Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
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This chapter presents the methodological approach of my study. In the first section I describe how I gained access to the institute. In the second I describe the decision-making processes regarding the selection of the place of study and its participants. The third section gives an overview of the methods used during fieldwork and the challenges I encountered. Next, I reflect on my position as a researcher in a child institution in South Africa: my own safety, my emotions in the field, and ethical issues. The last section summarises the different steps I took to analyse my field data.

3.1. Gaining access to the field

The preparation for my study among children in a secure care facility in South Africa began with familiarising myself with academic and professional literature on children and childhood, as well as working with children and research methods with children. During this preparatory phase, colleagues warned me of the possible difficulties I would encounter when working with disadvantaged children. For instance, the children’s level of participation was raised as a possible concern. But in hindsight, it proved much harder initially to gain access to the children than to work with them.

Based on my previous experience in working in secure care facilities, I expected to encounter extensive ‘red tape’. As a result, on the advice of the Deputy Director of Research at the Provincial Department of Social Development in Cape Town, I addressed a letter to the department informing its staff, even before funding was granted, of my intended study and requesting permission to access the institution and the boys. The Department’s main concern was related to children’s rights and ethical concerns that some form of psychological support would be made available to the participants.

After putting in place a structure for psychological support, the application for approval of my study was sent to Pretoria, where it was reviewed. Formal permission was granted by the Department of Social Development just before funding was received in December 2005, and in June 2006 I travelled to Amsterdam for the first year of study in which I would take courses and elaborate my proposal. While in Amsterdam, I maintained contact with Middletown staff members. In May 2007, roughly two years after having first approached the institution, I introduced myself in the presence of a member of the Department of Social Development to the new manager of the facility, who warmly welcomed me. Based on the proposal I presented during that meeting, we discussed my plans and decided upon my fieldwork time-tables. On the Friday after this meeting, I was officially introduced to the rest of the staff during their staff meeting. Later that day, I was also introduced to some of the boys and, in June, the care worker managers showed me around the facility.
3.2. Participation selection procedures

3.2.1. Deciding on the institution and dormitories

At the planning stage, I had proposed to follow a line of investigation at various secure care facilities instead of doing a study into one particular facility. At the time, this decision seemed practical to overcome expected challenges for the ethnographic work such as the rapid turn-over of boys and problems in accessing enough participants. But because I intended to mainly work with pre-adolescent and early adolescent boys, Middletown became my primary option since this was the only facility that catered for this particular age group. Being placed at a single facility seemed beneficial as, I would have the chance to immerse myself in the daily lives of the boys and staff at the institution. Therefore, instead of viewing the rapid turn-over of boys as a methodological challenge and problem for the study, I decided rather to embrace these situations of change and mobility as part of the daily experiences of boys and staff within such a facility.

Once within Middletown, I had to decide which boys to ask to participate in my study. As two dorms, Sharks and Panthers, housed the boys younger than 15, I decided to work in both. However, these two dorms proved to be very different from one another. The Sharks dorm was referred to as a ‘fruit salad’ by one of the staff, that is, it comprised boys who were perceived as good, bad, healthy, psychologically challenged, and so on. This variety made it a very interesting setting for my fieldwork and, because the boys accepted me more easily and were more interactive than the Panthers group, I eventually decided to make Sharks the main dorm where I would conduct my ethnographic research. It also helped that the staff of Sharks were more co-operative than the staff of Panthers.

Thus Sharks became my focal corner in the institution for the day-to-day observations and interactions at the facility. Nonetheless, as time went by and boys and staff in Middletown became more comfortable with my presence at the facility, I also moved to other dorms – to Panthers and Owls – where I conducted interviews and group discussions with boys there as well. The Tigers dormitory did not take part in my study as extensively because the boys housed there were older than the age group my study focused on.

3.2.2. Selecting participants

The most important factor in deciding which boys within these dorms could participate in the study was age: boys younger than 15 years old. Although violence was one of my primary interests, the seriousness of their alleged crimes was not taken as a criterion. I decided this because I did not want to add to possible stigmatising or glorifying processes that I knew, from my earlier work experiences at other institutions, may exist around violent offenders.

