'If you take it personally you break' Neglected voices on violence in secure units for adolescents

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Abstract: To a large degree, the voices of staff running daily operations in secure units for adolescents, particularly on sensitive issues such as violence and abuse, have been missing. The aim of the present paper is to make these voices heard by investigating what forms of violence staff in secure units encounter in their day-to-day work and to deepen our understanding of how they handle it. The study uses two theoretical starting points. First, the secure unit is understood in terms of Berger and Luckmann's concept of institutionalisation, emphasising how behaviour and practices develop through well-defined roles. Secondly, inspiration is drawn from Goffman's notion of frontstage and backstage, highlighting how staff within an institution (i.e. secure unit) enter into different roles. Fifty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff at three different secure units for adolescents in Sweden. The material was organised through a thematic analysis, yielding six themes placed under two headings; 'A violent scene? A matter of definition' and 'Handling violence: strategies employed'. The results show how staff describe youth as the violent party and how they suppress their own emotions. Additionally, staff articulated their own use of violence toward youth and their emotional stance, describing an interpersonal shield that protected them from violence. The results underline the importance of raising questions about the nature of violence in secure units for adolescents and how staff handle such violence in their everyday work.

Keywords: Secure units, staff perspective, violence, front and backstage, institutionalisation

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Introduction

Violence perpetrated against social work staff is a reason for concern amongst policy makers, professional bodies and staff themselves. Within health care, such as youth psychiatric units, a system for monitoring and reviewing violent incidents is common. Within social work, however, this is a rather neglected area. Furthermore, within secure units[1], research has primarily focused on youth's perspective, different treatment models and on the relationship between youth and staff (cf. Degner et al., 2015; Sallnäs, 2009; Johansson, 2007). This article looks at violence in day-to-day work for staff at secure units for adolescents. Specifically, it addresses how staff members describe and handle violence. Secure units can be described as a violent physical setting (Alink, 2014; Steckley, 2010), often placed in rural areas. Furthermore, working in a context of threats and violence may have undesired physical and psychological consequences.

Violence is a complex, culturally bound, and emotion-laden concept, where fear is thought to play a key role in the damage it causes. In her article on the multiple meanings of violence, Parkes (2007) calls violence a 'slippery concept'. Due to the many forms violence can take (e.g. Överlien, 2015; Collins, 2008; Denney, 2005; Åkerström, 2002), and its subjectivity and situation dependence, the concept of violence is unstable and hence difficult to define (cf. Hamby, 2017). Although the meaning of the concept has expanded to now embrace a broader range of actions than before (cf. Haslam, 2016), there is still a stress on physicality: on physical actions leading to bodily harm (Parkes, 2007; Kelly, 1988). This is despite research showing that emotional or psychological violence can have an equally or even more severe negative impact on emotional wellbeing, compared to physical violence (cf. Naughton et al. 2017; Thoresen and Hjemdal, 2014; Isdal, 2000).

Secure units for adolescences are often closed to the surrounding society, often situated in remote places and they are also closed off in the sense that few others, such as researchers, are allowed in. As a result, considering the gravity of the intervention of placing young people in care against their will, and radically changing their lives, as well as the large costs involved for society, limited research has been conducted in secure units for youth (cf. Silow Kallenberg, 2016). This is especially true regarding staff working with detained youth in the everyday life at the institutions. This becomes even more complicated when seeking to explore staff experiences of violence, as this issue often is considered to be sensitive. Hence, the staff of secure units for youth can be considered a hard-to-reach population, in particular when the topic of interest is violence.

Two key aspects of secure units should be noted. First is the way they merge care and control: contradictory mandates for the staff. Second, they house adolescents with a mix of behavioural difficulties and background stresses, another concern for staff to be aware of (Enell, 2015; van Nijnatten, 2007). The fusion character of secure units, operating at the crossroads of psychosocial care and legislation, leads

to daily tension for staff and exacerbates their already complex working conditions (cf. van Nijnatten, 2007). Secure units must also deal with the complexity of victim-perpetrator overlap (cf. SiS 2016/1; Ahonen and Degner, 2014).

The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (SiS)[2] has in recent years reported an increasing number of incidents between staff and youth (SiS, 2016). Similarly, de Valk et al. (2015) have shown that from a European perspective, staff in secure units often encounter violent behaviour by the young people residing there. A violent or threatening act that causes harm or fear will be categorised as an 'incident' by staff (SiS, 2016). In 2016, 1923 incidents were reported, an increase of 157 per cent since 2013. Furthermore, Mörner and Björck (2011) observe that staff in secure units argue for the need to use coercion in order to provide the required care. At the same time, de Valk et al. (2015) argue that staff who are excessively rigid increase the risk of violence.

