

Understanding community violence: A critical realist framework for community psychology

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Abstract

Critical realism can unsettle a number of orthodoxies that surround the study of community violence within community psychology. This is to say, because critical realism is embraced so rarely by community psychologists, it can institute a parallax shift within the discipline, whereby we are granted alternative ways of perceiving violence within community contexts. Drawing on transdisciplinary thought, we offer in this article a retroductive framework for studying community violence. This framework, we argue, can facilitate an understanding of structurally violent causal mechanisms through interrogating how direct—or observable—violence intersects with epistemic violence (i.e., harmful and inaccurate representation). Demonstrating the efficacy of this framework, we provide an example from our work, where participants from a low-income South African community produced and screened a documentary film on community violence and collective resistance. Reflecting on the ways by which this film engaged xenophobic violence in particular, we examine how community members used the film to trouble perceptions of community violence and advance a multifaceted anti-violence agenda. By way of conclusion, we consider how our framework can be used to inform a critical realist community psychology, wherein violent social structures are analyzed against the agentic community-driven initiatives which oppose these structures.

KEYWORDS

community violence, critical realism, participatory filmmaking, retrodution, South Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

Critical realism represents a divergent, meta-theoretical position that challenges research paradigms which mistake knowledge about reality for reality itself (see Bhaskar, 1979). Perhaps it is because critical realism does not provide an empirically grounded theoretical framework that it has, for the most part, been neglected within mainstream psychological scholarship, whose legitimacy oftentimes rests on it being taken seriously as a science (Pilgrim, 2017). However, this does not explain why critical realism has not been taken up by critical community psychologists, who tend to reject mainstream psychology's obsession with institutional legitimacy (Kagan et al., 2011). Indeed, it is curious that critical realism does not feature among the plethora of research paradigms that have been adopted within critical community psychology work, which include postmodernism, poststructuralism, pragmatism, empiricism, interpretivism and structuralism, among many others (see, e.g., Fisher et al., 2007; Goodley & Lawthom, 2005; Kral et al., 2011; Tebes, 2005). Added to this, there is considerable overlap between the concerns of critical community psychology and critical realism. Consciousness-raising, participatory action approaches and critical philosophic reflection are central to both (see Houston, 2001, 2010; Kagan et al., 2011; Pilgrim, 2017), just as each is preoccupied with agency, social structures, dynamics of power, and transformative change-making (see Bhaskar, 1979; Fisher et al., 2007; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

In contributing to what we understand as a critical realist community psychology, in this article, we work from within the commonalities between critical realism and community psychology to advance a framework for studying community violence. More specifically, in drawing on transdisciplinary thought, we develop a critical realist framework that is able to facilitate an understanding of structurally violent causal mechanisms through interrogating how direct—or observable—violence intersects with epistemic violence (i.e., harmful and inaccurate representation). We maintain that because critical realism has been so neglected within community psychology, such a framework can institute a parallax shift by moving our perspectives within the discipline (see Žižek, 2006), thereby facilitating alternative ways of understanding and studying community violence. As such, we argue that a critical realist framework imbues community psychology praxes with an action orientation as well as a sensitivity towards the discursive, material and interlinked nature of both community violence and collective, antiviolent resistance (Fletcher, 2017; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007).

In what follows, we begin by critiquing mainstream formulations of community violence. Following this, and drawing from critical psychology scholarship, we offer an open-ended and critical conception of community violence, which is then considered in the context of community psychology via a critical realist framework. In an attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of this framework, we then provide a case illustration from our community-engagement work, wherein participants produced a documentary film that explored xenophobic violence in Thembelihle, a low-income community in South Africa. We conclude by considering the parallax shift that critical realism can engender within community psychology praxes concerned with community violence.

2 | TOWARDS A CRITICAL CONCEPTION OF COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Flynn et al. (2020) note that most mainstream violence scholarship relies on the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of violence as

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Krug et al., 2002, p. 1084).

Following on from this definition, WHO defines community violence as 'violence between individuals who are unrelated, and who may or may not know each other, generally taking place outside the home' (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006, p. 280). These definitions, influential and useful as they may be, are attentive only to actual or potential enactments of physical or psychological harm. Violence, in other words, exists as a spectral or an actual act between individuals. What is ignored are the invisibilised, potential, structural and discursive iterations of violence which are, indeed, experienced by many as violent (see Dutta et al., 2016; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007; Suffla et al., 2020).