Similarly, I had to lay aside the criteria that staff found relevant for differentiating the boys and that they thought should determine my sampling. For instance, in the beginning of the fieldwork some staff preferred me to work with the better-mannered boys and recommended them to me. Not wanting to insult the staff, I would inform them that I would consider the boys they had recommended, but as far as possible took care to make independent decisions about the sampling process. The most relevant factor apart from age was the boys’ willingness to participate.
While my main research focus was on boys, staff’s participation was vital. Staff members, especially care workers, were important gatekeepers to the boys and it was imperative that they felt accepted, included and, more importantly, somewhat in control of the study, since they made it clear to me that they felt responsible for issues of safety, order and the well-being of the boys. In the earlier stages of the study, staff members were extremely guarded, not only because I was an outsider but mostly because of their previous experience with a prominent legal researcher in Cape Town, who had entered the facility to conduct fieldwork for one day and published a journal article on care workers at the facility, which was not received too well. Nonetheless, after a short while, most staff willingly participated. In the first phases of the fieldwork, the management and school staff also played an active role in the study. Management was important for gaining access and in the collection of local documents at the facility, while teachers were very helpful in offering work space for my study. At later stages of the fieldwork, the teachers’ involvement diminished because management had many other daily responsibilities and the boys were only attending classes for two hours a day. Throughout the study, however, care workers and specific staff members in the front section of the facility became the primary respondents among the staff.

3.3. Research methods

In this section I present and discuss the range of child-centred, qualitative methods I used in what was primarily an ethnographic study. They range from participant observation, informal and in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and child-oriented techniques such as art and games.

3.3.1. Being there

Through participant observation, I immersed myself in the institution and interacted with the boys and staff on a daily basis. I spent four days a week at the facility, over the period of a year. I used Fridays to complete weekly field notes, transcribe my data and reflect on the week’s events. On fieldwork days, a typical day at the institution would be as follows: I would arrive at around 9 a.m. and go directly to the Sharks dormitory. Once I arrived at the dorm, the care worker would unlock the gate and I would enter. Here, I would chat with the boys until they left for school. While the boys were at school, I used the time to interact with the care workers and other staff members and have informal discussions with those individual children who did not attend school for specific reasons (such as being a new admission and still needing to be assessed by the school principal). When the boys returned from school, I would continue to spend time with them. I participated in various activities alongside the boys and staff: from ‘hanging out’ with the boys in their dorm to attending meetings with staff members, participating in workshops and even overseeing boys in the absence of a care worker. This degree of interaction provided me with a deeper insight into the daily routines, social relations and interactions inside the institution. The daily interaction also allowed for the development of relationships and trust between me, the boys and staff.

In short, the main approach I followed was, in Tonkin’s phrase, ‘being there’. She described this kind of ethnographic fieldwork as ‘a continuing process, a learning process, which pulls together a mass of perceptions into some sort of amalgam with which to gloss and relate the multiple kinds of information that one is simultaneously trying to grasp’ (2005: 55).
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In the first three months, I did not conduct any formal interviews as the boys, and staff members were still uncertain about my role and intentions. Instead, I used this time to acquaint myself with them, learn their names, befriend some of them and gain insight into their daily activities. Eventually, I developed relationships with individual boys in the dorms and semi-structured interviews and group discussions took place, guided by topic lists that I designed and readjusted whenever I established data saturation on topics explored.

3.3.2. Interviews

Children’s life histories and experiences, in and outside the institution, were the main topics of these interviews. Depending on what was happening that day, two planned interviews were conducted in rooms that were available at the time and where the participant felt most comfortable. Impromptu interviews also took place when possible. I conducted interviews in the dorms, either by finding a secluded area in the dorm or in the care workers’ office, the boardroom in the reception area, or outside while the boys were having a smoke break or playing. My conversations with the boys usually took place over two separate interview sessions (or longer, if a boy so requested). I divided the topic lists into two sections. The first focused on demographic information and experiences relating to school, family background, and economic circumstances. Once a trusting relationship had been established with the boy, I explored the second set of questions: the boys’ history of violence and trauma (their exposure to violence, substance-related abuse, and criminal history) and what these experiences meant to them.

