

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE WAVE OF VIOLENCE AROUND THE COUNTRY AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

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INTRODUCTION

The current violence in various communities across South Africa this last couple of weeks has shocked the world, and shamed South Africans from all walks of life. Although violence in our country is not new to our everyday reality, the current violence against Africans of other-than-South Africa origin is of deep concern. This is particularly so for those of us who have struggled against apartheid, and who continue to direct this activism against the effects of the legacy of our unjust and brutal past.

It is apparent from media reports that most people are attempting to make meaning of the current outbreak of violence around the country. Since most of the victims are immigrants, and most often refugees from war-torn countries in Africa, this violence has been explained as xenophobia, characterised as an intense dislike, hatred or fear of others based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity. While most commentators on the recent events recognise this as the ‘face’ of the current violence, different explanations are offered of the origins of this wave of violence, and the location of responsibility for its emergence and perpetuation.

Some have asserted that the xenophobia is being driven primarily by criminal forces, with criminal groups exploiting current conditions for their economic gain, with apparent support for this explanation derived from the emerging images of the looting of both business and personal premises over the past weeks. Others suggest that there may be active stimulation or complicity from as yet unknown groupings, a ‘third force’ operating in a fashion similar to that exposed during the apartheid period in, for example, KwaZulu-Natal.

Most observers have argued that the causes of this wave of violence (and of violence in general in the country) are linked to, among others, the sharply deteriorating economic circumstances as indicated by the increased food insecurity, and/or persisting inadequacy of basic infrastructure such as housing, and/or high levels of unemployment experienced by a large percentage of people in this country. The persisting socio-economic inequalities that typically underpin the

differences between communities in South Africa arguably exacerbate the sense of dissatisfaction and vulnerability to feelings of threat experienced by many individuals, especially in a context of perceptions that their basic life security is threatened by the presence of immigrants seeking refuge and economic security in the country.

The socio-economic realm is reported to comprise a major cluster of ‘risk factors’ (that is, factors that place people at risk of being victims or perpetrators of violence) in all forms of violence, and particularly within a xenophobic environment. These and other factors express themselves at all levels of the system: at the individual level (for example, psychological factors such as low self-esteem and challenges to one's identity, lack of anger management skills, and aggressive tendencies), at the relationship level (for example, exposure to and experience of violence within families and other primary relationships, prejudices and inequalities relating to gender relations, and involvement with anti-social peers), at the community level (for example, exposure to gang and other violent environments, lack of adequate safety control, exposure to alcohol and weapons), and at societal level (for example, norms that support violence, referred to as a ‘culture of violence’, the role of the media in modeling violent roles, patriarchal and capitalist political and economic structural arrangements, globalisation).

SOME KEY “THREADS” OF RISK

There are many clusters or “threads” of risk that permeate the violence that we have witnessed. Consistent with the multi-level risk-factor logic noted above, these threads extend from individuals, through relationships and communities, to the larger society. Factors such as unemployment, inadequate housing, income inequality and lack of adequate neighbourhood infrastructure constitute one knot of risks.

Another constellation of factors that place people at risk of becoming perpetrators of violence (but at other times victims) is inequitable and often violent gender relations. Inequitable gender relations refers to ways of relating between males and females which are supported by patriarchal structural relations. An instance of such ways of relating, on the basis of recent media reports, is the case of perpetrators declaring that they are motivated by anger at immigrants taking or raping “our women”. While this may well be an expression of the need to protect, it also reflects an attitude of ownership of women, which results in dominance and other expressions of inequality of power relations between men and women.

An aspect of gender relations that is usually not identified or emphasised is that of ‘masculinities’. This refers to a set of beliefs and expectations about what men should and should not do. This relates to the concept of social identity, and more specifically, to ideas about manhood. Studies on male interpersonal violence have identified masculinity ideology and its relationship to other risk factors, such as unemployment or loss of meaningful role in the family or community, as being a central factor in the perpetration of violence. A recent pilot study

focusing on theoretical frameworks and risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence, conducted by the Medical Research Council-University of South Africa's Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme, has highlighted this risk factor cluster as pivotal to understanding, and responding to interpersonal violence, and as such to the manifestation of xenophobia.