Although many community psychologists have recognised the multiple dimensions of violence (Flynn et al., 2020), the discipline has, in the main, struggled to critically interrogate the political and rhetorical deployment of community in the study of violence, as well as how the concepts of violence and community mutually constitute one another (see, e.g., Coimbra et al., 2012; Dutta, 2018; Kagan et al., 2011; Malherbe et al., 2020; Suffla et al., 2020). This is to say, by focusing on violence as an act within a predetermined category of community (i.e., communities as fixed geographic spaces to which connotations of deviance or virtue are attached, see Malherbe et al., 2020), much community psychology ignores how the absence of observable violence can set the conditions that determine violent acts. Similarly, when we consider violence as an act, and community as a fixed backdrop for this act, we ignore how histories of collective antiviolent resistance determine how, if, and when acts of violence take form (see, e.g., James, 2012). A preoccupation with the violent act also risks ignoring violent social systems which, themselves, engender particular discursive and material effects. This is to say that when research on community violence is inattentive to ways by which community violence is systematically ascribed to the very character of low-income communities and those who live there, such research risks signifying each as fundamentally violent and/or Other (Hendricks et al., 2019). An illusion of coherence is, in this respect, established around the notion of 'community' to bypass the historically contingent, multitudinous composition of violence—and antiviolent collective resistance—within and across communities (see Malherbe et al., 2020; Suffla et al., 2020). Tuck (2009) notes how such 'damage-centred' research looks to document the pain and brokenness of communities, rather than encourage accountability, solidarity and collective action.

It seems imperative, then, that critical community psychology scholarship work from a more nuanced and expansive conception of community violence that conceives of violence beyond the act. In his study on the genocidal violence of Nazi Germany, Zygmunt Bauman (1989) advances a complex, open-ended understanding of violence that is alert to the ebbs and flows of power, social structures and resistance. He asserts, quite simply, that violence transfigures the undesirable subject into a desirable object. This conception of violence is useful for our purposes in that it negates any attempt to arrive at *the* definition of violence (which is perhaps why the focus on the tangible violent act is appealing for some), suggesting instead the characteristic thrust of violence, that is, a situated attempt at draining the individual subject of agency so as to render it a controllable, even dehumanised, object. For Bauman (1989), violence need not assume the form of the manifest or threatened act. Rather, violence works through socio-political transfigurations that violate human subjectivity (e.g., oppressive laws, institutional racism, and exclusionary school curricula). Thus, the legitimisation of a violent social order is, in itself, a modality of violence in that it prefigures, fosters and shapes the violent act (see also Dutta et al., 2016). Although Bauman's (1989) work has undergone considerable critique over the years (see Joas, 1998 for a useful overview here), his definition of violence retains an analytic poignancy that assists us in probing into the dehumanising, sociological and even bureaucratic functionality of violence as it exists in the present conjuncture (Lyon, 2010). As such, Bauman's (1989) engagement with violence contains 'a profound moral dimension and existential directedness' (Joas, 1998, p. 52) that renders it particularly useful for interrogating the sociohistorical embeddedness of violence within and across communities.

The ontological status of the living subject can never be entirely reduced to that of an object, meaning that violence, as Bauman (1989) conceives of it, is never foreclosed. It is precisely because the subject can never completely take the form of an object that the dehumanising impulse of violence can be, and always has been, rejected (see, e.g., James, 2012; Robinson, 1983). Therefore, while it is true that Bauman's (1989) definition of violence accounts for violent action, discursive violence, and violent social systems, this definition, we argue, is also attentive to how antiviolent collective resistance (in both its collective and individual formations) influences the formation of violence, oftentimes curtailing the power and/or expansiveness of violence.

Although Bauman's (1989) work allows for a necessarily expansive definition of community violence, there are challenges in how we conceptualise the different forms that such violence can take. Does it make sense, for instance, to categorise vastly differing phenomena—such as patriarchal ideology and police brutality—under the category of violence? How can we understand individual acts of violence against histories of collective antiviolent resistance? Does the purpose for which violence is wielded (e.g., oppression or liberation) alter how we interpret violence? These questions are complex, and speak to the recent call from Bowman et al. (2018) for critical scholarship to not only seek to understand different forms of violence, but to understand them by making connections between them. Certainly, within community psychology, there has been very little work that articulates how different forms of violence interact with and mutually constitute one another (Flynn et al., 2020).

