

RACISM, SELF-ESTEEM AND VIOLENCE IN SA:

Gaps in the NCPS' explanation?

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Ten years after the launch of the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS), South Africa is still bedevilled by high levels of violence. Given this situation, it is worth reflecting on the NCPS' analysis of the causes of crime and violence. In particular it seems the Strategy may have failed to recognise the important role that internalised racism, and related low self-esteem and concerns about status, would play in contributing to violence. These issues are discussed here in relation to the high level of interpersonal assaults in South Africa.

Ten years after it was accepted by Cabinet, the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) remains the only policy of its kind to have been developed for the country.¹ Launched in May 1996, the NCPS intended to shift the approach to crime in South Africa that focused on crime control, to one that emphasised prevention. The NCPS also promoted partnerships as a mechanism for preventing crime, along with a shared responsibility among a range of government departments rather than just the police and courts as had previously been the case.

The nature and impact of the Strategy has been analysed elsewhere.² This article is concerned with the detailed discussion of 'factors giving rise to crime in South Africa' provided in the NCPS. As articulated in the Strategy, these can be divided into those associated with the legacy of apartheid and those related to the transition to democracy.

NCPS on the legacy of apartheid

The NCPS says that the violence and intolerance which had dominated apartheid political culture

was now 'spilling over' into the social and domestic arenas.³ Criminalisation of political activity under apartheid had blurred the dividing line between political and criminal activity, and criminals used this to rationalise crime. Law enforcement and criminal justice agencies had been discredited which undermined popular discouragement – and contributed to popular approval – of illegal activities.

The NCPS also emphasised apartheid's socio-economic legacy of "poverty, unemployment, and relative deprivation" as well as "youth marginalisation". Stark disparities in wealth, the NCPS said, operate as an incentive for criminal activity. With political rationalisations, these are also used as a justification for crime.

Marginalisation, it was argued, was also not only economic. Young people had been marginalised socially and in other ways, and felt rejected by the dominant culture, contributing to a crisis of identity. This was occurring within the context of the destruction of the family, the school and other vehicles of social cohesion.

NCPS on the impact of the transition

Breakdown of social controls

The NCPS emphasised that increased violence and crime conformed with a pattern of heightened instability and violence during political transitions in other countries. In South Africa the transition involved the "dismantling" of illegitimate apartheid era state institutions. The NCPS also refers to the "unshackling of democratic political process" – implying that there was a breakdown of the social control function performed by popular mass based organisations. Together with the fact that the negotiation process had been slow to transform the state institutions, this contributed to a vacuum of legitimate social authority.

Culture of violence

Related to the culture of violence, the NCPS argued, was the continued tendency for violence to be used as an instrument of political rivalry during the transition. This tendency contributed to the further growth of paramilitary structures which had become a law unto themselves. Violence which was ostensibly political was also a vehicle for competing claims over economic resources – a trend that further blurred the line between political and criminal violence.

Now that South Africa was undergoing a process of transition, the culture of violence and legitimisation of criminality were also reinforced by a "culture of entitlement" and expectations which had been generated by the process of political change. Due to the slow pace of change this was translated into frustration contributing to "escalating social conflict as well as violent and acquisitive crime".

The NCPS also argued that the shift from resistance to the politics of negotiation had resulted in the youth losing their role at the centre stage of political life. Ironically this also compounded their crisis of identity, propelling them into criminal gangs as a source of identity and social cohesion.

Impact of economic development

The NCPS acknowledged that economic development was necessary to address the causes of crime. But the Strategy suggested that development also contributed to crime. Sophisticated banking, telecommunications and transport systems, combined with weak mechanisms of regulation (including poorly regulated

borders) and corruptible officials, all facilitated criminal activity and attracted crime syndicates to South Africa.

The injection of resources into communities as part of development might promote competition, conflict, crime and violence within these communities. Economic development, it was pointed out, would also not address the economic crimes perpetrated by the affluent, or the problem of crime syndicates or gender-specific violent crime.

Social change

Finally, dramatic social change generates stress and insecurity, and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. Because of widespread crime and violence, everyone is forced to think of themselves as potential victims. These factors, the NCPS argued, would feed into the growth of paramilitary structures as well as vigilantism and the demand for guns. Another consequence of these "social psychological" stresses may be the resort to alcohol and drug abuse which itself feeds into crime.

