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Sadness in young children and the inadequate development of inner outer containment in childhood

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Abstract

Violent crimes and domestic violence are notoriously high in South Africa, which leaves many children defenceless to struggle with emotions such as loneliness and sadness. The healthy development and socialisation of children can be difficult in a society characterised by domestic tribulations, poverty, crime, single-parent homes, and absent parents. In South Africa, children often do not co-reside with their biological parents, mainly due to labour migration and low marital rates. Divorce and long working hours for parents also contribute to limited family interaction. Many children are raised by grandparents or other siblings and relatives, especially in rural areas. Due to these and other factors, children experience poor parental attachment, loss, sadness and loneliness, which impact their general well-being. These correlator factors often contribute to weak outer and inner containment, which are essential for a young person to develop sustained law-abiding behaviour. Being sad and lonely often prompts issues such as delinquency, violence, insecurity, insufficient self-control, and bullying. Reckless' containment theory shows that these behaviours often stem from the absence of the inner and outer controls that are necessary for the development of normative behaviour. Healthy bonding with and attachment to significant others are also important to the development of normative behaviour. In this contribution, the findings from a study conducted in Limpopo, South Africa, are discussed. The qualitative research study involved asking 373 children, between the ages of eight and nine years, to draw and narrate what made them sad. The researchers wanted to determine the specific challenges that young South African children face. In line with the interpretivist paradigm, it was also important to determine what these children regarded as sad and challenging situations, to understand their unique perspectives and life worlds. The study was therefore guided by the research question: What challenges do young South African children face in their daily lives? Findings revealed that exposure to bullying, loss, inadequate attachment, and crime can cause the development of weak inner and outer containment, which might lead to future misbehaviour, poor self-control, incorrigible actions, and bullying behaviour.

Keywords: *inner containment, outer containment, containment theory, loss, bullying, crime, attachment*



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1. Introduction and background

South Africa faces pressing challenges of widespread violence and social disarray that reached a critical point and led experts to categorise the country as an 'at-risk' society (Burton, *et al.*, 2011). In the period between January and March 2023, the nation experienced a disturbing surge in murders, with over 6 200 individuals falling victim to this alarming trend, equating to an average of about 70 murders per day. Tragically, the statistics recorded for these three months include 245 children among the victims (Unicef South Africa, 2023). Eventually, 27 494 murders occurred in South Africa during 2023 (Magome, 2024).

Several social and economic factors create a climate in which violence and disorganisation are encouraged. These factors include high levels of poverty, poor service delivery and health services, socially disorganised neighbourhoods, high levels of family disruption, social and cultural norms that encourage a subculture of violence, fading economic opportunities, low community participation due to diverse groupings, and corruption in government (Zinn, 2020). All these adverse factors can have a significant impact on families, childrearing, and child well-being.

Research has consistently indicated a strong connection between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and long-term psychological well-being (McGregor, *et al.*, 2018). ACEs have been associated with various negative outcomes, including child-to-parent violence (Nowakowski-Sims & Rowe, 2017) and lasting psychosocial effects on children (Hillis, *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, children exposed to adversity face a heightened risk of developing psychiatric disorders later in their lives (Parade, *et al.*, 2017). Children who grow up in adverse environments such as South Africa, where the four important pillar institutions – the political power base, the family, the school and the economic powers – are disorganised and out of sync time and again, are placed at risk and made vulnerable to failure later. In addition, many children do not get adequate opportunities to attach to significant others and to emotionally bond with them. Attachment is significant for the development of lasting psychological regulation and happiness. Healthy attachment to significant others creates a safe and nurturing space for children to confidently explore their surroundings and to handle societal challenges (Bowlby, 1988). In this regard, Travis Hirschi developed the social bonding theory postulating that those children who have strong and enduring attachments to the conventional societal role players are less likely to deviate from society's rules compared to those children with weak bonds and attachment to their significant others. The parent-child bond is deemed especially critical in deterring potential future criminal or incorrigible behaviour in the child (Hirschi, 1969).

