

# Violence as an Essentially Contested Concept

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## Introduction

Scientific understanding of human violence is one of the most urgent tasks of our time. Given this sense of urgency, it is shocking how little we seem to know about it (Turpin & Kurz, 1997: 1–2). In fact, even among scholars there is not even the beginning of an agreement concerning a definition of what exactly ‘violence’ is (Stanko, 2003: 3). One of the most common ways of defining violence is to only consider forms of *criminal* violence and to argue that violence is the use of force that has been prohibited by law (Riedel & Welsh, 2002: 3). However, whilst ‘violence’ might conventionally connote physical attack, the notion of physical violence represents a surprisingly broad spectrum of incidents (Waddington, Badger & Bull, 2004: 149). This is obvious, even within the legal point of view which, typically, defines violence rather technically as “the actual or threatened, knowing or intentional application of statutory impermissible physical force by one person directly against one or more other persons outside the contexts both of formal institutional or organizational structures and of civil or otherwise collective disorders and movements for the purpose of securing some end against the will or without the consent of the other person or persons” (Weiner, 1989: 37–38). Thus, it may appear to be self-evident what ‘violence’ is but, in reality, ‘violence’ is “a slippery term which covers a huge and frequently changing range of heterogeneous physical and emotional behaviors, situations and victim-offender relationships” (Levi & Maguire, 2002: 796).

Social scientists attempting to come to grips with the phenomenon find the concept of violence “either under-, or over-defined, or both.” (Bauman, 1995: 139) Even though two overarching assumptions seem to be that: 1. violence is typically assumed to be motivated by hostility and the willful intent to cause harm and 2. violence is – legally, socially, or morally – deviant human activity, it

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has been argued that these assumptions are based on ‘conceptual quicksand’ in which important questions about the defining attributes of violence have slipped away. The very social and policy imperatives that have driven sociological analysis of violence have molded and warped our understanding of it and spawned a conception of violence that is biased and morally charged and at the same time as it is clouded and unwieldy (Jackman, 2002: 387).

Nearly all inquiries concerning the phenomenon of violence demonstrate that violence not only takes on many forms and possesses very different characteristics, but also that the current range of definitions is considerable and creates ample controversies concerning the question what violence is and how it ought to be defined (Heitmeier & Hagan, 2002: 15). Since there are so many different kinds of violence (Reidel & Welsh, 2002: 1) and since violence is studied from different actor perspectives (i.e. perpetrator, victim, third party, neutral observer), existing literature displays a wide variety of definitions based on different theoretical and, sometimes even incommensurable domain assumptions (e.g. about human nature, social order and history). In short, the concept of ‘violence’ is notoriously difficult to define because as a phenomenon it is multifaceted, socially constructed and highly ambivalent.

Violence is multifaceted because there are many different forms of violence, which are exhibited in a wide range of contexts. It may, for example, be distinguished in ‘youth violence’, ‘gang violence’, ‘school violence’, ‘street violence’, ‘teen violence’, ‘dating violence’, ‘intimate violence’, ‘domestic violence’, ‘workplace violence’, ‘suite violence’ (Punch, 2000), ‘urban violence’, ‘interpersonal violence’, ‘random violence’, ‘racist violence’, ‘media violence’, ‘mimetic violence’, ‘systemic violence’, ‘symbolic violence’, ‘structural violence’ or even ‘apocalyptic violence’ (Hamm, 2004). Violence can be physical (‘aggression’, ‘abuse’ or ‘assault’), but it can also be verbal (‘bullying’, ‘humiliation’ or ‘intimidation’). It can be overt but also covert like in language and literacy, abstraction, interpretation and representation, and in the violence of ‘censure’ (Valier, 1997). Violence can be individual or collective, interpersonal or institutional, national or international, symbolic or structural. The context may be private or public and the victims may be family members, acquaintances or strangers. Based on the offender’s motive, violence may be angry, impulsive, hostile, expressive, dispute-related, instrumental, or predatory. “Some incidents occur, more or less, ‘out of the blue’, whereas others occur within some form of relationship in which conflict escalates. Some incidents are concluded in a few moments, whereas others evolve into long-term conflict relationships. Non-physical attacks can be made against the gender, race or sexuality of the victim, or – as in some of these cases – their professional integrity.” (Waddington, Badger & Bull, 2004: 159). Instead of or in addition to physical injury; violence can have mental (‘psychological’), social and/or material consequences and there is seems no simple relationship between the apparent severity of a violent act and the impact it has upon the victim.

