The world of the Wetslaners: an analysis of some organisational features in South African prisons

W.J. Schurink, MA (Unisa) D.Phil (PU for CHE)
Centre for Criminological Research
Institute for Sociological and Demographic Research
Human Sciences Research Council

Introduction

Various theoretical constructs have thus far been proposed by criminologists and other social scientists to explain the emergence of prison subcultures as well as the conflict between its normative content and that of the norms and values of the institution. These attempts gave rise to a heated debate on the origins of prison subcultures which lasted for a decade or more, and in some circles is still continuing. These explanations are generally grouped together under two opposing models, namely the direct importation model and the deprivation model of prisonisation. The former is commonly referred to as the indigenous origins model and

... provides a functionalist explanation that relates the values and roles of the subculture to the inmates' responses to problems of adjustment posed by institutional deprivations and conditions of confinement (Feld 1981: 337).

According to this construct the inmate social system is shaped by the formal organisation of the prison. The latter is referred to as the indirect importation model, and provides an alternative explanation whereby the characteristics of the prison subculture are attributed to

... the identities, roles and values held by the inmates before incarceration (Feld 1981: 338).

Researchers who have been working under the banner of the importation model tend to emphasise the open-system characteristics of the prison, while those utilising the deprivation model tend to emphasise the closed system characteristics. Recent studies (cf. Bowker 1977; Feld 1981; Propper 1981; Slosar 1978; Thomas 1970) however, suggest that both pre-institutional effects and institutional effects play a role in the development of prison subcultures. These and other
studies suggest growing awareness of the need to combine these two constructs in an attempt to understand more fully the social organisation of prison subcultures.

Another attempt in this direction, which promises to be more successful, occurred within the general area of deviant behaviour. Two sociologists, Joel Best and David Luckenbill (1982) developed a comprehensive framework for the understanding of the social organisation of deviant subcultures. They state in *Organizing deviance* (1982) that there are four problems: the causes of deviance, the consequences of deviance, the creation of deviant labels and laws, and the control of deviance that account for most studies in the sociology of deviance. Best and Luckenbill (1982: 13–14) correctly point out that sociologists studying these problems usually adopt one of two levels of positivistic analysis, namely: social-psychological (with the individual as centre of attention) or social-structural (where environment is the centre of attention) (Cohen 1965; Gibbons and Jones 1975). Best and Luckenbill (1982: 14) claim that

Between the social-psychological and social-structural levels is an intermediate level of analysis — social organizational. At this third level, the focus is the group (subculture) rather than the individual or society.

Thus social organisation refers to a network of social relations.

Best and Luckenbill (1982) believe that relationships between deviants take many forms and vary along a dimension of organisational sophistication that involves elements of complexity, coordination and purposefulness.

Organizations vary in the complexity of their division of labour, including the number of members, the degree of stratification, and the degree of specialization or organization roles (1982: 24).

These sociologists proposed a classification scheme that includes various different forms of social organisation of deviants. These different forms are described on a continuum that ranges form loners (i.e. alcoholics, embezzlers), colleagues (i.e. prostitutes), peers (i.e. delinquent gangs), mobs (i.e. road hustlers, pickpockets) to formal organisations (i.e. large street gangs).

Lone members do not associate with other deviants, participate in shared deviance, have a division of labour, or maintain their deviance over extended time and space. Colleagues differ from loners because they associate with fellow deviants. Peers not only associate with one another, but also participate in deviance together. In mobs, this shared participation requires an elaborate division of labour. Finally, formal organizations involve mutual association, mutual participation, an elaborate division of labour, and deviant activities extended over time and space (Best and Luckenbill 1982: 24–25).

Assuming that the study of deviance is very much the study of the people that organise themselves, Best and Luckenbill (1982) consider three forms of deviant activities (transactions): individual deviance, deviant exchange and deviant exploitation. These transactions range from: individual deviance that involves one actor alone (e.g. suicide), deviant exchange that entails the voluntary exchange of illegal goods or services (prostitution, drug trafficking), and deviant exploitation that takes place between two conflicting parties with one being the offender and the other the victim. Deviant exploitation can either be coercive (involving actual or threatened punishment, as in murder and robbery) or surreptitious (e.g. burglary and pickpocketing, crimes in which the perpetrator steals in stealth in order to ensure that the victim is unaware of the crime occurring). Deviant exploitation also includes fraud and extortion. In extortion there is the threat to harm a victim unless some type of payment is received (kidnapping), and in fraud the victim’s cooperation is gained through trickery and deceit.