Many children who are sad and unhappy are vulnerable to a path of delinquency and criminality over a lifespan from childhood to adulthood (Jones, 2021; Hoeve & Van der Laan, 2012). At-risk children may also present with anxiety, fear, and other mental disorders due to their emotional vulnerability and adverse environments. An environment of this nature and the feelings these children experience often position the youth for criminal career patterns, as many grow up with weakened inner and outer containment. For children to stand a chance of developing inner and outer containment and developing mechanisms to manage adverse factors, they need to experience warm, close, and continuous relationships with their primary caregivers in devoted relationships in which the child and the primary caregiver find joy and fulfilment (Siegel, 2016).

2. Inner and outer containment

Walter Reckless developed the containment theory in 1961 (Jones, 2021). He utilised several theories and synthesised them into the containment theory. He developed a general explanation of the factors and variables in a young person's life that propel them toward crime or negativity and the factors or variables that restrain them from crime or negativity. Factors that push individuals towards crime and negativity are known as 'social pressures'. These include many of the factors highlighted above such as poor living conditions, lack of opportunities, and low status in society. Additionally, 'social pulls' are those factors that pull individuals away from a certain lifestyle such as delinquent friends. Furthermore, 'internal push factors' such as hostility, prejudice, impulsiveness, and aggression contribute to pushing individuals towards crime. Not all children will be propelled towards negativity or delinquent behaviour because many develop certain factors that contain any thrust towards crime or negative demeanours. These forces are known as 'outer containment' such as bonding with the mother, family cohesion, consistent discipline, and 'inner containment' such as a sense of responsibility, self-control, self-regulation, and a strong superego (the self-critical conscience) (Lanier & Henry, 2010; Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

Reckless (1961), (in Jones, 2021) wanted to explain wrongdoing and aberrant behaviour and emotions as the result of the interplay between the two forms of control that influence people: internal or inner containment and external or outer containment. He wanted to know what types of factors caused some people to commit crimes, why they joined delinquent gangs, or manifest negative feelings, while others living under the same social conditions and subjected to the same pressures pursue socially acceptable patterns of behaviour (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

The containment that is referred to, also known as repression, deals with restrictions that are placed on people's behaviour. Both internal forces and external forces impact people and the emotions they attach to a situation when they choose to get involved in crime or to avoid it. Reckless' containment theory (1961) also explains incorrigible behaviour, anxiety, loss, sadness, and uncertainty in children and how they experience abnormal conditions in their core environments (e.g., absent parents, bullying at school, and domestic violence):

- Firstly, Reckless (1961) believed that children are subjected to adverse environmental pressures, which include conditions such as poverty, economic insecurity, unemployment, family conflict, incomplete families, absent parents, lack of opportunities, and social inequality that impact on their attitudes, feelings and behaviour;
- Secondly, children are subjected to pulls such as bad companions among their peers, delinquent or criminal subcultures, unlawful opportunities, the mass media, and deviant groups; and
- Thirdly, individual behaviour may also be affected by a variety of internal organic and psychological pushes, which include factors such as intense inner tensions, strong feelings of aggression and hostility, mental conflicts, recklessness, sadness, rebellion against authority, inner compulsions, anxieties, rejection ambivalence, and fears (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

There are two reinforcing structures that act as safeguards against wrongdoing. These safeguards might occur because of the abovementioned pushes and pulls, namely inner containment and outer containment (Lanier & Henry, 2010; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020). Inner containment is often linked to nourishing family interaction, intact families, and stable attachment. Inner containment is essentially formed by the age of 12 years. The age group we approached in the current study are between eight and nine years old, which means they are deemed very vulnerable in terms of push and pull factors as well as containment. Young children show a higher likelihood of developing faulty inner and outer containment avenues if they are confronted by adverse factors while growing up, especially before the age of 12 years. Outer containment is often linked to strong social relationships with parents, teachers, and other sources of conventional socialisation such as coaches, religious leaders, and elders in the community (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

