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Contents

Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief Sten Hagberg and Jörgen Hellman.....	5
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VARIA

Food consumption and obesity in Cochabamba, Bolivia: Healthcare professionals' perspectives and experiences Rodrigo Álvaro Quispe Condori, Johan Wedel and Carmen Ledo.....	9
Concerning Violence: With Fanon in Uganda Sverker Finnström	23
Making Crime Scene Technicians: Playful Professional Socialization Corinna Kruse.....	39

PERSPECTIVES

Between Us – What is That? Ulf Hannerz.....	57
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Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief

Sten Hagberg | Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University

Jörgen Hellman | Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg

This issue of *kritisk etnografi* – *Swedish Journal of Anthropology*, is a collection of three peer reviewed articles and one article in the section Perspectives. The three research articles illustrate the breath and scope of *kritisk etnografi*. They cover different ethnographic areas, methodologies, theoretical traditions, textual approaches, individual and collective research, while keeping a keen eye on the material, the ethnography. The Perspectives section includes a timely reflection on the socio-political situation in the US and Sweden through an extensive review of Anand Pandian's book *Something Between Us*.

The first article is the result of a collaboration between Rodrigo Álvaro Quispe Condori and Carmen Ledo, both from Universidad Mayor de San Simón, Bolivia, and Johan Wedel from the University of Gothenburg. The three authors are conducting a joint project on health and food consumption in Bolivia. Through interviews with healthcare professionals, they explore ethnographically the views on obesity, health and consumption.

The second article is written by Sverker Finnström, Uppsala University. The article builds on Finnström's long and extensive research interest in Uganda and the use of violences. The text is a thoughtful deliberation on President Museveni's political legacy and his relation to Frantz Fanon as a source of inspiration.

Corinna Kruse, Linköping University, concludes this section with a detailed ethnography of the education of Swedish Crime Scene Technicians. It turns out that apart from the formal training, in the process of becoming professionals, humor and socialization play important roles. The material is produced through extensive ethnographic fieldwork.

In the Perspectives section, Professor Emeritus Ulf Hannerz, Stockholm University, provides us with a timely, extended review of Anand Pandian's book *Something Between Us*. A book in which he discusses what it is that divides people in the US, and the enigma of what kind of country that would make Donald Trump their president. Apart from giving a review of the book, Hannerz includes a call to Swedish anthropologists to conduct similar ethnographic research in Sweden as Pandian has conducted in the US. Please read and contemplate.

Since the journal was launched in August 2018 with the inaugural issue that dealt with The Public Presence of Anthropology (Vol 1, No 1, 2018) developed around Didier Fassin's Vega Symposium in 2016, we have worked hard to consolidate the journal's publication and dissemination. The second issue, which was a double issue, was themed Comparative Municipal Ethnographies (Vol 2, No 1-2, 2019), edited by Sten Hagberg, and focused on the anthropology of local politics across the world. The first issue of 2020 inquired

into *The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times* (Vol 3, No 1, 2020), and was developed around Paul Stoller's 2013 Vega Symposium. The second issue of 2020 focused on ethnographic practices in applied contexts, *Putting Swedish Anthropology to Work* (Vol 3, No 2, 2020), edited by Lisa Åkesson and Maris Boyd Gillette. Two issues were published in 2021. The first one was a *Varia* issue, and the second explored *The Social Life of Water* with Karsten Paerregaard and Paula Uimonen as guest editors. In 2022, *kritisk etnografi* was published as a double issue addressing the question, *Is Europe skilling for sustainable food?* developed by guest editors Maris Boyd Gillette and Cristina Grasseni. The first issue of 2023 was themed *The Future of Diversity*, focused on Thomas Hylland Eriksen's Vega Symposium in 2022. The second issue in 2023 was also a thematic issue on *The Fear Among Us*, under the leadership of the guest editors, Anna Gustafsson and Eva-Maria Hardtmann, both anthropologists from Stockholm University. The first issue of 2024 focused on *Infrastructure and environments in late industrialism* with guest editors Chakad Ojani, Susann B. Ullberg, and Asta Vonderau. The second was a *Varia* including a number of original articles. 2025 commenced with a themed issue on *Exploring Methodologies*.

As Editors-in-Chief of *kritisk etnografi – Swedish Journal of Anthropology* we welcome proposals for thematic issues, individual papers, and shorter pieces from colleagues at Swedish universities and beyond. To recall, *kritisk etnografi* is a scientific, peer-reviewed, truly open access journal, free of any charges. The journal is run by researchers and published by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG).

Spread the word! Aux plumes! Fatta pennan!

