Research paper

"Children also have rights, but then who wants to listen to our rights?" Children's Perspectives on Living with Community Violence in South Africa

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Contextualisation

The research described in this paper is located in the field of violence prevention in South Africa. It draws on a number of disciplines, with its roots in developmental and social psychology. In its inquiry into children's active construction of meaning, it takes an interpretive perspective. Its emphasis on collective, shared meanings is informed by social constructionism.

Abstract: *This paper presents the research design and shares some of the early findings of a qualitative study of the social worlds of children living with community violence in Cape Town. It shows how children in a community with high levels of violence actively construct 'rules' which help them to make sense of and resist that violence. With roots in history, experience and social relationships, the rules are fluid, sometimes contradictory, and they can be adjusted and reconciled. Paradoxically, they can serve both to resist and perpetuate the violence in children's worlds. The same rules can help to make sense of roughness and fighting in the playground and conflict and aggression in the community. But in contexts of extreme violence, the rules are challenged and some possible consequences are explored, together with the implications for violence prevention.*

Introduction

The extent of violence in contemporary South Africa, and particularly poorer communities, has led to the dubious reputation as a 'culture of violence', in which: "violence is part of a dynamic and systemic cycle that appears to have its origin in the apartheid years when institutionalised violence became a way of life in our homes, schools, and communities" (Matthews, Griggs and Caine, 1999). In the South African literature on children and violence, children tend to be conceptualised as passive victims, who, through the damaging effects of violence, may in their turn become part of the problem, or the "cycle" of violence. With the political violence and oppression of the past together with continuing poverty and inequality associated with high rates of criminal and domestic violence, there is an emphasis on children's socialisation into violent lifestyles (Bundy, 1992; Burnett, 1998; Byarugaba, 1993; Duncan and Rock, 1994). Anthropological and social psychological studies often focus on the role of the family as the 'cradle of violence' (Campbell, 1992; Glanz and Spiegel, 1996; Ramphele, 2000) while the educational literature focuses on the role of the school and educational system (Eliasov and Frank, 2000; Gultig and Hart, 1990; Morrell, 1998). The psychological literature explores the negative effects on children of exposure to violence - post-traumatic stress symptoms, including fears/sadness, attention and concentration, and aggression (Barbarin and Richter, 2001; Dawes and Tredoux, 1990; van der Merwe and Dawes, 2000) and developmental consequences (Barbarin and Richter, 2001). The damaging consequences of violence are emphasized throughout the literature, though some studies raise questions about why so many children seem resilient to these effects (Straker, Moosa, Becker and Nkwale, 1992; van der Merwe and Dawes, 2000). As indicated in the comment of one 13 year old girl in the title of this paper, children's voices remain unheard. Children's perspectives, their active engagement with their social worlds and their resistance

to violence receive little attention in the literature, and it is these that form the basis of this study.

Constructionist and interpretivist approaches to human inquiry share "the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1998) and so offer a valuable theoretical basis for research on children's perspectives. There has been a shift in developmental psychology from an individual-environment dichotomy towards viewing children as active social beings who construct their perspectives through a process of social negotiation within a context of discursive repertoires stemming from history, culture and experience (Bruner, 1990; Gaskins, Miller and Corsaro, 1992; Goodnow, Miller and Kessel, 1995). The implication for research is a focus on ethnographic methods and discourse.

Cape Town Context

The study is located in a community which developed in the mid-twentieth century when people designated 'coloured' under the system of apartheid were forced to move from their Cape Town homes and to relocate in new socially engineered communities in the dusty, windswept Cape Flats. The community today is characterised by social problems, including high unemployment, poverty, overcrowding, substance abuse and high levels of criminal and domestic violence, with widespread gangsterism (Carolissen, Jacobs and van der Riet, 2001b; Jones Peterson and Carolissen, 2000; van der Merwe and Dawes, 2000).

Within this community, the fieldwork was based in a primary school of 660, 5-13 year olds. Afrikaans and English are both spoken at the school, with caregivers opting for their children to be educated in an Afrikaans-speaking or an English-speaking class. Christianity and Islam are the main religions and one-sixth (16%) of the children at the school are Muslim. Children at the primary school face many stresses, with 40% of caregivers out of work, more than half the children living with one parent, and almost a third living in multi-family households (source: School Principal). In a recent survey, more than 70% of children reported direct exposure to forms of community violence (van der Merwe and Dawes, 2000). Resources and support services are limited and non-governmental organisations provide much of the available support. It was through working with one of these, COPES Violence Prevention Programme, that the fieldwork was negotiated (Carolissen, Jacobs and van der Riet, 2001a, Carolissen *et al*., 2001b).

