



Gendered objects and gendered spaces: The invisibilities of 'knife' crime

Current Sociology
1–16

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0011392120932972

journals.sagepub.com/home/csi



Elizabeth A Cook 

City, University of London, UK

Sandra Walklate 

University of Liverpool, UK; Monash University, Australia

Abstract

The knife is a relatively mundane, domestic and easily accessible household item. At the same time, it is the most commonly used weapon in intimate partner homicide. Recently however the knife has become an object of fear and panic in England and Wales when used in public by mostly young men on other young men. This aim of this article is to offer some reflections on the conundrums posed by these two observations. Here the 'knife' is considered through the integrated lenses of space, gender and materiality. Situated in this way the contemporary preoccupation with 'knife' crime illustrates the ongoing and deeply held assumptions surrounding debates on public and private violence. Whilst criminology has much to say on gender and violence, the gendered, spatialized and material presence of the knife remains poorly understood. In prioritizing 'knife' crime as a 'public' problem over its manifestation as an ongoing 'private' one, its gendered and spatialized features remain hidden thus adding to the failure of policy to tackle 'knife' crime in the round.

Keywords

Gender, intimate partner homicide, knives, space, violence

Introduction

In Jo Nesbo's most recent crime novel, *Knife*, his main character, Harry Hole, is a detective implicated in the murder of his partner, the love of his life, from whom he is

Corresponding author:

Elizabeth A Cook, Violence and Society Centre, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, UK.

Email: elizabeth.cook@city.ac.uk

temporarily separated. She is murdered in her own home with a knife (a treasured gift from Harry Hole to her). This story has all the components and patterns indicative of a 'domestic' homicide. Yet, as it unfolds, we find that the perpetrator of the crime is not Hole but someone known to them both motivated by jealousy of Hole. For the purposes of our discussion here this story situates the knife as the material object at the centre of it. In so doing this reminds the reader of the value placed on objects, the meanings they convey, who shares in those meanings, and the challenges posed in placing such objects outside of that meaning context. In this story, this knife cuts across and cuts through a range of issues associated with the 'safe haven' of the home and the objects within the home when compared with the presumed dangerousness of the streets. As a story then it raises some interesting questions about space, vulnerability and dangerousness. These kinds of questions carry over into contemporary real-world preoccupations with 'knife' crime. To be specific, it leads to the question as why it is that the lethal use of the knife in public garners more fear and terror than its lethal use in private. Here we endeavour to explore this question.

We start from the position that violence is gendered. However, the *nature* and *extent* to which this gendering of violence unfolds is subject to some contestation. There is a considerable and wide-ranging body of evidence demonstrating that violence is gendered (see inter alia Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2018: Ch. 4); albeit this is a feature of violence neglected by mainstream contemporary social theory (Walby et al., 2014). Put simply, as Braithwaite (1989: 44) observed some time ago, one of the 'most consistently supported associations in empirical criminology' is that crime is committed by (young) men and any 'credible' theory must acknowledge this to move forward. This endorses the view expressed by Wootton (1959: 32) sometime earlier that 'if men behaved like women, the courts would be idle and the prisons empty'. The gendered feature of the recourse to violence transgresses the presumed boundaries between war, peace and post-conflict situations (Barberet, 2014). Yet difficulties in transgressing these boundaries persist in understandings of offenders, the nature of their offending behaviour, the location of their offending and their weapon of choice. This article explores the potential such transgressions offer for a much more rounded appreciation of 'knife' crime.

The article falls into five parts. The first part considers the (limited) criminological engagement with 'knife' crime and situates this within the intervention made by Walby (2012) on the centrality of violence to both criminology and sociology. In particular, criminological interventions on violence, although sensitive to the nature of interpersonal violence across time, place and relational dynamics, have also served to reinforce approaches to such violence as a separate and separable specialism. Often these approaches have failed to speak to one another since they tend to focus on either offenders or victims rather than the relationships between them (see inter alia Iratzoqui and McCutcheon, 2018; McCulloch et al., 2019; Smith, 2019). In reviewing this literature here 'knife' crime is used as a focal point to highlight how specialist threads of knowledge could be pulled together to help make sense of fatal violence. The next three parts of the article offer an exploration of the taken for granted dimensions associated with contemporary public preoccupations with 'knife' crime. These are: the knife as a material and cultural object; 'knife' crime as a gendered phenomenon; and

'knife' crime as a spatial phenomenon. Here we suggest that these taken for granted dimensions shape and moderate our responses (or lack thereof) to the construction of 'knife crime' as a problem. The article concludes by considering the extent to which these taken for granted and thereby invisible dimensions of 'knife' crime sustain the ongoing distinction between public and private violence and the extent to which this distinction perpetuates understandings of who and what counts in relation to fatal violence. The article therefore traverses questions posed by an analysis of gender, space and violence but argues that integrating these lens with a gendered analysis of objects and instruments provides a window into the linkages between these different axes. In doing so it considers what can be learned from counting the *means* of gendered violence against men and women as well as ensuring that the gendered nature of such violence counts.