We argue that if Bauman's (1989) definition of violence is to be utilised in a manner that allows us to make connections between different kinds of violence, it may be useful to rely on taxonomic categories. Accordingly, we posit that violence, as conceived by Bauman (1989), coalesces through the interplay of direct, structural and epistemic violence (see also Suffla et al., 2020). In demonstrating this, we first need to understand what is meant by each of these three terms (see Table 1). Direct violence involves an object, actor and action (Galtung, 1969). It is the physical (i.e., anatomical) or psychological (i.e., relating to the psyche) violence that disrupts 'normal' social functioning (Galtung, 1990). Direct violence refers to the violent act as outlined by WHO (see Krug et al., 2002). Structural violence, on the contrary, constitutes the social systems that produce, maintain and normalise marginalisation, inequality, oppression, exclusion and exploitation (Galtung, 1990). In essence, structural violence constitutes the unequal distribution of resources in a society (Flynn et al., 2020). An example here would be how the social degradation and exploitation inherent to racial capitalism (i.e., social and economic value produced via racialised and racist capitalist exploitation) are—due to legacies of colonialism and slavery—concentrated among Black populations (see Robinson, 1983). Direct violence is always enacted in, against and through structurally violent conditions, and while it is insufficient to understand every instance of direct violence as the linear consequence of structural violence, each concept can inform how we understand the other. Lastly, epistemic violence is enacted whenever marginalised groups are represented by dominant groups as an essentialised Other that can only ever be understood as a shadow of the self (Spivak, 1988; Teo, 2010). Epistemic violence reflects the discursive logic of structural violence, and can thus be used to validate direct violence under the guise of legitimate ways of knowing. We might understand constructions of the essentially violent community, outlined above, as a kind of epistemic violence. Direct, structural and epistemic violence are all connected in particular ways. For instance, the horrific incidences of racist police brutality (i.e., direct violence) that we see today cohere under the capitalist dictum to protect private property over human life (i.e., structural violence), as well as with centuries of

TABLE 1 A taxonomy of violence

Type	Definition
Direct violence	Physical or psychological force that disrupts normative functioning
Structural violence	Social systems that reproduce oppression and distribute resources unequally
Epistemic violence	Exclusionary, oppressive and inaccurate representations and knowledge forms

racist discourse (i.e., epistemic violence) that has worked to dehumanise Black peoples. We can understand the global Movement for Black Lives as representing a collective, antiviolent response to such structural, epistemic and direct violence.

Although direct, structural and epistemic violence do not point towards neatly distinctive phenomena that are without complexity or contradiction, such a taxonomy can enable us to get a theoretical handle on how agency, social structures and ways of knowing work to give form to Bauman's (1989) more general conception of violence. In other words, it is through this taxonomy of interlocking violences that we can begin probing into the different ways by which Bauman's (1989) definition of violence finds form in reality.

3 | CRITICAL REALISM AND COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

How might critical community psychologists apply the above conception of community violence? In answering this question, we outline critical realism as it relates to our framework. Following this, we describe the framework, after which we offer an example from our community-engaged work as a means of illustrating the efficacy of this framework.

3.1 | What is critical realism?

Unlike his postmodern contemporaries (e.g., Lyotard, 1984), Roy Bhaskar's (1979, 1993, 2005) pioneering work on critical realism represents a meta-theoretical position which posits that there is a real, intransitive world. Although the ways by which we interpret this world are continually developing and improving, Bhaskar (1979) posits that our knowledge is fundamentally limited; we can never know the world in its entirety. Therefore, reality—according to critical realists—is theory-laden, rather than theory-driven (Fletcher, 2017). In stressing the explanatory limitations of knowledge in this way, critical realism differs from positivism, interpretivism and constructivism, all of which—in different ways—tend to equate ontology (i.e., the nature of reality) with epistemology (i.e., what we know about reality). More specifically, critical realists insist that the scientific method of positivism, the constructivist frameworks of interpretivism, and the participatory approaches of constructivism misrecognise what we know about reality for reality itself (see Gorski, 2013; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007).

