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

This chapter contextualises the topic of the dissertation within the history of South Africa as well as present-day concerns about children involved in criminal activity and policy responses thereto. Against this background, I formulate the study’s hypotheses, objectives and research questions, and introduce its main theoretical concepts. The chapter concludes with an outline summarising the content of the body of this dissertation.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. From heroes to villains: youth in post-apartheid South Africa

In the 1980s the dominant theme in literature related to youth in South Africa was their involvement in the social and political struggles of the period (Seekings 2006). Many youth forcefully asserted their agency in these revolts, often taking spontaneous political action without adult stimulus (Ennew 2003). After the political transformation, however, these once-celebrated youth encountered difficulties because they had failed at school, were involved in conflicts with security forces in the townships, and challenged parents and other authority figures. They became known as the ‘lost generation’, their image shifting from that of ‘heroes’ to ‘villains’ (Seekings 2006). In the eyes of policy-makers and the general public, being young has come to be seen as a liability.

Post-apartheid South Africa brought with it a mixture of opportunities and disappointments (Meintjies and Hall 2008). While it raised hopes for equal opportunities, the reality is that, whereas some South African children live in extraordinary wealth, the majority subsist in poverty and lack basic needs and services (Gooskens et al. 2010). As such, some children create opportunities for themselves by engaging in criminal activities that range from petty theft to murder; in the process becoming perpetrators, as much as, victims of social circumstance. A subset of these children is the main actors in this thesis.

In present-day South Africa, there is great concern about children involved in criminal activity, especially about those who sexually abuse or kill other children. Data reports from other countries, including the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States, on children involved in murders, school shootings and gang rape, show that South Africa is not alone in its concern. Whereas people’s involvement in violence has been a core topic for enquiry throughout the history of the social and behavioural sciences, research traditionally focused on adult men and, later, on adolescents committing violence. Children’s involvement in violence and crime has only over the last 15 years been recognized as a concern for scientific

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2 According to the Child Alliance’s conference report (August 2006), entitled ‘Child Justice in South Africa: Children’s Rights Under Construction’, in May 2005, 2,047 children were awaiting trial in secure care facilities, occupying almost all of the secure care beds available in these institutions.
study. Child soldiers in particular gave, at an international level, a high profile to these issues (De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Jok 2005; McIntyre 2005).

In South Africa, most children involved in criminal behaviour belong to socially disadvantaged groups. Consequently, explanations of these children’s behaviour focus on their everyday encounters with violence on the street, at school and in the home (Lockhat & Van Niekerk 2000; cf. Reynolds 1989). However, the processes by which the country’s past and current social problems are expressed in children’s behaviour are little understood (cf. Abbink 2005: 18). I have tried to understand these processes by viewing the youngsters who participated in this study as social actors actively coping with violence and making sense of it. A particular aim of the study is to allow child perpetrators to speak about their experiences of violence and incarceration.

1.1.2. The South African policy climate

The fieldwork for the study took place in 2007–2008, against the backdrop of South Africa’s constitutional recognition of children’s rights. Of the many legislative developments that flowed from the Constitution, two are especially pertinent to this study, namely, the Child Justice Bill and the Children’s Amendment Bill. During the period of this study, these policies were both in the process of being amended. Eventually, the Child Justice Bill was signed by the President and gazetted in May 2009 as the Child Justice Act. The Children’s Amendment Bill came into effect as the Children’s Act on 1 April 2010. The fieldwork for this study thus took place in the transitional period before these crucial policies for children came into effect. It is within this liminal phase that this thesis set its roots. For the sake of clarity, the policies will be referred to the Child Justice Act and Children’s Act in this section.

