Introduction

Violence, health, and South-North collaboration: Interdisciplinary research in light of the 2030 Agenda

CrossMark

In adopting the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the United Nations (UN, 2015) did something unprecedented: it brought the world community together, in broad strokes, to focus on wide-ranging, long-term goals. While this also happened with the *Millennium Declaration* and its Goals (MDG's) (UN, 2000), the scale is incomparable. Just as the *2030 Agenda* aims to ensure that "no one will be left behind" (UN, 2015, p. 3), it also leaves no one free from responsibility. Far from a conversation about what the Global North can do for the Global South, it highlights our interdependence and what we can do for each other on issues that affect us all. Everything that one sector does will affect every other sphere, and ultimately the quality and character of human life on this planet. The prevention of violence and the scholarship around it cannot be more relevant at this time. Its identification of risk factors (which touch upon all levels of society), of the interrelationship between different types (which unite phenomena that look very different on the surface), and of the importance of prevention (which reveals that all conditions have a potential role in increasing or decreasing violence) has the potential to be a significant contribution to defining the way forward. The *2030 Agenda* calls for this by placing the goal to "[s]ignificantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere" as the top priority for the overarching goal to "[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development" (UN, 2015: Goal 16). Violence is thus a particularly poignant measure of societal health. It is the opposite of health, or the life-giving state of generativity and creativity that is more than just the absence of disease. Until we arrive at a world without violence, its levels will always serve as a barometer for a society's ability to develop and to thrive.

The need to address the issue of violence is also at the heart of the recent *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014* that was jointly published by the WHO, the UN Development Programme, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2014). The first global update since the *World Report on Violence and Health* (Krug et al., 2002), it reviews the current status of violence prevention efforts in 133 countries, covering 6.1 billion people and representing 88% of the world's population. Evidencing visible gains in the homicide reduction across the world, it reported variations in the state of violence by income: in the high-income countries (HIC's) the homicide rate has decreased by 39% since 2002, while in middle-income countries (MIC's) this decline was substantially lower at 13% over this time period, and in the low-income countries (LIC's) the homicide rate showed a 10% decrease over the last twelve years. The report also offers recommendations at regional and global levels

as well at a national level.

The key objective of this special issue is to bring together evidence from multiple regions of the world and to interpret it through an interdisciplinary lens that is reflective of the diverse expertise of the contributors. Articles range from original studies with a broad theoretical base to systematic, comprehensive, and thematic reviews. We present several large-scale studies spanning multiple decades and regions of the world with the goal of honing in on the most important determinants for future prevention efforts. Additionally, we have incorporated studies that address questions about the measurement of violence with the purpose of helping to standardize and shape future research endeavors. In sum, we hope that the thirteen articles of this special issue will help reflect four (out of five) of the *2030 Agenda*'s overarching goals: People, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (the missing goal is Planet, and even though any violence done to the environment is violence done to humanity, and indifference to such violence a form of collective suicide, given our dependence on the planet for survival, we have considered articles on this topic to be beyond the scope of our special issue at this time).

1. Theoretical issues

Given the overarching framework mandated by the UN and the WHO, scholarship around violence must similarly adopt an integrated, global vision while ensuring that no field will be left behind. Many public organizations and fields of scholarship are increasingly recognizing that violence is a complex human problem that requires a conversation across different disciplines and a concerted effort among different players in order to properly promote the prevention of violence and the promotion of health. Like the *2030 Agenda*, we must consider the larger context in which we do more specialized studies, and the implications of these studies for the larger, theoretical picture. It must reflect on the relationship of each type of violence with all other types, for many are interconnected with common root causes and shared solutions. It must conceive of overt violence not as an event but the final outcome of a long process that involves not only an affected individual's or group's development, but the historical trajectory of an entire society and, ultimately, the world at large. We can no longer ignore the fact that how the world chooses to structure itself will have implications for epidemic rises or systematic declines of violence rates, not to mention related deaths from other diseases. This is the conclusion to which a scholarly, health-centered approach has

brought us, since the rallying call of the 49th World Health Assembly (WHA, 1996) to deal with violence as a public health issue rather than merely a security and criminal justice one. The scholarship of violence and health thus needs to have an fully interdisciplinary agenda: sociology, anthropology, political science, and peace studies have as much a place at the table as biomedicine, mental health, public health, and epidemiology. As complex a phenomenon as violence is, and as incapable of being fully understood in all its forms by a single field, we must break out of our silos and speak with one another. These are the implications of the first set of two articles in this issue.

