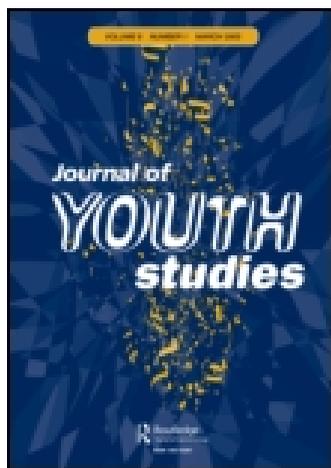


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The rules of violence: a perspective from youth living in South African townships

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Levels of violence and violent crime amongst young people in South Africa are extraordinarily high and, on the surface at least, evidence of lawlessness and a moral crisis. Responding to historian Eric Hobsbawm's 1969 assertion that in order to assuage increasing lawlessness, there is a need to identify the social uses and rules governing violence, this paper explores the settings, forms and experiences of violence amongst a group of 37 post-Apartheid black youth living in an impoverished township in Cape Town. It discusses five apparent rules of violence that emerged from an analysis of youths' accounts of violence that include using violence to defend dignity, the importance of social positions in using violence, violence as means of social sanction in the absence of institutional action, the rules of revenge and valuing the threat of violence over violence itself. The paper offers Swartz's nascent theory of moral capital as an extension of Hobsbawm's theory. It argues that the presence of rules in the midst of violent behaviour does not just mean that lawlessness in society is not increasing – a deficit view. Instead, moral capital argues that young people's use of rules to govern violence may be viewed as a social asset that demonstrates their somewhat rational decision-making despite adverse contexts.

Keywords: interconnectedness of violence; normalisation of violence; social uses of violence; moral capital; youth assets

Introduction

Data of youth involvement in violence, and its outcomes, abound. In order to develop greater insights into youth violence, theoretical lenses through which data might be analysed are crucial. Eric Hobsbawm's 1969 theory that the presence of rules in violent behaviour is evidence that lawlessness in society is not increasing (Hobsbawm 1998) is one useful lens through which violence may be analysed. However, his arguments do not adequately take into account the settings, forms and lived experiences of violence among those who live in adverse and impoverished contexts. This paper, therefore, examines the experiences of a group of young people living in a South African township for which violence is an everyday reality.

Through concerted analysis of collected data, it assembles a set of rules from their experiences. These rules include the relationship of violence to the defence of dignity, the importance of social positions in using violence, violence as means of social sanction

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in the absence of institutional action, the rules of revenge and how the threat of violence is valued over violence itself. It then offers Swartz's (2009) nascent theory of moral capital as an asset-based extension of Hobsbawm's deficit view that the presence of rules proves that lawlessness is not increasing. The theory of moral capital foregrounds youths' rules, strategies and agency in violent actions and allows these to be viewed as a social *asset* (MacDonald and Valdivieso 2001) to demonstrate youths' rational and reflective decision-making abilities and to counter moral panics of 'increasing lawlessness'. In order to achieve these aims, we begin by surveying the literature on youth violence before describing in more detail the two theories we use in analysing empirical data about youth involvement in violence in a South African township.

Violence and young people

Levels of violence and violent crime amongst young people in South Africa are extraordinarily high, though given the country's history of political violence perhaps expectedly so. Youth violence levels are also high in many other countries of the world. Violence occurs in numerous ways and contexts, including political violence, sexual abuse, rape, gang violence, bullying, domestic violence and homicide resulting from interpersonal conflict. A recent report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2011) reveals that young men aged 15–29 are more likely than any other age group to die by violence. The global homicide rate for this age group in 2008 was 21.2 per 100,000 people (UNODC 2011). To contextualise this statistic, Table 1 compares the global homicide rate among young men (for whom statistics are more readily available) with recorded rates in South Africa and Jamaica, two states with high current levels of violence, as well as Brazil and the USA, whose homicide rates, though still above average, have declined notably since the mid-1990s. The data show that violent deaths in South Africa and Jamaica are both considerably more prevalent than in Brazil and the USA, and nearly nine times as high as the global rate. With respect to the South African context specifically, violence was the leading cause of death among 15- to 34-year-olds who died of unnatural causes in 2008 (Donson 2009) and is acknowledged as a public health crisis in the country (van der Merwe and Dawes 2007).

The focus of current research

Not surprisingly given these high figures for youth male homicide, the academic literature has tended to focus on young men, especially those who offend and are

Table 1. Comparing homicide rates among young men in four countries and globally.

Country	Homicide rate among young men (per 100,000)	Age cohort	Year measured	Source
Global	21.2	15–29	2008	UNODC (2011)
South Africa	184	15–29	2000	Seedat et al. (2009)
Jamaica	188	15–29	2004	Cunningham et al. (2008)
Brazil	98.3	20–29	2007	Isfeld (2010)
USA	13.1	15–24	2007	Xu et al. (2010)

incarcerated (Polaschek, Calvert, and Gannon 2009) or involved in institutionalised violence such as school bullying or that linked to gangs (Zimmerman et al. 2004). Current academic literature associates violence amongst young men with aggression and frustration levels (Blake and Hamrin 2007), their expressed need for respect (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Elliot 1994), a sense of 'futurelessness' (Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli 2009), low levels of self-esteem (Alsbrook 1968; Lim and Chang 2009), conflict amongst migrant youth (Baier and Pfeiffer 2008) and political turmoil (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

While there is a growing focus on the relationship between masculinity and violence (see, for example, Errante 2003; Soudien 2011), very few studies in South Africa focus on the other ways in which youth violence is socially embedded. An exception to this is van der Merwe and Dawes' (2007) review of the antecedents of violence. These include early exposure and initiation into violence, neighbourhood adults involved in crime, conflict with family members and the presence of delinquent peers and siblings.