Lastly, Best and Luckenbill (1982) turn to the question of how these organisational formats effect deviants’ careers and control agency efforts. The main theme of Best and Luckenbill’s (1982: 19) approach is that:

A comprehensive theory of social organization and deviance must distinguish between the social organization of deviants — the patterns of social relations among deviant actors — and the social organization of deviance — the patterns of social relations among the roles performed in the deviant transaction.

Thus social organisations can be viewed as an association, a network or relations among members of the same organisation (including structure and aims of the organisation). Secondly, an organisation can be viewed as a transaction, a network of relations between individuals involved in a common activity, but not necessarily belonging to the same organisation.

The Institute for Sociological and Demographic Research (ISODEM) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was requested by the South African Prisons Service to undertake research concerning prison gangs. It is clear that these number gangs, as they are commonly known, correspond to Best and Luckenbill’s (1982) formal organisation. Since it was found that neither the deprivation nor the importation model on its own could provide an adequate explanation of the organisation of gangs in South African
prisons, it was considered a worthwhile endeavour to explore whether, and to what extent, Best and Luckenbill’s (1982) framework could provide an explanation for these gangs.

Scope of the article
The aim of this contribution emanates from the preceding paragraphs: namely to utilise Best and Luckenbill’s (1982) social organisational model in an attempt to provide a better understanding of the organisation of number gangs or numbers. More specifically the purpose is to describe (i) the patterns of relationships amongst members of number gangs by focussing on the aims, structure, organisation, functioning and continued existence of the gangs; (ii) the network of relations between gang members and non-gang members emphasising deviant transaction and the effect of deviant careers on control agency efforts.

There are many interesting facets in the mystical world of the prison gangs, all of which can of course not be dealt with in the scope of a single article. I shall therefore, in this contribution select only those facets in the world of number gangs which I believe to be of central importance in developing an organisational perspective thereof. In addition I shall throughout the article, refer mainly to the 28 gang, as it is still considered as the predominant gang from which all other gangs originated.

Methodology
Before comparing the applicability of Best and Luckenbill’s (1982) social organisational model to the world of gangs in South African prisons, a few words on the methodology used in the study are in order. Since a detailed discussion cannot be given here, I shall suffice with a brief description of the most important steps and decisions which were taken in the course of the research. In ISODEM’S study of prison gangs, participants were viewed as subjects who exercise a choice in their behaviour and who accord significance and meanings to behaviour in everyday life situations. In order to assess and appreciate the world as experienced by members of numbers, and to discover their meanings, use was made of a qualitative methodology. More specifically, “soft” data gathering methods such as in-depth interviews, observation, autobiographical sketches and other documents were employed.

Approximately 60 prisoners were interviewed during the course of the study, the overwhelming majority being coloured men serving long-term prison sentences in the St. Albans and Brandvlei prisons. When a colleague, Morg Lötter, and I met informants for the first time, we explained the purpose of our visit and asked for the prisoner’s permission to tape interviews. We not only verbally stressed our independence vis-à-vis the Prisons Service, but emphasised this in other ways, for instance by dressing casually and by establishing our identity as researchers by showing prospective informants examples of our published work. The informants were typically older gang members, persons who were no longer active in gang affairs, but who still enjoyed the respect and protection of the gangs. Interviewing took place during separate visits to the institutions. This resulted in some of the more knowledgeable and articulate informants being interviewed on as many as four occasions. Interviews lasted on average from three to five hours, but interviews of a few days duration were not uncommon. Initially, a totally unstructured approach was used, and prisoners were encouraged to speak freely. Interviews became more focused as the research progressed and in the final round of interviewing the contents of the draft report were checked with the best and most trusted of the informants.

Certain personal documents were also used. The bulk of this material was provided by prisoners who reacted to our invitation to write to us about “life in prison”, “prison gangs” or any other topic. Some of the documents received were of considerable value, for instance one handwritten manuscript of approximately 120 pages accurately — as became evident in the course of the study — recounted the gang lore of one of the major prison gangs. Several unpublished documents written by staff members were also located. Some of these were useful, especially during the initial stages when we had difficulty in grasping what the gangs were all about. Accounts of the origins of the gangs were, however, consistently inaccurate, often because prison legend had been accepted as fact. Transcriptions of trials of the accused in gang-related murders and transcriptions of evidence in official enquiries were also consulted. The very little published material included Van Onselen’s (1982, 1983) description of the origins of the first South African prison gangs and of the social conditions that spawned them.