The nature and extent of 'knife' crime

The Office for National Statistics (2019) reports that from 2007–8 to 2017–18 around 200 young men died each year as a result of coming into contact with a sharp instrument (this figure peaked at 222 in 2017–18 and was at its lowest at 116 in 2014–15). Over that same time period, the figures for (predominantly) young women being killed by a sharp instrument were more or less stable at around 60 deaths per year. Indeed, as Brookman (2005: 45–46) points out in reviewing data for England and Wales from 1995 to 2001, in the killing of both males and females the favoured weapon is a sharp implement. These statistics arguably point to a major disjunction between media coverage of such crimes and their presence in criminal statistics (Squires, 2009). Indeed, as far as the criminal justice system is concerned, there is no such thing as 'knife' crime. The construction of this term, much like in Hall et al.'s (1978) earlier analysis of media coverage of 'mugging' (a crime that did and does not exist in criminal law), speaks volumes about the media desire to sensationalize such events whilst at the same time reproducing some silences in relation to them. Moreover, when the figures quoted above are put within the context of homicide statistics more broadly they serve to illustrate the commonly held truism that (young) men mostly kill other young men known to them as friends and/or acquaintances in public places, and women are killed mostly by their partners and/ex-partners usually in their own homes. Indeed, this public/private pattern of lethal violence reflects historical continuities between Davies's (2008) scuttlers (who often went out ready to fight other young men in public equipped with knives) and the contemporary concern with public violence involving the use of knives between predominantly young males. Thus the gendered nature of 'knife' crime is not new.

However, the more recent emergence of 'knife' crime as a problem for public concern has prompted some interesting interventions. For example, in June 2019, Nottinghamshire Constabulary came under criticism from domestic violence campaigners and survivors following the suggestion that blunt-ended knives be distributed to victims of domestic abuse (Bennett, 2019). This echoed an equally unpopular proposal by Hern et al. (2005). The intent by both was to ensure that fewer sharp implements were available to potential perpetrators, but not only did this suggestion obscure the causes of violence against

women it also manifestly illustrated the silo thinking (referred to above) entrenched in understanding the perpetrators of such violence and their weapon of choice. Indeed, this thinking has been rendered more visible in the increasing use of knives in terrorist attacks. For example, in October 2019, Mickaël Harpon used a 33-centimetre long kitchen knife and an oyster knife to kill his colleagues in a Parisian police station and in December 2019, Usman Khan, armed with two kitchen knives, killed and injured people in the vicinity of London Bridge. Both events resulted in widespread public consternation. The question remains: why? Is such consternation the result of the use of what many people might consider to be a domestic implement in the 'wrong' space, i.e. public space? Does 'knife' crime cut across the public-private divide in such profound ways that are too difficult to articulate in public discourse? Evidence documents that the knife has, historically speaking, been the weapon of choice in perpetrating fatal violence against women. Yet this feature of lethal violence has rarely incited the fears and anxieties which have been triggered by the debate on 'knife crime' as currently presented to us by the media and political parties.

Of course, hidden in media portrayals and policy 'interventions', heavily gendered and heavily racialized rhetoric surrounding the problem of knife crime is also evident. Reflecting on the 2008 'knife crime epidemic', Wood (2010: 97; see also Squires, 2009) writes:

Recent media portrayal of, and government response to, the 'knife crime epidemic' has created a distorted image of the reality on the ground. The evidence presented in this article suggests that, whilst some marginalised young people in the UK are carrying knives, the image of violently nihilist, feral, often Black or Minority Ethnic teen gangs armed with knives and guns is, at best, only a snapshot of the grim reality for a very small minority. At worst, this kind of imagery, replicated unchallenged and unqualified on our screens and from the dispatch box, leads to a punitive and misguided political climate which may ultimately fail the very teenagers it aims to reach.

This point remains true for the more recent debates around knife crime in which its construction is seen as a problem confined to young, black men in large urban centres. These assumptions have translated into interventions from government promising to increase stop and search powers, more prison places, additional funding for prosecution and so on. The use of the knife in the private domain, however, remains invisible in this public attention – despite the knife being the weapon of choice in perpetrating (lethal) violence against women (Women's Aid, 2017). Given the achievements of feminist movements in making visible the effects of violence against women it would be difficult to argue that such violence in general remains invisible in social and cultural spheres. So whilst violence(s) against women have become increasingly visible, responding to such violence(s) remains obscured and frequently downplayed as a policy priority, legislative and other initiatives notwithstanding. At the same time, the ongoing academic drift to categorize such violence(s) either by offender or victim or offence is complicit in such obfuscation. It could be argued therefore that the use of knives by men against women is not necessarily invisible but obscured and downplayed. In what follows we excavate why it might be that the lethal use of the knife in public garners more fear and terror than its lethal use in private other than for those who are threatened by it.

The knife as a material-gendered object

Situating the knife in its material culture brings together a range of discussions concerning functionality (of an object), memory (including arguably emotional attachment to an object), history (the increasing presence and use of an object over time) and heritage (the value assigned to an object over time). It is certainly the case that in the Nesbo storyline, touched upon at the start of this article, the value and emotional attachment assigned to the knife used to murder Hole's partner is central to its narrative. However, in the context of lethal violence in the real world, little work has taken the material nature of the knife as an object as its focal concern. For example, Hughes et al. (2012) inform us that there has been relatively little work done on the use of kitchen knives (as opposed to the more generic term of sharp instruments) in cases of homicide. They go on to suggest that use of an implement of this kind is more likely to be associated with an unplanned incident. Their work was primarily focused on the relationship if any between mental ill health, homicide, and the use of a kitchen knife. In analysing reports from independent homicide inquiries from 1994 to 2010, they conclude that the:

... predominant type of knives used by perpetrators of homicide who have had contact with mental health services in England are kitchen knives and that most homicides in this group lack planning. (Hughes et al., 2012: 561)

Interventions of this kind exemplify one strand of criminological work on homicide more generally which draws attention to what is sometimes referred to as the 'toxic trio': the compounding effects of alcohol, mental health problems and drug use in the recourse to (fatal) violence (see also Gadd et al., 2019).