Although research has shown that, in general, staff in social work contexts are exposed to violence (e.g. Koritsas et al., 2010; Pollack, 2010; Macdonald and Sirotich, 2005; Ringstad, 2005), data on violence in secure units, and in particular qualitative accounts of violence from the staff perspective, are hard to find (cf. Pelto-Piri et al., 2017; Littlechild, 2005). Existing research more often focuses on topics such as nature and extent of violence, not on how workers describe and handle violence. The following study aims to help fill part of that research gap by seeking an understanding of what kind of violence staff meet in their day-to-day work and how that violence is handled. More specifically, the article focuses on the following questions:

- What forms of violence and abuse do staff in secure units for adolescents encounter in their day-to-day work, and how do they handle it?
- How can both their perceptions of the violence and their responses to it be understood through Goffman's (1959) notion of front- and backstage?

Previous research

Harris and Leather (2012) report that in the UK, residential staff (e.g. staff at secure units) appear to carry the highest risk of self-reported client violence in comparison with other social work professionals, such as field or home care workers. They stress a connection between exposure to violence and lower levels of job satisfaction and stress symptoms. Also in the UK, Colton and Roberts (2007) report on high turnover in residential care due to physical violence and verbal abuse directed at staff by youth. Their research stresses that physical and verbal violence directed at staff by youth is a major concern and can result in an impaired sense of self-worth, stress and sick leave. They also highlight the complexity, diversity and demanding nature of the task undertaken by the staff, concluding that they need access to

appropriate training, supervision and support. This view is supported by a Swedish study (Ahonen and Degner, 2014) showing that the majority of treatment staff in secure units feel they lack adequate skills to handle the sometimes extremely diverse problems they face on the units. In the Netherlands, Alink et al (2014) concludes that residential institutions are a 'violent setting'. Almost all participants in this study said they had been subjected to verbal threats, and the risk was highest in secure settings, in comparison to staff from group care settings where youth were free to leave the facility.

In contrast to other studies, Winstanley and Hales (2015, 2008) show that emotional exhaustion of staff due to violence is trending upward, especially staff members who report being exposed to threats, i.e. psychological violence (cf. Littlechild, 2005). Further, they note that staff reported more regular and sustained levels of violence, i.e., repeated victimisation within a relatively short timescale, a finding not seen in earlier studies.

Along the same lines as Degner et al. (2015), Andersson and Johansson (2008) and Sekol (2014) emphasise the staff-youth relationship in residential care. Sekol, however, explicitly present the voices of the youth and their experiences of being exposed to violence by staff. According to the youth, the staff used violence (pushing and controlling) against those whom they could not handle or whom they disliked (cf. Euser et al., 2014). The key finding of Sekol's study is that violence should be seen as a product of the institution, not just an act involving two individuals.

Øien and Lillevik (2014) raise this topic from a Norwegian perspective. They focus on staff working at childcare institutions and argue that staff should view youth aggression as meaningful. It is important for the staff to identify the reason for a young person's frustration, as this could make treatment more productive. Furthermore, adopting a strategy of sensitivity and awareness toward youth may enable helpers (i.e. staff) to stay ahead of aggressive and violent incidents. No Swedish studies have specifically addressed violence in secure units, but Wästerfors (2009) has examined the concept of 'quarrels'. The action of a conflict is seen as a social interaction, which is not separated from other social interactions, and the explanation for the conflict is 'downward displacement of blame': i.e., the staff blame the youth and vice versa.

Theoretical framework

The present paper takes its point of departure in two theoretical concepts, stressing interactions within the institution on the one hand, and the role of the staff on the other. First, Berger and Luckmann's (1991) concept of 'institutionalisation' highlights how behaviour and practices develop in institutional contexts, such as a secure unit, through different well-defined roles. The idea is that membership in an organisation, or participation in institutionalised activities, is made conditional upon some

tolerable degree of conformity, with behaviours delineated by a well-specified role (ibid.). In this way of thinking, institutions do not control human behaviour; instead it is the actor (i.e. staff member or young person) who establishes and maintains everyday routines or subverts them in a reciprocal process with each other and with institutional rules (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011; Willmott, 2011). Thus, the focus lies on roles, rites and the rituals that simultaneously challenge, modify and disrupt e.g. a role adopted by the staff.

Second, Goffman (1959) draws a distinction between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' human behaviour. Frontstage behaviour is shaped by people watching us: it is how we behave and interact when we have an audience. Frontstage behaviour reflects internalised behavioural norms and expectations that are formed in part by the setting (i.e. by the institution) and the particular role we play within it. Backstage, on the other hand, is free from the expectations and norms that shape our behaviour when we are frontstage.