Violence is socially constructed because who and what is considered as violent varies according to specific socio-cultural and historical conditions.

While legal scholars may require narrow definitions for punishable acts, the phenomenon of violence is invariably more complex in social reality. Not only do views about violence differ, but feelings regarding physical violence also change under the influence of social and cultural developments. The meanings that participants in a violent episode give to their own and other's actions and experiences vary and can be crucial for deciding what is and what is not considered as violence since there is no simple relationship between the apparent severity of an attack and the impact that it has upon the victim. For example, in some cases, verbal aggression may prove to be more debilitating than physical attack.

Violence is also highly ambivalent in the ways it is socially sanctioned, legitimized and institutionalized, as well as how it is culturally transmitted and experienced as graphic illustrations of violence abound in world press photos, on television screens, in the movies and in video games. Depending on the context and perspective, violent actions may either be condemned and considered immoral, illegal and disruptive or admired and considered moral, legal and functional. As a topic, violence is 'deeply emotive', "coloring the political and criminal justice responses not just to violence but to crime in general" (Levi & Maguire, 2002: 795). However, precisely because violence is so highly ambivalent an increased sensitivity and reflexivity is required in both theory and research on violence (Heitmeier & Hagan, 2002).

Not surprisingly, controversies occur and recur about both the substance of the concept and the scope of the definition of violence. In this chapter, debates about various definitions of violence will be interpreted against the backdrop of what the philosopher Gallie (1956) has called the 'essentially contestedness' of concepts, i.e. the claim that debates about concepts can never reach closure as invariably good theoretical, methodological and moral arguments can and will be made in favor of one or another definition. However, as we will see, the arguments against restrictive definitions of violence are mostly of theoretical and moral nature. Theoretical arguments tend to be and focused on the question of what violence is. For example, what is the 'essence' of violence and how should violence 'essentially' be demarcated from aggression? Moral arguments tend to be focused on the question of what the scope of violence is. For example, should sexual abuse, hate speech or bullying be recognized as serious forms of violence?

Instead of discussing the question of what violence essentially consists of, this chapter will discuss the scope of the notion of violence and focus on the question whether the notion of violence should best be defined by limiting what qualifies as 'violence' to physical attack or should be extended to a broader definition. This, for example, would be a definition, "which implicitly claims that a 'violent act' can be anywhere along a *continuum* running from an angry and hostile glare (which in certain circumstances can cause a degree of alarm), through verbal abuse, a verbal threat, threatening gestures, a single blow, an attack causing minor injuries, an attack causing major injuries, to an attack causing death." (Waddington, Badger & Bull, 2004: 145). After exploring arguments for and against either a limited notion of violence to be defined in

a rather restrictive way or an extended notion of violence to be defined in a more inclusive way, it will be concluded that, depending on the contexts of discovery and justification, valid arguments are feasible for either inclusive or restrictive definitions of violence. Any definition of violence, however, should be considered as a temporary outcome of theoretical debate – an outcome, which may or may not prove to be useful in future research.

## Defining Violence Restrictively

In order to provide a conclusive definition, restrictive definitions of violence are being offered which tend to limit violence to physical attack. I will briefly discuss three examples.

In *The Anthropology of Violence* (1986), anthropologist David Riches defines violence as “an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses” (p. 8). According to Riches this definition is compatible with “basic properties” of violence, which have cross-cultural validity, i.e. that the performance of violence requires relatively little by way of specialized equipment or knowledge, that the practice of violence is highly visible to the senses and that, therefore, violence as such is unlikely to be mistaken. Discrepancies in basic understandings amongst those implicated in the performance of a violent act are likely to be minimal. Nevertheless, violence is inherently liable to be contested on the question of legitimacy.

