RESEARCH ARTICLE
Artículos de investigación

Security, obedience, and the emergence of violence in contexts of confinement

Seguridad, obediencia y gestación de la violencia en contextos de encierro

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Received: May 11, 2023 – Accepted: February 12, 2024 – Published: January 13, 2025

APA citation format:
Perlo, C. L., Gallego Carmona, D., & Carlín, M. C. (2025). Security, obedience, and the emergence of violence in contexts of confinement. *Revista Colombiana de Ciencias Sociales*, *16*(1), 338-356. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

Abstract

In this article, we further develop theoretical reflections on the relationship between obedience and violence within the contemporary security paradigm in contexts of confinement. These reflections stem from the conceptual and theoretical framework that informs our research, framed within confinement as a socio-educational setting. We understand violence as a complex social phenomenon tied to a socio-historical

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

trajectory generated by patriarchal living conditions that have fragmented the human experience. We begin by examining the repressive-punitive paradigm that underpins current public policies anchored in security, with special emphasis on penitentiary policies. We then delve into the theoretical contributions surrounding the banality of evil, revisiting the landmark experiments conducted by social psychologists Stanley Milgram (1963) and Philip Zimbardo (1969), which empirically support the thesis advanced by philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963/1999). These contributions lead us to review recent epigenetic research on the contextual factors that foster violence. Our methodology—guided by participatory action research—allows the articulation of vivid field testimonies with the theoretical developments presented here. Finally, we propose conclusions regarding the tensions between security and care within confinement, tensions that ultimately place contemporary democracies in a precarious position.

Keywords

Security; Violence; Prison; Education; Obedience; Penitentiary Policies; Research.

Resumen

En este trabajo, profundizamos la reflexión teórica en torno a la relación entre obediencia y violencia dentro del paradigma securitario en el encierro. Esta reflexión deriva del *corpus* teórico-conceptual que forma parte de nuestras investigaciones, enmarcadas en el encierro como contexto socio-educativo. Comprendemos la violencia como un complejo fenómeno social que se encuentra ligado a una deriva sociohistórica, generada por condiciones de vida patriarcales que han fragmentado lo humano. Inicialmente, hacemos referencia al paradigma represivo-punitivo que sustentan las políticas públicas actuales ancladas en la seguridad, con especial referencia a las políticas penitenciarias. Profundizamos en los aportes teóricos, en torno a la banalidad del mal, revisando los experimentos de los psicólogos sociales Stanley Milgram (1963) y Philippe Zimbardo (1969), quienes, empíricamente, demuestran la tesis de la filósofa Hannah Arendt (1963/1999). Estos aportes nos conducen a revisar investigaciones recientes de la epigenética en torno a los contextos que propician la violencia. Nuestra metodología, guiada por la investigación-acción-participativa, nos permite articular vívidos testimonios de campo con la teoría aquí expuesta. Finalmente, presentamos conclusiones en torno a las tensiones entre la seguridad y el cuidado en el contexto de encierro que ponen en vilo las democracias actuales.

Palabras clave

Seguridad; Obendiencia; Violencia; Prisión; Educación; Políticas penitenciarias; Investigación.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

Introduction

In this article, we present a theoretical reflection on the relationship between obedience and violence, developed from our research situated within confinement as a socio-educational context. This is a qualitative study carried out through participatory action research. When we refer to confinement as a socio-educational context, we understand organizations as learning environments in which learning emerges—at times almost imperceptibly—through the interactions inherent in the everyday lives of individuals. In this sense, we draw upon the broader framework of more than twenty years of studies situated in the field of Learning and Organizational Development conducted at the Rosario Institute for Educational Sciences Research (Instituto Rosario de Investigaciones en Ciencias de la Educación–IRICE-CONICET/UNR).

In earlier work (Perlo & Carmona, 2021), we developed a theoretical body that analyzes the risks of addressing violence and public security either through a punitive lens or exclusively through the restitution of rights. Both approaches are grounded in the same paradigm of control and are implemented through a vertical, hierarchical political strategy that disregards the ethical and care-oriented dimensions of the issue.

Building on that corpus, we first present a theoretical development aimed at understanding violence as a complex social phenomenon rooted in a socio-historical drift generated by patriarchal living conditions that have fragmented the human species and, under supposedly naturalized conditions, legitimized conflict and crime as inherent traits of humanity (Perlo, 2023b).