The South African socio-political system has been struggling with the question of how to deal with children involved in criminal activities, in particular those involved in acts of extreme violence. The South African Constitution of 1996 dedicates a section to children’s rights. Section 28 constitutes a ‘mini-charter’ of these rights and covers diverse issues, including civil and political rights, socio-economic rights, shelter and basic health care. Subsection 28(1)(g) presents principles that relate to the detention of children, including the principle that detention should be considered only as a last resort and then used for the shortest period necessary. It also stipulates that children should be detained separately from adults as well as treated in ways, and detained in conditions that take into account the child’s age. In addition, section 28(2) requires that the best interests of the child be of paramount importance in every decision taken in relation to the child.

Regarding children in trouble with the law, the Child Justice Act of 2008 (Act No. 75 of 2008) was promulgated in order to give effect to the relevant principles in Section 28 and is therefore also important. This Act has a long and tumultuous history (Gallinetti 2009). The process that inspired it began in late 1996 with the appointment of the South African Law Commission – previously referred to as a Project Committee of the South African Law Commission – that sought to investigate juvenile justice. In 2000, the Committee finalised its Report on Juvenile Justice together with a draft of the Child Justice Bill. The draft Bill was presented to the Department of Justice and in 2002 introduced to Parliament as Bill 49 of 2002. This Bill was adopted by the National Assembly on 25 June 2008 and passed by the
Assembly in November 2008. It was subsequently signed into law in May 2009 and published as the Child Justice Act in Government Gazette number 32225 on 11 May 2009. Finally, on 1 April 2010, after more than a decade of advocacy, deliberation, drafting and re-drafting, the Child Justice Act was officially launched and implemented throughout the country.

The Act created a new procedure for dealing with children afoul of the law, and it represents a rights-based approach to children accused of committing crimes. Furthermore, it aims to ensure children’s accountability and respect for others by handing down, in the spirit of restorative justice, alternative sentences to those used in the mainstream criminal justice system (Gallinetti 2009). According to the Child Justice Act, children – defined as those under 18 years – can no longer be held in prisons or police cells while awaiting trial, and detention is applied only as a measure of last resort. During the fieldwork for this study (2007-8), concerted efforts were made to get children released from prison, but I still encountered young children being imprisoned.

Rather than imprison children with adult offenders, the South African government established institutions such as secure care facilities for children awaiting trial or the opportunity to hear the outcome of their court case. In terms of the Child Justice Act (part 2, section 29), a presiding officer can order the detention of a child who is alleged to have committed any offence in a specified facility. Both convicted offenders and children awaiting trial can be detained in child and youth care centres that are registered to provide secure care. These centres are not generic child and youth care centres, though, as there are specific norms and standards regarding secure care facilities. For example, such facilities must have containment facilities.

The Child Justice Act states that children who are not released into the care of their parents or caregivers may be placed in secure care facilities (currently named child and youth care facilities). The Act also provides for the sentencing of children to compulsory residence in a child and youth care centre (see section 76). These facilities are officially registered as child and youth care centres, but during the period of my fieldwork were referred to as ‘places of safety’. The term I use throughout the thesis is ‘secure care facility’. Placement of young offenders in these facilities, which officially aim at correction and rehabilitation, can only happen by order of a criminal court. Secure care facilities are managed by the Department of Social Development. The Annual Report (2011) on the implementation of the Child Justice Act refers to 28 such facilities countrywide. At the time of writing, three additional facilities – in De Aar, Rustenburg and Newcastle – have been completed.

The Child Justice Act aims to provide clear rulings on how to manage child offenders, but there remain grey areas in some of its provisions. For instance, the Act changed the minimum age of a child’s presumed capacity for criminality from 7 to 10 years. Thus, children younger than 10 cannot be prosecuted as they are understood to have a limited ability to form intent; therefore, their accountability is considered limited as well. In addition, for children younger than 10, the prosecution is expected to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the child had criminal capacity at the time the offence was committed (see section 11 of the Act). However, exceptions are made in the case of children between the ages of 10 and 14 years when it can be proven without reasonable doubt that the child had the cognitive ability to understand the consequences of his or her actions.

