ARTICLES

Media constructions of violent crime

Monique James
School of Applied Human Sciences
Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
South Africa
moniquecjames@gmail.com

Anthony Collins
School of Applied Human Sciences
Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
South Africa

ABSTRACT
There seems to be a pervasive attitude amongst South Africans that crime levels are rising and that crime is “out of control” as anyone, no matter how careful they are, can fall victim to crime. Based on these assumptions, criminal violence and the risk of victimisation are perceived by many people to be the most pressing issues in South Africa at the moment. Many factors influence each individual’s perceptions of criminal violence, such as past experience of victimisation, cultural understandings of criminal violence, and particular ideologies that an individual adopts. Media presentations have a powerful and pervasive influence not only on the ways in which people come to perceive criminal violence but also on the ways in which they experience their own victimisation, should they become a victim of violent crime. A small number of studies have been carried out exploring the influence of mass media representations of criminal violence on audiences’ perceptions of violent crime. This exploratory article reviews these studies and considers their results and inferences. It shows that the news media form an important part of the conceptual framework through which people construct their understandings of crime. We conclude that South Africa, which has a comparatively high level of crime and where fear of crime seems to be consistently escalating – despite decreases in crime statistics – needs more contemporary studies of the nature and extent
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of the news media’s influence on these conceptual frameworks. These studies should also explore in more depth the effects these frameworks have on subjective experiences of risk and victimisation as well as on crime management policy and practices.

Keywords: crime prevention; crime control; fear of crime; media; policing; social constructionism; violent crime

Much has been written about violent crime in South Africa, and there is a great deal of research which takes criminal violence as its topic. These studies usually tend to seek the prevalence and causes of violent crime, or the effects of criminal violence on the victims and society, or they examine the historical trajectory of violence and crime in South Africa (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, CSVR, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2009). This article takes a slightly different approach, and explores the news media’s contributions to South African citizens’ understandings of violent crime. The aim is to explore how people come to understand crime in specific ways, how this produces certain fears rather than others and how these lead to specific ideas and practices of how to reduce or avoid violent crime.

POLICING AND THE CASE OF ANDRIES TATANE

On 13 April 2011, Andries Tatane, a community leader and political activist died of injuries when he was attacked by six armed policemen during a service delivery protest in Ficksburg (Dean, 2011; Prince, Masondo, & McLea, 2011; Serrao, Williams, Jooste, & Sapa, 2011). During an evening broadcast of the news, the South African Broadcasting Corporation screened footage showing police beating and kicking Tatane while a post-mortem revealed that he had also been shot (Dean, 2011; Prince et al., 2011; Rawoot & Underhill, 2011; Sapa, 2011; Serrao et al., 2011). While there was a public outcry immediately following his death, this soon died down. In other democratic societies we might expect that after such a widely publicised and criticised tragedy there would be national appeals for changes in policing policy and practice. However, while there are a few lonely dissenting voices, for the most part, the South African public continues to stand behind Police Commissioner ‘General’ Bheki Cele’s advocacy of an aggressive and militaristic approach to crime which includes ‘shoot to kill’ tactics by police. We argue that in South Africa many believe that police have to be violent in their reactions to crime, as this type of policing is needed to ‘get the job done’. These ‘tough on crime’
attitudes predominate where there are high levels of fear of crime among the general public (Palmary, 2011).

**FEAR OF CRIME**

The proliferation of gates, high walls, barbed and razor wire, burglar proofing, streets sealed off by boom gates, security guards and private security companies are constant reminders of many South Africans’ fear of becoming a victim of crime. Few would argue against the assertion that crime rates in South Africa are genuinely high (CSVR, 2007). However, as some authors (Hamber & Lewis, 1998) maintain, fear of victimisation by the general public is on the whole disproportionate to the actual threats as levels of many (but not all) types of violent crime have been stabilising or decreasing. Homicide provides one statistically reliable example, and the homicide rate is 30% lower than it was in 1995 (Altbeker, 2007; South African Police Services, 2011). Despite this, fear of victimisation continues to increase. National statistics, such as those released annually by the police (South African Police Service, 2011), may lead people to mistakenly believe that violent crime is the same everywhere, enveloping all communities. However, when these statistics are broken down by various criteria such as geographic region, socioeconomic indicators, type of crime and demographics of victims, we see that this is not the case (Hamber & Lewis, 1997) and that the poorer and predominantly black sectors of society are still more vulnerable to crime (Palmary, 2011).