In most cases, interviews did not exceed one and a half hours, but there were instances when it did, especially when boys brought a friend along to the interview session. Interviews conducted in the presence of a friend were usually quite productive because the boys appeared to be more comfortable in expressing their views while having a companion present. Before the actual interviews, I had prepared to assist the boys in the exploration of the topics with various toys and props, but I quickly came to realise that these aids were not necessary. The boys often seemed keen to discuss what I perceived to be sensitive topics sooner and more easily than I had expected. In general, they were eloquent and open in sharing their opinions and perspectives, even when they narrated traumatic experiences. There were only a few times when I decided to stop the interview and continue it at a later stage because the child was showing distress while relating his story. Whenever parents were visiting the boys and showed interest in participating in the study, I would include them. However, in most cases, the parents were either not visiting the boys or they lived too far from the institution for me to interview them. Therefore it was not possible to triangulate what boys told me by interviewing their parents.

My approach when interviewing staff was different. I scheduled two interviews per day with staff members during their lunch break or while watching the boys during their breaks or when the boys were at school. I would usually create an atmosphere conducive to discussing their grievances and once they had ‘let off steam’, I would steer the discussion towards specific topics. This allowed the staff to feel that they were being heard and that their grievances were being acknowledged. Through this approach, empathic relationships were created and staff felt less threatened by my presence as a researcher than was initially the case. After my decision to work mainly with Sharks, I decided to focus most of my attention on twelve care workers there.
3.3.3. Focus group discussions

Before entering the field, I assumed that conducting group discussions would allow me to be more structured and in control than in individual interviews, but the size of the groups proved to be large, often comprising 10–15 boys. In many cases, this was out of my control as the boys would join the group discussions as they saw fit. Repeatedly the boys themselves took the responsibility for controlling their peers. For instance, they suggested that if anyone did not behave, he would be thrown out. They steered the group and I would intervene only when I noticed that the discussion was being dominated by specific boys. Sometimes I split the group into smaller groups to facilitate more in-depth discussion. In addition, I appointed an assistant to co-facilitate the large groups. The assistant was a full-time postgraduate student with a background in the social sciences, studying social work. She would help me to maintain order in the bigger groups, observe the group process and look out for issues that were easily missed due to the group size.

At first, I was rather sceptical of the results of group discussions of what I perceived to be sensitive topics such as physical and sexual violence and criminal histories. However, the boys seemed to feel more comfortable discussing these topics among their peers than in individual interviews. A benefit of group discussion was that boys bounced ideas off each other. The boys would ask each other questions and make comments on each other’s remarks, creating further discussion on the topics at hand. For instance, I conducted a group discussion with seven boys on sexual violence. Without even alluding to the topic, the boys started to talk about the sodomy happening in their dorm and to question each other about what they thought or heard about these occurrences. In other words, they used this group discussion as a way of exploring this case themselves. Eventually, this discussion created an easier pathway for me to follow up on the topic.

Yet there were challenges when facilitating group discussions. First, confidentiality was at risk. The boys sometimes revealed intimate information about themselves, which was later used by others to ridicule them. Whenever I came to hear about this, I would talk to the boys concerned and insist they remain respectful towards one another and each other’s experiences. If boys were unable to adhere to this, they were asked to leave the discussion and not participate in the future. In other instances, the shared intimate information created tension between boys, particularly when they confronted each other in an intimidating manner. I would counter this by isolating them from the group and discussing the issue in question, and during these discussions I would sometimes share my own experiences of being in situations when I felt scared and uncertain. This usually helped them to speak more freely of situations when they felt afraid and to be more open to the experiences of others.

3.3.4. Cameras, movies and enactment

I originally intended to supply disposable cameras as a way of helping the boys express their perceptions and experiences. However, for various reasons this proved problematic. First, for reasons of confidentiality the Department of Social Development forbade the use of cameras in the institution. I also realised that the boys could use the cameras as a bargaining tool among their peers and that cameras would create tension and dissatisfaction between the boys who participated in the study and those who did not, thereby
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putting boys at risk of being assaulted. So I abandoned my plan to work with cameras. However, as time went by, staff members would ask me to bring my camera along to take photos of different programmes they were hosting at the institution.

