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

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

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

The methodology of the study was guided by the structures of confinement of the secure care facility in which it was conducted. This type of institution functions simultaneously as a setting geared towards the safekeeping, caring and betterment of inmates and as a place of incarceration for keeping society at large safe from them. The methodological approach included participant observation and a number of (child-centred) qualitative methods that ranged from informal and in-depth interviews with boys and caretakers to focus group discussions and the use of art and games. The emphasis of the study was on providing the reader with an in-depth understanding of these boys and the micro-world of the institution in which they find themselves. Central to the project were boys’ own accounts of their lives, experiences, perceptions, aspirations and the reasons why they followed various strategies in navigating their social relations with staff and peers. Adopting this ethnographic perspective allowed for a thick description of day-to-day interactions in the institution.

The following sections aim to provide answers to the core questions that the study posed. First, the general findings are presented in an overview that takes into account the main themes which emerged from the analysis and structured the contents of the thesis. Secondly, the findings are considered in relation to three core concepts that guided the analysis: the total institution, agency and violence. The section thereafter discusses the implications that the analysis holds for answering the three main research questions. The chapter concludes by making recommendations based on the findings.

9.2. General findings

The thesis began by describing the heavy, locked steel gates and multiple layers of barbed wire atop fences that greet visitors as they enter the institution, and we learned how
security guards unlock these gates only once bags have been searched and visitors signed-in. The mere process of gaining access to the boys and the institution was governed by strict rules and mediated by literal and figurative gatekeepers. In essence, the institution conveys the impression of being a bounded and rigidly structured facility where daily activities take place according to strict, predefined codes. Physically, the institution looked closed, imprisoning insiders and controlling access by outsiders; socially, its anatomy seems fixed and hierarchical. However, the more data one acquires, the greater are the number of cracks that appear in this image of inflexibility.

Chapter Two gave an account of facility’s physical structure, location and ground plan, as well as its formal policies, roles, rules and regulations. This physical structure forms both the background to the dynamic social processes taking place within its walls and an intrinsic part of them. The admission of a new boy to the secure care facility implies a physical movement, first from his community to the institution, and, secondly, within the facility to a specific dormitory. The latter assignment is crucial for what will happen to him during his stay.

By entering a specific institution and within it a specific dormitory, boys enter a pre-existing social world governed by already-crystallized hierarchies between staff and boys as well as among the boys themselves. A new boy’s admission is found to be a turbulent phase for all involved, one in which all relations are (re)negotiated and (re)defined. Characteristically, a power struggle takes place between a newly admitted boy and what were called ‘seasoned’ boys. The new boy confronts the challenge of having to adapt to unfamiliar rules that are to structure his daily life in intimate ways and to the new authoritative structures and their associated role divisions. But he also has to find, or fight for, a place in the intricate and often unstable informal hierarchies that govern relationships between the boys themselves. This holds the risk of verbal, physical and sexual abuse by his peers, and usually makes the early period in the secure care facility a phase of emotional turmoil.

However, the data also reveal that the admission of a new boy creates vulnerability amongst the other boys. A new admission destabilises power relations between them, which impacts on relations between boys and staff. What is commonly perceived as bullying, unnecessary violence and intimidation by others is a complex process of negotiation for the currency of power and the forging of ever-changing hierarchical relationships.

The instability that characterises relations between boys and between boys and staff is also manifest at the level of identities, that is, the labels by which boys identify themselves and are identified by others. Arguments against incarcerating boys sometimes maintain that once a boy is incarcerated he will be permanently marked as a criminal. However, this study established that daily interactions were decisive in determining how his identity fluctuates between being a ‘criminal’ or ‘a child capable of betterment’. The study also showed that these interactions are influenced, on the one hand, by the subjective, moral appraisals that staff make of a boy’s behaviour and individual traits such as his body potential, and, on the other hand, by the resources and competences available among staff and in the institution. Decisive and dramatic shifts in identities may occur as a result of incidental yet crucial opportunities that are created on the spot when, for instance, a staff member makes a simple decision to include or exclude a boy in an activity or interaction. To a large degree, it is these volatile identities that determine the boys’ experiences, how they are managed within the institution, and, disturbingly, their future, given that the identity labels which arise may influence later decisions as to the boys’ discharge or longer imprisonment.
Although these interpersonal processes take place within the bounded field of the institution, the data also reveal how deeply these processes are embedded in, and influenced by, external social norms that regulate interactions in the community beyond the institution. The boundaries between social life outside and inside the facility are blurred. The multiplicity of factors at work in the community, such as culturally informed ways of dealing with differences of gender, age and educational level, are carried into the institution by both the staff and boys and translate into equally culturally-informed styles of interaction in the micro-world of the facility. Thus, the multi-ethnic composition of the outside world translates into widely different, sometimes conflicting, patterns of interaction.