In one of the most ambitious attempts at understanding and preventing violent behavior, the National Research Council of the American Academy of Sciences defined violence simply as “behaviors by individuals that intentionally threaten, attempt, or inflict physical harm on others” (Reiss & Roth, 1994: 2). In this way, the panel limited its considerations to intentional, physical, interpersonal violence, thereby excluding forms of interpersonal violence (such as those inflicted by intimidation and emotional abuse) resulting in non-physical harm as well as forms of violence in the institutional and structural spheres. However, while their definition seems to effectively restrict violence to behaviors that are interpersonal, inflict or threaten physical harm, and are motivated by harmful intent, these restrictive criteria are relaxed on an ad hoc basis when they become inconvenient for the inclusion of features that have come under scrutiny in a specific line of research e.g. psychological injuries in the context of family. In this way, Reiss & Roth’s formulation of a ‘precise definition’ merely highlights the points of emphasis – as well as the inconsistencies – that have marked current violence research.

Something similar is the case with Neidhardt (1986) who also argues that a restrictive definition of violence is most appropriate both from a sociological and a historical perspective. It is most appropriated from a sociological perspective because physical violence is a universal media of communication. It is also most appropriate from a historical perspective because the monopoly

of violence always applied to physical rather than mental violence. However, even though Neidhardt seems to consider the problem of the definition of violence solved, he does allow for the possibility that in different contexts valid arguments for other definitions may be feasible (1986: 135). Unlike some (e.g. Nedelmann, 1995: 8; von Trotha, 1997: 20) who seem convinced that the question of how to define violence has been adequately solved, at least for the time being, by defining it as bodily harm by physical use of force, Neidhardt admits that nothing raises so many doubts as the definition of violence.

The most substantive arguments against restrictive definitions of violence are not of a theoretical rather than a methodological and empirical nature. In his *Aspects of Violence*, Schinkel (2005) takes issues with Riches' definition of violence by arguing that this definition has as its major disadvantages 1. that the restriction to "physical hurt is arbitrary and cannot be adequately grounded, not even in ordinary language; 2. that the initial focus on ordinary language leads to a neglect of forms of violence that use ordinary language a vehicle of disguise; 3. that problems arise out of Riches' incorporation of the concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy in the definition of violence; and 4. that this definition – like any definition which requires violence to be an 'act' – is problematic and untenable. Riches' incorporation of the concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy in the definition of violence raises problems because it is unclear how the discrepancy in basic understandings amongst those implicated in the performance of a violent act can be 'likely to be minimal' when an act of violence by definition is deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses?

Others have argued that differences between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence tend to be ideologically or morally constructed and have more to do with variations in the extent of social outrage and in the political denial or awareness of these particular forms of violence than with the seriousness of harms. Indeed, injuries from other kinds of harms are often no less (and sometimes even more) painful and tragic than those from acts that have been defined as 'illegally violent' (Barak, 2003: 26). Moreover, the usual definition of violence – the use of force toward another that results in harm, narrowly conceived of as physical pain and suffering, tends to omit several critical elements of harm: "First, it excludes the emotional and psychological pain that result from domination of some over others. Second, it tends to focus on the visible, intentional, interpersonal harm between individuals, while excluding harm against individuals by institutions or agencies. Third, it ignores the violence of social processes, which produce systematic social injury, such as violence perpetuated through institutionalized racism and sexism. Fourth, it excludes the 'symbolic violence' of domination, that "gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and it not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety" (Bourdieu, 1977: 192)" (Henry, 2000: 2).

In order to widen our field of vision to incorporate under violence a diverse array of actions which are integral to social life, we need a systematic,

autonomous, generic conception of violence, freed from the biases and inconsistencies of past research (Jackman, 2002: 387).