3 The change of names from secure care facility to child and youth care centre (CYCC) took place when the Children’s Act was implemented on 1 April 2010.
1.2. Hypotheses, objectives and research questions

The research for this project began with the hypothesis that social-cultural conditions and legal ambiguities concerning child perpetrators are translated into the daily and disciplinary routines of secure care facilities, and that these institutional dynamics may contribute to perpetuating violence among children. This working hypothesis required the collection of a range of data: individual histories of institutionalised children; the day-to-day social construction and enactment of their lives in these institutions; their perspectives on violence in and outside the institution; and their strategies for coping with violence. I decided to focus this study on boys younger than 15 who committed criminal acts and are institutionalised in secure care facilities in Cape Town. Compared to older adolescents and young adults, age groups of pre and young adolescents are under-researched in South Africa.

1.2.1. Hypotheses

As the study evolved it became premised on the following three hypotheses:

1. South African socio-cultural and legal-political perceptions concerning children and violence are reflected in and can be studied’ through the design and programming of institutions for violent children.

2. On the basis of this ‘ground plan’ of infra-structural arrangements and regulations, secure care facilities are socially constructed and enacted through the day-to-day actions of children and their caretakers, as well as interactions between children and caretakers and among children themselves in these institutions.

3. Children play an active role in making sense of and coping with their own and others’ violent deeds outside and inside the institution.

1.2.2. Main objectives

Proceeding from these hypotheses, this study has three specific objectives:

1. To explore socio-political and legal-political perceptions of violent children and their enactment in a secure care facility;

2. To study the day-to-day life of children in a secure care facility; and

3. To gain insight into children’s experiences, perceptions and strategies regarding violence outside and inside the institution.
1.2. 3. Research questions and themes

Based on the objectives, three research questions were developed to guide the fieldwork for this study.

1. How are socio-cultural and legal-political perceptions of violent children reflected in the infra-structural arrangements and regulations of a secure care facility?

The themes related to this question include: how the institution is embedded in the legal-political system; the institution’s mission and design; definitions of childhood in the delimitation of the service; and the programmatic translation of the aims of correction and rehabilitation into contact regulation between the institution and the community.

2. What are boys’ everyday lives like in a secure care facility?

The focal points here are: the boys’ day-to-day activities; the responsibilities and resources of staff members and inmates; opportunities for boys to create their own social space; the development of power differences and hierarchies among the boys, and the role of caretakers in this process; and the forms of violence the boys are exposed to in the institution.

3. How do institutionalised boys experience, perceive and exercise violence in and outside the institution?

This question will be answered by focusing on boys’ life experiences before they were institutionalised; their experiences as perpetrators and/or victims of different forms of violence; and their perceptions and explanations of these experiences.

1.3. Theoretical framework

1.3.1. The total institution and its permeability

As explained above, secure care facilities are compulsory residence facilities for children who are suspected of criminal activities, children awaiting trial or finalisation of their court cases, and children who have been sentenced to correction and rehabilitation. At first sight, the secure care facility where I conducted my research is secluded from society by its geographical location and the barbed-wire fencing and steel gates that secure its perimeter (see chapter 1). My early encounters with the institution confirmed my first impressions of secure care facilities as ‘total institutions’, as conceived by the sociologist Erving Goffman in Asylums (1961).

According to Goffman, a total institution ‘may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’ (p. xiii). The encompassing character of total institutions is ‘symbolised by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, waters, forests or moors’ (p. 4). It was these features that made me think of secure care facilities in South Africa as total institutions.
Soon after I began my fieldwork, however, I came to realize that the secure care facility I had chosen as my fieldwork location is a much more permeable institution than I first thought. Nevertheless, in the course of my research I kept in mind Goffman’s concept of a total institution, using it as a reference point against which to examine the permeability of the structure of the secure care facility and the social life within this structure as well as the permeability of the walls separating the world within and beyond the secure care facility.

