

# 'PALE FACE' / 'POINTY FACE'

## SA criminology in denial

SARAH HENKEMAN\*

resource@netactive.co.za

*This paper responds to key aspects of Bill Dixon's article, Understanding 'Pointy Face': What is criminology for? It suggests that criminology should unambiguously be 'for' social justice in South Africa's trans-historically unequal context. South African prison statistics are used as a conceptual shortcut to briefly highlight racialised constructions of crime, the criminal and the criminologist. A trans-disciplinary conceptual approach, as a more socially just way to understand violent crime in South Africa, is proposed. A methodological framework,<sup>2</sup> which draws on the notion of cultural-structural-direct violence<sup>3</sup> and intersectional theory,<sup>4</sup> is presented. These extend Bill Dixon's call for criminology to include history, structure, human psyche and biography<sup>5</sup> and resonates with Biko Agozino's call for a 'counter-colonial' criminology.<sup>6</sup> The paper ends by returning the Eurocentric gaze of most South African criminologists, calling them out on their denial about trans-historical violence that implicates 'Pale Face' in the violence of 'Pointy Face'.*

Bill Dixon's article *Understanding 'Pointy Face': What is criminology for?*, which critiques Antony Albekker's book *A Country at War with Itself*, draws attention to harmful blindspots that contribute to the 'explanatory crisis' experienced by South African (SA) criminology. These are: (i) an 'overriding concern with controlling crime', (ii) an 'unwillingness to add fuel to the fires of afropessimism', and (iii) its 'almost painful whiteness'.<sup>7</sup> He raises a key question triggered by Albekker's response to 'Pointy Face': 'what does this urgent acquisitiveness, and this readiness to use extreme violence, say about the South African condition, the structures and mores of post-apartheid society?'<sup>8</sup> The question suggests that, like Albekker and most other SA criminologists,

Dixon limits his view of violent crime to post-apartheid society. This conflates political and knowledge boundaries, which marginalises a 'deeper and longer'<sup>9</sup> understanding of violent crime.

Neoliberal narratives and demarcations of the 'miracle/rainbow nation' obscure the fact that South Africa is *not* a 'post-conflict' society. By removing the term 'post-apartheid' from Dixon's question, the focus of analysis shifts to the *interaction* of trans-historic cultural, structural, psychological and physical violence generated during colonialism-apartheid-market democracy. This shift of focus has the potential to deal with the 'crisis of understanding' and the obsession with control ascribed to SA criminologists. As Dixon points out, despite Shearing and Marks' reference to Cuneen's call for a postcolonial perspective, their emphasis remains overwhelmingly control oriented.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the conceptual approach and methodological framework proposed in this article offers a 360° view of violent crime, to

\* Sarah Henkeman is the mother of two 'black young men'. She also has firsthand experience of the sustained criminalisation of blackness. This article draws on her PhD thesis, which found, amongst others, that a culture of denial co-exists with the culture of violence in South Africa. She has a D.Phil in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies, is an independent conflict analyst/peacebuilding practitioner, and a research associate of the Social Law Project, University of the Western Cape (UWC).

maximise understanding and to increase the range of remedies beyond control. This resonates with the research agendas of conflict and peace researchers, who follow violence to its roots, without the artificial constraints of disciplinary, academic, temporal and political boundaries.

The emphasis of this paper is on social justice. To this end, three broad approaches to crime are briefly summarised to justify the proposed approach.

## INDIVIDUAL FOCUS

Criminology is based on a legal definition of crime that holds the individual responsible. In South Africa this focus masks state-approved violent crime against black (diverse) people by white people during colonial and apartheid rule. It also obscures the implicit conflation of blackness<sup>11</sup> and violent crime during market democracy. For example:

In South Africa, from as early as the 1890s through until the 1960s, psycho-dynamic approaches (with strong ‘racialised’ overtones) dominated understandings of violence ... violence was viewed as the conscious manifestation of unconscious wishes drives and fantasies due to poor defence mechanisms within the personality structure and an inability to repress these unconscious impulses...<sup>12</sup>

An exclusive focus on individual level factors leaves structural factors out of the frame of analysis.

## STRUCTURAL FOCUS

Structural definitions of crime place causes in the social structure. In 1985 SA lawyers and sociologists stated that ‘social structures in South Africa create conditions that encourage criminality among those exposed to the demands of the capitalist economy ... [who are] simultaneously denied access to its benefits’<sup>13</sup> While this was an attempt to move away from individual level, racialised explanations, an exclusive focus on structural factors leaves

individual factors outside of the frame of analysis. This approach does not explain why some individuals manifest criminal behaviour and others do not.

## INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

An integrative approach allows the *interaction* of individual *and* structural factors that produce violent crime to be brought into the frame of analysis. Intersectional theory, as critical social theory, allows ‘multiple and simultaneous’<sup>14</sup> linkages to be made. Conceptually it enables a trans-disciplinary examination of the intersection (and interaction) of horizontal, vertical and cross-cutting phenomena that produce violent crime. It makes room for excluded knowledge to serve as counterpoint to the dominant knowledge of mainly white criminologists. Counterpoint, as popularised by Edward Said, allows for reading, thinking and writing that ‘realise suppressed voices, invisible facts and other hidden elements’.<sup>15</sup>

## Rationale for a trans-disciplinary approach to violence in South Africa

Due to space constraints, South Africa’s 2011 prison statistics are used to provide a conceptual shortcut that exemplifies the disproportionate representation of black (diverse) people, and underrepresentation of white people in the criminal justice system. At first glance, these statistics reflect the view implicitly held by many South Africans and SA criminologists, as the majority of prisoners are indeed black (diverse) males. Beneath the surface, however, a more complex picture emerges when a ‘deeper and longer’ view is taken. Table 1 is a simplified version of 2011 prison statistics on males only.

**Table 1:** Combined 2011 Census and Correctional Services statistics

	Total population		Prison population	
	Number	%	Number	%
Asian	626 690	2,6	727	0,5
Coloured	2 188 782	8,9	27 689	17,5
Black	19 472 083	79,4	127 543	80,5
White	2 227 526	9,1	2 441	1,5
<b>Total</b>	<b>24 515 081</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>158 400</b>	<b>100,0</b>

In more stark form, Table 2 shows that the number of white males is consistently lower than the aggregated and disaggregated black group (black, Asian and coloured males).

**Table 2:** Percentage and number of people per 5 000 males in prison per group

	% of total race group in prison	No. per 5 000 males in prison
Asian	0,12	3
Black	0,66	16
Coloured	1,27	31
White	0,11	3

From this breakdown, for every 5 000 males per race group, three Asian, 16 black, 31 coloured and three white males are in prison. These statistics cast light on the role that the criminal justice system and SA criminologists play in rendering the transtemporal effects of South Africa's violent past invisible.

## SOME MANIFESTATIONS OF DENIAL AMONG SA CRIMINOLOGISTS

Following Stanley Cohen, it has been suggested that a *culture of denial* exists about how South Africa's past cultural-structural-direct and counter violence informs the present culture of violence.<sup>16</sup> Certain manifestations and patterns of denial are evident among SA criminologists and these contribute to the societal culture of denial about the links between various forms of violence. For example:

- In common with many other South Africans, most SA criminologists avert their gaze with regard to the continuity of colonialism-apartheid-market democracy violence by conflating knowledge and political boundaries (of the 'new' South Africa). This leads to a complicit silence about the trans-historical links between cultural, structural, psychological and physical violence that contribute to the 'explanatory crisis'.
- Black scholarship, which presents a direct counterpoint to white-centred criminology, is largely ignored in South Africa. For example, Shearing and Marks approved of Cuneen's 2011

call for a post-colonial criminology; however, they maintain a silence about Agozino's call, as early as 2003, for a counter-colonial criminology, despite the fact that Cuneen cites his work.

- Successive white regimes drove criminal violence against black (diverse) people in South Africa since 1652. Yet white people are underrepresented, coloured people overrepresented and black people disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system – and SA criminologists still construct criminals as 'the other'.
- Black (diverse) individuals are presently held solely responsible for their maladaptive responses to intergenerational and lifespan trauma, expressed as violent crime. Yet SA criminologists do not advocate for change to the criminal law definition of crime that takes account of cultural, structural, psychological and physical violence.
- The large number of black (diverse) people who are detected, detained and/or imprisoned on a daily basis, reinforces the enduring fiction that violent crime equals black (diverse) in a brand new South Africa without history. Yet SA criminologists find it completely acceptable to carve out careers on more 'progressive' and 'humane' methods of control that reinforce the de facto criminalisation of blackness.
- In addition, the constructed invisibility of continued and nested inequality (structural violence) contributes to the de facto criminalisation of blackness in 'the new South Africa' without history. Yet SA criminologists do not engage with the link between inequality and violent crime in a way that affects their almost exclusive focus on control.