Finally, in order to gain a more accurate impression of the activities and behaviour of the numbers (prisons gangs), Мпрата (prisoners not belonging to a number gang) and Мроэза (prison officials), I observed what was going on in various places in prison and recorded my observations and impressions of these activities on tape and/or in the form of field notes.

In concluding this section I wish to provide some indication of how the analysis of the data was handled. As has already been indicated, we followed an unstructured approach during the initial phase of the research, whilst at the closing phase our approach became fairly structured. The reason for this lies mainly therein that at the start we wanted the prison-
ers, as far as possible, to share their world with us. Towards the end of the study we wanted to verify patterns and themes that started emerging from the data. By utilising this strategy we were in the end in a position to construct various indigenous, *emic or first-order* typologies11 (e.g. the social structures of the number gangs, forms of violence). However, it must be noted that we also utilised foreign, *etic or second-order* taxonomies12 (e.g. Parson’s functional imperatives) in attempting to describe the world of the wetslaners.13

**Findings**

**Aims of numbers:** The gang scene in prisons where gangs are active is usually dominated by the number gangs. Of these, the 28 gang is the strongest. The 26 gang is second most powerful and often vies for ascendency with the 28. The once powerful 27 gang has become weak. Members of numbers regard themselves as wetslaners (law beaters) of laws in South Africa. According to them only the number gangs are entitled to survive. Other gangs have no right of existence in prison. Members of the numbers view themselves as a privileged category and their victimisation of other prisoners as legitimised. The formal aims of the number gangs differ to a great extent, and each must do its own work. The 26 is involved with money (obtaining goods by means of cunning), the 27 with blood (assault), and the 28 with poison, referring to wyfies (catamites), blood and to rectifying harsh conditions inside the Vier Hoek/Four Corners (prison).

**Social structure of numbers:** All number gangs have a quasi-military structure. The 26 gang has two sections, the junior section which consists of ‘soldiers’, ‘sergeants’ and a ‘sergeant major’. Captain, ‘doctor’ (nyangi), ‘agent’ (melle) and ‘judge’ are positions in the senior section. The 28 gang has two lines. The Blood-line, also divided into a junior and senior section, denotes the fighters, and the Private-line with ranks such as ‘probationer’, ‘silver and goliat (goliath) in the junior section, and ‘magistrate’ (umgobi), ‘clerk’ (mabalan), ‘inspector’, ‘doctor’ and ‘government’ (“governor”) in the senior section. The Private-line consists of wyfies (catamites) and ‘officers’ who have worked themselves up from the rank of the wyfie. The Blood-line consists of the fighters. Each gang has its own culture and tradition which has been orally transferred. For example, every gang has their own ‘flag’ representing their ‘country’. The country of the 28 is ‘Moliva’, and that of 26 gang ‘Chicago’. Every different rank in the gang wears a different “uniform” with a distinctive ‘badge’ and also has different ‘equipment’. The soldiers, for example, are all equipped with ‘.303 rifles’ with 26, 27 or 28 ‘rounds’ for the 26, 27 and 28 gangs respectively. The rankings of the 28 gang and their ‘badges’ and/or ‘equipment’ are as follows:

### Schematic representation of the 28 gang

**PRIVATE-LINE**

**Division 1**

- Nonzala (no ‘badge’)
- “Government” (7 “silver” and 7 “gold stars”)
- “Doctor” (6 “gold” and 6 “silver pipes”)
- “Inspector” (6 “gold” and 6 “silver stars”)
- Mabalang (4 “gold” and 4 “silver stars”)
- “Magistrate” (3 “gold” and 3 “silver stars”)
- “Landrost” (2 “stars”)

**Number Two’s**

- Goliat 1 (white “hankerchief” and “oxtail”)
- Goliat 2 (2 “keys”)
- Masilva 1 (1 “key”)
- Masilva 2 (“silver key” and “crayon”)
- “Probationers” (white “hankerchief”)

**BLOOD-LINE**

**Division 1**

- “Lord” (no “badge”)
- “Judge” (7 “silver” and 7 “gold stars”)
- “General” (6 “silver” and 6 “gold stars”)
- “Colonel” (4 “silver” and 4 “gold stars”)
- “Captain” no. 1/“Wireless” (3 “stars”)
- Jim Crow (2 “silver” and 2 “red/gold stars”)

**Number Three’s**

- “Captain” 1 (4 “stripes” & “castle”)
- “Captain” 2 (4 “stripes”/“rifle”)
- “Sergeant” 1 (3 “stripes”/“ammunition”)
- “Sergeant” 2 (2 “stripes”/“knapsack”)
- “Soldiers” (“assegai” and “.303 rifle”)
Each of the different number gangs have their own structure. These structures have evolved to enable the numbers to function effectively in prison, and in order that the needs of members can be met. There are, for example, management bodies such as *sjoemanambienie* or *Twelve Points* which, among other things, determine policy, analyse problems, judge conduct, swear in recruits and act as courts in order to sentence gang members who have transgressed codes of conduct.

