Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
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Citation for published version (APA):

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When it is time for a boy to leave the institution, a panel is arranged to decide whether he is to be discharged from the institution to return to his family and community or whether he should be further institutionalised and sent to a different facility. The panel that decides a boy’s fate routinely comprises a number of individuals involved in the boy’s life from both inside and outside the institution. It includes staff members such as the social workers and care workers, as well as the boy’s probation officer and family members.

This chapter opens with a description of a panel’s decision-making process regarding boys’ further trajectories. I will show how boys’ own tactics for staying safe inside and outside the institution factor in the panel decision-making. However, the boys’ own understanding of the best strategies to survive and be safe, whether inside or outside the institution, proves to be radically different from the panel’s understanding of positive behaviour that should be rewarded by discharge from the institution and that, according to the panel, will help the boys to thrive in the outside world. The boys’ understanding is based on their life experiences in the outside world, which usually does not provide the safe haven the panel envisages for the boys.

8.1. Exiting or extending a boy’s incarceration

On 14 August 2008 I was invited by health-care workers to attend a consecutive panel assessment of two boys, Marvin and Quinton, with whom I had been working in the Sharks dorm, to observe how decisions were made regarding the boys’ future trajectories. In addition to the social worker, occupational therapist and probation officer, the boys’ family members also participated.

First, Marvin was assessed. Marvin’s mother was present and showed herself to be very concerned and caring towards him. It seemed apt that the panel first reflected on Marvin’s good family relationships, the relative degree of financial stability in the family, and the absence of substance-related behaviour, such as drug or alcohol abuse. They acknowledged the presence of some level of discipline exercised by one adult at the family level. Then the panel reflected on advantageous factors that had emerged from Marvin’s stay in the secure care facility.

The social worker and occupational therapist highlighted specific factors that they understood to reveal Marvin’s resilient nature and would result in him conceivably abandoning his violent, criminal actions: they mentioned his success in taking on and completing tasks, co-operation with others, undertaking leadership positions in various programmes, good communication skills, and taking care of his physical appearance. According to the panel, these changes reflected a possible behavioural change for the better, and thus resilience. The occupational therapist remarked, ‘Marvin is relaxed’, meaning, he was not constantly in trouble or engaging in fights with staff or peers. The social worker
added how Marvin would accept the limits that she set. She argued, ‘Marvin is one of the strong children here. He is not the kind of child to send deeper or further into the system.’

The panel, in particular the probation officer, also reflected on the factors they saw as putting Marvin at risk of returning to a life of crime and violence. The panel noted that Marvin had tattoos on his body, interpreting it as a possible sign he had joined a gang in the institution, but when they asked him if this were so, he denied it. The occupational therapist and social worker also mentioned that Marvin still needed adult supervision and guidance. The probation officer raised the issue of support structures that Marvin would require while being at home, to which the occupational therapist and social worker replied that Marvin and his parents should participate in a conflict resolution programme for children and their parents, a substance-related programme and home-based supervision. Also, the panel indicated that he had to return to school and admit that he was wrong in committing this violent crime.

At the end of this assessment and based on the information provided in the panel, it was decided that Marvin would be discharged and reunited with his family. In Marvin’s case, the factors that the panel understood as possible indicators or promoters of ‘healthy’ development included available adult supervision and mentorship, a level of economic stability within his family, perceptions in his home environment of various discipline strategies and guidelines for how Marvin is expected to behave as a child once he is back home, and finally his individual characteristics.

In Quinton’s panel assessment his family was represented by his elderly grandmother. The discussion took off in a rather different way compared to the discussion earlier that day on Marvin’s case. Instead of focusing first on protective factors, the panel started by discussing risk factors. First, it was made explicit that Quinton’s mother was absent from the meeting. She had been invited to come in person, but had asked the grandmother to attend the panel session instead. The mother’s absence made the team reflect first on the family support and structure that Quinton was currently experiencing and would be subjected to if sent home. His grandmother, who expressed much support and love for him, was considered too elderly to manage Quinton in the way the panel would expect her to. The grandmother confirmed this when she said, ‘Quinton also does what he wants. He goes when he wants and decides his time when he sleeps.’ She explained how he started his criminal career already when he was 11 years old and used drugs when at home.

