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“I Grew Up... I Was Still Small”: Experiences before and after Juvenile Incarceration in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment and exposure to violence are pervasive in South African townships. Coupled with economic hardships, many youth turn to drugs and crime, and eventually come in contact with the juvenile justice system. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how one young man perceives aspects of his life prior to, during, and after incarceration in South Africa. The study focuses on a semi-structured interview with “Bobby”, a twenty-six-year-old male living in a city in western South Africa. The theoretical perspective guiding this study was Dilthey’s hermeneutics. The interview data was analyzed using Gilligan’s Listening Guide methodology. Prevalent themes include pervasive violence for Bobby at home and in school, drug abuse, gang activity, and crime. Bobby’s experiences often produced dissonant melodic lines – conflicting voices that are in opposition with one another. Two voices of conflict were the voice of knowing his current reality and the voice of evading the violent reality that surrounds him. This study illustrates the need for research to hear the voices of other youth, as well as the need for research on effective school- and community-based interventions to address issues with the maltreatment of youth, substance abuse, and gang involvement.

Violence against children has been a longstanding problem in South Africa (SA; Barbarin, 2003; Leoschut, 2013; Madu & Peltzer, 2003; Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). The most disturbing evidence of child maltreatment in SA is that the homicide rate of youth younger than age 18 is 5.5 per 100,000, which is double the estimated global rate of 2.4 per 100,000 (Mathews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin, & Lombard, 2013). Moreover, in a study of child homicides in SA, Mathews et al. determined that 44% of all homicides of children ages 17 and under were the result of child abuse and neglect. Children are victimized in all primary social settings (e.g., home, school, community) and are often victims of more than one form of violence, including physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse (Breen, Daniels, & Tomlinson, 2015; Chinakidzwa et al., 2013; Clark, 2012; Du Plessis, Kaminer, Hardy, & Benjamin, 2015; Mathews et al., 2013; Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Ndhlovu, 2015).

Child maltreatment is defined as any intentional or unintentional act, series of acts, or failure to act by a parent, caregiver, or other person active in the child’s life, “which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Reauthorization Act of 2010, P.L. 11–320, Sec. 3(2)). In an interview study of middle to low income families living in an urban township near Cape Town, where unemployment rates were higher than the national average and crime rates were some of the highest in Cape Town, children reported being the victims of child maltreatment on a daily basis, both at home and at school. The children shared stories of being beaten by caregivers, making this a “key experience in these children’s lives” (Breen et al., 2015, p. 136).

Other studies of children and adults in SA illuminate the prevalence of child maltreatment (Chinakidzwa et al., 2013; Green & Hartweg, 2004; Maphosa & Shumba, 2010; Mathews et al., 2013; Meinck et al., 2015). In a survey of SA parents, 40% of women admitted to “beating children under the age of three with a stick or belt” (Clark, 2012, p. 83). Younger children are particularly vulnerable (Green & Hartweg, 2004). A study of child homicides in SA in 2009 revealed that nearly 74% of the deaths of children under the age of five were the result of child abuse and neglect (Mathews et al., 2013). Moreover, youth that experience violence at home are three times more likely to be victims of violence at school (Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, 2008).

Furthermore, many SA children witness violence in their homes. For example, 21% of partnered women in SA experience domestic violence (National Department of Health, 2017). Children in homes where domestic violence occurred were 60% more likely to be abused or neglected than children who did not live with domestic violence (Campbell & Thompson, 2015).

Child neglect is also common in SA due, in part, to the high rate of unemployment throughout the country and, in many poor communities, the absence of health care facilities and basic services like clean water and electricity (Chinakidzwa et al., 2013). Poverty and the lack of sufficient food are strongly related to higher incidences of neglect (Barbarin, 2003; Meinck et al., 2015; Noonan, 2012). In recent years, the SA government has established school food programs, free medical clinics for low-income families, and the Child Support Grant to help struggling families and children. However, many children in SA continue to live without adequate access to basic necessities for their physical health and well-being (Barrientos, Möller, Saboia, Lloyd-Sherlock, & Mase, 2013).

In addition to witnessing violence and experiencing maltreatment and neglect at home, violence in schools is a common complaint from children in SA (Clark, 2012). Corporal punishment was made illegal in 1996 through the South African School's Act 84 and the National Education Policy Act 27. However, it continues unabated due to common cultural beliefs (Leoschut, 2013). Breen et al. (2015) found that children were anxious about being beaten in school, and those who were beaten usually did not report it to anyone. However, nearly 52% of students surveyed said they had “been hit, caned, or spanked by educators or the principal” (Clark, p. 82), and almost 50% of students reported being physically hit by a teacher or principal. Most school violence took place in classrooms, and violent crimes like assault, sexual assault, and rape increased in schools between 2008 and 2012 (Leoschut, 2013). Peer to peer violence and bullying are also common in SA schools. Burton and colleagues also noted that 19.2% of youth reported being attacked at school by someone without a weapon and 15.9% reported attacks with a weapon. In another study, 83.8% of students reported that bullying was prevalent in their SA school (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013).

Witnessing violence and experiencing maltreatment or neglect

Witnessing violence, as well as experiencing maltreatment or neglect, can have serious and lasting effects on children. Children in SA who witnessed a family member intentionally hurting another family member were more likely as an adult to carry a weapon, get into physical fights, and threaten or injure someone with a weapon than children not exposed to violence in the home (Clark, 2012). Child maltreatment in SA “is an everyday experience ... it has negative emotional and behavioral consequences, and ... it plays a role in how children resolve interpersonal conflicts” (Breen et al., 2015, p. 131). The emotional and behavioral effects of child maltreatment include fear, anxiety, depression, toxic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and antisocial behavior, (e.g., aggressive and criminal behavior) (Du Plessis et al., 2015; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). The fear children experience due to maltreatment appears to have a silencing effect on children, and those who are abused are less likely to ask for help when needed, which may place them in even more harmful situations (Breen et al., 2015). Attachment relationships, like those between a child and parent or grandparent, are important to overcoming adversity later in life. Unfortunately, child maltreatment at home damages those relationships and creates an atmosphere of fear and tension, which may result in toxic stress in children (Breen et al., 2015; Lowell, Renk, & Adgate, 2014).

