Peer violence in adolescent residential care: A qualitative examination of contextual and peer factors

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the way contextual and peer factors influence peer violence in adolescent residential care. One hundred and twenty residents aged 11–21 from 20 residential care facilities participated in 20 focus groups about peer violence in care. The results demonstrated that four, mutually interrelated themes, contributed to explanations of violence amongst residents: 1) residential peer culture; 2) vulnerability at the beginning of institutionalization; 3) deprivation, stigmatization and frustration; and 4) poor relationship with staff. The results are discussed with reference to the existing residential care and prison-based research on bullying and peer violence and a number of research and policy recommendations are provided.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Bullying and peer violence in adolescent residential care

The existing research on residential care suggests that bullying and peer violence represent one of the greatest threats to achieving the complex aims of residential care (Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998). However, research on residential care that focused exclusively on bullying or peer violence amongst residents is limited. Except for one qualitative study focusing on peer violence in general (Barter, Renold, Berridge, & Cawson, 2004), and one quantitative study (Sekol, 2011) focusing on bullying in particular, no previous research has focused solely on attempts to explain peer violence and bullying in adolescent residential care.[1] Although using different approaches, both studies demonstrated that bullying and peer violence are serious problems amongst young people in residential care.[2]

Using an anonymous self-reported bullying questionnaire, Sekol (2011) explored the nature and prevalence of bullying in a national sample of institutionalized youth in Croatia (N = 601) and individual

risk factors for bullying and victimization. Approximately three quarters of residents in both children's homes and correctional homes were involved in bullying at least two or three times a month, either as victims or as perpetrators. Indirect and direct bullying and victimization were about equally prevalent and more girls than boys were involved in bullying. Just under half of residents in both samples believed that staff rarely knew about bullying, that bullying was part of the way things work in residential care, and that victims deserved to be bullied. More than a quarter of residents in both types of facilities believed staff rarely try to stop bullying and about half of all victims in both samples stated that they did not report their victimization to staff.

In terms of individual risk factors for bullying, Sekol (2011) examined personality traits, empathy, self-esteem and attitudes towards bullying and demonstrated that residents who reported the involvement in bullying and victimization differed from those who did not in a number of important ways. However, her final regression models accounted for, at best, 27.0% of variance in bullying and 18.0% of variance in victimization. This left a large proportion of the variances still to be accounted for by other individual and contextual variables.

The context of peer violence was explored by Barter et al. (2004).[3] Semi-structured interviews with 71 young people and 71 staff from 14 English children's homes revealed six institutional factors that contributed to peer violence amongst residents. These referred to: 1) the inconsistent application and scarce practical assistance of policies and

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[1] More papers examined peer violence in residential care (for instance, Morgan (2008) and Gibbs and Sinclair (2000)). However, these studies only dealt with the nature and prevalence of peer violence and did not attempt to *explain* peer violence, especially not the contextual and peer factors that might contribute to peer violence in care. Therefore, these studies are not reviewed in this paper.

[2] Since some studies presented in the Introduction section did not focus on bullying per se but rather on 'peer violence', it may seem that the terms 'peer violence' and 'bullying' used throughout this literature review are somewhat conflated. However, it is important to note that not all bullying is violent (at least not in a form of physical violence) and that not all 'peer violence' is bullying. Unfortunately, a lack of consistency in what was actually measured in the studies that follow did not leave any other choice than to use the terms that were included in each study.

[3] This study did not focus on bullying per se. Rather, violence in homes was defined only by participants' own interpretations, and no definition of violence was provided in interviews. Four main categories of peer violence were identified by residents: physical violence, non-contact attacks (e.g., attacks on personal belongings, and intimidation by looks, gestures or written threats), verbal attacks and unwelcome sexual behaviors. Verbal and physical violence were the most prevalent.

procedures regarding peer violence; 2) misinterpretations of the Children Act 1989; 3) a lack of rationale for the organization of the young people's meetings that provide residents with the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions about peer violence; 4) inappropriate referrals of residents; 5) inappropriate physical features of the homes; and 6) insufficient staffing levels.

The authors also recognized the importance of the residential peer group and its norms in shaping violence amongst residents. They noted that: a) residents had their own rules; b) there was a normalization of violence in the homes and that residents' perceptions of violence depended on their place and role within the peer group; c) peer group dynamics was hierarchical with dominant members ('top dogs') who used oppression and control to impose their will upon their peers); d) residents often had a justification for behaving violently (e.g., 'I never hit him before he hits me'); and e) young chronological age and/or immaturity often served as catalysts for violence.

The authors further described how young people usually perceived a new admission as a threat to their own position in the hierarchy stating that they had to 'protect their patch' (Barter et al., 2004: 64). To do so, residents used a variety of unacceptable means ranging from verbal and physical attacks and intimidation to 'initiation ceremonies'. If new residents did not fight back or resist in some way, they would be labeled as weak and placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Overall, staff viewed the peer hierarchy as a normal and even beneficial aspect of peer relationships in care, stating that it was important for residents "to know where their little places are" (Barter et al., 2004: 44) and describing the practice of relying on residents' pecking orders as a mechanism of control. Similar processes of manipulating residents' social hierarchies by staff and social changes after new admissions were described in the classic work of Polsky (1962). Although Polsky (1962) did not focus explicitly on the relationship between peer culture and violence, he provided a detailed description of the social system of delinquent boys in residential treatment and found that aggression represented the main model by which boys learned to conform to group norms.