## Defining Violence Inclusively

In an attempt to introduce a more systematic, comprehensive analysis of violence several propositions have been made for a more extended notion of violence to be defined in a more inclusive way. I will briefly discuss three recent examples of such inclusive definitions of violence presented by Barak (2003), Jackman (2002) and Henry (2000) respectively. Barak (2003) has made an attempt to be conceptually inclusive, i.e. to take into account the full range of harms associated with a variety of interpersonal, institutional, and structural relationships and behaviors and to not exclude any forms and expressions of violence, whether they refer to individual acts, institutional arrangements or structural conditions as well as whether or not they are prohibited by law. To this end, he adopts a definition of violence as “any action or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons” (Iadicola & Shupe, 1998: 26; quoted in Barak, 2003: 26).

Jackman (2002) also proposes a generic definition of violence that focuses unequivocally on the injuriousness of actions, detached from their social, moral or legal standing. This definition provides a consistent, autonomous basis for identifying the full population of injurious social behaviors, purely on the basis of their indigenous behavioral attributes. It includes all actions that directly inflict injury as well as those that either threaten or result in injury. It specifies that injurious actions and outcomes may take many forms, immediate or delayed, certain or probabilistic. More significantly, this definition sets no constraints on the motivations of either the victim or the agent, and is agnostic about whether the behavior is unusual or commonplace and whether it meets with society repudiation, disinterest, acceptance or admiration. It thus provides a stripped-down template to identify all behavior that inflict, threaten, or cause injury in order to pursue new questions about violence in social life.

In a similar vein, Henry (2000) suggests that a more inclusive, integrated definition of violence is necessary, which replaces the term ‘force’ with ‘power’ and takes a more comprehensive view of harm. Violence is thus defined as “the use of power to harm another, whatever form it takes” (Henry, 2000: 3). In this case, harm is not only physical pain and suffering. It “can also occur along many dimensions beyond the physical to include psychological or emotional, material or economic, social or identity, moral or ethical, and so on. Within each dimension, the harm can be of two kinds: ‘harms of reduction’ and ‘harms of repression’ (Henry and Milovanovic, 1996: 103). Harms of reduction remove something from a person’s existing status as a human being. For example, physical harms or reduction produce bodily pain or loss (of blood, organs, limbs, physical functioning). Material harms of reduction remove some of the

person's economic status (property, wealth, money). Psychological harms of reduction have destructive effects on the human mind and weaken a person's emotional or mental functioning (such as in posttraumatic stress syndrome). Social and symbolic harms of reduction lower a person's social status (by violating their human rights, sexuality, social identity). Moral or ethical harms of reduction corrupt standards of concern for the well-being of others (as in hate, pressure to cheat, and the like).

In contrast, harms of repression reveal how the exercise of power acts to systematically limit another person's capability of achieving higher levels accomplishment along any of these dimensions. (ibid.: 116). Violence, then, is the exercise of power over others by some individual, agency, or social process that denies those subject to it their humanity to make a difference, either by reducing them from what they are or by limiting them from becoming what they might be" (Henry, 2000: 5).

Perhaps not surprisingly, these recent inclusive definitions of violence have been met with similar skepticism, especially in Germany where the burden of history renders researchers particularly sensitive to the moral and political implications of definitions of violence. A case in point is von Trotha (1997) who argues that given the moral and political implications of the study of violence, it is especially urgent to avoid any conceptual and descriptive ambivalence, because as soon as one allows imprecision in questions concerning violence, one has not only lost out scientifically but has also taken a politically and morally suspect direction (von Trotha, 1997: 24). More recently, Waddington, Badger & Bull (2004) also found considerable drawbacks associated with an inclusive definition of violence. Whilst for them there is no doubt that the inclusive definition of 'violence' is valuable as a methodological tool allowing respondents to express the subjective meaning of their experiences, they do fear that such a definition may become so broad that almost any situation that any person finds disagreeable would qualify as a form of 'violence'. Secondly, an inclusive definition of 'violence' could obstruct our understanding of violence by cloaking the complexities of the phenomenon in a definitional fiat. And thirdly, privileging subjective meaning may involve a risk of circular reasoning when, for example, one concludes that a person must have acted 'violently' because others felt frightened by him. Thus, analytically, so broad a definition of 'violence' could confuse connotation and denotation, and leave analysts referring to very different events and experiences whilst using the same conceptual apparatus.