Despite differing levels of risk of victimisation, what is common across South Africa’s population is a pervasive attitude that crime levels are “out of control”, unrestrained and rising, and that victimisation is to be expected (Mattes, 2006). Based on this assumption, criminal violence and risk of victimisation is perceived by many people to be the most pressing issue in South Africa at the moment (Callebert, 2007). Many people talk of how they fear becoming a victim of crime and are especially anxious about becoming a victim of violent crime.

If we consider that perceptions of quality of life are directly related to perceptions of safety, general anxiety over criminal violence has important implications for the quality of life that South Africans experience. For this reason it is important to explore those aspects that contribute towards this fear of victimisation. Such an investigation is critical as over time this fear of victimisation feeds a feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability which psychologically empowers criminals and inhibits us from locating appropriate solutions to violent crime (Hamber & Lewis, 1998). This persistent fear not only disempowers the population, but encourages interventions that take ever more desperate forms such as vigilante violence and calls for harsher punishments for perpetrators. Such solutions are problematic, not only because they are ineffective but because they often also undermine human rights and further perpetuate the ‘culture of violence’ in South Africa. This culture
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of violence describes an ethos in South African society where violence is often used as a first resort (both legitimately and illegitimately) to solve problems and achieve goals (Du Toit, 2001), and leads to the marginalization of other, potentially more effective, violence reduction techniques.

FEAR OF CRIME AND POLICING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Ramphele (1991) argues that democratically elected governments have greater trouble dealing with crime and lawlessness because they are expected to be more responsive to populist pressure and criticism. This is clearly illustrated in the government’s shift away from the National Crime Prevention Strategies that had characterised policing since 1996, to what can arguably be thought of as a return to apartheid policing strategies that focus on ‘crime control’. Crime prevention approaches stress collaboration between organisations providing social welfare services, government and civil society and include interventions such as community policing in the focus on the protection of potential victims. The emphasis of the crime prevention approach is on targeting those underlying causes of crime, rather than simply directing resources towards the punishment of offenders (Palmary, 2011). In contrast, crime control approaches have a more punitive focus that gives weight to the identification and punishment of perpetrators (Palmary, 2011).

By the year 2000, the state reacted to the pressure from a crime beleaguered populace by declaring ‘war on crime’ (Newham, 2005). Indicators of this return to ‘crime control’ policing are the implementation of stricter bail laws since 1998, a return to militarised police ranks and a commanding, rather than managing, of police as a force against criminals, instead of a service for citizens (Goldstone, 2010). Furthermore, Police Commissioner ‘General’ Bheki Cele’s ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy would amend existing legislation so that police officers can shoot when confronted by offender’s guns and not only their gunfire (Marks & Wood, 2010). In fact, the ‘suspected’ perpetrator’s ‘suspected’ weapon would not even need to be seen as the proposed changes to Section 49 of the Criminal Procedure Act would allow police to open fire on a person that they believe is a violent criminal who would otherwise be impossible to apprehend.

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

There are many factors that can influence an individual’s perceptions of criminal violence, such as past experience of victimisation, cultural understandings of criminal violence, and particular ideologies or frameworks of social explanation that an individual adopts. Using a social constructionist approach, we can explore the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by the presentations of violent crime that the media use. Social constructionism holds that people do not discover
knowledge about the world so much as they construct it, and that this construction takes place within collective conceptual frameworks through which the world is described and explained (Schwandt, 2000).

Using a social constructionist approach allows us to understand how – given the proliferation of television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the internet and other media that people are exposed to on a daily basis – media presentations will come to have a powerful and pervasive influence not only on the ways in which an individual comes to perceive criminal violence, but also on the way in which they experience their own victimisation.

PERPETRATORS AND MORAL PANIC

The current fear of victimisation present in South Africa can be thought of in terms of the moral panic model created by Cohen (1972). A moral panic is a response to categories of people who are perceived as threatening the integrity and welfare of a community or society (Jewkes, 2004). This response is mainly fuelled by media reactions to these people, as they are fostered by heavily publicised reports of sudden increases in particular sorts of criminal violence (Best, 1999; Jewkes, 2004). As Tonry (2004) explains, this response is disproportionate to the extent of the threat that these people actually pose.