Fieldwork

Ethnographic and participatory action research approaches form the basis of the fieldwork. Multiple methods were used, with a particular emphasis on interviews and a series of group sessions. Thirty-six children participated in the research, selected by age, gender and friendship. Following individual semi-structured interviews with each child, six friendship groups were established, each with 6 girls or boys. Three age groups were represented – with mean ages of 8 years, 10 years and 13 years. These groups met with me weekly in two-month blocks and discussed key themes about friendship, conflict, life in the playground and the community. Each session involved themed discussions, and a mix of age appropriate games, art, role play and music. All interviews were audiotaped, and the group sessions were videotaped. These tapes were then transcribed.

Analysis

Discourse analysis of children's talk has provided the main analytic tool (Cameron, 2001, Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). Discourse analysis aims to "make explicit what normally gets taken for granted" (Cameron, 2001). Viewing children's

development as essentially social, then talk becomes the key source of evidence or insight about their social lives and social relations. Reflecting on the meaning and significance of children's talk is central to this analysis. Such an approach has been criticized for reflecting what people say rather than what they really do and this criticism has some validity. But focusing both on what people say, and on how they say it, gives insight into people's understandings. In talking about a theme, people will draw actively on a repertoire of perspectives available within their community, so in a sense it can be seen as a method for investigating the 'social voices' available to people (Cameron, 2001). Indeed, many social researchers argue that people's understandings of the world are not merely expressed in their discourse but actually shaped by the ways of using language we have available (Foucault, 1972). At the same time, discourse is active and creative and can be seen as a form of "social action" (Wetherell, 2001).

The focus of this paper is the analysis of discourse relating to *rules* about violence. By rules, I mean the guiding beliefs, assumptions or premises with which children make sense of violence, and which are rooted in historical and cultural practices. For this analysis, all transcripts were read and extracts in which children talked about violence, whether in the playground or in the community, were indexed thematically according to the rules embedded. Patterns were sought, including both the shared features and the variability in children's accounts. As patterns appeared to emerge, the analysis took the form of writing – drafting and redrafting – partially reassured by the comment of one discourse analyst that "progress can be judged by the volume of unsatisfactory drafts in the waste-paper basket" (Billig, 1997).

Findings

VIOLENCE JUSTICE

Based on rules:

- Violence is wrong
- An eye for an eye
- Respect for adult authority
- Stand up for your friends

Figure 1: Children's rules about justice

One clear pattern that emerges in children's talk is that violence in the playground or community is balanced, moderated or resisted by a system of justice, seen metaphorically here in the scales of violence versus justice (Figure 1). Violence is associated with a human – and particularly male - tendency towards *"wildness" – "sometimes I'm also out of control, then I can't help hitting children", "it's just in us already", "they're very rough, our class boys. They just want to hit and hit and hit the whole time."* Violence is viewed as inherent, and so to some extent inevitable. The dilemma is how to curb or curtail the natural tendency towards violence, or how to maintain order. Children do this through constructing rules, which underpin the system of justice. The key rules emerging in this analysis as central to children's thinking about violence are (1) violence is wrong, (2) an eye for an eye, (3) respect for adult authority and (4) stand up for your friends.

Violence is wrong

Violence is the major social problem identified by children in this study, both in the playground and in the community. In the playground, concerns focus on fighting and roughness. In the community, children fear criminal and gang violence, as illustrated in these responses by a 13 year old girl, an 8 year old girl and a 10 year old boy, to my question: *what would you say are the main problems in the neighbourhood?*

Shandre (S): People breaking in by there and they like fighting and the weapons that they use is dangerous.

Jenny (J): What kinds of weapons do they use?

S: Knives, guns, and I don't know what still they use. I only know they use knives and guns. Especially here by the shop, here's the shop, then the gangsters like stand there and then, then when my mommy say, "You must go to the shop." Then she say, "You mustn't go to that shop when it's late because they are, they all like crowded." They crowd the shop. Then, so she said, then she say, "You must go to Seven Eleven". Go there to go buy what she want.