## **Philosophical Clarification**

Not only in the social sciences but also in philosophy, there is a tendency to, on the one hand, eagerly extend notions of violence and, on the other hand, exhibit a marked reluctance to view violence beyond what may be regarded as the

indispensable point of reference for all analysis of violence: bodily harm by physical use of force.

One of the most frequently quoted and reprinted<sup>1</sup> definitions of violence has probably been formulated by the philosopher Garver (1968). According to Garver, one cannot comprehend the violence that surrounds us, if one thinks of it as necessarily physical or as necessary illegal. In his view, a successful account of violence has to “make it clear that violence (1) is a matter of degree, (2) can be social or institutional as well as personal (3) can be psychological as well as physical, (4) has moral implications when it is social that are radically different from those that it has when it is personal, (5) can be legal as well as illegal (6) needs, when it is social, to be discussed in conjunction with law and justice, and (7) can in principle be excused, however, personally abhorrent one may find it” (Garver, 1972: 39).

For Garver defining violence poses ‘a typical philosophical question’ to which his answer is “that violence in human affairs comes down to violating persons”(1977: 270). Against the more common philosophical view that violence entails causing injury through the use of vigorous physical force, Garver suggests that we focus on violence not as a matter of physical force but rather as the violation of a person, i.e. the violation of basic human rights which are undeniably, indissolubly, connected with being a person: the right to one’s body and the right to autonomy (270). Garver illustrates how persons can be violated either with respect to their bodies (physical violence) or with respect to their ability to make their own decisions (psychological violence) and he shows that each kind of violence has both personal and institutionalized forms. In addition, he contrasts overt to covert forms of violence, which he calls “. . . the quiet forms which do not necessarily involve any overt physical assault on anybody’s person or property.” (1977: 272) As illustration of such ‘quiet violence’, Garver refers to ‘institutionalized violence’ (p. 273), i.e. violence which is not be personal, but done while acting as a faithful agent of an institution.

Reactions of other philosophers to Garver’s propositions are mixed. Litke (1992) applauds Garver’s account for giving “a useful way of viewing a vast range of very diverse and often spectacular human behavior . . . which enables us to see through the diversity and spectacle to certain essential features” (1992: 174). But Platt (1992), in response to Garver’s categorization of ‘quiet violence’, comments, sarcastically “that one can hardly avoid wondering if the discovery of ‘non-violent violence’ is to be the next step in the process.” In fact, Garver’s remark that he rather leaves it to the reader to ponder whether all sex acts are acts of violence, suggests to Platt that, indeed, the transition from ‘quiet violence’ to ‘non-violent violence’ is well underway. (Platt, 1992: 186).

Although Platt admits that there is much to be said for the extended meaning, which has been given to the notion of violence and has effectively sensitized

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the reprints, revisions and expansions of Garver’s original article, see Betz (1977: 339, note 1).



large numbers of person to the morally dubious status of many social structures and practices, he also argues that extending the meaning of violence leads us in the wrong direction in the final analysis. In his view, the very plasticity of language which allows us to bend or extend the meaning of terms also makes it possible for us to obscure significant distinctions, thus managing to confuse ourselves and others as well as increasing the likelihood of producing fallacious lines of reasoning. According to Platt, the combination of relatively vague descriptive content, coupled with a negative moral and emotional connotation makes the word 'violence' ideal for use in polemic discourse. And it is, therefore, not surprising to him that, generally speaking, the extended use of the term violence tends to occur in works that share an obvious intent to change opinions (i.e. 'consciousness raising') (1992: 187).