Some scholars point out the lack of a body of youth violence studies that 'reports from the standpoints of youth themselves' (Daiute and Fine 2003, 2) and the importance of such perspectives to inform interventions (Johnson et al. 2004; Zimmerman et al. 2004). However, while in this paper we acknowledge the existence of many studies about youth experiences of violence in general, we argue that what is missing is a theorised analysis of their experiences and actions that asks whether violence is indeed gratuitous and whether our society is in fact becoming more lawless. Furthermore, while many youth researchers and development practitioners are committed to asset rather than deficit-based models of youth development (MacDonald and Valdivieso 2001), this commitment has seldom extended to understanding young people's involvement in violence. This paper, therefore, addresses these gaps and offers a theorised study of the rules of youth violence, something that currently is unavailable to scholars and practitioners.

The two theories it employs, namely, the notion of 'moral capital', and ideas of 'gratuitous violence' and 'increasing barbarism and lawlessness' (Hobsbawm 1998), will each be considered before describing the empirical study upon which this paper draws.

Viewing violence through the theoretical lens of 'moral capital'

Swartz's nascent theory of moral capital arose from an empirical study of the moral lives of South African township youth (2009, 2010) in conversation with current literature on social capital. She describes moral capital as follows:

those qualities, capacities, intelligences, strategies, and dispositions that young people acquire, possess, and can 'grow' in the pursuit of moral maturity, and where moral maturity (with its goal of 'being a good person') is related to educational, career, and financial success. Moral capital consists of accruing a record of moral stance, enactment, and reputation. It can be possessed, enlarged, increased, invested in, lost, gained, and transferred. It is recognised by others, creating advantages, and comprises a combination of personal, social, relational, institutional, and structural features that ultimately convey (economic) benefit to those who possess it. (Swartz 2009, 148)

Moral capital is thus both *acquired* in the process of getting ahead and *required* in order to get ahead. Both depend on following community-defined morally acceptable behaviour that includes avoiding violence as far as possible. Swartz describes various assets that young people acquire (from being good), such as a good reputation, the tendency to remain in education, social skills and social connections. However, in order to achieve these outcomes of being good, she suggests that youth require (1) relational connection; (2) reflective practice; (3) personal agency and (4) an enabling environment. Figure 1 provides a summary of these four main elements of moral capital, with constituent components in each category (see Swartz 2009, 2010 for a detailed explication of each element).

Swartz argues that it is productive to study lived human morality as a moral ecology comprising social, institutional and personal influences and actions in order to offer contextual interventions, especially for youth living in resource-impooverished contexts. This is similarly useful when considering young people's involvement in violence. Moral capital as a theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting youth violence allows for researchers and youth practitioners to unravel violence as a phenomenon. As an analytical concept, moral capital urges us to shift the focus from what is absent in the moral lives of youth (in the case of violence – lack of restraint, anger management and peaceful conflict resolution abilities), to what is present, for example, rational rules governing violence that highlight assets such as differentiation, moderation and reflection. In adverse contexts, it foregrounds young people's disposition to moral goodness despite a morally disabling environment. If an aim of youth development is to nurture or increase moral capital, then moral behaviour can be analysed with regard to the extent of moral capital already available to an individual or to a group. In becoming involved in violence, youth might be said to be lacking moral capital in particular areas, rather than being labelled as generally 'bad', 'delinquent' or 'immoral'. In turn, violence-reduction interventions might focus specifically on discussing the implications of a disabling environment with youth and developing strategies for increasing aspects of moral capital such as relational connection, agency and reflection.

'Gratuitous' violence and Hobsbawm's theory of increasing barbarism and the breakdown of rules

In the context of South Africa's history of violence, its current high violence statistics and the clear relationship between poverty and high rates of violence (De Coster, Heimer, and Wittrock 2006, Kramer 2000), a study of the social embeddedness of violence, its uses and rules is important. According to several national studies, township youth comprise a group especially vulnerable to physical and sexual violence (CSV 2007; Burton 2008; Reddy et al. 2010). Confronted with this evidence, the international perception has been that South Africans, particularly poor ones, must contend not only with a residual culture of violence left over from the many acts of political violence during the Apartheid years (Scheper-Hughes 1998) but also with what has been widely described as the 'gratuitous violence' (Bruce 2010, 13) that seems to characterise the country's crime. At a local level, Robins (2002, 666 emphasis added) reports that 'townships are perceived by middle class suburban residents to be *even more dangerous and "unruly"* than they were under apartheid'.