Method

Individual interviews

This article is part of a research project studying how staff workers at secure units for adolescents perceive violence at work. The study is based on 53 individual interviews with treatment staff, all working at Swedish, state-operated, 24-hour secure units for young people aged 15 to 21. The interviews were conducted between February and May 2017. The Regional Ethical Committee in Stockholm, Sweden approved the study.

The interviews were semi-structured and in the form of an 'interviewing partnership' (Robinson and Schulz, 2016). Interview questions were thematically ordered according to specific areas, such as 'describe violence at your workplace', 'describe your relationship to the youth' and 'describe how you cope with violence in your day-to-day work'. Each interview started with the question, 'How do you define violence?'

The interviews were also influenced by Robinson and Schulz's (2016) 'iterated questioning approach', a technique specially aimed to capture dialog within front- and backstage talk, for example with a third-party interlocutor. Through focusing on 'honourable' and 'visceral narratives' (e.g. Pugh, 2013; Goffman, 1959) within the interview, it was possible to elicit frontstage and backstage talk. By answering the iterated questions in sequence, interviewees progressed through frontstage talk before taking the interviewer backstage. In the interviews for this study, backstage was reached by asking the interviewee about visceral subjects such as violence and related expressions of emotion. As treatment staff is a group that is 'hard to

reach' and violence being understood as a sensitive issue, the technique adopted from Robinson and Schulz is a fruitful approach to get closer to the staff and to the subject in question. Nevertheless, the third-party interlocutor was not always present, maybe because of the first author's previous experience working within the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care. This may have provided a safety aspect for the interviewee making it possible to elicit backstage talk without using a third-party interlocutor in a systematic way and in getting access into the institutions (i.e. secure units).

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis (TA) in this study is drawn from Braun and Clarke (2006). TA is a process for encoding information, seeking patterns and developing themes. A theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but can be understood as capturing something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning across the data set.

A mix of inductive and theory-driven analysis is used, emphasising highlighting a form of abductive recursive process, i.e., going back and forth between empirical material and theoretical concepts. A starting point has been to understand staff members' descriptions of violence through front and backstage talk. From there, the focus is on investigating different elements that are used to construct personal stories of working in secure units with focus on violence. A more theoretically driven thematic analysis tends to provide less rich descriptions of the data overall but more detailed insight into some aspects of the data (ibid.).

Current context and informants

Staff members at secure units for adolescents are most often either social workers, sometimes with therapeutic skills, or treatment staff with varying backgrounds and experience, including working with juveniles or child care or treating adults in prison. Relatively frequently, staff have no previous experience or higher education (cf. Ahonen and Degner, 2014). Typical reasons for placing youth in secure units include criminality, substance abuse or other socially destructive behaviour (cf. Sallnäs, 2009; Johansson, 2007). Most cases fall under the Care of Young Persons Act[3]. In 2017, 1114 young people, including 380 girls and 734 boys, were placed in 23 different institutions in Sweden (all state-licensed). An ADAD[4] report (SiS 2016/1) makes it possible to discern a general picture of their psychological condition before institutionalisation. For example, one-third of these adolescents reported being subjected to psychological or physical violence by a parental figure. They also

reported a high degree of psychological vulnerability, including severe trust issues, depression and suicidal thoughts.

At secure unit 1, staff work only with boys aged 15–21. Twenty-seven of the participants in this study came from this institution, including 7 women and 20 men (median age: 38). On average, they had four years of experience working in a secure unit. Fifteen had the required two years of graduate education.

At secure unit 2, staff also work only with boys aged 15–21 years. Twenty study participants came from this institution, including 9 women and 11 men (median age: 35). On average, they had three and one-half years of experience working in a secure unit. Nine had the required two years of graduate education.

At secure unit 3, staff work only with girls aged 15–21. Six study participants came from this institution, including 3 women and 3 men (median age: 43). On average, they had nine years experience working in a secure unit, and all of these participants had the required two years of graduate education.

Results

The first section below, entitled 'A violent scene? A matter of definition', covers two themes that point out the violence encountered by staff in their day-to-day work. The second section, entitled 'Handling violence: strategies employed', covers four themes centring around how staff members handle violence.

A violent scene? A matter of definition

'Threats and attacks': Violence on an ordinary basis

All of the participants in the study stressed, in different ways, how they were exposed to violence from youth in their care. The most common acts of violent behaviour they encountered were psychological (i.e. threats, repeated verbal violence) and material (smashing or throwing things), although physical violence was also reported. For example, here is how Basel[5], a young man with less than three years of work experience on unit 1, answered my question about what kind of violence he faced during his daily work on the ward:

> What I see at work in terms of violence is that they throw things, that they make very violent threats about what they are going to do, they attack each other and staff. That's the kind of violence that happens at work, that's what you see. [unit 1]

Basel's emphasis on the fact that violence was something seen on a regular basis, thus a part of the everyday, was common to all the interviews (cf. Denney, 2005).

