

Murder and Moral Outrage: understanding violence

Betsy Stanko examines public attitudes and moral outrage following the tragedy of a schoolboy's murder, and describes the need for a more informed understanding of the social realities behind acts of violence.

The tragic death of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor in Peckham, South London in late November brought on a public soul-searching discussion of the impact of random violence. Within hours of the killing, journalists began calling me as the Director of the Violence Research Programme (VRP) for 'statistics' on violence: how many young people carried knives, how many young people killed other young people last year, what is the 'gang membership' for the South London estate, how many other stabbings took place between young people in the country, have these increased lately? Of course, the journalists found it frustrating that I did not keep such numbers. They also had learned that no one else had these figures either. What was published as the 'record' of violence in the area was the police statistics for the month of October 2000. These data are compared to those from the same month last year (reported violence was 'up' by 54 from the previous year).

Violent crime data

What are these data on violent crime? Do these data tell us anything about the context within which the young school boy bled to death? Do we gain anything from debates about 'yobbery' for our creative thinking and

understanding of the way intimidation affects the lives of young people on the North Peckham estate? My interest in this short article is to explore whether it is possible in the popular imagination to challenge the use of the term violence, which eschews its unproblematised 'generic' nature. The Guardian's editorial on November 30 lamented that this tragic killing demonstrates once again how such a death reminds us of our collective failure to protect young people from random violence. But to characterise this event as a random tragedy is surely to ignore what community leaders are saying about the day-to-day reality of young people's lives in and around the estate. It denies the collective sentiment of the estate's residents that this was a tragedy waiting to happen. It also denies Damilola's own active management of the dangers arising from the damaged conditions of life on the estate. After all, school officials, his mother and perhaps others were actively challenging the bullying he had already experienced during his short residence of only four months in South London.

The Violence Research Programme - the ESRC programme I have directed for the past three years - falls within the ESRC 'theme' of social stability and social exclusion. When I am contacted for information - as I frequently am in my capacity as Director - by associations, groups, governmental bodies, ministries, the media, students, fellow academics and others, such thematic grouping becomes irrelevant to the questioner. I therefore begin my conversations by asking what the person means when he/she uses the term 'violence'. I receive a variety of responses. I've summarised some of them here for purposes of debate. First, people make claims about violence for many different reasons: to name personal harm; to demand equal citizenship; to complain about harsh and unfair working conditions; to demonstrate the breakdown of the rule of law or the decline of civilisation or to ask for state assistance in punishing the offender or righting the wrong.

These are often contradictory claims and give rise to expectations of institutions, the state and personal rights. Somehow, the intersection of people's social characteristics and the impact of violence confuses people. It is as if we 'all' experience violence in the same way. Clearly, the horror of journalists combing the North Peckham estate for the meaning of the death of a young boy could barely be concealed in the television and radio reports that followed. Strange you might think. But it is only when one thinks about the above statement for what it does not say that we can begin to understand how it is possible NOT to understand the context of differential impact and differential vulnerability to violence. Without entering the realm of structural advantages and social privilege - which is, I suggest, the realm of the real politic of negotiating structural social power - it is impossible to understand how different people define violence and how its different meanings mask the issues that are interwoven when thinking about violence.

Signifiers of violence

I will suggest here that violence - as a term - has become a primary signifier of social inclusion and claims about social exclusion. But as a term, it is taken to mean the same thing to us all. Such misunderstanding is carried on when people look for 'statistics' on violence. Time and time again, the common approach is to make claims about violence without any credible or non-credible evidence about its level and impact on particular segments of the population. The Guardian's publication of police statistics on violence for the month of October is typical. How many different kinds of violence do these figures reflect? How much of these data are domestic, racist, homophobic, robberies, pub fights or disputes between neighbours? What does this information tell us?

Without knowing the context within which situations involving violence arise, and within which its participants, its victims and its potential intervenors all have influence on the meanings and



outcome of threat, it is impossible to think about violence as something that can be avoided. People then imagine the users of violence as totally 'innocent' or guilty, but as somehow suspended from the very social conditions within which violence always takes place. In effect, violence is 'naturalised' as a necessary or inevitable part of social life, unfortunate as it might be. While there is much collective angst in the death of the schoolboy, there is little that has been offered as a way of thinking about why many children and adults choose violence to settle disputes, to cause disputes, to pass the time, to bully and intimidate others. The only way forward is to criticise the police for failing to make the estate safe. But how does policing relate to situations where many adults and children use violence in their social relations? Can police, without a host of social programmes, make the estate safe?

So rather than turn to the intractable social conditions within which people live, many commentators use law (or their common-sense understanding of what is 'illegal') to frame their moral outrage about violence. The 'control' of violence is treated in

that small space can 'understand'? Few explanations will be regarded as 'sufficient', for few who live outside the estate will truly understand why subjecting some people to violent taunts and threats gives others a sense of personal power.

Managing violence

Although resorting to violence is seen in negative terms, many believe the ability to defend yourself with and from violence is a basic survival skill. The Violence Research Programmes's twenty research projects explored many different kinds of violence: door staff or bouncers, prison conflict, attacks on sex workers, racist offenders, and the violent-resilient school are but a few of the project topics. What the Programme demonstrates is that it is crucial to know as much detail about violence as possible. Who, what, when and where are critical social and demographic features of social relations to begin to sketch out why violence happens, what it means to the parties involved, what social resources these parties use to manage its impact, and which institutional support might be available to minimise its impact.

Our research continues to tell

us that the way people respond to an experience of 'violence', be it a threat, a physical or a sexual assault, is to tell no one. And if someone is told, it is not a police officer to whom people turn, it is a friend or family member. Perhaps what is most tragic about this case is that young Damilola broke his silence. He told his mother, he spoke to the head teacher about his experiences of threat and intimidation as a young school child. Perhaps this is a testimony to an anti-bullying campaign in the school. At least he learned to tell someone about his experiences of intimidation. We do not know whether his killing was in any way an extension of the bullying he felt in school. To link forms of violence unproblematically is surely a mistake. To explore its intersections is not.

One final observation about violence I'd like to make. The single most common question I am asked about as Director of the VRP is about the violence of women and/or girls. Here, violence is a signifier of the disruption of a number of social 'givens': women's passivity, non-violence, or the presumed naturalness of men's aggression. The cause of the violence is generally blamed on television or women's liberation. There is an on-going and vitriolic research battle to prove the existence of widespread women's violence in the domestic setting. This quest for proof takes place against the curious imbalance in the gender of other forms of violence: pub fights, football hooliganism, conflicts and disputes among men. But the point to this commentary is that we insist that we can make observations even about gender without an overview of violence in its different forms.

Without understanding violence as having socially contextual forms, I suggest, it is impossible to think strategically about any intervention or plan of action that will begin to take the safety of all citizens seriously.

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