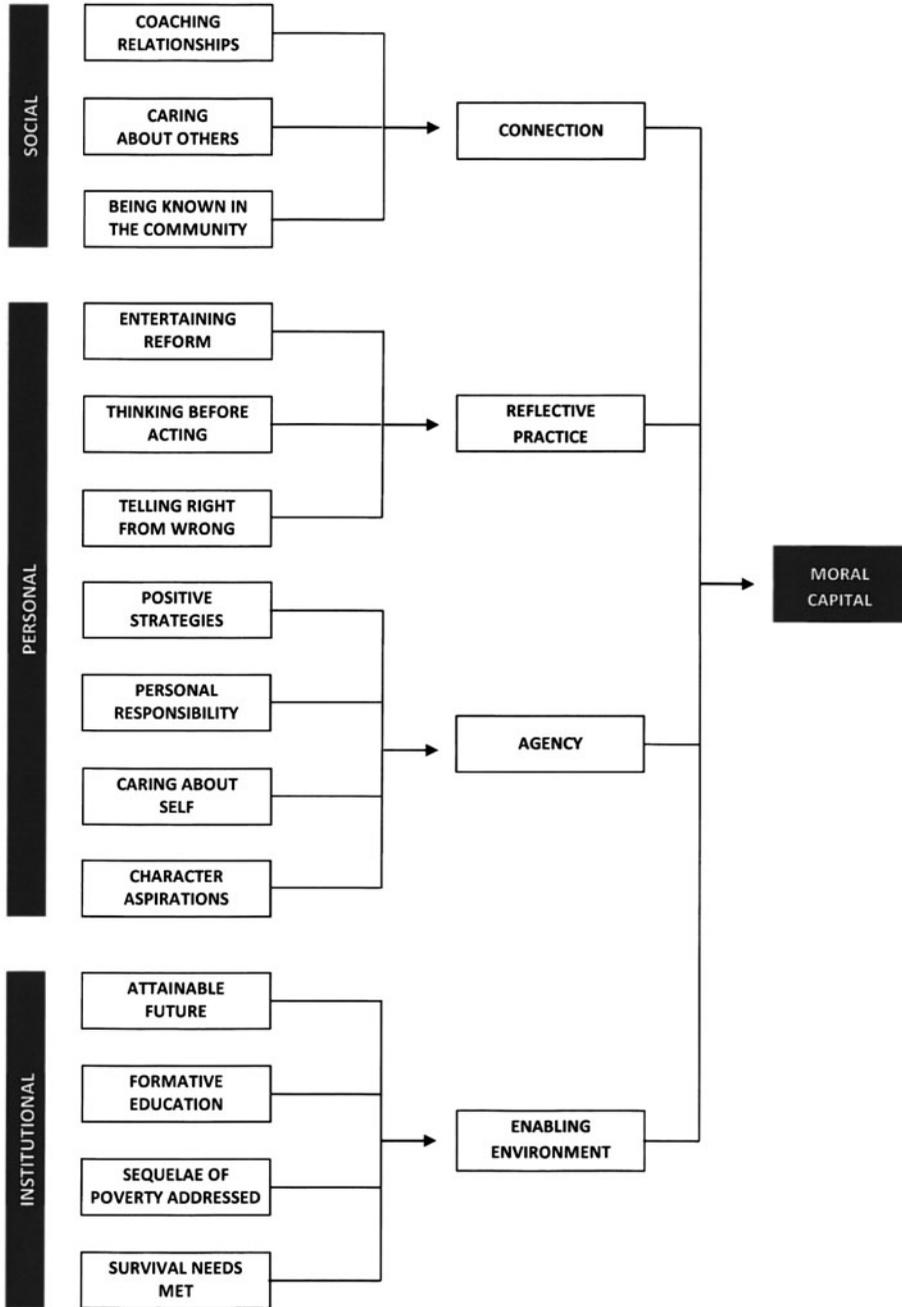


Figure 1. A schematic representation of the various components of 'moral capital'. Adapted from Swartz (2009, 149).

The *Oxford Dictionaries* (2010) defines a gratuitous act as 'uncalled for' or having been 'done without good reason'. Though Bruce (2010) does not take an apologist stance on South African crime, he does refute the notion that the phenomenon of

violent crime prevails without some sort of motive. He argues that violence has both 'expressive and instrumental motivations' (Bruce 2010, 13), including 'violence that expresses anger, hatred or the need to feel respected or in control' (Bruce 2010, 14). He claims these motivations should be distinguished before describing violence as 'gratuitous'.

The question regarding the gratuitous or, otherwise, nature of violence has received focused attention by the renowned late historian Eric Hobsbawm. In his seminal piece, entitled 'The Rules of Violence', first published in 1969, he argues that:

[Since] we are probably once again moving into an era of violence within societies . . . we had better understand the social uses of violence, learn once again to distinguish between different types of violent activity, and above all construct or reconstruct systematic rules for it. (Hobsbawm 1998, 305)

According to Hobsbawm, rules assuage lawlessness and understanding the dynamics of violence requires an exploration of individuals' lived experience. He asserts that 'genuinely violent societies are always and acutely aware of these "rules" . . . because private violence is essential to their everyday functioning' (Hobsbawm 1998, 301). Though Hobsbawm recognises the personal aspect of violence, he frames a resurgence of violence in temporal-historical terms, referring to a new 'era' of conflict. In contrast, when social scientists explore the phenomenology of violence, they always embed these into the larger social matrix and explain the social forces involved in local manifestations of violence (Walter 1964; Farmer 1996).

In a subsequent paper, Hobsbawm predicts the rise of an era of 'barbarism' or lawlessness, the genesis of which he views as 'the disruption and breakdown of the systems of rules and moral behaviour by which *all* societies regulate the relations among their members' (Hobsbawm 1994, 45). Hobsbawm is quite clear that he understands barbarism to be 'the reversal of what we may call the project of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, namely, the establishment of a universal system of such rules and standards of moral behaviour, embodied in the institutions of states dedicated to the rational progress of humanity' (Hobsbawm 1994, 45). In this, he demonstrates an affinity with philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau, Enlightenment thinkers 'that display strong agreement on the violent and disruptive effects of barbarism' (Neilson 1999, 81). This Enlightenment paradigm, which contrasts the violence and oppression of a pre-modern society with the supposed rationality and progress of a modern and civilised society, portrays an environment in which gratuitous violence might easily thrive. While the project of modernity has been widely criticised by post-modern scholars, not least for its ambivalence towards the violence and oppression committed in the name of civilization, various pronouncements of a 'moral crisis' (Rauch 2005, 9) within South African society seem to echo Hobsbawm's perspective.

