These tools are integral to Milliff's analysis of his singular datasets, and provide the quantitative foundation for informing his policy ideas. If, as his work suggests, people in crisis make decisions based on their sense of control and predictability, perhaps community institutions could bolster citizens' abilities to imagine concrete options. "Lack of predictability and a sense of control encourage people to make choices that are destabilizing, such as fleeing their homes, or joining a fight."

Milliff continues to analyze data, test hypotheses, and write up his research, taking time out for biking and nature photography. "When I was headed to graduate school, I decided to take up a hobby that I could do for 15 minutes at a time, something I could do between problem sets," he says.

While he acknowledges research can be taxing, he takes delight in the moments of discovery and validation: "You spend a lot of time coming up with ideas of how the world works, diving into a pit to see if an idea is right," he says. "Sometimes when you surface, you see that you might have come up with a possible new way to describe the world."

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