The panel discussed the family structure. Although Quinton was not orphaned, both parents were practically unavailable for parenting. He had no relationship with his biological father and his mother, although physically present from time to time, was an unemployed alcoholic, who herself had been incarcerated. Therefore the family structure was deemed questionable and described as a possible risk factor by the panel; he would not receive support and mentorship from his family.

The panel proceeded to discuss Quinton’s individual characteristics. Unlike Marvin, Quinton was a multiple offender. He had already been institutionalised elsewhere before coming to Middletown. This in itself meant that he was considered ‘high risk’, that is, at high risk of re-offending if discharged. The panel then returned to the unstable emotional and financial situation at home. According to Quinton’s grandmother, his mother would beat him when he came home late and she mentioned that his biological father never paid child maintenance for him or visited him. She argued that Quinton wanted to live with his father but was rejected by him. After his grandmother explained his relationship with his parents,
the probation officer turned to look at Quinton and asked, ‘From that rejection, where did he go? What did he do?’ and the other adults responded, ‘He turned to drugs.’ The probation officer then asked Quinton, ‘How do you feel about your mother and father’s relationship?’ He responded expressionlessly: ‘Nothing.’ Shortly afterwards, though, he started crying.

The probation officer said: ‘There are too many loose ends. His grandmother has no control over him and there is too much sadness in Quinton.’ As Quinton was crying, the panel continued to highlight the factors they considered to be possible threats in his development and life if he had to be discharged. I sat there and sadly watched as none of the panel members turned to console him. The probation officer then continued, ‘My concerns about Quinton are that there is no control at home. His grandmother is too old to look after him and won’t have much control over him. I’m also worried that he will use drugs again and then [there is] the problem with peer pressure.’ The occupational therapist and social worker who work with Quinton at the secure care facility attempted to intervene and include more positive aspects. They mentioned he was hard-working, creative and sensitive; nevertheless, the occupational therapist said, ‘But he is still so very guarded. He is not strong enough to go into the community because drugs will be a problem for him again. He’s still very vulnerable.’

Finally, after much discussion but with unified opinion, the panel decided to send Quinton to another secure care facility. According to them, this would be a place where he could develop his creative skills and learn more ‘structure’ (discipline). The occupational therapist then turned to his grandmother and said, ‘He’s too sensitive to go home. He misses home and is very sad and depressed. He needs further counselling.’ As the panel was closing the session, they explained to Quinton’s grandmother that this was in the child’s best interest and that he would be looked after. The panel gave Quinton and his grandmother a chance to say goodbye and he was escorted back to the dorm, while his grandmother watched with tearful eyes as he walked away.

8.2. Unpacking the panel’s decision-making process

Different factors played a role in the panel’s decisions for Marvin’s release and Quinton’s move deeper into the justice system. First, the risk of a return to criminal activities was postulated in the light of the panel’s appraisal of the family situation they would be sending the boy home to. In line with the Children’s Act, the panel clearly hoped to place the child in the family’s care at the earliest possible opportunity after apprehension and incarceration. How well the family is performing as a support structure is crucial in the decision whether to release or further institutionalise the boy. The panel’s expectations of what good family care should look like were overtly expressed during the cases of Marvin and Quinton. Marvin’s family appeared to be financially and emotionally relatively settled and Marvin had a good relationship with his mother and stepfather, who were both available to supervise him; Quinton’s family was disrupted, his mother was an alcoholic, unable to support him and frequently abusing him, and his father was absent from his life. As his main caregiver and guardian, his loving, but elderly grandmother apparently had no real control over him. A good family support system means a stable economic situation, absence of substance abuse and the presence of at least one loving adult or caretaker with parenting and disciplining skills.
A second vital consideration in the panel’s decision-making was the boys’ conduct inside the institution. This pertains to what staff considered desirable and undesirable behaviour: a boy’s history of being co-operative and hard-working and friendly with staff members, or, on the contrary, being involved in peer fights, disobedience or perceived aspirations for gang membership. The boy’s willingness to develop himself during his stay also played a role; changes for the better in a boy’s behaviour (for instance, an increasing ability to express his thoughts and feelings verbally) were taken as a hopeful sign.