Goffman conceived of the total institution as an ideal type. Even though the type was constructed from observations of reality, it was not intended to correspond to any single case. Instead, it was meant, in the words of Quirk et al. (2006: 2107) as ‘a conceptual device to be used as a tool for examining formal organisations’. According to Goffman, what is distinctive about total institutions is that each exhibits many of the same general features. One central feature is a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating the three basic spheres of life: sleep, play, work. In modern societies ‘the individual tends to sleep, play and work in different places with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan’ (5-6). In total institutions individuals are collectively regimented and march through the day’s activities in the company of a batch of similar others. Among the further general characteristics which Goffman identifies are: a basic split between a large managed group comprised of conveniently-named inmates and a small supervisory staff (7-9); restrictions on the inmates’ contact with outside society (9-12); and the mortification of a person’s self (14-35).

Goffman’s conception of the total institution has been widely used to describe features of all kinds of institutions in Western societies as well as other parts of the world. However, the adequacy of the concept has been challenged. Davies (1989), for instance, states that while total institutions are presented as unified organisations, in reality they are a much less homogeneous cluster of organisations. According to Davies, Goffman fails to spell out the implications of the variations among total institutions, such as ‘the amount of role differentiation found within the staff and inmate groupings and the clarity of the line between the two strata’ (Goffman 1961: 110). Referring to a range of institutions characterised by features of totality – Soviet labour camps, monasteries, re-education camps and old-fashioned boarding schools – Davies observes that the assemblage of characteristics that Goffman regards as typical of total institutions manifest in very different ways in these institutions. Some institutions prove to be more total than others. For Davies, the challenge is to tease out the differences in these assemblages with greater clarity and precision.

Authors such as Quirk et al. (2006) have declared Goffman’s model outdated. They argue that, given the process of institutional openings in Western societies in the past decades, the concept of ‘permeability’ might be a more helpful reference point or ideal type against which to examine and compare empirical cases. This argument is illustrated with empirical studies of mostly prisons and mental hospitals, the two institutions that Goffman presented as clear examples of a total institution. For instance, Quirk et al. (2006) found evidence of a high degree of permeability in the three acute psychiatric wards in England they studied. In their findings they highlight three dimensions of permeability: ward membership of patients as well as staff changes regularly; patients maintain contact with the outside world during their stay; and the institutional identities of patients and staff are blurred. This permeability has positive and negative effects. One positive result is a reduced risk of institutionalisation; a negative consequence is an increased risk of outsiders entering the hospital and causing trouble, for instance, by encouraging illicit drug-use among patients.
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The inevitable opening of institutions to outside social influence poses the challenge of identifying and developing strategies to manage permeability better.

Similarly, recent prison studies from around the world point to the need to reconsider the theoretical status of a total institution and re-examine the boundary separating that institution from the outside world. To do be fair to Goffman, he does discuss permeability as one of the dimensions of variation among total institutions (1961: 111-114), defining it as ‘the degree to which the social standards maintained within the institution and the social standards maintained in the surrounding society have influenced one another’ (1961: 119). However, his overall account stresses the impermeable aspects of the institution.

In an overview article, Byrne and Stowell (2007) argue strongly for considering prison and community culture as reciprocal and co-constitutive. An example in the South African context is gang culture as described by Steinberg (2004) and Lindegaard (forthcoming). Many others have urged the need to focus on the nature of the prison-society relationship – what Da Cunha (2008: 345) terms the ‘swamping of prison boundaries’ – and highlighted various aspects of these boundaries. Jefferson (2010), for instance, in his study of post-prison survival in Sierra Leone, points to the continuity of pre-prison, prison and post-prison life. Those young men caught in the cycle of exchange between prison and ghetto or slum move back and forth between one form of confinement and another.