By unpacking these interactions, various layers of difference were brought to light. In respect of the staff, questions of how they were socialised in their own communities, what they expect of boys’ behaviour and what boys in turn expect of them, form one dimension of difference. Educational background and pedagogical skills form another level, one which cuts across ethnic and cultural divides. The same goes for a dimension which is more difficult to pinpoint, namely the personality traits and interactional style of the staff involved. All these differences result in particular daily interactions, leading, even in the course of a single day, to widely varying restrictions and opportunities for boys to act and express themselves.

With regard to the boys, they bring with them culturally informed manners of enacting childhood, masculinity and gender that influence their actions, sometimes in unexpected ways. Two factors emerged in particular that seemed to contradict the notion of boys as children in need of care. The first concerns the use of violence. For many, resisting violence in their communities, as well as exercising it to obtain power and protection, was part and parcel of their pre-institutional lives. These predispositions influence how they act and express themselves, particularly (but not only) in terms of how the engage with their peers inside the institution and the extent to which violence becomes part of these interactions. Secondly, rather than being cared for, many boys – in line with cultural norms in their communities about masculinity – fulfilled caring roles in their pre-institutional lives, especially towards mothers and other female relatives. These norms also are at play within the institution, and boys were seen to develop caring roles in relation to certain staff members as well as their peers.

For the boys, the community remains a point of orientation in terms not only of how they behave in the institution but where they situate their belonging. The common practice, during the period of study, of boys’ regular abscondment allowed for an analysis, first, of the permeability of the boundaries between the institution and the community, and, secondly, of the boys’ intentional management of these boundaries. It appeared that boys usually absconded with the explicit intention of returning to the institution irrespective of the consequences they might have to face. Staff members seemed to know this, and a few of them were little perturbed by the flow of inmates back and forth between the institution and community. In some ways this is in line with the Children’s Act, which encourages ongoing communication between the incarcerated child and his or her family and community.

Boys abscond for different reasons. They may want to create space for themselves to engage in behaviour considered unacceptable inside, or escape the illegal and sometimes violent transactions to which they can be subjected to within the institution. Running away may also help them acquire resources, in particular goods that can be strategically used in their interactions with their peers inside. Alternatively, absconding is a strategy for escaping the boredom of daily life in a relatively poorly resourced institution. However, recurrent successful or failed abscondments deeply affect the perception that staff have of boys in such
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cases, a shift which was seen to materialise in decisions to send them to other facilities rather than release them to their families. During the study, recurrent abscondments in all secure care facilities finally led the magistrates to enforce serious restrictions that prohibited excursions and home visits during their incarceration. The section on agency below (section 9.3.2.) returns to the double-edged sword that is presented when boys navigate the boundaries between the community and the facility.

A crucial occasion in a boy’s career is attendance at the panel where discharge or further institutionalisation is discussed. Here, the adults who are involved with the boy in the two micro-worlds, that of the family and community and that of the institution, meet. At this vital conjuncture, clashes become apparent between, on the one hand, the tactics the boys have learned in order to survive and stay safe within and outside the institution, and, on the other, the decision-makers’ interpretation of these tactics as indicative of psychological problems or deviance. The panel’s assessment of the parenting skills of the boys’ parents and the safety of the community plays a major role in decisions, and boys have little to say in this. In the end, despite their fighting spirit, they are subordinated to the power others have to decide their fate.