Within this theoretical development, we briefly revisit Milgram's (1963) obedience studies and Zimbardo's (1969) Stanford Prison Experiment—two foundational scientific milestones supporting the philosophical theory of the banality of evil, which exposes the relationship among violence, discipline, and patriarchy within disciplinary contexts. These contributions guide us toward recent epigenetic research concerning the conditions that foster violence. Finally, we present conclusions regarding the tensions between security and care from a biocentric educational perspective—that is, one centered on life.

The failure of punitive approaches

Numerous studies—spanning philosophy and the social sciences more broadly—have, since the mid-twentieth century, identified and denounced the failure of punitive models embedded in modern institutions, particularly those designed to confine the "abnormal," such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals. While the latter have undergone gradual deconstruction through

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

deinstitutionalization policies, the former appear notably resistant to transformation. Particularly relevant are the works of Foucault (1975/1976), which clearly articulate the orientation of modern institutions toward surveillance and punishment.

In this regard, Goffman (1961/2001) deepened the analysis of the harmful effects of total institutions on individual subjectivity, defining such institutions as:

> a place of residence or work where a large number of individuals in the same situation, isolated from society for an appreciable period of time, share a daily routine administered in a formal manner. Prisons stand as the clearest example, but it must be noted that other institutions whose members have not violated the law share the same intrinsic characteristics of imprisonment. (Goffman, 2001, p. 13)

Goffman (1961/2001) makes it clear that punitive models and confinement as a method of separating the "abnormal," as well as punishment, are not exclusive to a few institutions designed for that purpose; rather, they reveal a cultural pattern that exposes humanity's incapacity to coexist. However, it is within the prison institution that this situation becomes most acute, and security procedures in service of punitive logic reach their most pronounced form. In these institutions—which, according to Article 18 of the Argentine National Constitution, were not designed for punishment—confinement nevertheless emerges as both a method of deprivation of liberty and a mode of treatment.

People themselves are not inherently dangerous; rather, they are placed in situations of danger. First, within an unequal and discriminatory society, and later, within confinement—where conditions of risk are amplified, as we will discuss when examining the Stanford experiment. In this sense, it is important to highlight that analyses of various studies and official statistics show that the process of imprisonment does not extend to the general population that deviates from the "social contract." Instead, it overwhelmingly affects a specific segment of society that, in fact, has long been denied what Perlo (2023a) refers to as the State's "minimum guardianship" of rights—namely, access to basic education, healthcare, and employment.

A substantial body of research (Wacquant, 1999/2000; Alexander, 2011; Reiman & Leighton, 2020), alongside official reports such as those issued by the National System of Statistics on Sentence Enforcement (SNEEP), demonstrates that imprisonment and punishment disproportionately affect people living in poverty. The 2022 SNEEP report illustrates this starkly: upon entering prison, only 34% of individuals have completed primary school, 10% have completed secondary school, and 44% have no trade or profession. Similarly, recent studies point to the criminalization of poverty (Bayón, 2024; Jaramillo & Londoño, 2021; Azaola, 2021; Mancini, 2020).

When we refer to confinement, we do not mean solely the physical separation of individuals and their containment in spaces isolated from society; we refer to something deeper—the closing off of their lives. This becomes evident when analyzing SNEEP data. According to the report, the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

population entering the prison system—composed predominantly of men (95.8%) between the ages of 25 and 44 (65%)—faces a worsening of its already precarious conditions through further violations of basic rights.

For instance, while 56% of the population surveyed had a trade or profession at the time of admission, and 62% were employed full-time or part-time, once inside prison 64% of this same population has no paid work; 80% neither participates nor has ever participated in a vocational training program; and 49% neither participates nor has ever participated in an educational program (SNEEP, 2022).

The reasons behind restrictions on education and work within confinement can be traced almost exclusively to security—a logic that effectively seizes the lives of incarcerated individuals under the premise of protecting society as a whole. Although, according to Law 24.660 (1996), the process of carrying out a sentence is intended to promote the "resocialization of individuals," the security-oriented paradigm serves as a structural impediment to achieving this objective.