The use of movies proved to be a helpful technique. Every month I would bring movies for the boys to watch. I allowed the boys to decide which movies they wanted to watch but I also chose movies that I could use to initiate discussions on various topics. I would set up the equipment in the dorm, but after a while they started to set up the laptop, speakers and whiteboard themselves. The care workers were always sceptical about me doing this because they feared that the boys would break the equipment or steal it. But this never happened and through acting the way I did, the boys could see I had confidence in them and their ability to use the equipment correctly and not steal it. This gave the boys a sense of control over things that did not belong to them as well as a sense of being trusted.

Once the equipment was set up, the boys would watch the movies while enjoying the snacks that I would usually bring along. After the film, I would start a discussion of it. I generally used films that the boys could identify with, such as The Wooden Camera and Tsotsi. I used these because they were locally produced and dealt with issues relevant to them, such as the lives of street children and gangsterism.

Another visual aid was a DVD camcorder. After I had watched various movies with the boys, they suggested that they produce their own film. As a result, I brought the camcorder to the institution for the boys to use as a way to capture their skit (small dramatic performance) that they independently created that same day. They decided on the different roles, the producer, cameraman and actors. The storyline they created was about a boy who joined a gang and eventually was able to leave behind his criminal life with the help of religion. This method proved to be a good way to allow the boys to work together in ways that they would not normally do and allow them freedom to express their interests. The boys were very creative during this process. They used the dorm-space for this work.

3.3.5. Moving beyond the walls

Although I collected the majority of my ethnographic data inside the facility, my fieldwork reached beyond the institution’s walls. After months of working with the boys and becoming more comfortable with them and the staff, I decided to step outside the institution to collect data in other spaces as well. I would ask, or staff members and boys would invite me, to join them on various trips.1

As the physical space in which I conducted my research expanded, so did the number of participants. Venturing into the courts and homes of the boys, people such as lawyers, magistrates, legal officials, parents, external social workers, probation officers and friends became involved. When I heard that a boy would be appearing at court, I would ask whether I could accompany him. Most of the boys seemed very pleased and eager for me to join them, and in some cases boys would explicitly ask me to accompany them. Going to the court meant that I would have to be there at 8:00, because neither the boys nor their lawyers had an

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1 Such trips included day excursions, forensic assessments at the homes of the boys and court appearances. During my fieldwork, however, day excursions and home visits were banned as boys used it as an opportunity to abscond. See Chapter 7, ‘Moving beyond the physical confinements of the institution and back in’
idea what time the boy would have to appear before the magistrate. I would be there in the early morning and the boys sometimes would appear after 15:00.

During such long days, I would sit with the other visitors in the waiting room, waiting to be called to the court rooms, while the boy would be locked up in a jail cell until his appearance. The waiting rooms were a good place to listen and talk to families and friends who were there to support or testify for someone standing trial. On the odd occasion, I would have informal talks with lawyers, magistrates and police officers. While waiting for the boys to appear, I also visited the court cells where the boys were waiting. In the cells I talked to some of the other juveniles awaiting trial.

3.4. Positionality

Conducting research at ‘home’, that is, in my native South Africa, with participants who had ethnic backgrounds similar to mine, was a challenging experience in various ways. I constantly had to negotiate my personal identity as an educated, coloured, unmarried, young South African woman, so as to fit in with the different ethnic groupings present in the facility. As noted above, the boys who were institutionalised during the time of my fieldwork were all of coloured or black African origin. To be accepted by and blend in with one group, such as the coloured boys, I had to ‘be coloured’. With the black African boys, my obvious identity as a coloured young woman sometimes created distance between us and I had to find other ways to gain their acceptance. Yet, in general, I had to set myself apart from the participants as a researcher so that I could discuss issues with them that would be inappropriate in any of my other identities.

Being coloured allowed me insight into nuanced meanings of what was expressed during the fieldwork. For instance, I better understood humour and comments related to being coloured. Showing this helped the coloured participants interact more freely with me and trust me more quickly. This was demonstrated by their being comfortable enough around me to make racial comments about some of the black African boys. This was especially apparent with staff members. In such situations, I often felt I had to exaggerate my ‘colouredness’ to blend in: for instance by using slang mainly used in the coloured communities and making reference to places and things considered to be coloured. My upbringing in a coloured township, familiarity with typical family dynamics and social problems such as gangsterism, as well as my understanding and use of Western Cape prison slang, immediately created a level of acceptance from the boys. Thus, in this study my ethnic background can be considered beneficial in developing rapport with the coloured boys. Nevertheless, this ethnic identification also produced difficulties. Often the coloured participants overemphasised our ‘sameness’. They sometimes wrongly assumed that I fully understood their experiences and expressions. From my side, I constantly had to be careful not to over-identify with their experiences and thereby infuse their narratives with my meanings.