9.3. Reflections on findings from the perspective of core theoretical concepts

9.3.1. The permeability of the secure care facility

The concept of the total institution as developed by Goffman (1961) was taken as a reference point for analysing the study findings; in particular, it was used to examine the different dimensions of permeability that applied at the secure care facility at which this study was conducted. Goffman regarded his concept of total institution as defining an ideal type that did not necessarily correspond to any single existing institution. In practice, certain of them conform to this type in more respects than others, meaning that some institutions can be more ‘total’ in nature than others. This section addresses various dimensions of permeability that were evident at the Middletown facility, and groups them into two kinds: those in terms of which the facility corresponded to the ideal type of the total institution, and those in terms of which it diverged from that ideal type. The permeability that has been identified enables the boys actively to shape their lives to varying degrees within the structures of confinement.

Middletown does certainly have some of the characteristics of a total institution. It is a place of residence, secluded from society by virtue of its geographical location and the barbed-wire fencing and steel gates that secure its perimeter, where like-situated boys together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. The incarcerated boys wear institutional clothing most of the time and all have the prescribed short hair. They are constantly surveilled by the care and security staff, although in certain parts of the building the surveillance is less stringent than in others. The boys are collectively regimented and march through the day’s activities in the company of a batch of similar others.

However, the boys are not as secluded as the physical build of the institution would suggest, given that physical movement and social intercourse occur to some extent across the walls of the institution. Furthermore, within the institution a degree of physical mobility is allowed, there is a relatively large turnover of inmates, and the staff-inmate split is not as rigid as it would be in a total institution. Rules and regulations are not always strictly
implemented; the social distance between the relatively small supervisory staff and large
group of inmates is not always as great as that which is formally prescribed; and clear,
institutionally enforced distinctions between the identities, roles and positions of staff and
those of inmates either do not exist on all occasions or become blurred at times. In extreme
instances, there is even role reversal, as happens, for instance, when a boy takes care of a
staff member and watches over her (rather than the other way around), or when staff care for
boys who are perceived as ‘children’ instead of ‘criminals’. In addition, in their interactions
with each other boys can adopt the supervisory and caring roles that are otherwise expected
of staff members.

While there are hierarchal and power differences between staff and boys, these
differences also exist among boys. There is an on-going battle between them to position
themselves in terms of power vis-à-vis each other. Power differences among staff do not play
themselves out as much as these differences do among boys. More substantial differences
exist in the way staff members use their power in their interaction with boys. Differences in
interaction between staff and boys can be explained as the outcome of an intersection of
differences among staff in, for instance, age, gender, ethnicity, cultural background and
culturally determined communication styles, language, educational level, communication
skills and personalities. Boys respond to these differences in their continuous negotiation
with staff. An example is the negotiation that takes place regarding the boys’ criminal ability
and criminal identity. Subjective factors among the staff co-determine whether a boy is
labelled a criminal or a child with potential. The labelling process is not always fair, and has
considerable impact on the boys’ prospects for remaining in the judicial system or returning
to the free world.

The complex of factors that contribute to the volatility of staff-boys interaction also
reflect circumstances that determine communication and negotiation between adults and
children in the surrounding society. In this respect, the boundary between the socio-cultural
world inside the institution and the one beyond it is permeable, permeability which is both
evidenced and illustrated by the movement that takes place across the physical boundaries of
the institution.

The boys maintain contact with the outside during their stay at Middletown, contact
which is stimulated in various ways by the institution itself and the Children’s Act. Visiting
rights are not excessively restricted. Family and friends as well as professionals move in and
out of the institution, while boys themselves choose to run away, spend time in the
community and then return, a situation that contributes to ongoing communication between
them and their families and friends. Moreover, for many of the boys, the institutional
environment is, in a sense, not much different to the world they know outside: survival skills
learned in their communities are brought with them into the institution, and similar skills
learned in the institution are transferred back to the community, a process that represents
another form of permeability.