A recent example that illustrates the power of a moral panic can be seen in public reactions to the riots that occurred in London in August 2011. The British media carried stories focusing on incidents of violence, destruction, looting and arson (Ambrogi & Abbas, 2011; BBC, 2011; Harrow Observer, 2011; Howie, 2011; Moore, 2011). While being mostly contained and fleeting, these riots were presented as evidence of a dangerous, anti-social and criminal element within British society that threatened the very fabric of British civilisation.

Commenting on representations of rioting and raiding that inundated the British media, Lemmings (2011) notes that these depictions conform to Cohen’s longstanding moral panic model. He explains that these situations are often due to a divide between a group of (predominantly) male youth and the society they believe has disenfranchised them and does not provide enough opportunities for improvement (Lemmings, 2011). He details that appeals to technology, popular culture, music, drugs or materialism as the causes of such uprisings is an old ideology that prevents engagement with the actual societal triggers of such disturbances and guarantees simple resolutions. These simple, ‘trouble-free’ solutions include increased surveillance, such as the placement of CCTV cameras in city centres; amplified law enforcement, such as having more police on the streets; and management of technology, such as the calls for mobile networks to be disabled during the London riots. However, these solutions circumvent the social problems behind such riots and thus will not solve the problem. Instead they criminalise the poor and other
marginalised social groups (Lemmings, 2011). Using the model of a moral panic to understand this issue is not to suggest that criminal violence does not occur and that fear of victimisation is determined solely by media hype, but rather that the media provide the public with a particular, exaggerated framework for understanding criminal violence (Jewkes, 2004). The argument is not that the media in South Africa are purposefully conspiring to create a moral panic around criminal violence, but that this is an unfortunate consequence of the way in which they report on criminal violence in order to attain another goal, that of getting an audience to ‘consume’ their news.

DEFINING VIOLENT CRIME

In line with a social constructionist argument, we contend that the way in which people describe a phenomenon, shapes how they ‘see’, understand and experience it. Violent crime is an important issue for many South Africans, but it is not always apparent what specific things people are referring to when they talk about violent crime or violence more broadly. While people may admit to having different views about what does and does not constitute violence, there is an assumption that we all know what violence is, and that we are all talking about the same thing when we refer to violence, unless specifically stating otherwise. Yet if one questions people about what they think violence is, it quickly becomes apparent that people have differing conceptions of the term and the phenomenon.

These differences in the lay definitions of violence are echoed within the social sciences, as a review of professional literature concerning violence shows that there exist numerous and often conflicting definitions of violence. Diverse definitions are drawn on by different authors, depending on the view of violence that the author has taken, the types of violence she is concerned with, the way she has chosen to categorise forms of violence, and the discipline, paradigm or epistemological stance guiding the author’s examination. Different definitions of violence stress particular characteristics and foreground certain elements of the phenomenon. In doing so, each definition also ‘loses’ or fails to emphasise other features and characteristics of the phenomenon. It is therefore valuable to consider the impact of using a particular definition on the way in which violence is understood.

While it is not within the scope of this article to provide an examination of different definitions of violence, what such research reveals (James, 2010), is that it is possible to pick out a number of common features in popular definitions. The first of these common features relates to the use of physical force which is either illegitimate or contested in some way. A second feature concerns the intention of the perpetrator to have committed the violence with the express intent of coercing or harming the victim in some way. This distinguishes violence from accidents and acts of negligence. Most definitions require that both a perpetrator and a victim
can be identified in the act of violence. Furthermore, there has recently been a trend towards defining violence in terms of the harmful effects that the violence has had on the victim. Using such features to identify an act of violence often means that we end up recognising only interpersonal forms of violence (such as assaults, rapes and murders) as it becomes difficult to recognise an act of violence in which physical force is not used, or where the violence that was employed was legitimate or unintentional, or where a victim and/or perpetrator could not be identified, or where it is not easy to quantify the effects on the victim.

What constitutes violence is always a social construction and as such the way in which violence and criminal violence is defined is inherently dependent on the context in which such a definition is made (Stanko, 2005). What represents a violent act in one situation may not be considered violent in different circumstances. We argue, in agreement with authors such as Jackson (2004), that not only are definitions of violence dependent on the contexts in which they are used, but that they are in fact products of the context in which they are used. Considering that the media’s main purpose is to make a profit, they will therefore employ a definition of criminal violence that will allow them to achieve this objective (Jewkes, 2004). The idea of violence that the media tend to use to define criminal violence is usually that of direct or interpersonal violence, one which explains criminal violence as an act in which one person illegitimately attempts to gain power over another (Brownstein, 2000). As Jewkes (2004) posits, the definition of criminal violence that is used by the media is one that is easy to report, can be easily understood, and will catch and hold the attention of readers. Representing criminal violence in terms of extreme interpersonal physical violence allows for this.