Children living in violent homes, communities, and schools may also feel the need to act in ways that will provide protection, like joining a gang (Branson, Baetz, Horwitz, & Hoagwood, 2017). Violent parents/guardians and poor attachment to these caregivers, as well as a need for a sense of belonging, put youth at risk for gang involvement (Cooper & Foster, 2008; Cooper & Ward, 2012). While SA youth as young as 12 may be actively sought after to join gangs (Leggett, 2005), researchers found that gang involvement actually increased the exposure to violence and victimization (Howell, 2013).

Maltreatment and incarceration

The pathway from child abuse to youth delinquency and subsequent incarceration are substantiated in national and international studies (Gilbert et al., 2009; Maas, Herrenkohl, & Sousa, 2008). Approximately 60,000 individuals under the age of 25 are currently incarcerated or awaiting trial each year in SA, a prevalence rate second only to the USA (Noonan, 2012). Incarcerated youth as a group represent some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals in society (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). Their entry into the juvenile justice system, known as the school-to-prison pipeline, starts long before school, with many researchers agreeing that the risk factors for entry into corrections begin as early as prenatal development (McRoy, 2008). From the beginning of their existence, the lives of youth that become incarcerated are troubling and complex (Gie, 2009; Leoschut, 2013).

If we consider the characteristics and life experiences of youth who become involved with the justice system in SA, we see a complicated picture of difficulties and disadvantages. However, no information is available that systematically studies the myriad of influences on youth that may contribute to their involvement in the justice system from the first-hand perspective of a young man living the experience. As such, the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how one young man perceives aspects of his life prior to and after involvement in the juvenile justice system in SA. These findings emerge from a larger study examining the experiences of three young men. The guiding research question was: How do formerly incarcerated SA young men view aspects of their lives with regards to their involvement in the justice system?

Methods

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective guiding this study was Dilthey's hermeneutics (Dilthey, 1976). Dilthey's objective was to find a way to understand (make meaning of; interpret) human experience in order to understand other individuals. From his perspective, language is considered the primary means of access into understanding how people perceive their experiences. He believed the best way to accomplish such understanding was to begin with a fixed textual expression of the lived experience that can be interpreted, such as a transcribed interview text.

In order to fully comprehend the parts of an individual's experience, Dilthey posited that the interpreter must first examine the whole of the individual's lived experience before interpreting its individual parts. This can be accomplished when the researcher enters into what is known as a hermeneutic circle. First, the researcher examines the experience from a bird's eye perspective before honing in on individual aspects of the experience. Having examined the experience as a whole and then as individual aspects, the researcher returns once again to the whole of the experience. This process allows the researcher to arrive at a new, deeper level of understanding of the experience (Tappan, 1990).

Study setting

This study took place in the Western Cape region of SA. Interviews were filmed at a local university and were conducted by the first author. In all, approximately 10 hours of interviews were conducted in hour sessions, with 1–2 sessions per week.

Study design and participant

Following institutional review board approval and signed informed consent, this study focused on semi-structured interviews with Bobby (pseudonym), a twenty-six-year-old male living in an urban area in the Western Cape region of SA with a history of involvement with the corrections system. Bobby's findings are part of a larger study exploring the experiences of three young men with of incarceration. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological model of the systems of human development served as the framework to design the interview guides. Bronfenbrenner asserted that an individual's development does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it takes place within a series of nested and interconnected systems that together influence the child.

The interview guide included questions designed to gain an understanding about the participant's life experiences spanning family, home, neighborhood, school, and society. The questions and interview process were designed and implemented in such a way that Bobby and the first author could explore and discuss areas not otherwise included in the interview guide. At the start of interviews, the first author reminded Bobby that interviews were confidential and that he had the right to terminate the interview, and his participation, at any time. Bobby received no incentive for his participation, but was provided breakfast and lunch. He was interviewed a total of 11 times by the first author to gain an understanding of his life experiences and pathway into and out of the juvenile justice system. With permission from Bobby, the interviews were videotaped. The audio was then transcribed verbatim.

The current study focused on a one-hour interview with Bobby that focused on the microsystem level in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological model (Data available upon request). The microsystem includes those relationships, places, and organizations most immediate to a child, including caregivers and family, friends and other peers, home, and school. The guiding questions for the semi-structured interview focused on two topics. First, Bobby was queried about his childhood: (a) Could you introduce yourself to everyone? (b) What were you like as a child? (c) How did you spend your time as a child? (d) What were your hopes and dreams (for the future) as a young child? (e) What was the best part of your childhood? (f) What was the worst part of your childhood? (f) How was your childhood similar to/different from other kids? (g) What were you like as a teenager? (h) How did you spend your time as a teenager? (i) What was the best part of your teenage years? (j) What advice would you give to a younger version of "yourself"? and (k) What else should people understand about your childhood? Second, Bobby was asked questions about his drug use: (a) What were your views as child and what are your current views about drugs and alcohol? (b) Have you ever been addicted to drugs? If so, tell me about it. (c) If you ever got treatment, tell me about it. and (d) What else should people understand about your experiences with drugs?

Data analysis and validation

The interview data collected in this study was analyzed using Gilligan's Listening Guide methodology (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003), which views each person as being comprised of multiple voices. In order to understand the whole of a person and his or her experiences, we must listen for these various voices. This analysis consists of four steps. The first step is listening to the plot. This calls for identifying the big ideas, the characters and landscapes of the entire story, and the major themes, in addition to what is expressed and what is not. The second and third steps hone in on specific parts of the story. The second step, crafting I poems, focuses specifically on the voice of the "I" who is speaking. "I" passages are extracted from the transcript and kept in the same sequence in which they appeared in the transcript. Each phrase becomes its own separate line of an I poem. By creating an I poem, the listener is able to isolate the "I" voice and attend to the text in an alternative medium, in order to identify themes that may otherwise get lost in the transcript (Gilligan et al., 2003). The third step is listening for contrapuntal voices, or multiple themes of the teller. This involves focusing on emotions, actions, and/or beliefs that were prominent in Bobby's stories during

the interview. The fourth step of the Listening Guide is to return back to the whole of the participant's story and synthesize the findings based on the first three steps of the Listening Guide. The entire process allows the researcher to arrive at a new level of understanding of the participant's experiences.