Thirdly, a boy’s perceived psychological status and emotional balance were also taken into account. Marvin appeared to be composed: he was relaxed and confident, and able to keep his anxieties in check. He and his mother seemed able to understand the risks the panel still observed and willingly agreed to participate in an anger-management and conflict-resolution programme, a substance-related programme and home-based supervision. In Quinton’s case, both the social worker and occupational therapist who worked daily with him said they sensed ‘sadness’ in him. While working with him in my research I had also noticed this feeling in him; we knew he was struggling with his relationships at home with his abusive mother and absent father. When the lack of support at home was made explicit during the panel assessment, he broke down in tears, and it seemed as though Quinton himself was uncertain what would happen if he were sent back home. The panel, however, decided that Quinton was ‘not strong enough to go out’ and that he first needed counselling to deal with his relationships and the pain he was suffering. Unresolved emotional pain clearly is seen as a risk factor for returning to substance abuse and criminal behaviour.

In their weighing up of the condition of the family (and the outside environment) and boy’s own behavioural improvements and psychological well-being, the panel genuinely aimed for the best possible pathway away from crime. In this thesis that aims to gain insight in the boys’ own perspectives, experiences and strategies, the question that needs to be answered is how a boy’s appraisal of what is needed to survive with as little damage as possible outside the institution compares to the panel’s view on positive behaviour. I try to find answers to this question by presenting the appraisals of Marvin and Quinton that I interacted with in the institution. The panel may consider a supportive family life one of the guarantees for a boy staying away from criminal behaviour. However, the context in which boys’ lives are lived is much larger than the context his family provides him with. That wider context is neglected in the panel’s decision-making process.

8.3. Boys’ own perspectives on desirable and undesirable behaviour

One morning I spoke to Anwar in Panthers dorm. At the time, he was a 12-year-old boy who had been incarcerated for four months. So far I had not met Anwar in person, but his reputation preceded him. He was infamous for his quick response to being stabbed or his attempts to stab his peers when angered. Staff and peers alike would laugh when they described how Anwar would run to his room to grab a pen or any sharp object he could use to injure someone. They usually said, ‘Anwar wil net steek’ (Anwar just wants to stab).

In the interview, Anwar’s first statement was that he would stay out of trouble when he returned home. I asked what he meant and he explained, ‘I won’t do things like breaking into homes or stabbing people with a knife again and robbing them. I’ve had lots of cases already.’ However, as we continued, he described his struggle with keeping himself from
violence. He explained how at times he would get angry and what would happen to him at that moment:

Sometimes when people make me angry, I swear at them. Sometimes I just want to be alone! I don’t like it when they tease or swear at me. I get angry and stab them with a knife. Even if it’s someone I know who teases me, if I catch them, I will hurt them. I’ll hit them. Now and then I will stab them.

He recounted an incident when he fought with a peer at school because the boy hit him with a chair and would not stop even after Anwar reported this to the teacher. He decided to take action himself and stabbed the boy with a pencil. It was for this incident that Anwar was expelled from school.

At first, I was sceptical about Anwar’s intentions to stay out of trouble, and assumed this story about his peer’s aggression was how he justified his violent actions. However, during my visits to the dormitory, I started noticing a recurrent pattern of interactions. It would start with Anwar’s peers teasing him about his ‘kort’ fuse (short temper). He would react by asking the boys to leave him alone but they would continue, without much intervention from the care worker on duty. Eventually, Anwar would get angry and this would lead to him becoming verbally and physically aggressive. As a result of Anwar’s violent reactions, his peers would either leave him alone or they would report him to the care worker, who would eventually remove Anwar from the group if his behaviour continued. Why the boys targeted Anwar was not altogether clear. Perhaps it was his periodic self-chosen withdrawal from the group. Anwar made it very clear that he needed to be alone at times.

