

Angels, prisoners and other human beings

Doing research with boys who have killed

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The article analyses the relationships between the researcher and ten boys, who are incarcerated for murder in Pollsmoor prison, Cape Town, South Africa. It provides ethnographically rich descriptions of the boys' responses to questions about the moment of killing. The argument is if the relational aspect of violence is to be recognised we need to move into, what one boy describes as his 'dark side'. Moving in there requires that the researcher is willing to let go of her or his perception of normality.

[violence, perpetrators, prison, intersubjectivity, boys, South Africa]

I cannot believe that I was opening my dark side in me for you. It was nice talking to you really but I want to know: why did you feel uncomfortable when I was talking to you?

I receive this question in a letter from Damian, a 20 years old boy, who participated in my research in Pollsmoor prison in Cape Town, South Africa in 2006. By 'dark side' Damian refers to the moment where he had raped and killed a woman he knew from school. During my daily visits in a period of seven months I got to know Damian and nine other boys in the age of 17-25; they were recently incarcerated for murder. The purpose was, during interviews, to make the boys zoom in on the moments when they had killed, stabbed, smacked, shot or raped. I interviewed all of them four times each; we met in smaller groups six times; I hanged out with them in their cells and I observed interaction in the corridors and in the courtyard as much as possible during the research period. My relationships with the boys did not end when I left the prison and South Africa. We continued our discussions through letters and particularly my correspondence with Damian is significant for what was at stake in our relationships, which is what will be described in this article.

My uneasiness while I talked to Damian was a reflection of my internal struggle with acknowledging the human capacity to do evil, and thus acknowledging potential evil as a part of me. In anthropological studies on violence this seems to be a gen-

eral problem. Very few studies pay attention to perpetrators¹ and even less to what Vetlesen (2005) refers to as 'evil' defined as 'intentionally inflicting pain and suffering on another human being' (Vetlesen 2005: 2). Within studies of violence it has been acknowledged that violence is relational (Jackson 2002, Riches 1986) but the step into what Damian refers to as the 'dark side', the attempt to understand people, who sometimes intentionally inflict pain on others, seems not to be recognised as essential for understanding everyday practices of violence. When social scientists research interpersonal violence they tend to focus on what happens before and after 'the pain has been inflicted on the other' (Schinkel 2005). During my research my intention was to move towards 'the dark side' by focusing on what happened in the moment of killing. In this article I will argue that such a move required willingness to see 'the other' in a new light; contest (convenient) boundaries between 'us and them' and transgress perceptions of normality and thus what it means to be a human being.

Conceptualising intersubjectivity

In Damian's letter above he seems to acknowledge that in certain moments we reached a shared reality, which is what Tankink and Vysma (2006) refer to as an intersubjective space; in other moments inter-subjectivity was lost, which were the moments, where Damian registered that I was uncomfortable. Our relationship was a process of losing and regaining moments of shared reality. In my understanding interaction is a process where social categories, through which we meet each other sometimes, become stiff and consuming, sometimes fluid and contestable (Staunæs 2001). In moments of shared reality categories are fluid and open for new interpretation. According to Tankink and Vysma (2006) it is only those moments, which are defined as intersubjectivity but in my understanding inter-subjectivity both refers to moments where categories are stiff and moments where they become fluid. When we interact certain subject positions become available and we take them on, contest or reject them. This process has been referred to as subjectivity (Davies & Harré 2000). The question is what the difference is between subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. In my understanding inter-subjectivity stresses the relational aspect of becoming a subject. What I become is not a matter of 'me' and 'him'; it is a matter of how I become articulated by him and how he becomes articulated by me. There is something happening between us, and it is not just about 'me' and 'him' but about what we articulate in relation to each other in the particular place where we interact; in this case the prison. What I describe in the article are both moments where some kind of shared reality is brought about between the boys and me, moments where social categories become fluid and open for interpretation, and moments where our pre-defined perceptions of each other become stiff and consuming. It is in the moments of fluidity that normality is contested.

Transgressing normality

When Damian displayed his ability to do 'evil' I felt uncomfortable and distanced myself, which confused him. He seemed to doubt whether I did, what he probably experienced most other people to do: judge him for his capacity to kill and rape. I reply to Damian's question with the following words:

For me it was shocking to get exposed to your 'dark side'. I never dared to move to that side before I got to know you. I felt uncomfortable because I was afraid of both you and myself. Knowing that you had raped and killed a woman I was thinking: could he do it again? Why doesn't he do it to me when he was able to do it to someone he knew from school? Am I different from her? Am I safe? I felt related to you and your story, which made me think: if someone like him, whom I feel connected with, can do this kind of 'dark' stuff, then why not me?

Here I suggest that the distinction between me and him has become blurry. I am no longer sure what to consider normal and abnormal. Distinctions between 'me' and 'them', good and bad, innocent and evil, light and dark have started to merge. This blurriness was characteristic for moments where our pre-defined perceptions of each other were allowed to become fluid. Daring to let go of the image we had of ourselves and the other was at the same time daring to let go of our perceptions of normality; transgress boundaries and leave them open for a while. Both the boys and I were confused about fundamental moral questions like: is one able to be 'good' when one is doing 'bad'? Is it possible to have done 'bad' and change into 'good'? My aim was to neutralise discourses of guilt, through which the experiences of these boys are usually articulated; whether it is in their daily life in prison; in the court or in their family. In moments where we were not willing to see each other in a new light, I did not succeed; those were moments where we were searching for a confirmation of our pre-defined perceptions of good and bad, trying to control what was going on. Then normality was not transgressed but rather maintained and confirmed.