VARIA



Food consumption and obesity in Cochabamba, Bolivia: Healthcare professionals' perspectives and experiences

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ABSTRACT: The consumption of unhealthy foods and obesity are today prominent problems worldwide. In this article, based on qualitative, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with eight medical doctors and two nutritionists in Cochabamba, Bolivia, the relationship between food, obesity, and culture is discussed. The results show that the interviewees were concerned about people's unhealthy food habits and sedentary lifestyle, lack of time and money to prepare healthy food, oversized portions, stress, perceptions of the body that contribute to being overweight, unhealthy food habits in relation to social activities, and lack of knowledge about unhealthy eating. Although the healthcare professionals strived for a patient-centred approach, the patients' experiences were to some extent individualized, de-socialized, and medicalized in healthcare encounters. The interviews point to the importance of a holistic, multifaceted, interrelated, multi-dimensional, and culture-sensitive approach to food consumption, and indicate the necessity for medical practitioners and nutritionists to understand the cultural context in which people's ideas, values and norms are expressed, including the social and symbolic use of food, perceptions of the body, structural inequalities, poverty and lack of agency, as well as the risks of medicalizing both food consumption and the body. It is shown that healthcare professionals and their experiences can contribute to valuable insights concerning both healthcare encounters with overweight patients and when developing food-related public health policies.

Keywords: Food consumption, Obesity, Cochabamba, Bolivia

Introduction

Globally today, there is an alarming increase in obesity and related illnesses. To respond to this worldwide crisis, there is a need to know more about how people experience and understand the problem. Particularly important in this context are healthcare professionals who encounter obese patients daily. They have a unique insight into the suffering and experiences of obese and overweight patients and their families, as well as an understanding of how food-related interventions and policies can be beneficial, sustainable, and have long-lasting effects. This focus may also deepen our understanding of "how lived experiences of inequality become embodied to produce, uphold, and shape nutrition-related health disparities and alter nutrition interventions" (Owens 2024: 10).

To address the global 'fast food revolution' (Popkin and Reardon 2018) or 'fast food

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genocide' (Fuhrman 2018) and the 'globesity' phenomenon (Costa-Font and Mas 2016), several measures, interventions, and prevention strategies have been proposed. Among these can be mentioned: health fairs and campaigns; social support groups; nutrition and cooking workshops; dance and exercise; walking groups; the use of community health workers; nutrition education and food skills in schools; taxes on unhealthy foods; subsidies for healthy foods; nutrition labelling on foods; removing infrastructural constraints on healthy food production, and supporting agricultural diversification; a ban on marketing unhealthy foods for children; and the reduction of excessive portion sizes of foods and beverages at restaurants. However, it is not always clear how to implement these disparate interventions (Popkin and Reardon 2018; Hawkes et al. 2015).

In the Global South, which is particularly hard hit, this development is largely caused by a sedentary urban lifestyle, poverty, and a shift in diet from a low fat, low calorie, plant-based, whole food diet, to an unhealthy, nutrient poor, energy dense, ready-made, ultra-processed diet, high in refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, sugar and sodium. The poor living in urban centres in the Global South have been severely affected by the nutritional transition as they often do not have the economic means to avoid this kind of unhealthy food. Both adults and youth are affected, and obesity and overweight have also increased dramatically among children (Popkin and Gordon-Larsen 2004; Monteiro et al. 2013; Tzioumis and Adair 2014). This is further complicated by the fact that "[i]mported processed foods are often more readily available and easier to preserve than fresh, locally produced foods, which reorganizes both tastes and local material cultures of food production, fuelling the rising pandemic of malnutrition" (Waldstein 2018: 7).

Latin America has been particularly affected by the nutritional transition. Today, in some Latin American countries, two-thirds of the women, about half of the men, and about one tenth of the children under five years old, are overweight or obese. In Latin America, the dietary shift has brought about a poor diet of snacks and ultra-processed, deep-fried foods, with large amounts of saturated fats, sodium, sugar and refined carbohydrates. This consumption of unhealthy so-called junk food, together with a decline in physical activity, has resulted in high levels of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and other related health problems in Latin America. Regrettably, this has also led to enormous economic and social costs (Popkin and Reardon 2018). These food products are sometimes tax-exempt contraband imports, and as such, they tend to be more economical, and are not subject to health inspections.

Bolivia is one example of this swiftly changing food pattern, and the country has experienced a rapid increase in obesity and related illnesses. Cases of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, kidney damage, and other pathologies resulting from metabolic damage caused by an unhealthy lifestyle and the consumption of cheap, unhealthy, junk food has increased (Quispe Condori, Wedel and Ledo 2025). This situation is worsened by the fact that the poorest and most vulnerable are not entirely included in the national healthcare system. The social security subsystem, which concentrates most of the resources, covers only about 20 per cent of the population, most of whom are from the middle-class. It is a pending task for the state to include the indigenous and native peasant population in the benefits of the social security system. Moreover, migration has led to urbanization and a decline in the importance of the agricultural sector. These changes have also created extensive pockets of contamination. Rural areas and urban peripheries experience the highest rates of morbidity and mortality due to air, soil, and drinking water contamination. Overall, rural and

marginalized urban regions face significant setbacks in healthcare services. (Ledo 2024a).