While the data on youth involvement in violence tell a particular story of the extent to which young people are involved in and affected by violence, it is the personal stories of daily encounters with varied forms of violence that reveal a more textured portrait of the individual and group experiences of youth violence in South Africa's townships. What might at first glance seem like gratuitous violence is often more accurately described as an expressive and reasoned act. In order to illustrate how violence is experienced and structured and the apparent rules which govern it,

this paper foregrounds the voices of young people's raw experiences of violence as both victim and perpetrator. It probes the phenomenon of violence from *their* perspective and captures *their* analysis of what is going on and why it goes on. It describes the 'social uses' of violence in everyday township life and demonstrates the moral meanings and rules of violence in young lives and on township streets.

Ultimately, this paper confronts Hobsbawm's anxieties regarding the breakdown of rules of violence to argue that they undoubtedly remain intact and evident – although some remain 'barbaric' at heart. It responds to his call to identify or 'construct systematic rules' for violence, though these may not appear civil at first or at all. Furthermore, this paper contends that young people's sensitivity to the rules of violence indicates a rational awareness of their actions, though a reflective deficit means they frequently fall short of the moral standards they set themselves (Swartz 2009).

Research methodology

The study upon which this paper draws (reported in detail elsewhere, see Swartz 2009), explored how young people living in an impoverished South African community understand, articulate and enact the concept of morality. It foregrounded the social and cultural contexts of young people's lived morality and asked how young people who live in adverse contexts develop moral lives; what difference poor schooling, partial-parenting, a history of dehumanising racial subjugation and the normalisation of violence make to their lived morality; and how they retain their humanity in the midst of filthy environments, struggles for survival, the physiological effects of poverty, the absence of recreation and the widespread availability of alcohol and drugs.

The study site was a school in Langa, a peri-urban township near Cape Town, although young people attended school from both Langa itself and nearby townships. Townships are under-resourced, ill-serviced residential areas created by the segregationist policies of the Apartheid government, especially between 1948 and 1994. They have similarities with a favela in Rio de Janeiro, a slum in Calcutta or Nairobi, the barrios of Caracas and Mexico City, and to some extent with British council estates and the ghettos of urban America. In colloquial terms, a township is often referred to as *ikasi*.

Thirty-seven young men and women, aged between 14 and 20, were followed over the course of 16 months. The majority of these youth were in Grade 9 (usually aged 14–15) and attended a local school or dropped out of school over the course of the study. The research design combined conventional elements of ethnography such as participant observation of young people in a local school and in their communities, focus groups around particular questions and activities and in-depth interviewing. A short survey questionnaire was also used mainly as a discussion starter. In this paper, we report primarily on qualitative interview and observational data about violence. While the interviews were conducted with the 37 primary participants, observations involved a wider range of youth as is usual in an ethnographic study.

A series of three interviews were conducted with each participant by a researcher with extensive experience in youth work and who was able to establish rapport over time. The 'rules of violence' that emerged followed intensive inductive coding of interview data, written observational and fieldwork notes and lengthy subsequent

analysis. After the initial exercise of coding all data aided by Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, themes relating to violence and reasons for violence were prominent and pervasive. Individual case studies of both young men's and young women's experiences were then compiled; these were used to compare and contrast experiences of, and justifications for, violence. From these data, we noticed clear patterns and clusters of responses out of which 'rules' could be recognised. While we initially compiled a much longer list of rules, after intensive analysis and in conversation with other research and literature on youth violence in general, we amalgamated this more extensive list into a set of five rules that covered, most coherently, individual and group responses to violence.

Our list is, therefore, a crafted set of rules that others may have constructed differently. Consequently, our analysis makes no claims to being representative of all South African youth. However, what emerge from the data are themes useful for building, from participants' perspectives, a schema of rules that is constitutive of their everyday uses of violence.

At the outset of the study, youth participants were asked to speak about their understanding of 'right' and 'wrong', and to provide examples of their own 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour. Numerous accounts of 'wrong' behaviour included violence of various sorts. The examples we have used illustrate the range of violence in which young people were involved. Luxolo, for example, stabs her cousin for taking meat off her plate at a Sunday lunch and witnesses vigilante violence and violence during a housebreaking. Andile kicks and beats a female school friend to defend his mother's honour. Andiswa beats her boyfriend's head against a wall for treating her 'like a doormat'. Thulani doesn't defend himself when his mother beats him, leaving him with a broken nose. Ingwazi gets stabbed in the head by a peer but takes no revenge because the perpetrator, like Ingwazi, was drunk and pays for Ingwazi's transport to hospital. Vuma defends his jacket to the point of violence (even death) in order to safeguard his dignity in township life. Siphos uses violence in robbing people and hits girls when he feels they are laughing derisively at him.

Without exception, all 37 young people described incidents of violence to which they were exposed or involved in. What differed, however, was the extent to which young people perpetrated or were affected by violent acts. For the young people, whose stories we highlight in this paper, the *range* of their exposure was typical of that of the whole group of participating youth, but the *extent* to which these particular youth were exposed or involved was considerably higher than most. Their stories serve to provide the details and allow the reader in some small sense to become familiar with particular individuals as they describe their encounters with violence. For ease of reading, [Table 2](#) provides a summary of their demographic characteristics.