Angels and human beings

In Damian's answer to my response above, the struggle to define normality becomes articulated. The letter starts with a poem:

The first time I saw you, your eyes were shining, so I thought to myself. Maybe your father was a thief and stole diamonds and hides it behind your eyes. That is why your eyes shine like the stars above. So I did not believe so. I said a special prayer and asked my father to send an angel to watch over you but in a flash that same angel returns and said to me: Damian, are you crazy? How can one angel watch over another angel so I guess what I am trying to say is you are an angel...

An angel is not a real human being. It is someone, who belongs to another world. Angels can go to dangerous places without getting hurt; they are immortal, protected, usually not gendered and in any case not sexual, and they can avoid dangers by flying away. I am not sure how an angel would define 'normality' but it seems unlikely that it would include violent acts like killing. In relation to Damian I became an angel. I was not in prison, I did not seem particular violent, I am educated, white and from a world on the other side of the earth and I am going to dangerous places without getting hurt. The fact that I am interested in the 'dark side' does not make me similar to the boys, just more unreal. What the boys seem to articulate in me is innocence. It is something, which they never had or experienced to have lost by having killed. What I articulate in them is a different kind of power. It is the willingness to apply physical force. I will refer to these forms of power in a purely descriptive way: the power of innocence and the power of killing. These forms of power are not the only ones at stake in our relationships but as I will show in the analysis they often become articulated and somehow represent the process of transgressing normality.

When Damian continues his letter it becomes clear that the power of innocence includes the power to judge:

For me to start I will tell you about what I said when we were together. These are things [about his 'dark side'] that really hurt me. Hurt me every day of my life. I wonder what goes through your mind when you look at me because you speak to a man that killed someone and you know what took place with the murder.

Damian is wondering 'what goes through my mind': do I judge him now that I know what he did? He feels vulnerable about the fact that I know about the murder. The things about his dark side 'hurt him every day'. Usually you feel hurt by things other people do to you; not by things you do yourself. He seems to wish that by displaying these feelings I would not judge him. He continues:

I will think of you because I told you a story that nobody else knows about me. It is just you and Kyle [his cell mate] that knows. But Marie, you must know that you must never, never think that I am that kind of person that that will do that to you because I shared something very important with you and this puts you in an important place in my heart.

But you must always remember, that I, Damian van Wyk will like to get 'l's' [letters] from you and then I will tell you more about this stuff. I will end off with the words: live well, live well and if anyone tries to rob you remember what I said. Do not be scared. Most of the robbers do not have a heart like me, who will stab a beautiful girl like you with a knife. You must live well, Damian will think about you, ne. (translated from Afrikaans)

Here it is clear that the fact that I know his story gives me a special position; the position of an angel who can be in danger without getting hurt. He is 'not that kind of person' that would rape and kill me when I have such a position in his heart but

he is still a robber with a heart that makes him able to stab 'beautiful girls like me'. Perhaps Damian is right when he suggests that my genuine interest in the stories of the boys was what protected me in potentially dangerous situations. Before I analyse what happens when angels and prisoners meet face to face I will tell a little bit more about the prison.

Prison conditions

What is most striking when entering Pollsmoor prison is the smell; it is similar to what I remember from the lion's indoor cages in zoo; the heavy smell of animals and the sense of humidity. Shannon, one of the boys participating in my research has similar associations:

When I came to Pollsmoor for the first time I was shocked. I was there in the admission centre and it was like there were animals hanging all over the place. It was like a cage and there were animals both inside and outside.

The prison houses about 8000 prisoners; half of them are non-sentenced and it exceeds occupancy capacity by 200 percent. In medium prisons the cells are about sixty square metres, often shared by about eighty people. These cells have narrow windows placed just below the roof so one has to climb on a bed to be able to look at the sky. The 'maximum security' area (sentences longer than ten years) consists predominantly of single cells of about four square metres, usually shared by three people. In the maximum security area and most waiting trial sections the windows are covered so daylight never reaches people inside. The big cells have a few showers and toilets with no separation doors. In a single cell there is one toilet but no shower. Prisoners sleep in stable beds or on mattresses on the floor. They sometimes have to share mattresses due to over-crowdedness. Inmates are allowed out of their cells for one hour per day; TVs, radios, drawing material, sport equipment and books are scarce so most time drifts away during sleep. Inmates are served bread and tea in the morning, vegetable stew in the middle of the day and in the evening bread and tea. Depending on their behaviour in prison, they are allowed to get two visits a month.