The central task of critical realism is to demonstrate that what is real is not necessarily perceptible to us in the moment that we are trying to study it. Indeed, social structures regularly obscure our ability to comprehend what is real (Collier, 1994). Bhaskar (1979) theorised that there are three levels of reality (see also Roberts, 1999): the empirical (i.e., our experience of an event, which encompasses our interpretations, meanings and decisions), the actual (i.e., all events, whether we experience them or not), and the real (i.e., the unseen mechanisms which, in emanating from social structures, generate events at the empirical and actual levels). Where the real level's causal mechanisms produce events on the actual and empirical levels, it is only when we experience these events that we can say that they exist on the empirical level. To take an example from the natural sciences, when we see lightning, it exists on the empirical level. However, all lightning, whether we see it or not, exists on the actual level. The flow of electrons that caused the lightning, however, exist on the real level. Yet, because critical realism represents a framework for the social sciences, it is able to yield more complex understandings than those offered by this explanatory example.

Although ideas and meanings are as 'real' as the physical world, the critical realist seeks to understand how the conditions of our material world relate to the causal mechanisms which exist beyond our impressions, observations and thoughts (Houston, 2001; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). Thus, of the three levels of reality, critical realist inquiry is primarily concerned with the real (Houston, 2001). There is no foundational critical realist method for studying the real though. Rather, method is determined by the research question, and analysing the causal mechanisms of

the real is not undertaken with the intention of predicting outcomes. Indeed, it is because causal mechanisms are forged in open social systems that they provide us little in the way of accurate prediction or generality (Fletcher, 2017), with our minds dependent on—but never reducible to—the structural forces from which causal mechanisms arise (Bhaskar, 1993). Instead, studying causal mechanisms allows for explanatory understandings (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994; Houston, 2010). From these understandings, we can act to counter and reconstitute the manner by which oppressive causal mechanisms operate on the actual and empirical levels. Social and epistemic structures are, in this sense, understood as enduring, rather than permanent (Bhaskar, 2005; Pilgrim, 2017).

How, then, do critical realists analyse causal mechanisms? Bhaskar (1979) developed a method known as retrodution which, he explains, seeks to infer from a particular social phenomenon that which produces, or acts as the necessary conditions for, activating this phenomenon. In other words, in thinking from effect to cause, retrodution attempts to understand causal mechanisms by examining how one event gives rise to another (Pilgrim, 2017), all while accounting for individual agency and structures of power (Bhaskar, 1979). Houston (2010) cautions that retrodution should not be undertaken in a linear fashion. It should be used to consider how causal mechanisms operate on several domains simultaneously. These domains, he writes, include the individual (i.e., the subjectivities and actions of people), situated activity (i.e., interpersonal interaction), social settings (e.g., the family or workplace), culture (i.e., meaning-making systems and artefacts) and political economy (i.e., capitalist state apparatuses).

In sum, Bhaskar's (1979, 1993, 2005) highly original work on critical realism endeavours to establish a philosophical and methodological framework for the social sciences, wherein human agency is considered with respect to how it interacts with power structures and social life to both constraining and enabling effects (Gorski, 2013; Houston, 2010). Critical realism, therefore, does not offer a value-free, or pragmatic, mode of academic inquiry (Houston, 2001). Instead, it attempts to inform collective action by understanding how social injustices function beyond our immediately comprehensible thoughts and perceptions (Houston, 2010).

3.2 | A critical realist framework for studying community violence

We contend that a critical realist framework for studying community violence, as we have conceptualised it in this article, should begin by mapping direct, structural and epistemic violence onto Bhaskar's (1979) three levels of reality (see Table 2). On the real level, structural violence represents a particular set of 'invisible' causal mechanisms. On the actual level, structural violence informs and reinforces the forms that epistemic violence assumes. Thus, the interaction of epistemic and structural violence on the actual level constitute the culturally mediated symbolic order that informs violent thought, action, resistance and legitimacy on the empirical level.

