

Abstract

In instances of child-perpetrated crime or violence, normative constructions of the child contradict those of the criminal, creating an ambiguous discursive landscape in which juvenile-offenders have to situate themselves. The construct of the child is premised on the assumption of innocence, naivety and purity which are incompatible with aggressive constructions of perpetrators. The aim of this research was thus to explore juvenile-offenders' use of discourses in producing or resisting the subject-position of a child-offender and in navigating the discursive conflict within this subject-position. Accordingly, this study targeted incarcerated South African juvenile-offenders who have been charged with murder. Participants in this study were aged between 18 and 21, and were all under the age of 19 at the time of the offence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 incarcerated juvenile-offenders across several juvenile correctional facilities in South Africa. Thereafter the transcripts of these interviews were subjected to a Faircloughian (1989-1995) critical discourse analysis to portray how participants drew on conditions of childhood, vulnerability and victimisation to challenge their belonging to the category of 'criminal'. Specifically, participants in this study utilised gendered discourse and normative constructions of crime, criminality and victimhood to restrict the category of 'criminal' being imposed upon them by the material condition of their incarcerations. In this way, the child as violent is made possible, while the child as criminal, particularly the child as a possible murderer, is resisted and marginalised. These findings challenge normative constructions of both childhood and violence, and consequently provide counter-knowledge for how we understand violence and criminality in contemporary theory and practice.

Keywords: Child-perpetrated violence; murder; critical discourse analysis; power-knowledge; South Africa