Odette: We heard about people what is shooting the other peoples and just around the corner she heard about this lady what was hanging up her washing and then all the gangsters came over the wall and then they put the black bag over her neck and then she was dead next time and her son came home and then her son called the police.

Mikhail: When they drink wine and then, then they drunk and then they throw bottles over your head and then I go inside and they shoot gun and all of that thing.

The view that violence is wrong is evident both in the content of children's talk and in the form in which they talk. In talking with me, children consistently describe their fights as responding to aggression (physical or verbal) of others and whilst they will emphasise the injuries they sustain, the injuries inflicted by them on others are not mentioned. Their own actions are minimised. Timothy describes a fight in which he was engaged: "*A lot of children hit me – tramped in my face…I couldn't even walk when they hit me*." He describes the fight in detail, but makes no mention of his own actions until he later talks about the punishments, admitting that: "*I also hit them a little*".

This distancing of the self from the acts of violence is a further illustration that violence is viewed as wrong, at least when children talk with me. It is likely that their discussions with each other when I am not present will draw on different beliefs. The point though is that frequently in their talk children draw on this perspective, which is a view voiced by the adults around them in school, at home and in the community, as expressed in this discussion about the role of religion in helping 8 year olds resolve a playground fight: "*Because, they look at each other and then they start getting this feeling making friends, so then in their heart and then God say: 'come on man, don't fight with each other, make friends', then they say, 'okay God' and then they make friends*". Here, the authority of God enforces or encourages 'right', in contrast to the 'wrong' of violence.

An eye for an eye

Notions of paying back, retaliation and punishment in response to violence are central to children's views about justice:

J: So Brandon kicked you?
Ismael (I): And he hit me.
J: And then he hit you? And then what happened?
I: And so I got him back.
J: Yeah. What did you do, kick him or hit him?
I: Hit him.

J: And if I ask other children about… does Richard fight? What would they say to me?
Richard: Because the whole day… then sometimes I fight but now only if they first start with me.

Rushana (R): We were on a outing in a bus and so this child hit me on my head, so I just lift my hand like that and so it went in her face by accident, so she hit me hard on the…
J: Mm.
R: …on the head and so when we came out of the bus we just started fighting.

These are typical of children's accounts of their own engagements with violence, which are almost always described as retaliation for aggressive acts by others. Faced with aggression of others, the 'eye for an eye' rule outweighs the rule that 'violence is wrong', and so fighting is justified.

Children do not always retaliate themselves, but they do hold the view that violence should be punished – the offender should be made to suffer. Punishments vary from *"skelling out"* (scolding) by adults and exclusion from school to widespread support for corporal punishment, both at home and at school, as in this extract:

J: And what could stop the children doing that?
Natalie (N): By hitting them.
J: Pardon?
N: By hitting them.
J: Hitting them? So if you hit them it will stop them from hitting somebody else, will it?
N: Yes. When they're hitting every time.
J: And who must hit them?
N: His teacher.
J: Aaahhh.
N: Or his mommy.

Support for harsh punishment is commonly expressed, as in this group discussion with 13 year old boys.

Luke (L): What's that place that the Muslim always go to?
Tariq (T): Afghanistan and …
L: No man.
T: In Mecca
L: In Mecca yes, where if you steal then they chop off your hand.

T: If you steal they chop off the hand.
J: Yeah. What do you think about that?
L: Ja, they must do that if you break into someone's house…
T: And if you steal – and if you steal something very expensive, like if you steal a gun then they keep you in jail for 5 months.
J: So it's okay – okay to chop off a hand…
Randall (R): Ja.
J: …as a punishment for…
T: Stealing.
R: And if you kill somebody they can kill you…
T: And if they say you swear, they chop off your tongue.(overtalking)
?+: (talking to each other –not clear)
?: And if you rape someone then… (?)(mumble)
?: (giggling)
J: And do you think – does everyone think that they should bring back hanging?
?+: Yes. Ja. (all nodding)

In this case the boys are drawing on notions of punishment from outside South Africa, learned perhaps in the media.

Here the 13 year old girls group share their views on the death penalty:

Ramona: She said, "as hulle dood gaan dan moet hulle net maar dood gaan" – if they die they must just die.
J: Okay. Okay.
J: And so does everyone here think that they should introduce the death sentence?
All: Yes. Yes.
J: Why?
Jacqueline: Because the people are scared to die.
Fatima: So there can be fewer crime in the country.

