

Review

VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN

Review of CIS, *The influence of violence on children* (Cape Town: Centre for Intergroup Studies, 1990).

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Recent work on political violence has started to focus on people as active agents, rather than seeing them only as 'victims'. 'Active agency' does not mean that most people are necessarily perpetrating violence, but that people act and react to the conditions and experiences of violence that they find themselves in. While the shift from seeing people as victims to active agents is important there might still be a sense in which the term 'victim' has some currency, and that is with children. However, even young children who are often 'victims' of political violence are involved in making sense of their lives as they act to reconstruct a 'normal' life within the ravages of the struggle.

What can be called the 'victimology perspective' seems to be dominant in the papers in this collection, *The influence of violence on children*. The papers (21) from this collection were all part of a symposium entitled 'Society under stress: the influence of violence on children' held in November 1988, and organised by University of Cape Town's Centre for Intergroup Studies (CIS). The papers vary in their content from play therapy following the detention of a child's parent (Letlaka) to the human rights considerations of refugee children (Bennett); and in their format from empirical research studies ready for publication in a standard academic journal (Van Zyl) to very brief impressionistic pieces from practitioners involved in various aspects of childcare work (Clowes).

In the three years since this symposium a lot has happened politically, and especially in terms of political violence, both in its commission and comprehension. Hence many of the papers from this 1988 symposium are surprisingly rather dated. This is not to suggest that the victimology perspective has nothing to offer, nor that the problems with this perspective no longer need to be explained.

There are at least three contextual issues which need to be borne in mind when considering the problems facing the victimology perspective.

1. The first wave of studies that explored the psychosocial dimensions of violence - of which this collection is representative - concentrated rather narrowly on the

effects of political repression on people's lives. Consequently there are many papers in this collection concerned with detention and other aspects of political repression (for example, Dowdall; Letlaka; Straker; and Giles discussing child witnesses). This is valuable work, but because it tends to focus on the more or less direct effects of political repression it tends to portray the children as affected and passive. Thus even when the context is political violence in general, rather than specifically political repression, the focus on the victims still tends to predominate.

2. The overriding clinical focus of this symposium is evident in Professor Ampie Muller's remark in the 'Preface' that the objectives were '... to determine: i. the nature and extent of the impairment; ii. the risk factors, and the children most at risk; and iii. suggestions to lessen the severity or permanence of the impairment, i.e. to determine the protective factors' (p1). Furthermore, many of the contributors were in one way or another from the 'helping professions' - social workers, clinical psychologists, medical doctors and psychiatrists.

3. Not only is the stress on impairment and psychopathology a problem mitigating against a more dynamic view of people, including children, in situations of violence, but for many of the participants of this symposium their practice with regard to violence was as therapists. As Muller says, many of the participants to the symposium had '... insights into the mechanisms of therapy by means of which that society can be supported and protected ...' (p1). Again, nobody is denying the important therapeutic work that many professionals have done, but by its very nature the therapeutic focus is rather restrictive and asocial.

The victimology and clinical approach belies a number of problems. For example, in a paper by Bentley and Miller they raise the interesting point about 'resilience' in children. Their work, which is much more within the purview of applied developmental psychology, and in some ways quite out of tune with the other papers of the symposium, indirectly challenges the view of children as victims. In discussing some of the results of their empirical study they say that 'It would appear that despite gross differences between environments, class and cultures, there is a significant minority of children whose cognitive performance appears to be unaffected by their material conditions' (p191). Now what pertains for cognitive performance might not be the case for emotional and social dimensions of children's lives. However, Bentley and Miller's findings at least caution us about seeing children as 'passive sufferers' and require that we investigate more fully the whole question of resilience in children. What factors - social, political, familial - can we identify that would differentiate between children who are resilient in the face of violent living conditions from those less resilient? Clearly children are affected by violent living conditions, but it would be a real break-through in terms of social reconstruction if we could specify some

of the factors which facilitate coping in these adverse conditions.

These effects are often quite subtle and as Kerry Gibson points out '... the sequelae of political violence are not limited to a clinical syndrome' (p108), and frequently involve the moral and political socialisation of children. By presenting two very different case studies of children, Gibson is able to '... illustrate that children do not have to be detained or assaulted in order to be affected by political violence' (p108). And it is to the meaning and implication of growing up in an environment where political violence exists, and unfortunately will continue to exist for a long time, that research efforts need to be directed.

The 'second wave' of research studies on the effects of political violence on children (and adults) needs to be conducted within a sophisticated and dynamic theory of society. The clinical and victimology approach is unfortunately far too individualistic to adequately bridge the social and individual divide. And unless the clinical studies on the effects of political violence are conducted within a social theory, there is the danger of collapsing analysis and moral outrage. Many of the (shorter) papers seemed to be statements or stands against the unacceptable socio-historical basis of political violence in our country and the state's complicity in this. It seems that by 1988 many professional groupings and service organisations - from which many of these shorter papers derive - were starting to make an explicit political commitment on the side of their affected clients and their communities. There was no longer any justification for professional neutrality in the context of these troubled times.

There is no intention to suggest that the analysis of political violence can really be separated from a moral discourse. As social researchers we need to be aware of the discourses operative in the sphere of political violence and not foreclose the potential of our social thinking by obscuring analysis and political commitment. These are clearly vexed questions which received far too little attention in the papers at this symposium. This volume cannot duck the issue by saying that its objective was other - the epidemiology of violence-related stress. We cannot disentangle the social world in this way, and especially when discussing political violence.

I am sure that many of the above issues concerning the politics of research on violence were discussed and debated at the symposium. It would have been beneficial to readers of this collection if an introductory editorial had tried to capture the context and substance of these discussions. What did the symposium make of the wide-ranging usage of the term violence in the various papers? Outside of Degenaar's conceptual analysis of the notion of violence was any attempt made to clarify and reach some consensus about violence, structural violence, political violence, political repression, general societal stress and so on? Was the 'victimology perspective' accepted by the participants?

In an attempt to address the issues facing children living in violent circumstances, the symposium organisers have been too broad in their focus. For example, the symposium hoped to address '... the different types of stressors that children have to deal with in their everyday lives, the moderating factors, and some coping mechanisms' (p3). These very broad concerns, apparently cohering around the issue of violence, have unwittingly added to the sense of chaos which pervades much of the current research on this topic. Simply publishing all the papers presented at the symposium, without either grouping them into sections or using particular papers to make sense of the crucial issues, is neither a help to further research nor is it a particularly useful resource. We need all the help we can get in trying to understand the impact of (political) violence in our society, and unfortunately this collection will disappoint those searching for some direction in this difficult area of research.