Pollsmoor prison is notorious for being ruled by gangs. Entering prison new prisoners are asked 'sun up or sun down' which refers to the two dominant gangs. Choosing 'sun up' one aspires to become a 26; 'sun down' refers to the camp of the 28s. In South African prisons there exist three major gangs, which in over-all terms are called 'the Numbers'. The Numbers have different tasks within prison: the 28s rule in the night after lock-up and they implement punishments such as rape of fellow prisoners and stabbing of prison warders. The 26s rule during the day and they deal with 'money matters' such as smuggling drugs and goods from outside. The 27s mediate between the 28s and the 26s in case of conflicts (Gear & Ngubeni 2003, Steinberg 2004). The prison gangs play a major role in the social organisation of the prison. They have a strong impact on the staff and as an inmate you always have to define yourself in

relation to the gangs even if you wish not to participate. When I entered the prison I became a potential allied ally or enemy of the gangs. I could become a target, possibly by being raped or stabbed, if someone high in the gang hierarchies decided I somehow posed a threat. My safety strategy was to treat all the boys equally in terms of time spend with them. Sometimes they asked me to phone and visit their families, which I always did on their request. I took photos of their families that I brought to them, and I provided all of them with paper, pens, books, games, envelopes, stamps and food when we were together in a group. I never gave them anything individually, which I hoped would prevent conflicts between or within the gangs.

Inter-subjectivity in prison

My position as a visitor in interaction with the boys changed over time and was characterised both by how they looked at me but also by how comfortable I felt in their presence. During my first encounter with the participants I was careful telling them that I could not get them out of prison; I could not make their sentence shorter but what I could do was to listen to their stories and to try to understand. I also told them I was interested in their experiences before prison more than how they dealt with being in prison; their English had to be on conversation level and they had to be willing to talk about themselves to a stranger like me. What I was not aware of at that moment was that they immediately perceived me as any other visitor, which meant someone who was interested in hearing about their future plans and about how they were going to change and become better human beings when they got out of prison. During the first two interviews I felt unable to get rid of that perception. The first boy I interviewed, Keith, had been a gangster his whole life. He had killed a few people and went to prison for the first time when he was 15. He talked about change in the following way:

In the past I shot every guy. My life is like that. I can't take that away. It will be in my life till I die. But I must change my life. I must stand on my own two feet because that is the right thing to do.

Whenever I tried to zoom in on his experiences with shooting, he would stick to the idea that it was not right; he was going to change so we did not need to talk about what he later during the interview referred to as 'business time'; his time as a hit man. I was embraced by the category of the visitor, which made me unable to approach the experiences of the boys, which I was interested in. Like Bourdieu (1999) suggests I was the one setting the rules for our interaction but I needed to make the rules more clear. I had to challenge the way I was articulated as a visitor. I did so by starting off the first round of interviews by saying I supported them in making plans about their future but for my research that was not interesting. I wanted to know what happened before prison and particularly I was curious in understanding their experiences with killing. Those rules made new positions available to the boys and they took on those

positions in different ways. Where other visitors rewarded the boys for displaying their willingness to change, I rewarded them for elaborating on their power to kill.

On the one side I embodied innocence; they embodied killing and in order to establish relationships between those two positions, I will argue, we both needed to move towards each other. The first step was that I toned down my innocence; I invited them to elaborate on what a few of them referred to as their 'dark side'. By rewarding them for articulating those kinds of experiences I suggested that human beings embody many different forms of power; we are internally differentiated (Moore 1994); we can both be killers and sensitive people at the same time. My intention was to create neutrality; I wanted to avoid judging or accepting them neither as victims nor as perpetrators. I will argue that this position was necessary for this kind of research. If I had accepted the position I was invited to take as a visitor I would most probably never have had access to their articulation of experiences with killing. If I had aspired towards their position as boys who have killed, they would most probably not have believed me. How could someone in my position convince them that displaying their power of killing was rewarding? My invitation, to set the rules for our interaction somewhere where both innocence and killing were acknowledged as a part of being human, created various responses.

I will describe my interaction with two boys: one, who refused to articulate his innocence and one, who refused to see himself as embodying the power of killing. Most of the boys displayed both the power of innocence and killing at the same time but Damian was the one, who succeeded most in integrating the two. He was therefore most confronting to my distinction between good and bad; to my perception of normality. He was both good and bad at the same time. In the relationship with him, predefined categories became fluid more often than with the other boys. There was only one boy in my study who refused to see himself as capable of killing. Where Damian merged innocence and killing at the same time, Phumelele tried to keep these two forms of power as separate as possible. He insisted on his innocence and refused the power of killing. By claiming their separateness, Phumelele did what I did when I became afraid of the boys: I tried to control who belonged to categories of good and bad. It was only in one of our last interviews that I allowed myself to see Phumelele as both good and bad; in the beginning I was only looking for the power of killing not allowing myself to see his innocence. His reaction was to insist on his own innocence. It is impossible to say if I reduced Phumelele to a monster because he insisted on being an angel or, if it was his insistence on being an angel, which made me afraid of him and thereby made me reduce him to a monster. My interaction with Phumelele highlights how my relationships with the boys were highly *intersubjective*.

Phumelele's and my unwillingness to see the other in a different light, and our reduction of the other's being is how Schinkel (2005) defines violence ontologically. When there are no moments of fluidity and openness towards seeing the other in a new way; when there is no willingness to transgress boundaries of good and bad, let go of one's perceptions of normality by leaving space for the other to define himself, it could be characterised as violence. How we reduce each other's being varies from calling someone a name (Butler 1997) to smacking and killing. Reduction of being and unwilling-

ness to see the other in a new light is a part of all social interaction but there are usually moments in between, where categories become fluid and changeable. I am bringing in these ideas about violence because I wish to highlight that violence is not just about smacking, stabbing, raping and killing; it is not just to be found in behaviour, which I until now have referred to as evil and bad. My interaction with Phumelele is included in the analysis because it highlights that human beings are both good and bad at the same time and interaction becomes violent when we are not willing to acknowledge that.