2.1 Inner containment

Inner containment refers to the ability of the children to direct or steer themselves by means of 'self-control' and moral development and include elements such as:

- a favourable self-concept or positive self-image;
- an orientation towards socially approved goals;
- a high level of frustration tolerance;
- obedience;
- containment or strong inhibitions;
- acceptance; and
- identification with norms, social customs, values, codes, rules, laws, and institutions (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

Children's experiences at home, the environment around them, and their physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills influence their ability to develop a moral compass – a sense of right versus wrong. If children do not have the basic moral qualities necessary for effective and nurturing interaction, negative emotions and delinquency are likely to manifest. In this regard, Piaget (in McLeod, 2023) postulated that children need to be subjected to consistent rules and guidance by parents, teachers, and other significant others. With consistent guidance and rules, children develop unilateral respect for these role players and the rules. From the age of 10 years, most children develop the understanding that the morality of cooperation is important to create a compliant society. They comprehend that people must work together to decide what is acceptable and unacceptable. Youths develop the ability to use logic and to contemplate their own thought processes. At approximately the age of 10 years, children begin to understand that morals represent social agreements between people and are intended to promote the common good for all. This consistency, structure, and rule-bound behaviour fosters heteronomous morality. Many children with heteronomous morality show moral behaviour, respect for authority, and see themselves as diligent, obedient, honest, and rule-bound conformists (Lanier & Henry, 2010; McLeod, 2023). Additionally, they often have strong inner containment. In cases when some role players are absent (e.g., parents), children could find it difficult to develop inner containment and heteronomous morality.

Reckless (1961) believes that inner containment is important in contemporary societies. In these settings, people spend a good deal of their time away from their families and other supportive groups that assist in their containment. Consequently, individuals are more reliant on their own self-control to prevent them from acting-out behaviour or deviancy and to regulate their emotions. The result of inner containment is that people must rely primarily on their inner strength to function as holistic beings in a modern society that presents many unfavourable opportunities. Children who grow up in an environment where adversity and secondary attachment are rife (due to absent parents) will likely develop a skewed sense of morality, weak self-esteem, as well as weak inner and outer containment to regulate behaviour and emotions. This places them at risk of developing delinquent actions, negative thoughts, and sadness (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

2.2 Outer containment

This concept refers to the ability of society, the state, the tribe, the village, the community, the family, and other significant groups to hold the behaviour of individuals within the bounds of accepted norms, rules, regulations, laws, expectations, and values. In contemporary society, it involves some of the following components:

- providing the individual with meaningful roles;
- provision of reasonable limits and responsibilities for individuals;
- reasonable norms and expectations;
- fostering a sense of identity and belonging; and
- the availability of alternative ways (additional opportunities) and means of fulfilment when one or more other means are closed to them (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

In a diverse society such as South Africa, the family and other small support groups primarily provide these containment components. Reckless suggests that the individual who finds a sense of satisfaction, belonging, recognition, and support within their small immediate group (who are also bound by societal rules and norms) is inclined to follow the accepted norms and rules of society. Outer containment could serve as a second line of defence against inner pushes when the individual's inner containment and moral compass are weak. A child who finds it difficult to cope with issues such as bullying at school, shaming, disrespect, weak self-regulation, and low esteem will find it difficult to cope at school if they do not have strong bonds and outer containment safeguards such as committed loving parents or caregivers. The inability to cope with emotions and feelings will be exacerbated if strong outer containment safeguards are absent.

By categorising each of the two containments as either strong or weak, the containment theory clearly illustrates the possible impact on an individual:

- When a child has strong inner containment and strong outer containment, the chance of involvement in delinquency is highly unlikely and he/she will have more safeguards to deal with setbacks;
- When a child has strong inner containment and weak outer containment, there is a lower risk of getting involved in delinquency and he/she most likely still will be in good stead to deal with setbacks;

- When a child has weak inner containment and strong outer containment, the possibility of involvement in delinquency or developing negative thoughts and feelings is higher than in either of the previous two combinations of containment and the child probably will express this absence of inner containment in different ways (e.g., sadness or low self-esteem); and
- When a person has weak inner containment as well as weak outer containment, the chances of getting involved in delinquency or showing their vulnerability, fears, feelings of sadness, and frustrations at all levels of their life are significantly more probable (Jones, 2021; Van der Westhuizen & Bezuidenhout, 2020).