Five moral rules governing interpersonal violence amongst youth in South Africa

According to Swartz (2009, 104 emphasis in original) morality is best understood in multiple dimensions as '*doing the good . . . knowing the good, desiring the good, and having a moral self-identity*'. Each story related in this paper by a young person was in response to a particular interview question that asked them to relate the things they had done that were morally 'wrong' or 'bad'. It was clear, therefore, that the young people in this study understood the acts of violence they related to be morally

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of young people referred to in this paper.

Pseudonym	Age	School/Grade	Sex	Area
Andiswa	15	School B/Grade 10	Female	Langa
Thulani	16	School B/Grade 9	Male	Langa
Sipho	17	School A/Grade 9	Male	Kuils River
Vuma	19	School A/Grade 9	Male	Nyanga
Luxolo	19	School A/Grade 9	Female	Langa
Ingwazi	19	School A/Grade 9	Male	New Crossroads
Andile	19	School A/Grade 9	Male	Langa

wrong. In finding evidence of ‘rules’ in these young people’s uses and understandings of violence, several elements of moral capital emerge as indications of the ‘tools’ young people already have – relational connections are prominent – as well as those they have not yet attained, specifically reflective practice, which is the ability to take stock of a situation before acting.

We now describe these rules and examine them in light of the theory of moral capital and in the context of a disabling and impoverished environment. The five apparent rules that govern township violence are neither all-encompassing nor representative of rules governing violence in all of South Africa. What is demonstrated is the way in which violence, to a greater or lesser extent, impacts on young people’s lives at every level of township life – home, school, streets and community. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in interviews young people spoke of multiple contexts, forms and uses of violence. These are offered as focal points for discussion and ongoing research.

Rule one: violence is justified to defend the dignity of significant others and self

The first rule to emerge is that violence is acceptable to defend the dignity of individuals linked through a significant personal relationship. Thus Andile, a 19-year-old young man, living with his unemployed mother, who has felt much anger and shame due to his father’s deliberate absence from his life, recounts a fight he had with a female classmate: ‘Me and Nokothula we used to make each other jokes . . . Then [one day] she swear my mother out. Then I said to her “Haai – you mustn’t swear my mother out, that’s wrong”’. After Nokothula ignored his warning and repeated her insult, a fight ensued that involved kicking, scratching, hitting and biting. ‘The problem’, Andile stated, ‘is I like my mother very much. Because I don’t have a relationship with my father . . . My mother, she does everything for me’.

In another instance, Sipho, a furtive and angry 17-year-old young man, asserted that ‘my mother is dead *neh*, so I don’t care about another person dying or something’. This sort of callousness is extreme but highlights the centrality of certain relationships in determining the moral choices and perspectives of individuals. While Andile’s violent behaviour will undoubtedly act to his detriment by undermining his reputation as he navigates better life chances, perhaps he perceives the alternative outcome as worse: a breakdown in his central relational connections which might signify a blow to the foundations of his moral capital. In contrast, Sipho’s remarks indicate that he lacks the relational connections that are a feature of moral capital and perhaps does not feel constrained by the same rules as Andile. In the original

study, Siphos was portrayed by peers as a *skollie* (or gangster) – someone who lives their life predominantly outside of home and school and whose ‘moral positioning was one of *ignoring* moral codes’ (Swartz 2009, 78).

Rule one, furthermore, extends to protecting your own dignity, in this instance tied to property. Vuma, a 19-year-old young man, provides a clear analysis of why his social position propels him into violence:

I didn’t kill – but almost. I was drunk you see *ish* . . . I stabbed them like in the tavern. One of them like he stabbed me here [points to shoulder] . . . *I have no choice* . . . I was carrying a knife . . . for protection – you see there are guys who can rob you with the knife . . . They take the shoe with the knife, or your clothes you’re wearing. So like [pause] I grew up in a township so . . . *if someone want to rob me he has to kill me first* you see ‘cos I can’t [laughs] strip my jersey or give him my things. No, I cannot do that. If I can hear it is money he want – that money he’s supposed to take it but *not while I’m standing*.

Within the framework of moral capital, individuals would ordinarily desire to do good in order to maintain or enhance their public esteem (manifest in their community reputation) and cement their relational connections. One might question, therefore, why Vuma would turn to violence if he, like the other respondents, perceives it as morally ‘wrong’. However, the situation Vuma describes of maintaining a tough *ikasi* posture so as not to be taken advantage of, almost certainly points to a paramount need to retain his sense of personal worth (caring about self), even though he may as a result have to confront the disapproval of his close acquaintances. In the event his reputation suffers, he, nevertheless, retains value in his own eyes and, therefore, the sense that he can define a path that gives him moral and economic mobility. This is echoed by Andile’s explanation that his use of violence is in defence of ‘my pride . . . and my mother’ rather than for group status.

This interpretation of the need to be respected and to feel self-respect resonates with 15-year-old Andiswa’s desire to protect herself, especially in the face of her sense of powerlessness over the physical assaults she mentions her parents had to endure during the Apartheid struggle. She told of an encounter with her previous boyfriend in which she repeatedly hit his head against a brick wall because he treated her ‘like a doormat’. Her violent response appears as an attempt to maintain her sense of self-respect and as a demonstration, as much to herself as to others, of her control over her social interactions.

The narratives examined thus far have revealed (dis)respect and honour as central and interrelated motivators of violence (see also Anderson 1999 and Bourgois 2003). This was especially notable in the young men’s stories, as Siphos demonstrates in the following comment:

When [girls] disrespect me you see . . . [when] you walk like past a girl . . . they are laughing and I hate that. I just look back and see, okay, who’s laughing. Maybe, I just pick a girl here, beat her up . . . with the fist, a bottle, anything.

