

CONSTRUCTING MEANING ABOUT THE DELINQUENCY OF YOUNG GIRLS IN PUBLIC HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS¹

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Girls' delinquency in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Young girls' delinquency is an growing topic of public debate in contemporary societies, and its study is important in the analysis of social change in a given context and time. Early anti-social behaviour is one of the best predictors of future anti-social behaviour; children under 13 years of age who are involved in delinquency have an increased risk of recidivism, and are two to three times more likely to become violent and chronic offenders (Loeber & Farrington, 2001; Loeber et al., 2008). Evidence shows that there tends to be a period of seven years of warning before a juvenile becomes a violent and serious offender, which means more special attention should be given to child offending (Augimeri et al., 2011).

Social concern about the relationship between gender and delinquency is neither new nor exclusive to the present. It is proved that the prevalence of offending in Western societies tends to increase from late childhood, peak in the teenage years (15-19 years), and decline afterwards in the early 20s (Piquero et al., 2012; Blokland et al., 2012). Girls tend to peak earlier (Wong et al. 2010), and to desist from delinquency more quickly than boys. They

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are also less likely to victimize strangers, to become involved in physical aggression or to carry or use weapons (Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2006). The age-crime curve is higher and wider for males (particularly minorities) growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Fabio et al., 2011).

The female juvenile offences highlighted by the media and the constant dramatization and politicization of delinquency in Western societies tend to suggest we are now living in a unique social setting, where girls have become more violent than ever. It is a fact that in many countries, such as Portugal, there is an increased justice system involvement among girls, mainly those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Duarte & Carvalho, 2017).

Girls' delinquency is seen in this context as an expression of a social problem associated with a range of factors and circumstances brought into play in a specific territory. This stems from the Chicago School's traditional combination of sociological views with the most recent perspectives on social ecology and childhood studies. The physical and social environment which influences, and simultaneously suffers the effects of the action and social control exercised by individuals (Elliot et al., 1996; Morenoff et al., 2001, Kingston et al., 2009), is that to which girls, as social actors, ascribe a particular meaning by appropriating, integrating, (re)constructing and (re)producing it in their lives (Corsaro, 1997; Schneider, 2016).

Sampson and Groves (1989) suggested that the structural factors of certain residential areas – low socioeconomic status, residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity and family breakdown – tend to be the external sources of social disorganization that lead to the weakening and collapse of institutions and social networks. The residents' low level of agency, and the dilution of informal social controls in a neighbourhood could emerge and reinforce the lack of regulation, causing an increase in disorders, violence and crime.

Thus, delinquency arises as a result of the social learning process (Akers, 1998) associated with the existence of opportunities that facilitate the practice of delinquent acts. Among these opportunities, special attention should be given to the prevalence of certain patterns of social networks in certain areas (Cloward & Ohlin, 1970; Kingston et al., 2009; Sampson, 2012).

For decades, girls were absent from the focus of neighbourhood studies; only recently, the role of neighbourhood variables in determining gender differences in violence and delinquency has become more visible, but the available research has pointed out mixed effects (Kling et al., 2005; Goodkind et al., 2009; Zahn & Browne, 2009; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010; Hayne et al., 2014; Lei et al., 2014; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017). In spite of the methodological differences that could explain the discrepancy of results in this field (Fagan & Wrigth, 2012), there is strong evidence demonstrating differences between girls who are exposed and those who are not exposed to structural disadvantage and violence where they live (Augimeri et al., 2011).

The neighbourhood effects have an impact on gender socialization and children's delinquency in complex ways (Kling et al., 2005; Lei et al., 2014). Socially disadvantaged children tends to display higher levels of mobility in public spaces and more autonomous activity with little or no parental supervision (Schneider, 2016). Boys are more frequently associated with offending behaviour in disadvantaged neighbourhoods than girls. Nevertheless, strong gender similarities in the links between structural disadvantage and arrest rates were proved by authors in USA and Canada, who suggested exposure to criminogenic neighbourhoods and witnessing or experiencing violence affect both male and female delinquency (Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2006; Jacob, 2006; Mrug & Windle, 2009). In contrast, Fagan and Wright (2012) showed that neighbourhood variables, such

as collective efficacy and disadvantage, may have more impact on girls', delinquency than on male offending.