The researchers decided to guide this study with Reckless's (1961) containment theory, as the theory is flexible and can be utilised interdisciplinary (for example, by criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other practitioners). The basic premise of this theory was considered to identify individualised behaviour and emotional experiences in children.

3. Research methodology

The qualitative study was conducted in five randomly selected primary schools in Limpopo province. This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand human meaning and behaviour without imposing external influences on the process (Mills, *et al.*, 2010). Interpretivism posits that reality is subjective and can vary based on an individuals' context, perspective, and interpretation (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). According to Williamson (2006), the interpretivist paradigm emphasises the construction of knowledge through observations made in participants' natural settings. Thus, this paradigm was particularly appropriate for the study, as children were asked to create drawings of ideas that made them sad while in their familiar classroom settings. The children independently assigned meaning to their drawings, while the researchers refrained from intervening in their creative process (Mills *et al.*, 2010). Following the completion of their drawings, the children, who were between the ages of eight and nine years, shared their stories with the researchers in the classroom, which established a comfortable and familiar environment for expression. Two researchers were present at all schools. The groups of 20 to 30 children per class were asked to draw a picture, whereafter the researchers conversed with each child individually in a private space.

The present study was conducted as part of a larger research project within the field of social sciences and used a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore children's lived experiences of sadness. "This approach provides a rigorous means for elucidating and describing the psychological essence of a particular phenomenon as it was lived by the subject" (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015:3). The researchers deemed it important to determine the specific challenges that young South African children are faced with daily. In line with the interpretivist paradigm, it was also important to determine what these children regarded as sad and challenging situations, to understand their unique perspectives and life worlds.

The research project was therefore guided by the research question: *What challenges do young South African children face in their daily lives?*

All ethical principles as set out by the University Ethics Board were adhered to.

3.1 Children and drawing

Children’s drawings have been used as a valuable source of data and a significant diagnostic tool. Scholars such as Steele and Kuban (2013) suggest that drawings may serve as a safe medium for children to communicate aspects that may be difficult to express verbally. Additionally, drawing is often a spontaneous activity for most children, which allows them to express their desires and fears (Hawkins, 2002). Children’s drawings serve as reflections of their fears and hostilities and play a crucial role in their emotional development and overall well-being (Tielsch & Allen, 2005).

Drawings have the potential to help children elaborate on their experiences, particularly when they lack the verbal capacity to articulate their emotions (Steele & Kuban, 2013). According to Malchiodi (1998), children’s drawings are believed to reflect their inner worlds by depicting both conscious and unconscious emotions and providing insights into their psychological state and interpersonal style. Tielsch and Allen (2005) agree that children’s drawings are projections of their personality, how they see themselves, their experiences, and their views of the important people in their lives (their outer containment safeguards). Therefore, it can be deduced that drawing is an important medium for children to express themselves. Given that the participants in this study were young children, we considered drawings to be a suitable instrument for obtaining data rich in information about their emotionally challenging experiences and containment mechanisms.

The schools included in the study were situated in rural and semi-urban areas within the Limpopo province of South Africa. There are various challenges in this province, including inequality, unemployment, and poverty. In this context, many young people in Limpopo are particularly exposed to adversities such as drug abuse, violence, family challenges, alcohol misuse, HIV/AIDS, and crime (Kanjere & Choenyane, 2021). Table 1 outlines the schools that were included in the study, as well as the number of participants for each school.