Furthermore, Andile’s statement that ‘our respect are all we have in *ikasi* – we don’t have the respect that rich people are having from good jobs and nice cars’ encapsulates how fragile a concept is self-respect for young people living in impoverished communities. There has been much written in other contexts, including

South Africa, USA and Colombia, about the way in which respect is intimately tied to men's ideas of their own masculinity (Johnson et al. 2004; Zubillaga 2007; Bhana, de Lange, and Mitchell 2009). Indisputably, there are complex power dynamics at play in these circumstances, but township youth's adherence to a rule of violence that governs their defence of personal agency – their care for certain character aspirations – sheds light on their moral ways of being, even though these may be 'morally fraught in many respects' (Swartz 2010, 323).

Rule two: social positions determine the freedom individuals have to use violence

A second rule, related to the first in its emphasis on locatedness in *ikasi* life, is that one's position in society determines the freedom that a person has to use violence. This is particularly evident when considering gang members and the violence in which they partake. Siphso, involved in the Young Moscow gang in Langa, had this to say of the local lore of 'gangsterism':

If you have the guts – maybe to kill someone . . . in front of his parents . . . [then you] can be a big Moscow . . . it's only the gun that matters. Because like the Young Moscos *neh* – they don't kill people. They can stab you but not to death . . . but [the older guys] they can even go killing inside your house, in front of your family. That's gangsterism.

Drawing on a utilitarian theory of violence, the purpose of the violence related by Siphso is to gain social mobility, associated with more money and power. The prevalence of this sort of instrumental violence recalls Hobsbawm's concern that the ostensible breakdown of traditional modes of regulation might result in a situation approaching 'Hobbesian anarchy' (Hobsbawm 1994, 53), such that the state's loss of control of its citizens would lead to unrestrained struggles between individuals for power and property. Though such a rule governing social mobility might seem alarming, perceived through the lens of moral capital, individuals who act in accordance with it display a form of agency, one of the four major features of moral capital.

Young people also articulated the rule that violence is acceptable and justifiable when administered by parents and how self-defence here is unacceptable. Sixteen-year-old Thulani told of having his nose broken by his mother. When asked why he had not defended himself he replied, 'because I can't, I can't, she's my mother. So I can't beat my mother. It's wrong'. In Thulani's moral hierarchy, respect trumps self-defence, and retaliation is not an option because of the position his mother occupies as parent.

Rule three: violence is acceptable when individuals transgress a group's social norms

The third rule to emerge from these youth is that violence is acceptable when individuals flout a group's moral code. Vigilantes are commonly described as taking the law into their own hands once they perceive official sources of intervention to have failed; stories of 'street justice' appear regularly in the South African press (South African Press Association 2006; Mackay 2012). Luxolo, a stocky, tough, 19-year-old young woman, drew attention to community violence, with vigilante justice being a key vehicle through which violence is normalised. Young people

become accustomed to seeing it occur not only with community involvement but also with their apparent sanction. Near the beginning of the study, Luxolo related a harrowing account of vigilante violence in which a suspected rapist was taken to a nearby park, beaten with a concrete block and, finally, immolated by having a burning brazier tipped over his head.

While vigilantism and unregulated mob violence might easily be tied to evidence for increasing lawlessness in society, Buur and Jensen (2004) note how vigilante groups are themselves pivotal in the production of ‘moral communities’ (145). The South African Constitution, popularly lauded as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, inscribes a moral community in terms of what is and what is not morally and legally acceptable. Yet there exist numerous moral orders within the South African ‘community’, all of which delineate their own modes of justice according to moral codes well known amongst locals. This was evinced to some extent in Luxolo’s assertion that street committees did not always beat people who committed crimes – sometimes they expelled them from the community. A *skollie* would return home to find his possessions had been put on the street and his shack padlocked. He had no choice but to leave the community on threat of being beaten ‘until he was scrap’ or even killed. This was just one of numerous variations of stories of street committees meting out their own form of justice according to the offence committed.

The way in which vigilante groups act to enforce their own set of norms is also starkly evident in the practice whereby young men consider it their job to ‘cure’ lesbians by raping them. This so-called ‘corrective rape’ is known to occur frequently in South African townships (Mufweba 2003; Reddy et al. 2010). As one form of group violence, it occurs not in response to injustice but in response to those who contravene a perceived social norm – in this case homosexuality, especially lesbianism. This is a particularly brutal act of violence, highlighting again how the rules of violence can themselves be barbaric. How this barbarism can articulate with the idea of moral capital is discussed later.

Rule four: violence or revenge is not justified in the presence of apology or offer to pay damages

Ingwazi, a 19-year-old young man, recounted an instance when an acquaintance, at whom he swore when he was rebuffed from a drinking circle, hit him over the head with a drinking glass. Surprisingly for someone who has been seriously assaulted, he focused on his own actions, saying that he provoked his assailant, that they were friends and that the acquaintance had not intended for it to happen. When asked whether there would be retaliation, he stated quite vehemently that he wanted ‘peace’. Besides which, his attacker had paid for transport to get him to the hospital and had taken care of his medical expenses. For Ingwazi, drunken violence between acquaintances belonged in a particular category. The fourth rule to emerge, then, is that retribution should not be taken if the perpetrator expresses their regret and pays damages – even more so if alcohol has driven the violent action.