Recent studies focusing on the gender gap found that differences between boys and girls who commit violence are less pronounced in gender-equal neighbourhoods compared to those characterized by gender inequality. Gender equality levels in a specific context may explain why boys and girls are affected in different ways by neighbourhood effects (Zimmerman & Messner, 2010; Lei et al., 2014;).

Based on the perspective of traditional gender roles, girls are less exposed to street influences than boys because families place more restrictions and control on their actions (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Fagan et al., 2007). Girls tend to spend more time at home while boys are allowed more freedom outside; this results in boys' being more exposed to neighbourhood social and structural factors (Fagan & Wriqth, 2012). However, when exposed to community violence or abuse and maltreatment at home, girls are more affected than boys (Augimeri et al., 2011). As a result, girls are mainly regarded as in need of more protection and supervision than boys, and their behaviour is more likely to be regulated by the family.

Gender differences are also expressed in peer influence on delinquency, (Piquero et al, 2005), mainly on violent offending, as females are more likely to be influenced by peer involvement in such practices than males. Girls tend to select friends according to their behaviour, and to have more intimate friendship ties with other girls than boys have with their peers (Zimmerman & Messner, 2010; Hayne et al., 2014).

The research

This paper is based on a larger PhD research project in sociology concerning childhood, violence and delinquency in Portugal (Carvalho, 2010).ⁱRooted in social ecology

approaches and in childhood studies which recognize children as social actors, this study aimed to achieve a better understanding of children's socialization processes in multi-problematic spaces, particularly concerning their involvement in delinquency. Between 2005 and 2009, a case study based on ethnographic research and child-centred methods (neighbourhood drawings, semi-structured interview, and community photography) was carried out in six public housing neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Portugal; they were chosen because they experienced relatively high levels of social deprivation, violence and crime, although they are located in one of the richest counties in the country, the first to eradicate slums in 2003 by promoting public housing policies. Five of them form a homogeneous continuum in this county territory, and the sixth is less than a half a mile away from the other five.

Participants were 312 schoolchildren aged 6-13 ($M = 8.38$) attending two primary state schools (1st-4th grade), living in one of the neighbourhoods selected. Exactly half of the participants were girls ($n=156$). Most were of African origin from the former Portuguese colonies (62.8 per cent), mainly The Cape Verde Islands, 9.2 per cent were Roma, and 28.0 percent were Caucasian. Nearly all were from lower SES households, with 86.7 percent getting financial support from social services at schools.

Given the extent of the study, this text presents only some of the most important results relating to girls' social practices in order to learn from the resident girls, aged six to 12 years old, and the reasoning and meanings assigned by them to their own actions in this context. Based on the analysis of the girls' drawings of these neighbourhoods, interviews (18 girls were interviewed, aged 7-11 years), and field notes, we discuss the features of girls' socialization in the field and examine their perspectives on offending behaviours.

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional national research legislation. According to Portuguese law, as the

participants were under the age of 18, the researcher had to explain the project beforehand to the girls and to their parents or legal guardians who had to give permission. Letters of consent were sent to them in order to obtain permission for the girls' participation, and through informed consent they also expressed their willingness to take part in the research. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. For ethical reasons, to protect participants and guarantee their privacy and anonymity, the girls' names are replaced by alphanumeric codes in this paper. Though translated from Portuguese, the original language and expressions have been retained as far as possible.

As the exploratory qualitative research study focused on a specific context at a particular time, the findings presented in this text cannot be generalized to other urban settings.

The gendered social learning of delinquency

One of the first issues is to analyse and focus on the way in which the girls perceive the position of 'being a child' in the context under study, according to gender.