Similarly, being coloured also created challenges during my interaction with the black African boys. I often felt I had to make a concerted effort to interact with them, and it appeared sometimes that they did not feel as comfortable talking to me as the coloured boys did. The initiative to communicate was invariably from my side. As a result, after some time in the field, I felt I had to deconstruct my ‘colouredness’ and use social distance as a way to place myself altogether outside of the boys’ world, so that I paradoxically was more free to
interact with them irrespective of my colour. In short, I had to free myself from my identity as a coloured South African woman. I did this in several ways.

First, I used my international affiliation and travels to create a degree of disconnection from my ‘colouredness’. I emphasised to staff and boys at the facility that I had been studying abroad. Secondly, as much as language was a medium of social inclusion among the participants, it also set me apart. As almost all the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, when conducting interviews, I used language in a different manner. When I wanted to create social distance from my colouredness, I decreased my use of slang in favour of ‘proper’ Afrikaans. This produced a perception among the boys and staff of my professionalism. Then, during my interaction with the black African boys, I would sometimes change the language I was using in a particular interview and continue to conduct that interview in English. Overall, these strategies helped me create social distance for myself in times when it was needed.

Gender also played a vital role in my relations with others. On multiple occasions, staff members would ask me whether I was being sexualised by any of the boys. I explained to them that to my knowledge this had not happened. In reality the challenge seemed to be more with some of the male staff members, married or single. Being a young, single female researcher, I was confronted and challenged on a daily basis by adult men inside and outside the facility. I had to interact with older males who had been working in the institution for years and set the tone of the institution as a highly sexually charged environment. Various male staff members rather demandingly questioned me about my relationship status, the extent of my involvement with other male colleagues and a few made sexual comments directly to me. One staff member would even refer to me as ‘his’ Heidi when speaking to other staff members. He once started a discussion about me with one of the boys while I was in the dorm, suggesting that the boy only wanted to participate in the project because he was physically attracted to me. Whereas I would usually just ignore such behaviour, I later noticed that female staff, having similar experiences, would sometimes negotiate such interactions by replying with similar sexual comments. Since such engagement would not be appropriate for me as a researcher, one of the ways I would diffuse the sexually charged atmosphere was by using humour.

3.5. Ethical issues, safety and emotions in the field

Before the fieldwork began, the project protocol that included detailed descriptions of the consent procedures with staff and children was submitted to the ethics committee of the University of the Western Cape for approval. The committee and I agreed that before the interviewing began, a child’s consent to be interviewed was needed, and that the caretakers’ consent could not be considered a proxy for the child’s consent. In other words, access to the boys was sought through their own consent. At the start of my fieldwork I extensively introduced the project and orally explained its aims and methodology to the boys in language they could understand. I gave special attention to how I structured the consent forms and interview questions. During the fieldwork, the boys’ identities were confidential. All the boys I approached or who approached me to participate in the study consented.

Throughout my fieldwork I was wary of possible repercussions on the boys’ well-being after sharing their stories of suffering and trauma with me, and I monitored how the boys were responding to my questions and whether they were uncomfortable in any way
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during the fieldwork. I was concerned that my questions might evoke in them difficult emotions but in most of the interactions the boys were rather open and honest about their feelings and experiences and seemed to manage these feelings well. The independent counselling service that was made available to the boys if needed was not used during or after the project.

The sensitive topics I explored and the ethnographic nature of my research in the confined setting of a secure care facility did pose some challenges for my own psychosocial well-being. During my fieldwork, I witnessed physical violence and listened to traumatic stories of suffering and pain that were branded into my memory. As an anthropologist, I was not trained to deal with these experiences during fieldwork, but my earlier training in psychology helped me to find ways of constructively managing my emotions. Moreover, during the fieldwork I regularly attended therapeutic debriefing sessions with a consultant psychologist from the University of the Western Cape, who assisted me through the process of expressing and reflecting on my experiences, ethical dilemmas and emotions in the field.