The ‘relational connection’ that characterises several of the case studies described has already been discussed. The vignette of drunken violence described above points to another of the major features of moral capital, namely, ‘personal agency’ (Swartz 2009, 320). Young people’s moral agency was pervasive as they described ‘struggles to reform, as well as the way in which they displayed responsibility for their

behaviour' (Swartz 2009). For Ingwazi, it was essential that his assailant apologised and took responsibility for the transport costs. Equally, he felt compelled to assign some blame to himself. Revenge is an important motif in violence amongst youth in general (Errante 2003). Indeed, the youth in the study made it clear that if someone stabbed you, you (and your friends) 'hunted' them down to retaliate. Considered in this light, the incident between Ingwazi and his acquaintance is conspicuous for its peaceable outcome. The process by which peace was achieved on this occasion is particularly salutary because it reveals the conventions of peace making. That is, the rules of revenge dictate that it is not enough to know someone but that the parties involved in a fight must first admit their agency and culpability in the incident before voluntarily taking responsibility for making reparations.

The act of admitting one's agency, which appears to challenge Hobsbawm's notion of the inexorable attrition of moral values, extends to the conflict that occurs between parties who are unacquainted with each other. However, this process differs in that the payments for the damages more often represent instrumental reparations, as opposed to personal acceptance of moral wrongdoing. Ingwazi, on another occasion, noted that in the case of violence associated with robbery, paying damages is the best way to make amends for the property taken and the physical pain caused.

Rule five: the threat of violence should be pursued, rather than violence itself

In discussing cases of housebreaking, young people acknowledged that violence often played a part in these events. Notably, though, youth emphasised that violence usually occurs as a result of surprise and fear, not premeditation. It is the *threat* of violence that young people hope will lubricate the robbery, not violence itself. When Luxolo was asked about the use of weapons during housebreaking she replied:

It was only the third time, I was, I was going with [a friend] . . . And then at the top of the wardrobe we found a gun and then he took it. Yoh! But he didn't even last a month, a month later he was arrested with that gun.

As evidenced by recent crime statistics in South Africa, more incidents of unarmed 'burglary' (480,000) were reported than 'common robbery' and 'robbery with aggravating circumstances', i.e. with a weapon or use of violence (150,000) (South African Police Services 2012). This is reflected amongst the young people interviewed in this study; for those who were involved in housebreaking and theft, these were conducted with the threat of violence rather than intentionally with weapons (although weapons encountered in the event were used as illustrated above). Few resorted to guns; for most when a weapon was used, knives were preferred since it was easier to inflict graded harm with a knife than with a gun.

However, despite plans to the contrary, burglaries frequently end up in violence since they are opportunistic and unplanned to begin with, and when combined with the artificial courage of drugs and fear are apt to spiral out of control. Luxolo describes an incident of housebreaking that turned to unplanned violence:

Both of us were in the lounge we heard the keys . . . but it was only one person. It was a boy and my friend hit him with his fist and then he fell down. He had a pizza in his hands. And when he fell we got out the door and we ran.

She, and others, concluded that it is best to choose victims judiciously so as to minimise the possibility of violence, or violent reprisal if caught.

Discussion

Categorising young people's experiences and explanations of violence into five discrete rules has been no simple task. Frequently, there are overlaps, sometimes contradictions. Partly, this suggests that it may in fact be too early to call these 'rules'. Certainly, the small sample of youth means that conclusions drawn are specific to the area in which the study was undertaken. Any broader application of the conclusions must be tentative and exploratory, though there is reason to expect a good degree of applicability in similar settings in South Africa. Despite these limitations, two clear themes emerge from the study as a whole, and these rules in part. One concerns the moral meaning attached to violence by these youth, while the other is the question of whether these rules can be considered 'civil' in any way, given that the outcome, that of violence, remains 'barbaric' and 'lawless'.

Interrogating the civility of youth's rules through the lens of moral capital

Hobsbawm's basic thesis is that the presence of rules in society, including those that govern violence, is evidence that lawlessness is not increasing and that rules prevent the rise of 'barbarism'. In this paper, we argue that not only do rules exist in youth violence but that the existence of these rules may be also seen as a form of moral capital. Specifically, the presence and substance of rules one to five reflect the agency youth have in recognising the rules, and the relational connections that animate, but do not justify, several rules. Even if the rules are finally judged to be less than civil, seen through the lens of moral capital, their relationship to township youth violence gives insight into how young people's adherence to the rules opposes the notion that anarchy is rising and that a moral crisis is at hand. On the contrary, youth living in an adverse environment characterised by violence develop capabilities that allow them to work towards moral goodness despite lacking a formative education and a clearly attainable economic future. The rules that govern violence are perhaps appalling, but they, nonetheless, demonstrate the presence of moral capital.

Of course, not all commentators agree with the thesis that violence is governed by rules. Niehaus (2009), for example, draws on his study into homicides committed in Bushbuckridge, a town in South Africa's Mpumalanga province, to assert that 'most homicides that occurred were the unanticipated consequence of men striking out in moments of anger' (16) and that it is this emotional state, frequently brought on by intoxication, 'that expresses the very antithesis of civilised conduct' (29). Niehaus argues that the 'unconstrained behaviour' of the men in his study points to 'non- or even anti-utilitarian meanings [of violence]' (2009). Arguably, however, it is intoxication itself that frequently causes youth to transgress most of the rules on which we have reported. Unconstrained behaviour is evident, therefore, in instances when youth lose their ability to judge whether or not their actions will accord with the rules. It does not in itself indicate lawlessness.