The structure of the number gangs determines the communication between gang members to a great extent. “Soldiers” must discuss their problems with “sergeants”, and “sergeants” with “captains”. *Jim Crow* controls the *spore* (communication channels) between the two divisions of the 28 gang. It is also his task to *pons* (send) the *wyfies* (catamites) from Division 1 to Division 2. *Wyfies* and “soldiers” are not allowed to mix. If for example a “soldier” wants to give something to a *wyfie*, he must put it down on the floor from where the *wyfie* must pick it up.

The formal structure may change at times (when there is peace). For example, when the *Sixes* (gang 26) operates on the policy of *die stamp van nyangi twee* they will take part in a *bottels* *breek* activity. All gang members may then regardless of rank or position, communicate with each other. When *ndodas* (gang members) operate on the policy of the *stomp van nyangi een*, battle will result, and the formal structure will be re-instated. These policies of nyangi one and two can only be changed by the *functions of a number gang:*

*Functions of a number gang:*
Because of the fact that number gangs are characterised by complicated structures, and different functions are assigned to every rank, a comprehensive discussion of all these functions cannot be provided here. The focus will rather be on the broad functions of gangs as such.

As already noted, the number gangs are primarily distinguished from each other by specified goals which must be respected by others. For example, *Nongoloza* (the 28 gang) keeps catamites (*wyfies*) and *Grey’s Camp* (the 26) steal and rob by cunning (*piemp*). Nowadays, *Nongoloza* is regarded as the number gang — in main, they have supplied information concerning fellow prisoners to prison officials, and acted as state witnesses or otherwise cooperated with the authorities. Members of the *Air Force* are generally regarded as *skoon* (clean).

**Violation of gang codes can be punished in various ways:**

- **Do not snitch** (*piemp*) or cooperate with the authorities.
- **Warnings** in the case of *wyfies* or “soldiers” who committed a first offence, are given by the appropriate *Four Points*.
- **Skoepe**s: The offender must drink a prescribed amount of water and then receive an established amount of blows on the stomach.
- **Op die band gooi**/trees are moving (gang rape): In case of a serious violation committed by a private of the 28 gang, he will be submitted to gang rape by the division one (officers). If they *dina-madina* (persist) with their deviant behaviour they will be submitted to gang rape by the *Number Three’s* (“soldiers”).
- **Bloedvat** (bloodletting): When officers persist in their wrongdoing they can be tried by the *Twelve Points* and sentenced to correct their wrongs by stabbing a member of the *Fourth Camp* (the *Big 5* and *Air Force* gangs which are not regarded as number gangs, and non-gangmembers). However, generally only *vuil* (dirty) members of the *fourth camp* are selected as victims to correct wrongs. *Vuil* prisoners have transgressed the laws of the number gangs — in main, however, they have supplied information concerning fellow prisoners to prison officials, and acted as state witnesses or otherwise cooperated with the authorities. Members of the *Air Force* are generally regarded as *skoon* (clean).
- **Tou** (death penalty): This punishment is only executed by the *Twelve Points* of the 28 gang. It is seldom applied, and only in the case of a very serious violation of the gang code (e.g. *piemp* (snitching)), and murder of a *brother*.

**Normative structure**

According to Lawrence Wieder (1983: 78–90) who undertook a study in a halfway house, problematic behaviour of prisoners can be directly traced to the inmate code. In prisons where number gangs flourish, the more diffuse inmate code is often dominated by well-defined gang codes. Some elements of the gangs’ codes are:

- To be loyal and obedient towards the gang and share everything that you have with gang members.
- Love your *gazilaams* (gang members), respect and support them and live together in harmony.
- Do not snitch (*piemp*) or cooperate with the authorities.
- Warnings in the case of *wyfies* or “soldiers” who committed a first offence, are given by the appropriate *Four Points*.
- Skoepe: The offender must drink a prescribed amount of water and then receive an established amount of blows on the stomach.
- Op die band gooi/trees are moving (gang rape): In case of a serious violation committed by a private of the 28 gang, he will be submitted to gang rape by the division one (officers). If they *dina-madina* (persist) with their deviant behaviour they will be submitted to gang rape by the *Number Three’s* (“soldiers”).
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common functions for their members. The most important include the following:

**Training.** Training consists of the acquiring of knowledge, skills and equipment by members, which will enable them to adapt to their prescribed roles and to move upward in the gang, thus making a career for themselves. Imchaela (training) in the oemkosi of the 26 gang, happens after the Twelve Points of the Number Two's ("inspector" 2, nyangi 2, "judge" 2, melie 2, mabalang 2 and the fighting) have decided that the gang will work on a stamp of nyangi twee. The specific functions of this policy of nyangi twee are om bene sterk te maak and recruiting new members with the purpose of strengthening their ranks.

Training is given in the following aspects:

- The origin of the gang as well as the rituals that apply when members join the gang.
- Specifications of "clothing" and "equipment" of different ranks within the gang.
- Behaviour towards mpoxa (warders), franse (non-gang members) and other gang members.
- Behaviour towards brothers and regulations in this regard.
- Drilling, various exercises and salutike (saluting).
- The manufacturing and use of dangerous weapons, e.g. knives and jugs.

Training in drilling, use of weapons and fighting strategy in the 26 gang is managed by "inspector" 2 and "captain" 2, who command "sergeant" 2 to do the training of the six-nine (bathroom area of the cell). Nyangi 2 must first decide that the "soldiers" are medically fit for training. Training of "probationers" is instructed by the Four Points of the privates (Number Two's) and mainly undertaken by Masilva 2. "Probationers" receive training in ligte werk (e.g. sexual techniques).

**Security.** Gangs must see to it that its members are protected against any external danger. The "soldiers" play an important role in this regard. It is their task to stand guard and not to let suspicious people (vail franse or mpitas) through. In cells shared by members of 28 and 26 gangs and mpitas, the 26's will occupy the sun-up part while the 28 gang will occupy the sun-down part. The mpitas must make do with what is left. Gang members are prepared to defend their territories with their lives and die if necessary for their gang.

**Fulfilment of physical, psychological and social needs.** Number gangs strive to attain favourable positions in prison (e.g. chefs) in order to acquire and store much sought-after articles such as food, tobacco, dagga, liquor, etc. These are hidden in a safe place. It is the responsibility of the nyangi to look after the ill and injured. Existing medical facilities provided by the authorities are inter alia covertly utilised for this purpose. In the 28 gang he is the one that must decide whether a recruit should become a wyfie or "soldier".

Number gangs provide camaraderie, status, protection and in the case of the 28 sexual outlets are also provided. "Welfare services" also make provision for permanent disability and retirement. Gang members who are op die plaas (who have retired) or are kondem geslaan (medically unfit), will still receive the same privileges and protection from the gangs. The psychological support offered by gangs is considerable. The strong may quickly gain status or a reputation which would have been impossible otherwise. The weak may find not only physical, but also emotional security. Gangs serve as a membership and reference group, thus enhancing self-esteem. In some instances gang members become totally immersed in the reality and fantasy of gang life.

Apart from certain practical measures instituted by the authorities in this regard, gangs may alleviate some of the pains of imprisonment such as idleness, boredom, institutionalisation, powerlessness, sexual frustration and the deprivation of goods and services.

The continued existence of number gangs. In order to survive it is necessary for any organisation to provide means whereby goals can be fulfilled (Cilliers and Joubert 1966: 32 – 34). In structural functionalist terms, four functional problems or prerequisites exist, namely: adaptation (adapting to the environment); integration (encouragement of group cohesion, stability and order between units of the system by the promotion of morale and punishment of wrongdoing), and pattern maintenance (regulation of stress and provision for socialisation into the norms and culture of the organisation).