MEDIA PRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENT CRIME

Jewkes (2004) claims that the media present a “version of reality” rather than reality itself. This version is determined by a number of factors that can be thought of as the resources that a journalist can draw on when presenting a story (Jones, 2005). One of the most important of these factors are newsvalues (Jewkes, 2004). Newsvalues are determined by the assumptions that the media make about their audience and are used to assess not only the public appeal of a story, but also the way in which stories will be presented. Jewkes (2004) lists a number of newsvalues that are used to determine how newsworthy a story is. Those that are particularly pertinent when considering why the media present the specific stories about criminal violence that they do, and in the way that they do, are violence; simplification; and conservative ideology and political diversion. If we consider that one of these newsvalues is violence, this means that all stories about criminal violence are already potentially newsworthy (Jewkes, 2004). This is expressively summarised by the journalistic adage, ‘if it bleeds, it leads’, and the more shocking the story the more newsworthy
it is. The acts of criminal violence that are often picked out by the media are extreme but rare examples of violence. Being presented with such examples on a daily basis leads people to believe that these examples are the norm, rather than instances of excessive and out-of-the-ordinary violence (Best, 1999).

A potentially newsworthy account about violent crime is also assessed using the other newsvalues to determine the newsworthiness of the story and how that narrative will be presented. A newsvalue that is particularly important is simplification because it creates a ‘formula’ for reporting on criminal violence (Jewkes, 2004). Within this formula victims are securely situated within family structures and as a result are validated as innocent and pitiable sufferers. Similar contextualization is almost never given to perpetrators. Whereas victims are located within the framework of the family, establishing them as ‘typical’ and ‘normal’, perpetrators are anonymous or represented as individuals living in seclusion of familial and communal attachments (Greer, 2007). Setting up victims as being of society and perpetrators as being outside society (Hall, 1978) serves to uphold conservative ideologies of criminal violence which locate the issue within the individual, and acts as diversion away from explanations which locate the problem in particular social arrangements (Jewkes, 2004).

EFFECTS OF MEDIA PRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENT CRIME

As Best (1999) explains, the media also typically present violent crime as being random and senseless. In presenting stories of violent crime the media will often give very little – if any – consideration to the context of the incident, focusing instead only on the event. Devoid of a framework or context in which to understand the possible causes or reasons for the incident, it becomes ‘yet another’ instance of meaningless, mindless violence. As these senseless incidents stack up they begin to suggest ‘a new crime wave’, which insinuates the idea of society-wide deterioration and collapse. In addition it suggests that everyone is equally at risk of being a victim. Studies of victimisation show however that this is not the case, and that victimisation mostly occurs in distinguishable patterns (Best, 1999).

Considering the combined effects of such presentations, the media produces a sense of societal collapse, where we can never relax because we can never predict if we are going to be the next victim of a homicidal stranger with no regard for life or dignity (Best, 1999; Hamber & Lewis, 1998).

Reporting on criminal violence in the way that the media affects the form in which information is presented to the public and therefore has implications both for individuals and at a societal level (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Two major and immediate implications are that levels of fear among the public increase, and that particular groups of individuals become stigmatised. Through these increasing levels of fear and stigmatising of social groups, levels of intolerance are likely to
increase, justifying calls for tougher ways to deal with perpetrators (Jewkes, 2004). Similar explanations of how inflated public concern over particular types of crime leads to increasingly punitive calls for justice are described by Wilkins’ (1964, cited in Jewkes, 2004) theory of the deviancy amplification spiral and Stuart Hall’s (1978) description of representations of muggings in Policing the Crisis. These calls for increasingly punitive forms of justice often legitimate forms of counter-violence such as reinstatement of the death penalty, the increased use of police force, and ever harsher sentences for criminals. Research shows that such measures do not decrease ‘official’ rates of violent crime recorded by police (Best, 1999). If we consider these as examples of violence in a society, we can see how such measures, instead of lowering the instances of violence, lead to an increase in the occurrence of violence in a society overall.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH STUDIES