TABLE 2 A critical realist framework for studying community violence

Level of reality	Phenomenon	Violence
Real	Causal mechanisms	Structural
Actual	Event	Structural Epistemic
Empirical	Experience	Structural Epistemic Direct

Epistemic and structural violence move from the actual level to the empirical level only once these violences enter into our perception. It is also in this sense that direct violence only occurs on the empirical level, as its very existence depends on it being experienced (i.e., activated or brought into our perception).

We can apply the above framework through the various steps of Bhaskar's (1979) retrodution method, which have been usefully synthesised by Houston (2010) as well as Fletcher (2017). The first step includes asking a transcendental question (i.e., what are the conditions of possibility for a particular act?). In the case of community violence, we could ask what are the structurally violent causal mechanisms (e.g., ideology or policy) which determine direct violence and epistemic violence on the empirical level. The second step requires that we develop a hypothesis based on relevant research literature. In the third step, this hypothesis is tested by examining how causal mechanisms (i.e., structural violence) manifest on the empirical level (i.e., through direct and epistemic violence). Here, one's analytic approach can either be extensive (i.e., widespread, and usually through quantitative methods), or intensive (i.e., in-depth, typically with qualitative methods). In the fourth step, the hypothesis is reworked in accordance with the results found in the third step. In the fifth and final step, the findings and reworked hypothesis are used to develop collective action that speaks back to the causal mechanisms.

As was the case in our critical formulation of community violence, we acknowledge that the framework outlined in this section is rather abstract. Indeed, this is a criticism that has been levelled against critical realism more generally (see Fletcher, 2017). We hope to remedy this in the following section by detailing how we sought to give form to this framework in our own critical community psychology work.

3.3 | Case illustration

The following case illustration is derived from a project that emerged out of a decades-long community partnership (see Suffla et al., 2020 for more here). In 2016, the University of South Africa's Institute of Social and Health Sciences and a number of people living in Thembelihle (a low-income community located in south-west Johannesburg, South Africa) partnered to produce a documentary film. Different community members appeared in the film, and several others assisted with its production, which entailed participatory film editing as well as determining the focus and scope of the film. Community members decided that the film, which they titled *Thembelihle: Place of Hope*, would depict quotidian and political life in their community from a number of perspectives, including those of a farmer, a peer educator, a scrapyard owner, a dancer, two self-identified activists, a shop-owner, a brick-maker, two nurses, a soccer coach, and a kindergarten school principal. In short, through a range of community voices, the film sought to represent the kinds of humanist, political and life-making activities within Thembelihle, all of which take place against a sociopolitical backdrop of austerity, police brutality and dehumanising news media narratives (see Malherbe et al., 2020; Poplak, 2015).

3.3.1 | Research question and hypothesis

Although many different kinds of violence were discussed in *Thembelihle: Place of Hope*, for the purpose of this article, we will focus on the film's interrogation of xenophobic violence. Although a complex phenomenon, xenophobic violence can be broadly understood as an attack that is based on the perception of an individual or a group being of a different nationality to the attacker. However, as Hayem (2013) notes, it is not always foreign nationals who feel the effects of xenophobic violence. National citizens can get hurt trying to protect foreign nationals, or they may mistakenly get identified as foreign nationals, or they might be attacked for not being enough of a local citizen (e.g., by speaking a marginalised language). Accordingly, as outlined above, because the first step of retrodution is to ask a transcendental question, we asked what the causal mechanisms of xenophobic violence in Thembelihle were.

Moving on to the second step, we consulted literature on xenophobic violence in South Africa to develop a hypothesis. Research has shown that xenophobic violence can be attributed to several variables related to capitalist political economy, including poverty, unemployment, inequality and State neglect of public services (Seedat et al., 2010). It, therefore, follows that capitalist State apparatuses ignore the role that an unequal and exploitative political economy plays in reproducing xenophobic violence. In South Africa, many politicians have given their tacit and explicit endorsement to xenophobic violence (see Jacobs, 2019), or have remained ambivalent towards xenophobic violence (Hayem, 2013), and much mainstream media coverage has attributed xenophobic violence to the very character of low-income communities, or has looked to blame foreign nationals for such violence (Duncan, 2016; Malherbe et al., 2020). Accordingly, some have argued that xenophobia is a misleading term as it is not the foreigner as such who is feared, but rather the poor—usually Black—Other who is demonised and made responsible for centuries of colonial violence (Mngxitama, 2009). There also seems to be an unwillingness on the part of the South African State to engage, support and/or cover community-led and civil society efforts to combat xenophobic violence (see, e.g., Hayem, 2013; Tselapedi & Dugard, 2013), possibly because many of these efforts operate outside of, and are opposed to, the logic of capital accumulation (Neocosmos, 2008). Added to this, and perhaps due to the tremendously tense and controversial nature of xenophobia in the country, academic researchers have been reluctant to explore xenophobic violence from the perspective of those living in communities where such violence has occurred (Kerr et al., 2019).