Furthermore, the idea of violence waiting to happen, or the constantly present threat of violence – called latent violence by Isdal (2000) – was a recurring theme in all staff interviews, regardless of respondents' age or gender. Hence, in all the interviews violence could be understood as a continuum of acts not necessarily resulting in physical injury, emphasising the tension between the categorisation and the actual situation (cf. Wästerfors, 2009). Throwing something at someone or being attacked (i.e. physical violence) might be categorised as violence, but within a specific situation and context, such as on the unit, it also might not be.

Basel talked about what we could define as material, psychological and physical violence. However, exposure to violence does not necessarily lead to adopting the position of a victim. Furthermore, Basel's statement above is an example of the often-portrayed picture of the problematic violent youth and can therefore be understood as talk elicited by what Goffman (1959) describes as the 'frontstage'. Thus, Basel's frontstage talk is also an utterance that provides an overall framework for staff and the institution regarding violence. In addition, we can also understand Basel's talk as shaped by his institution and his assigned role within it (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Staff most commonly drew a distinction between psychological and physical acts, with the latter being defined as violence. Here, Beth, who also works only with boys, describes how she delimits violence:

I[6]: *'What kind of violence might you meet with on a normal work day?'*
B: *'Directed at me, it has mostly been threats. I haven't been exposed to violence yet. Rather, they've been frustrated, angry, screamed at me, called me various ugly names.'*
I: *'So you're not thinking of this psychological stuff you're describing as violence?'*
B: *'I don't think of it as violence, because the times I've been called whore or whatever else they come up with in the moment, even if it's directed at me, I don't feel like I'm the one who made them feel that anger or frustration they're feeling, I'm more the person they're taking it out on, so it's not hard to let it go afterwards. [unit 1]*

Beth distinguishes between psychological and physical violence, and implies that psychological violence may be more common (cf. Winstanley and Hales, 2015; Harris and Leather, 2012). Perhaps the distinction has to do with how Beth chooses to present her workplace. Addressing psychological violence as a part of everyday life, Beth makes the workplace violent and herself a victim. However, she does not present her workplace as violent, as she chooses to define violence only as physical acts. Many of the staff, like Beth, resist the interviewer's suggestion that 'the psychological' can also be understood as violence. Here, Jenny, from another institution but of similar age, responds to a similar question.

'I don't even think that you think of it as a threat, because somehow you've gotten so used to that kind of language. //...It's really normalised and I don't even think about it, until maybe when I'm sitting down with my friends. [unit 2]

Jenny uses the word 'normalisation', and with help from a third-part interlocutor in the form of 'friends', she produces some backstage talk. The essence of her statement is that through backstage talk, it is possible to define psychological violence as violence. Inside the institution, however, threats and repeated verbal abuse are the daily state of affairs. Jenny's statement sheds light on the circumstance that within secure units there may be unrecorded incidents of violence due to normalisation and how violence is defined. Staff normalise aggression by youth through talking about it so that it falls outside the boundaries of violence (cf. Åkerström, 2002). They achieve this definition through different, defusing descriptions, including e.g. sympathetic accounts of the aggression, as well as through claims that these actions do not constitute violence. Paradoxically, the consequence is that staff work in a violent setting, but do not define it as violent.

'Violence under controlled forms' – can you call it that?

The second theme involves how staff label their own actions towards youth. The essential aspects of this theme lie in the intention of the action, highlighting a tension between 'violence', 'control' and 'protect'. Anders, a young man relatively new to this field of work, addressed this issue in a way typical of many of the interviewees:

> Whether physical coercion counts as violence? I wouldn't call that violence. It's more about controlling the youth than anything else...//...I wouldn't want to define it as violence...//...the purpose is really just to control the youth, not to cause pain or be destructive in any way. [unit 1]