The use of an Afrikaans saying here suggests that this is a view held in the local community, where Afrikaans is more commonly used than English. While Ramona gives a literal translation, the more colloquial meaning carries with it the implication that if you kill, you have to die.

The 'eye for an eye' rule may reflect existing cultural practices and local beliefs about harsh punishment, which were historically widely sanctioned in South Africa (Hamber, 2000), but the rule is quite different from the approach to justice adopted by the present Government, which abolished the death penalty and outlawed corporal punishment in schools in 1997 and has promoted alternative values through, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This perhaps illustrates one of the huge challenges facing the Government in new South Africa – that of converting policy to local practices and beliefs.

Respect for adult authority

The 'eye for an eye' rule recurs many times in the discussions with children about violence, with acts of retaliation being implemented by children or by adults. Children expect adults to respond to violent incidents and to punish the offenders. Almost all children stated that the main problems in the playground are fighting and roughness. Asked what would solve the problems the responses changed with age. Most children referred to adult authority – usually

'skelling out' or scolding by a teacher/Principal. But while the 8 year olds only cited adult authority as a solution, the 10 year olds sometimes also suggested trying to talk about the problem and to sort it out yourselves. The 13 year olds were much more likely to question the effectiveness of existing punishments, which may be ignored or bypassed by taking the fight outside the school grounds. The shift in perspectives with age would be predicted by developmental theories of social cognition, with children entering adolescence exhibiting more anticipation of consequences and critical thinking (Coleman and Hendry, 1990). The peer cultural practice of fighting off the school premises enables children to reconcile the rule about 'adult authority' (within school) and the rule of 'eye for an eye'.

The next extract follows a discussion with the 10 year old girls group, in which the girls have just expressed collective support for parents hitting naughty children:

Simone (Si):	Mrs Parkes it was like on a Friday and this other lady next to us, we heard it, my friend, I heard my friend crying because she was hitting the child with a stick - it was a hard stick and she hit the child.
J:	And what do you think about that?
Si:	Unnecessary.
J:	Unnecessary. What do other people think? Do you think it's okay – did you hear that? What do other people think about that? If you hurt someone, hitting their child very hard with a stick, do you think that's okay?
Faiza (Fa):	No.
Feriel (F):	No.
J:	And does everyone think that?
Shanelle:	You can only hit with your hand.
J:	Only a smack?
Fa:	A slipper
J:	Or a slipper?
J:	Does everyone think that? (overtalking)
Si:	Or a belt.

Here, Simone challenges the collective support for corporal punishment by narrating an incident of parental violence, which reiterates the 'violence is wrong' rule. To resolve the dilemma of two conflicting rules, the group add a new dimension to the 'eye for an eye' rule, which involves judging the relative harshness of different implements of punishment. This extract then illustrates how rules can conflict, and how children are able then to make adjustments, which help to reconcile the rules.

A contrasting perspective on the use of corporal punishment is expressed in this discussion with 13 year old boys about when it is and is not okay to hit.

J:	What about teachers? Should teachers be able to hit kids?
Clinton (Cl):	No.
David (D):	No.
Lester (L):	Only some of the teachers.
J:	Are you saying teachers shouldn't be able to hit?
Luke:	You can ask anybody here I - if someone must hit me, I hit them back. (giggling) A teacher must – I'll hit her back and if she's not happy in the end she knows the rules of the schools.
J:	Okay. So the teacher – so you're saying that it's not okay for teachers to hit because its…
L:	That's a rule of all the schools…

J: …against the rules.
L: …the Government say you can't.
J: Against the law - there's a law about it, okay.
Cl: Ja.

I stated earlier that, in supporting corporal punishment, children often draw on local cultural beliefs which differ from the official Government position. Here though, the children are drawing on their existing rules, such as the 'eye for an eye' rule, but they also adjust the rule about 'respect for adult authority' so that this authority is imbued in the 'law' rather than the 'teacher'. Their own teacher is one of those who have chosen not to use corporal punishment and she may be instrumental in helping children construct this view, which differs from more familiar cultural practices (Burnett, 1998; Henderson, 1996). With the shared assent of their teacher and of the law, the boys are choosing to incorporate this view in their rules and so they, in their turn, also contribute to the changing practice.