Another aspect of permeability that Goffman neglects is the possibility of blurring of institutional identities of inmates and staff and the variations of this blurring across different total institutions. For Goffman, the social distance between supervisory staff and inmates is typically great and often formally prescribed. Inmates survive through forming contacts and strategies which facilitate the stay but do not challenge it. Yet there is an underlying reference in Goffman’s work to individuals creating alternatives and exercising some freedom within structured institutions. He refers to this as ‘secondary adjustments’ to the social order, explaining it as ‘any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organisation employs unauthorised means, or obtains unauthorised ends, or both, thus getting around the organisation’s assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence, what he should be’ (1961: 189). Secondary adjustments, in contrast to primary ones, ‘represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution’ (idem). Goffman mainly discusses techniques that do not directly confront the staff in the institutions but which allow inmates to challenge them indirectly, that is, through satisfying forbidden desires or accepted desires by forbidden means. Thus, Goffman concentrates on relatively safe forms of secondary adjustments – what he calls ‘contained secondary adjustments’ (1961: 200) – instead of adjustments of the disruptive kind.

As stated above, despite the critical reception of Goffman’s concept of total institution I will use it as a reference point for my analysis of my study findings, specifically for examining the various dimensions of permeability of the secure care facility. A major focus of my research is children’s lives within the structures of confinement of the secure care facility, which includes the ways they survive, act, adjust, resist and interact within the institution. The concept of agency, which I introduce next, helps to identify and explain how children shape their lives within the structures of confinement and create openings in the expected strict compliance with official regulations dictated by the structures. In this vein, the concept of agency also helps us to examine whether and to what extent the ‘mortification of selves’, which Goffman identifies as one of the general characteristics of total institutions, applies to Middletown, the secure care facility where the fieldwork took place.

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1.3.2. Agency and children

Conceptualising agency in the context of a study involving children confined in rigid institutions has been challenging, not only in relation to ongoing debates in the social sciences about the relationship between ‘agency’ and ‘structure’, but also in relation to the question of how to conceptualise children as actors and, therefore, children’s agency. I will briefly discuss some concerns.

In his Structuration Theory (1984) Giddens states that social life entails more than random individual acts, nor is it merely determined by social forces. All human action is performed within the context of a pre-existing social structure that is regulated by norms and distinct from other structures. However, these structures and rules are not permanent but reproduced and modified by human action. According to Giddens, structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity; structure only exists through individual actions. Social structures provide the means through which people act, but the form these structures take is a result of their actions (James and James 2008). Individuals can and do have the power to transform social structures and institutions through their actions, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. From this perspective, ‘[a]gency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened’ (Giddens 1984: 9). Giddens states that agents possess knowledge of their society which informs their action, which in turn reproduces and possibly transforms social structures. Thus, agents understand, to a certain degree, their social and physical environment. They are aware how certain structural properties limit their lives, and can take strategic advantage of specific structural properties to fulfil their needs.

Giddens’ conceptualisation of agency as a capability to intervene consciously for one’s own benefit and in the lives of others, as well as on structures themselves (even under extreme circumstances), has helped me focus on confined boys’ motivations and strategic actions in their daily lives in secure care facilities. Understanding structure and agency as reciprocally constitutive helped me frame questions and gain insight into the processes whereby children interact with their caretakers and, in so doing, re-create the secure care facility as a daily environment.

A fundamental debate in social theory concerns the extent to which it is possible to distinguish between semi-unconscious routine acts and the type of conscious acts that Giddens and many others are interested in. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the extent of intentionality in the actions of incarcerated boys in Middletown. I concur with Ortner (2006: 136), who argues that there is a continuum between routine practices that proceed with little reflection or planning and calculated acts that intervene in the world with an outcome in mind. By approaching even young boys as active agents, my aim was exactly that: to understand their actions and interactions and their consequences by exploring their thoughts and desires.

