

# **Reframing Gun Violence in South Africa from the Prism of Cultural Violence**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines gun violence in South Africa from different perspectives of violence looking at the works of several scholars including Galtung, Krug, Anthony Collins and the Australian gun buyback policy. It also examined the inter-relationships between gun violence and the non-criminal societal permissible violence forms. In doing these, the study deconstructed the concept of violence beyond the generally well documented and most recognised physical form of violence and went on to establish similarities and points of divergence between nonviolence and violence. The article deduced that violence is not strange to the human race but it is rather often advocated and that addressing it requires a holistic approach. This is because the type of violence which is abhorred is usually an extension of the societal permissible violence termed cultural violence. The article also made some recommendations about the need for nonviolent conflict engagement through the science of peace which shows there are always more effective alternatives to violence and advocates that peace education be included in South African schools to build the societal fabric of peace.

**Keywords: Violence, Non-violence, Gun-violence, South Africa.**

## **Introduction**

The presence of violence as a part of human existence is a ubiquitous one with visible impacts in wars, civil uprisings and terror attacks. Annually,

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over a million persons die or suffer injuries because of violence which can be interpersonal, self-directed or collective/group violence. It has been further said that, violence is one of the leading causes of morbidity globally for people aged 15–44 years (Krug 2002). Hence the importance of this study on violence and more specifically gun violence. This work has as its objectives: one, the examination of the linkage between gun violence and cultural violence and; two, seeking ways by which gun violence can be curbed to ensure that people's right to life are upheld. This study employs qualitative research using secondary data sourced from relevant literature on the discussion. This is then carefully reviewed towards fulfilling the objectives of the study.

In subsequent sections of the paper, we will review literature relevant to the study. First, this is done by critically engaging works on violence, followed by discussion on violence/gun violence in the society. The findings and conclusion of the study are presented in the last section, which is done with recommendations and further research pathways into the issue of addressing gun violence in South Africa.

### **Violence**

Violence, including nonviolence may often seem very simple to the layman most of the time, however disagreements of a great degree has often characterised attempts at having a strait jacket definition of either of them, especially when we attempt a comparison of both terms (Govier 2008: 1). Ackerman and DuVall (2002) in a chronology of “people's power” posits that the existence of such a concept as non-violent force or nonviolence could be very potent as it ensures effectiveness by stripping the target of the ability to maintain control or exercise power by working on their weaknesses. It has been established that the goals of non-violent mass action include coercion, conversion and compromise, all of which are deemed to be favourable results (Govier 2008). However, the presumption or belief is that violence, especially in political circles, consists of mainly physical violence. This is demonstrated by the assaults, murder, property destructions that often characterised political contexts. In like, manner, political theories are more favourably disposed to physical violence most of the time (Govier 2008). Hence` physical forms of violence comes to mind most times when there's a discourse about violence on the political scene.

On closer scrutiny of nonviolence, while it may not involve physical violence, Govier believes it involves structural and psychological violence components. For May (1972) cited in Van der Dennen (1980:5), in relating violence or aggression to power and powerlessness there are five strata of relationships namely;

- a. the power to be;
- b. The power of self-affirmation – not only to be but to be significant;
- c. the power of self-assertion – “I demand that you notice me”.
- d. aggression – taking some of the power of another for oneself; and lastly,
- e. violence largely physical because the other phases, which can involve reasoning and persuasion, have been *ipso facto* blocked off.

For Bloom (2013), exposure of individuals to family violence, wars and acts of terrorism or natural disasters predisposes them to antisocial personality disorder risks. While also looking at violence, especially among youths from the perspective of crimes as a social control theory as proposed by a sociologist, Donald Black in 1983, Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry (2009) postulated that violence/crime are more often a moralistic fallout of self help to attain protection and justice especially in situations where the official form of legal protection fails. The above can be related to such variables as communal protection from violence, personal safety, effectiveness of the justice system in respect of crimes and violence in the society and the role of law enforcement officers especially the police all of which often encourages self-help strategies. Thus, in the failure of all these variables people are often forced to rely on self- help in the form of violence/crime to protect themselves.

Furthermore, de Haan and Nijboer (2005) cited in Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry (2009), in examining youth violence in Amsterdam and Groningen found out that there exist several conditions under which the involvement of youths in acts of violence can be classified as self-help. Among such conditions are:

- a. Exposure to constant threat of violence;
- b. Lack of trust in the security forces and the societal legal systems (Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry 2009: 28).

This study of Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry (2009), was focused on male youths, in particular, aged between 16-24 years who are resident in areas predominantly high in violence and poverty in Brooklyn and South Bronx using youths who have been convicted for a violent offence, individuals injured in a violent act and youths who have been actively involved in acts of violence in the previous six months to the study. Interestingly the study found out that youths felt justified to be involved in violence/crime consistent with the self-help postulations of Donald Black, as a result of the lack of access to the legal system to confront or address violent situations and institutionalised corruption in the police (Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry 2009:29).