Another important thread of risk factors for violence which we believe is pertinent in our attempts to understand the current outbreak of community violence relates to historical colonisation and ongoing racism. Frantz Fanon once said, "The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people"¹. He warned that the "post-independence period turns on outsiders: "From nationalism, we have passed to chauvinism, and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave, their shops are burned, their street stalls are wrecked"². This argument accentuates the extent to which the damaging effects of injustice, external oppression, and psychological and physical violence have been internalised, brutalising the souls of all concerned. The deleterious consequences of long years of oppression are then prominently evident today, manifesting in various ways in our society, including high levels of substance abuse and sexual violence.

The concept of 'historical trauma' has been used in some contexts to capture the above-mentioned dynamics. This concept is central to public health interventions in Native American contexts. Duran and Duran³ argue that it is important to understand the colonial history, particularly the 'colonisation of the life world' of people, and the severe spiritual and psychological injury (the soul wound) and intergenerational trauma that has occurred as a result. "The notion of soul wound is one which is at the core of much of the suffering that indigenous peoples have undergone for several centuries"⁴. This notion is directly linked to the process of internalised oppression, which refers to internalised despair and a sense of helplessness and self-hatred. In turn, this is all related to intergenerational Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, where the oppressor has been integrated and interwoven into the fabric of the family. This then results in various forms of self- and other abuse, where shame and rage is turned in on itself and others. This is relevant when considering the recent violence against legal and illegal immigrants, and refugees in South Africa.

¹ Frantz Fanon, 1967, cited in Suran Pillay (see below for full reference).

² Suran Pillay, Cape Times, 21 May 2008, p.13.

³ Eduardo Duran & Bonnie Duran (1995), *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

⁴ Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 24 (see above for full reference).

Although many leaders in our country argue that it is time to leave apartheid behind and move on, the high levels of violence in South Africa and the recent outburst of violence involving immigrants and refugees from countries outside of South Africa suggest that we still have a great deal of work to do.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was one important step in this process. Other concrete steps that have been taken to address economic inequalities and infrastructural needs, to address racial, gender, ability and other forms of discrimination, and to strengthen the criminal, justice, and safety and security systems in the country, have also helped us to ‘move forward’ and, indirectly and directly, to address violence in this country.

It is clear, however, that we are faced with a crisis that will not disappear without commitment and intentional focus directed firstly at addressing the immediate challenges relating to crime, violence and injury, and secondly on the creation of a safe and caring social environment for our own citizens, and our brothers and sisters across the African diaspora. Many individuals, groups, organisations and government institutions are clearly attempting to formulate and implement more responsive intervention strategies. Many significant responses, and proposals on responses, have been identified in public forums, including the media. We would like to contribute to, and support these efforts by recommending additional action steps. These proposals are linked to a need to develop solid understandings and practical responses to the current and ongoing crisis of violence in South Africa.

PROPOSAL FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

First, we have to *understand what the violence is expressing*. What is the violence about? We believe it is necessary to *involve a range of experts* in trying to understand the root causes of the various forms of violence occurring in South Africa at this point in its history. This includes the best of our thinkers and actors from this continent and all over the world who should be assembled to share insights on both understanding and effectively dealing with the current violence. These actors and thinkers should not only include the usual leaders from government, political and community organisations, and trade unions, although these people are important. We also need to involve men and women, and the youth, from around the country who are directly affected, or are likely to be affected, by the violence. We need leading and innovative scholars from a variety of disciplines and professions, social activists, religious leaders, filmmakers, artists, and others who can help us to view the challenges and strategies in new ways.

