

Researching with ‘Violent Actors’: Dangers, Responsibilities and Ethics

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Abstract It is difficult to understand people’s stories if researchers do not go beyond the labelling and categorisation that is common in all contexts. Those who live outside inner-city communities in Jamaica often do not understand the loyalty that is shown by inner-city residents to actors whom outsiders dismiss as cruel and violent perpetrators. This briefing note reinforces the importance of delving beyond society’s labels in order to effectively research why people think and act the way they do. Choosing to engage with violent offenders raises serious ethical issues, which researchers in Jamaica contemplated and responded to in diverse ways.

1 Briefing note

This briefing note discusses some of the challenges of working with ‘violent actors’. It emphasises the importance of going beyond the labels that are assigned to people (Moncrieffe, ‘Negotiating Children’s Social Contexts in Jamaica’, this *IDS Bulletin*), and engaging with individuals as human beings, rather than as outcasts. It also highlights the particular challenges of engaging with those children who are both perpetrators of violence and victims.

2 The challenges of ethical research with ‘violent actors’

Across many inner-city – particularly ‘garrison’ – communities in Jamaica, the label ‘violent actors’ does not portray the full stories of the personalities so described. Some of these individuals are regarded as guardians of the community and it is impossible to gain access, conduct research and engage in community development work without their knowledge and input. However, engaging with perpetrators of violence raises serious ethical issues, which the research team in Jamaica was forced to confront. One co-researcher refused to meet with anyone who was knowingly responsible for violent crimes, particularly not on terms that they dictated.

The team discussed two key questions: is it ethical and responsible to allow violent actors a

voice, particularly when these actors are, reputedly, involved in slaying children? Conversely, is it ethical and responsible to deny these actors their rights to ‘voice’, particularly when these perpetrators are young children? Ultimately, the decision to conduct research among ‘violent actors’ was not viewed as a team commitment and strategy but as a particular pursuit of some, but not all team members, to understand the stories of these actors who are, at the same time, victims.

3 The dangers of engaging with ‘violent actors’

Over time, the nature of gate-keeping and authority structures in communities change and evolve, which presents added challenges for researchers. For example, in 1997 when I conducted fieldwork in two garrison communities in Jamaica, it was fairly easy to identify, contact and obtain permission from the local authority figures: the dons, who then represented the interests of particular Members of Parliament, which normally meant securing the respective party’s vote. In return for their votes, the communities – via the dons – were able to gain access to petty benefits and spoils. Such ‘contracts’ still exist between selected politicians and dons; however, dons have now diversified their sources of income. Some of the major dons, many of whom no longer reside in Jamaica, are involved in trade in cocaine, while others, less

powerful, are involved in the increasingly damaging local extortion racket.

With these developments, since 1997 the authority structure within communities has become much more complex and difficult to navigate. Currently, the hierarchy within some communities comprises:

Juveniles' (often boys as young as nine years), cadets (youth in training), 'shottas' (who take note of the don's enemies and act on his command), lieutenants and generals (who do the major 'work') and dons, who often are not involved in firing guns and may even have a political role. There are cases where multiple aspirants – some of whom are labelled fryers – inhabit one community, each exerting control over nothing more than a lane.

(From Moncrieffe 2007: 13)

Because of this competition for power and control, researchers without the correct contacts can place themselves at risk; outsiders are often regarded with considerable suspicion and labelled 'police informers'.

In this project, as well as school children, we were interested in accessing out-of-school children and gang members, many of whom could be defined as perpetrators of violence and, therefore, comprised a group that was hard to reach. Consequently, in order to gain access, we worked through local community development and child services agencies, which have a long tradition within the communities, are respected by warring factions and, therefore, offer comparatively safe spaces for engagement. Significantly, meetings with out-of-school youth did not occur within communities but at the agencies' local offices, which were considered neutral ground. Meetings with gang members were held on their turf and at a time of their choice. It was critical to involve researchers who knew or were willing to learn about and negotiate the cultures within the gangs. Moreover, researchers had to approach gang members as human beings entitled to a voice rather than un-entitled criminals. Helpfully, one co-researcher – from an inner-city community – advised on appropriate and inappropriate language, desirable styles of dress and strategies for building trust, such as ensuring anonymity (see below). This effort to respect their minimal desires, such as on the location of the research,

was well rewarded; gang members participated fully in the conversations, which they were invited to lead. Poignantly, the young men reinforced what Levy and Chevannes (1996) had earlier discovered: gangs often react violently to what they perceive to be society's persistent disrespect.

4 Negotiating responsibilities

Researchers who decide to work with perpetrators of violence expose themselves to continual dilemmas and may be forced to take a moral position. For example, there is the question of the level of responsibility that researchers ought to have to violent actors. To what extent should researchers maintain certain confidential information, such as on previous or planned murders? Questions such as these surmount ethics, for knowledge of particular crimes can be life-threatening to the researchers. This makes it imperative to establish boundaries and devise careful research strategies. In this project, we established some important safeguards. First, we attempted to ensure anonymity: all respondents chose fake names, although they recorded their true ages. Second, they were not asked to divulge information on crimes they had committed, although some chose to inform on their exploits. Third, there was a stipulation that no third party names should be mentioned. Fourth, none of the interviews were tape-recorded; researchers relied on hand-written notes. These simple measures were important for building confidence and provided some structure to the conversations.

How should the voices of those involved in violence be represented? In this particular context, we considered it our responsibility to present the actual voices of these young perpetrators of violence in order to improve popular understanding of the social conditions and structural violence that shape these young men and boys' lives. There were diverse personalities among the interviewees, who were more and less disposed to violence; however, the majority revealed the difficult choices they were forced to make within the boundaries of their garrisons. By presenting their voices, we portrayed more comprehensive pictures of these actors, especially the humanity behind the label: 'violent actor'.

However, while some of us agreed to meet with older perpetrators of violence within their communities, we were not prepared to work with school children in these contexts. We acknowledged that working with children within their communities could expose them to reprisals from contending factions. Although this type of turf politics is now permeating the schools, it is still not as prevalent there as within the communities. Schools are managing to bridge community boundaries and to offer more reliable spaces for influencing social action. As the children's safety was paramount, we considered it responsible and ethical to restrict our work with children to schools. The risks that a researcher may choose for herself may be entirely different from those she may choose for respondents, particularly children, who despite their resilience are also vulnerable.

References

Levy, H. with Chevannes, B. (1996) *They Cry Respect: Urban Violence and Poverty in Jamaica*, Kingston: Centre of Population, Community and Social Change

5 Conclusion

This briefing note has highlighted some of the challenges of ethical research with 'violent actors'; the dangers of engaging with violent actors; and some of the techniques and strategies that are required for negotiating contexts and researcher responsibilities. The key issues that emerge are the importance of choosing co-researchers carefully and, particularly, involving researchers who know or are willing to learn about and negotiate the cultures within the gangs; the need to approach 'violent actors' as human beings; the wisdom of working through agencies that have credibility on the ground and of developing a range of strategies of interaction to reduce antagonism. The briefing note has also highlighted some of the important moral questions that researchers may encounter and suggested ways of dealing with them.

Moncrieffe, J. (2007) *Making and Unmaking the Young Shotta [Shooter]: Boundaries and (Counter)-Actions in the 'Garrisons'*, IDS Working Paper 297, Brighton: IDS