School violence is a persistent international crisis, yet most analyses of the problem are very local in their focus. Many theories of school violence lack not only an international perspective but also political and historical contexts (Astor et al., 2006; Ohsako, 1997; Smith et al., 1999). This chapter argues two points. First, that theories stemming from work dating from the mid-twentieth century Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States are not always adequate in understanding school violence in a cross-national perspective in the early twenty-first century. Second, theories that account for historical and political contexts may be more valid in accounting for school violence in countries that are usually not at the forefront of theory development. In other words, though theories developed in the United Kingdom, Western Europe and the United States may have had validity in their own contexts, they do not necessarily transfer automatically to countries that have experienced vastly different histories and political situations.

This chapter, based on qualitative research in South Africa, aims to summarise the common theories of school violence, to indicate how they may not be pertinent when examining school violence in an international perspective (with specific reference to South Africa), and then to discusses one theory in particular – social disintegration theory – and how a broadening of this theory to take into account political and historical dimensions of countries’ circumstances may help us to develop more pertinent cross-national theory. Finally, to highlight this point, the chapter examines three forms of school violence in South Africa related
to gangs, corporal punishment and rape, and how these forms of violence emerge as significant when one undertakes a more historically and politically informed analysis.

This chapter aims to broaden the context of social disorganisation theory in accounting for school violence. The focus is on South Africa because it is a country with high rates of school violence and all the elements of social disorganisation (Jürgens et al., 2003; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; Shaw, 2002). It is also a country with a unique history and political situation, which may impact school violence. The focus on South Africa is also meant to gain a better understanding of school violence as an international phenomenon. Astor et al. (2006) noted that a more international perspective may help us to better understand similarities among countries as well as differences that reflect unique cultural and national characteristics. Like other researchers, they recognise how ‘nested contexts’ (p. 107) can influence school violence, including contexts related to the school; neighbourhood; families; culture and economics. Along with economics, they also include the ‘social, and political makeup of the country as a whole’. Their work broadens ideas about the context of school violence; they include, for example, the potential role of religion in aspects of school violence, something not seen in more localised analyses.

Theories of school violence

Most researchers of school violence view the problem in one of several ways: it is a problem originating from the school, from society or from the individual. Most theories are a variation of one of these three contexts or a combination of them. The following are some of the most-cited theories organised according to their context (individual, school, community). After describing them, they are discussed in terms of why they are not wholly appropriate in accounting for school violence in South Africa.

The individual context: Biological theory and rational choice theory

Of the theories that pinpoint individuals as the cause of violence, biological theory and rational choice theory are two of the most popular ones. Rational choice theory contends that all individuals are rational beings, and as such our decisions are based on a simple weighing of benefits and consequences (Akers, 1990; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). The