Table 1: Demographic data of schools

School	Demographic area	Number of participants (n=373)
School 1 – Private school	Vhembe District	31
School 2 – Government school	Vhembe District	104
School 3 – Government school	Fondwe District	101
School 4 – Government school	Thohoyandou District	118
School 5 – Government school	Phiphidi District	19

The study utilised a descriptive phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of young children. This approach is known to provide a means of elucidating and describing the psychological essence of a specific phenomenon as experienced by the subjects (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015). The researchers recognised the importance of identifying the challenges faced by young South African children by determining the specific pull and push factors they are exposed to. Within the interpretivist paradigm, it was also crucial for understanding how these children perceived situations they deemed sad (a relatable emotion to this age group) and challenging (inner and outer containment) to gain insights into their unique perspectives and life worlds.

A psychologist conducted the qualitative content analysis of the findings, which was independently verified by a senior researcher in social sciences. Qualitative content analysis, as described by Bauer and Gaskell (2000), is an explicit procedure for analysing textual data in social research, and it represents a systematic and objective way of describing a phenomenon (Elo, *et al.*, 2014).

Informed consent and assent were required from the school principals, parents, and children. All interviews were transcribed, and observations were documented. To protect privacy, pseudonyms were used. To enhance the reliability of the study, the participants had an opportunity to clarify their narrations and explain their drawings to the researchers, which also enhanced the credibility of the study. One researcher completed the data analysis, which was confirmed by another senior researcher.

4. Findings and discussion

The qualitative findings from this study were also presented in a descriptive statistical way to highlight the margins between the different variables. When the children were asked to draw and narrate things that made them sad, significant themes emerged that were related to physical and verbal violence in the form of bullying (29%), loss (28%), environmental factors (19%), exposure to crime (12%), parental arguments and punishment, as well as parental absence. A summary of the themes identified are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Themes identified in the study

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Bullying	107	29%
Loss	103	28%
Environmental factors (e.g., fire, car accidents, animals)	71	19%
Crime	46	12%
Parental arguments and punishment	24	6%
Parental absence	22	6%

In the next section, some of the most significant themes will be outlined. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and each participant was also allocated a unique number; for example, L60.

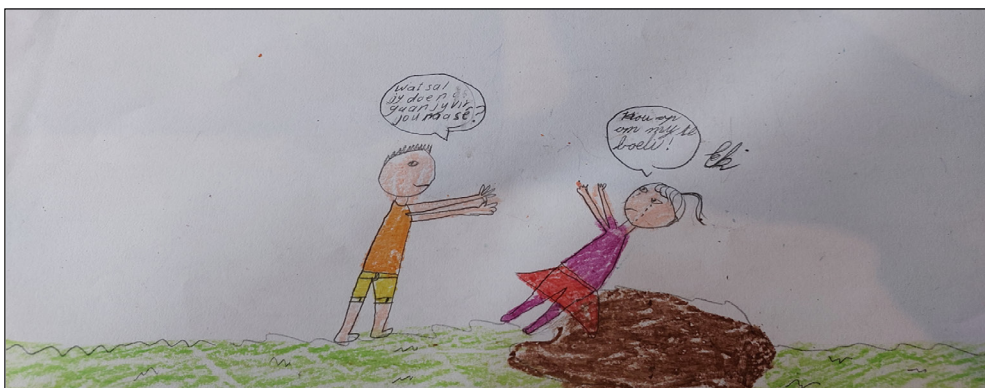
4.1 Bullying

Several children drew pictures depicting physical and verbal abuse (bullying), mostly at the hands of other children. Bullying was also noted at home (e.g., by siblings) and at school. Thiro L15 narrated the following: "At home when my brother shouts at me, I feel sad. When my friends kick me, I get sad." Leo L62 wrote and narrated that his brother bullies him. He mentioned that his brother cut his (Leo's) finger. Vusi (Drawing 1) explained that a child hit him with a brick, because he did not want to play. He drew the bully bigger and with long legs. He emphasised the objects such as the brick and used excessive colouring to show his unhappiness. Heavy overcolouring of objects is an indication of stress and anxiety. The emphasis of feet may be an indication of uncertainty (Van Niekerk, 1986).