I myself as a researcher also experienced this permeability to a degree. While at first I
found it hard to gain access to the institution and its children, security staff gradually allowed
me to walk unescorted; I could bring snacks for the boys, and, over time, care staff let me
engage with the boys without their surveillance. My experience as a researcher was very
different to that described by Waldram (2009), for whom it was always a daunting task to
gain access to a prison throughout the 15 years he devoted to prison research in the Unites
States.
Nevertheless, contrasts do certainly exist between life inside and life outside the institution. The secure care facility is not like a hospital, where life is shaped by everyday society to a far larger extent than it is in Middletown. As Van der Geest and Finkler (2004:1998) observe: ‘The hospital is not an island but an important part, if not the “capital”, of the “mainland”.’ The same cannot be said of Middletown. Despite the various dimensions of permeability identified in the study, this secure care facility does have some of the characteristics of a total institution as conceived by Goffman, albeit without the definitive clarity found in his work.

9.3.2. Agency in confining circumstances

When I began my study, mainstream anthropology still had adult actors at the core of social theory and intentional action was a capacity attributed mainly to adults. However, in the subfield of child anthropology there has been increasing acknowledgement that even very young children make sense of, and act intentionally upon, others in the here-and-now, and that they should therefore be studied as social actors with agency in their own right. Child-focused research was no longer about whether children are capable of demonstrating agency, but about the issue of how they do so. As such, the questions shifted from asking if children have the capacity for agency to asking how their agency is constituted through actions and interactions in specific environments (see Chapter One, Introduction).

My study has followed this line of thought. In terms of the agency-structure debate, it aimed, on the one hand, to establish how children’s subjectivities and motivated practices (agency) are shaped and restrained by the existing social world they enter when they are institutionalised in Middletown (structure), and, on the other, to examine how children contribute to the constitution, reproduction or change of this social world and the restraints on their agency (cf. Ortner 2006). My study was to take place in a restrictive environment par excellence, a setting where rules and regulations could be expected to be more explicit and rigid than in others and would seemingly leave boys with fewer opportunities for strategic planning in the course of their lives. This had prepared me for a focus on tactical agency, a specific type of agency to cope with the immediate, concrete conditions of life by seizing opportunities and openings at any moment (cf. Honwana 2006). As described above, in reality the structures of the correctional institution proved to be less rigid and more permeable than expected. In this section, then, three concluding remarks are made regarding the way in which boys’ agency is constituted within these structures and the extent to which we can thus speak of tactical agency.

First, my findings have shown how boys’ agency within the institution is as much shaped by the structures they formed part of and were shaped by before they entered the institution; as their agency is shaped by the here and now of their incarceration. When I introduced the boys, I referred to the adverse conditions many of them found themselves in before they came to the facility. Their narratives were riddled with tales of the poverty, crime and violence that characterised their families and communities, the type of stories that lead to the representations of black and coloured children as victims of deprivation and inequity that are so present in the work of well-meaning NGOs.

However, the narratives boys told me about their experiences before incarceration spoke of lives either almost entirely liberated from adult supervision or enmeshed as the pawns of struggling and sometimes abusive parents. Before they came to the institution, most
of the boys, even when very young, had made many decisions for themselves, from going to work to earn money in order to survive, to deciding to leave their homes in cases where they were abused. With neither parents nor the state providing for them, the boys had become resourceful and creative in responding to their own needs and those of their families. In so doing, they participated in behaviour generally understood as adult behaviour, such as being employed, contributing to the financial upkeep of families, engaging in sexual relations, abusing substances, getting involved in criminal activities and so forth.

When boys enter the facility, however, they physically leave behind the precarious social world that shaped their expressions of agency and enter a new micro-world where their capacity to act is met with an ambivalent reaction. Positioned as inmates in relation to staff, the boys find that the resourcefulness which helped them survive on the outside, and which used to be seen as a positive strength, is discouraged; intelligence and inventiveness in exercising skills are viewed with suspicion and relabelled as ‘risky’ and ‘being difficult’; and behaviour that does not conform to what is expected of a child is frowned upon or punished. Instead, staff and other adults in power expect the boys to follow strict rules that are enforced by the institution; their overall behaviour is required – and actively forced – to change from that of a streetwise actor seizing opportunities as they present themselves to that of a vulnerable child being cared for by, and obeying and listening to, adults while interacting peacefully with his peers. At the same time, boys have to find, and often fight for, a position in a micro-world of peers that on the whole continues to be governed by the rules of their pre-institutionalised life. By institutionalising boys in groups, the institution recreates their outside social world inside. Thus, the boys’ agency – which, outside the institution, was required and shaped by the demands of life – is constantly challenged within the institution, even though it is as necessary as ever for surviving among their peers.