In a slightly different vein, Brennan (2019) focuses on the prevention of weapon carrying as a feature of harm reduction of violent crime. In this analysis knife crime is seen as a constituent element of such prevention and in a very detailed, if ungendered analysis, the case is made for a more integrated theoretical approach to this issue. Commenting that violence prevention in this field has become preoccupied with rather single-level theories, Brennan (2019) goes on to make the case for a social-ecological approach to theory and practice in this area. Social-ecological approaches to violence prevention seem to have some global approbation, having been embraced by the United Nations (and others) in the context of addressing and understanding violence against women (UN Women, 2015). This model posits that there is no single causal explanation for violence against women but is the outcome of the different ways in which the individual, their relationships, the community and society interact with one another. As Walklate et al. (2020) argue, this model has value insofar as it turns the professional gaze away from a search for individual pathology in either the victim or the perpetrator towards wider structural, cultural and historical inequalities – all of which add to the complexity of understanding human lives. However, there are limits to this ecological gaze emanating from its inherent functionalist view of society and social relationships. Fundamentally, as a theoretical starting point, this fails to capture power, power relations and the agency of individuals in negotiating these. As a result gender is not necessarily fully accounted for, space even less so, and an understanding of the meaning associated with the weapon used, almost invisible.

Although the intervention suggested by Hern et al. (2005) misplaces the burden of responsibility, it does offer some appreciation of its domestic history and utility of the knife. Pointing out that the modern kitchen and every school home economics department has ‘a plethora of readily available weapons . . . that makes it unnecessary to look further for another lethal weapon’ (Hern et al., 2005: 1221), they go on to argue that only making blunt-ended knives available would reduce the capacity for knives to cause serious physical harm (the view taken up by the Nottinghamshire Constabulary cited above). Indeed, in support of their case, they state:

In 1669, King Louis XIV of France noted the association between pointed domestic knives and violence and passed a law demanding that the tips of all table and street knives be ground smooth (Hern et al., 2005: 1222)

Yet the presence of long (and short) pointed knives persists in both domestic and commercial kitchens, leading us to ask whether implements such as these have value above and beyond their culinary purpose. The answer to this question is simple: yes, they do.

In a differently informed approach exploring the role of mundane objects in ‘doing’ family, Holmes (2019) reveals how different objects passed on between different family members not only do the work of sentimentality they also do the work they were intended for. Thus, Holmes (2019: 175) comments:

These are not objects exhibited on mantelpieces or displayed in ‘special’ cabinets for all visiting to see. They are spades, bread knives and patched up dungarees, found in wardrobes, kitchens and sheds; items which are mundane, ordinary and everyday, but still nonetheless significant to the making and doing of kinship.

Indeed for one of Holmes’s respondents a bread knife figures as one such material object. For the purposes of the analysis here this work points to several key features associated with material objects and their importance in everyday life: their ordinariness, their presence within the family context, and the value assigned to them. In this sense kitchen knives are valued because they are functional and ordinary (though some have more value than others dependent upon their monetary worth) and when placed in the context in which they are most frequently used, the kitchen, they are also gendered. Thus the (kitchen) knife has both value and purpose in a gendered domain long seen as the preserve of women (Cowan, 1985) in the domestic (private) setting, and still predominantly seen as the preserve of men in the commercial (public) setting (see Harris and Giuffre, 2015). Moreover, there is an overlap embedded within these observations which connects the materiality of the knife with the materiality of the home (Meth, 2003). This is developed below.

Thus, the knife is distinguished by its function and is, by default, assumed to be sharp and have the capacity to cut. We routinely interact with knives and these interactions are embedded within gendered assumptions across their uses in different spaces surrounded by a material culture which governs their proper use. Deviation from this prescribed material culture frames the knife as a relatively functional, domestic object which, when used exceptionally, can have fatal consequences. If we were to consider knives as objects designed to seriously harm or kill, as in military training for example, these assumptions would look quite different. The act of using a knife to kill a partner or ex-partner, most

often done by men towards women as indicated in the statistics cited above, crosses the borders of both legality and gendered assumptions surrounding the use of this material object. Hence the gendered nature of the (kitchen) knife, or indeed the oyster knife and so on (*qua* Nesbo, 2019), not only comes into view but also serves to remind us of the ongoing dichotomous gendered thinking prevailing in debates about public and private violence(s).

The knife and gendered spaces

In many respects the wider public embrace of ‘knife’ crime as a problem of the streets, rather than a problem of the home, reaches back through time – at least back to the debates surrounding the formation of the ‘new police’ whose primary task then (as it is arguably now) was to keep the streets safe (the streets were/are police property; Lee, 1981) and free from the ‘garroters’ who were, it was argued, inhibiting the free movement of the middle classes. Then even more than now the ‘safe haven’ of the home as a place in which serious harm was also perpetrated did not feature much in such public debates. Neither did the gendered nature of crime and/or the spaces in which it occurred. However, since that time, and particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century, a body of work has exposed the powerful presence of both gender and space in analyses of fatal violence. It is perhaps, then, the use of the knife (a gendered object) as a lethal weapon in public space (also gendered) which lies at the heart of the conundrum of ‘knife’ crime: the ‘wrong weapon’ in the ‘wrong space’?