Reluctance to innocence

My first impression of Damian was a soft guy, who looked like someone who happened to be in the wrong place. During our first interview my impression was revised. Damian was sentenced 12 years for murder and he was eager to tell what happened:

I: When did you come to Pollsmoor?

D: Three weeks ago. I killed a woman!

I: Oh [my voice is low; I sound shocked]. So what happened?

D: Must I tell you?

I: No [I misunderstand him; I think he says: "have I told you"]. You did not tell me?

D: Must I tell you how it happened?

I: Yes.

D: Ok [he sounds pleased]. I think it will be a relief for me.

I: Mm.

D: Me and my friends we were like three guys, we were walking. I left the house because my father kept yelling at me. So we first wanted to steal a car but the security was too busy there so we walk around the location [informal settlement] looking for ganza [Marijuana]. I met some of my friends and they said, hey, do you want to come along and drink and we said, yes, fine, we just want to get our ganza. So we come back and there are a couple of girls there but I do not know them. There is only one girl that lives in the place that I know. So there are a lot of rings, money, drinks and that kind of stuff. One of the girls, I see she has a lot of rings, gold rings, so I just time her.

I: You what?

D: I time her; that means just looking at her the whole night.

I: Like flirting?

D: No just looking. Something runs through my mind. I think I must rob her. So I told my friends. The things are like this. Before midnight we must get the stuff and disappear. So we drink and how can I say, the drinking gets up. So she says she wants to walk with us so I get the banga [big scythe kind of knife] under my bed. I have it here on my side but she did not see. So my friend says, we will walk you home because it is not safe here so she says, ok, so we walk. Maybe three, four streets away from my friend's house. And we say, we want money and all the rings and she says, no, you know me and I say no, it is not about knowing. I just want your stuff. She starts to scream so I shocked her. We walk with her in a gravel road and we just hide her away. The community in the location they are patrolling. And we are near a church and she starts screaming. And I

say, no, this girl is making a lot of noise so I grab a meg and my friend takes his knife. He sticks the knife through my fingers [shows the scars to me] when he sticks her in the neck. A lot of blood is coming out and she starts running.

I: How can she run?

D: No but I mean the blood is boiling out but she holds it while she runs. I say to my friends, hey, if this girl is running now, she is going to pimp us [tell the police], she will tell where we stay and all of that so we must kill her. The other guy says ok, but can we not rape her first. And then we are starting to rape her and after that I take the banga and I just smash her head. And so do the other guys, they smash her, how can I say, there was like 21 wounds. A part of her head was under ground, like this part, some parts are out [deep sigh]. We run away and hope that nobody will find us.

I: Do you get the rings and money and that stuff?

The quote is taken from the very beginning of our first interview. My experience is that Damian forgets about his audience; he is unable to include me as a listener in his story. I shift between being unable to focus on what he tells me because I am shocked, and ask irrelevant questions like 'how can she run' and 'do you get the rings and the money', and move back into my interviewer role where I remember to ask him to elaborate on the experiences he displays. His story is more disturbing than other murder stories I have heard because it comes closer to me: firstly because he killed and raped a woman; secondly because he describes that knowing the girl does not prevent him from killing her; thirdly because he pretends to be friendly towards her by suggesting to walk her home; she trusts him but he anyway kills her. In the moment of the interview I also trust Damian. We sit alone in a room and if he wanted to he could also kill me. The description therefore creates an atmosphere of tension, which emphasises anxieties I already have about doing research in prison. Furthermore, in my perception it is worse killing someone you know than someone you do not have a relationship with. The fact that Damian did that pulls him far away from what I would define as normal. His story articulates the power of killing and I know I will not be able to identify with him if I do not see the power of innocence in him as well. Damian does not show any signs of regret in the beginning of the interview. The interview therefore starts out by me trying to pull Damian towards my perception of normality and him rejecting this invitation by only telling the part of his story, which articulates his willingness to use physical force. He does not show any attempt to meet me somewhere in the middle where categories are less stiff and consuming. The more he describes his willingness to be violent, the more I focus on things I am able to grasp such as practicalities of the situation. It is only when he shows signs of being troubled by what he has done, and thus acknowledge my distinctions between right and wrong, that I am able to step back into the interviewer role and focus on things relevant for my research:

D: Yes but killing a girl... It is like it is going down. Like one of us [one of the three that killed the girl]. He sleeps the whole day. He stands up, go to the toilet and then he sleeps again.

I: Is that one of your friends?

D: All of us got 12 years but we will get four years suspended so we are going to do that outside. Like eight years here but the parole says we must only do five years inside and the rest outside.

I: So one of your friends is clearly disturbed. How do you react on it? [Here I am able to focus on things relevant for my research]

D: I... there is not a day, every day passes and I must think about it because it is the reason I am here. So I think about it every day. Sometimes someone in the room asks me, hey, why are you so quiet? But sometimes I talk about it to close friends to relieve it. [He displays regret]

I: How do people react when you say you have killed a woman?

D: Joh... they are like, you are evil man. But in my inside I know myself man. It is not me. Because I am sitting here and I know my mother and father, they are disappointed in me. And I know I have a sister, she is 3 years old. My other sister is nine and then there is the one on 21. They are not feeling well.