Anders' statement is in line with the findings of Mörner and Björck (2011), stressing the importance of the intentions behind staff actions. Hamby (2017), in line with other literature in the field, argues that a definition of violence depends upon the intentional aspect. Anders differentiates between two such intentions – controlling and inflicting pain – where only the latter indicates violence. He argues that controlling is not violence; instead, it is part of the important job of protecting other youth, staff and the young person themselves, by force if necessary, which includes physical action. Hence, in line with Hamby's reasoning (ibid.) these staff actions do not fall under the definition of violence. Missing, however, is the youth's perspective. As shown by e.g. Överlien (2004), physical acts can be perceived as violence by youth, regardless of staff intentions. We would argue that one important aspect missing in statements like these by Anders and other staff workers is that violence is a reciprocal process that also includes the experience of the other party. Furthermore, Anders' statement above may be seen in relation to the findings of de Valk et al. (2015), who argue that staff who are too controlling may increase the risk of violence. Thus it highlights an institutional paradox, whereby the intent to

reduce violence might actually lead to increased violence. Hence, it demonstrates a potential conflict between the intentions behind staff actions and the institution (cf. Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011; Willmott, 2011). It could also be a strategy to avoid creating victim/perpetrator roles. Here, Joanna, who only works with girls and has longer work experience than Anders, reflects on this complex question:

> *It's violence under controlled forms, can you call it that? I don't usually think of us as acting violently, because the grips we use don't hurt her, unless she's acting very unusually. But normally it shouldn't hurt, at least not physically. Of course it also depends on what it triggers inside her. I guess I haven't thought that much about it, but obviously it affects her. [unit 3]*

Joanna, unlike Anders, problematises the staffs' actions. Even though she does not usually think of these as violence, she asks whether they might be. In addition, she includes the youth as a third-party interlocutor with regard to what is happening inside them, something that is missing in Anders' statement. Hence, through inducing backstage talk it is possible to reflect on staff actions as violent, which is an important insight due to the relationship between staff and youth that highlights how staff establish and maintain everyday routines or subvert them in a reciprocal process with youth (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

Handling violence: strategies employed

'Don't take it personally': The professional role

Although most staff described experiencing violence, they also described not taking it personally, because 'it is what this job is about'. Hence, one way of handling violence is to associate the experience with a professional role, rather than one's own person. 'If you take it personally you break', was a common response. Hendrik, for example, who had experience working with both boys and girls, said:

> *You can't take it personally. She didn't hit me specifically, she hit an employee. You have to make that distinction. From her point of view, I'm someone saying no to her demands, and then it doesn't matter who you are. [unit 2]*

Similar statements were made in almost every interview. On one hand, this underlines the nature of the workplace as violent, but on the other hand, staff did not define it as such (cf. Alink et al., 2014). Statements such as Hendrik's reinforce the static picture of the violent young person. Hendrik illustrates how working at the secure unit means entering a role by renaming himself 'an employee', not Hendrik, one of the staff (cf. front and backstage). By taking a front stage position, Hendrik doesn't need to reflect upon the impact on him of the violence he is exposed to. In addition to saying that violence should not be taken personally, staff also frequently

said that it was important not to be too sensitive. Lara, who had about the same amount of work experience as Hendrik, said:

You can't be too sensitive, because you do get a lot of threats. You can't take it personally, you have to be able to…when it's time to go to work you gear up for it, and after work you go home. Shake off whatever happened and don't give it much more thought once you get home. You really need to not bring it home with you and I think a lot of people tend to make that mistake…//…you probably need to be a special kind of person, not so sensitive that you take it all personally, because that won't work at all. Because you're going to hear all kinds of things, and you absolutely cannot take it personally. It has to be water off a duck's back. [unit 2]

Lara goes deeper than Hendrik, more explicitly addressing how violence is part of her work by talking about emotions. Being too sensitive could be interpreted as a sign of weakness, because, she argues if you are exposed to something (i.e., violence) you should just shake it off. One interpretation of Lara's statement, like Hendrik's, is that she emphasises different roles. She provides a strong frontstage character unaffected by violence. This is illustrated in her reasoning regarding her colleagues, whom she says make a mistake in taking work home with them. Hence, Lara's statement illustrates how violence is normalised, because she converts something unusual and special (i.e. violence) to something common. Many participants talked about getting used to the violence, and one of the consequences of the normalisation process is that the staff no longer reflect on what they are exposed to. But not all participants agreed that violence was a part of the job. Simon, a young man from unit 1 with fairly brief work experience, but who unlike Lara and Hendrik had the required educational background, said, 'Sometimes I think I'm really an idiot, go to work and subjecting myself to this kind of thing, trying, but being subjected to violence.' Although Simon calls himself an idiot, he is reflecting about the violent workday in a wider sense than Hendrik and Lara. Simon makes himself an active subject, which makes it possible for him to handle violence in another way. Implicitly he takes the position of a victim, but by using the word 'idiot' he constructs some distance to that position.