There has been a long history of (Western) feminist inquiry working to challenge the longstanding dichotomy of private/public spheres which has been employed widely and used variably to inform discussions about politics, regulation, privacy, autonomy and intimacy. As Pateman (1989: 118) commented, this dichotomy has been at the centre of much feminist scholarship where its critique has sought to make visible issues around the gendered divisions of care, domestic labour and power in the household and therefore to bring attention to sources of women’s oppression. While some might contest the totality of Pateman’s claim, feminist interventions on the private/public dichotomy have played a significant role in challenging and making visible various forms of women’s oppression. These boundaries have been identified as the root problem in the devaluation of domestic labour, the neglect of women’s voices in political spheres, and in the gendered dynamics of violence and abuse that take place within the home. However, as Lacey (1993: 96–97) has pointed out, it is important to distinguish between the descriptive and normative claims being made here. She states:

For whilst it is both true and highly significant that women still bear a disproportionate responsibility for domestic labour, the converse suggestion that women have lived their lives exclusively or mainly in the private sphere of the family is quite unsustainable. Working-class women in particular have worked outside the home to a far greater degree than the public/private critique has tended to acknowledge. At a descriptive level, the idea of a private, unregulated family simply collapses when subjected to scrutiny.

Rather than be drawn into these particular debates, the concern here is to highlight the ideological implications of this dichotomy and what this means for those wishing to avoid and/or deny the import of violence perpetrated within the ‘safe haven’ of the home

when compared with the presumed 'dangerousness' of the streets. More broadly the issue here is perhaps the extent to which Lacey's observation speaks to what Pain (2015: 66) refers to as 'spatial hierarchies' which privilege and separate out different forms and shapes of violence. Rejecting the 'scalar or spatial hierarchies' which have sought to separate out spheres of domestic violence and international warfare, Pain and Staeheli (2014: 345) use a framework of intimacy-geopolitics to apply to their analysis of violence and argue that such hierarchies do not 'acknowledge that the same violences are often already there within the intimate realm'.

In this hierarchy the notion of the 'safe haven' of the home speaks not so much to the reality of private life in which a building becomes a dwelling (Dant, 1999) but to an ideology of familism (or familialism). This, as Dalley (1996) argues, works to sustain an image of an 'ideal family' and 'ideal family lifestyles' revolving around the core values of security, safety and sanctum. It reinforces concepts of 'feminine nurturance, masculine protection, maternalism, self-sacrifice, and emotional and financial security' (Tyner, 2011: 39). In this sense, as Porteous (1976) argues, the home 'as a territorial core' provides three 'territorial satisfactions': identity (the ability to assert and express identity), security (in both a physical and psychological sense) and stimulation (of fulfilment from expression and defence of space). In other words, the home is a 'refuge' from outside interference (Hareven, 1991). The ideology of familism reinforces this notion of the home as a place of refuge offering both freedom and security affording permanent solace and privacy from the influence of control or intervention. These three assumptions of refuge, permanence and privacy have been deconstructed by feminist geographers, sociologists and family studies scholars and this work has some relevance to the concerns of this article.

The idea of the home as a relatively innocuous, private sphere providing refuge from outside dangers is one that forgets and obscures the violent aspects of family life and intimacy. It has been heavily criticized in contemporary debates surrounding violence against women, space, place and gender. These debates point out that the home is not a 'safe haven' for everyone. While the ideology of familism has created the assumption that women require men's protection, there is also an extensive body of literature making brutally apparent the extent of violence occurring within the home predominantly by the men presumed to protect them. The nature of men's intrusion into supposedly safe, secure and inviolable spaces for women which includes fatal and non-fatal intimate partner violence and abuse has been well-documented (see inter alia Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Stanko, 1985, 1990; Valentine, 1992). As discussed above, women are most likely to be killed by someone that they know – typically a man who is a partner or former partner and historically the knife has been the weapon of choice in perpetrating such violence against women (Women's Aid, 2017). Thus if knife crime is understood not only as the use of a gendered object but also as a spatialized behaviour, this also brings into view a range of assumptions about gendered spaces and puts to the fore questions about the 'safe haven' of the home. As Stanko (1990: 9) pointed out in her earlier analysis of gender, space and violence:

The current thinking about safety and danger fails to capture what people know and experience as personal violence. Whilst our attention is continuously attuned to that which happens in public places, there is a stony silence, almost a denial of the extent of violence that happens in

private, usually between those who already know each other, however slightly. To the extent that it is acknowledged at all, we assume that this private is normal. Real violence, that committed by strangers, is abnormal, an affront to public safety.