In this context, as Daroqui (2008) argues, it is imperative to construct a counter-discourse that delegitimizes the "use" of imprisonment as a solution to insecurity associated with crime. In neither our country nor internationally is there a linear correlation between crime rates and incarceration rates. At the same time, it becomes necessary to develop strategies that make the prison issue visible and to "penetrate" prison walls with non-punitive institutional alternatives that allow incarcerated individuals to access and exercise their rights.

The Danger of Obedience and the Banality of Evil

At this point, it is essential to recall that institutions—as ideological apparatuses of the State (Althusser, 1988)—were originally created in early modernity with a hierarchical, pyramidal design (Perlo et al., 2011, 2019). This design makes it particularly easy for individuals to attribute the ultimate meaning and responsibility for their actions to decisions made by someone immediately superior in the chain of command. Perhaps it is here that we find the greatest danger identified by philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963/1999): no danger inherent in the individual, but in the *model of thought* that led her to write about *the banality of evil.*

In her well-known work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt (1963/1999) argues that to banalize evil is to deposit the full meaning and responsibility for one's actions in an authority perceived as legitimate. That is, many practices involving such banalization are carried out by obedient individuals who merely "do their job." Yet it is precisely in this way that evil hides and refuses to appear as such.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

In this work, we understand the "evil" described by Arendt (1963/1999) not as the opposite of "good" in a simplistic dichotomy, since such a dichotomy would overlook the harmful and violent effects of many practices carried out *in the name of good*. Examples can be found in Narayan's analyses of care narratives used to justify, for instance, imperialism (Tronto, 2020). For this reason, we consider evil to be a way of naming irresponsibility toward the face of the Other (Lévinas, 1953/2001).

In organizations grounded in patriarchal and mechanistic models—punitive by design—the ethical meaning of one's actions becomes diluted through chains of orders that are received uncritically. These are organizations built upon a strong sense of obedience, in which reflecting on or questioning an order is, in effect, perceived as calling into question the entire organization and as failing to do one's job correctly. This technical morality, characteristic of mechanistic modernity, replaces an authentic sense of responsibility for the Other with a narrow focus on executing and complying with orders (Najmanovich, 2021).

Organizations shaped and sustained by this instrumental rationality devalue sensitivity, affection, and emotions, perceiving them as "deviations" from what is considered truly important: the execution and obedience of orders in the pursuit of doing a good job. Within this framework, not only is the affective dimension—fundamental to human life—suppressed, but so is what Arendt (1963/1999) calls "mere instinctive pity" (p. 161), meaning the instinctive capacity to experience the suffering of others as if it were one's own, thereby enabling empathy.

The human–animal dichotomy reinforced by the mechanistic paradigm carries with it the belief that rationality is the distinctive feature of humanity. However, many of the most brutal acts carried out by human beings have been carefully planned, designed, and executed under the guidance of an exemplary rationality. As Arendt (1963/1999) observes regarding the members of the Nazi squads:

> The Einsatzgruppen troops came from the armed SS, a military unit no more criminal than any other in the German army, and their commanders were selected by Heydrich from among the best of the SS, all of them university graduates. Thus, the problem lay not so much in lulling their conscience, but in eliminating the mere instinctive pity that any normal man feels at the sight of physical suffering. (Arendt, 1963/1999, p. 161)

The concept of pity invoked by Arendt (1963/1999) aligns with contemporary contributions on empathy (Rifkin, 2015), which, as Butler (2017) notes—drawing on Lévinas (1953/2001)—entails a certain openness that allows us to receive others and to feel what happens to their bodies. In other words, empathy names one's own vulnerability, understood as the possibility of being affected in encounters with others (Carmona, 2021).

However, this genuine empathy is not always activated or experienced. This raises the question of which social and cultural frameworks obstruct it, especially in relation to certain Others whose lives are not considered valuable by society—lives whose loss is not mourned (Butler, 2009/2010).

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Organizations operating under a mechanistic paradigm, such as prisons, prevent individuals from acknowledging their own vulnerability, thereby creating adverse conditions for the prevention of violence. “From where could a principle arise that commits us to protecting others from the violence we have suffered, if not from acknowledging a shared human vulnerability?” (Butler, 2006, p. 57).