According to the NCPS, the feelings of powerlessness – experienced by men as emasculation – are displaced into the domestic arena as a means of reasserting their authority "within those relationships in which they still hold sway", resulting in increased violence against women and children. Exposure of children to high levels of violence within the family in turn has a damaging and long lasting impact on the youth, according to the NCPS.⁴

Violence in South Africa

In reflecting on whether the framework for understanding crime provided in the NCPS is sufficient to account for violence in South Africa today, it is necessary to consider what form violence takes. A number of different types of violent crime can be identified:

- assaults related to arguments and domestic violence;
- robbery;
- rape and sexual assault;
- conflict between groups over territory, markets and power such as gang warfare, taxi violence and political violence;
- violence against state and economic institutions including protest violence and terrorism;

- violence to resist law enforcement interventions;
- excessive force by public and private policing agencies and vigilantism;
- violent child abuse;⁵
- culpable homicide which can be regarded as negligent fatal violence (often involving motor vehicles);
- other forms of violence including serial killings, muti killings and other premeditated murders not covered by the above categories, and violence related to kidnappings.

Murder can be linked to any of these forms of violence, as any of them can be fatal. It should also be noted that acts of violence falling into many of the above categories often involve actions which seem to be sadistic or gratuitous.

When an act of violence is reported to the police it is classified as murder, attempted murder, rape, indecent assault, assault common, assault with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm (assault GBH), common robbery, robbery with aggravating circumstances, kidnappings, or public violence. Thus, without additional information about the circumstances in which these offences happen, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of many of the types of violence listed above.

However it appears that violent crime in South Africa primarily fits into the first three categories – interpersonal assaults, robbery and rape – and that these account for as much as 80–90% of all violence (Table 1).

Table 1: Recorded violent crime in South Africa, 2005/06

Crime category	Number of cases	% of total violent crime
Assault GBH	226,942	30.1
Common assault	227,553	30.2
Aggravated robbery	119,726	15.9
Common robbery	74,723	9.9
Rape	54,926	7.3
Attempted murder	20,553	2.7
Murder	18,545	2.5
Indecent assault	9,805	1.3
Total	752,773	

Source: SAPS 2005/06 Annual Report

But the vast majority of violent offences (60%) in official statistics are recorded either as assault GBH or common assault. While these incidents could be related to several forms of violence referred to above, it appears that most are linked to arguments generally between two men. They also include incidents of domestic violence. Given that assault makes up the largest portion of recorded violence in the country, these are considered in the more detail below.

Interpersonal assaults

Incidents in this category generally involve people who know each other relatively well. The 2003 National Victims of Crime Survey indicates that in 30% of assault cases, assailants were "community members known to the victim", and 17% were friends or acquaintances.⁶ In 12% of cases, the assailant was a spouse or lover. While it is likely that women were reluctant to report domestic violence to interviewers conducting the victim survey, especially because the interview was conducted in their home, the data suggest that domestic violence incidents do not make up the majority of cases in this category.

The Victims of Crime Survey data therefore probably don't indicate the extent to which women are victims of these types of assaults. Information on the sex of assault victims provided by the SAPS for the 2005/06 financial year indicates that 53% of victims of common assault, 38% of victims of assault GBH, 18% of victims of attempted murder, and 14% of victims of murder, were female.⁷

This suggests that assaults tend to be more serious when both parties are male. It is also possible that reporting behaviour varies between men and women, with women tending to report less serious assaults more often than men. Roughly the same number of common assaults and incidents of assault GBH are reported to the SAPS, even though common assaults are presumably far more frequent.

While the majority of these incidents involve people who are known to each other, some do involve strangers. The Victims of Crime Survey indicates that in 11% of assaults, the assailant was completely unknown "with 20% of respondents being confident that the perpetrator was from the community though personally unknown to them".⁸

Particularly when both the parties involved are male, it is also not always easy to ascribe the roles of victim and perpetrator. Both parties may be involved in contributing to the escalation of the argument – though not always with equal enthusiasm. In relation to the substance of these arguments, the National Victims of Crime Survey indicated that 20% of victims of assault thought that the assault was due to long term personal anger towards the victim, 15% sudden personal anger, 13% money disputes, 12% jealousy or other romantic motives, and 12% anger towards the friends or family of the victim.⁹

Though these may seem to be mundane disagreements, this does not moderate the violence which ensues. Evidence indicates that most murders are linked to this type of argument. According to the SAPS 2002/03 Annual Report, "the majority of murders started as an argument which degenerated into a fight and then an assault".¹⁰

Low self-esteem and status insecurity

Violence remains a serious problem in South Africa, notwithstanding declines in most categories reported in the 2005/06 SAPS statistics. Is South Africa still in a process of transition or are there other factors, perhaps not recognised by the NCPS, which contribute to violence? Would these factors help to explain why everyday disagreements provoke such extreme and pervasive violence?