Undesirable behaviour – in the case of Anwar, enacting violence – was motivated by his wish to maintain a certain degree of social and physical space and to prevent or counter intrusion and assault. Dylan, one of the seasoned boys in the dorm, argued that

If you don’t act a certain way [aggressive], if you don’t fight for your things or for yourself, the others [peers] will take advantage of you. They will come into your room and steal your stuff and they take over everything.

Indeed, as we have seen, the physical setting of the institution and its daily functioning does not encourage and allow for much physical and social distance among the boys and between boys and staff alike. My observations confirm that boys who were more withdrawn and therefore perceived as less assertive, often experienced their peers invading their physical space in the dorms and stealing their belongings. Particularly in the hall when the boys were having lunch, boys who were more assertive were also the boys that were almost never assaulted or tested by their peers. With assertive boys, the mere threat of what they are capable of in fact prevented the need for showing it, which would amount to undesirable behaviour. Paradoxically, boys who were in principle stronger were thus better able to stay out of conflicts. For boys like Anwar and Dylan, the visible enactment of violence or withdrawal from social interactions is experienced as the only recourses to create some personal space and stay out of harm’s way.

Both Anwar and Dylan explained their aggressive behaviour from the constant harassment they experienced from their peers. These repetitive challenges to their physical, social and emotional boundaries frustrated them deeply. However, their experiences in the institution were not new to them, since they had experienced similar challenges in the
community as well. Outside the institution, the often aggressive mockery, however normalised, between generations and among peers frequently resulted in violent responses. Anwar’s immediate response to his peers’ assaults on his personal space was usually to say that he wanted to be left alone, before opting for verbal or physical violence. Violence can be the final step in an accumulation of frustration. From Anwar’s and Dylan’s perspective, their behaviour was effective because it indeed instilled insecurity and fear in their peers, who became more hesitant to interact with them. Thus Anwar and Dylan felt they were able to create personal space for themselves in the facility through projecting an image of someone inclined to unpredictable bursts of violence. However, the result of such repetitive accumulative processes was that within the institution Anwar and Dylan created images of unpredictable, angry and violent personalities. The violent behaviour these boys experienced and enacted as a means of staying out of trouble led to their being perceived by their peers as violent individuals – which only perpetuated the harassment they were trying to avoid.

8.3.1 Creating safety in unsafe conditions

During my interview with Anwar, I questioned him about his three different criminal charges. His first house-breaking case took place when he was 11 years old. His second and third criminal charges were for being in possession of a weapon (the same year) and for assault (a year later). I asked Anwar to tell me about his second criminal case. Without hesitation, he said: ‘The merchant’ gave me the gun. He didn’t want to go to jail for having it.’ Anwar did not know exactly what the merchant had used the gun for, but explained: ‘He probably used it to shoot someone. When the police came they got away and I was caught. I had the gun for one day.’ I asked Anwar how he felt, carrying the gun around the community. He grinned: ‘I felt that if anyone should look for trouble, I would shoot them’.

As the interview progressed, I asked Anwar about his assault case when he was 12 years old. He explained how he was playing in the park with a skateboard when some boys assaulted him:

Two boys took my skateboard from me and when I caught the one I stabbed him. There were three boys and they were about my age. It was about a week after they robbed me. I saw him in our road and stabbed him with a knife in his chest. It was one of my mother’s cooking knives. I stabbed him and threw the knife away, by the train lines. I didn’t want to get caught with the knife. I did confess in court about stabbing him, thrice. I was angry because he took my skateboard! Something just told me to stab him. I told him the day he stole my skateboard that I was going to stab him when I get him the next time. Then, that day, when I saw him walking near my house, I ran inside, grabbed the knife and stabbed him. If I didn’t stab him, he would do it [rob] to me again and then, others would also [rob me].

