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

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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 recently classified 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

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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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2.2. Violence, human life and moral economies

Although authors such as Wolfgang and Ferracuti's (1967) seminal work on violence called for researchers to examine value systems in subcultures of violence, there is a glaring absence and evacuation of an overt recognition and study of issues of morality within contemporary, mainstream research on violence. Rather, morally inflected assumptions and positions are often implied through pejorative discourses of who is considered to be at risk, prevention imperatives and their concomitant assumptions about which forms of violence are defined as asocial, and socio-political activism directed towards the eradication of forms of violence that are understood as being central to forms of systemized domination. While both the public consciousness and scholarly domains are replete with moral discourses in relation to violence, there have been decidedly few attempts at theorizing violence as being embedded in a range of fluid and contradictory moral economies that are in circulation at any given point in time. Here, we refer to the uneven distribution of rights, obligations, responsibilities, sanctions, censures, legitimacies and illegitimacies that different subjects may hold in relation to violence itself, and that allow us the social currency to construct violence as reprehensible or justifiable – a system in which differing orders of morality exist for both victims and perpetrators that reveals not only the will to and justification for violence from distinct moral positions, but also the ability to contest the context and process of the act of violence itself as either legitimate or illegitimate (Stevens, 2013, 2015). Given that different orders of morality may be drawn upon by perpetrators, victims and even scholars of violence to account for violent acts, attempts at theorizing violence outside of these moral frames of reference may limit our fundamental understandings of violence itself. Varied orders of morality that govern the differential attribution of value to human life across sectors of populations have existed throughout modern history (Maldonado Torres, 2008). However, the 20th century has given a specific shape and form to this process. Increased wealth disparities (Piketty, 2014), together with advances and the privatization of healthcare and the biotech industry, have contributed to a specific configuration of surplus life and bare life – surplus life in the sense that prolonging life has itself became a site for capital accumulation, but also leading to life being lived more excessively and conspicuously amongst some sectors of the population as compared to others; and bare life (Agamben, 1998) in which large sectors of the global population are consigned to the status of the "living dead" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40) by virtue of their limited access to resources essential for prolonging life itself. Under these circumstances, we may very well encounter discourses that reify the sanctity of life, sitting uncomfortably alongside apparently contradictory discourses that do not distinguish between the sanctity of human life over any other aspect of resource accumulation in social life. A failure to recognize differing moral economies and orders of morality may hamstring our ability to understand violence as we often depart from the assumption that human life is equally understood as worthy of preservation, when in fact large sectors of the population may consider the life of the human subject to be no more or less valuable than the objects in our social worlds, thereby enabling enactments of violence that at times may be viewed as confounding because they appear extreme in their objectification, dehumanization, perversion or 'gratuitousness' (Altbeker, 2007; Bruce, 2010; Stevens, 2008).

The above points to three important considerations as we attempt to advance a 'second wave' of violence scholarship and theorizing. Firstly, we have to be clear about the object of inquiry in each and every instance. This must of necessity involve accommodating varying definitions of violence, but simultaneously avoid infinite inclusivity, as this is likely to obscure the object of inquiry even further. A comprehensive approach must be able to integrate the continuum of factors that range from the socio-structural to the individual, the immediate and background factors, the subject and the context, the subjective and the objective, and the systemic and symbolic. Secondly, there has to be greater openness to the idea of polymorphic violence in which various forms of violence may be simultaneously enacted within a given event or across events, involving a rupture with the orthodoxy of monomorphic typologies or taxonomies. Thirdly, there has to be a recognition and challenge to our implied moral standpoints as researchers in the area of violence, taking into account that variegated moral economies and orders of morality have a fundamental bearing in determining a biopolitics of the value of human life amongst different sectors of the population, and consequently, on what counts as forms of violence worthy of attention and intervention within a given social formation. This kind of fine-grained theoretical analysis is perhaps best undertaken and optimized within the careful and nuanced study of strategically important cases of violent enactments, in which these levels of complexity become evermore evident.