Some of the youths also identified the lack of jobs as setting the pace for the causes or instigation of violence stemming from the larger economic context, thus, pushing the youths into the informal or black-market economies where the law does not regulate their activities and where self help is the norm rather than the law e.g. drug trade or armed robbery. While others highlight the paradox of the criminal justice system that creates a diminished opportunity for youths to get legitimate economic opportunities after incarceration, thus propelling a vicious economic cycle (Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry 2009:31). In addition, according to Wilkinson, Beaty and Lurry (2009: 33), the youths expressed a profound lack of faith in police protection as policemen are also scared about their personal safety, especially in situations of armed violence involving the youths. These situations can be related to that existing in the Nigerian society, where police normally arrive an armed violence scene long after the perpetrators might have disappeared only to arrest innocent passers-by and sometimes even the victims of such incidents.

For Anthony Collins, in his study on violence, there's a dichotomy between the imagined scenarios that keep people awake at night and the actual violent incidents or risks of violence obtained from incident studies (Burton *et al.* 2004; Collins 2013: 29, 30). In essence, to him, there's a huge gap between popular opinions about violence and research data on violence. Collins (2013) goes on to explain that public opinion influences researchers at times even though the specific claims of their studies might be derived from rigorous research backed with data. He, however, insists that there are underlying assumptions based on popular opinions that still find themselves into how the research is conceptualised, the research question formulated

and the sort of theories tested (Collins 2013: 30). Another challenge to the understanding and eradication of violence noted by Anthony Collins is that of the political elites, who instead of seeking long term solutions to specific problems, choose to understand their roles as political leaders to just involve a pandering approach to serious societal issues most of the time relying on their personal uncritical beliefs instead of seeking to be led by detailed research data and analysis. This, Collins noted, is often due to attempts at political populism in order to cater for the anxiety of the voters without going deep into addressing the underlying issues to generate sustainable solutions (Collins 2013).

Although we agree with his opinions that scholars should be wary of the influence of the received or popular opinion about violence on research studies and also separate violence from crime, even though both have intersections, we, however, disagree with his classification of some crimes such as assault, robbery and rape as violent, while he posits that other crimes like theft and fraud are not violent (Collins 2013: 30). This is based on the classifications of violence by different scholars such as Galtung (1990); Fisher (2011:4, 30) as physical, psychological, cultural and structural in forms. Hence, theft and fraud, while they may not be harbingers of physical violence they are capable and often impose psychological and structural violence on their victims which may even do more damage beyond what assault can ever achieve (Collins 2013: 30).

Collins (2013: 30b) is also of the opinion that there are non-criminal forms of violence which are generally deemed as acceptable, justifiable and necessary in specific social contexts. The descriptions of such forms of violence is consistent with Galtung's conceptualisation of cultural violence (Galtung 1990; Fischer 2002). Collins (2013) went further to link these acceptable forms of violence to criminal behaviours especially in the context of his study area. He noted that while the threat of a violent crime is a hindrance to quality of life via the inducement of anxiety which in itself is a form of violence. In the same vein, Fisher (2011:9, 10) posits that, people are quite at home with others and very enthusiastic about other forms of violence such as wrestling, action movies, horror movies and video games that often induct the young into large scale virtual violence. In addition, violence is often also encouraged in law enforcement (Collins 2013:30b).

This is exemplified by the actions of the security agents in the Marikana riots in which unarmed protesters were shot from the back and the extra judicial killing of about 800 Shiites in Kaduna in 2016, both in South Africa and Nigeria respectively (Soifer 2012:9; Amnesty International 2015). Another scenario is where the security agents fail to or intervene late, zealous citizens seize the opportunity to take the law into their hands, being cheered on by members of the society who often stand by watching and even recording fellow human beings been burnt alive extra judicially (Collins 2013: 31a).

Collins surmised that the people believe that violence is often the most effective way to address criminality within the society, as the fear of credible promise of violent reprisals will serve as an effective disincentive in violent crime matters, saying that the most effective disincentives will be those holding the promise of the most terrifying repercussions (Collins 2013:31a). Although this belief system is consistent with the axioms of rationality or the rational choice theory, retributive justice has never been proven to have an overwhelming success in handling criminal matters or transforming the individuals involved.

Going further, a list of other commonly acceptable forms of violence in Africa, using South Africa as a microcosm include:

- a. The use of violence to raise and correct children often through corporal punishments;
- b. The use of violence to regulate interpersonal relations;
- c. As an indispensable tool in intimate relationships also known as intimate partner violence (IPV);
- d. As a means of disciplining students in educational institutions e. And also as a means of establishing social status (Collins 2013: 31a).