From the above discussion it should be clear that number gangs fulfil all these prerequisites. One of the most important ways in which the survival of number gangs is insured, is by recruitment. Recruits are taught that they came to the gang with their own feet, their whole heart and full mind. It must be noted that gang formation is actively discouraged by prison authorities, and inmates are therefore warned against the dangers of joining a gang as well as the fact that disciplinary steps will be taken against any gang formation. However, gangs still succeed in recruiting newcomers, and may resort to entrapment or other forms of coercion to enrol inmates with sought after qualities. Newcomers with fighting ability and pluck may be welcomed by all the gangs. The 28 may welcome a young man with feminine traits, whereas the 26 — fearing that he will become a wyfie or be subject to sexual attack — may find him unacceptable. If an inmate has been labelled as "dirty", he will be unacceptable to all the gangs with the possible exception of the Big 5. The numbers might be prepared to consider him as a recruit only after he has physically assaulted somebody, thereby "washing
away” his “spot” with blood or correcting his wrong. In the 26 and 28 gangs the “inspectors” are entrusted with recruiting. A likely recruit of the 26 will be brought to the “camp” (gang or gang territory) by the “inspector”. He will be put in the care of the “gate-keeper”, and is not allowed to enter the “gates” giving access to the gang for six days. During this time, he will be regarded as a possible spy or as somebody with “spots”, and the “inspector” will investigate his background. After the “gates” have opened and the recruit admitted, instruction begins, and he will learn about his duties, chain of command in the junior section in which he has to serve, and details about the “uniform” and “equipment” that will be issued to him. He will become a full-fledged member at a special meeting of officers of the junior section. Even now the “inspector” will again search his body for “chappies” (tattoos) of other gangs. The “doctor” will examine him to ascertain whether he is fit and healthy. A foot stamping ceremony (“one-time shotgun and two-time shotgun”) will be performed and the recruit’s name “written” in the “book”; he is now a brother.

Number gangs have a very long history. The first of these gangs were established amongst black prisoners in the Transvaal soon after the Anglo-Boer War. Despite various attempts of authorities to stamp out gang activities (mainly because of the fact that gangs oppose cooperation between prisoners and authorities), gangs have survived tight corners (cells where gang members of one specific gang are isolated), koeloekoets (punishment cells) and koekblikke (single cells for wyfies). At the time when the fieldwork was conducted, the most prevalent threat to the continued existence of number gangs were members of violent street gangs, e.g. the Mafias, Mongrels, Cape Town Scorpions, Born Free Kids, et cetera, who are typical products of subcultures of violence. While these could strengthen the ranks of number gangs, they could also in-clude extortion and fraud. In the case of extortion, there is the threat of harm to the victim unless some payment is received, e.g. intimidation. In fraud (the speciality of the 26 gang) the victim’s cooperation is gained through trickery and deceit — overpower met gedagte (overpowering with thought). With exploitation as the main type of transaction in mind, I shall now discuss the relationship between numbers themselves and other actors on the prison scene.

The relationship between number gangs and other gangs:

The most basic division of prison gangs in South Africa can be made between that of number gangs and other gangs. According to the numbers no other gang has the right to exist. Amongst other gangs are counted the Big 5 (25) who, through informing and collaborating with authorities, seek to maximise their privileges, and the Air Force (24) which has as its goal the organisation of escapes. The number gangs are of the opinion that, according to tradition, members of the Fourth Camp have unlawfully usurped numbers, 24 in the case of the Air Force, and 25 in the case of the Big 5. According to them mpatas have no work, and their existence is therefore not justified. However, an important distinction is made between the Air Force and the Big 5, namely that the former is regarded as clean mpatas, while the latter is unquestionably vuil (dirty). This is so mainly because of the fact that Big 5’s piemp (snitch) cooperate with authorities. The Big 5 breaks down prison solidarity which can be regarded as the corner stone of the prison code. Some of the prison murders have, therefore, been committed on these vuil mpatas. Another category that is regarded as clean mpatas or clean frase by the number gangs, is the Black Powers who have little status in their eyes. Serious conflicts have taken place thus far...
between number gangs and Black Powers. The main reason for this may be that numbers have, up until now, been pre-occupied with conditions within prisons, and not with conditions in the outside society. Whether this will stay so remains to be seen.

Violence between number gangs and dirty mpatas or franse is common practice. All forms of this violence can be regarded as exploitation. Major types of violence inside South African prisons between number gangs and the Fourth Camp can be classified as follows:

— Violence in order to correct a wrong. A wrong (committed against members of the same gang) must be corrected by bloedvat (taking blood). By assaulting a dirty mpata, number gangs will correct their wrongs. Bloodletting can occur in private or in public. If the member of a number gang must be punished according to the sentence of the Twaalf or Vier Punte, by authorities, bloodletting will take place in public.

— Violence in order to become a gang member: Admittance to number gangs is sometimes only possible when a recruit can prove that he is able to do the work of the gang. He will thus have to assault a vuil mpata.

— Violence for promotion: Certain promotions within the numbers can only occur when a vuil mpata has been assaulted. This occurs typically in the case of higher ranks.