The analysis began with the second and third authors each immersing themselves individually into the transcript data to gain an initial understanding of the whole before meeting to discuss their impressions. Subsequently, for each step of the process, the second and third authors engaged in individual analyses and then met to discuss their impressions. The results are presented below, organized by each step of the Listening Guide process and including transcript excerpts that illuminate the findings.

Results

Step one: the plot

When Bobby was about two years old, his mother left his father, and Bobby moved to the Western Cape region of SA with his mother to live with her parents. Bobby lived with his older brother and his mother's three sisters in one room of his grandparents' two-bedroom apartment. His mother worked during the week and lived with friends because she said the two-bedroom apartment was too small for so many people. Bobby's mother tried to stay with the family for longer periods of time, but that never lasted. Consequently, Bobby did not see his mother often. She worked in a factory knitting socks and came home on weekends to spend time with the family and bring money, but she always left on Sunday or Monday. She eventually moved out permanently, but Bobby continued to live with his grandparents. In contrast, most of his friends lived with their mothers and he missed having his mother around.

Some of his earliest memories revolve around his grandfather. Bobby described his grandfather as physically and psychologically abusive. When Bobby did something wrong, his grandfather called him names and beat him. When Bobby complained about being beaten by neighborhood kids, his grandfather told him to hit them with his fist or with a brick. Bobby followed his grandfather's advice, but the injured child's parent would complain to Bobby's grandparents, and his grandfather would again beat him. He viewed his grandfather as a tough man, but he also feared his grandmother. He described her as a lion that would kill you if she was angry. She also beat Bobby, and while she beat him less frequently than his grandfather, he said the beatings she gave were significantly harsher.

Bobby's grandfather was too ill to work, so his grandmother worked outside the home. His grandfather woke him up early, right after his grandmother would leave for work at 6:00 a.m. to leave for school. It was so early when Bobby left home in the morning that other children were not yet outside. He would leave the house tired and often preoccupied by the inferior quality of his clothing. Bobby also noticed other children's parents taking them to school, and he said it troubled him that he did not have anyone to take him to school. By the time school started, Bobby was exhausted and had difficulty focusing. He would fall asleep in school and his teachers would beat him.

Bobby failed his first year of school but decided he did not want to fail again, so he worked harder and did well. By seventh grade, he was a prefect, which meant he had to take students who misbehaved to the principal. However, many of his friends were the ones who misbehaved and he decided to quit as a prefect so he could "have fun." It was at age 12, in the seventh grade, when his life began to fall apart. Bobby said he did not have the kind of family he could confide in or that would guide and protect him. He joined a gang and the members became his family. He also started smoking marijuana and said marijuana made him feel like he could get rid of the problems and worries in his life.

At 16, Bobby started using "tik" (crystal methamphetamine), after trying it several times with friends. It only took a few times before he was addicted, and whenever he had money, he would spend it on tik. He also stole money for drugs but said, "this isn't me," and he eventually dropped out of school and got a job so he could buy clothes and drugs. He believes this is when things started to go very wrong for him. He always felt like he did not belong in his family, and he just wanted to get out. However, he found he had nowhere to go and had no other choice but to stay with them. He bottled up his anger and problems, and it built up over

time. Because he grew up in a home with his grandparents instead of with his mother and father, he believed that he did not understand what it was like to be in a family or benefit from the support of a family.

When Bobby looked back at his childhood, he remembered having hopes and dreams for college and a career. He believed these dreams remained unrealized without the support from his mother and father. Initially, he wanted to be a policeman. However, the community viewed police as the enemy due to their high level of corruption. At one point, he was told he had some talent playing soccer and would go far, so he decided to be a professional soccer player. However, a verbally abusive coach angered him and he quit. He joined a street soccer team, but his smoking forced him to quit. Following these failures and his introduction to tik, his dreams were replaced with a focus on his next drug fix. Because he was exposed to drugs over his entire life, he initially did not view drugs as something dangerous. However, his addiction to tik convinced him that drug addiction drove people to engage in aggressive crimes to simply get money for their next fix. Bobby's behavior became increasingly violent and ultimately led to his incarceration.

After being released from prison, Bobby began a friendship with neighborhood Rastafarians (Rastas). He credits them with helping him quit tik by giving him marijuana, which eased the need for the drug. However, Bobby's relationship with the Rastas went far beyond smoking marijuana. They were religious and helped him work through his emotional problems. He would smoke marijuana with them and sit and think about what he did and feel the pain he had caused others. He came to believe that there were people whose childhoods were worse than his and he felt less angry about his own childhood. The Rasta lifestyle made him see he could change his life.

Then, his younger brother became addicted to tik and Bobby wanted to help him beat his addiction. It hurt him to watch his brother do tik and he told his brother not to come home if he was high. He tried to be an example for his brother, so he did not smoke marijuana with him. At home, Bobby's brother was verbally abusive toward their grandparents. This angered Bobby, and he became abusive toward his brother, like his grandfather was to him. He felt like the only solution was to take his brother out of the Cape Town community as soon as he was finished with parole.

When asked about his childhood, Bobby reported not remembering a lot because it was so painful. He would see something that reminded him of his childhood and the memories felt so painful that he would cry. Although his memories are few and far between, Bobby has started to view his childhood as a good one because, in the end, he believes he learned a lot from his grandparents through the way they raised him. He even viewed the painful parts of his childhood as positive because, as he said, those are the experiences that make you stronger.

Step two: i poems

Traditional formats of data analysis and reporting do not always reflect the nuances of the data. However, using a concrete or pattern form of poetry, such as the I poem, helps emphasize the more nuanced nonlinguistic elements, including the passing of time or thought versus action.