1.2. Prison culture and peer violence in prisons and young offender institutions

While residential care research provides little information about the role of contextual and residential peer influences in creating tensions between residents, existing research on bullying and peer violence amongst adult and young offenders provides a better insight into the prisoners' subculture and factors creating it. Residential living of any kind means that the whole personality of a young person is involved in a more or less inescapable social system (Elliot & Thompson, 1991). Such a system not only renders victims captive and increases their exposure to the aggressor, but it also gives the aggressor access to personal information (e.g., about family situations) for intimidating or controlling the victim (Baker, Cunningham, & Male, 2002). Residential care facilities also admit young people with troubled backgrounds, challenging behavior and conflicting needs (Gibbs & Sinclair, 2000), making it likely that patterns of peer violence and peer cultures similar to those found amongst young offenders will occur in other types of residential care for young people. Therefore, the classic and recent work of prison sociology, which describes the nature of inmate hierarchies and the defining features of the inmate 'code', may be useful for understanding peer violence in adolescent residential care.

Sykes and Messinger (1960), for example, argued that prisoners' social relations were determined by their value system which took the form of an explicit 'inmate code'. The inmate code was seen as a product of the natural deprivations of prison life ('pains of imprisonment') and explained as a cultural mechanism for alleviating these pains. Five principles of the code served as guidance for inmate behavior: "never rat on a con"; "refrain from quarrels or arguments"; "don't exploit inmates"; "don't weaken"; and do not show "respect to the custodians or the world for which they stand" (Sykes & Messinger, 1960: 6, 7, 8).

Although the dominant themes of the inmate code were group cohesion, solidarity and loyalty, the violations of the code could result in variety of "sanctions ranging from ostracism to physical violence" (Sykes & Messinger, 1960: 5). Furthermore, deviation from and conformity to the inmate code also served as a basis for determining inmate 'argot roles'.[4]

The above-described deprivation model (see also Goffman, 1961) was first challenged by Irwin and Cressey (1962) who argued that the 'inmate code' is an extension of the 'criminal subculture' which prisoners bring with them into the prison. Hence, while Sykes (1958) described a single prison subculture, Irwin and Cressey (1962) found three different subcultures imported into the prison.[5] The research that followed was based on the deprivation–importation debate and demonstrated that the prison culture is determined not only by 'pains of imprisonment' and influences from the outside world, but also by the ideology and management of the institution (Sparks, Bottoms, & Hay, 1996).

The role of correctional officers in contributing to peer violence in custody has also been examined. Peterson-Badali and Koegl (2002) interviewed 100 male juveniles in Canadian secure custody and found that correctional staff allow, and even encourage, inmate-on-inmate violence. Approximately half of the juveniles reported that they had witnessed staff turning a blind eye to imminent peer violence, guards using too much force on inmates, or staff saying or doing things to put inmates' safety in jeopardy. Roughly one-third of participants reported that they had witnessed or experienced staff offering an incentive to an offender to intimidate or assault another inmate. Just a little under half of juveniles stated that it is unwise to report problems to staff for fear of being labeled a 'rat'.

Using a grounded theory approach in analyzing qualitative data obtained in two focus groups with young offenders, Spain (2005) also found that the negative interaction between prisoners and staff disrupted the overall social cohesion of the prison. The lack of social cohesion led to the separation of the prisoners and staff subcultures. The stronger the 'us and them' society was, the less likely the inmates were to report bullying for the fear of peer reprisals and the stronger the inmate code was. Overall, the role of staff in inducing bullying was the most important factor contributing to the disruption of the prison's social cohesion. Participants reported that they had witnessed staff inciting bullying through favoritism, using the 'favorites' to control other prisoners by violence, or turning a blind eye to bullying when it occurred. Social cohesion was further disrupted by frustration because of lack of material goods, poor relationship with staff, unpredicted regimes, and boredom. Apart from social cohesion, two other themes relevant for explaining bullying emerged from the focus groups. First, to avoid bullying, residents had to 'adapt to survive' which meant abiding by the inmate code and having the support of peers. Second, rejection of new prisoners was common and sometimes referred to as being triggered by race, religion or regional rivalries.

Although the pioneering work in residential care by Barter et al. (2004) provided valuable information about the influence of group structure and its hierarchy in shaping violence between residents, the authors referred to peer group norms as to a feature that existed per se. They spoke of the fact that young people had their own rules, without disentangling either what those rules were or what had shaped them. Consequently, the crucial question of deviation from *what* norms of a peer culture provided justification for violence remained unanswered. Similarly, Spain (2005) noted the importance of abiding by the inmate code in young offender institutions but described only one principle of the code. This referred to the double-bubble rule which

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[4] The roles ranged on the continuum from a 'rat', a 'tough', a 'gorilla' to a 'merchant', a 'weak sister', and 'a wolf'. The role that generated admiration amongst both prisoners and staff and had a great influence in maintaining order of the prison referred to the 'real man'.

[5] These were as follows: a 'thief subculture', a 'convict subculture' and a 'legitimate subculture'. The members of the first one were professional criminals.