One concept which is not discussed in the NCPS is that of self-esteem. International literature consistently links violence to low self-esteem and "fragile self-concepts".¹¹ Although at one stage analysts believed aggression may be linked to high self-esteem, this has since been refuted by research which finds that aggression is associated with a type of insecure and easily threatened inflated self-image which is underpinned by anxiety about one's worth or status: in effect a disguised low self-esteem.¹² Any disagreement or criticism, or even a perceived lack of consideration, may be experienced as undermining and threatening to one's self-image, thus provoking aggression.

Low self-esteem on its own then is not a predictor of violence. But the roots of violence are often found in mental-emotional states which serve as a psychological defence or compensation for low self-

esteem. Perhaps the most important of these for understanding why people react very aggressively to minor insults (whether real or perceived), is a state of mind, underpinned by low self-esteem, which is associated with an inflated idea of one's own worth or status.

Research on homicide in Canada and the USA indicates that levels of violence, as measured by homicide, correlate strongly with levels of inequality.¹³ While the authors see violence as being linked to "status competition", it is possibly more accurate to define this violence as linked to insecurity about status which is accentuated by high inequality.

The relevance of these findings is twofold:

- the importance given by individuals to their status, sometimes reflected in a pre-occupation with machismo, or consumer status symbols, but also associated with a disposition to over-react in relation to minor arguments, can be related to low self-esteem;
- these findings also indicate that self-esteem and personal feelings of worth are affected by social and economic factors.

Heightened levels of inequality may feed feelings of inferiority and insecurity among people relating to their status. 'Status' here is used in the subjective sense of beliefs or feelings about one's ability to achieve standing, acceptance or respect among members of one's family, peer group or community.

In so far as they increase insecurity about status, social and economic factors increase the psychological motivation to compensate for this inferiority through inflated ideas about one's own worth. This in turn may increase the disposition to feel threatened by minor acts which are interpreted as challenging one's status. As discussed in the next section, in addition to inequality, other social factors which inspire feelings of inferiority, powerlessness, isolation or marginalisation may heighten these effects.

Low self-esteem and status insecurity in SA

According to the NCPS, the main features of apartheid which were relevant to understanding violence in South Africa were:

- the violent nature of the apartheid system;

- the related tendency to rationalise crime as political; and
- structural deprivation and marginalisation.

The NCPS emphasised that marginalisation "is only in part economic". But the Policy ignored racism as the core ideology in terms of which exclusion was justified, and did not consider the enduring impact of apartheid racism, and how this was internalised by many South Africans.

Perhaps the key to understanding the uneven impact of apartheid on self-concepts lies in the differential impact of apartheid on the family. The legacy of apartheid is partly reflected in single parent families (characterised by an absent father), the absence of consistent primary caregivers, and families which are plagued by problems such as alcoholism and violence.

The impact of the past on the family as a socialising institution was not uniform. The family has also been resilient, in many cases serving as a nurturing environment for young children despite the many challenges which they face. Nevertheless, the level of damage to the family is linked to a pervasive problem of people not developing the integrated personalities which come from growing up in an emotionally nurturing environment. Many of those who might be prone to internalised racism, low self-esteem and status insecurity – and thus potentially prone to violence – might come from these damaged families.

While the NCPS did not broach the issue of the enduring impact of apartheid's racist ideology, it emphasised that there would be a range of factors fuelling insecurity. The insecurity which fed the growth of vigilantism and the demand for guns, for example, did not simply originate in anxieties about safety, according to the NCPS. It also fed off the broader social uncertainty and instability generated by change. In turn, this would contribute to other social problems as well, such as alcohol and drug abuse.

The NCPS also detailed various factors detrimental to social cohesion such as apartheid, and violence both during apartheid and the transition process. But given that it was written in 1996 when the framework for development and growth was still the Reconstruction

and Development Programme (RDP), the NCPS could not have anticipated the form that economic growth over the next decade would take, and the degree to which this would undermine social cohesion in South Africa.

As opposed to the apartheid period when inequality mirrored the division between black and white, the post apartheid period has seen rising inequality within the black community. The breakdown of communal solidarity linked to the dissolution of apartheid and the increased social mobility of sections of society, not only undermines cohesion but reinforces insecurity about personal worth. While people are now included culturally, for instance through mass television, and politically through the democratic system, they continue to be excluded structurally through poverty and economic insecurity. The phenomenon of 'conspicuous consumption' further reinforces this type of insecurity.

One of the legacies of apartheid is therefore likely to be underlying low self-esteem among many South Africans. Though internalised negative racial stereotypes might contribute to this, this would not be the only factor. Emerging from low self-esteem, as well as from the broader sources of insecurity, are likely to be pervasive insecurities about status.