Thus, in this manner children behaviours which might be perceived as disturbing can be effectively and quickly addressed with a whack or smack, an unwilling sexual partner forced into submission, or jealousy inducing lover slapped into their “right senses” and a successful fight can often serve as an antidote to humiliations triggered by an insult. Violence is also used as an instrument of removing perceived threats posed by political

opponents in a democracy which can be through murder or large scale organised violence bouts (Collins 2013: 31a). Some other examples include the murders of key political candidates, intimidation of candidates and their supporters (Cohen 2016). In similar manner, violence is also used as a tool for eliminating perceived economic competitors and even competition for feminine affections, as witnessed in the South Africa's xenophobic uprisings against foreign nationals' resident in South Africa who were accused of "stealing their jobs and their women" Harris (2002). This also happens in matters of sexual orientations through corrective rape of lesbians and gay bashing (Harris 2002; Mkhize *et al.* 2010; Collins 2013: 31b).

Therefore, it can be stated that contrary to the belief that violence is a hated concept that the world will like to see fizzle away from the society, people widely accept and defend violence as a critical tool in dealing with a wide range of issues within the society. An example is the Section 55(d) of the Nigerian penal code which is an aspect of the Nigerian constitution. It allows for the man to beat his wife, kids and servants in as much as such "*is corrective and does not lead to grievous bodily harm*" (Gamawa 2013). This highlights another problem of boundaries between what the society terms as non-violence/acceptable violent behaviours and antisocial violent crimes which Collins (2013) posits that the latter is just a reinforcement of societally acceptable aggression which may go out of hand and cause more damages than ever imagined or where the societal criticism of lesbians becomes an affirmation for a group to engage in what is termed corrective rape (Collins 2013:31b).

### **Addressing Violence/Gun Violence in the Society**

Thus, it can be said that the major hindrance to the removal of violence in the society is not the deficiency in theories or research about violence but rather in the conceptualisation of our everyday "common sense" which reinforces violence in several ways and yet does not see the nexus between the acceptable forms of violence and the non-acceptable ones, a phenomenon Galtung referred to as cultural violence (Galtung 1990; Collins 2013:35). Consistent with the submission of Collins (2013), Sen (2008:5) posits that violence can be said to be ubiquitous and present everywhere in the human society. This, he relates to the culture, the political economy of poverty which he believes do not adequately explain the occurrence of violent

incidents although they offer some plausibility in certain forms.

Sen (2008) instead advocates that scholars and policy makers should avoid isolationist explanations of violence using either the prisms of economic deprivation or social inequality exclusively or in terms of culture and identity factors. He believes that none of the aforementioned can, on its own, give a full comprehensive picture of the causes of widespread violence and lack of peace in the human society (Sen 2008: 15). Instead, he posits that there is a need for having intersections between the listed factors to get such a comprehensive explanation about the occurrences and incidence of violence. In a similar manner Kane-Berman (1993:13) also asserts that violence cannot be rooted solely in problems associated with poverty alone or better put, socioeconomic factors alone. This he predicated on the happenings in Pretoria and Witwatersrand in South Africa where the personal income of individuals doubles that obtainable as a national average, but these areas were responsible for more than half of the violence recorded in South Africa during the study period.

Hence in tackling the menace of gun violence in South Africa, it is essential that the views of Collins, Sen and Berman should be coupled with the Australian approach to the same matter after the mass murder of 1996 in Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australia, where thirty five people were killed and twenty three others wounded by a single, assailant Martin Bryant (Davey 2016). This saw the country initiate a ban on rapid fire long range guns and, later, a programme that compelled citizens to sell their rapid firing long range guns to the government was enacted. This was extended, in 2003, to include handguns. Consequently, there has not been an incidence of mass murder in Australia in over ten years after the gun amnesty programme. This is unlike what was obtained in the previous eighteen years before the programme, during which the country witnessed thirteen mass shootings.

In addition, results also show that there was a rapid decline in other fire arms related deaths i.e. suicides and homicides by a figure that was double the previous rates after the gun policy was enacted (Chapman *et al.* 2006). This shows that the National Hand-Gun Buyback Act of 2003 policy was a success as the country has not witnessed mass murders for over a decade (Chapman *et al.* 2006:365; Lee and Suardi 2010:76b). As the act reportedly removed over seventy thousand guns from civilian circulation in six months (Lee and Suardi 2010: 76b).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In the light of the above, it is advocated that an exact model of gun buyback policy of Australia be embraced in South Africa as it has worked effectively well in Australia. It is also observed that there is a need for nonviolent conflict engagement through the science of peace, which shows there are always more effective alternatives to violence. There is also the need for peace education to be actively included into the curriculum of high school and university students in South Africa as this will expose the young citizens in South African schools to other alternatives other than violent conflict engagement, thereby enhancing community engagement efforts to build the societal fabric of peace.

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