Indeed, the home as a space offering material and permanent protection can be easily unstitched under pressure. Meth's (2003) analysis is informative here. She deconstructs the assumptions associated with 'home' in her interrogation of the concept of 'domus' or 'domestic' as in domestic violence. She takes issue with the lack of critical discussion around the physical and/or spatial mechanisms of the home and argues that a closer examination of the term 'home' is required which pays attention to how the physical nature of 'differentiated space' regulates women's experiences of domestic violence. The home is 'assumed to be concrete, real, established, providing shelter, and possibly permanent' despite the reality of insecure, informal and impermanent housing for women facing domestic violence (Meth, 2003: 320). The literature in which Meth's work is situated illustrates the influence of housing insecurity and precarity on women, not only as a consequence of intimate partner violence (Tutty et al., 2014), but also as a barrier preventing women from leaving abusive men (Baker et al., 2003). This is a material factor in protection from violent risk (Meth, 2003). As much criminological work has demonstrated, this violence is not solely 'domestic', but is also gendered (Walby et al., 2014) and the notion of 'home' does not universally inspire feelings of security and protection.

Against this backcloth, 'knife' crime has the capacity again to put the home as a private, permanent and secure space under closer scrutiny. The knife, as a relatively mundane and freely accessible household object, places pressure upon a whole range of assumptions about who requires protection, from whom, and where this is needed. The home does not provide a sanctum of privacy, permanency or protection for everyone. If we centre the knife as a domestic object we are reminded that for women the home is a space where lethal danger is threatened and exploitation and oppression is reinforced by the failure to fully recognize intimate violence as a public or political issue. Thus, returning to Lacey (1993), the private/public dichotomy in the context of violence holds little substantive, descriptive weight. However, the normative claims behind the dichotomy do. As Lacey (1993: 97) also points out, it:

... exposes the way in which the ideology of the public/private dichotomy allows government to clean its hands of any responsibility for the state of the 'private' world and depoliticizes the disadvantages which inevitably spill over the alleged divide by the position of the 'privately' disadvantaged in the 'public' world.

Moreover, it is clear that while much of the violence perpetrated by men against women takes place within the privacy of the home, women also report high levels of fear and anxiety which are likely to affect their movement around different spaces outside of the home (Day, 2001; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1992). Indeed, there is a large body of feminist criminology and geography that speaks to the importance of space, gender, violence and fear respectively. As the disintegration of these public/private boundaries continues (see, for example, the increasing presence of work on the 'spaceless terrain' of the digital world [Harris, 2018] and its controlling consequences [Douglas et al., 2019]) there is

some wider recognition of methods of violence against women which constitute capillaries of control outside of the home (see for example, Vera-Gray [2016] on street harassment and on public transport). This work not only highlights multiple forms of violence against women existing alongside each other in domestic places and relationships, but also how knowledge is constructed about *where* is considered safe and *what* or *who* is to be feared (Fanghanel, 2016; Stanko, 1990). It is self-evident that these strategies of control can be experienced at any time in any place, adding further texture and nuance to the continuum of violence(s) as experienced by women long recognized by feminist work (Cockburn, 2004; Kelly, 1988).

Consequently, as noted by Pain (1991), the idea of public spaces as masculine, political and dangerous spaces and private spaces as feminine, domestic and endangered spaces, does not represent the spatial distribution of violence against women but a broader ideology of the state to control and restrict women's behaviours and movements. Even more, it inspires us to ask questions 'about the relative absence of intimacy, and its relegation as less significant than the public realms and violences that are more often labelled as political' (Pain, 2015: 72). The body of feminist interventions cited here presents serious challenges to the public/private dichotomy and raises questions about what constitutes security, 'whose security counts' and where it might be required (Walklate et al., 2019: 71). To separate violence which takes place in private from that which takes place in public seems therefore not only substantively unsustainable, but politically disingenuous as it privileges certain spaces as worthy of intervention and others as not. It perpetuates 'spatial hierarchies' (Pain, 2015: 66) and is so doing ensures that 'knife' crime in public trumps 'knife' crime in private on each and every occasion in which it occurs. It endorses the paradoxical construction of 'safe havens' and 'dangerous streets' which presumes that men can simultaneously be unpredictably violent in public and providers and protectors in private (Valentine, 1992). It also misses the mark in framing the (male) perpetrators of such violence(s) by continuing to differentiate perpetrators of private violence from those who commit public violence whereas in reality the continuities between these two domains are there for all to see (McCulloch et al., 2019; Smith, 2019). This returns us to one of the thorny questions with which this article began: what does criminology (or for that matter sociology) have to say on the issues of concern here?

Criminology, sociology, violence and society

It is well known that incidents of serious violence in public are largely perpetrated by men against men and that inclines and declines in violence are unevenly distributed across time, places and person. The recent rise in fatal violence has been met with many speculations over the role of drill music, county lines, violent drug markets and social media which conflate a number of different problems (Ellis, 2019). There is a well-elaborated literature in criminology that speaks to the macro shifts in political and economic contexts and their influence on fatal violence with a particular emphasis on violence by men against men (see, for example, Currie, 2016; Spierenburg, 2008). When this work is added to a longer history of classical sociological theory on violence including Elias's (2000) thesis on the 'civilising process', Weber's (1948) notion of the state monopolization of violence and Žižek's (2008) reflections on the triumvirate of violence,

it is possible to point to quite a body of work which takes as its central problematic the question of violence. Classical texts such as these have remained influential in the field of sociological theory and violence but, as Walby (2012; and with Towers and Francis, 2014: 188) notes, these have developed quite apart from the fields of domestic and gendered-based violence which has established 'its own conferences and journals; its own theories, concepts and forms of measurement; its priority fields of enquiry'. Although a vocal feminist movement has raised the visibility of violence against women, the assumptions of classical theorists have been translated into concepts and methods of measurement which have been largely set apart from research on violence against women. Similarly, whilst much of criminology and many criminologists have concerned themselves with violence in all its forms, the increasing separation of such inquiries into specialist areas of investigation has resulted in a vision blinkered to the wider nature and extent of violence, its perpetrators and victims (Barberet, 2014). These fields having developed quite separately with different concepts, methods, units of measurement, definitions and ontologies of violence and require, as Walby et al. (2014) argue, some reconciliation to fully understand the extent and effects of violence on society. They go on to suggest:

Criminological theory should more systematically address the gendered patterns of violence in which violence against women is nearly as common as violence against men. The gendering of violence is not a marginal special issue, but should be central to the field. (p. 210)

The excavation of 'knife' crime as discussed above brings the neglect of gendered understandings in many of these discussions to the fore. For example, in relation to statistics on fatal incidents of 'knife crime', there are few disaggregated data available on the victim and offender relationship. Whilst recent increases in sharp and/or knife-related homicides can be identified for male victims, an increase of 38%, and female victims, an increase of 24% (Office for National Statistics, 2019), as Brookman (2019) points out, 'it is not clear' whether the most recent increase of knife-related homicides experienced by female victims is connected to those increases experienced by male victims or perhaps represents change of a 'different order'. In addition, there is a need to recognize that the theoretical explanations offered by criminology, so far, have offered little by the way of substantive analysis on trends in violence in relation to gender and are not in this sense 'gender-specific' (Walby et al., 2016). This is a significant lacuna particularly when 'knife' crime in public has garnered significant attention from politicians and the media but when at the same time there has been considerably less attention on the consequences of 'knife' crime in private as documented above. This perhaps speaks to what Pain (2015: 66) refers to as 'spatial hierarchies' which privilege and separate out different forms and shapes of violence from each other, generating different and differential policy responses at the expense of seeing the continuities between them.

If we centre the knife as a domestic object, it devalues its public threat, heightens its private threat and brings into the frame a whole range of problematic assumptions around fear, vulnerability and security. More fundamentally, it challenges the dichotomy between notions of the 'dangerous streets' and the 'safe haven' of the home perpetuated in popular and political discourse which obscures a more nuanced discussion of these spaces.

Importantly this process brings to the fore questions of not only what to measure, count and how to record those practices, but also the question of who counts.

Conclusion

This excavation of 'knife' crime has rendered visible some features of this phenomenon that have largely remained invisible and unspoken in the drive to categorize and respond to a social problem in ways reminiscent of what Young (2011) has called a cosmetic fallacy (covering up deeper problems to no good effect). Further, once this particular social phenomenon has been subjected to closer scrutiny its gendered and spatialized dimensions become clearer, rendering the continuities with the use and deployment of the recourse to violence(s) more generally as gendered visible for all to see. This visibility has consequences, however, not just for sensationalist media coverage accompanied by the (usual) political rhetoric; it also carries consequences for those researching and debating these fields of inquiry within the academy. At several junctures this article has commented on the blinkered vision that can accompany the development of specialist areas of inquiry which proceed as if the social world were comprised of separate and separable units. Of course, social reality does not come packaged in this way and more work needs to look for continuities, processes and interconnectedness, as opposed to differences and incidents.

The separation of concepts and measurement of violence which we have pointed to also has far-reaching consequences for the politics and practice of counting violence. What does it mean to say that violence is private or public? It is perhaps not only a reference to space (although it does appear to mark out boundaries and areas in which violence(s) take place), but an assertion about the responsibility to protect and intervene. The practice of labelling some violence as private and others as public translates variously and often unequally in the allocation of resources, provision of services, concerns about accountability and the inclination to intervene. The 'knife' traverses both spheres and perhaps underlines the importance of counting the *means* of gendered violence and the use of objects and instruments which are ascribed with their own meanings as 'domestic' or functional household items and why such instruments incite fear in some spaces and not others.

There is a good deal of support in the argument presented here for more careful disaggregation and counting processes so that who does what to whom (Hester, 2013) is no longer hidden in plain sight. However, the failure to count carries with it the further consequence of adding to the slow violence(s) experienced by many women on a routine, daily basis (Wonders, 2018). Counting, understood as appropriate measuring as well as ensuring people count, can and does achieve a number of outcomes. As Walklate et al. (2020: 102) observe in the context of the importance of femicide indices can:

. . . offer both a point of counting, a centre from which to generate meaningful and culturally sensitive practices of prevention, and a place in which those lives lost to intimate femicide may be afforded memory justice.

The political project of counting is as pertinent to academic and public debates on 'knife' crime as it is to those same debates on femicide. Otherwise we run the risk of not only failing to count but also failing to speak for those (gendered) lives which count.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Jude McCulloch for her helpful comments on a previous draft of this article, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

Funding

This work was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (Reference ES/S011471/1).