Some research studies propose that public wisdom about crime and justice is largely drawn from the media (Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 1998). There are several studies that have been conducted that examine the media’s influence on public perceptions of crime. These studies have mixed results about such an influence. Some studies find no relationship between consumption of news crime stories and fear of crime (Gomme, 1986; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981), while other studies do find a positive correlation between these factors (Gebotys, Roberts, & DasGupta, 1988; Gordon & Heath, 1981; Heath, 1984; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Smith, 1984; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). The attributes of the audience are important in these findings and show that diverse groups of readers and viewers interpret the media presentations of violent crime in different ways. One particular study found that a positive relationship is specific to particular demographic groups, particularly white, middle-aged to elderly women, who in fact have a low likelihood of being victimised, compared to other groups (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997). Of the studies that have found a relationship between consumption of news crime stories and fear of crime, not all show positive relationships and some have shown reductions in fear for those people who regularly read newspapers (Doob & McDonald, 1979). Researchers also argue that as entertainment often features crime and violence it is difficult to distinguish between the influence of the news media and the influence of the entertainment media (Dowler et al., 2006).

The findings of these studies do not unequivocally confirm that the news media do in fact raise levels of fear of violent crime. Further, many of these studies conclude that the relationship between consumption of crime news and fear of crime is dependent on characteristics of the message, the audience and the specific measure of fear (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). However, even those studies that do not reveal a relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, find that stories
about crime and violence are overrepresented compared to other stories. The public are bombarded with stories that present them with a view of societal deterioration where they can never be safe, cultivating a violent and threatening view of the world. This is important in that this becomes one of the most common discourses on violent crime, providing an important part of the framework through which criminal violence is understood. In this way the media facilitate the process of defining crime and structure the discourse on crime in public spheres (Chiricos et al., 1997).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most of the research that has been conducted in this area is over a decade old and, with a few exceptions, none of it was conducted in South Africa. Given that levels of fear are increasing (Callebert, 2007), even though police statistics show that levels of many types of violent crime are decreasing (CSVR, 2008a), it is important that such studies are carried out in South Africa.

An important part of the National Crime Prevention Strategy was that it took cognisance of fear of crime as well as actual crime levels (Newham, 2005). As described above, the National Crime Prevention Strategy has been abandoned for ‘law-and-order’ forms of intervention. Surely issues surrounding fear of violent crime are still important as they continue to have a bearing on quality of life for South Africans. This happens in a number of respects, not least of which is that they impact on public policy in ways that seriously limit human rights via populist politics which calls for policing that is ‘tough on crime’ (Dodds, 2011). Surely the death of Andries Tatane and similar incidents – such as the shooting of three year old Atlegang Phalane because, as police allege, they thought he was holding a gun (Smith, 2009; Tau, 2009) – are inevitable consequences of such forms of policing? While this is reminiscent of how policing operated under the apartheid regime (Mthembu, 2011) – when police acted more as a force to prevent and disperse uprisings, rather than being an organisation which is meant to serve and protect people – the situation today is in fact far graver. Last year 524 people were shot dead by police (Africa, 2011) and the Independent Complaints Directorate confirms having investigated 1769 cases of people dying in police custody or as a result of police action (Pithouse, 2011). This means that the police are now killing twice as many citizens as they were under the apartheid regime. If the news media are one of the important sources of the framework through which we understand violent crime and how to deal with it, we argue that it is very important to explore the impacts of the news media’s presentations of violent crime, and how this affects the task of
understanding and decreasing violence. As such, we believe that it is important that such research is carried out in South Africa.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

**Monique James** has a Master’s degree in Psychology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal having completed, in 2011, a thesis that explored discourses of violent crime in South Africa. She will begin a PhD later this year using feminist theory to explore the impact of gender based violence on male victims. Her research interests include forms of and understandings of violence, qualitative methodologies and critical psychology.

**Anthony Collins** is a critical social psychologist with interests in violence, trauma, and consumer culture. His work explores the interface of psychology and critical social theory, using qualitative research methods and critical analysis to develop new ways of framing problems in these areas. His has published in several journals ranging from Psychology and Society to the International Journal of Critical Psychology, and has co-edited and contributed to textbooks on Critical Psychology and critical approaches in Social Psychology. He is involved in human rights and violence reduction activism, especially around issues of gender-based violence. He holds a Master’s degree in Psychology from Rhodes University and a PhD in History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is currently employed in the School of Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and has previously taught at the University of the Witwatersrand, and Rhodes University.

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