According to the philosophy of Lévinas (1953/2001), when faced with the vulnerable and exposed face of the Other, we may respond with hospitality (care) or with a negation of their alterity (violence). This negation—reducing the Other to a label, in our case, “the criminal”—produces indifference and a micro- and macro-politics of inhospitable relations. Rather than fostering hospitality aimed at responsibility and the possibility of reparation by the person who commits an offense, the repressive-punitive model responds uncritically and obediently with punishment—a punishment that extends to anyone who does not obey, including those who claim or protest (Olivas, 2023), within organizations where hierarchy (hieros–archy) prevails (Perlo, 2017).

Security procedures in prisons reinforce the banalization of evil discussed earlier, as for many correctional officers, questioning an order becomes equivalent to challenging the hierarchy itself. A focus on tasks and an orientation toward punishment—without ethical consideration of how incarcerated individuals are treated—makes it possible to draw parallels between these environments and the concept put forward by Arendt (1963/1999).

In line with Arendt’s (1963/1999) work, Stanley Milgram (1963) of Yale University designed an experiment shortly after Adolf Eichmann was tried and sentenced to death. Milgram (1963) asked: *Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices were simply following orders?* (p. 17). The study included forty male participants who responded to a newspaper advertisement in New Haven seeking volunteers for research on the effects of punishment on learning.

In the experimental setup, the experimenter in a white lab coat represented science. Through a draw rigged by the researchers, participants were assigned the role of “teacher,” while another individual (an accomplice of the experimenter) assumed the role of “learner.” During a learning task, learners were attached to electrodes that supposedly administered electric shocks. The experimenter informed the teacher (the actual subject) that their task was to read word pairs to the learner, monitor whether they could repeat them, and deliver an electric shock for each error.

During the experiment, the punishment was simulated—no actual shocks were delivered—but the learner intentionally made mistakes, and the teacher, following the experimenter’s instructions, was required to increase the voltage progressively. A generator with 30 switches was used, reaching a maximum of 450 volts—a clearly life-threatening shock. In response to

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

hesitation or questions, the experimenter used four standardized prompts: "Please, continue, "the experiment requires that you continue, t is absolutely essential that you continue, and "you have no other choice; you must go on."

In this experiment, 65% of participants (26 individuals) obeyed the "scientist's" orders all the way to 450 volts. "This violence was not mediated by rage; it had virtually no aggressive component. On the contrary, many wished to 'help' their victims and suffered as they administered the shocks" (Najmanovich, 2019).

This experiment advanced a line of inquiry into the "social psychology of obedience" and its dangers within the social fabric generally, and more specifically, within organizational contexts. The study shows that although individuals often know they are acting wrongly, their loyalty to hierarchy is stronger, preventing them from rebelling against imposed orders. "The essence of obedience is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out the wishes of another person, and therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his own actions" (Milgram, 1980, p. 4). The experiment also sheds light on responses to authority in relation to task distribution, particularly when the person inflicting pain does not do so directly. This dynamic clearly illustrates the relationship between depersonalization and the dissolution of responsibility—an issue we have examined in our previous research (Perlo, 2017).

Milgram attributes this phenomenon to the marked shift brought about by the division of labor during the Industrial Revolution and to the fragmentation of the self that led to social disintegration. The Stanford case, presented below, reinforces the premises of Arendt (1963/1999) and Milgram's (1963) findings, exposing bodies to a profoundly cruel human experience—violence within the prison context, the core focus of our work.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

You do not need a bad person to serve in a bad system. Ordinary people fit easily into malevolent systems.
—Milgram, 1980

Both Milgram's (1963) experiment and Zimbardo's (1969) Stanford experiment provide empirical demonstrations of Arendt's (1963/1999) thesis on the banality of evil and contribute to the field known as the social psychology of obedience. In both experiments, the researchers explain how violence is socially produced in relation to submission to authority, the emergence of fear of punishment, the need to belong, and the fear of disapproval from authority figures.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