Secondly, the support of family, friends and supervisors was essential for me to talk about these experiences and be alert to reactions that influenced the quality of my work – for instance, when I found myself trying to avoid returning to the institution due to some unpleasant experiences I had had there. Also, I participated in two working groups, one in the Netherlands and one in South Africa, which served as support when I experienced emotional distress or ethical dilemmas. Some of the more difficult-to-cope-with emotions were linked to instances when I perceived the staff’s behaviour towards the boys to be unreasonably harsh, unfair or punitive, and when boys were obviously waiting for me to react to this behaviour. I learned to approach such situations first by physically distancing myself and then, after a short time spent reflecting on what had happened, returning to the boys and staff to discuss the incident separately with them.

Regarding safety, staff members were genuinely concerned about my well-being and made sure that one of them was usually present when I interacted with the boys, in case I needed to be protected. But the boys never took advantage of situations when I was alone with them. Through my fieldwork at the institution and my developing relationships with the boys, my initial perception of them as criminals and my wariness of possible threats to my safety shifted towards sense of them as just young boys that I was hanging out with.

Whereas safety did not pose an issue inside the institution, there were instances outside of the institution where it did. For example, on one occasion when I was visiting the court, I found myself standing between adjoining doors, one leading to the court rooms and the other to the court cells. In this tiny space, I was encircled by about fifteen men and one policeman, tightly squeezed against each other. They started tugging on my clothes, stroking my hair. Then, as the policeman struggled to unlock the gate leading to the cells, one of the men said, Wat kan jy doen as ons se plaat skyf? (What can you do if we decide to do something now?).

Thus, while working at the courts with older men I did not know and men charged with crimes serving time in prison, I occasionally found my safety compromised and experienced fear. I created safety strategies for myself during fieldwork. For instance, I did not carry my cell phone or money when visiting the facility, courts or prisons, so as to make myself less of a target for assault. More difficult to describe is how I trusted my intuition – a ‘sense’ as to when it was safe or unsafe to interact with someone in a specific space. I believe that this ‘sense’ has been enhanced through my previous experiences of working in prisons, but also by growing up in a community rife with crime and violence. Nonetheless, being
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locked behind bars for most of my fieldwork created a rather ambivalent position for me. On the one hand, one’s position in relation to safety is somewhat more delicate in an enclosed space; on the other, from the outside being under guard in a secure care facility may create an impression of safety.

3.6. Desk work

Field notes were recorded every day and stored in a journal and computer. Voice recordings allowed me to revert to the recordings and write up the notes at a later stage as well. Each Friday I transcribed and reflected on that week’s findings. After the fieldwork period and while in Amsterdam, all field notes were recorded before I did the final analysis of my data. Upon my return to Amsterdam after my first fieldwork period, I started coding the data that I had collected. All the interviews and group discussions were coded by hand. Thematic and content analysis took place during the whole research process and I revisited and adjusted my topic lists to the themes that were emerging until I felt data saturation had occurred. Emerging themes were discussed with my supervisors and within the working groups I was part of. I regularly reflected on the themes in relation to the research questions, and formulated further questions in an on-going process.

After the second period of fieldwork, I returned to Amsterdam and started the writing process, which continued after my time in Amsterdam was over and I had returned home. I revisited the field (Middletown) once for a week and on four occasions for one-day visits because during analysis questions arose regarding certain topics that I felt needed clarification, and to follow up on some of the boys.

The writing process was guided both by my research questions and the themes that had emerged. The chapters and chapter sections in the dissertation have been organised according to these themes. After developing the main arguments that would thread through the dissertation, I decided which case studies and ethnographic examples I would use. While doing so, I did my utmost to present contrasting cases and represent the diverse voices of the boys as well as of the staff as they came to me during this work.

Finally, anonymity of the institution, participants and staff members was maintained through the creation of pseudonyms. Therefore, it is important to mention that the identifying information of participants and the institution has been changed.

We will now turn to the empirical part of this study that present my findings, and it is appropriate that we start with a description of the first day of a boy’s admission and what happens to him during the early phase of his confinement at the secure care facility.