ORCID iDs

Elizabeth A Cook  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7608-8702>

Sandra Walklate  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1628-9713>

References

- Baker CL, Cook SL and Norris FH (2003) Domestic violence and housing problems: A contextual analysis of women's helpseeking, received informal support, and formal system response. *Violence Against Women* 9(7): 754–783.
- Barberet R (2014) *Women, Crime and Criminal Justice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bennett C (2019) Blunt knives to stop domestic violence? What next stab vests in the kitchen? *The Guardian*, 16 June.
- Braithwaite J (1989) *Shame, Crime and Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brennan I (2019) Weapon carrying and the reduction of violent harm. *The British Journal of Criminology* 59(3): 571–593.
- Brookman F (2005) *Understanding Homicide*. London: Sage.
- Brookman F (2019) *Written Evidence Submitted to the Youth Select Committee Inquiry into Knife Crime*. 8 July. Available at: www.byc.org.uk/uk/youth-select-committee (accessed 6 December 2019).
- Cockburn C (2004) The continuum of violence: A gender perspective on war and peace. In: Giles W and Hyndman J (eds) *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cowan RS (1985) *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology*. New York: Basic Books
- Currie E (2016) *The Roots of Danger: Violent Crime in Global Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalley G (1996) *Ideologies of Caring: Rethinking Community and Collectivism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Dant T (1999) *Material Culture in the Social World*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Davies A (2008) *The Gangs of Manchester*. Preston: Milo Books.
- Day K (2001) Constructing masculinity and women's fear in public space in Irvine, California. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 8(2): 109–127.
- Dobash RE and Dobash R (1979) *Violence Against Wives: The Case Against the Patriarchy*. New York: Macmillan.
- Douglas H, Harris B and Dragiewicz M (2019) Technology-facilitated domestic and family violence: Women's experiences. *The British Journal of Criminology* 59(3): 551–570.
- Elias N (2000) *The Civilising Process*, rev edn. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ellis A (2019) A de-civilizing reversal or system normal? Rising lethal violence in post-recession austerity United Kingdom. *The British Journal of Criminology* 59(4): 862–878.

- Fanghanel A (2016) The trouble with safety: Fear of crime, pollution and subjectification in public space. *Theoretical Criminology* 20(1): 57–74.
- Fitz-Gibbon K and Walklate S (2018) *Gender, Crime and Criminal Justice*, 3rd edn. London: Routledge.
- Gadd D, Henderson J, Radcliffe P et al. (2019) The dynamics of domestic abuse and drug and alcohol dependency. *The British Journal of Criminology* 59(5): 1035–1053.
- Hall S, Critcher C, Jefferson T et al. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Hareven T (1991) The history of the family and the complexity of social change. *The American Historical Review* 96(1): 95–124.
- Harris B (2018) Spacelessness, spatiality and intimate partner violence: Technology-facilitated abuse, stalking and justice. In: Fitz-Gibbon K, Walklate S, McCulloch J and Maher JM (eds) *Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security: Securing Women's Lives in a Global World*. London: Routledge.
- Harris AD and Giuffre P (2015) *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hern E, Glazebrook W and Beckett M (2005) Reducing knife crime: We need to ban the sale of long pointed kitchen knives. *British Medical Journal* 330: 1221–1222.
- Hester M (2013) Who does what to whom? Gender and domestic violence perpetrators in English police records. *European Journal of Criminology* 10(5): 623–637.
- Holmes H (2019) Material affinities: 'Doing' family through the practices of passing on. *Sociology* 53(1): 174–191.
- Hughes NS, Macaulay AM and Crichton HHM (2012) Kitchen knives and homicide by mentally disordered offenders: A systematic analysis of homicide inquiries in England 1994–2010. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 23(5–6): 559–570.
- Iratzoqui A and McCutcheon J (2018) The influence of domestic violence in homicide cases. *Homicide Studies* 22(2): 145–160.
- Kelly L (1988) *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lacey N (1993) Theory into practice? Pornography and the public/private dichotomy. *Journal of Law and Society* 20(1): 93–113.
- Lee JA (1981) Some structural aspects of police deviance in relations with minority groups. In: Shearing C (ed.) *Organisational Police Deviance*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- McCulloch J, Walklate S, Maher JM et al. (2019) Lone wolf terrorism through a gendered lens: Men turning violent or violent men behaving violently? *Critical Criminology* 27(3): 437–450.
- Meth P (2003) Rethinking the 'domus' in domestic violence: Homelessness, space and domestic violence in South Africa. *Geoforum* 34(3): 317–327.
- Nesbo J (2019) *Knife*. London: Harville Secker.
- Office for National Statistics (2019) *Homicide in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018*. London: ONS.
- Pain R (1991) Space, sexual violence and social control: Integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women's fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography* 15(4): 415–431.
- Pain R (2015) Intimate war. *Political Geography* 44: 64–73.
- Pain R and Staeheli L (2014) Introduction: Intimacy-geopolitics and violence. *Area* 46(4): 344–347.
- Pateman C (1989) *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Porteous D (1976) Home: The territorial core. *American Geographical Society* 66(4): 383–390.
- Smith J (2019) *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men into Terrorists*. London: Riverun.

