



The second wave of violence scholarship: South African synergies with a global research agenda



Brett Bowman^{*}, Garth Stevens, Gillian Eagle, Malose Langa, Sherianne Kramer, Peace Kiguwa, Mzikazi Nduna

School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Violence is a serious public health and human rights challenge with global psychosocial impacts across the human lifespan. As a middle-income country (MIC), South Africa experiences high levels of interpersonal, self-directed and collective violence, taking physical, sexual and/or psychological forms. Careful epidemiological research has consistently shown that complex causal pathways bind the social fabric of structural inequality, socio-cultural 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 to produce this polymorphic profile of violence in the country. Engaging with a concern that violence studies may have reached something of a theoretical impasse, 'second wave' violence scholars have argued that the future of violence research may not lie primarily in merely amassing more data on risk but rather in better theorizing the mechanisms that translate risk into enactment, and that mobilize individual and collective aspects of subjectivity within these enactments. With reference to several illustrative forms of violence in South Africa, in this article we suggest revisiting two conceptual orientations to violence, arguing that this may be useful in developing thinking in line with this new global agenda. Firstly, the definition of our object of enquiry requires revisiting to fully capture its complexity. Secondly, we advocate for the utility of specific incident analyses/case studies of violent encounters to explore the mechanisms of translation and mobilization of multiple interactive factors in enactments of violence. We argue that addressing some of the moral and methodological challenges highlighted in revisiting these orientations requires integrating critical social science theory with insights derived from epidemiology and, that combining these approaches may take us further in understanding and addressing the recalcitrant range of forms and manifestations of violence.

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1. Introduction

The declaration of violence as a public health problem by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1996 represented a watershed moment in the history of violence studies (Krug et al., 2002). Conceptualizing violence as an important object of health research and intervention fundamentally shifted the construction of violence from a mainstay target of study by the social sciences and intervention by the criminal justice system to a preventable 'social

disease' (Mercy and O'Carroll, 1988; Williams and Donnelly, 2014). In keeping with the basic tenets of the public health approach to disease, researchers in both the global South and North began thinking about violence as a complex outcome of intersecting risk factors across the human lifespan and within the different tiers of the ecological systems that shape it. Convinced by the approach's successful prevention, containment and or eradication of other epidemics, its champions made a formal international call for the problem of violence to be defined, measured and programmatically prevented with the release of the World Report on Violence and Health in 2002 (Krug and Dahlberg, 2002).

The latest report on the global responses to this call over a decade later shows that aggregated rates of homicide have decreased across the world's three categories of countries grouped by income (WHO, 2014). In the high-income countries (HICs) the

^{*} Corresponding author. School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Private Bag X3, WITS, 2050, South Africa.

E-mail address: Brett.Bowman@wits.ac.za (B. Bowman).

homicide rate has decreased by 39% since 2002, while in MICs this decline was substantially lower at 13% over this time period. In the low-income countries (LICs) the homicide rate showed a 10% decrease over the last 12 years. Thus, this latest global synopsis on the state of violence suggests that although varied by income, there have been visible gains in the reduction of homicide over the last 10 years. However, recognizing that homicide is but one indicator of violence that is frequently located at the apex of the injury pyramid, the preponderance of a range of other manifestations of violence clearly still remains a serious public health, human rights and psychosocial concern. The continued weight of this challenge and the need to drive theoretical advancements in our understandings of violence alongside epidemiological gains have been met with important convergences in the thinking of violence scholars working across country-income divides. Recent work by Hamby and Grych (2013) on a co-occurrence model of violence demonstrates a clear case for rethinking the conceptual foundations upon which our definitions of violence are built. Hamby (2011) argues for a greater role for theory in violence research because "... it is vital for making sense of and synthesizing raw data and for pointing to new directions in research, practice, and policy" (p. 164). Built on this premise, she calls for a 'second wave' of violence scholarship that focuses on integrating and advancing the now formidable, epidemiological empirical work through more theoretically-oriented, but also data-driven, fine-grained analysis of different causes, forms and consequences of violence and their interconnections.