Zimbardo's (1969) experiment sought to replicate a prison in the basement of Stanford University. Twenty-four individuals—university students with no criminal records—were recruited and randomly assigned the roles of "prisoner" or "guard." The goal was to assess the pressure that role compliance can exert. Although the experiment was intended to last two weeks, it had to be halted on the sixth day because of the cruelty several "guards" inflicted on "prisoners." In this way, the experiment demonstrated—contrary to endogenous explanations of violence—the decisive importance of context in shaping violent actions. Zimbardo (1969) showed through his experiment, and even more clearly through its early termination, that prison does not promote integration or reinsertion; rather, it produces an unrestrained and escalating violence, as evidenced by Ormart et al. (2013), who cite Zimbardo's own reflections:

> We created a very realistic prison environment, a 'bad barrel' into which we placed 24 volunteer individuals selected from among university students for a two-week experiment. We chose them from 75 volunteers who had passed a battery of psychological tests. A coin toss determined who would play the role of prisoner and who would be a guard. Naturally, the prisoners lived there day and night, and the guards worked eight-hour shifts. At first, nothing happened, but on the second morning the prisoners rebelled, the guards suppressed the rebellion, and then created measures against the 'dangerous prisoners.' From that point on, abuse, aggression, and even sadistic pleasure in humiliating the prisoners became the norm. (p. 21)

The author of the Stanford experiment concluded that individuals lose their intellectual capacity and judgment when they are part of a group and that there is a tendency to abuse power in group contexts (Canto & Álvaro, 2015). Najmanovich (2019), for her part, argues that interpreting the behavior of those who played the role of "guards" as merely an "abuse of power" overlooks the systemic characteristics that drive obedience and discipline. As she explains, obedience lacks vital thought; individuals act out of fear of punishment, the desire for approval, or the yearning to belong. Within this framework, a form of "floating responsibility" emerges, as responsibility for one's actions becomes displaced "in such a way that it ultimately seems to float in a void, belonging to no one" (Najmanovich, 2019).

Current developments in the neurosciences—and, more specifically, advances in epigenetics related to human behavior—have led us to reconsider the Stanford experiment and punitive practices in confinement by incorporating the systemic interaction of positive and negative eco-factors present in the environment.

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Figure 1. *Contributions of Neuroscience and Epigenetics to Rethinking Violence.*

Source: Photograph by the authors. Mural "Ningún pibe nace chorro" in Barrio República de la Sexta, Rosario, Province of Santa Fe, Argentina.

In the developments surrounding the biocentric principle, Toro (2007) identifies eco-factors that interact to produce specific human behaviors. Eco-factors are elements of the environment that influence our growth and development by either enabling or inhibiting the expression of our genetic potential. These include the surroundings in which we live, the people with whom we interact, and the activities we engage in, among others. Positive eco-factors nurture and strengthen us, whereas negative ones block expression and, in some cases, inhibit the development of life and generate violence.

The Stanford experiment (1969) is a clear example of how the conditions of a prison context affect human development. This motivates us, in this section, to explore—albeit briefly—several concepts recently developed by neuroscience and epigenetics.

From these fields of knowledge, the way individuals respond to adverse experiences is understood as determined by the interaction among biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. These factors do not simply add together; they are interwoven in interaction, making it impossible to separate one from the other. As Maturana and Dávila (2015) explain, the human being is, above all, a living organism endowed with a biological matrix (sensory, operational, relational) and a cultural matrix (history, worldviews, values) in constant interaction with the environment in which it is embedded. This complex web that constitutes the human being is configured as a system whose components are mutually dependent and cannot be isolated from one another.

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The acquisition of resilient skills that support adaptation to adverse circumstances has been studied by affective neuroscience (León-Rodríguez & Cárdenas, 2020). This field has shed light on emotional functioning by articulating events that occur within systems mediated by neurotransmitters and that depend on at least two elements: the expression of specific genes and ongoing environmental feedback.

From a genetic standpoint, living organisms are composed of cells whose nuclei contain molecules of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), which hold the information needed to produce all proteins essential for the organism's functioning. This information is contained within structures known as genes—sequences of DNA whose expression is directly influenced by the environment. External factors that condition whether genes are expressed are known as the *ambiome*, the molecular equivalent of what we have previously described as eco-factors.

From an epigenetic standpoint, we focus on positive eco-factors and on the genetic aspects involved in caregiving processes, which we prioritize over punitive security approaches. Care-related behaviors are regulated by various neurotransmitters, with oxytocin being the most significant. This neurotransmitter is synthesized in the hypothalamus and binds to receptors located in brain regions associated with socialization, parental bonding, positive emotions, and pair relationships.