Drawing 1: Vusi

Ronald L46 explained that he was bullied on his way back home from school. The bully slapped him in the face. Miemie L84 (Drawing 2) said a boy bullied her and pushed her down in the mud. She wrote that she cried and that it was the worst day ever. She added speech bubbles and dark clouds to emphasise her unhappiness. If a child adds speech bubbles to their drawing, they want to emphasise a point or ensure that the message is clearly understood (Koppitz, 1968). In the speech bubble of Miemie's drawing, the boy taunts her while tears are streaming down her face. The girl in the picture shows a rude sign to the bully.



Drawing 2: Miemie

The participants also drew and narrated stories of verbal bullying. Moki L123, for instance, explained that she feels sad when other children make fun of her. Vavi L98 drew and wrote that she did not like it when her friends laughed at her. Several of the children mentioned or drew pictures of verbal insults. Some of the children were called fat, ugly, and stupid by the bullies.

Discussion – Bullying

Bullying at all levels and ages of South African society is an everyday occurrence (Juan, *et al.*, 2018). In the discussions with the children and from the drawings, it became evident that many of the children did not have the necessary skills to deal with their bullies. Many of the children in this study were exposed to verbal and physical bullying and aggression in school and at home, which complicates the development of adequate inner and outer containment. Most of the children internalised the negative experiences which led to anxiety, sadness, frustration and low self-esteem. Jaffe, Sudermann and Geffner (2000) also indicate that victims of this type of behaviour often have lower social competence and lower performance in school. Many victims of bullying may develop problems with aggression such as aggressive attitudes towards authority figures and as part of their disposition (Bartol & Bartol, 2021). Post-traumatic symptoms may also manifest and children may develop different levels of stress. Importantly, children who are bullied may experience difficulty with their cognitive development, the processing of social information, and social cues (Bartol & Bartol, 2021). It often affects their behaviour as well as the ability to trust, develop healthy containment, and moral safeguards. The opposite is also important as many children become bullies due to their inability to contain their feelings (e.g., sadness) and frustrations. Pro-active bullying allows a child to obtain some control and status by dominating other children (Jara, *et al.*, 2017).

4.2 Loss

Another notable theme in this research pertained to the experiences of loss and grief. Many children expressed their feelings through drawings and conversations, specifically relating to the loss of a parent, sibling, grandparent, or other family members. Additionally, some children emphasised the loss of a beloved pet. The following section presents a selection of these drawings and discussions.

Ria L25 (Drawing 3) drew and wrote about her mother's passing: "When my mother died, I was very, very sad ...". Her drawing depicts herself beside a grave with tears flowing down her face.



Drawing 3: Ria

Mary L5 (Drawing 4) also described her sadness. When she was five years old, her mother passed away. In her picture, the crying family stands next to the grave with arms stretched out. The addition of clouds in the drawing may be an indication of depressed feelings. The outstretched arms may be associated with uncertainty and a need for love (Van Niekerk, 1986).



Drawing 4: Mary

Cari L116 drew and narrated her feelings of sadness when her grandfather died. She also mentioned that her parents moving and leaving her behind was a significant loss. Nina L106 mentioned two losses in her life. She mentioned the loss of a loved one (deceased), as well as the loss of her mom when she goes away from home for work (parenting at a distance). Leli L93 (Drawing 5) mentioned feelings of sadness when a loved one goes away from home (migrating parents who work away from home). In her picture, the rain covers the whole page, which might emphasise the intensity of her sadness. Absent parents were identified in 6% of the analysed drawings.



Drawing 5: Leli

Discussion – Loss

Considering the importance of attachment to parents and loved ones to develop inner and outer containment, it is evident that many children in this sample did not have the luxury of developing healthy containment mechanisms. It is also probable that the absence of parents and significant others could impact negatively on moral development. During the discussions about the drawings, children emphasised the gravity of “loss” in their lives when parents are not involved in their day-to-day activities. One cannot generalise, but it was clear from the drawings and discussions that fractured families, or cases when parents have to leave for extended periods of time (job opportunities elsewhere), had a significant impact on some of the children in the sample. Absent parents create a challenge in terms of containment, moral development, and secure attachment for nurturing happy and well-adapted children. Children with weak containment, inadequate moral development, and weak attachment to primary caregivers are likely at risk for victimisation by bullies, emotional distress, depressed mood, anxiety, and acting-out behaviour such as bullying.