'Do not show fear': Suppressing emotions to maintain an outward attitude

A second theme in how staff described handling violence was the necessity of hiding emotions, especially fear, that could be interpreted as signs of weakness. Steven, who had a few years of work experience, expressed a common view:

I'd say the one thing you can't show at work is fear. If you show them you're afraid of conflict, I mean, these kids are smart. They know immediately which staff to lean on if they want something extra, or if they want to do something that's not really allowed. So showing fear in front of them? You need to be very, very careful about that. [unit 2]

Steven says that if you show fear, you risk not being able to handle a conflict. Consequently, certain emotions are allowed and others not. Reluctance to show fear was not tied to staff gender, but it was tied in some sense to the gender of the detained youth, being considered less risky in front of girls. Furthermore, on one hand, staff spoke about the importance of showing their emotions to each other and to the youth, and said their workplace could be considered an emotional work setting. On the other hand, they made clear that fear was not an acceptable feeling in this environment. Harris and Leather (2012) observe, moreover, that the experience of fear has a close relationship to the experience of violence. It seems there is a dissonance between representations of perceived violence and the experience of fear. Here, Baran explicitly addresses the importance of coping with violent situations, which leads to the suppression of certain emotions:

For example, I've seen these youths sharpen a toothbrush and use it to hurt a woman on the ward. That happened. They throw things, they rebel, they throw chairs. It happens, and you have to dare do your job. If you act like a coward in front of them, then you can't handle this job, and you're showing them that. [unit 2]

Baran gives examples of violent situations that can arise and continues with the word 'dare': staff have to 'dare' to do their job despite the violence. Furthermore, one cannot be a 'coward' in front of the youth, and you are a coward if you show fear. This should be interpreted in the context of the violent situations Baran describes, where fear in a sense comes naturally. Fear is associated with weakness and if you are weak, you cannot handle your job. Hence, your ability to deal with violent situations determines whether you can handle the rest of your job, placing violence in a key role. Staff working with girls, however, seemed to find it easier to express fear. Leo, for example, an older man with many years of work experience, said:

L: I have felt fear many times. It's important to allow yourself to feel it and use it in supervision or in briefing group. If you've been involved in a situation, to say 'I was afraid.' Maybe there's a young woman next to you, now she knows that you were scared. I feel like I've said it many times, and I have been afraid many times as well.
I: What kinds of situations make you afraid?
L: I might feel afraid in a situation where we the staff lose control, lose our handle on it. If the situation is very unstable, I can feel that way. Or it might be a very specific situation, when you need to get hold of a youth and all of a sudden you're standing there without them and both of you have lost your grip, that can scare you, because you don't know what's going to happen. Is she going to calm down? Or is she going to come at us? [unit 3]

Paradoxically, it may be easier for staff who work with girls to talk about feeling afraid because a detained girl is not actually a physical threat (cf. Johansson, 2007). Interestingly, the situations Leo describe do not actually differ from those described by Baran. The key distinction is that Leo does not associate fear with weakness. Instead, Leo suggests that fear is a positive emotion that can help the staff team

improve (cf. Øien and Lillevik, 2014).

'We back each other up': Volence or not violence

A third common strategy when handling violence was for staff to help each other – to have each other's back – in the case of an episode of violence. This is the only theme that emphasises some form of cooperation rather than solely individual strategies. As previously discussed in regards to fear, many participants stressed the importance of working with confident colleagues who would back them up if an incident arose. The fact that many participants talked about the importance of trusting their colleagues seems opposed to the idea that one should not feel fear, adding another layer of complexity to the work environment. Richard from unit 1 addressed the importance of good communication with colleagues, saying, 'We face huge risks sometimes, so it's so important for us to back each other up, communicate and feel safe with working with each other.' Hence, many interviewees talked about their colleagues' feelings of fear, rather than their own – although, of course, their own fear is implicitly expressed in the desire for backup.

In contrast to Richard's statement, Jenny told a story highlighting this facet of staff culture in a more negative way. Jenny was a young woman with rather long experience of working with detained boys:

> It's difficult. On the one hand, we're supposed to back each other up. There's a kind of esprit de corps.[7] We have each other's backs, period. Don't believe what the kids say. A boy will say, 'Didn't you see him put me in a stranglehold?' No, I didn't see it, even though I did, and the boy knows I did. But I'm going to say, 'No, I didn't see it,' because we have that kind of group culture. We defend each other to the death. So you do that. We back each other up. It can be a problem if there's someone on the staff who you know always uses too much violence[8]…I won't say that I wouldn't cover for him. [unit 2]

Jenny explicitly describes a staff culture where workers back each other up, but she also describes its downsides (i.e. backstage talk), where some staff actions could be considered violence towards youth. This suggests a risk that a 'we and them' culture can thrive, affecting the relationship between staff and youth and highlighting how these 'well-defined' roles can be harmful (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Further, Jenny uses the phrase 'too much violence', which can be related to theme two, where the key point was that staff did not label their actions as violence, indicating that Jenny actually did view some physical acts in her daily work as violence. The statements by Jenny and Richard illustrate one more important point, namely that conduct within an institution is not an individual act but an institutional act, built up by the entire staff in interaction with youth (cf. Sekol, 2014; Willmott, 2011).