In South Africa, there is growing recognition of the importance of addressing violence. Presidentially sponsored programs and specialist units within universities, civil society and the public sector have produced strong epidemiological profiles of this very prevalent local problem (Matzopoulos, 2004; Matzopoulos et al., 2015; Seedat et al., 2014; Schuurman et al., 2015). This work has clearly shown that complex causal pathways bind the social fabric of structural inequality, socio-cultural tolerance of violence, militarised masculinity, disrupted community and family life, and the erosion of social capital, to individual-level biological, developmental and personality-related risk factors, to produce high levels of both interpersonal and collective violence in the country (Matzopoulos et al., 2008a). However, in line with a general appeal for greater attention to theory and context in social epidemiological work (Krieger and Zierler, 1997, 2001) recent calls by Bowman et al. (2014) for empirical studies and theoretical projects that provide the kind of resolution required to better understand precisely how those pathways to violence are constituted and the mechanisms by which these risks are activated and mobilized to produce violent outcomes, resonate strongly with Hamby's (2011) 'second wave' violence research agenda.

Drawing on perspectives crafted at the intersection of critical public health, critical psychology, sociology, philosophy, cultural studies and anthropology, we argue that progressing this 'second wave' implies an important heterodoxical project for violence researchers locally and across the world. Drawing on several examples of critical social science approaches to research on violence currently being undertaken by a collective of violence and trauma scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, we suggest that revisiting two fundamental conceptual orientations to violence appears an important departure point for social scientists committed to enhancing the resolution of the picture of violence generated by sound public health work. Firstly, the definition of our object of enquiry requires revisiting to capture its complexity. Secondly, we advocate for the utility of specific incident analyses/case studies of violent encounters to explore the mechanisms of translation and mobilization of multiple interactive factors within enactments of violence. We argue that addressing some of the

moral and methodological challenges highlighted in revisiting these orientations requires integrating critical social science theory with insights derived from epidemiology and violence research worldwide and, that combining these approaches may take us further in understanding and addressing the forms of violence so prevalent in South Africa and other MICs.

2. Defining, conceptualising and categorizing violence

While there is a well-established historical and contemporary literature focussing on the study of violence globally that has emanated from disciplines such as criminology, psychology, sociology and public health, in the social and health sciences, it appears that our object of analysis is neither always consistent nor clear.

2.1. Revisiting definitions and revisiting forms

Varying definitions of violence as central to the human condition, as a correlate of pernicious formative socialization experiences, as instrumental to the attainment of other ends, as a consequential outcome of ecological and socio-structural determinants, and as equivalent to forms of systemic domination, marginalization and oppression, pervade scholarly work on violence. Within this context, Schinkel (2004, p. 6) remarks that,

... violence itself has been shied away from in the vast majority of social scientific inquiry concerning violence. What has been researched are certain patterns through which violence inscribes itself, and what has been understood are meanings given to particular occurrences, perhaps even particular kinds, of violence. But these are extrinsic to violence itself. They are added to it, they are facilitative for it or they are the quantitative shape that violence assumes. But they are not violence itself. We have hardly begun to understand violence *itself*.

While this is a bold and controversial assertion, we have to at least recognize that considerable variability in the definitions of violence have contributed to a number of challenges for violence researchers. These include moments when defining violence relies on foregrounding the subject at the expense of situational, contextual, socio-cultural and historical analyses, or alternatively, evacuating the subject and his/her agency in favour of focussing on the social determinants of violence through situational, contextual socio-cultural or historical lenses (Žižek, 2009). Furthermore, divergent definitions have resulted in certain cavalier and insular disciplinary assumptions about the conceptual correctness of these definitions, leading to limited interdisciplinary engagement and a degree of incoherence amongst researchers and across research in the social and health sciences (Stevens, Seedat, Swart and van der Walt, 2003). Understandably though, many of these definitions of violence have also been shaped by the pragmatic need to measure the outcomes of interventions directed towards its prevention.

Following from the variability of the definition of violence is the matter of the form that violence may take. Here too, we observe categorizations of violence as instrumental versus emotional (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994); as self-directed, interpersonal or collective (Kobusingye et al., 2010) and as embedded within monomorphic taxonomies or typologies that often assume that forms of violent enactment are discrete. In reality however, many of these discrete categorizations of the forms of violence co-occur in situations of polyvictimization, polyperpetration and polymorphic enactments of violence (Bowman et al., 2014; Hamby and Grych, 2013) and within moral orders that call into question the ways that victims, perpetrators and indeed violence itself are classified, as will be further elaborated.

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