- Spierenburg P (2008) *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stanko E (1985) *Intimate Intrusions: Women's Experience of Male Violence*. London: Routledge.
- Stanko E (1990) *Everyday Violence: How Women and Men Experience Sexual and Physical Danger*. London: Pandora.
- Squires P (2009) The knife crime 'epidemic' and British politics. *British Politics* 4: 127–157.
- Tutty L, Ogden C, Giurgiu B and Weaver-Dunlop G (2014) 'I built my house of hope': Abused women and pathways into homelessness. *Violence Against Women* 19(12): 1498–1517.
- Tyner J (2011) *Space, Place, and Violence: Violence and the Embodied Geographies of Race, Sex and Gender*. London: Routledge.
- UN Women (2015) *A Framework to Underpin Action on Violence Against Women*. Available at: www.unwomen.org/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/prevention_framework_unwomen_nov2015.pdf (accessed 14 December 2019).
- Valentine G (1992) Images of danger: Women's sources of information about the spatial distribution of male violence. *Area* 24(1): 22–29.
- Vera-Gray F (2016) *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment: A Critical Analysis of Street Harassment*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Walby S (2012) Violence and society: Introduction to an emerging field of sociology. *Current Sociology* 61(2): 95–111.
- Walby S, Towers J and Francis B (2014) Mainstreaming domestic and gender-based violence into sociology and the criminology of violence. *The Sociological Review* 62(2): 187–214.
- Walby S, Towers J and Francis B (2016) Is violent crime increasing or decreasing? A new methodology to measure repeat attacks making visible the significance of gender and domestic relations. *The British Journal of Criminology* 56(6): 1203–1234.
- Walklate S, Fitz-Gibbon K, McCulloch J and Maher JM (2020) *Towards a Global Femicide Index: Counting the Costs*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Walklate S, McCulloch J, Fitz-Gibbon K and Maher JM (2019) Criminology, gender and security in the Australian context: Making women's lives matter. *Theoretical Criminology* 23(1): 60–77.
- Weber M (1948) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. GerthHHMillsCW. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Women's Aid (2017) *The Femicide Census: 2017 Findings*. London: Women's Aid.
- Wonders N (2018) Climate change, the production of gendered insecurity and slow intimate partner violence. In: Fitz-Gibbon K, Walklate S, McCulloch J and Maher JM (eds) *Securing Women's Lives: Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wood R (2010) UK: The reality behind the 'knife crime' debate. *Race & Class* 52(2): 97–103.
- Wootton B (1959) *Social Science and Social Pathology*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Young J (2011) *The Criminological Imagination*. Oxford: Polity.
- Žižek S (2008) *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile Books.

Author biographies

Elizabeth A Cook is a lecturer in the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London. Previously, she worked at the Universities of Oxford and Manchester. She researches in the areas of family, family activism and fatal violence.

Sandra Walklate is Eleanor Rathbone Chair of Sociology at the University of Liverpool (UK) and Professor of Criminology at Monash University (Australia). She is internationally recognized for her work in victimology and research on criminal victimization. Her recent publications include *Intimate Partner Violence, Risk and Security* (edited with Kate Fitz-Gibbon, Jude McCulloch and JaneMaree Maher; London: Routledge, 2018).

Résumé

Le couteau est un article de ménage relativement banal, qui appartient au domaine domestique et est facilement accessible. C'est en même temps l'arme la plus couramment utilisée dans les homicides conjugaux. Depuis peu, cependant, le couteau est devenu un objet de peur et de panique en Angleterre et au Pays de Galles lorsqu'il est utilisé en public, dans la plupart des cas par des hommes jeunes contre d'autres hommes jeunes. Cet article a pour but de proposer quelques réflexions sur les problématiques posées par ces deux observations. Nous abordons ici le « couteau » à travers les prismes intégrés de l'espace, du genre et de la matérialité. Ainsi, la préoccupation contemporaine concernant les agressions « au couteau » illustre les hypothèses actuelles, profondément ancrées, qui entourent les débats sur la violence publique et privée. Bien que la criminologie ait beaucoup à dire sur le genre et la violence, la présence matérielle, spatialisée et genrée du couteau reste mal comprise. En donnant la priorité à l'agression « au couteau » en tant que problème « public » plutôt qu'à sa manifestation en tant que problème « privé » persistant, ses caractéristiques sexospécifiques et spatialisées sont occultées, ce qui contribue d'autant plus à l'échec de la politique de lutte contre les agressions « au couteau ».

Mots-clés

Couteaux, espace, genre, homicide conjugal, violence

Resumen

El cuchillo es un artículo de menaje relativamente mundano, doméstico y de fácil acceso. Al mismo tiempo, es el arma más utilizada en el homicidio de la pareja. Recientemente, sin embargo, el cuchillo se ha convertido en un objeto de miedo y pánico en Inglaterra y Gales cuando se usa en público, en la mayoría de los casos por hombres jóvenes contra otros hombres jóvenes. El objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer algunas reflexiones sobre las cuestiones planteadas por estas dos observaciones. Aquí el 'cuchillo' se considera a través de las lentes integradas del espacio, el género y la materialidad. De esta manera, la preocupación contemporánea con el delito 'con cuchillo' ilustra los supuestos contemporáneos, profundamente arraigados, que rodean los debates sobre la violencia pública y privada. Si bien la criminología tiene mucho que decir sobre el género y la violencia, la presencia material, espacializada y de género del cuchillo sigue siendo poco conocida. Al priorizar el delito con 'cuchillo' como un problema 'público' sobre su manifestación como un problema 'privado' persistente, sus características de género y espacializadas permanecen ocultas, lo que contribuye al fracaso de la política para luchar contra el delito con 'cuchillo'.

Palabras clave

Cuchillos, espacio, género, homicidio de la pareja, violencia