When I asked another boy, Darius, to describe one of the criminal charges for his incarceration, he started telling about his second case when he was 11 years old:

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1 People on the Cape Flats and in Cape Town also use the term ‘merchant’ for ‘drug merchant’. This is someone who sells drugs and often also allows drug users to use drugs on their premises.
Being Safe After Discharge From the Institution

My mother sent me and Debo [his friend] to the shop to buy some food. I always keep a knife on me. I left Debo at Spar and I went to Shoprite [the names of two different convenience stores] and when I came back he was crying. He told me that one of the boys took a bag from him. When I got home, I didn’t know what to tell my mother and saw the boy walking past our house. I ran after him and when he tried to stab me, I took my knife out and stabbed him thrice in the back. I took the bag and left him there.

Darius also spoke about the rape case for which he was then awaiting trial. The victim had reported him as the lookout. She said he was the one who watched to see whether people were watching them. In his interview with me, he indeed admitted to standing there while she was being raped but swore that he did not know that his friends were raping her. But then he said:

> It wasn’t nice standing there while she was crying and I’m looking to see if anyone was coming. I was thinking I could have told them to leave her, but in such a case you don’t think about going against your friends. You just leave them. I wanted to walk away but they would think I was not a friend to support them. That’s how it works. Then, you also become a target.

As mentioned in Chapter One, most of the boys had been raised in communities where they, their families and their peers are exposed to high levels of violence and crime. At the start of my work with the boys in the institution I had trouble understanding why they would put themselves at risk of being caught, incarcerated and possibly killed while helping others such as the merchant in Anwar’s case and the friends in Darius’s case. However, the boys helped me understand that, for them, these were not merely habitual actions or deeds of loyalty, but ways in which they were able to survive on a day-to-day basis under such violent conditions. The creation of and involvement in social networks in the community assisted in developing a certain degree of safety for the boy, and acquiring some protection and control in volatile neighbourhoods.

Much attention has been paid to the issue of children being used by adults to commit various crimes. But when Anwar made the decision to take the gun (whether he was forced or not), he created trust, reliance and confidence in the men he had assisted, older men for that matter, who were perceived as more powerful than most in the communities. Both in the community and the institution, boys involved with merchants or gangs were perceived to be protected by these feared groups. Knowledge of a boy’s involvement with gangs and drug merchants translated into the perception that he was not acting and could not be assaulted as a single entity but as part of a larger, feared group one would have to reckon with.

From this perspective it is important that such violence is enacted not secretly and unseen. It has to be performed publicly. When Anwar ran out of the house to stab the boy, he made his anger (and crime, from the perspective of the law) a public spectacle. This spectacle is in line with Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that staging punishment as a public spectacle is intended to create fear and hesitation in others. Anwar perpetrated this public violence in an attempt to create fear and hesitation in others to perpetrate such violence against him in the future. Thus behaviour that is deemed undesirable in the institution and perceived by the panel as a negative predictor of a boy’s future well-being

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2 See the COAV project. COAV is the abbreviation for ‘Children and youth in Organised Armed Violence’.
may from the perspective of boys provide them with a certain degree of safety within a chronically toxic, violent environment.

From an objective observer’s viewpoint, these strategies form a double-edged sword. A boy’s involvement with drug merchants and gangs increases his risk of being victimised by others, including by those gangs and merchants. Nonetheless, by their involvement in the illegal activities of others, boys perceive themselves taking some measure of control over their conditions and positions in the community. It is thus important to understand that from the boys’ perspective violence does not only beget violence; perpetrating violence can also deter violence.

8.3.2 Ensuring economic resources

One of the social workers invited me to sit in on the assessments she had to do of two boys. They were both re-offenders and familiar with the institution, having been incarcerated at this secure care facility once before. The social worker asked one of the boys, ‘So, why do you steal?’ and he answered, ‘We are three children and I’m the second eldest. My father gets home drunk a lot of the time and my mother will get angry. My parents don’t have money. That’s why I steal’. Then, Ferdi, the other re-offender, responded to the same question. He had been incarcerated for house-breaking and theft. He explained, ‘It was in a white area; where there are only white people living. We rather rob them than our own people. We are poor and white people are rich. We work for them.’ A similar explanation was also provided when I asked Anwar why he robbed people. He explained:

I rob people when I need money. I sometimes need money for food or clothes and also drugs. We just take a walk and if we see someone maybe has a nice phone, we take it. I’ll sell it to the Nigerians in town. Once I got a thousand rand for the phone. We spend it quickly on expensive food that we don’t even finish.