Honwana’s (2005: 49) concept of ‘tactical agency’ is helpful in the context of confinement and relative lack of social space for strategic action that characterises situations of confinement such as a secure care facility. She developed the concept from de Certeau’s The practice of everyday life (1984). Tactics are the art of the weak, who must constantly
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manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’. Tactical agency is thus awakened ‘blow by blow’. Individuals employing tactical agency have the mobility to seize the openings offered at any given moment. The child soldiers that Honwana worked with had few opportunities to set long-term goals and develop strategies to achieve them in the extremely volatile circumstances of their lives. She explored their tactical agency as a specific type of agency to cope with the immediate, concrete conditions of their lives, turning difficult circumstances into opportunities of escape.

There is a caveat here when we think of children, agency and violence. Anthropology originally focused on how violence obeys rules, is part of culture and fulfils certain functions. It found violence to be collective, rather than individual, social rather than anti-social (Riches 1986). More recently, anthropologists have reported the interpretation of violence from the perspectives of violent actors (Das 1990; Feldman 1991). In this light, violence can be seen as the sign of a capacity to process social experience and consciously influence the world and others (Giddens 1984).

However, with ‘intentionality’ and ‘power’ at the core of definitions of violence, the application of this perspective to children seems problematic. The writings of social theorists such as Goffman, Giddens and Ortner clearly have adult actors at the core. Agentive action seems to refer to a capacity attributed mainly to adults. This is underpinned by the claim of widely accepted psychological models that maintain that conscious intent, and therefore agency and accountability, gradually develop as part of growing up. In relation to children, social theorising has been implicated in the construction of a Western stereotype of children as pre-social, pre-cultural, passive, dependent and innocent, and childhood as a temporary state, with efforts directed solely at the termination of this state in becoming an adult (Berman 2003; Caputo 1995; Christensen 2000; Christensen & James 2000; Hardman 1973, Jenks 1996; Reis 2000: 67-8). Whereas gender has become a constant point of reflection, mainstream social theory seldom asks to what extent its arguments apply across age differences: that is, also apply to children. However, in the fast-developing field of child-actor research, empirical research with rather than on children shows that even very young children make sense of and act intentionally upon others in the here-and-now, and that therefore they should be considered social actors with agency in their own right. The question driving research with children is thus not whether children are capable of demonstrating agency, but how their agency is constituted through actions and interactions in specific environments (Akello 2010; Akello et al. 2006 Christensen 1998 Helleiner 2000; Lee 1999; Mayall 2000; Reis 2013; Reis & Dedding 2004; Van Reeuwijk 2010; Woodhead & Faulkner 2000).

Acknowledging children’s agency invokes the issue of children’s accountability for their actions, and nowhere is this more problematic than in relation to children who commit violence. Children are usually conceived of as relatively innocent actors displaying ‘positive’ rather than ‘negative’ agency. In most societies, a young child who intentionally inflicts serious harm or imposes its power on the bodies of others is viewed as an anomaly. Children who murder others unsettle dichotomies basic to modern morality, such as innocence versus guilt, victim versus perpetrator (Honwana 2005). In studies of violence, children are mainly conceptualised as victims of violence (Korbin 2003: 433) and violence enacted by children commonly seen as a symptom of a moral crisis in society. Children’s own violent behaviour is explained in psychological models by pointing out the effects of socialization, child-raising practices and individual, collective and structural violence on individual children’s behaviour (Garbarino 1999; Garbarino & Kostelny 1996; Govender & Killian 2001; La Greca et al.
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2002; Richman 1993; Stichick 2001). The media are often accused of ‘feeding’ children with violent images. More sophisticated socio-political and historical-cultural explanations focus on violence as part of complex social processes that reflect, produce and reproduce social conditions and relations constituting children’s lives (Das 1990; Richters 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent 1998). Most research in this area neglects the voices of children who themselves perpetrate violence (De Boeck & Honwana 2005; Feldman 2002). This study aims to fill this gap.