In his effort to discredit Garver's extended approach to violence, Platt has clearly overlooked Garver's (1988) more recent suggestion that: "It is useful to think of *violence* as an 'essentially contested concept' and to make use of the insights of W.B. Gallie when trying to understand its normative dimension . . . as well as the contested nature of its applications." (220). Garver refers to Gallie (1956) as the philosopher who has provided convincing arguments to counter the prejudice easily engendered by an overly simplistic empirical or scientific outlook, that any concept which cannot be clearly and unambiguously applied is bound to be confused. Gallie suggests that some concepts are too complex to be adequately captured by a single definition requiring, instead, a number of competing characterizations differing according to which elements are regarded as most salient or fundamental for determining the concept's extension. Whereas Garver does not fully develop his suggestion, a former student of his (Reilan, 2001) has recently shown, more specifically, "that the vagueness that the concept of rape has acquired can best be understood in terms of essential contestability, in something like W.B. Gallie's sense (1956), and that once we understand rape as an essentially contested concept, we will see that extending the boundaries of the concept is part of the proper use of the term" (p. 44)

For Gallie, an essentially contested concept is a concept that is used to make an appraisal, a value judgment that attaches to all objects that fall under the concept's scope and is based on a complex set of characteristics drawn from some original exemplars or paradigms, which everyone agrees fall within the concept's extension. While everyone agrees that objects must bear a resemblance to the paradigms in order for the concept to apply properly, there is no similar agreement over which characteristics of the paradigms count the most or how various characteristics figure into the appraisal. Instead, there are competing understandings of what should fall under the scope of the concept. Adherents to each rival understanding of the concept are aware of other understandings, and maintain their definitions in the face of these rivals (Gallie, 1956: 168–181).

According to Reilan, rape can be understood as an essentially contested concept because there is no question that rape has a strong evaluative character. Moreover, there are clear paradigm cases of rape (i.e. examples which everyone

agrees fall under the scope of the concept) that have a complex array of characteristics, all of which are regarded as significant features of the individual cases. It is also clear that different theorists emphasize different aspects of the paradigms as being significant or essential, such that while they agree *that* the paradigms are instances of rape, they disagree about *what* makes them instances of rape. Is it the use of force or coercion, the presence of power differentials, the absence of consent, or the degradation and objectification of the victim?

The vagueness of the concept of violence, however, is not due to any epistemological consideration; it is, rather, an essential vagueness due to the evaluative character and the 'emotive meaning' of the concept (Burgess-Jackson, 1995: 421). Which definition one accepts has significant normative import because the definitional debate is, in effect, a debate over which borderline cases ought to be subjected to the same sort of negative appraisal as the paradigms. In this debate, the feature that has been historically singled out as most significant need not be taken as essential. By the same token, a feature that seems currently to be the most significant might in hindsight be regarded as less or even completely irrelevant, or as a distraction from what really matters.

## Implications

Having explored some of the arguments for or against, on the one hand, a limited notion of violence to be defined in a rather restrictive way or, on the other hand, an extended notion of violence to be defined in a more inclusive way, the question remains what are the implications for empirical social and historical research on violence.

The continuous debates about the preferable definition of violence have been interpreted against the backdrop of what the philosopher Gallie (1956) has called the 'essentially contestedness' of concepts. However, strictly speaking, Gallie's notion of the 'essentially contestedness' of concepts may not be appropriate here because this chapter has been focused not so much on the substance of the concept as on the scope of the definition. Therefore, it could be more appropriate to assume that definitions of violence will always be 'radically or fundamentally contested' if only because every definition of violence bears its own theoretical, methodological and moral implications. Recognizing the radically or fundamentally contestedness of any definition of violence seems to be the most realistic as well as the most fruitful starting point for empirical research. While it may be true that the debate about the preferable definition of violence is about whether violence should be defined from the perpetrator's or the victim's point of view, trying to define violence from the point of view of an impartial spectator or third party not only seems impossible but also premature (Bufacchi, 2005: 199).

One of the implications of definitions of violence being ‘radically or fundamentally contested’ is that locating violence empirically is not a neutral undertaking, solely dependent on what is ‘out there’ to be found. Empirically, violence will always be seen with reference to a particular conception of violence. Instead of trying to conclusively define the concept of violence empirical researchers could consider the *costs and benefits* involved in holding a particular view on violence. This means that various concepts or definitions of violence are best being evaluated for their suitability for coming to terms with a particular research problem, i.e. their enabling or constraining the investigator to ‘see further and deeper’ into his or her material (Lukes, 1979: 272).