By displaying the need for relief he articulates the power of innocence; his reaction proves a sense of guilt and regret, which makes it easier for me to focus and stay in control of the interview. He is struggling with what he has done and feels guilty about his family, who does not feel well because of what he has done. He shows regret and confusion about who he is. He knows himself as someone who is not evil. Other people see him as evil. By displaying innocence he moves towards me and that gives me space to try to understand. A little later in the interview I move towards him in the field by asking him to describe the situation where they raped the girl:

D: There is this like white wall and we do it behind that and we sort of push her down. We like tail her. Then we take her clothes off. Lekker [good looking; sexy]!

I: Hmm [I am looking down; feeling uncomfortable]?

D: We take her clothes off and she was lekker... [He insists on a reaction from me]

I: So do you remember how she looked and how she reacted? [I insist on his regret]

D: She said she will not tell the police. We can rape her. She will not tell the police. We must just not kill her. I tell my friends, we cannot trust her. She will tell the police. She says no, please man. And one guy puts his penis in her anus. I put my penis in her mouth. So we go on like that and we make turns...

I: And how does she react? [Here I insist on his ability to show empathy with her]

D: Every time we turn we make sure that the banga is by her neck so she cannot scream. And she says no, please man. I think she was not sexing a lot!

I: She was what?

D: She was not sexing a lot. I can feel it.

I: What do you mean?

D: Like when we start to sex her you can feel that it was maybe three, four months ago she had sex. She feels closed... and then we...

I: And how does that make you feel? [I interrupt; feel upset and keep insisting]

D: But we hit [penetrate] her with a condom... How do you mean what does it feel like? [He is confused about what I mean by 'feeling']

I: Did you like to know that she had not had much sex or how did that influence you?
[Here I invite him to reflect on what they are doing and he takes on that position]
D: I know it is crazy in the moment when I do it! I know it is crazy but I anyway do it...
I: Can you describe if it makes you feel strong? Now you say you know it is crazy in the moment you do it but it must give you something anyway?
D: How can I say...[sigh]. At that time I am disappointed in myself. I say to myself I am weak man.
I: But do you do that in the very moment where it happens?
D: Oh, exactly that time? No, I feel good. If I can say, I feel brave. Hmm. I feel like that.

When Damian repeats how 'lekker' the girl was it seems like he expects a reaction from me. I refuse this agenda by making him focus on how she looked and how she reacted. He frames her reaction in relation to his own interests: she will not tell the police. I insist that he focuses on her and not himself and he explains how they make sure that she cannot scream. Instead of elaborating on that he stays with his own sexual experiences of the rape, which makes me nauseous even when I read it now. I hear him talking about the rape as if it was consensual sex where observations, such as when a girl had sex last time, might be relevant. This strongly contrasts with the fact that the girl was raped. I experience this comment as extremely degrading of the girl and since I identify myself with the girl, the comment also becomes degrading of me. When I ask him how it makes him feel, he is busy with his sexual experiences of the rape, which he describes by the fact that they used a condom. He cannot imagine that I refer to his feelings towards his victim. When I am finally able to make my question more precise, he steps out of his elaboration of the rape and moves towards me by saying he knows it is crazy. In the quote Damian again pulls me towards his power of killing. When I look through the second interview I realise he does so in order to get a response that confirms his opposite power. He experiences his actions as far away from the dominant moral; he doubts his own ability to be normal and he uses me to contest his doubt. In my interaction with him I enlarge my limits for what I consider normal. He tests these limits by telling horrible details about his killings; I focus on the aspects of his being that make him normal and not a killer. In the following he tries to convince me that he is a bad person:

D: For me, it is like, a man he, he also do bad stuff. Also girls but it is like they have a bigger heart, you see. Because a girl, when she comes into a guy's life, it is like a lot of things changes in him. She actually brings him out of gangsterism. There are girls that do that. In the end of the day she changes things man, for another guy, you see. So actually that girl, she was giving something to a man. She is the good creator to a man. It is actually like that girl I killed, right? There is a guy for her and I am thinking, how is that going to be now because it is like that guy he is missing one leg or shoe you see. Actually she could, with a guy like that, one that is also 'sleg' [meaning bad; like himself], she can bring him right. But I take her away, you see.
I: So are you thinking that the girl is someone, who could have taken you right?

D: She was not actually too bad for me, you see. I could have taken over [meaning they could have formed a couple] but I killed this woman who was always... She is in my face and I see her every time and I talk to her but I take her life away. It is crazy... really....

I: [Long silence] I am curious to hear what she is to you in the moment where you kill her?

D: Obviously she was an enemy. When you feel someone is an enemy but I do not know. She was doing nothing...

Here Damian explains that killing a woman is worse than killing a man. He suggests that he could as well have tried to get a relationship with the woman he killed instead of killing her. He does not understand it himself; he does not have good explanations. He leaves it up to me to understand what is happening. That leaves both him and me in a very vulnerable position. We both agree that what he has done is crazy but I cannot express my opinion openly. In order to make him elaborate on his experiences I have suggested that normality is a wide concept and now I am desperately trying to recognise that in the stories he tells me. It is a painful exercise. During the second interview it seems like he has taken me into his 'dark room', but when we are in there I do not know how to get out again. I start asking leading questions, which are too suggestive and direct, because his reaction confuses and surprises me. His killing is not only traumatic to him but also to me:

I: How does it make you feel to talk about it [his killing] like this?