3. The importance of incident and deviant case analyses

A key driver in the call for 'second wave' violence studies (Bowman et al., 2014; Hamby, 2011) has been the recognition of the need for ever deeper and more complex theorization of violence and its forms and motivations. While the public health approach has significantly identified broad parameters that underpin the emergence of violence, it is still the case that many of the proximal and translational factors that link, for example, a high Gini coefficient with actual enactments of violence, remain under-explored. In keeping with many social scientists who assert the benefits of methodological pluralism (Stevens et al., 2003) we would argue that qualitative methodological approaches are vital in complementing the quantitative analyses characterizing the bulk of epidemiological violence research, allowing for the clarification and elaboration of identified relationships. We contend that both (critical) incident analyses (Butterfield et al., 2005) and single or multiple case-based approaches (Ayres et al., 2003) can potentially bring new insights to bear. Such approaches have for many years been the province of clinical, community and organizational psychology in which intra-individual, interpersonal, systemic and group dynamics have been studied in-depth. In addition, case- and event-based studies also mirror criminological approaches that make post-hoc sense of key elements (and their interaction) in violent events (Wilkinson and Hamerschlag, 2005).

In calling for more qualitative research studies we should caution that we are not motivating for a return to what some have argued was an overly individualistic and over-pathologizing formulation of violent offenders. Rather we are proposing that in choosing objects of study that might represent either 'typical', or alternatively, 'extreme', cases of violent enactment we may be able to generate a more layered appreciation of how and why different forces come together in complex ways to produce violent moments. These sorts of studies should be understood as going beyond the linking of distal and proximal factors, to attempting to do justice to interactional, contextual, evolving and historical-time based features of violence as well as its multiple, intersecting causes. Some recognition of the heuristic value of such approaches is evident in the constitution of multi-disciplinary teams to tackle violence at community, familial and partner level. These teams bring together actors from legal, physical and mental health, social service, criminal justice, and labour and employment sectors, amongst others, acknowledging that entertainment of a range of perspectival views contributes to enhanced situation analyses and provides a

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comprehensive basis for intervention. *Ikhaya Lethemba*, in Johannesburg, a "One Stop Centre" for women who are victims of intimate partner violence and their children, providing physical care, legal advice, counselling, child support and skills training, is an example of this kind structure, as is the Family Violence Death Review Committee (FVDRC) of New Zealand that includes representation from a range of sectors, including cultural experts and service users, alongside professionals. These kinds of service and policy generating bodies reflect an appreciation of the poly-causal nature of violence and its cross-sectoral impacts and mirror calls for interdisciplinary scholarship.

To offer one theoretically-driven example of the potential of the kind of form of analysis that is being promoted for consideration here, De Wall and colleagues' (2007) research highlights how the enactment of violence (investigated both experimentally and via autobiographical accounts) is linked to the simultaneous occurrence of depletion of reserves of self-regulation and vulnerability to external provocation through slight or insult. In South Africa, it is possible to speculate that living in enduringly high violence contexts that predispose many to the experience of Continuous Traumatic Stress (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013), creates a contextual basis for self-regulation depletion, in turn creating conditions for over reaction to interpersonal challenges or conflicts. Case-based analyses of violent enactments may well therefore reveal the complexities of such interacting forces at play.

In addition to highlighting interactional and evolving dimensions in violent enactments, case and incident research may also assist in tracking historical and contextual patterns in phenomena that may appear different but carry similar traces. Kalish and Kimmel (2010) identify, for example, how reforms to reduce lethal school violence in inner city schools appear to have been largely successful but arguably have displaced such violence to suburbs and rural areas based on their analysis of 30 cases of school shootings since 1982. In South Africa, many have suggested that militarized, political involvement in anti-apartheid struggles assumed forms that appear to have endured and become reinvented in contemporary expressions of violence (Langa and Eagle, 2008).

Survey data cannot surface this significant information that might reflect enduring links between types of subjectivities and types of contexts that produce violent displays and events. In extreme case research it may be possible to explore the boundaries of phenomena, looking not only to affirm but also to disconfirm existing assumptions. For example, Kleijn's (2010) research into rapists of children under three years' of age based on depth interviewing of ten incarcerated men, was able to foreground not only how their motivations appeared to be vengeful rather than directly sexualized, but also to refute the commonly held perception that 'infant rape' in South Africa is motivated by the idea that virgin penetration can cure AIDS. Kramer's (2014) qualitative analysis of extreme cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse, based on interviews with ten self-identified victims, was able to expand on the growing understanding that sexual violence is not solely perpetrated by men. The fact that several victims were male meant that the rich empirical materials exposed the moral dimensions undergirding 'victim worthiness' – a term that can be also used to highlight the erasure of some persons from legal and social recognition as victims, and provide a critical examination of the entanglement and intersectionality of race, socio-economic status, immigration status, sexual orientation, and violence, for example.