Moreover, when boys take action and engage with their environment as they see fit, adult caretakers label it as resistance, whereas for the boys is simply a matter of exploiting the cracks in the permeable and contradictory social world in which they find themselves. The practice of abscondment is the perfect illustration of the tactical agency that boys employ. Boys used abscondment to create safety for themselves outside of an institution that proved to be unable to protect them from their violent peers, or they absconded to escape the institution’s terrible boredom and insufficiency of resources to find excitement and familiar but transgressive pleasures in the community. Interpreted as demonstrating resistance and a lack of adaptation, the boys’ behaviour was reprimanded at an individual level but no systemic change was made to the adverse conditions – for example, some boys’ vulnerability to peer violence and boredom – that led them to enact this behaviour. On the contrary, at an institutional level abscondment ultimately contributed to an effort to seal up the cracks, with magistrates denying inmates contact with the outside world. The boys’ cumulative tactical agency ironically helped to reproduce the very structures they tried to escape.

In the third place, this study has shown, rather unexpectedly, that it was not only the child-inmates who enacted what could be called tactical agency but caretakers as well. The latter’s behaviour was, of course, ordained by rules and regulations, with the day-to-day management of the facility laid out in protocols that are meant to create regularity and a safe environment for children’s development. However, large variations were apparent in the extent to which different members of staff were trained to execute these rules; many simply acted on the spur of the moment, grasping opportunities to remain in control rather than strategically coaching the boys in more productive modes of behavior. The study findings show how the general lack of resources, combined with cultural and educational differences
and the scope for personal styles, generated significantly different interactions with the same boys, differences that resulted in the boys being offered fast-shifting, contradictory subject-positions in which, sometimes in the course of a single day, they would be interpellated as children in need of loving support or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, as hardened criminals in the making.

### 9.3.3. Violence from the perspective of boys

As already discussed, the boys experienced such high levels of adversity in their communities that they had to fend more or less for themselves to gain a degree of financial stability and safety in their own lives and those of their families. While it was common for them to have been exposed to crime and violence as victims, they were themselves also perpetrators of it. The boys admitted to Middletown were accused or convicted of offences that included housebreaking, theft, possession of drugs or a weapon, stabbing, sexual assault, rape and murder. Within the institution, exposure to violence as well as its perpetration – for some boys, on a daily basis – continued in the form of verbal intimidation (bullying and threats) and abuse, theft of belongings, physical fights and violence (beatings), and sexual violence (sodomy and rape). The violence was committed mostly by their peers, and, if the boys were powerful enough, they would retaliate in kind. However, staff could be violent as well: boys were scolded, for instance, or hit with rulers or kicked, and some staff members initiated and entertained aggressive interactions with the boys.

In this thesis, which focuses on boys’ experiences and perspectives, the question arose as to how the boys themselves understand what is defined in the justice system as violence and how they perceive their accountability. The answers are manifold. In the boys’ narratives, different, and at times contradictory, perspectives came to light. On the one hand, in some of their narratives the incarcerated boys do not regard themselves as criminal or violent; instead they criminalise older men as well as boys incarcerated in prisons or in security care facilities that house older boys. Regardless of the violence they committed, the boys perceive themselves as children, describing their violent behaviour as part of their day-to-day lives. On the other hand, when asked about the violence they committed, they would frequently take responsibility and admit they had done wrong and that they needed to change their lives.