I think... and I do not think that being a child in this neighbourhood is different from other places. I think it's good because now and then you get along with other people and learn good things. But other times I think it is not good being a child here because I see the boys smoking, doing crap and they try to steal and then they will stay like the others. I think the girls are less naughty [laughs], the boys like to go out at night and do other crap. Girls... only a few do the same, we are more timid. (...) But some girls are rude and also go in the same way of the boys ... I'm not saying that the boys are naughty, not all, right? But some are bad, they are very bad. (Girl01, 9 years-old) (Carvalho, 2010: 312)

Within a gender typing culture, children's socialization results in different gender roles and behaviours sustained in gender-based beliefs, as expressed by this girl in what she considers to be acceptable for each gender. Traditional gender stereotypes are present at an early age among girls, determining their preferences, a trend also visible in their delinquent practices.

In this study, the interviewed girls were mostly involved in offences against property, primarily achieved through shoplifting in commercial spaces that for the most part are located near the neighbourhoods. This is a delinquency of acquisition, in which girls want to obtain consumer goods, mainly those associated with fashion and women's lifestyles.

– No, I didn't choose, I only chose one thing. (...) I chose the coat, she [Gir27, 11 years-old] gave me some T-shirts and trousers, and we went to put them on in the changing rooms. (Gir136, 11 years-old)

– Then I took a sweater, just one sweater. I put on two sweaters and a pair of trousers. Girl [27] told us to put on some shoes, but if they didn't fit, I didn't put them on. (Gir137, 8 years-old)

– Me neither, it was a red coat with a brand name, like this, short. And she [27] chose a [brand name] track suit (Gir135, 9 years-old)

– And your sister [8 years-old], did she get something too?

– Yes, socks (...) she didn't have them on her feet, but she put them in her bag, and she had two pairs of trousers, one pair [brand name] and another pair, three sweaters, a top, a sweater, and her own sweater (Gir136).

– And how were they caught?

– They said that she [27] took something out of the trousers to turn off the alarm and put it in the rubbish bin. The police let her go into the toilet to take them off. Then I saw [27] and [35] with a policewoman. After, the police told us to take the clothes off. We took them off and the police said we had to go to the police station. (Gir136). (Carvalho, 2010: 394)

This gender-biased trend in stealing goods was pandemic with girls, often acting with peers of a similar age, in pairs or in small groups, stealing clothes, accessories (earrings, chains, bracelets, assorted decorative accessories, and handbags) or school materials. The current status and organization of families, schools and of the media (particularly new social media) as sources of socialization, promote new relationships for the growing development of horizontal socialization processes, with peers, in a fragmented puzzle of social and educational references, social bonds and roles in constant change that replace some of the traditional forms of vertical socialization (Corsaro, 1997; Piquero et al., 2005).

The willingness to follow other girls is strongly present and the gendered character of peer influence emerges as an important variable when examining their explanations and understanding of their offending behaviours (Giordano et al., 2002; Miller, 2007; Haynie et al., 2014; Duarte & Carvalho, 2017). Close interaction between young boys and girls

involved in delinquency has not been observed or mentioned by the interviewed girls. It is not surprising in these age groups based on gender, and is a trait common to childhood experiences anywhere in the world. However, very little is known about the phenomenon of young girls' delinquency as literature mainly focuses on delinquency among older girls. This study intends to contribute to our knowledge of the offending behaviour in younger age groups.

Shopping centres and hypermarkets become places of pleasure, representing a kind of large and very attractive playground, which some girls use frequently, often removed from any family supervision. To some extent, this might occur because of the lack of playgrounds in the neighbourhoods, either because they have not been built, or the two existing ones have been vandalized by adults and youngsters who have used them for other purposes.



Fig. 1 My Neighbourhood

These are the buildings, the cars and the boys playing when there were slides and swings and seesaws. I used to go there to play but now there's nothing because they pulled it all down and I don't know why. (...) A playground is very much needed here so we can have a space where we can go play. We need space to play, we can go to the street and there we have space, but then the balls go into the road and sometimes the cars are driving so fast in street races that someone can be killed (Girl16, 7 years-old)

Not having playgrounds was one of the girls' major complaints. Associated with a notion of territoriality, a playground was a collective aspiration in all these territories, regarded as a social symbol perceived to be accessible to social groups living in other places. Without specially designed areas for recreational use in their neighbourhoods, children are mainly sent to the street. While giving them the opportunity to explore their physical and social environment fully, the street simultaneously exposes them to a range of other situations that are clearly more unfavourable and potentially generate different risks. Not surprisingly, the commercial areas outside their neighbourhoods should be understood as primary socialization spaces that fulfil some of the girls' most important social and educative needs, providing them with access to opportunities that they would otherwise not have.