Based on the above research literature, and considering our critical realist framework for studying community violence (see Table 2), we hypothesised that the capitalist economic system (i.e., structural violence), as well as capitalist discursive logic which attributes the failures of capitalist political economy to the individual (i.e., epistemic violence), work to foster the social conditions within which individuals take up xenophobic violence (i.e., direct violence). We also hypothesised that effective community-level resistance to xenophobia addresses these causal mechanisms in explicit ways on the empirical level.

3.3.2 | Testing our hypothesis

In testing our hypothesis, we harnessed an intensive approach. Our data comprised of the in-depth, qualitative interviews that featured in *Thembelihle: Place of Hope* (see Adams, 2015 for an overview of the interview conventions that we followed). We analysed these data using critical discourse analysis (CDA), which entailed studying 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted' (Van Dijk, 2008, p. 352) within participants' speech. We understood CDA as facilitating an understanding of how capitalist discourse informs the hermeneutic logic surrounding xenophobic violence, as well as how—and to what extent—this discourse was resisted by community actors.

Xenophobic violence in Thembelihle reached its highest levels in 2009 (Tselapedi & Dugard, 2013) and in 2015 (Poplak, 2015). In the documentary, Albert Kabede,¹ an Ethiopian man who owns a small convenience store in Thembelihle, speaks of his experience of xenophobic violence in 2015, noting that during moments of community-led collective resistance several protesters would 'loot us ... beat us ... take everything from our shop ... so it's very hard to recover at that time'. However, in insisting that '[i]t's not all the people that are xenophobic', Kabede rejects dominant discourses which construct xenophobia as a ubiquitous, community-wide sentiment in Thembelihle (see Malherbe et al., 2020). In other words, by attributing xenophobic violence to certain—perhaps opportunistic—protesters, rather than to the character of protest as such, Kabede rejects dominant discourses in South Africa which conflate violence with collective insurgency (see Day et al., 2021; Duncan, 2016). In this regard, Kabede does draw on a discourse that debases individual responsibility for xenophobic violence, but rather notes

¹All participant names have been anonymised in this article.

how the intersection of precarity and social turbulence can foster the conditions in which people enact xenophobic violence. Thus, direct violence is linked to an open system of structural violence, whereby those whose lives are most disenfranchised under capitalism are, in turn, the most vulnerable to Bauman's (1989) notion of violence (i.e., an attempt to render the subject an object).

Later in his interview, Kabede explains how he, along with other foreign nationals living and working in Thembelihle, collaborated with activists from different community-based social movements to intervene in the xenophobic attacks. Members of these activist groups worked in shifts to protect foreign nationals and hosted a number of friendly sporting events between South Africans and foreign nationals in the community (Tselapedi & Dugard, 2013). There was virtually no media coverage of these community-led interventions into xenophobia (Malherbe et al., 2020), or of the Most Integrated Community Award that residents of Thembelihle later received from the State's Department of Home Affairs for this intervention (Department of Home Affairs, 2016). When considering the substantial media attention that was devoted to covering the xenophobic attacks in Thembelihle, the ignoring of such community-level antiviolence measures represents a kind of epistemic violence that functions to fix Thembelihle as a fundamentally violent community within public consciousness. In this regard, statist interventions into xenophobia are subtly endorsed, which could also be observed in how police violence was constructed in much mainstream media as an apparently necessary response to community violence in Thembelihle (Malherbe et al., 2020).