I poems are traditionally written as a series of I statements, one statement following another.

The poem "Mommy" begins to showcase Bobby's complicated relationship with the members of his family.

Mommy

I call my grandmother

I call her mommy

I call my mother another name

I grew up

I would tell her she's my mother

I still call my mother another name

I call my grandmother

I call her mommy

By setting apart the line “*I grew up*,” we represent the passing of time and how his relationship with his mother was forever changed when she left him with his grandparents. There is an affectionate naming of “*mommy*” for his grandmother and the cold label of “*another name*” for his mother. Oddly, he doesn’t share the name he uses for his mother. Was that unimportant to him because she is unimportant? Is it his way of keeping distance from a painful relationship?

The I poem “*Uncle*” illuminates the relationship with his grandfather, and again, his struggle with the structure and relationships in his family.

Uncle

*I would always think
I'm not their child
 I started calling my grandfather

 I would call him uncle
 I didn't call him grandfather

I feel like I don't belong
I just want to get out
I had nowhere to go
I had to stay with them*

He called his grandmother “*mommy*,” which may signify his close relationship with her – a direct lineage. But he calls his grandfather “*uncle*,” a title for someone not in the immediate family – not in the direct lineage. The term “*uncle*” may signify the distance between himself and his grandfather. His grandfather was very abusive, so this name may have helped him place his grandfather in a more distant family relationship. More importantly, he didn’t call his grandfather “*dad*.” He seems to still be upset by his father’s absence and not having the normative family – father, mother, children. It might be that he still holds a special place emotionally and psychologically for his absent father, possibly a much-idealized place, and his grandfather would never fill that place.

Bobby’s perceptions are reflected in this poem as the stanzas shift from what he thinks and feels, to what he does, and back to what he thinks and feels again. It encapsulates in very few words how Bobby feels about family. He has never felt like he had the right family and believes things would be different if he lived with his mother and father. As it stands, without a traditional family unit he has trouble feeling like he belongs and wants to exit the situation, but is convinced there is nowhere else to turn, reflecting a form of learned helplessness – “*I had nowhere to go, I had to stay with them.*”

In the I poem “*My Dreams*,” Bobby’s words are the shape of a mountain. He’s going up the mountain, climbing higher, succeeding, and then descends, fails. He tries again, but the ascent is less significant, like that of a man already weak with defeat.

My Dreams

*I started to play soccer
I started to play soccer
I'm good at it
 I can go further
 I started to work on that dream
 I started to join other clubs
 I got less motivated
 I'm useless
 I made one mistake
I got angry
I swear at him
I just left soccer
I didn't want to play*

I started to play street soccer
I want to be a professional street soccer player
I started to smoke
I left that dream
I had a lot of dreams
I see
I want to become
I just left everything
I started to smoke drugs
I just left my dreams

There is a cyclical flow to his words and a sense of momentum in which his aspirations grow quickly. For example, moving from “*I started to play soccer*,” to “*I’m good at it; I can go further*,” and later from, “*I didn’t want to play*,” to wanting to play street soccer and then proclaiming that he wanted to be a professional player. It appears to take very little to knock him down from a temporary soccer driven high – he loses motivation, makes a mistake, and starts to take drugs. Every time he attempts to go for a dream, he does something to subvert the dream, and once he became involved with drugs, the peaks disappear and the road goes flat. There are no more dreams, but there is also no anger or sense of defeat. There is a memory of dreams, but they are now muted and dull by his drug use.

This I poem seems to combine learned helplessness and learned hopelessness. He is unable to solve the problems with the coach except to “*swear at him*” and quit. Does he picture himself as successful? Does he believe he can accomplish something positive for himself? Does he have any hope for his future? Can he act on that hope to make it real? The next poem provides some insight into Bobby’s future.

Still In It

I’m trying to help my brother
I have to take him out of Cape Town
I just want to take him and let’s go
I want to show him there’s more to life

I see him with them
I start to chase them
I will only ask them “what do you want”
I would tell them to go
I just hit you with something
I’m a gang member
I can just call someone

In this poem, we see Bobby open with how important family is to him as he tries to be a savior figure to his brother. He wants to show his brother that there is more to life than what they have now, and he believes the only way he can open his brother’s eyes and change his behavior is by taking him out of the Western Cape. Bobby’s savior stance shifts quickly, however, as he identifies the specific actions he is taking to try to help his brother: through violence, threats, and his connections to seemingly dangerous people. He wants to show his brother that there is more to life, but he has not found that himself. Perhaps when he is speaking about how his brother needs an out, he is really speaking about himself.

Step three: contrapuntal voices

Bobby’s experiences often produced dissonant melodic lines – conflicting voices that were in opposition with one another. Two voices of conflict were the voice of knowing reality and the voice of evading reality. These two voices were so intertwined that they are presented together.

Voices of knowing and evading reality

When Bobby recalls his childhood, he describes himself and his experiences in rapid contrasts. He asks himself, “What was I like when I was a child? ... I was a quiet child.” However, he goes on to recall learning how to hit someone with a brick, a lesson he learned from his grandfather to survive in his Western Cape community: “That’s how I grew up ... when I was still small ... I was trying to stay like I was, the quiet guy, but things got out of hand.”

Bobby has a clear image in his mind of the way he believes things should be versus the way that they actually are. The views are rooted in the fact that he lived with his grandparents and not in a traditional home with a mother and father:

It’s just that sometimes, I feel a bit disappointed in my childhood process because there were certain things that kids do that I didn’t do ... like growing up with both their parents. For me, that was actually the downside of my childhood – growing up without my mother and father. But my childhood was good.

He likes to remember and describe his childhood as a good one, although he also speaks frequently in sharp contrast about the deep pains of growing up. This contrast is also present when he reflects on specific members of his family:

And my grandmother was always the soft-sided one. But, actually, I was scared of her because that lady, she have power, and she know how to sort you out. So, I didn’t actually care about what my grandfather would do, but when it comes to my grandmother I was very scared.