4.3 Crime

In this study, the children drew and narrated stories of crimes such as house robberies, murder, and rape. Sello L94 (Drawing 6) wrote the following about his picture: "I hate crime, people disturb peace (sic) when stealing our things." He drew a picture with vibrant colours. He included clouds, a stream, and a motor vehicle. He clearly depicts a robbery situation with the robber pointing a semi-automatic rifle at a man. Additional details such as houses, bridges, and streams in a drawing may be interpreted as uncertainty. The clouds in the drawing may be interpreted as anxiety (Van Niekerk, 1986). Carlo L1 also expressed his sadness about crime. His picture depicts a house robbery. He wrote the following: "I feel sad about crime. It is not good." Lily L64 indicated that she feels sad when someone is shot. Several of the participants' drawings indicated gun violence.



Drawing 6: Sello

Kelly L92 (Drawing 7) wrote the following: "I become sad when one of our friends has been raped." Lauren L76 also mentioned rape: "I hate people who rape, because some of them have AIDS." Ryan L81 also mentioned rape in his narrations: "The gangsters rape the family. I feel sad."



Drawing 7: Kelly

Discussion – Crime

As mentioned before, South Africa has the notorious label of being one of the most violent countries in the world. Regrettably, violence in neighbourhoods spills over into pillar institutions such as the family and the school. The children in this study who were distressed by crime did not hesitate to signal their fears and insecurities in drawings about violent crimes. Unfortunately, young children who enter a phase when their morality should flourish are hampered by an endemic subculture of violence (Bezuidenhout, 2018b). Their moral containment will most probably be affected as children at this age are supposed to see and internalise the common good but are confronted by violence and the negative effects thereof. Most children will find it difficult to develop heteronomous morality, containment, and rule-bound behaviour due to the exposure to violence and crime. Sadly, some children with weak inner and outer containment will be tempted to get involved in crime. Therefore, we assert that poor moral judgement, weak inner and outer containment, as well as low self-control could be significant push factors for many children to develop delinquent and rebellious behaviour.

We contend that the uncertainty that appears in some of the drawings might reflect the “crossroads” some children find themselves at. Although they mostly indicate sadness in terms of crime, they also show general feelings of uncertainty. The life stage they find themselves in makes them vulnerable as they are entering a stage when moral development is foregrounded. If their moral development is skewed or interrupted, they could be on a path of failure and delinquency. Bezuidenhout (2018a) insists that ineffective or absent

moral development correlates strongly with youth misbehaviour. Additionally, children who experience crime, poverty, and hardship daily (as depicted in the drawings) might be drawn into a world of crime and substance abuse due to weak inner and outer containment.

Not all children who witness crime have weak containment, or who have insecure attachment become criminals or act violently, but interestingly, most young offenders have containment gaps and attachment disorders. Fortunately, Hay and Meldrum (2016) remind us that not all children will derail due to adverse situations such as witnessing violent crime, experiencing pull and push factors daily, or growing up in criminogenic neighbourhoods. They believe many children have the ability to redirect themselves away from these circumstances (e.g., experiencing violent crime daily) and temptations (e.g., delinquent peers). Self-control and other control mechanisms should not be seen as a fixed quality in all people as some humans could redirect themselves in adverse situations. We contend that inner and outer containment should be seen as fluid and that some children only need a little of each of these containments to deal with adverse challenges and hardships. Unfortunately, not all children have this ability to survive childhood unscathed and for that reason, we believe that all children should have the privilege to develop sound inner and outer containment, strong morals, and healthy attachment to counterbalance the impact of adverse factors such as crime, bullying, and loss.

