Going Postal: The Make up of Workplace Violence

Bevan Catley
Department of Management and International Business
Massey University - Albany
Private Bag 102904
North Shore MSC
Auckland
New Zealand

Paper Proposal for Management and Organization History Stream, 4th International Critical Management Studies Conference Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge 4th – 6th July 2005.

Keywords: *History, Violence, Organisation Studies, Workplace Violence, Critique*

Abstract

It used to be we went to work to earn a living; today, frequently, we go to the workplace and encounter death (Johnson & Indvik, 1996: 19).

According to Johnson & Indvik (1996), our workplace relationships have taken a new, deadly turn. As a citizen, employee and researcher with an interest in organisations, comments that workplace violence happens "everyday, everywhere" (Grossman, 2002: 37) give me cause for disquiet. On this basis, this paper takes up the literature's plea to take the issue of workplace violence seriously.[1] Part of that task, I contend, is examining the prevailing assumptions that frame understandings of workplace violence rather than accepting them as a starting point. Engaging with history can make a number of important contributions to this task.

Johnson & Indvik's (1996) remarks are an example of comments that frame workplace violence as a 'new' problem, or at least a problem with a very recent history. However, such a framing abjures the historical links between violence, the workplace and work. Violence as a strategy of managerial control, an outcome of the work process, or the phenomenon requiring an organised response, are just some of the ways violence has played a key role in shaping management knowledge and practice. In generally ignoring the historical relationships between violence and the work organisation, accounts of workplace violence as something new are not simply mistaken. What Laden & Schwartz (2000) have termed the "new workplace violence account" serves a political function by limiting workplace violence to a set of circumstances that reinforces the virtue and unproblematic nature of management knowledge.

This paper proposes that locating workplace violence within a historical context is not only a vital part of developing critical approaches to workplace violence but also provides productive departure points for critical management studies. As Hearn (1994: 737) argues, making explicit the connections

[1] See Coco (1998: 16) for an example of a call to take workplace vioelnce "seriously."

between violence and organisation can provide important lines of enquiry for theoretical development and empirical analysis when it comes to asking "what is happening in organisations?" Specifically, this paper contends that the "new workplace violence account" (Laden & Schwartz, 2000) evacuates the historical connections between violence and the work organisation by focusing on a narrow range of extreme acts of violence. In ignoring historical concerns about violence and work, other manifestations of workplace violence are denied or marginalised. In addition, such historical myopia contributes to accounts whereby workplace violence is:

> …stripped of its potential for raising critical questions about workplace management or wider social realities; it is directed instead to procedural issues about workplace selection, early detection of potential troublemakers, adequacy of liability insurance, risk management and effective exclusion of potential as well as actual offenders (Mullen, 1997: 22).

Drawing out the historical relationships between violence and organisation can provide important connections for articulating 'inconvenient' histories of management and organisations. Connecting violence with the formation and management of organisations provides a very different set of associations than the technically rational collection of responses identified by Mullen (1997). Such historical connections challenge the 'sanitised' histories of management that either ignore violence altogether or contend that violence was left far behind as management and organisations progressively became more 'humane'. It also challenges ahistorical accounts whereby history has no relevance to the study of organisations or that 'violence' and 'organisation' have remained stable throughout time.

An examination of the historical record also challenges simplistic claims that workplace violence is a new problem. Employee, management and community concern about workplace violence has often been a driving force for change and industrial reform. Take, for example, the Sadler Committee, a British parliamentary committee set up in 1832 to investigate the working

conditions in the nation's textile factories. As relayed in Scott & Baltzly (1930), much of the testimony focuses on the violence of the factory system – the excessive hours, beatings, physical deformities and injuries endured by workers. The subsequent report published by the committee, with its first hand accounts of working in the textile factories was instrumental in the passing of legislation the following year that limited hours of employment for women and children in textile work (Scott & Baltzly, 1930).

Thus recognising these historical connections and concerns indicates that what 'counts' as workplace violence is subject to historical change. The Sadler committee's concerns about 'workplace violence' are not the same as those of the "new workplace violence account." Consequently, an historical engagement with workplace violence can enrich our understanding by pointing out that there are other ways of understanding workplace violence than what is presented in current accounts. In addition, a historical engagement can invigorate a critical understanding of the relationship between violence and organisation by prompting us to ask why workplace violence, in this form, is a problem now, and what are the implications of framing workplace violence in this manner. Addressing these questions not only has the potential to enrich the study of workplace violence but also promote critical lines of enquiry for thinking about the organisation of work and the work organisation.

Coco, M. P. (1998). The New War Zone: The Workplace. *SAM Advanced Management Journal, 63*(1), 15-20.

Grossman, R. J. (2002). Bulletproof Practices. *HR Magazine, 47*(11), 34-42.

Hearn, J. (1994). The Organization(s) of Violence: Men, Gender Relations, Organizations, and Violences. *Human Relations, 47*(6), 731-754.

Johnson, P. R., & Indvik, J. (1996). Stress and Violence in the Workplace. *Employee Counselling Today, 8*(1), 19-24.

Laden, V. A., & Schwartz, G. (2000). Psychiatric Disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the New Workplace Violence Account. *Berkeley Journal of Employment and Labor Law, 21*(1), 246.

Mullen, E. A. (1997). Workplace Violence: Cause for Concern or the Construction of a New Category of Fear? *Journal of Industrial Relations, 39*(1), 21-32.

Scott, J. F., & Baltzly, A. (1930). Readings in European History Since 1814. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.