In this view, it may seem to be preferable for historians concerned with the history of violence to opt for a restrictive, e.g. legal definition of violence, particularly as historians often – but not always – depend upon archival sources, which are often juridical in nature. Historical inquiry concerned with the increase or decrease of violence in societies over long periods of time, therefore, would benefit from a restrictive, e.g. legal definition. At least from a practical point of view, using a limited notion of violence to be defined restrictively may have the advantage of the results of such research being less contested than when a more inclusive definition would be applied. Although sociologist Zygmunt Bauman strongly believes that even historians will never reach consensus with regard to the question of whether or not violence in modern history has been increasing or decreasing for this reason that it is impossible to ‘objectively’ measure the overall volume of violence (2000: 32; quoted in Imbusch, 2005: 53). In order to answer the question of why societies differ in what phenomena they define specifically in terms of violence to include them in the criminal code, a restrictive, i.e. legal definition needs already to be accompanied by a more inclusive social definition of violence.

However, for a criminologist a restrictive, e.g. legal definition implies more serious disadvantages. To begin with, a restrictive, e.g. legal definition is not necessarily a precise definition because even if we focus upon an extremely limited notion of violence, it will immediately become apparent that ‘violence’ – however narrowly defined – represents a surprisingly broad spectrum of incidents. Restricting *a priori* what qualifies as ‘violence’ would unduly and unhelpfully limit our understanding of how violence is socially constructed. An important benefit of a more inclusive definition of ‘violence’ is also that it allows researchers to penetrate the personal experience and subjective meaning of ‘violence’ for those involved either as victim (or perpetrator). In this respect, a broad inclusive definition of violence is preferable to a more restricted one because a restrictive definition tends to be a ‘etic’ while a broad inclusive definition enables emergent ‘emic’ perspectives to be integrated in the concept of violence. Only by refusing to make *a priori* assumptions about what qualifies as violence or not, can the full spectrum of behavior remain open to empirical research (Waddington, Badger & Bull, 2004: 149).

As an example, Åkerström (2002) studied in detail how in actual practice demarcations were made in order to either include or exclude certain acts in

the concept of violence. She interviewed staff in nursing homes for the elderly and found that nursing home staff describing how elderly residents sometimes slapped, pinched, or hit them made an effort to avoid pushing persons outside the boundary of accepted normalcy by labeling these events as ‘not violence’. Studying the ‘talk work’ used to construct an act as an instance of ‘violence’ or as ‘not violence’ allowed her to see how the social construction of violence proceeds by drawing lines of demarcation or through the interactional work of distinguishing ‘a slap’ from ‘violence’. When staff used the term ‘slap’, ‘pinch’, or ‘punch’ instead of ‘violence’, they downplayed the event in contrast to police or court statements in which similar terms may be used to invest actions with a ‘sense of drama’. Åkerström notes that apparently ‘violence’ has connotations that cannot simply be equated with those of punches, shoves, slaps,” and the like and argues that placing the elderly’s violence outside the boundaries of violence meant that the elderly remained ‘care recipients’, the staff ‘caregivers’, and the nursing home a ‘caring context’. In this respect, nursing home staff clearly differs from occupational groups like the police who have a vested interest in ensuring that ‘violence’ is an issue for which they can claim professional competence and which they can use to preserve the image of their jobs as dramatic and dangerous. In both cases, workers evinced interest in defining actions so that they fall either inside or outside ‘violence’.”

In conclusion, I would argue that, for a criminologist it is more fruitful, both theoretically and methodologically, to consider definitions of violence to be essentially contested, to accept that, depending on the specific contexts of discovery and contexts of justification, valid arguments are feasible for either inclusive or restrictive definitions of violence, and that a proper definition of ‘violence’ should not *a priori* be seen as a starting point for empirical research but as a temporary outcome, which may or may not prove to be useful in future research. Exploring a diversity of definitions is fruitful because by means of adjusting concepts scientific progress can be made.

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