As Bobby recounted the experiences of his life, his voice is actively trying to reconcile what he wanted, a stable loving family, with the reality of his life.

But I was beaten, but actually, my childhood was all right. I don’t actually remember a lot of my childhood because it was painful for me. Sometimes I see something, and then I remember about my childhood and I would start to cry or do certain things like that. Then I would just go and sit in a spot that’s nice and quiet and I would try to remember everything, but I don’t remember a lot. ... as time went on, I start to accept. My childhood, it was a good childhood, because I learned a lot from my grandfather. Actually, from my grandparents. They raised me up the way that they were raised. So yeah, that was my childhood.

The voice of knowing (“But I was beaten ... I don’t actually remember a lot of my childhood because it was painful for me”) and evading (“but actually, my childhood was all right My childhood, it was a good childhood”) runs throughout Bobby’s life experiences. He counters each painful family memory with an attempt to evade the pain.

Moving beyond the pain caused by his home situation was not possible for Bobby, as expressed in the I poems *Uncle* and *Still in It*. There were attempts to find a better situation, as seen in *My Dreams*, but Bobby’s problem-solving skills were often overshadowed by the lessons of violence he learned at home and in school. This was reflected in two conflicting voices – the voice of helplessness and the voice of overcoming.

Voice of helplessness

Bobby describes his early life as being completely controlled by others and he accepted his helplessness as normal. This learned helplessness often prevented him from feeling empowered to solve his own problems. He appears to believe that he had no other choice but to make certain decisions, even if he perceived them to be wrong or less than ideal choices. He often connects his problems back to the absence of the ideal family.

My hopes and dreams when I was a child was to just to grow up with my father and with my mother. I think if that would have happened, then I wouldn’t even be out of school I would still be in college or something. So, I had a lot of hopes and dreams, but I didn’t know where to start or how to begin working on my dreams. And because my parents don’t sit down with me to motivate me, give me options in life, which way to go, almost like guide me, that made me think that I’m not going to achieve anything because my family doesn’t seem supportive. But I had a whole lot of hopes and dreams. But I couldn’t achieve it.

Bobby believed that without his parents, or a supportive nuclear family, he could not achieve anything – he was helpless. By the time he started school, Bobby had accepted his inability to change his situation and had found ways to cope. However, his coping skills were simply ways to avoid physical punishment at home and school, as conveyed in his response to his grandfather waking him so early that he was tired by the time school started.

I go to school, I am tired, and now the teacher want my full attention, but I can't focus because I am tired, and they would beat me. I don't go home and cry to my grandparents, because I know I'm the wrong one in their eyes, so they're going to beat me, so I just kept quiet, kept quiet.

As a child, the accepted helplessness of his situation is evident in his decision to remain silent and avoid a beating. As an adult, every attempt to achieve a dream was undermined by Bobby's choices, which is evident in the I poem *My Dreams*. When thinking about his life dreams, Bobby said,

My dream was I want to be a professional street soccer player but I started to smoke and things didn't go so well. I left that dream. But as time went on, I had a lot of dreams. Something that I see, I want to become it. But as you know you can't ... So I just left everything because then I started to smoke drugs. Drugs only make you focus on your next kick When are you going to smoke it again. So, I just left my dreams.

He perceived himself as helpless when it came to achieving his dreams, so he walked away from them. The voice of helplessness tells of Bobby's defeat in a world over which he has no control.

Voice of overcoming

The voice of overcoming creates the dissonance to the voice of helplessness, but it is expressed in two very distinct ways. When Bobby shared difficult life experiences in which he needed to overcome a problem, the methods used to resolve his problems were either constructive or destructive. His first year of school was a struggle due to his grandfather waking him too early, resulting in his inability to focus. However, Bobby chose to overcome the situation.

I did good in school, but my first year, I didn't pass, so my parents were angry. My grandparents. So, I didn't tell them what's wrong, but when I go back to school, I started to learn more because I want to pass. I don't want to be in the same grade. I was becoming like a senior now in the school, so I became a prefect in my primary school.

There is tension between the voice of helplessness ("my parents were angry ... I didn't tell them what's wrong") and Bobby's achievement at school, the voice of overcoming. In the school environment, he used methods to help him succeed, and by the seventh grade, he "became a prefect." However, the community outside of school brought another set of problems, and, as he grew older, he became concerned with bullying.

Along the way [to school] I would meet with a lot of guys. Trying to rope me in. That made [me take] some weapons to school, so I can protect myself. ... I thought to myself that no one's going to bully me. And because of this, lessons that my grandfather taught me, the way he grew up, take a brick and smash his head, and run – so I started to do that and you know, teenagers, you get aggressive with teenagers and they are more aggressive than me. I had to be more aggressive ... I thought if you stab me, then I'm going to stab you more than you stab me. That's how I started to fear no one anymore.

In the counterpoint between the two ways of overcoming, there is evidence of Bobby's success with the methods used to help him progress academically. However, the methods used to succeed in school and those used to protect himself from the violence in the community took him down different paths in life. When he resigned as a prefect, he set aside the methods that were important to achieving his dreams of college and a career; he was forced to solve his problems in the community using violence, the method he received from his grandfather. When Bobby became addicted to tik, he had to find ways to satisfy his cravings:

And the stuff that you have in your house, like laptops, cellphones, things like that, you will start to sell it because the way you feel the next morning without the drug, you have to take it again, so you can feel good

again. But the more you use, the worse you feel the next day, so that's how bad. I didn't sell anything of mine. I usually go out and rob, or I would steal from people.

His dependency on tik resulted in using methods that harmed others to support his drug use. The counterpoint to this voice of overcoming is how Bobby overcame his addiction.

Every time I would get a craving I would go to [the Rastas] and I would smoke. And I forgot about I wanted to smoke crystal meth now. So, every day, when the craving come, I go to them and I smoke. That's how I started to get off it. I just thought to myself that I can become stronger because there's certain days I can get without it so I started to push these friends away that were still using it. They would come to me and they would ask me, "do you want to smoke?" And I would chase them away. ... when I smoke [marijuana], it doesn't make me go and do crime, or make me think of bad things. It actually make me think about right. And how can I improve on my mistakes.