Through a highly important review, Bowman et al. (2015) offer a theoretical perspective on violence as a serious public health and human rights challenge with global psychosocial impacts across the human lifespan. Although their reflections are based within the context of South Africa, many of the points they raise relate directly to the issues at the heart of the current study of violence. While the *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014* shows that aggregated rates of homicide have decreased, recognizing that homicide is but one indicator of violence reveals that a range of other manifestations of violence clearly still remains a serious public health, human rights, and psychosocial concern. The need to drive theoretical advancements in our understandings of violence alongside epidemiological gains has been met with important convergences in the thinking of violence scholars. Careful epidemiological research in South Africa has consistently shown that complex causal pathways bind structural inequality, sociocultural tolerance of violence, militarized masculinity, disrupted community and family life, and erosion of social capital, to individual-level biological, developmental, and personality-related risk factors in the production of a polymorphic profile of violence. The authors thus argue for a "second wave" of violence scholarship that relies not primarily on amassing more data but rather on better theorizing the mechanisms that translate risk into enactment, mobilizing individual and collective subjectivity. Given several illustrative forms of violence in South Africa, they suggest that the definition of violence requires revisiting to capture its complexity, and advocate for the utility of incident analyses and case studies that explore the mechanisms of violent enactments. Like the wave of scholarship before it, they state that the success of this second wave will largely depend on global collaborations and strong commitments to advancing what we know about violence through questioning and stretching our current moral, conceptual, and methodological assumptions.

In a similarly perspectivistic manner, Fleming et al. (2015) discuss the history of public health approaches to violence prevention, whose funding, research, and intervention lines have been drawn systematically along typologies of violence. These divisions, though pragmatic and practical, have resulted in multiple fields of violence research that have different foci, stakeholders, and approaches. The fields of "intimate partner violence" and "sexual violence," for example, are typically grouped together and focus on men's violence against women despite the fact that men and boys are also victims, and the fact that gender inequalities between men and women are a root cause, just as in youth violence (Abramsky et al., 2014). They argue that this approach of isolating each type of violence and constructing separate interventions for each type is inefficient and ineffective. Instead, the authors advocate for preventing violence holistically, tackling its common root causes, noting that men are more likely than women to perpetrate nearly all types of violence (e.g., intimate partner violence, murder, assault, and rape). Drawing upon theories that explain the drivers of violence, they examine in particular how gender norms, including norms and social constructions of masculinity, are at the root of most physical violence perpetration by men against women and against other men. Notions of masculinity are thus central to understanding the violence in the streets, in the military, within the police force, against homosexuals, or to themselves at home. The authors call for recognition of these commonalities and recommend integrated responses that seek to transform norms at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and policy levels with the goal of achieving more wide-ranging and long-standing change.

2. Contextual issues

The remaining articles focus on the need to address the issue of violence in the South and the North and the need to share accruing knowledge. In the second set of four articles—one from South Asia, two from Africa, and one spanning between Central America and West Africa—review and examine the importance of context with regard to several types of violence. Dealing with parental violence, sexual and physical violence among youth, intimate partner violence, and violence against women, each article in this section demonstrates the importance of considering local context.

Sriskandarajah et al. (2015), for example, make the important observation that children living in post-conflict settings are not only at high risk of developing war-related psychopathology but also of experiencing maltreatment within their families. Catani (2010) established that the cycle of violence could also be adapted to the context of war: in other words, exposure to war may lead to disturbances at community and family levels which, in turn, elevate the rate of violence against children. Nevertheless, little is known about the mechanisms of the relationship between war and family violence. Through a two-generational study with Tamil families in the North of Sri Lanka, the authors found that child traumatization, rather than parental traumatization, drove the transgression from mass to family trauma: children's exposure to mass trauma emerged as the main predictor for children's victimization by family violence even after controlling for parental traumatization and parental psychopathology. While mass trauma may change the behavior of the affected children and makes them more challenging to manage for the parents, who, in turn, might apply more violent and coercive parenting strategies. The mere stress load caused by trauma exposure and psychopathology, for example, may overstrain the coping skills of all family members, inducing more dysfunctional problem-solving strategies. However, psychological symptoms in children were a significant predictor for child-reported victimization but not for parent-reported perpetration. This suggests that, from the perspective of the parents, psychological symptoms could likely be the effect of child abuse rather than a risk factor for child maltreatment. In sum, the authors' findings support the transmission of mass trauma into family violence, highlighting the importance of these common but complex contextual factors.

Ohene et al. (2015) take a wider approach of exploring the nature and scope of youth violence in Ghana through the Global School-based Health Survey among senior high school students in Ghana. Relative to high income countries, studies on the various dimensions and mechanisms of youth violence in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC's), including many in sub-Saharan Africa, are few, despite the evidence of significant levels (WHO, 2013a; WHO, 2013b). Because very few studies have assessed factors associated with physical and sexual violence among youth in Ghana, the authors set out to assess risk and protective factors at the individual, family, and environmental levels. On the surface, Ghana has many protective structures: a democratic government, a legislative framework that denounces violence, a number of policies and laws intended to reduce violence, including a Domestic Violence Act that established within the police service a unit for violence prevention and victim support, and laws restricting weapon access and use.