Later in the documentary, Anele Biyela, a long-time local activist who was involved in this community-led antiviolence intervention, recounts how he and his comrades 'had to suspend the protests because we were told that criminals were doing their own business [i.e., looting shops belonging to foreign nationals, as well as beating foreign nationals]'. Biyela goes on to say that his movement 'confiscated about 14 fridges [from looters]' and 'took them back to our brothers and sisters from Africa'. Thus, for Biyela, the well-being of foreign nationals became part and parcel of the political demands of his activism. This inclusive conception of community resistance politics which sought to develop a radical conception of belonging (see Hayem, 2013) is especially remarkable in the context of South Africa, where protester demands oftentimes focus on the rights of South African citizens only (Kerr et al., 2019), and where government policy regularly obscures the very meaning of human rights when it comes to foreign nationals (Hayem, 2013). However, Biyela engages xenophobic violence somewhat differently from Kabede. Where Biyela discursively dislodges xenophobic violence from the protesters (naming them 'criminals' rather than 'protesters'), Kabede renders such violence the responsibility of particular protesting subjects (noting that 'whenever they protest, we are the targets. They directly come to our shop'). Therefore, for Biyela, protesters assume the status of criminal only when they violate the inherently ethical character of community resistance politics, whereas for Kabede, it is not incongruent that the protesting subject would enact xenophobic violence. These differences may point towards the difficulties of fostering solidarities in the context of divisive capitalist discourse. Indeed, the agency of foreign nationals was, at times, obscured in Biyela's speech, with their safety reified only through the actions taken by South African protesters. Further, by referring to foreign nationals as 'our brothers and sisters from Africa', dominant discourses of South African exceptionalism (see Neocosmos, 2008) are reinscribed within Biyela's construction of anti-xenophobic community action.

Although capitalist discourse was not entirely absent in the documentary, for most participants, the documentary represented a significant modality of epistemic correction. During the participatory editing process, participants and other community members insisted that an image of the Most Integrated Community Award be depicted in the film's credits. That was notable because no participant who featured in the documentary made mention of the award, despite the fact that—as was apparent during the participatory editing sessions—this award was a source of much pride in the community. It would seem that, for participants, the external recognition signified by this award was less important than communicating the pragmatic and ethical valances of the community-led intervention into the xenophobic attacks. It was only after it was clear to participants that the social consequences of their intervention had been clearly articulated in the documentary that it was suggested that the award be depicted. The impetus was thus to enact a mode of epistemic justice by first representing and

assessing the community's socially just achievements on discursive terms that were set by the community, and to only then refer to how these achievements were acknowledged by external agents.

3.3.3 | Revisiting our hypothesis

It would seem that, as a structurally violent causal mechanism, capitalist political economy did indeed shape xenophobic violence in Thembelihle. Capitalist discourse, however, did not merely obscure people's understanding of their own grievances (*a la* a reductive understanding of false consciousness). Rather, capitalist discourse and political economy worked in tandem to render poor foreign nationals especially vulnerable in times of heightened social turbulence (i.e., social protest). What we did not hypothesise, though, was the extent to which collective intra-community efforts were able to combat direct and epistemic xenophobic violence. Indeed, such efforts remain largely under-analysed in the research literature (see Neocosmos, 2008; Tselapedi & Dugard, 2013), and almost completely ignored in the mainstream media (Malherbe et al., 2020). We also did not hypothesise how even those involved in anti-xenophobic community interventions could, at times, subtly reinscribe divisive discursive tropes. It would seem, then, that capitalist political economy (i.e., structural violence), as well as capitalist discourse (i.e., epistemic violence) influenced the social conditions in which xenophobic violence (i.e., direct violence) was enacted in Thembelihle, as well as how such violence was collectively resisted.

3.3.4 | Towards action

The hesitancy in South Africa to engage xenophobia's 'politics of fear' means that humanistic, community-driven efforts that confront violence of this kind should be identified, built upon and learned from (Neocosmos, 2008). Both Biyela's and Kabede's speech seem to concur with Kerr and colleagues' (2019) suggestion that because xenophobic violence occurs at the complex intersection of systemic forces and individual agency, we should not attempt to analyse its character or 'origin' deterministically. Rather, there is a range of socio-historical forces that need to be accounted for, many of which continue to linger well after the observable manifestations of xenophobic violence. It is for this reason that a critical realist approach to understanding xenophobic violence may be useful.