Most girl offenders' actions tend to bring their potential for creativity and practical ability to solve problems to the surface, based on a logical plan developed to meet challenges and take greater risks (some real, some imagined). The ineffectiveness of social controls, both informal and formal, turns out to be decisive in how they perceive and anticipate the effects of delinquency. The girls' initial experience of success with their first delinquent act may assume increasing importance, and accumulated successful experiences encourage acceptance that delinquency should continue. Society's investment in them might be perceived as inadequate. This perception does not facilitate the internalization of conventional internal controls, as reflected in the distinction between what they considered a violation of legal norms according to the categories of morality constructed and internalized by these girls themselves.

- I never did it, I've never stole clothes! - [GirlF35, 9 years old,]
- Your mother said all the clothes you have are all stolen!" [Girl F36, 11 years old]
- No, but my mother has already stolen ... [F35]
- My mother never stole or steals but you and your mother stole clothes [F36]
- I had already 'taken' clothes from the [name of the shop], on Friday we went there too. [F35] (...) I only 'caught' socks. [F35]

– I also only ‘brought’ socks, she [F27, 11 years old] ‘took’ more things, she removed all the alarms ... then you leave. [F36] (Carvalho, 2010: 395)

For some girls, delinquency appears to be based on their distorted perception of its severity. The frequent use of terms such as 'catch', 'grab', 'bring' and 'take' was identified as common amongst them and many of the neighbourhoods' adults. This perception was associated with codes of conduct where the disapproval of illegal acts tended to be voiced only when the acts went above a certain level. The predominant view of a petty theft as a trivial experience is expressed by a significant number of the girls. However, this does not mean they do not demonstrate an understanding of good or evil, though this trend becomes more visible only when they also become victims of crime. Nevertheless, such victimization was no impediment or obstacle to continuing with delinquent practices. What is more significant is the dissolving of the clear boundaries between conformity and deviation. This leads to the notorious under-valuation of the importance and consequences of the violation of social norms and rules, a perspective that stems largely from the neighbourhoods' social disorganization.

The girls' passive role also emerges, even against their will or their family's wishes, when exposed to a high incidence of disorder and violence from which they cannot escape simply because it happens where they live. When comparing risks in different urban settings it is clear that children living in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods are not only more frequently referred to as aggressors, but also more likely to be victims of violence (Elliot et al., 1996; Morenoff et al., 2001).



Fig. 2 My neighbourhood

This here is a man running over a little boy... On the other side is the youngster who killed the other near my house. He went home to pick up the gun and then came back and killed him... In the building there is a man shooting at his wife. He pushed her away and she fell out of the window. The neighbours called the firemen and there's nothing more... I don't like living here. There are too many sad things and it's very sad to live here. It's like this... (Girl02, 9 years-old)

The territory where children live clearly influences the choices and opportunities they have at their disposal in daily life (Kingston et al., 2009; Sampson, 2012). Not surprisingly, there are girls in this context who use physical violence as a resource for their defence and social inclusion in the area where they live as a result of the 'normalization' of violence to which they are often subjected.

Yeah! All the people go fighting here, there is always someone against me and (...) Bang! There she goes! I give her a punch hard too!" (Girl06, 8 years-old) (Carvalho, 2010: 396).

The girls interviewed do not reject conventional values, but violence can emerge as an attractive socialization strategy, varying from what is considered to be play to the need to obtain social recognition nor even to defend themselves from others.