Stand up for your friends

Another recurring rule underpinning children's systems of justice is that you 'stand up for your friends'. This can include jumping in to stop a fight between friends or fighting on your friend's behalf:

L: Luke's also a nice friend. Sometimes like if someone want to like hurt me, then I just call Luke and Luke will tell them, 'stop it' and that. He'll tell them like, they mustn't, like they mustn't hit me or he's going to like tell them, he's going to hit them and then they get scared of him and they do nothing to me."

Rushana (R): I was once involved in a fight last year…. One of my friends went to go call my cousin and my cousin just came and smacked the girl."

Fatima (F): Like it's, this one boy, Standard Two or One, when he, like, brought a knife to school, like a butter knife, and so he wanted to stab this boy in my class, Charles - that tall boy.
J: I know Charles, yeah.
F: And so, um, Charles mos don't have a lot of strength anymore because he was in hospital…
J: Yeah.
F: …and so, um, they…He like tried to stab him and so, um, Charles told my teacher and so this boy, Edward in Grade Seven, being Afrikaans class and mos this boy's friend in Standard One and so he, Edward, came to skell Charles out and so Robin jumped in, so Robin and he fought here on the school grounds.

Charles has leukaemia, and so, when he is challenged or threatened by Edward, his friend Robin "covers up for" or fights on his behalf. Within the peer culture "covering up for" a weaker friend or family member is common, and offers a way of reconciling the rule that 'violence is wrong' with the rules 'stand up for your friends' and 'eye for an eye'. Strength, size and fighting skill are key sources of social status, particularly for boys. Weakness is often associated with fear and lack of popularity. In an Australian study of playground life, fighting was viewed with ambivalence – it can be useful and generate respect, but it can also be viewed as a 'pose' or trying to be 'big' (Davies, 1982; Davies, 1991). In this example, Robin, by fighting on behalf of his friend, avoids this ambivalence; he is able to practise his fighting skill, reconcile the rules of justice, and maintain his high social status.

Again the rules are adjusted and reconciled. The paradox here is that the qualities which help to underpin the system of justice are the same qualities which can serve to perpetuate the violence.

When community violence outweighs justice

These examples illustrate how, in their discourse, children are able to mitigate or at least make comprehensible, the violence in their social worlds through creating a code of rules. Within the playground context this code helps to make sense of and so enable children to gain a sense of control over the violence, such that children rate break times highly.

In the neighbourhood though, the rules about justice are viewed by many children as failing to curb the violence. The majority of children in the study view violence as the main problem in the neighbourhood, a view which is expressed increasingly with age, and there are frequent accounts of gang fights, shootings, assault and robbery. In some accounts most of the rules seem to be violated – of adult authority, standing up for friends (or family) and the wrongness of violence - as in this discussion of the social origins of violence:

J: And what do you think are the main problems for children in this neighbourhood?

Simone (S): For all the raping and the, and if grown ups mustn't fight and learn the children how to fight and swear…

J: M-m.

S: …and sometimes my mother and my father have problems.

J: M-m.

S: But then they give it onto the child so then if the child gets used to it then they will get more of that kind of things that their parents do and they pass it on to the child; and then the child will pass it onto the younger ones and the younger ones will pass it on and it goes on-on-on. The child continues on all the problems we have in South Africa.

When the violence flouts so many of the rules children have constructed, it is hard to imagine a system flexible enough to cope with such violations.

Children's immediate responses to violence are often to avoid or escape – to distance themselves from danger: *"Nobody should go out at night", "The last time that man chased me and my cousin with a knife – I don't know for what – so we had to run." "If I hear a gunshot, then I just lie under my bed."* Asked about solutions, the younger groups still resort to adult authority – most often in the form of removal of offenders to jail. Older children express deep disillusionment. For example, asked what might stop the neighbourhood problems, 7 of the 12 children in these groups raised police or prison, but in each case they raised doubts about the ability of these institutions to solve the problems – police take too long to arrive or are in the pockets of the gangsters, people only commit more crimes on release from prison, where they may have become even more deeply trapped in prison gangs. This disillusionment has two possible and quite different responses in children, as can be seen in these two responses to my question about what could stop the neighbourhood problems:

Nicholas: Nothing. They won't listen. The people won't listen. They have to control their own. Nobody can stop them. If you stop them and then they will just go on and on. They won't listen.

