



Young boys behind bars. An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa

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Abstract

This thesis is the result of an ethnographic study which had as its topic young boys who were awaiting trial for criminal activities behind bars in a secure care facility in South Africa. The chapters introduce some of the boys to the reader through case studies providing information about, who they are where they come from, why they were institutionalised and glimpses of what they endured in their daily lives outside the institution. The core of the thesis describes the social composition of a secure care facility and the daily activities and interactions that take place within its walls. We follow the boys in the trajectories they took inside and outside the criminal justice system, obtaining glimpses of the families, communities and staff with whom they come into contact.

Overall, the study was guided by three main research questions. How are socio-cultural and legal-political perceptions of violent children reflected in the infrastructural arrangements and regulations of places of safety? How are boys' daily lives in places of safety enacted? And how do institutionalised boys perceive themselves inside and outside the institution?

The methodology of the study was steered by the structures of confinement of the secure care facility in which it was conducted. This type of institution functions simultaneously as a setting geared towards the safekeeping, caring and betterment of inmates and as a place of incarceration for keeping society at large safe from them. The emphasis of the study was on providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of these boys and the micro-world of the institution in which they find themselves. Central to the project were boys' own accounts of their lives, experiences, perceptions, aspirations and the reasons why they followed various strategies in navigating their social relations with staff and peers. Adopting this ethnographic perspective allowed for a thick description of day-to-day interactions in the institution.

We start off with a description of the heavily bounded institution and how the mere process of gaining access to the boys and the institution was governed by strict rules and mediated by gatekeepers. Physically, the institution looked closed, imprisoning insiders and controlling access by outsiders; socially, its anatomy seemed fixed and hierarchical. However, the more data one acquires, the greater the number of cracks appeared in this image of inflexibility.

The thesis then describes what happens when a new boy is admitted to the institution, the daily negotiations he is involved in during the early period of his incarceration, and the intricate social dynamics between the new and seasoned boys. Here, I highlighted the emotional turmoil that new boys frequently experience when having to transition from their communities and enter the facility. The process of being admitted and settling into the institution is intricate and volatile. The potential risks these new admissions are exposed to include verbal, physical and sexual abuse by their peers. What is commonly perceived as bullying, unnecessary violence and intimidation by others is a complex negotiation process for currency of power and the forging of hierarchical relationships between the incarcerated boys; of which new and seasoned boys are vulnerable. In the facility, it also became clear how power is fluid and ever-changing. Boys are found to constantly reflect upon their own positions in the hierarchy and institution and actively negotiate their status by acting upon other boys and staff. However, in the end power inequalities between boys and staff restrict their negotiating power.

It is then revealed that once a boy is incarcerated, he is *not* permanently labelled a criminal. Rather, we see how perceiving and labelling (making and unmaking) incarcerated children as criminals or non-criminals is a fluid and negotiable process. It is the daily interactions among boys and staff in the institution that determines a boy's criminal status. These interactions are heavily influenced by subjective, moral appraisals by staff of a boy's behaviour. Daily interactions that determine boys' identities are also heavily dependent on the conditions (such as resources and competences) and contexts in which these interactions take place. Overall, the production and reproduction of labels related to a boy being a criminal or not influences and determines the management and experiences of the child in and outside the institution. It also influences the manner in which the boys respond to others and their environment. Such labelling of boys does not only influence how they are dealt with inside the institution but also the future decisions that either result in longer imprisonment or discharge from the institution.

Yet, what appeared to be a distinct difference between the staff members who were assumed to possess power with clearly assigned roles compared to the boys, who were perceived as children, in need of adult care and supervision, in practice, it was evident that staff members use their power and interact with the boys very differently. This was clearly highlighted in the example of two staff members, reared in different ethnic groups, and their interaction with the

boys. It was also interesting to witness how the different staff members' interaction developed and affected the boys. Here, I was able to explore the multiple dimensions that are at stake in the institutional interactions between staff and inmates on the ground, allowing for a fluidity of roles not covered by the classical picture of a clear distinction between staff members and inmates. How the staff members have been socialised in their own communities, what they expect of boys' behaviour, and what boys expect of them, do play a role in the interactions I observed. Factors such as the level of education, personal background and personality traits also influenced the interaction between the staff members and boys. I have shown how these differences are acted out in specific contexts within the daily life of the institution and how it leads to widely differing restrictions and opportunities for boys to act and express themselves, sometimes varying over the day, when shifts of caretakers replace one another. In contrast to the image of a total institution where rigid rules determine the relations between staff and inmates, this study displays the fluidity of the roles and positions of the boys and staff and how the various individuals enact and play out a particular image in particular interactions.