D: Joh [deep sigh], I feel a little bit strange man. After this I must go and get my food but I do not think I am going to eat now. Because I, actually it is like I was doing it two, three days ago. But I do not, how I feel now is different man, because I feel shit...

I: Did it make you nauseous? Like you almost feel like throwing up? [That is how I feel]

D: Not at that time... but now it did.

I: What is it that makes you nauseous?

D: The way she looks...

I: Is it also thinking that you were a part of it [Leading question]?

D: No, it is her [Long silence].

I: [I am getting confused here; do not know how to get him out of there again] Did you somehow block yourself out in the moment?

D: Hmm [meaning what]?

I: Would you say you were somehow not really present in the situation [Leading question]?

D: [Silence; nods meaning yes]

I: So somehow you must have put this experience somewhere inside yourself. How did you put it into your heart and accepted that it was there? Do you remember how you did that [Leading question. Silence would have been pleasant]?

D: Yes [silence; he sits with his head in his hands at the table; tears are rolling down his cheeks].

I am suggesting that Damian has put his experience somewhere inside himself where he is able to live with it but this seems to be my wish more than his. Thinking about experiences in that way is extremely abstract and in that moment Damian's experiences seem to be anything but abstract. Damian's story continued to be one of the stories I felt most traumatised by in the sense that I did not know where to put it in my mind. When I drove back from the prison on the days where I had interviewed Damian I got lost on the way. When I transcribed his interviews I was confused and felt like showering and get outside to be able to breath. When I told his story to fellow academics I lost the ability to analyse and distance myself. It seems like Damian's story became so intriguing because he displayed both the ability to kill and the ability to be innocent at the same time and he required that I acknowledged both. He provided me with his experiences with killing and during the interview he revealed his innocence. With the following boy it was the other way around: he tried to convince be about his innocence; I had to search for his ability to be violent.

Reluctance to killing

In my first encounter with Phumelele I felt he undressed me with his eyes. He spoke with a soft and deep voice; he always smiled and he was helpful with organising practicalities for my interviews but for some reason he was not very successful in his attempt to be a sweet guy. After my first interview with him, where I felt exceptionally uncomfortable, one of the warders said, confirming my feeling:

Nobody dares to be alone with Phumelele. If he has to go somewhere he will always have at least two warders accompanying him. Normally one warder would be enough but nobody trusts him. It is like he seems like the sweetest guy on earth but just below the surface, there is a lot of aggression and if he snaps you never know what he is capable of doing.

The warders did not know what Phumelele was sentenced for. They knew he was sentenced to 40 years in prison but nobody knew for what. My fear of Phumelele played a central role in the relationship we developed together. When I listened through the interviews and read my transcriptions I realised that I had blocked out essential parts of what Phumelele had been telling me. Due to my fear I simply did not hear certain things during our interviews. He denied everything he was sentenced for. In a judicial system characterised by too little resources particularly for people who cannot afford a private lawyer, it is not unlikely that Phumelele was sentenced for something he never did. Nevertheless, I was afraid of him from the first time I saw him. My body felt alert in his presence in a way I could not recognise with the other boys.

Our interviews became a struggle between him trying to convince me about his innocence and me trying to convince him and myself of the opposite. During both the first and the second interviews I experienced to be betrayed. Phumelele refused my agenda for our interaction by focusing on himself as an innocent guy:

I: So they ignore that you actually stole the money for the food?

P: Yes, then in January I am attending school. Until July. In August I do not go to school. I go to housebreaking and I am arrested in December. I go to school in September and they say, hey, you must attend school. My friend says so. They know me at school. I am good at school. They know I can pass...

I: Did you change your name when you were arrested?

I ask Phumelele about something he stole; he continues by talking about school and he emphasises how good he is at school. I ignore his attempt to present himself as a schoolboy by focusing on the criminal aspects of his being. He answers my question but soon draws the attention of the interview towards other aspects of his being, which has nothing to do with the fact that he is in prison. I want him to focus on the dark sides; he wants to focus on his light sides and none of us want to give up our agenda. In the end of the first interview he becomes slightly aggressive because I ask more closely about what he is sentenced for:

I: What was the evidence [for the rape and murder he is sentenced for]?

P: There was no evidence! No evidence when we are arrested. But they say to me I was raping that girl. I do not know anything about that rape. I never saw that girl before. The first time I see her was in court. But they arrested us.

I: But did they not have any evidence of the rape? I mean usually it is quiet difficult to...

P: They say they have my DNA. And with my friend they say they have his fingerprints. With that case we were like with eight people and four get a sentence.

I: Four of you get a sentence?

P: Yes.

I: But how can they find your DNA on that...

P: I do not know! I do not know what can I say... I did not think right. I kept explaining but they cannot believe me.

I: But perhaps you just do not remember?

P: No, I did not do that thing!

I: I was just thinking that sometimes when we are traumatised we block out things and we believe we did not do certain things. Perhaps we did it but because of the trauma we do not think so. But apparently you are sure you did not...

P: No, I did not do that thing. I am sure.

I: But the murder, was that the same woman?

P: No, it is her father they say in court. That woman, she is still alive. I do not know who they shoot or who they killed or who they break their house. I did not see it.

I: So you were not there [here I play along with his story]?

P: I was not there.

I: Do you know the guys that did it?

P: No, I do not know who did it. Because if I knew I could have told the court the truth but I do not know.

I: So it was not your friends?