— Collective violence of gang warfare: Collective violence is usually the result of a decision by the Twaalf Punte to work on the stamp of nyangi een. Collective violence between numbers and other gangs usually take the form of generale warfare (total warfare), and the intention is to seriously harm or kill. Weapons such as knives and sharpened objects may be used.

• Relationships between members of number gangs

Although the members of gang 28 and gang 26 are sometimes in opposition, they recognise the existence of one another as well as gang 27 (where it still exists). Members of all these camps regard themselves as wetslaners. Gang codes of the numbers determine that the gang members of 28, 27 and 26 must die for each other. Gang 28 is regarded as the father and gang 26 as the child. They also respect one another’s work and will not allow a recruit to become a member if he committed a wrong against any of the numbers. The wrong must first be corrected. One mechanism that is used to prevent conflict between gangs is to ensure that communication only takes place between the “Inspectors” and “wirelesses”. However, conflict does occur and may lead to collective violence. In such a case gang warfare tends to be structured, and the intention is not necessarily to kill or harm seriously, but to slaan met sasloekoes van Msoegwane (laws of the number gangs). During this ritual warfare between number gangs, only the Number One’s are allowed to participate and not the soldiers. General warfare between numbers can however also take place.

• Relationship between number gangs and prison officials

The relationships between numbers and officials are mainly determined by whether number gangs are of the opinion that they can lekker bandiet (serve their sentences the way they want to), and whether officials are just and show respect towards prisoners. As long as their prison “careers” are not harmed they will respect and obey authority in return. However, they remain wetslaners and will therefore, not cooperate with authorities. The gang code is in this case also an important regulator of relationships between number gangs and authority. Conflict with officials merely for the sake of conflict, will rather be avoided by number gangs. However, assault on a mpoeza (official) may sometimes be ordered by the Twelve Points in order to correct a wrong. For instance, the gang laws determine that the blood of an official must be taken when the “flag” of one of the number gangs is “torn” by another. Complaints against authority are often manifested through violent behaviour towards vuil mpatas and franse. An aspect which complicates the relationship and communications between officials and number gangs even further, is the fact that gang members are forbidden to speak to officials first.16

Conclusion

The world of South African prison gangs generally corresponds with Best and Luckenbill’s social organisational model. Moreover, characteristics of number gangs clearly resemble that of Best and Luckenbill’s (1982) formal organisation. These characteristic features include:

• Clearly defined goals: Each number gang has its own work.

• Formal structure within which members have specified positions or ranks: Number gangs have various ranks/positions and “offices”.

• Positions (ranks) are differentiated along both a vertical hierarchy of authority and a horizontal division of responsibility: For example, “Sergeant” 2 of the 28 gang, who must do the training of new gang members.

• Existence of efficient communication channels in the structure: In numbers gang members must communicate through their immediate seniors.

• Special “departments” rendering specific services: For example, planning and rule enforcement are
functions of the Twelve Points, public relations assigned to the “wireless” and the “government” (“guv’) deals with illicit goods such as dagga. In the case of gang 28 wiffies provide sexual outlets by means of klipslaan (sodomy).

- Systematic operations and steady productivity: For example, overpowering with thought, that is the major task of gang 26.

- Recruiting new members: Kampbou in order to expand membership and see to the continued existence of the gang.

- Binding, albeit unwritten rules for guiding members in organisational action and active enforcement of these rules: For example, the rules of the gang code which are enforced by the Twelve Points.

Regarding the transactions that number gangs undertake, it can be compared mainly with deviant exploitation, which according to Best and Luckenbill (1982: 157) is

... an illicit transaction in which a deviant uses stealth, trickery or physical force to compel another person to surrender goods or services.

However, other types of transactions such as deviant exchange and individual deviance are also evident within number gangs. On the whole, the social organisational model of Best and Luckenbill (1982) does provide a means of deciphering the multifaceted world of number gangs. In addition, it does also provide insight into the Fourth Camp. The object in view, namely to give a description of the patterns of relationships between members of number gangs, and the network of relations between gang members and other actors on the prison scene, could thus be reached.

In conclusion, it must be noted that it was not possible to look into all the features of the number gangs, nor to cover the whole spectrum of Best and Luckenbill’s approach in one paper. Notably more attention needs to be given to their important insight that there is a link between deviance and social control, and as with two opposite sides of the same coin, it is impossible to consider one without examining the other (1982: 235). Furthermore, it may be fruitful to consider their stages of entry into and exit from deviance (1982: 244) as well as their statement that the social organisation of deviance provides a context within which occupational and non-occupational deviance can occur (1982: 246).