According to Bobby, the Rastas were reformed criminals who were now deeply religious, and he credits them with motivating him to change his life. Currently on parole after incarceration, he prides himself in having overcome his drug habits and, furthermore, helping his friends overcome their tik addictions by smoking marijuana instead of tik. He is now focused on helping his brother overcome his addiction to tik and to avoid a life that leads to violence and prison time.

But for me, it's hard to see my brother under that influence So that make me almost like, being more of an example to my brother. I saw that if I don't smoke something with him, he's going to look for friends that are using drugs that are worse. So I told him you can come and smoke with me ... this is what my brother to be like with me No matter if I say he's wrong, or he's right, when he's in the situation where people want to stab him, do something to him to hurt him, then I will be the one that would start to beat him and hit him. So that those people can just leave him, and everyone knows that and even knows that I'm not scared of anything. So now I beat him, he's scared of me. I'm just trying to correctify him All his friends, when I see him with them, I start to chase them and they would run. They are scared to come and look for me at home because they know I will only ask them, "What do you want." When they tell me they are looking for my brother, I would tell them go. Go. And they don't talk a lot because they know I just hit you with something or do anything to you. And because I'm a gang member, if they talk a lot, I can just call someone.

The two ways of expressing the voice of overcoming is most evident in Bobby's dealings with his younger brother. His concern for his brother's welfare prompts him to be supportive and smoke marijuana with his brother to reduce his cravings for tik. However, his desire to protect his brother reverts to the methods of violence learned from his grandfather and his connections with his gang. The voice of overcoming creates two melodic lines – one in which Bobby perceives that he has overcome his negative behaviors of the past and another that understands only the problem in front of him and the few alternatives from which he can choose.

Step four: analysis

Determining how Bobby views aspects of his life with regards to Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development is important to his perceptions of his involvement in the justice system. Bobby's understanding of himself and his life pathway is inexplicably intertwined with his feelings about the way he thinks things "should" be. Because things have not been the way they "should" be, Bobby feels like he had no other choice but to make certain decisions, even if they were not the "right" ones. All of the moments of his life are connected to big events and important relationships that have not been the way they "should" be.

Bobby's concept of family is very traditional. His disappointment in family is obvious in his voice of helplessness:

It's just that sometimes, I feel a bit disappointed in my childhood process because there were certain things that kids do that I didn't do. That they got from their parents, like growing up with both their parents. For me that was, that was actually the downside of my childhood – growing up without my mother and father.

His mother leaving him with his grandparents had a profound effect on Bobby, as expressed in the I poem *Mommy*. Bobby's grandmother became his "mommy," and his mother was known by "another name." He still calls his grandmother "mommy" even though he spends time at his mother's house. His older brother was also a disappointment. Bobby's voice of helplessness clearly revealed his relationship with his older brother: "I didn't have any, any, um, actually I have a oldest brother but he wasn't there to protect me around when I'm on my own." Beginning with "I didn't have any" may indicate that he forgot, for a moment, that he had an older brother because "he wasn't there to protect me." This implies that Bobby believes protection is part of the role of an older brother. It also suggests he needed protection. Bobby's description of his relationship with his grandfather, however, clearly depicts his family structure.

... my grandfather was the one that teach me the things that my father used to teach me, but he didn't teach me like he would teach his own son. Because he would tell me that "I'm a faggot" or that "I'm this" and "I'm that" when I did something wrong. When children outside the house, they hurt me, and I cry and I go home, then he would tell me "Are you a faggot? Go take a brick and smash that guy's head." So I did that, and then these kid's parents would come to the house and then my grandfather would be the one that beat me up.

Bobby's relationship with his grandfather was not that of a father, as he states, "he didn't teach me like he would teach his own son," and this is supported by the I poem *Uncle*, in which he says he calls his grandfather "uncle," not grandfather. The use of "uncle" instead of grandfather may be Bobby's attempt to establish a more distant relationship with his grandfather, who did not measure up to his ideas of how a father, or "grand" father, would teach a son. In the poem and in his voice of helplessness, Bobby exposes the bare bones of his relationship with his grandparents: "But at that time, I would always think that the reason why they hit me was because that I'm not their child So, I feel like I don't belong in this family. I just want to get out. But I had nowhere to go, so I had to stay with them." As a child, Bobby never felt like he had a family or belonged.

This early beginning established Bobby's relationship with his grandparents. He did not feel close to them, so he was unable to confide in them:

I didn't speak to my parents [grandparents], even today, I can't sit down with them and have a family talk. It's hard for me because I didn't practice this while I was little, so that was kind of tough. Keeping all my problems to myself.

His feelings of loss for his traditional family influences his later life: "But for me, I wasn't interested in family because I didn't see my father or a lot of my mother so I didn't actually know what it's like to be in a family."

Bobby appeared to be on his own very early in life, guided only by the psychological and physical abuse from his grandparents and the huge gap left by the absence of his mother. He recognized how the lack of a supportive and caring family influenced his life when he said, "My hopes and dreams when I was a child was to just to grow up with my father and with my mother. I think if that would have happened, then I wouldn't even be out of school I would still be in college or something." He appeared to view his lack of success in his adult life, including the time spent in prison, as a direct result of not having the traditional two-parent family.

A contradiction to his inability to succeed without a supportive family is found in his voice of overcoming when he discusses his experiences in primary school. "I did good in school but my first year, I didn't pass so my parents were angry. My grandparents. So, I didn't tell them what's wrong, but when I go back to school, I started to learn more because I want to pass, I don't want to be in the same grade." Bobby found the drive to be successful in the classroom, one of the microsystems in Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development. Whether it was to avoid punishment at home or because he "didn't want to be in the same grade," he was successful in his early years of school. This overcoming of his lack of family support and succeeding in school is reinforced when he disclosed that in the seventh-grade he was a prefect, a student leadership position that comes with special responsibilities in the school. One responsibility of the prefect

was to take students who misbehaved to the principal's office. Some of those students were his friends, which created a dilemma for Bobby, and he resigned his position as prefect.