- Teacher, are you missing Valentine's Day? [Girl21, 7 years-old,]
- Do you have a boyfriend? - asked the teacher.
- Yes, I have it in T [other public housing neighbourhood] [21]
- How old is he?
- He's eight years old.
- So he's older than you! [Girl05, 7 years-old]
- Yeah, but I have the strength to beat him up, I'm not afraid of him! (Carvalho, 2010:306)

While exploring the contexts in which the girls emerge as aggressors, the social dynamics which still make many of them victims become even more visible. Domestic violence affects a significant proportion of the neighbourhoods' households, regardless of their composition. Males tend to be identified more often as aggressors toward women and children, but several cases where women were the main aggressors, especially towards their own children, were also mentioned. In other cases, females seem to react more against males.

My father hit my mother, and then my mother tried to kill my father. (Girl24, 8 years-old) (Carvalho, 2010: 317)

Gender assumes another expression, which is particularly visible in the case of assault. When examining the profile of the victims of delinquency committed by the young girls, is it common for victims to be from the same gender. This could be regarded as a sign that these girls perceived female victims to be more vulnerable and were thus able to incorporate this understanding into their own offending behaviour. Moreover, those who are aggressors can also become victims at the hands of older girls in what seems to be a social reproduction of gendered violence patterns among females.

I like playing in my neighbourhood, but what I don't like are the older girls who come beating on us and steal. (Girl38, 10 years-old) (Carvalho, 2010: 396).

Zimmerman and Messner (2010) showed that neighbourhood disadvantage increases exposure to peer violence and has a significant impact on girls' violent offending, promoting the reduction in the gender gap at higher levels of disadvantage. Social disadvantage is manifested in a low level of confidence in relation to others, which reduces the residents' expectations about lessening social control, while also lowering their expectations of taking collective action for children's socialization (Sampson, 2012). Wherever children live, discovering the existence of the *other* implies raising questions

about identity, difference, otherness and power. Taking into account the complexity of social life it can be observed that, the relations between cultural and ethnic groups are often conflicting. This is something that girls become aware of and point out as one of the major problems in their neighbourhoods.



Figure 3. My neighbourhood

It's my street and the buildings on the side of the 'Gypsies' and on the other it's me and my friends. What I like least in my neighbourhood are the 'Gypsies' and if I could, I would move them to another neighbourhood because they are noisy and rude and throw litter on the streets. (Girl13, 9 years-old)ⁱⁱ

Many families have been relocated by local authorities to specific streets according to their ethnic origin. Of particular relevance in these territories is the divisions and boundaries inside them, which are mainly associated with ethnic origin and hierarchies among different cultural groups. This trend simultaneously encourages and (re)constructs permanent social dissatisfaction by reinforcing the neighbourhood's stigmatization, and is at the origin of many disorders and violence in which young girls are heavily involved.

Girl's delinquency as a female business

It is worth mentioning the importance of family in the girls' involvement in delinquent practices, while recognizing that there is a reciprocal effect between the family and the environment (Augimeri et al., 2011). There are many possible relationships among

families, informal social control and delinquency, but it is important to note that as families influence the development of their members through social control, they are also influenced by the context in which they live (Kingston et al., 2009).

Factors associated with families and the parental exercise of informal social control and supervision, as well as the educational learning processes parents and relatives build with girls – in particular, those involving adherence to social and legal values – are frequently addressed in research and strongly related to delinquency (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Loeber et al, 2008; Zahn et al., 2010; Piquero et al., 2012; Kruttschnitt, 2013).

Do you know a group [of 4 young adult females] called the Gang of the [name of a famous Portuguese clothing brand]? They bring me clothes, but my mother [who is living abroad] tells me not to accept [them] because if I have a lack of clothing, it is because I damage it. She always brings a suitcase of clothes. (...) They are smart; they have a 'silver suitcase' [lined with aluminium foil and silver inside] to pass the alarms without being caught. One is my aunt and they do not give clothes to others in the neighbourhood, they only give it to me; to the other girls, they sell at the same price. (...) People here buy a lot. (Girl27, 11 years-old) (Carvalho, 2010: 430)

Female participation in delinquent groups is not a recent phenomenon – what seems to be new are some of the ways in which girls participate, how they build gender relationships and how they orchestrate various forms of femininity through their delinquent practices. These practices are seen as 'girl's things' and 'girl's business' by the girls interviewed. The social learning of delinquency tends to occur within the matriarchal family context under the direct influence of relatives of the same gender—mothers, aunts, girl cousins, grandmothers and sisters—and not necessarily from any male influence. The gender schemas that female relatives provide for girls significantly influence their delinquent practices.