David: Night Watch, Neighbourhood Watch. Those are two. I had one in a long time. Because there was one which stopped and I think I'm

> going to make one up now again…And the men walk around at night and they see if the place is secure like.

The first response, much more commonly heard, expresses a sense of helplessness, powerlessness and despair, as if giving up on the codes of rules. Much less frequent are responses like the second, when children suggest the community take action – by taking the law into our own hands, demonstrating, possession of guns or vigilante groups.

Some of these alternative ways of seeking justice can also serve to perpetuate the violence. An extreme example of this is the rise of gangsterism. Here, Luke talks about two of the local gangs: the Americans and the Dixie Boys.

> Luke: You get "Americans". They get to...like they think they're cool. They think they're going to war us. But if you just…let's say now one gang member hurt another member of a other gang...
> J: Yeah.
> 33: ...and then they fight.
> J: Yeah.
> 33: Like here in Lavender Hill there's a lot of killings now. There's, I think it's the "Americans" and the "Dixie Boys" that are fighting. They already killed..."Americans" have already killed about twelve "Dixie Boys" - shot them here in...that's why my mommy and them don't want me and my brother near Lavender Hill.

This extract shows how gang culture, as described by these children, draws on the same rules underpinning the system of justice, yet serves to increase rather than decrease the violence. Children may join gangs as a way to protect themselves from violence and, in so doing, they find themselves opposing the rule that 'violence is wrong'. Luke's account of local gangs gives a chilling example of the 'eye for an eye' and 'stand up for your friends' rules taken to an extreme.

The stories children tell about gangsters seek to render gangsterism comprehensible, but <u>not</u> to mitigate it. All the children in this study strongly resist what they see as the trap of gangsterism: *"Like they say, 'you live a skollie, you die a skollie.' You can say you'll lose your life quick if you're a skollie, or you'll go to prison"*. And, while their rules about justice, reflecting cultural beliefs and practices, sometimes seem to endorse the violence they purport to counter, they much more often express resistance to violence.

Implications for violence prevention

Research which views children, not as passive victims caught up in a cycle of violence, but as active social agents who construct rules about violence and justice, can illuminate some of the complex and dynamic ways in which children understand their social worlds and, though speculative, it is possible to think of concrete instances when understanding children's rules about violence could inform interventions. Take, for example, a teacher who wonders why children seem to ignore her repeated efforts to tell them that violence is wrong. Fights continue in the playground. It may be that the children are not ignoring her – indeed they agree with her – but that in the playground the 'eye for an eye' rule is more powerful. Her efforts may then be better directed at talking with the children about alternative ways of responding to a challenge. She may want to address the 'stand up for your friends' rule by exploring with children different forms of social support or to consider with children ways, apart from fighting skill and strength, for boys to gain social status.

A violence prevention programme may want to help children cope better with the violence they witness in their neighbourhoods. Again, understanding children's rules and what can happen to these rules in the context of community violence may enable adults to support children's continued attempts to resist the violence around them. Take, for example, David's account of the unpunished physical assault on his brother, where he was powerless to help. Exploring adult sources of support for his brother and him, and how he can still provide emotional support to his brother in the aftermath of the incident could help to reinforce his own rules of 'respect for adult authority' and 'stand up for your friends'.

Conclusions

In a social world of discord, violence and adversity, children learn that violence is natural and perhaps inevitable, especially in boys, but that is not the same as acceptance – the children in this study are not 'de-sensitised' or 'numbed'. Rather, violence is to be resisted. In trying to make sense of their social worlds, the children draw creatively on local discourses about punishment and authority, loyalty and friendship. Through their social relationships - with friends, parents, teachers, the local community and wider society - they construct rules, which are fluid, dynamic, adjustable, and which help them to make sense of the social world around them. These rules become part of the children's culture: the "implicit and only semi-connected knowledge of the world, from which, through negotiation, people arrive at satisfactory ways of acting in given contexts" (Bruner, 1986). Extreme violence can so undermine the rules that the active construction so central to children's talk, shifts towards passive helplessness. This is the view of children as passive victims so common in the literature, and it is dis-empowering (Swartz and Levett, 1989). In contrast, an approach to research and to intervention, which listens to and engages in dialogue with children, embedding them within their complex social worlds, can help those children to plant the seeds of change.

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