I asked him what he considered expensive food. He answered: ‘A gatsby.’

Poverty, unemployment and financial instability have repeatedly been highlighted in the stories that boys narrated to me. In many cases, boys mentioned that their parents were unable to support them financially as their parents were too old to work or living with grandparents or parents suffering from substance-related behaviour. On numerous occasions boys described to me how they would have to fend for themselves to gain a certain degree of financial stability both for themselves and their families. Their involvement in criminal activities and perpetration of violent behaviour may be considered economic resources. It helped them to attend to basic needs like food and clothing as well as support drug habits.

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3 A gatsby is a loaf of bread, similar to a baguette, filled with fries, salad, and processed meats such as polony or viennas. This bread is usually not considered to be expensive. Instead, people usually buy it when they have a little money and have to feed a large number of people.
8.3.3 Control, empowerment and a sense of belonging

One of the most extraordinary examples I encountered of conscious use of violence involved Brendon (13) and his brother Randall (9), both incarcerated at the secure care facility. Brendon is a multiple offender, whereas his brother, despite having committed various crimes, had been criminally charged for the first time. The boys come from Rawsonville, well-known for high levels of alcohol abuse, child employment on wine farms, and other social problems such as school drop-outs and crime.

During an interview I questioned Brendon about his family background and his relationship with his siblings and parents. He told me his mother had passed away after suffering from tuberculosis and that his father was still alive. An older brother and sister did not live with their father, who is a cleaner. Brendon confessed that his father was an alcoholic and that while his mother was alive his parents were always physically fighting. Brendon explained that he would try to stop his father from abusing his mother and that this was how he had learned to use violence as a means to protect his loved ones from possible harm. As the discussion continued, Brendon described poverty of their home: ‘What I like about the secure care facility is that you are warm when you sleep at night and you get warm clothes. My father doesn’t want to buy us [clothes]. I don’t know why.’ When I asked him if his father had money to buy clothes for him, he exclaimed:

Yes! But he doesn’t want to. Then I rather look after myself and Randall. I either steal or ask my brother to buy me. I steal when my father chases me away and let me sleep outside. I would steal blankets to keep warm.

Brendon’s situation at home was noticeably volatile, and what Randall explained to me confirmed what the care workers and staff had suspected: at the initiative of Brendon, these two siblings involved themselves in a violent crime together as a way to escape their desperate living conditions. Through undesirable behaviour they were able to reach the safety they desired. Undesirable violent behaviour helped Brendon to care for his younger brother. Brendon encouraged his brother to enter the world of crime as a paradoxical means to become part of what he perceived to be a more stable environment. The secure care facility for these boys proved to be more beneficial compared to what they were exposed to outside.

8.4. Conclusion

In the toxic environments outside the institution, boys’ tactics to ensure well-being for themselves and the ones they care for are often diametrically opposed to what a panel would consider positive or promising behaviour. The panel assessment shows 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. But what this ethnographic data also reveals is that most of the boys experienced the same toxic environment within the institution as the one they experienced outside before they entered the secure care facility. Social issues and concerns that are prevalent in the outside community are also present inside the institution, and the types of peer relationships that boys engage in outside the institution also are at play within the institution. For some boys violence was a means of ensuring one’s safety. For
other boys who come from better functioning families, such as Marvin, a secure care facility may be more risky and more 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.

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 has clear ideas of 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. The exemplary cases in this chapter show how muddled and sometimes erroneous such reasoning is in the light of the boys’ daily life-worlds 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. It is to this actor that I will return in my final chapter.