I was not convinced by these statements. Did the boys to whom I had spoken to truly realise they had ‘wronged’? Or was their expressed need ‘to walk the right path’ generated by the institution’s enforced objectives of rehabilitation and correction rather than a product of genuine self-reflection? And how would the behavioural changes that the institution sought help the boys lead a safe and less troublesome life once they were discharged and sent back to communities riddled with violence, gangsterism, rape and unemployment? Would it help them if they were instead sent further into the judicial system and housed in a security care facility for older boys or in a prison? Would they be able to cope in such an event? Furthermore, was the institution doing them a disservice by seeking to change them, setting out to do so aware of the environments from which the boys came and to which they would return and yet, at the same time, not taking these contexts into account in its efforts to correct and rehabilitate?

They are not easy questions to answer. To arrive at any answers, the institution would, assuming this were possible, first have to gain a better understanding of the boys’ reasons for perpetrating violence, which they consider as having been beneficial to them in various ways.
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To be sure, violence did generate many risks for them, but the bad it brought to others and to themselves is also seen to have produced much good. For the boys, violence was one of the pathways to managing a situation where parents are absent and a supporting state is miles away. In their view, their violent actions are not senseless and meaningless, as is commonly said in the media and daily discourse on violence in South Africa. Instead these actions enhance the boys’ well-being, enabling them to create safety, a sense of belonging, positions of power as well as some financial security. The boys appeared to understand that their violence was risky and that they had to weigh up its risks and benefits, but their main concern was with the betterment of their position and survival in adverse circumstances.

Nevertheless, even though the violence to which they are accustomed in their daily lives in communities carries over into the institution, through their narratives they confided that, despite the struggles among themselves and with the staff, the institution provides them with valuable things they do not, and would not, possess outside of it. Within the institution they can be, at least to a certain extent, children who are taken care of by others. Whereas the boys adopt an adult-like role in the outside world, the institution, with its rules and regulations they must obey and the services it affords them, facilitates their adoption of a comparatively more child-like identity. This identity includes being cared for by adults, going to school, playing with peers, and obeying and listening to adults. Furthermore, within the institution they are protected from an unforgiving society that they have to confront when they are discharged. As this thesis makes clear, however, the behaviour and experiences of the child outside the institution maintain their hold on the child inside.

In short, even though violence is potentially self-destructive for the boys, it is also a pathway for them to attain a sense of well-being that produces meaning, purpose and opportunities. Boys use violence to empower themselves in a society that does not respect the right each child has to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual and social development (article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). In response, the police are summoned, the boys apprehended and handcuffed, thrown into the back of a police van, and driven to jail cells where they wait to appear in court before ultimately landing up behind bars. As such, secure care facilities are socio-political responses to the boys’ attempts to achieve greater autonomy through the use of violence.

While I adhere to a justice system that strongly objects to the violence committed by the boys, I keep struggling with the question of what the best response would be to break the cycle of violence they undergo in their journey from society to institution and back again to a society they find unchanged. The major challenge facing the justice system in general and secure care facilities in particular is how to assist the boys to achieve resilient well-being not through violence but other, more peaceful means. How could this challenge be met? The study findings have provided some modest, partial answers to the question, and these are presented at the end of this chapter as a list of recommendations.

9.4. Summary of responses to the three research questions

*How are socio-cultural and legal-political perceptions of violent children reflected in the infrastructural arrangements and regulations of a secure care facility?*

The facility is fully embedded in the legal-political system. The 14-16-year-old boys housed in Middletown were placed there by a criminal court order for the sake of correction
and rehabilitation. They are held accountable for the crimes they committed and for that reason are detained, but at the same time are considered as children who need care. The institution is thus governed by rules and regulations regarding both detainment and care. In practice there are cracks, created either by boys or staff, in the implementation of the rules concerning detainment; similarly, the care provided to the boys in their capacity as children was not always optimal, and boys themselves at times played out the caring role they had formerly adopted in their pre-institutional lives.

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

Although the boys’ lives are regimented and controlled by care workers in terms of day-to-day activities and behavior, they are also full of opportunities for creating social spaces in which power differences and hierarchies among them can be negotiated. Similarly, the boys’ everyday lives are unpredictable and volatile. Typically, days in the facility make allowance for instant changes, such as the cancellation of a programme, that reshape the day. In addition, the ways in which care workers interact with boys can be highly diverse, ranging, for instance, from interactions that empower them and acknowledge the boys’ need for constructive attention, to ones that debase them and criminalise them on contestable grounds.