Second, we need to look at *how to talk* about this challenge. We need more than one high powered talk-shop. We need several well-conceived forums across the country, where we can engage with the challenges within an environment that transforms the power that shapes our relations with each other. These discussions therefore need to be facilitated in a way that

discourages dominant voices from silencing others, and encourages those who do not usually share their views to engage and contribute to the discussion. This will only happen if power relations are openly acknowledged and managed, and if exclusionary language (for example, from professions and academic disciplines) is avoided.

Third, as many others have also argued, *Government departments* need to radically examine how they are responding to the needs of the country, individually, and *across departments and clusters* (for example, the social cluster and the safety and security cluster). This radical re-thinking needs to include a focus on *housing*, which challenges the avoidance of developing racially and economically integrated neighbourhoods, particularly on the part of middle- and rich-class communities. It also includes the need for an essential examination of job creation and addressing the high percentage of *unemployment* in South Africa, including looking at how the Extended Public Works Programme is addressing unemployment *and poverty*.

Fourth, Government needs to re-think the way in which it is dealing with the many men and women who flock to this country expecting help, but end up living in dehumanising circumstances, for example, outside the Home Affairs Departments, in abandoned and dangerous buildings, or under bridges. As many people have recently articulated in the press, we need a more effective *Home Affairs* policy and coordinated programme to address the needs of refugees and illegal immigrants.

Fifth, the Government needs to look at its *economic policies* that support consumerism and individualism, that is, capitalist values that play a key role in the development of violence, particularly amongst the youth who want and need to have the 'right' clothes and equipment to feel good about themselves and be accepted in their communities. In addition to the inequities created and maintained by such economic policies, the related values undermine the national spirit of Ubuntu.

Sixth, as many people have highlighted, *the safety and security, and justice system* in South Africa needs to continue to look at how it is combating crime and violence, including looking 'inside' at how members of these systems do or do not act as role models. Access to and control of alcohol, drugs and other substances that can be abused, particularly alcohol and drugs, should be a major aspect of this assessment, particularly given the central role of these factors in the perpetration of violence.

Seventh, the role of the *media in perpetuating a culture of violence* in South Africa needs radical and scrupulous examination. Research around the world and in South Africa has revealed how the media acts as a channel for normalising violence (presenting violent acts as 'normal' behaviour, for example via television programme content) and as a means of perpetuating a negative view of masculinity, which links males with violence rather than non-violence.

Eighth, as highlighted in a recent roundtable discussion facilitated by the Human Sciences Research Council Youth Policy Initiative, we need to understand and address the challenges facing *youth* involved in *violence*. This initiative needs to systematically investigate the factors that place youth at risk at all levels of the system: at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels. Efforts to address the challenges facing youth, many of whom have been involved in the recent violence against immigrants and refugees, also need to be directed at these multiple levels. Schools are critical sites for dealing with this challenge, but any violence prevention programmes developed need to be extremely sensitive to the current policy and administrative overload being experienced by educators and education administrators. There is also a necessity for something like a 24-month Youth Service Peace Corps incorporating an education and training programme in usable skills, and psychosocial and democracy education, as well as community service in another African country and/or in a province other than the individual youth's home one.

Home or family interventions also need to be central to any initiatives aimed at violence prevention, particularly given the theoretical and practical evidence of cycles of violence being experienced by so many youth in South Africa. The intergenerational transmission of violence highlighted by Duran and Duran (1995) needs to be attended to. We need to look at how to do this, drawing on others' experiences. For example, Duran and Duran discuss various integrated healing responses to this historical trauma, which include strategies aimed at helping people to reflect on their internalised oppression; providing ceremonial space to grieve for the many losses relating to issues such as death, self-esteem and land; and reclaiming cultural practices and values, particularly for the purposes of developing positive identity and self-esteem.

In conclusion, the many individuals, groups, organisations and government institutions committed to a better South African way of life will need to begin a process of engaging in a public dialogue on the persistence of violence in South Africa, and the challenges posed by the way ahead. We will need to find practical ways to concretise our Ubuntu values and our political commitment to developing a caring South Africa, one in which South Africans and our fellow Africans can live and grow together in a safe and supportive environment.