We talked to the mother of [Girl35, 9 years-old] and she explained everything. She put on the clothes, picked up her clothes, put on the clothes in the [shop] and then she told us to do what she was doing. She told us to take something off (...) that (...) the alarm tag. Her mother taught us, do it like this with your teeth (...). We managed to get it off, one took it off and we put on the clothes (...). Her mother told us, and she told us to go because there are stolen clothes at home and some bought, but most were stolen and then the case went to the court once. (Girl27, 11 years old) (Carvalho, 2010: 394)

The intergenerational transmission of crime has been extensively described in scientific research and affects both girls and boys. The most complex challenge emerges when the girl offenders' families are also involved in crime and delinquency; this is not a new problem, but an intergenerational one, passed from one generation to the next, within a process of social reproduction that is similar to that of other social problems (i.e. poverty, social exclusion).

Final remarks

Debating girls' delinquency necessarily implies talking about social dynamics and the multiplicity of challenges and risks that influence genderized social roles and the construction of identity during childhood in societies marked by changes in the role and position of women. At the origin of delinquency are gendered social processes and dynamics in which analysis in general, both scientific and social, is relevant, as it allows insights into the social construction of gender in broader terms.

For the 6 to 12-year-old girls involved in this research, the ties to deviant and criminal models present in the neighbourhoods were more obvious and significant than others related to social conformity. The girls' family and group relationships, especially with older female peers or relatives, are key-factors in their involvement in delinquency. Results suggest that the deviant influence of female adults on girls seems to be encouraged by the influence of the social environment, which easily turns into a particular knowledge that could be used amongst the younger ones for their own purposes. Moreover, talking about their participation in delinquency could give them personal recognition at the local level and increase their local social status. These girls do not reject conventional values, but in their offending practices there is more excitement, pleasure and adhesion to notions that are highly valued in these neighbourhoods, such as 'being

smart' and 'having power and money', which are recurrently associated with a code of the street (Anderson, 1999).

Delinquency has a functional and instrumental role, offering girls attractive and rewarding forms of socialization. So, it seems that girls are more present in the same spaces as boys and subject to the same tensions and conflicts in these neighbourhoods. This could lead to an understanding of how girls are increasingly challenging the traditional gender behaviours of children in Portuguese society.

In this process, special attention should be paid to what happens in the public spaces that influence girls' social practices and gender roles. As in the case of boys, the street plays a central role in the socialization of many girls', and parental supervision does not always provide adequate protection; often, girls referred to how they were involved in social disorder, violence and delinquency with their own parents or relatives. This forces us to question the nature of the existing social networks and how the residents' lack of intervention in social control reflects insufficient collective action to improve children's socialization, which may endanger social cohesion (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson, 2012). As a part of the context where they grow up, violence and crime seem 'normalized' to many girls. This 'normalization' strengthens the risk of the girls' under-valuing the seriousness and effects of these kinds of actions and some even start participating when very young. Ultimately, girls' social development through delinquency is already structuring how they interact with peers and adults now, and it will be reflected in their future roles in society.

As revealed by the high levels of autonomy and mobility of some girls outside the neighbourhoods, delinquency seems to be influenced by the spatial and social neighbourhood features. As a result, two aspects arise as fundamental: concentration and stigmatization. Located on the 'other side of the city' (Carvalho, 2010), these

neighbourhoods do not benefit from a closer relationship with socially differentiated residential areas where the expectations of the social control of children are higher. This was probably one of the most critical limitations in the urban planning of these neighbourhoods resulting in areas that promote girls' delinquency in different ways.

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ⁱⁱ The term 'Gypsies' was kept instead of the use of Roma because it was most common among the girls living in these neighbourhoods, including those who are Roma.