5. Conclusionary thoughts

In this study, children were asked to draw and describe situations that made them sad. As mentioned before, young children find it easier to share their experiences through alternative methods such as drawings. Drawing allows for own interpretation and reflection (Jolley & Rose, 2023). Drawing is seen as a vehicle for individuals to express their emotions and thoughts (Çetin & Güneş, 2021). The researchers anticipated that children in this research sample would canvas their inner and outer experiences on paper when asked to draw a picture about circumstances that made them sad (e.g., exposure to bullying, community, and family violence). It was confirmed that the foundations of the containment theory and the drawings were insightful to use in the identification of pre-adolescent youths who might be vulnerable and at risk of inadequate mechanisms to cope with their current and past challenges.

The findings of the study highlighted factors such as aggression (bullying), loss, crime, and several environmental challenges as the demands that the group of children grappled with. As mentioned before, South African children are exposed to several environmental, community, and home adversities. It is proposed that family hardship, poverty, and exposure to violence complicate the development of sound inner and outer containment. Sadly, violence and crime seem to be entrenched in the South African society, which contributes to a 'culture' of violence. Violence within South African households is widespread and interwoven with the culture of the society (Scorgie, *et al.*, 2017). The prevalence of violence is attributed to several factors, including structural inequality, societal acceptance of violence, the prevalence of militarised masculinity, breakdowns in community and family connections, and the erosion of social capital. Additionally, domestic violence is fuelled by widespread poverty, expressions of violent masculinity, and substance abuse (Mncanca & Okeke in Taukeni, 2019). In this study, it was clear that several of the children in the different schools resorted to aggressive acts (bullying) to deal with day-to-day challenges. The young children in this study were, therefore, victims and perpetrators of violent acts. Several research studies, as mentioned earlier in this article, emphasise the fact that the socialisation of aggressive behaviour might lead to future delinquency and aggressive acts.

Several of the children in this study also described experiences of loss; for instance, the death of a close family member or absent parent(s). Bowlby (1988) highlights that the primary goal of attachment is to create a safe and nurturing space for children to confidently explore their surroundings. Hirschi (1969) emphasises that the parent-child bond plays a pivotal role in deterring potential future criminal behaviour in the child. Hence, a negative or fragile relationship with the primary caregiver may have harmful effects on children, especially those already exposed to stressors such as violence in their environments. Seepamore (2016) believes that labour migration and fractured families are entrenched in South Africa and highlights “parenting from a distance” as a significant challenge. Children experience detrimental consequences due to parent-child separation for extended periods. Most notably are insufficient moral guidance, a lack of rules, and a lack of inner containment. Children in these circumstances experience a disruption of family roles, emotional distance, the gradual erosion of family relationships, discipline problems, and often struggle with household routines (Bartollas, 1997; Cahn, 2008; Maree, 2018). We believe that the exposure to loss left some of the children in the study vulnerable to push factors associated with psychological challenges such as anxiety and feelings of rejection. Therefore, one could assert that learnt behaviour, exposure to violence, and social pressures might push these children to resolve future problems inappropriately, which highlights the development of weak inner and outer containment.

We postulate that investigating the challenges that young children grapple with is important for insight into factors that influence inner and outer containment. It also provides information on the factors that should be dealt with in schools and communities. These insights also may be helpful in identifying children for early intervention to address matters such as sadness, loss and anxiety, and to ignite the development of inner and outer containments. The development of empathy was foregrounded in this study. Young children are still developing empathy but should be encouraged to develop sensitivity and compassion for others. Ultimately, it is hoped that preventative measures and programmes are put in place to support children, families, and communities to develop strategies to improve positive inner and outer containment in children to allow them to fend for themselves. We also reason that a child with strong bonds, solid outer and inner containment, as well as healthy moral principles will be adequately equipped to deal with setbacks of this ilk.

The study was limited to one province in South Africa. Future research should include more provinces in South Africa. Follow-up studies with older children might also see different perspectives emerge. However, the researchers endeavoured to provide a glimpse of the containment sphere of the typical young South African child using drawings and narrations.

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