1.3.3. Violence and resilience

In preparation for this study, I investigated the concept of violence extensively in order to define it in a way that could be applied to the lives of children confined in secure care facilities after having been accused of violent deeds. My conclusion is in agreement with Scheper-Hughes (2004: 2), who argues that violence is a ‘slippery concept’ as it is difficult to define and the emphasis on physicality overlooks its social context. In general I follow the World Health Organisation’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: 5). However, it is worth noting two points regarding my use of this definition.

First, within the bounds of this rather broad definition, in this thesis I treat violence as an empirical question rather than a pre-defined social phenomenon. Violence as defined by the WHO will be used as a heuristic concept, allowing for emic definitions of what constitutes violence in different contexts, relations and interactions. In the chapters of this thesis the issue of violence will arise in different forms. In the conclusion I return to the multiplicity of violence as it emerged from my empirical findings.

Secondly, I will not abide by the normative content of the WHO’s definition of violence. In the definition there is clear reference to the negative consequences of violence: the likelihood of ‘injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Krug et al. 2002: 5). In the anthropology of violence, questions have been raised about the normativity underlying this definition; most often this is paradoxically articulated in relation to those able to counteract or overcome these consequences, those who show ‘resilience’.

From the mid to late 1900s, researchers of psychopathology identified youth, who were able to excel despite being exposed to risk factors that adversely affected their peers. As a result, pioneers shifted their focus to the specific group that thrived. Normative positive development under stress came to be known as resilience (Ungar 2007). Researchers attempted to define the concept of resilience as a particular set of outcomes, behaviours and processes suggestive of well-being (Ungar 2004). One of the pioneers in the field, Ann Masten, defines resilience as a ‘class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development’ (2001: 228). The term ‘resilience’ can be used when referring to the state of well-being achieved by an at-risk individual or to the characteristics and means by which that well-being is achieved. But how do we define good outcomes? What are considered good results? And how do we understand adaptation and development? Questions such as these prompted discussions around the definition of resilience. These questions are of particular importance given that social norms and understandings of behaviour are not constant. What if children have other ways of
understanding and defining their behaviour that is too commonly and simply referred to as deviant, resistant, inappropriate?

According to Ungar (2008), over the last few decades the literature dealing with the idea of resilience analysed positive development in children who were confronted with adversity. At the outset, researchers explored individual traits that predicted variable results. Yet, shortly thereafter, a more contextualised understanding of resilience was explored. This came about at the same time that ecological theory – such as Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) in psychology and Meyer’s (1983) in social work – began to concentrate on the individual in context. Ungar criticises resilience researchers for their Eurocentric and normative perspectives. First, they focus on outcomes that are Western-based, with an emphasis on individual and relational factors typical of mainstream populations and their definitions of healthy functioning. Secondly, these definitions are lacking in sensitivity to community and cultural factors that contextualise how resilience is defined by diverse populations and expressed in everyday practices (Ungar 2004, 2005; Boyden and Mann 2005). According to Ungar, the meanings of resilience in non-Western populations and marginalised groups were not known. Ungar aims to link the theory of resilience to an emerging discourse among high-risk youth that shows the multiplicity of pathways to health, some of which are conventional and accepted and others, marginal and rejected (Ungar 2004).

Kirby and Fraser (1997) have already suggested that the concept of resilience has numerous applications. First, it may describe a constellation of characteristics children have when, regardless of being raised in disadvantaged circumstances, they grow up successfully. In other words, resilience refers to ‘better than expected developmental outcomes’ (Ungar 2008: 220). Secondly, resilience can refer to competence when under stress; and, thirdly, resilience may be positive functioning indicating recovery from trauma. Ungar states that the commonality in these explanations suggests that resilience occurs in the presence of adversity. Still, identifying children as good or bad, violent or non-violent, vulnerable or resilient has changed over recent decades from speculative reflections by agents of social control to a codified system of assessment and categorisation in which professionals have become powerful promoters (Blundo 2001; Ungar 2004). As children, who face adversity, become more categorised, the meaning that the children themselves construct for their behaviour and the context in which it happens goes unobserved.