While the boys are supposed to lead a secure life in the institution, this is far from being the case. Boys commit, and suffer from, a range of violent acts amongst themselves, and at times are also exposed to relatively minor forms of violence by the staff. Many of the boys experience life in the institution as full of boredom and insecurity while nevertheless enjoying the positive things it has to offer, like art and woodwork classes in the school. The boys juggle between the pressure to fend for themselves and the opportunity given to them to be a child who is entitled to care and play.

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

The boys experience the violence in which they are involved as perpetrators and victims, as more or less a normal part of life. They see themselves not as criminals but young people with the responsibility to fend for themselves and take care of family members. In addition, they regard violence as a vehicle which is sometimes necessary for responding to situations of deprivation. As suggested in the Foreword of this thesis, identities in communities rife with violence are continuously shifting, with the boundaries between who belongs to the good inside (the home, the community) and the dangerous, criminal outside being blurred and unstable. Regardless of his physical shift from the community to the institution, the ‘outside-child’ still functions alongside, and is intertwined with, the ‘inside-child’. This also applies to the normalisation of violence in their lives: violence remains a part of their lives in the institution as it probably will even once they are discharged.

9.5. Recommendations

i. Firstly, increased attention should be given to the transitions that boys experience when moving from court to institution. Support and minimal preparation can be given to better guide the boys in entering an unknown situation. Creating a ‘buddy’ system for new admissions might be useful. Seasoned boys could be assigned to orientate the newcomers. In this way, seasoned boys gain a form of responsibility and newcomers
are introduced into the general population by an ‘insider’, possibly reducing the abuse of new admissions and making for an easier transition into secure care facilities.

ii. Daily activities for the boys should be increased, better managed and formalised. Boys should be allowed to engage in a greater number of formal activities, including educational sessions. A curriculum could be created for enhancing the boys’ positive development during their stay. Schooling could also be better structured and made more appropriate to the educational level of individual learners, thereby working to reduce the difficulties boys experience when they re-enter the outside school system.

iii. Allocations of staff should be stricter. Individuals with higher qualifications should be appointed as carers and educators. Despite the progress made in professionalising Child and Youth Care Workers, the personal characteristics of prospective carers must be considered to determine if they are suited to the vision and functions of the institution.

iv. Specific training opportunities should be provided to the carers. Courses should include understanding norms and standards within dominant social groups in the region; cultural sensitivity; self-reflexivity; children and youth; and gender issues. In addition, increased supervision, guidance and support should be provided to carers in their interaction with the boys so as to enable the development of more appropriate relationships. Also, carers require psychosocial support for themselves, for example, debriefing sessions. Finally, team-building among staff should be encouraged.

v. Simultaneously, specific life skills (soft skills) and various training opportunities (harder skills) for the boys can be improved, as opposed to a situation in which short courses are offered and sometimes last as little as one hour. Intensive training can be introduced to develop the boys during their stay. The period of incarceration provides an opportunity for boys to participate in various development opportunities.

vi. Efforts to sustain and improve contact and interaction between the boys and their families are crucial during incarceration. Maintaining this connection and influencing the child-family relationship can help to prepare the boys and their families for eventual reintegration.

vii. Further to this, extensive efforts should be made in preparation for the boys’ reintegration into society and their after-care support. Similarly, ongoing attempts at working with the family and child are crucial after institutionalisation. Measures for building resilient families are also critical for decreasing the risk of children reoffending and being repeatedly incarcerated.

viii. The role of the institution should be redefined by creating and improving reintegration and after-care support for the boys. Specific programmes can be developed to educate boys about reintegration.

ix. The institution could also provide after-care support for those who have been discharged, for example by formalising a system whereby previously incarcerated boys can return, within a specific time frame, for different forms of psychosocial support. Boys and their families would then be able to return to the institution for
guidance and support whenever they are challenged during reintegration. Support groups could also perhaps be created for them.