Nevertheless, it seems that the organisational perspective shows great promise as a means whereby prison gangs as well as other deviant subcultures can be analysed. Therefore, I am of the opinion that this approach can play an important role in the building of a sociology of deviance in Southern Africa and elsewhere.

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NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of papers presented at (i) the Association of Sociology in South Africa’s Seventeenth Annual Congress: 30 June–4 July 1986, Department of Sociology, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa; and (ii) the Sixth International Human Sciences Research Conference: 26–30 May 1987, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.


3. The SA Prisons Service has, over the years, developed various strategies to combat gang activities. Owing to the complexity of the phenomenon and the SA Prisons Service’s concern for the welfare of prisoners committed to its care, the Human Sciences Research Council was approached in 1980 to conduct thorough research into the phenomenon, with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of the existing measures and the development and implementation of supplementary measures.

4. A more comprehensive exposition of gangs in South African prisons and specifically of number gangs (28 and 26) is presented in Lötter and Schurink (1986).

5. At present social scientists and sociologists have different views regarding the concept qualitative. It has been regarded inter alia as a form of data (“soft” versus “hard”), a specific method of data collection and a particular strategy in analysing and interpreting data. Qualitative in this paper is regarded as methodology, since it involves the entire process of social research including the logic and assumption on which it is based (cf. Filstead 1970).

6. Initial contacts between prisoners likely to cooperate with the researchers were arranged by staff-members. Further contacts were often arranged with the initial contacts acting as intermediaries. Some prisoners volunteered their help when news of the research spread. We were allowed to speak with whomever we wished.

7. In order to win the confidence of the subjects and in an attempt to ensure their honesty during the research, they were assured that their names would not be revealed in the report. They were also promised that the names of persons used in the publication would be fictitious.
8. Autobiographical sketches were utilised in the study which correspond largely to Allport's (1942) subject-centred and edited autobiography and Bogdan and Taylor's (1975) solicited composition.

9. The SA Prisons Service instructed institutions to forward material written by prisoners, uncensored to the researchers in reply-paid envelopes of the Human Sciences Research Council.

10. The roles that I worked out for myself varied between Gold's (1958) observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer roles.


14. The medical facilities provided by the SA Prisons Service include the following: (i) Medical treatment of prisoners is provided by doctors in the service of or contracted by the Department of Health and Population Development. Medical practitioners are assisted by trained nursing staff employed by the Prisons Service. (ii) There are set times each day during which prisoners have the opportunity to report any complaints of illness to the nursing staff. Less serious cases are dealt with in the prison hospital, but when more serious medical treatment and operations are necessary, prisoners are referred to public hospitals by the medical doctor. (iii) Dentists employed by the State are responsible for the dental examination and treatment of inmates. (iv) There are adequate pharmaceutical agents available to prisoners in all prisons.

15. Various measures to inhibit gang activities are implemented, which include inter alia the following: (i) The leader element is identified and isolated. (ii) Different gangs are incarcerated separately. (iii) Prisoners are made aware of the dangers of gang participation on admission. (iv) Continual attention is paid to the maintenance of the prisoner's family ties, and guidance is continuously given about the dangers of gang membership. (v) Professional services are available to prisoners should further specialised attention be required.

16. Channels instituted by the authorities along which prisoners may air their grievances and/or complaints or register requests, include the following: (i) Members under whose supervision the prisoner finds himself during the day or night. (ii) The Head of the Prison visits all sections daily to deal with complaints and/or requests by prisoners. Complaints and requests are recorded in an official register and finalisation is checked by the Commanding Officer. In addition, inspectors who are responsible directly to the Commissioner carry out regular inspections at prisons, during which the above-mentioned registers are thoroughly checked and prisoners are also given the opportunity of airing their complaints and requests. Visiting senior officers from the command or Prisons Headquarters may also be approached in respect of complaints or requests. (iii) A sheriff, deputy sheriff or messenger of the court has full access to prisons in the performance of his duties. (iv) Judges of the Supreme Court visit prisons unannounced at any time. (v) Magistrates visit prisons in their districts unannounced at any time. (vi) Appointed clergymen and religious workers have access to prisons in order to minister to their members/adolescents. (vii) Prisoners have, according to their needs, free access to and consultation with medical practitioners (district surgeons, as well as others). (viii) A prisoner has access to legal representatives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


