

THE IMAGE OF VIOLENCE

Rethinking the Concept of Violence

Broadly speaking, violence involves the infliction of emotional, psychological, sexual, physical and/or material damage. The harm felt by the recipient varies, as does the long-term impact on his/her everyday life. A recent experience of violence, or its threat, may have significant effects, altering an individuals' routines and personal lifestyle or it may have little noticeable influence on daily life.

Violent crime continues to capture the imagination of the public and is the chosen fodder of the media. Despite its seemingly rare occurrence, violent incidents are good news; perhaps because they portray life as precarious or as exciting, the love affair of the media with violence sensationalises and distorts its typical form. The wanton brutal attack by a stranger on a pensioner provides the best news copy. This idealised image of violence is not only accepted by the media, but, I suggest, also influences policing strategies and crime prevention policies aimed to minimise violence.

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Criminology continues to choose to wrap its knowledge about violence within the cloak of stranger danger. By far, most violence and threat arises from those who are familial and familiar. Rather than the street constituting the greatest threat to personal security, violence often happens in places such as the home or worksite. Interestingly, violence is usually seen as 'losing control', rather than, as I argue elsewhere, as 'asserting control' (Stanko 1985).

The ideological and practical strength of the image of 'real' violence remains fixated on the street. This focus on the street, and on the faceless, lurking assailants, has serious consequences for policy and practice of criminal justice. First, there is a distortion in the way we think about policing and the nature of protection. In public opinion surveys of policing, the most popular mode of measuring police-community responsiveness these days in England and Wales, what people say is much more a measurement of seriousness than of what the people call police about. Top of the list in the Operational Police Review is sexual assault, a crime which we all know is rarely reported to the police. Moreover, as all the evidence suggests, sexual assault is commonly committed by men known to the women and children they assault. Yet we are told time and time again that the way

to reduce violence, and all crime for that matter, is to put more police on the street.

The second distortion arising from linking violence to unsafe streets is in our understanding of the concept of fear of crime. The classic, and universal question, serving as the core measurement of fear of crime is: how safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark?

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Some researchers ask questions about how safe an individual feels at home, but this is usually linked to the possibility of intrusion from the outside. Overwhelmingly reported by women, fear of crime is characterised as a problem of trusting strangers. As I have forcefully argued elsewhere (Stanko 1990), women's fear of crime is not solely associated with their safety in public places. Women's fear, and understanding of the potential for violence, weaves their experiences of known men with those unknown. Assuaging fear, then, will take more than better outdoor lighting.

The third, and perhaps most insidious distortion, is that found in crime prevention literature. In Britain, the Home Office's crime prevention campaign features women as a particular audience for advice. No crime prevention advice is available for young men, who according to the Home Office's own crime surveys, report the most personal violence. (I also am concerned about this intransient finding of crime surveys. Men's harm seems to come to the attention of the police and crime surveys more than women's {see, Stanko 1988}.) The way women are recognised as targets of violence does not truly acknowledge the greatest risk to women: known men. Instead, the crime prevention advice is devoted to teaching adult women how to walk in the street, sit on public transport, park their cars, and lock their doors. What is even more extraordinary about the crime prevention literature, is that it is seemingly unaware of all empirical evidence which shows that women take more precautions for their safety than do men (see, for example Gordon and Riger 1988). Avoiding violence, according to the crime prevention literature, means either being a man (because men are supposed to know how to take care of themselves in public places?), or for women, being prepared, at all times in public, for an attack by a strange man.

This leads to my final point about how the fixation on unsafe streets distorts our understanding of violence and

violent crime. By connecting unsafe streets with violence, we continue to view violence as random, unpredictable, an attack upon our serene, problem-free, crime-free lives. Virtually everything we know about encountering threat and physical and sexual brutality forces us to recognise that, for a sizeable proportion of the population - both women and men - encounters with violence are part of their biographies (Stanko 1990).

Violence within the home, bullying at school or in the neighbourhood, courtship violence, gay bashing, racial harassment and crime, sexual harassment and intimidation, 'fair' fights between adolescent men or women - little of which comes to the attention of the police or any official agency - are commonplace. Equally important are the gendered dimensions and consequences of violence, and it is these gendered aspects which are most likely to be pushed out of the frame of understanding violence and its consequences. Women who have experienced violence cope with those experiences in the context of their understanding of what it means to be female, and by and large, women experience femaleness as **unsafety**. Whilst many women are abused by men known to them, they are acutely aware that some men they do not know may wish to violate them **because they are women**. Men's experiences of violence are all too often attributed to their experiences of normal masculinity. The way men cope with violence is multi-dimensional, yet, has been entirely overlooked by criminologists. Women and men of colour feel potentially vulnerable to violence in a white-dominated society, and indeed, many have experiences of verbal and physical abuse because they are not white.

Because we have fixated on the street in the way we characterise violence, we have limited our approaches to minimising the impact of violence on all our lives. It is time that the field of criminology question its approach to violence.

References

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