It is important to highlight that an epigenetic marker is associated with greater or lesser expression of oxytocin receptors in brain areas involved in social cognition. Research has shown that exposure to stressful experiences during childhood produces a chemical modification known as methylation, which prevents the gene from being expressed. As a result, fewer receptors are available for the neurotransmitter. This leads to a reduced capacity for emotional and social regulation, that is, difficulties in socialization.

In recent years, it has been demonstrated that DNA methylation is reversible, and that epigenetic modifications also occur in adult neurons (Spuch & Agís-Balboa, 2014). This molecular discovery has allowed researchers to describe the mechanism of brain plasticity, which refers to the "inherent biological capability of the central nervous system to undergo adaptive and functional changes in response to environmental demands" (Fóster & López, 2022, p. 340).

On one hand, an unfavorable environment (such as the conditions of the Stanford experiment (1969) or the punitive model) suppresses the expression of genes associated with a person's ability to socialize. On the other hand, a favorable environment may decouple the methylation that inhibits the expression of these genes, increasing the number of receptors available and, through their interaction with the neurotransmitter, restoring the functionality of the caregiving system and reinforcing its activity.

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Additionally, positive emotional environments exert beneficial effects on the brain. Studies show that in environments characterized by cooperation, active participation, positive expectations, and a natural acceptance of error, hippocampal regions involved in learning are stimulated (Guillén, 2013). This allows us to explain, from a neurobiological perspective, how social support, cooperation, and accompaniment may reverse the genetic consequences of neglectful contexts in which many incarcerated individuals grew up, thereby facilitating effective processes of learning to care.

At this point in our analysis, we aim to integrate the concepts of neuroscience and epigenetics developed thus far with the psychosociological contributions that frame our previous studies (Perlo, 2006). We refer particularly to the contributions of social interactionism articulated by George Mead (1973) through the Chicago School of Social Psychology (1905). Mead (1973) argued in *Mind, Self, and Society* that the self emerges in social experience with the Other. This implies that "a multiple personality is in a certain sense normal, as I have indicated. In general, there is an organization of the entire person with reference to the community to which we belong and the situation in which we find ourselves" (p. 174).

In this foundational work, Mead (1973) established the early foundations of symbolic interactionism and what could later be understood—through the lens of epigenetics—as the relevance of the environment not only in the formation of a psychosocial self but also, even more profoundly, in the expression of what is encoded in our DNA.

These concepts allow us to illuminate field testimonies such as the following: "What happens is that you don't really know them—inside the classroom they are lambs, and when you leave, they show their real face to us; they turn into wolves" (Correctional officer). Likewise, at the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, we recorded the following testimony from another correctional officer addressing a group of instructors: "We're so glad you came back—we didn't know what to do anymore. We needed you so you could show the other face and calm things down in here." This reading of the testimonies becomes particularly illuminating in light of the concepts we have presented regarding the environment and the face of the Other (Lévinas, 1953/2001), framed within theories of complexity (Morin, 1994).

It is also important to highlight the appropriation of truth that arises when one looks at the Other by absolutizing their essence—independent of the interaction through which the *I* and the *you* construct one another, generating a *we*. In any case, this involves not only denying the Other as a legitimate Other, but also denying the relational bond that reveals both subjects.

A perspective that negates this dynamic prevents us from recognizing the emergence of the self before an Other, as the generator of a multiplicity of relationships. Moreover, such negation—in one form or another—demands obedience and submission from the Other to the gaze of the self.

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Ultimately, this effort to articulate and integrate contributions from neurobiology, philosophy, social psychology, and sociology in pursuit of human encounter may allow us to find an Ariadne's thread for dismantling violence not only within prisons but also within human societies more broadly.

Final considerations

in this article, we have deepened theoretical contributions that help us reflect on the relationship between security, obedience, and the emergence of violence in contexts of confinement. It was not the purpose of this article to examine in detail the problem of resocialization or the educational strategies associated with it—issues we have explored in earlier studies (Perlo, 2023a). Nevertheless, we can affirm that security, when understood as punishment and obedience, produces no socializing or educational effect.