When he chose to resign, that was when his life fell apart. He joined a gang and started smoking marijuana. His peer group appears to have influenced him negatively. However, his gang membership also provided much needed protection from bullies. Bobby expressed in his voice of overcoming that he overcame the threats from bullies and gangs by joining a gang, taking "weapons to school," and becoming more physically aggressive than those who would do him harm.

When I became a teenager, I thought to myself that no one's going to bully me. And because of this, lessons that my grandfather taught me, the way he grew up, take a brick and smash his head, and run – so I started to do that and you know, teenagers, you get aggressive with teenagers and they are more aggressive than me. I had to be more aggressive. I thought if you stab me, then I'm going to stab you more than you stab me. That's how I started to fear no one anymore.

The link between the influence of family and peers is made evident in the voice of overcoming. Bobby overcame physical threats through violence, which is what his physically abusive grandfather taught him.

Bobby's discussion of his secondary education centered on his relationships with his peer group. He did not share any academic information, like he did for his primary education. In the plot, Bobby described his activities in high school as talking back to teachers and having a lot of girlfriends. His family did not have a lot of money, however, so Bobby, "started to rob and that was before I even started to use drugs. I did do that just to get some money." In the same way he overcame his need for physical protection by joining a gang and becoming physically aggressive, he overcame his lack of money by robbing others.

At the age of 16, his friends introduced him to tik. At first, he refused to try the drug, but his friends insisted and he gave in to their pressure. Bobby's voice of helplessness expressed the power tik had over him. "I'm awake. It's almost like that drug, it wake me up. Because the first thing on my mind I don't care about eat, or what I'm going to wear now. My focus is only on the drug." The plot indicated that he robbed to help fund his drug habit. It was the intervention of Rastas that helped him overcome his addiction.

Bobby described the Rastas as "really religious, when it comes to the word and the bible," which appears to be his religious setting, the fourth part of Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem. The Rastas helped Bobby overcome his addiction to tik:

I would start to crave this drug again, so this one Rasta guy tell me that if I start to crave again I just smoke some. So I smoke and I would feel the craving go away. So every time when I have a lot of money, I would just go and buy me some weed smoke that took the feeling. But now I don't need that anymore. Now that's how I started to get off from the drugs. Actually, I would say it was the Rasta guys that took me away from the drugs.

The "Rasta guys" not only helped him stop using tik, they also compelled him to reflect on his life. His voice of overcoming expressed how he would "sit with them and they started talking about life ... it started to make sense to me that made me think bigger ... when I hurt someone, and when I smoke ... I would sit and I would feel the pain." Bobby said most of the Rastas used to be gang members or "gangsters." He realized that if they could change their lives, he could change his, and he said "that made me actually change."

Bobby has become the big brother he lacked. His younger brother is doing much of what Bobby did, the drugs, gangs, crime, and Bobby believes it is his responsibility to protect him. His method of protection, however, is to teach his brother the same way his grandfather taught him, through physical abuse.

No matter if I say he's wrong, or he's right, when he's in the situation where people want to stab him, do something to him to hurt him, then I will be the one that would start to beat him and hit him. So that those people can just leave him and everyone knows that and even knows that I'm not scared of anything. So now I beat him, he's scared of me. I'm just trying to correctify him.

Bobby said that as a child, his grandfather would beat him when a parent came to the house and complained that Bobby hit their child, even if his grandfather told him to hit the child. Bobby balances between the one who “correctifies” his brother and the one who wants to save his brother. The I poem *Still In It* expresses Bobby’s desire to take his brother away from the Western Cape to “show him there’s more to life.” He also notes his continued connection with his gang and how he can “just call someone” if he needs help protecting his brother. Bobby does not appear to understand the contradiction between his goals and his way of life. When asked what he would tell the “young Bobby” he said, “Go sit with the Rastas and listen.”

Bobby’s expressed philosophy for life is “don’t worry.” He learned this from an old man and it helped him survive in prison. His voice of overcoming said, “When I worry, things happen to me and when I don’t worry it still happens. So now I’m in that state. I don’t worry.” However, he does worry. He worries about how he can get his brother out of the Western Cape.

Bobby has hopes and dreams and his current one is to help his brother. However, it seems impossible for him to reach those dreams, because he gets knocked down and discouraged so easily and remains chained to the ramifications of decisions made for and by him. Now, as a young man on the other side of incarceration, he frequently comments that his childhood was “all right” or even “good,” while in the next breath recounting painful memories. These expressed contradictions may contribute to the lack of momentum in his life. This seems most salient in his remarks about saving his brother. He boasts about being the one who redirects his brother into a more positive life away from drugs and that he needs to take him out of the Western Cape to begin a better life. At the same time, when Bobby speaks about the specifics of how he is going to help his brother, he mentions that he is a gang member, and he can just “call someone” to help address any problems. He believes he is helping others and perhaps helping himself. He believes he is making the right decisions. However, in listening to Bobby, he is still an exercise in contradictions. It is unclear who or what can pull him out of this contradiction.

Discussion

Although Bobby’s voice illuminates only one story, he shares an experience of growing up that is all too common in urban townships across the Western Cape. Like the children who shared that their earliest memories and pivotal moments in life involved beatings from their caregivers in the Breen et al. (2015) study, when Bobby was asked to share about his life experiences, his stories revolved around violence inflicted upon him by his family and learning to become violent himself to survive. Bobby’s story could be the story of many children growing up in urban townships in SA, and his life course into drug abuse, gang involvement, and incarceration sheds light on the consequences that may follow in light of early and frequent abuse and violence.