Undoubtedly, Niehaus's observation of the prominent role of alcohol in fuelling violence is reflected in the lives of these young people – it is true that not all violence is intentional or reasoned. But ought these acts to be declared 'unconstrained' or

'anti-utilitarian' which itself hints at gratuitous violence? This paper has sought to demonstrate that youth violence is governed by a set of rules known to individuals and groups. Even drunken violence which spirals out of control appears to have an original purpose – often to protect one's dignity or self-respect – and rational responses invariably follow as perpetrators seek to make amends for their actions. Rule four, which most clearly demonstrates young people's agency in taking responsibility for their actions, illustrates youth's sensitivity to the rules of violence. When they make amends for drunken acts of violence, they do so precisely because these breached the rules of violence.

The moral meaning of violence

Throughout the study young people spoke of violence as morally wrong and were remorseful for its presence in their lives. Violence was almost uniformly labelled as 'wrong', 'hated' or 'bad'. In compiling lists of 'right' and 'wrong' early on in the study, young people specifically listed gangsterism, murder, rape, hijacking, fighting, robbery, theft, stealing and bullying as wrong. Only one young man (out of 37) said it was right to 'fight'. In particular, youth listed actions such as 'to be aggressive, beat children, carry guns and knives, fight, be a gang member, teach children how to use guns, abuse women, be involved in violence, hold a grudge' and 'for teachers to beat students' all to be morally wrong.

Taking it as a given that all township youth viewed violence in all its forms as wrong, they then articulated the rules and reasons that governed its use and when it should be used (or when it occurred inadvertently). We have argued that this sensitivity to the rules of violence is a form of moral capital and a step towards acquiring further moral capital. Of course, the fact that youth's moral beliefs (condemning violence) did not match their moral behaviour (frequently participating in it) is all too evident in this paper. Despite these 'belief-behaviour gaps' (Swartz 2009), the moral meaning youth attributed to violence (the ability to distinguish right from wrong) and the agency they show in engaging with the rules of violence in their community, are forms of moral capital that have the potential to be nurtured into violence-preventing behaviours.

With a view to how the youth in this study could ultimately become better, non-violent people, two features of moral capital are noticeable for their absence from these youths' 'moral toolkit'. These are reflective practice and an enabling environment that would give them the suitable conditions to acquire moral capital. Arguably, the link between the absence of reflection and the perpetration of violence is the social embeddedness and normalisation of violence in their everyday surroundings, closely tied topics which have been discussed at length in the literature (Guerra, Huesmann, and Spindler 2003; Panday et al. 2012; van der Merwe, Dawes, and Ward 2012). Indeed, the 37 young people interviewed seldom referred to the links between their social contexts – especially the prevalence of poverty and high levels of unemployment – and the life choices open to them, including their involvement in violent behaviour. Just as youth seem unable to perceive the limiting effects their contexts have on their life prospects, so they seem unable to distinguish the barbarism implicit in some of the rules discussed above. Yet this is not in itself evidence that youth are becoming more barbaric. Rather, young people's awareness of the rules is the first step towards gaining moral capital, as this limits 'excessive

immoral behaviour' (Swartz 2010, 320). A second step to acquiring moral capital would be for youth to work towards, or be coached on, reflective practices that would help them to moderate their behaviour so that it agrees with their stated beliefs.

Conclusion

This paper has presented five rules of violence as articulated by young people living in South African townships. These are as follows: (1) violence is acceptable to defend the dignity of self and significant others; (2) social positions determine the freedom individuals have to use violence (e.g. gang memberships and parents); (3) violence is acceptable when individuals transgress a group's social norms and in the absence of institutional action; (4) retribution or revenge should not be pursued if the perpetrator expresses regret and pays damages and (5) the threat of violence should be pursued, rather than violence itself.

In presenting this set of rules, we respond to Hobsbawm's call 'to construct or reconstruct systematic rules' for violence. In light of his later comments on the lawlessness of society in the face of social and political decline, the elucidation of these rules critiques his proclamation that rationalism as exemplified by the Enlightenment project has atrophied. The young people encountered in this study act according to rules, though these may not be 'civilised' in the sense articulated by Hobsbawm. Furthermore, the presence of rules in the midst of violent behaviour does not *just* mean that lawlessness in society is not increasing – a deficit view. Instead, moral capital argues that young people's use of rules to govern violence may be viewed as a social *asset* that demonstrates their somewhat rational and reflective decision-making in adverse contexts. Furthermore, by taking an ecological perspective on the moral life of youth living in townships, the theory of moral capital reveals swathes of individual agency and is also able to suggest reasons why youth are frequently unable to make the 'right' choice, even when their interview responses indicate they are able to distinguish between right and wrong.

Finally, our efforts to elaborate on young people's often implicit understanding of the rules of violence respond to Daiute and Fine's (2003) call for a youth-centred understanding of the violence in which young people are involved. We have consciously sought to foreground the voices of young people living in a particular setting alongside a theorised reading of these actions in order to demonstrate the deeply situated nature of the violence experienced and committed by these individuals, and the rules that govern these actions. The challenge for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers is now to explore how transferable and widespread are these rules governing violence, and whether knowing of their existence provides opportunities for encouraging reflection among youth regarding the barbaric or civil nature of the rules. This paper has argued that young people being readily able to examine their involvement with violence and have rules to govern their action are a form of moral capital and an asset rather than a deficit. An aim of youth development and education should be to provide an enabling environment in which to nurture this 'moral capital' and aid youth to translate thoughtfulness into positive action so that 'private violence' becomes *less* essential to young people's 'everyday functioning' (Hobsbawm 1998, 301).

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