'The need for a backstage': Effects of violence

The final theme has to do with how staff handle violence by taking on different emotional roles that protect them from its impact. To some degree, staff discussed

going into character on the unit. This 'shield' or 'armour' approach is especially interesting in connection with the theme of not taking the violent behaviour personally. Sofia, who works with girls, described her thinking about armour:

> S: ... //but on the other hand you put on a kind of armour. Partly, to let things roll off you, getting cursed at, or when things happen to you; you prepare yourself a little for it, you put on the armour. But partly also that you are a certain way, you behave in a certain way, you don't discuss certain things that you might in your private life.
> I: Armour – what is that?
> S: For me, probably it's being prepared, knowing anything can happen at work, basically.
> I: What is anything?
> S: Well, maybe today when I get to work I'll get called ugly names, or someone will be really pissed off, or I'll have to run and answer an alarm because some of the youths are fighting. That you almost – expect is the wrong word, but almost that you expect that it's going to be one thing or another. In private, if someone called me a whore, I'd be like, what in the world? I'd be really shocked, probably really angry, I'd react completely differently. Here, I almost expect it. [unit 3]

The armour is necessary, Sofia argues, because anything can happen at any time. The phrase 'anything at any time' was used by many interviewees. Sofia tries to give examples, which in turn shows the complexity of her work. In addition, she shows using a third-party interlocutor (i.e. her private life) how emotionally different things are when she is not wearing her armour, which helps her on the ward not to be shocked and angry. Simon also described the importance and meaning of assuming a role at work, and explicitly addressed what the role entailed for both the youth he worked with and himself:

> : ... // When you go out on the ward, you take on a role. They can yell a lot of things but you have to stay professional, you can't sink to their level and yell back. But I think it could be good if there was a backstage where you can step back from the role and relax a little. 'Why the hell does he say stuff like that? What a moron,' and then step back into the role and take it well.
> I: Can we talk a little more about this idea of roles, what you mean by that?
> S: My thinking is that when I step into it, I can't say 'God what an idiot!' You know? I have to go back and exhale and look at myself in the mirror and say 'He's just clueless.' I have to shake off, and I can't shake it off right in front of them, that would be too weird. [unit 1]

For Simon, the role means not lowering yourself to the level of the youth, the implication being that staff do not use violence even if youth uses violence against them. Furthermore, Simon describes the importance of having a backstage where you can express yourself more authentically, addressing how these 'well-defined' roles have different homes (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Simon believes that the psychological violence sticks to him, and he has to shake it off, but he can only do

that backstage, not in front of the young people (cf. Goffman, 1959). Once again, this time through the statements of Simon and Sofia, we see that expressing emotions is conditional; emotion cannot be shown in front of youth. In this case – and Simon and Sofia are not alone – it appears that staff cannot be weak, sad or angry in front of the youth. Hence, being a member of staff leads to shutting down important emotions, which could actually help both parties (cf. Øien and Lillevik, 2014).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how staff at secure units for adolescents describe violence in their day-to-day work, focusing on what forms of violence and abuse they encounter and how they handle it. Furthermore, we explored how staff perceptions of violence and their responses to it can be understood through Goffman's (1959) notion of front and backstage. The results show that these workers face various forms of violence on a regular basis, mostly psychological and material violence. What is more, within the walls of the institution, staff do not always define psychological violence as violence, highlighting challenging boundary work and a normalisation process wherein staff to a large degree think that some forms of violence are included in the job. This includes latent violence (Isdal, 2000): that is, violence waiting to happen. Furthermore, our results show that staff to some extent seem to lock down their emotional toolbox, because otherwise they would not be able to handle their everyday work, which they do, for example, by not taking violence personally and by addressing the need for a backstage. We will now discuss the results in more detail.

'A challenging and demanding work setting'