Prison, as we know it today, constitutes an epigenetic design that—rather than generating processes of change and the learning of care among individuals (both incarcerated people and correctional officers)—paradoxically acts as a precipitant of violence. When we speak of change and the learning of care, we emphasize the ethical-relational dimension that informs our work (Perlo & Carmona, 2021).

The obedience demanded by the self generates submission and confinement of the Other. In this process, the Other becomes inhibited from expressing his or her own self (singularity), shaping the bond between them. In systemic-loop terms (Senge, 2010), obedience in the service of security produces violence. At the same time, the emergence of violence within the punitive-repressive paradigm is addressed with *more* security—a negative feedback loop in relation to the intended goals, which paradoxically demands more obedience.

In line with Senge's (2010) systemic-loop conception, we may infer that incarcerated individuals are prisoners of the correctional system, just as the correctional system is itself a prisoner of obedience to hierarchy, anchored in punitive power structures. Similarly, the executive, judicial, and legislative branches are prisoners of fear—fear of public and media opinion. Finally, society becomes imprisoned by its own shadow, failing to recognize that this shadow also belongs to it, projecting it outward and confining it to the realm of punishment beyond the bars. The shadow—unbound by bars—walks alongside a society that also feels imprisoned.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

Furthermore, we understand that wherever imprisonment dominates and security is chosen as the solution to violence, care is absent. This premise allows us to identify at least two situations in which care is lacking. The first refers to the fact that individuals who commit crimes generally come from environments where epigenetic contexts of care have already failed. In other words, these individuals lacked a family table or community gathering space—the kinds of relationships centered on care for oneself and others. Nor were the social bonds sustained by the State—those necessary to support the social fabric—present, or if present, not effectively so.

The second situation evidencing the absence of care is the prison context itself—the central focus of our analysis—in which the State doubles down on neglect. Care is not part of the institutional meaning-making within this State apparatus. On the contrary, these institutions operate within a culture in which disqualification, disdain, and mistreatment are distinguishing features—informally legitimized within the institutional fabric. Within this culture, some lives are deemed undeserving of care.

Fortunately, contemporary developments in restorative justice are enabling a rethinking of this issue. The relationship between harm and responsible reparation, and a complex understanding of the victim–offender relationship, converge with the ethics-of-care perspective that frames our work. Through this perspective, we seek to address the problem of violence by recognizing the Other and their singularity and by configuring relationships from a hologrammatic (Perlo, 2023b) and holistic standpoint.

We believe that if, for the time being, human communities continue to require prisons, these institutional models must undergo a profound examination of the dangerous relationship between security and obedience—a relationship that generates violence. Neither wolves nor lambs. In this context, we need to create learning conditions in which the person can emerge with their full potential. These organizations should be oriented toward environments that foster human–community experiences capable of generating powerful learning processes related to being and coexisting with others (Perlo & Costa, 2019).

To conclude, we share with our readers a brief onto-epistemological reflection on our own "not very obedient" way of producing knowledge. We believe these contributions have taken on a theoretical–methodological challenge aimed at "leaving confinement" and stepping out of the "safe place" of the disciplinary scientific paradigm. We have accepted Edgar Morin's (1994) invitation to foster dialogues that weave together knowledge from the natural sciences and the social sciences in order to understand human phenomena from a complex perspective. We trust that, in a context of care, the embrace of uncertainty—together with the courage to be and to coexist with others—may enable a human epigenetics grounded in peace.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4838

Conflict of interest

The authors declares the absence of any personal or institutional conflict of interest, or any conflict related to a commercial association of any kind.

Funding sources

IRICE – CONICET – UNR.

Authorship note

Claudia Liliana Perlo: Principal investigator; data collection; data analysis; fieldwork; theoretical framework; writing and revision of the final manuscript.

Diego Carmona Gallego: Co-investigator; data collection; data analysis; fieldwork; theoretical framework; writing and revision of the final manuscript.

María Celeste Carlín: Co-investigator; data collection; data analysis; fieldwork; theoretical framework; writing and revision of the final manuscript

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I hereby certify that this is a true, complete and correct translation from the original document I had in sight. ***JOSÉ F. JARAMILLO SANINT****. Official certified translator and interpreter for the English-Spanish-English languages, according to Resolution No. 0499 issued by the Colombian Ministry of Justice.*