Therefore, Ungar suggests, the way forward is to think about resilience as context-dependent. Given these challenges in the definition and understanding of resilience, Ungar offers a more culturally and contextually relevant definition:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar 2008: 225).

Thus, behaviour that is experienced by others as socially negative and that intuitively may be seen as a vulnerability and a threat to successful outcomes may paradoxically also be viewed as leading to resilience. Children lacking other resources may present troubling behaviour – such as drug abuse, self-harm, truancy, and delinquency – which may constitute an overlooked or ‘hidden resilience’ (Ungar 2004).
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In my study I consider boys’ agency in a non-normative way, even if the agency enacted is violent. Ungar’s description of resilience will act as a sensitizing concept to study boys’ agency, and possibly their ‘hidden resilience’, in the context of their daily lives. This will allow an exploration of the boys’ perspectives on the violence they undergo and engage in.

1.3.4. A map of the thesis

After a year of intensive and challenging fieldwork, the following chapters were developed in order to engage with the main research questions presented above.

Chapter Two presents an overview of the context in which the fieldwork took place. It first adds detail to the policies, introduced in the above section 1.2., that govern and embed the secure care facility Middletown where I conducted my ethnographic study; thereafter, the chapter provides a geographical account of this facility, describes its physical and social milieu, and introduces the social actors who populate this space: boys and staff.

Chapter Three presents the methodological approach to the study, starting with a description of the process that gave me access to the field and ending with the data analysis and writing-process at my desk. In between these points, the chapter describes the selection of the specific research location and the study participants, the methods I used to collect data, how I positioned myself in the field, and issues related to ethics, safety and emotions in the field.

Chapter Four focuses on the distressing experience of shifting from the outside world to a site of confinement and undergoing the early stages of incarceration. The chapter deals with the formal and informal procedures newly admitted boys endure from the day of admission, with the emphasis falling on issues of power and hierarchy among incarcerated boys. The new admissions are also exposed to verbal, physical and sexual violence in the ongoing power negotiations. After a 14-day transitional period, social positions usually appear to have been worked out, but the ensuing chapters demonstrate that boys nevertheless continue to negotiate their status by acting upon staff members and one another; in turn, the staff contributes to the fluidity of the positions which the boys have in the institution.

Chapter Five describes a specific aspect of the positioning of the boys in the secure care facility: the ways in which they are perceived as criminal or non-criminal by staff and peers. Three cases are presented to illustrate this process, to highlight its fluidity, and to tease out the factors that underlie the child’s construction and deconstruction as a criminal.

Chapter Six addresses an additional kind of fluidity within the institution, the permeability between the strata of staff and inmates; the fluidity of these relationships can even lead to role reversal. One of the factors contributing to this permeability in the officially assigned institutional hierarchy is the interplay that exists between the social environments inside and outside the institution, an interplay which is evident in the manner in which community culture and external social standards influence day-
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to-day interactions in the facility. As in other chapters, case studies serve to illustrate the main argument.

Chapter Seven deals with the permeability of the institution in terms of physical movement across the walls of the institution. Here, the focus is on abscondment and boys’ subsequent return to the institution. The chapter examines how abscondment is enacted; the reasons boys give for running away as well as returning; and staff responses and institutional sanctions in cases of abscondment.

Chapter Eight describes and discusses inmates’ discharge from the institution. A panel, usually comprised of individuals involved in a boy’s life inside and outside the institution, decides whether his trajectory is to return to the community or move deeper into the criminal justice system. Pivotal to the chapter is the contrast between what the panel considers a safe and stable future environment for boys and the boys’ own understanding of what the best strategies are for survival and well-being. For boys, the use of violence helps them to find safety in fundamentally unsafe environments inside and outside the institution.

Chapter Nine summarises the main findings of the study, reflects on them in terms of the three core concepts that guide the analysis – total institutions, agency and violence – and discusses the implications of the analysis for answering the three main research questions. The chapter concludes with recommendations based on the study findings.