In sum, the act of delinking present manifest violence of historically oppressed people from the different forms of violence perpetrated by historically privileged people (by erasing the past) exemplifies Stanley Cohen's argument about denial as 'the need to be innocent of a troubling recognition'.<sup>17</sup> In this view, the 'almost painful whiteness' of SA criminology is no accident, and the 'overriding concern with controlling crime' makes the stated 'unwillingness to add fuel to the

fires of afropessimism' sound as hollow as it is provocative.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTED CRIMINOLOGY

Many criminologists elsewhere have broken with the orthodox view of crime that exclusively holds certain individuals or groups responsible. SA criminologists have unfettered access to these literatures that are based on a social justice agenda. For example:

- David Friedrichs states that the shift to 'unorthodox' criminology 'highlights the need to understand crime and criminal justice within the context of the existing political economy'.<sup>18</sup>
- Gregg Barak suggests that a social justice standpoint does not accommodate or ignore what he terms 'the production of inequalities in society and the role of law in that construction'.<sup>19</sup>
- Carolyn Boyes-Watson avers that in the 'real world of relationships, the fundamental connectedness between the realm of individual wrongdoing and the realm of structural harms is crystal clear'.<sup>20</sup>
- Based on his famous Stanford prison experiment, Philip Zimbardo casts doubt on the notion of criminogenic traits in only 'some' people, when he suggests that all 'good people' can be broken down over time and can commit the most atrocious deeds if prompted by social forces.<sup>21</sup>

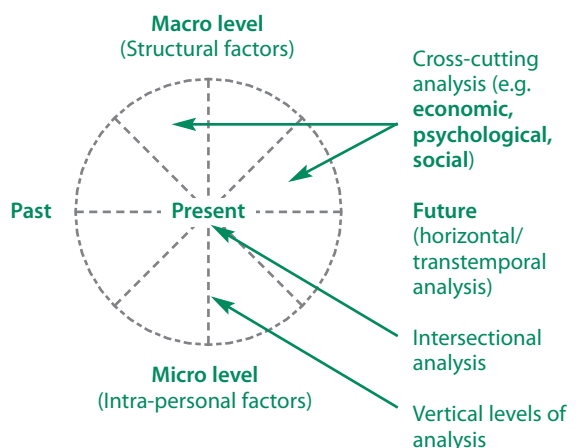
In addition, the work of economists Amartya Sen, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Sampie Terreblanche, Francis Wilson and others casts light on the link between inequality, crime and other social ills.<sup>22</sup> Psychologists like Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Vamik Volkan, Ramsay Liem and others focus attention on the inter-generational transmission of trauma, the 'soul wound' of colonised and oppressed people, and the individual and social harms that flow from it.<sup>23</sup>

Space does not allow a broader discussion, but Bill Dixon's paper opens the door to a frank dialogue between black margin and white centre. The dominant social location that produces the power SA criminologists wield to produce partial perspectives can also cause them to ignore this challenge from the margins. However, it will not remove the facticity of the transhistorical nature of violence. Nor will racialised individual level remedies remove the growing structural violence (that black people suffer from), which is linked to manifestations of violent crime. This suggests that a trans-disciplinary approach to violence, which is not confined to the academy and specific disciplines, is necessary to overcome the crisis of understanding, which ultimately preserves the status quo ante.

## TRANS-DISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR A SOCIALLY JUST APPROACH TO VIOLENT CRIME

A trans-disciplinary theoretical/methodological framework that is aligned with South Africa's constitutional goals of social justice, fundamental human rights and equality, is proposed in Figure 1. The display reflects that intergenerational (psychological) and (transtemporal) structural factors intersect and interact to produce violence in the present.