P: I do not know. I cannot say because I do not go with my friends on that day. I go to sleep. I cannot say...

I: So how do you feel about all this?

P: Joh, I feel so sad, I feel sad [Silence; first time there is silence]. But it is ok. There is nothing I can change. I must still look forward and not backward.

Phumelele clearly denies everything he is sentenced for and when I start questioning him he becomes irritated. I suggest that he perhaps had proven himself as someone who is willing to be violent, but he is still a human being who would not remember those kinds of traumatic events but he even refuses that. He totally denies the ability to kill. When he displays aggression I start playing along with his story by acknowledging that he was not there and asking him how he feels about being sentenced without having done anything. A little later in the interview he emphasises his position by presenting himself as a victim:

M: Did you ever use your gun?

N: My friend used his gun. He shot me but it was a mistake. He thought the gun was empty but then there was another bullet. It did not come in; it was here in my leg. [He is a victim]

I: So you never shot anyone?

P: No... I was carrying a gun.

I: Do you not have a lot of anger inside then?

P: No matter what, when people they judge you and say you did do this thing, you cannot say you go forward. But I cannot go forward I leave them just like that. When they say I did this thing I do not say anything. I just leave but I say you must still remember this thing, I did not do it. I did not do it.

Here Phumelele makes it very clear that if I insist on his guilt, and thus insist on what I want to know for my research, he is not willing to talk to me. He is a victim; he is innocent and those are the rules for our relationship. By insisting on that position Phumelele indirectly insists on being like me. He displays himself as innocent and he indirectly uses me to confirm this picture. If he can convince someone like me, a white woman from far away who somehow holds the power to judge, he has succeeded in convincing a significant other and then he must be able to believe his innocence himself. When I leave prison after the interviews with Phumelele I am not lost like I am after Damian's interviews. I am angry! I feel violated, kept in a position that fits with Phumelele's agenda. I feel I waste my time; I do not get the information I am looking for and I am unable to step out of the position Phumelele invites me to take. I continue my conversations with him anyway because I realise during the process that what I do to Phumelele by refusing to see many aspects of his being, and what he does to me by refusing my agenda, is perhaps the closest I get to practicing violence during my fieldwork. When we reduce each other, we violate each other. I feel I cannot influence the rules Phumelele suggests for our interaction, but the matter of fact is that I am try-

ing hard; I just do not experience it while our interaction takes place. One strategy I employ is to move towards the power of killing:

I: You do not want to join a gang?

P: No

I: Why not?

P: Because it was not the right thing.

I: Why not?

P: No [sounds surprised] because they are smoking drugs and drinking alcohol. It is not right [moves his face in a serious way as if he is worried about my suggestion]

Phumelele is surprised that he needs to elaborate on why he does not want to be in a gang to someone like me. I am suggesting that joining a gang might be meaningful and Phumelele believes that saying 'it is not the right thing' would be enough answer. He assumes that we understand the situation from the same point of view but I refuse to take on the position he makes available to me; to me it might make sense to be in a gang; perhaps not to him. Another strategy I use to contest his self-image is to ask him how other people look at him:

I: Why do you think people look at you in that way [he described they are afraid of him] because you described to me, also in the interview before...[He interrupts: I can say...] you all the time explain that you would never kill anyone. You would only do housebreaking and stuff like that. And now you tell when you get to prison, people are afraid of you because they know what you did outside. Then I am thinking, how does that relate to each other. Your picture of yourself doing housebreaking and their picture of you as someone they are scared of?

P: They do not know me as someone doing housebreaking. They know me as someone carrying a gun and robbing people.

I: That is why they are scared of you?

P: When you carry a gun and people, they hear it. They are scared of you.

I: So what do they hear about you?

P: I cannot say they hear the wrong stuff but... I did not shoot people so they died. People were not dying. People were so scared of him, you see.

Indirectly I confront Phumelele with my own fear of him by asking why other people are scared of him. During the second interview I am very confronting with Phumelele but I only realise that when I analyse my material when I am back in Amsterdam. I experience myself as passive while the interview takes place. My confrontational approach is a reaction to what I experience as Phumelele's refusal to comply with my rules for our interaction. The fact is that Phumelele does not refuse my agenda during the second interview; I only experience it as such because I am still very afraid of him. My fear makes me reduce him in his being. I only focus on the aspects of his display, which confirms me in the picture I have of him. I see him as manipulative and no matter what he says he remains manipulative. By reducing him I am able to control

him. I suspect him of being a psychopath, which seems like a convenient category to employ. Psychopaths need to be controlled and they should certainly not be trusted. By categorising and controlling Phumelele like that, I can more easily control my own fear. I can justify my own inability to establish a relationship with him.

In the above quote Phumelele refers to himself as 'him' instead of 'I' when he mentions that people were scared of him, which seems to be linked to his experience of not being there in the moment where he shot or killed people. They are scared of 'him' not 'me'. It is someone external to what he sees as himself, who is present in the moment where he exercises his power of killing. I am only able to be open towards this aspect of his being in the last interview. The evening before the interview I am emotionally distressed about my work so I do not prepare anything for the interview the following day. I have been unable to sleep the whole night so when I meet Phumelele in the morning I am tired; I have given up controlling the situation, which makes my meeting with Phumelele different from the previous ones. I listen more to what he says and I am even able to put myself in his place:

P: When they see me, they cannot see I am an old one. When they see me, they say look at that boy, he looks innocent. I know everyone that sees me they cannot see what I have done. They look at my face and think, this one must be innocent. They cannot see.