In so far as the combination of low self-esteem and an inflated concept of one's worth are the volatile mix that leads to certain forms of aggression, it would not necessarily be the most disadvantaged who would be the most violent. In the same way that efforts to enhance gender equality might fuel feelings of insecurity on the part of men who are invested in ideas about male superiority, racial equality may also feed into insecurity among those with an investment in apartheid ideas of themselves as superior. These insecurities could contribute to gender and racial violence, as well as aggression against other men from their own social group.

For example, low self-esteem and status insecurity might take certain forms in the coloured community, and might help to explain the high levels of violence in this community.¹⁴ Linked partly to the continuing internalisation of racist concepts, members of the coloured community might be

prone to see themselves, in racist terms, as lacking worth because of their colour. But, on the same basis, their 'part white' identity, which in the past served to elevate them above Africans, might be related to a tendency to an inflated, but fragile, sense of self-worth.

Accentuated by alcohol and drug taking, and aggravated by widespread firearm ownership, low self-esteem and status insecurity can plausibly be seen as key factors driving high levels of interpersonal assaults in South Africa.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the link between self-esteem and interpersonal assaults in South Africa. It is clear that violence in this country reflects the interaction of many factors, and the intention is not to suggest that self-esteem is the only, or even the main one, that should be considered.

Despite the passing of time, the framework provided in the NCPS continues to be relevant today. But a key shortcoming may be its failure to consider dynamics related to low self-esteem, in part a product of racism, and how these might feed into violence.

Finally, it is important to note that none of the frameworks discussed here explain why – although women would also be affected by low self-esteem and status insecurity – the perpetration of violence remains overwhelmingly the terrain of men. Part of the answer may lie in the fact that, while men may tend to deal with status insecurity through violence, women may resort to other behaviours and means of expression.

Endnotes

- 1 In discussing the NCPS, this article is referring to the strategy document launched in May 1996. The NCPS document is now available at <<http://www.cjcp.org.za/otherresources.htm>>.
- 2 See: G Simpson and J Rauch, Reflections on the National Crime Prevention Strategy, in G Maharaj (ed), *Between Unity and Diversity: Essays on Nation Building in Post Apartheid South Africa*, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 1999, pp 295-314; B Naude, The South African National Crime Prevention Strategy: A Critique, *Acta Criminologica*, 13(2), 2000, pp 1-11; J Rauch, Changing Step: Crime Prevention Policy in

South Africa, and E Pelser and A Louw, Lessons from practice, in E Pelser (ed) *Crime Prevention Partnerships: Lessons from practice*, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2002; B Dixon, Cosmetic Crime Prevention, in B Dixon and E van der Spuy (eds), *Justice Gained – Crime and Crime Control in South Africa's Transition*, UCT Press, Cape Town, 2004, pp 163-192.

- 3 For a critique of this type of historical account of violence in South Africa see G Kynoch, Urban violence in colonial Africa: A case for South African exceptionalism, Paper presented at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 15 May 2006.
- 4 The NCPS also highlighted other factors such as the absence of a national political consensus, inadequate support to victims of crime, access to firearms, and other factors highlighted by international research as causes of crime.
- 5 Some may argue that violence related to bullying and corporal punishment should also be added to this list but it is rare for these types of violence to be treated as criminal.
- 6 P Burton, A du Plessis, T Leggett, A Louw, D Mistry and H van Vuuren, *National Victims of Crime Survey: South Africa 2003*, Mono No 101, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, July 2004.
- 7 South African Police Service, *Annual Report of the South African Police Service for 2005/2006*, SAPS Head Office, Pretoria, 2006.
- 8 P Burton et al, op cit.
- 9 Ibid, p 130. In some cases (17%) victims also thought the assault was an attempted robbery.
- 10 South African Police Service, *Annual Report of the South African Police Service for 2002/2003*, SAPS Head Office, Pretoria, 2003.
- 11 M Levi, Violent Crime, in M Maguire, R Morgan and Reiner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.
- 12 B Bushman and R Baumeister, Threatened Egotism, Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Direct and Displaced Aggression: Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Lead to Violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 1998, pp 219-229.
- 13 M Daly, M Wilson and S Vasdev, Income inequality and homicide rates in Canada and the United States, *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, April 2001, pp 219-236.
- 14 See for instance A Altbeker, Murder and robbery in SA: A tale of two trends, chapter in forthcoming book to be published by Medical Research Council; T Leggett, Still marginal: Crime in the Coloured community' in *SA Crime Quarterly* No 7, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2004; S Mathews, N Abrahams, LJ Martin, L Vetten, L van der Merwe and R Jewkes, "Every six hours a woman is killed by her intimate partner": A national study of female homicide in South Africa, South African Medical Research Council, Cape Town, 2005.