**Figure 1:** A trans-disciplinary, intersectional framework



## APPLICATION OF THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY, INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

The approach takes account of the work of unorthodox criminologists like Richard Wortley,<sup>24</sup> who states that if someone has criminogenic traits, it puts them 'at an increased risk of committing crime, but that risk may not be realised until that individual encounters conducive situational conditions'. The approach can be applied to collect and analyse data on context and to aggregate violence perpetrated by individuals to provide a clearer understanding of manifestations of violent crime in transhistorical context. The display depicts:

- *Horizontal analysis:* A horizontal analysis enables the analyst to trace cultural, structural and direct violence from South Africa's unequal past to the present in which the inequality gap has increased. This needs only to be done once as data can be used to inform multiple analyses, or researchers can draw on existing research. It consists of secondary research on South Africa's history of cultural, structural, physical and psychological violence against colonised and oppressed groups from 1652, and counter-violence by oppressed groups.
- *Vertical analysis:* A vertical analysis helps to capture factors that are implicated in the manifestation of violence through crime, at different levels of analysis. Researchers can draw on existing research and/or conduct their own life history research with offenders and others in the sphere of influence. This analysis helps to locate individual offenders in their family, peer, community, society and global spheres of influence. It can generate evidence of possible lifespan trauma or other criminogenic influences.
- *Cross-cutting analysis:* A cross-cutting analysis helps to generate data on economic, political, psychological, social and other phenomena that are relevant to the individual story. Researchers can draw on existing research and overlapping information from the horizontal and vertical analyses. It can potentially generate (i) data that resonates with how historical trauma manifests;

(ii) data on criminogenic influences that offenders are subjected to during their lifespan; (iii) data on how offenders process their class status in an unequal society; and (iv) other salient themes embedded in individual and group stories.

- *Intersectional analysis:* An intersectional analysis lies at the heart of the approach. It combines data on structural factors with data on individual factors generated by the overall analysis. This enables the researcher to map as complete a picture as is possible of the patterns of interaction that produce violent crime, which helps researchers to make meaning of multiple and simultaneous intersections. Over time, the information can be aggregated to provide a reading of the manifestations and patterns of violent crime that keep the culture of violence in place. The knowledge produced can inform a wider range of remedies than the current emphasis on control. This constitutes a more socially just approach than an exclusive focus on violence manifested by individual black (diverse) perpetrators.

While this approach constitutes an entire research agenda, it can also simply serve as a way of thinking about violent crime. As violence crosses artificial boundaries, so must scholarship. The researcher can simultaneously collect data on risk and protective factors, as more nuanced, aggregated information provides data to inform complex solutions to the complex problem of violence in South Africa. The approach leads the researcher into uncharted territory from pervasive colonial thinking to a social justice orientation.

## WHY THE NEED FOR A SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH TO VIOLENT CRIME IN SOUTH AFRICA?

A social justice approach to violent crime will respond to the deep and wide culture of denial about the origins of the culture of violence in South Africa, and temper the 'warmaking' approach to crime. By seeking to understand interacting patterns and manifestations of denial

that operate to obscure the origins of violence at different levels in society, scholars can potentially:

- (i) Confront the blindspots of SA criminologists and how uninterrupted white privilege operates to render the links between transhistorical (white) and present (black) violent crime invisible
- (ii) Engage with racialised constructions of the criminal and disproportionate representation of black (diverse) people in the criminal justice system
- (iii) Find evidence of the relationship between nested and growing inequality and violent crime suggested by Amartya Sen and others
- (iv) Find evidence of the existence and consequences of intergenerationally transmitted trauma (and resilience) of colonised and oppressed people suggested by Brave Heart and others
- (v) Raise awareness, increase consciousness, provide information and educate society about the multiple interacting sources of violent crime
- (vi) Contribute to the development of more just responses to violence

The escalating violence in South Africa places criminologists and peacebuilders (as researchers and analysts of violence) squarely at the centre of the storm, where history, structure, biography and psyche of poor and privileged intersect. This moment can be seized to help craft a socially just present and future for all South Africans.

## CONCLUSION

This paper drew on recent peace research, to show that a trans-disciplinary approach and methodology are more socially just ways to comprehend and formulate a response to violent crime in South Africa. The suggested methodology is consistent with *bricolage*, which is regarded as 'the nuts and bolts of multidisciplinary research' that also 'highlights the relationship between a researcher's ways of seeing and the social location of his or her personal history.'<sup>25</sup> The paper resonates with Biko Agazino's call for a counter-colonial criminology,

which he characterises as 'a trans-disciplinary theoretico-methodological intervention'. The trans-disciplinary approach is not only scholarly in nature, it potentially enables researchers to cross artificial boundaries, deal with built-in blind spots, and contribute to social justice.

**Routine criminalisation of blackness:** On 18 August 2013, during the finalisation of this paper, SABC 3 news reported on the Oscar Pistorius case. At the point where the voiceover person mentioned Oscar's 'fear of criminals', the camera panned to and lingered on three black young men (all dressed in hoodies), as they passed by a court building.



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## NOTES

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