I: So do you become confused as well? How do you manage being a small boy [he refers to himself like that earlier] doing big boy's activities?

P: Joh... Sometimes some things I do, I did not know I was doing that thing. Or I am stressing when I am doing those things. Or I want something, I want to get something; I want to get money to do something and so, so. So that is why I have the power; I do not think I am small like they think. I say to myself, when something can happen, I can see it because I cannot say now, no, when I am going there, the boys, they can catch me or shoot me. I do not think about that. I say I can see that.

I: So what do you mean when you say that sometimes, when you do the big boy's stuff, you feel you are not there?

P: [Long silence] It is like say, when I am going with the big boys and me, I am not present. I am old now but I know, when they see me, they still say I am young. When they see my face they still say I am young. But I know this one is big to me and me, I am still big. I am not big but I know people can say to me, I am still young. Stuff like that. But they do not know my pain; why I am doing these things. Why I rob or something like that. They do not know they cannot afford to help me or I am supposed to do that thing.

Phumelele is clearly confused about who he is and how other people look at him. He is aware that he can play with other people's perception of him. He repeats his experience of not being there when the shooting and the killing takes place. It is remarkable that the interview is full of these displays of confusion. During our third interview I stop asking difficult questions. I dare to let go of my perception of myself as a researcher; I let go on my fear of him, which makes him dare opening up as well. He fears me, not because I display my willingness to physical force but because I embody

the ability to judge his innocence, which is something, he desperately searches for in himself. He fears to open up for his dark side and be rejected as not normal, and I possess the power to do so. He has experienced to be excluded from what is considered normal many times before and having to spend so many years in prison makes him even more fragile. He has very few opportunities to get his self-image confirmed through a relationship with someone he trusts. When I refuse to take up the position he invites me to take there is a lot at stake for him. We both reduce each others being and it is only when I let go that he also lets go.

Phumelele started off by denying his power of killing and claiming a position as innocent. That move was suspicious to me. He also installed his position by employing the power I lacked: he became aggressive when I asked him about things he was unwilling to talk about. His aggression reminded me of my own vulnerability and my reaction was to fear him. My fear made me unable to move towards him. I could not focus on what we had in common. I was busy proving how different we were from each other. It was only when I was able to let go of my fear that we managed to see each other in a new light. We were only able to communicate when we allowed the categories, we had ascribed to each other, to become fluid and negotiable. Before that our positions were stiff and consuming.

Damian and Phumelele employed two different strategies for being recognised as human beings in my presence and I developed different strategies to get access to their experiences with violence. It was in moments where we dared to open up the categories we had of each other and ourselves that the space between us was characterised by transcending normality. In those moments guilt and regret did not play a role. These moments were highly temporarily and the process a very painful experience. What I have argued is that we need to be willing to confront ourselves with this pain if we wish to understand the evil aspect of doing violence. I have furthermore suggested that understanding violence is not just about recognising the 'dark side' but actually to acknowledge the 'dark side' as inherent in the 'light side'; it is to merge dark and light, good and bad, killers and angels. If we only focus on the light side we run the risk of reducing perpetrators to victims; if we limit ourselves to the dark side we risk reducing victims to perpetrators. And then we are in fact doing violence to the people with work with instead of trying to understand what violence is from their point of view.

Closing remarks

Much academic literature has been produced about how fieldworkers develop relationships with the people they study (Hastrup 1990) but little research has been conducted among people who have killed. I have suggested that the limited literature on this topic might be a consequence of the denial of the evil aspect of violence. There is a moment where the one stands out as a perpetrator and the other as a victim and we cannot explain these divisions solely by focusing on social suffering and the inability to do 'good'. I have asked whether it is optimistic to think that we as anthropologists can deconstruct 'evil' and avoid discourses of guilt and regret, when we approach

people, who have killed. My answer is that the process of inter-subjectivity provides temporarily moments where social categories are allowed to be fluid and changeable; where we dare to transgress normality, distinctions between 'us' and 'them' and those are the moments where we might be able to reach understandings of evil without articulating the discourse of guilt and regret.

On a societal level there seems to be a reluctance to create a space for understanding 'evil' actions, which is not defined by guilt. As I have shown it is possible to avoid the question of guilt and regret but only temporarily. When the boys and I dared to let go of the perceptions we had of each other and ourselves this space was gained. When we reduced each other in our own picture these moments were lost. What the boys and I contested when we allowed categories to become fluid, was what it meant to be a human being; where were the boundaries for acceptable killing, stabbing and raping; where were the boundaries of what we would define as 'normal' human behaviour. Is it better to kill a woman than a man? Is it unacceptable to kill someone one knew before hand? Is it more ok to kill a gangster than a random person passing by? Could killing be a reaction to hunger and rape to loneliness? Does one become high from killing and for how long does this feeling last? These are some of the questions we need to ask ourselves if we wish to develop further understanding of violence. We need to include the perspective of the people practicing violence but in order to do so we have to start with ourselves. What is it about violence that makes it so intriguing?

Note

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1 Rosaldo (1983) writes about headhunters; Vigh (2006) about youth soldiering; Hinton (2004) about perpetrators during genocide; Sørensen (1998) about wife beaters.

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