Although a mainstay method of inquiry within the social sciences, incident analyses and (deviant) case studies are underutilised by violence scholars within health-oriented studies of violence. However, a brief overview of the above-mentioned South African, small-scale but information rich (deviant) case analyses clearly demonstrates their strategic methodological value in developing a stronger and more robust engagement with the 'why' rather than the 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how' questions that remain overly determining of the violence research agenda worldwide.

Recent work on what ostensibly appears to be a discreet form of collective violence in South Africa, described in the following section, provides an instructive exemplar of the significance of the theoretical and methodological points highlighted above. It is an apt illustration of the ways in which conventional categories and definitions of social and political violence that appear to share drivers (Fox and Hoelscher, 2012) are actually blurred by context, and the value of case study methodologies in illuminating and surfacing such complexities.

3.1. 'Service delivery protests', violence and the post-apartheid moral order

Alongside high rates of interpersonal violence, over the past three years South Africa has also experienced a dramatic upsurge of violent community protests to demand access to basic services, such as water, housing, health care and electricity (De Visser and Powel, 2012). Work by Langa and von Holdt (2012) suggests that service delivery protests are an important example of how violence in South Africa is fluid, contingent, interconnected with other forms of violence, and polymorphic. There is no doubt that service delivery protests may be characterized as a form of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2008) that is essentially a violent response to structural inequalities and growing wealth disparities within South African society, reflecting the class struggle for equity, fairness and justice in the new South Africa (Alexander, 2010) and frustration at perceived barriers to genuine citizenship in the country (Langa and von Holdt, 2012). However, while this form of collective political violence is often marked by the destruction of public and private property, as well as confrontations between armed police and stone-throwing crowds (Alexander, 2010; Langa and von Holdt, 2012), it is also at times infused with elements of interpersonal and criminal violence. Langa and von Holdt (2012) found, for example, that some politicians relied on organized criminal syndicates to kill their opponents in order to access or maintain political power within these protests, while the theft of public and personal property through housebreakings was not uncommon. In his book, *Bo-tsotsi*, Glaser (2000) refers to this phenomenon as *comtsotsi*, in which *tsotsis* (criminals) masqueraded as activists/comrades while committing criminal activities in the name of the struggle against apartheid. These repertoires of *comtsotsi* that are embedded within the historical legacy of violence in South Africa seem to be re-emerging in the very prevalent violent protests of post-apartheid South Africa and are also directed at shops owned by foreign nationals in xenophobic assaults that are at times underpinned by settling old interpersonal scores. Here, the confluence of collective violence, interpersonal violence, political violence, historical violence and criminal violence, reveal not only the polymorphic forms of violence that seamlessly co-occur, but also how our definitions of violence need to accommodate understandings that foreground social structure, the political landscape, individual and group subjectivity, and personal motivations. Furthermore, constructions of masculinity are deeply implicated and mobilized as young men are most frequently involved as both perpetrators and victims, reflecting again the recalcitrance of the historical legacy and socio-cultural construction of militarized masculinities in South Africa. Finally, this exemplar also cautions us to consider that differing moralities are at play within the same violent enactment, and that rather than imposing an assumed value judgment on

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them, an understanding of how a range of moral orders can coexist, despite their apparent contradictions, may add a further conceptual and theoretical dimension to our understandings of violence.

Studying service delivery protests in post-apartheid South Africa, as just briefly outlined, provides an obvious example of the value of supplementing epidemiological methods in violence research with complementary approaches. While large population-based studies and research offer us a great deal in terms of amassing descriptive and inferential data on correlates of and risks for violence, these methodological approaches may not be best suited to providing fine-grained analyses of the interconnectedness of upstream risk factors for violence, the situational context of these enactments, and the individual and collective subjectivities operating in the translation of risk for violence into its actual enactments.

4. Conclusion

Beginning in the North but finding increasing traction in the global South, violence has increasingly been taken seriously as a fundamental obstacle to human health and development (Bowman et al., 2008; Matzopolous et al., 2008b). Strong epidemiological work driven by an interventionist mandate has made unquestionable gains in painting a hitherto unseen picture of global violence as imminently mutable across countries, incomes, lifespans and a host of other important dimensions of human life. Building on these gains of the last three decades a second wave of violence scholarship will focus on not merely collecting more data but on building theories or frameworks to explain or interrogate links and patterns in the data to better understand and explain the variability of violence. Calling into question the confidence with which many violence scholars identify the object of their research and, using case-based methods to drive greater theorisation of the 'why' questions of violence represent two formative but foundational items on this agenda that are currently being tackled by a collective of violence and trauma scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. Like the wave of scholarship before it, 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 assumptions about, and orientations to it.

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