Community members made it clear that the point of the documentary was not merely to valorise community-driven antiviolent action, but to foster political solidarities. Thus, *Thembelihle: Place of Hope* has been screened numerous times within and beyond the community. As noted elsewhere (see Malherbe, 2020), at screening events, audiences have engaged the producers of and characters in the film on the community-led intervention into xenophobic violence. People from surrounding communities have shared their own stories of xenophobia, resilience and resistance, and have—in this way—sought to foster political linkages through affective points of connection. At other screening events, several residents from Thembelihle expressed that they were unaware that the xenophobic attacks had been addressed from within Thembelihle itself, with many young people expressing interest in contributing to similar kinds of activist intervention. Many audience members who were from Thembelihle also claimed to be unaware of the Most Integrated Community Award that community residents had received for combatting xenophobic violence. Moreover, several activist groups have used the documentary to gain support for their political demands, thereby building solidarities with other activist movements and making connections between seemingly distinctive arenas of struggles (e.g., the human rights of foreign nationals and the implementation of adequate public transport services). The documentary has also catalysed debate and discussion among activists with respect to belonging and humanism in conceptions of social justice.

In short, at documentary screening events, audiences engaged those who produced the documentary in developing a nuanced interpretation of xenophobic violence, one that did not relegate such violence as evidencing an essentially violent, low-income community (as is the case in many epistemologically violent news media reports,

see Day et al., 2021; Malherbe et al., 2020), but as a means through which to explore notions of agency and structural violence in the making and resisting of direct xenophobic violence. It was at screening events that community activists could communicate—and expand upon—their political demands to a wider audience, potentially garnering greater support and legitimacy for their antiviolent interventions. Such work is able to bring critical, community-led critique of violence into public fora and potentially embolden this critique by involving a greater range of voices that are attuned with and sympathetic to struggles for justice, thereby ensuring that discussions around democracy and belonging are not left to elite social classes (Hayem, 2013). Screening spaces, therefore, served to politicise some, while challenging and invoking a sense of pride in others. These kinds of collective interrogations into the causal mechanisms of xenophobic violence signified how community members sought to rethink antiviolence outside of State-centred logics that reproduce and defend the very capitalist mechanisms that determine such violence.

4 | CONCLUSION

Despite a number of critical realists drawing on psychoanalytic theory (see, e.g., Bhaskar, 1993), psychological research (Pilgrim, 2017)—and community psychology in particular—has been reluctant to incorporate critical realist approaches. In this article, we develop a critical realist framework for studying community violence from within community psychology (see Table 2), whereby structurally violent causal mechanisms are understood as shaping direct violence and attendant epistemic violence within communities. We then applied this framework to our own work by using Bhaskar's (1979) notion of retrodution to analyse how community members used a participatory documentary film to represent xenophobic violence and community-led antiviolent activism, as well as how this film was utilised to foster political solidarities and build community in ways that conceptualised justice beyond State-centric and/or capital-friendly discursive logics (see Day et al., 2021).

In looking to our study, we return to the question of how critical realism can instate a parallax shift within community psychology work concerned with violence. By theorising how the interaction of knowledges and social structures give rise to the conditions in which violence is enacted, critical realism allows us to go beyond comprehensions of violence that are concerned only with the violent act. In this regard, we are able to take up recent calls (e.g., Bowman et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2020) to study violence by making connections between different forms of violence. A critical realist community psychology of this kind also rejects 'damage centred' frames (see Tuck, 2009) through an understanding of violent causal mechanisms which is attentive to antiviolent collective resistance. In sum, critical realism instates a parallax shift within community psychology by conceptualising community violence not only as taking on invisibilised formations and antecedents, but also by accounting for the role that antiviolent community struggles play in shaping, combatting and curtailing violence.

We hope to have demonstrated how critical realism can afford to community psychologists a suitably complex and community-oriented approach to understanding community violence. We urge others to use critical realist insights to engage violence within community settings in innovative, expansive and—ultimately—emancipatory ways. However, because violence by no means represents the only, or even the primary, focus of community psychology praxes, we look forward to seeing other community psychology interventions that make use of critical realist approaches to understand a range of phenomena and build more socially just community relations.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

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