Likewise, the study illustrates that there is a variety of ways that boys respond to their assigned position, of powerless children, in need of care. Occasionally, as we have seen, there is a relatively strong blurring of presupposed institutional identities. A striking example is the role-reversal in terms of caring. In the pre-institutional lives of the boys, in many ways, they exerted violence from a certain position of power, and many of them do not give up that position entirely within the institution. It is possible that it might also be the caring role the boys performed in their pre-institutional life (for instance, for their mother and other close family members) that influenced their role-playing in terms of care for certain staff members and for their peers. Caring for others, especially women, is related to the boys' perceptions of masculinity and their social roles as men, and taking up caring roles in the institution is what from their perspective, males are supposed to do.

In short, staff and boys act and interact in the institution based on social dispositions, cultural backgrounds, educational levels and personality structures that they also displayed in their lives outside the institution. How strict or permeable the boundaries between social life inside and outside the institution, and between the roles and positions officially assigned to staff and boys, prove to be are context specific.

Abscondment also emerged as another aspect of the permeability of the institution. Boys frequently absconded with an explicit intent to return, regardless of the consequences they might have to face, using the community near the institution as a place to be at large. Thus, in practice, until the more restrictive policy was introduced, the boundaries of the institution were fluid to the extent of incorporating the community. Staff's decision to also not always chase after the boys, in anticipation of their return, revealed that staff members may be implicated in maintaining a flow between the institution and the community, either for the entire dorm or an individual. Data also revealed that the boys who abscond have a clear understanding of why, how and when they should run away. Abscondment therefore reflects boys' decision-making process and intentional agency: through abscondment they intentionally act upon their situation and environment. Analysis of policy documents, observations in the institute and interviews with staff indicated that abscondment is generally understood and managed as a strategy of resistance on the part of the children, or less so as a form resistance to an unjust system.

Nearer to the closing of this thesis, we see how boys' tactics to ensure well-being for themselves and the ones they care for in their environments outside are often diametrically opposed to what a panel, deciding their fate, would consider positive or promising behaviour. The panel assessments clearly show that the outside environment plays a critical role in the abandonment or extension of a boy's experience of incarceration. Such panels are aware that the boys have to return to their families but they also have to be reintegrated into the general population that is ridden with unemployment, substance abuse, gangsterism and violence. The data also revealed that the majority of the boys experienced the same toxic environment within the institution as they did outside, before they entered the secure care facility. Social issues, concerns types of peer relationships that boys engage in outside the institution are also present within the institution.

For some boys violence was a means of ensuring their safety. For other boys who come from better functioning families, a secure care facility may be more risky and toxic since they are at higher risk of being exposed to different forms of violence inside the institution, and they may acquire behavioural skills that they were not exposed to before incarceration. But neither the toxic environment many boys grow up in, nor the resulting tactical behaviour of such boys to survive or keep safe, complies with how children are conventionally perceived. The panel assessment revealed that clear ideas exist as to what a stable and safe environment is,

what type of parenting is expected, what 'healthy' behaviour is, and how undesirable behaviour points to problems in the psychological status of a boy, and finally, how this can be weighed up to determine a boy's future trajectory. However, the cases in this chapter show how muddled and sometimes erroneous such reasoning is, in the light of the boys' daily lives, both outside and inside the institution. Undesirable behaviour, such as enacting violence in peer relations, may or may not point to a boy's psychological or personality problems. That these problems can be expected when taking into account the sometimes toxic environments they came from is without question. Here we stumble upon what is recognised as the vicious circles involved in cultures of violence. How boys learn to use violence for maintaining their boundaries and safety in fundamentally unsafe, violent life-worlds, both outside and inside the institution, blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator.

However, these young boys are not simply blank slates onto which the violent environment inevitably and sadly imprints itself. There is an actor between the observed behaviour and the perceived emotional difficulties making the best of what is available to survive in adverse environments.