In line with other studies, such as Sekol (2014), Alink et al. (2014), Euser et al. (2014), Harris and Leather (2012) and Winstanley and Hales (2008), our study shows that violence is a common phenomenon within secure units for adolescents. Secure units are challenging work settings where adolescents with a range of problematic behaviour live under the same roof, while staff are often not adequately trained to deal with such behaviour. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the situation of the youth: they live within these contexts of violence. As observed by Euser et al (2014), staff need better training in dealing with the often challenging behaviour of youth in the units. One consequence of this lack education and training is that staff use different strategies for handling violence, which in turn leads to different ways of responding to violent behaviour. In other words, there are different roles defined within the institution, which in turn leads to different approaches to dealing with

violence (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Given the damage caused by exposure to violence, action to tackle it remains a high priority, as also highlighted by Harris and Leather (2012). In line with Littlechild (2005), there exist uncertain limits and boundaries regarding non-physical violence. The primary reaction of staff to verbal abuse is to ignore it, particularly because they do not want to waste time on something they do not think is important: for them, it is an ordinary aspect of the job. Further, the understanding that their encounters with verbal abuse tend to be short-term helps them to distance themselves from the insults. This makes ignoring verbal abuse a defining factor of their professional identity, in turn highlighting a frontstage behaviour (cf. Goffman, 1959). It is clear that they would not accept this sort of abuse while off-duty, further emphasising frontstage and backstage, with frontstage behaviour rewarded on the wards. This suggests a concern that violent incidents take place at these institutions but are not reported by staff because they do not see the point or that they are required to do that (i.e. backstage behaviour). As far as we could verify, staff learn their strategies not through education but in working on the units, highlighting the need for more training as well as education prior to beginning work. In any event, whether the focus is preventing incidents, improving skills for handling violent incidents and/or supporting staff afterwards, it should be aimed at the institution, not individual staff members, placing the creation of institutional roles in a new light (cf. Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

'Resisting a victim position'

Defining violence presents many challenges, since the contexts in which it occurs are complex (cf. Överlien, 2015; Parkes, 2007; Denney, 2005). Furthermore, definitional processes always involve exclusions. In this study different kinds of exclusion processes were seen, i.e. how a phenomenon that might be included in a category instead is kept out of it, depending on situation and context (cf. Collins, 2008; Åkerström, 2002). For staff this has both benefits and drawbacks. One drawback is that if staff more explicitly defined youth actions as violence, they would put themselves in the position of victims. Victims are typically construed as passive or helpless, a position staff are not comfortable with, highlighting the difficulty for them of entering backstage. Hence, it would be more productive for staff to address the tension between categorisation and the particular situation in which violence occurs (cf. Wästerfors, 2009; Collins, 2008). For example, when staff hold down a youth against his or her will on the floor, this act could be defined as physical violence. However, when the act takes place on the floor of a secure unit, the youth is in care, and the person holding him or her down is employed to provide care. This changes the definition. Here, there is tension on several levels, which is problematic for the staff (cf. Överlien, 2004). Placing youth's violence outside a definition means that

they remain 'youth in care' and the staff 'caregivers,' and the institution operates within a 'caring context' (cf. Åkerström, 2002). Thus, this investigation determines that staff strategies are specific to the context in which they have to operate and perhaps the role-taking observed in the results is a kind of de-escalating stance, i.e., an attempt to normalise the situation as much as possible. Instead of showing fear, it is important to remain calm and attempt to soothe confused youths. We want to argue that this de-escalating process underlines a frontstage behaviour (Goffman, 1959), whereas backstage behaviours in a more explicit way stress emotional impact and another way of addressing the violence. By not addressing psychological violence as violence, staff avoid the victim position, a role which is not well defined (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Another way of avoiding the victim position is by not reflecting on latent violence. Staff talked about violence waiting to happen using statements such as, 'It could happen at any time'. The experience of latent violence (cf. Isdal, 2000) stresses staff intentions behind their actions. Thus, they do not let their own feelings get the upper hand because that could influence the emotions of youth and colleagues in such a way that they cannot do their job in an orderly manner. They must remain calm and normalise very emotional situations by approaching those present in a reserved and strategic manner.

Conclusions

Bearing in mind that treatment staff is a group which is hard to reach in research, this article suggests that staff experiences of violence and what they learn from these experiences need to be more systematically included in policy development and review. In line with Denney (2005), it is important to create an understanding of the fear of violence. This places the institution in a 'pivotal position'. The importance of this lies in the fact that staff talk about their exposure to violence, but they do not talk about a violent setting (cf. Alink et al., 2014). Finally, we would like to argue that the institution itself has a responsibility to acknowledge and provide education about different forms of violence and how violence affects the individual.

Notes

1   In Swedish: *Särskilda ungdomshem*. In this article, the terms 'secure units' and 'institutions' are used interchangeably.
2   Statens institutionsstyrelse: the board that oversees and manages all state-operated forced care (secure units).
3   In Swedish: Lagen (1990:52) med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga (LVU).

4   The self-reported Adolescent Drug Abuse Diagnosis (ADAD) interview provides information about youth respondents based on nine life areas: physical health, education, labor/employment, leisure, friends, family relations, mental health, crime and the use of alcohol and drugs.

5   All names in this paper are fictional.

6   Interviewer.

7   In Swedish: *käranda*

8   In Swedish: övervåld

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