Bobby continually circled back to reflections on his desire for a traditional nuclear family, with a mother and father raising him, and how everything in his life seemed to go wrong because of his family circumstances. Bobby had a turbulent relationship with his grandparents, no relationship with his father, and frequent lapses of time without his mother due to their economic circumstances. Close relationships with caregivers, including parents and grandparents, are essential protective factors for overcoming adverse challenges in life (Breen et al., 2015; Lowell, Renk, & Adgate, 2014), yet 42.5% of children in SA live with just their mother and another 18.7% do not live with either parent (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Moreover, in many families across urban townships in SA like Bobby’s, relationships characterized by maltreatment and abuse are leading to anxiety, tension, and toxic stress (Breen et al., ; Lowell, Renk, & Adgate).

Violence pervaded much of Bobby’s life. At school, he continued to be victimized by teachers and made to feel unsafe to the point that he felt the need for a weapon and to join a gang for protection. As noted, the occurrence of violence at the hands of teachers and peers in schools is a significant problem in SA schools. Like Bobby, school violence affects student choices, including the decision to drop out, as well as their ability to focus on academics and succeed (Mncube & Harber, 2013). Further, youth like Bobby who experience maltreatment at home and at school often feel

disconnected from these adults and avoid asking for help and support (Breen et al., 2015). Consequently, they turn to gangs for safety and a feeling of “family” (Mncube & Harber, 2013).

Childhood maltreatment increases the risks of substance abuse, as youth enter their teen years and young adulthood (Brown & Shillington, 2017). While it is unclear if Bobby could actually be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), his experiences and comments might suggest this diagnosis. Certainly, Bobby’s use of tik is consistent with the self-medication hypothesis, which posits that youth who experience maltreatment attempt to escape the associated pain through drug use. It may also be postulated that his successive failures, personal misery, lack of caring adults, and poor economic situation may have contributed to his beginning to use and reliance on tik (Peltzer, Ramlagan, Johnson, & Phaswana-Mafuya, 2010). He recounts how his use of marijuana and long conversations with the Rastas in lieu of tik allowed him to feel the pain of his victims for the first time. Unfortunately, like Bobby, many children and youth in SA townships are faced with similar maltreatment, family and school violence, and parental financial difficulties that make them susceptible to substance abuse (Burton, Ward, Artz, & Leoschut, 2015; Chinakidzwa et al., 2013).

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, Bobby did not craft his Listening Guide. As the researchers, we constructed the final narrative that appears here, which may have altered the presentation of his experience in unintended ways. Second, a sample size of one limits the generalizability of findings. Finally, this study was limited by the participant’s abilities and motivation to verbalize his understanding of his experiences and what he chose to share. Rich descriptions were provided to allow readers to judge the degree to which the findings may be applicable to other individuals and contexts.

Implications for practice

Although corporal punishment in SA schools was outlawed in 1996, it remains a widespread practice in SA schools and at homes (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). Eliminating this common practice in society will require more action than simply making it illegal (Breen et al., 2015). The cycle of maltreatment and abuse continues across generations, as children grow up in abusive homes to become adults who are at an increased risk for subsequently delivering abuse to others (Gage & Silvestre, 2010). Interventions delivered by trusted people are needed that target educators, caregivers, and the broader public. The interventions should be designed as sustained learning opportunities delivered by stakeholders such as religious leaders and include information about the risks associated with using corporal punishment (Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011). Furthermore, the interventions need to focus on evidence-based practices that can be carried out in place of abusive and neglectful tactics and promote positive outcomes for children, caregivers, educators, and society at large.

Implications for future research

Broadly, there are concerns that “South Africa lacks systematic research on the extent and range of violence experienced by children” (Mathews & Benvenuti, 2014, p. 27) and data are rarely disaggregated by key variables (e.g., age, type of violence). Moreover, Mathews and Benvenuti express concern that little information exists on emotional abuse or the effects of any type of violence on children in SA. Beyond the need for identification of child maltreatment, there is an urgent need to conduct research to evaluate the effects of current approaches to child protection, as well as the feasibility and effectiveness of evidence-based approaches to the SA context, such as multisystemic therapy and functional family therapy (Celinska, Furrer, & Cheng, 2013; Van der Stouwe, Asscher, Stams, Dekovic, & van der Laan, 2014). Similarly, there is a need to study approaches that address student behavior and school violence, including the training and support for teachers and administrators to implement school and classroom management that relies on proven techniques (e.g.,

multi-tiered systems of behavioral support; Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008; Horner et al., 2009), rather than the prevalent piecemeal approach to addressing student behavior (see Mgijima, 2014). Further, community-based interventions to address the rampant problems with drugs and gangs in schools and townships are needed, given their association with violence (Mncube & Harber, 2013).

In terms of the research on youth involved with the justice system, much of what we know about the experiences of youth prior to, during, and after their incarceration is based on broad survey research of professionals from the SA Department of Correctional Services. There is a noticeable gap in the research; specifically, there is a need to hear the voices of young men who have been adjudicated, delinquent, and served time in prison in SA. If we are to promote a free and just society, we must give voice to the voiceless. We must listen to their experiences in order to begin to conceptualize meaningful interventions and supports to promote positive outcomes. As such, qualitative research is needed that includes interviews with children and adolescents, in addition to the adults in their lives (e.g., caretakers, educators). We must continue to explore and advocate for sensitive means of data collection, as well as analysis and dissemination of findings in multiple ways. Research sharing the experiences of youth at risk for incarceration, and who have been incarcerated, must be communicated to policy makers. However, it must also be disseminated beyond traditional means in such ways that it is accessible and meaningful to parents, educators, and children themselves.

Conclusion

It is evident that many youth in SA continue to face a variety of intense challenges in their lives (Leoschut, 2013), a heightened likelihood of incarceration, and traumatic events if they are incarcerated (Muntingh & Ballard, 2012). Abuse and neglect are all too common experiences for children and adolescents growing up, and the vicious cycle will only continue if society turns the other way. This study contributes in-depth knowledge about the experiences of one young man's life experiences leading up to and after incarceration in SA. With this new knowledge, there are implications for ways in which we might inform policy makers, educators, and caretakers in supporting children and adolescents, both in SA and elsewhere, to lead positive and fulfilling lives.

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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