The city of Cochabamba is commonly known as the gastronomic capital of Bolivia (Kollnig 2018, 2020). Among *cochabambinos*, citizens of Cochabamba, traditional food frequently provokes sentiments related to culture and heritage. Many have nostalgic memories of tasty traditional dishes, and people link their identity to certain dishes and food habits (Quispe Condori, Wedel and Ledo 2025). However, in Cochabamba there is also a high prevalence of obesity and cardiovascular disease risk factors, including alcohol consumption, low consumption of fruits and vegetables, and low level of physical activity (Miranda, Bento and Aguilar 2020; Mamani Ortiz, Gustafsson et al. 2019; Mamani Ortiz, San Sebastián et al. 2019). A nutrition and development survey carried out in 2022 (CEPLAG-ASDI 2022; Quispe Condori, Ledo García and Arce Cardozo 2025) suggests that approximately 10% of the population of Cochabamba might be living with diabetes, and many of those affected are socioeconomically vulnerable. Multiple factors related to air, water, and soil pollution, exacerbated by the lack of access to basic water and sewage services, also play a role in the cycle of poverty, waterborne diseases, and gender inequalities (Ledo 2002, 2024b).

Generally speaking, “a thin and firm body has become evidence of the ability to control the self” (Waldstein 2018: 7). In a study with diabetic patients in clinical encounters in the United States, it was shown that patients had difficulties adhering to medical, nutritional, and lifestyle advice. In this context, treatment programs were based on a ‘Western’ ethics of self-care, self-discipline, individualism, and the cultivation of a disciplined productive self. This required a precise timing of food and drug intake, and generated “a habitus that mimics the rhythmicities of capitalist productivity related to the control of consumption” (Ferzacca 2000: 36).

In a study in the Netherlands, it was shown that so-called ‘ontonorms’ (Mol 2012), (in our understanding) certain established cultural norms about being and behaving in relation to the body and eating, are embedded in different kinds of dietary advice that are enacted in clinical encounters and imposed on patients. When, for example, a patient is told to count calories, a rational, controlled biophysical model, or ontonorm, is at play where food is energy (instead of pleasure), homeostatic stability is an ideal, and the mind is supposed to take control of the body to hinder hedonistic overeating. Similarly, when five different kinds of food items are depicted on a plate, such as grains (carbohydrates), vegetables/fruits (vitamins/minerals), meat/fish (proteins), oil (fats) and water (fluids), an ontonorm related to a biochemical and physiological world becomes visible. In this case, foods are seen as nutrients and the variety of food is important. Accordingly, the eaters, by using their cognitive control, should restrain from bad eating habits, such as eating only one category of food (Mol 2012).

Other studies on healthcare encounters with obese patients have shown the importance of context-sensitiveness within clinical care (Felder, Felt and Penkler 2016), how nutritionists mainly focus on the human metabolism and how they primarily view eating as a physiological need, thereby ignoring “the sensuous potential of food stuffs” (Christensen, Hillerstad and Holm 2017: 223). A study in Latin America pointed out the need to counteract medicalization and individualization by using a broader concept of healthy eating, involving the concept culinary care, which includes social interactions, pleasure and relationships, as well as “cooking skills, tradition, ancestors, and soils” (Yates-Doerr and Carney 2016: 313).

In this article, we seek to contribute with an insider's, on-the-ground, perspective to the current debate on food, obesity, and illness, by focusing on medical doctors and nutritionists working in Cochabamba. In their daily struggle to give the best possible care and advice to obese and overweight patients, we think that a study that focuses on healthcare professionals' experiences with patients and their families can contribute valuable insights into day-to-day obesity-related healthcare problems, as well as to help inform food-related public health policies. In an earlier publication focusing on the experience of obese patients suffering from type 2 diabetes, and their encounters with healthcare professionals in Cochabamba, we showed that many people had economic difficulties accessing healthy food, and/or adhering to a healthy diet because of limited agency, structural barriers, and cultural perceptions. This, in turn, was also related to eating an abundance of unhealthy food at social gatherings. In healthcare encounters, patients often received advice from medical personnel that were based on individual behaviour and the alteration of the body, and we pointed out the need to consider the patient's whole social environment (Quispe Condori, Wedel and Ledo 2025).

Material and Methods

Semi-structured, open-ended, qualitative interviews with two nutritionists and eight medical doctors were performed in various healthcare settings in Cochabamba, Bolivia, during January and February 2025. Both nutritionists were females. Six of the medical practitioners were men, while two were females. Medical staff worked primarily in public hospitals located in the central area of the municipality, while only a few were employed in healthcare facilities situated in peripheral zones. In general, the healthcare professionals reported attending approximately 14 patients per day, with an estimated consultation time of between 15 to 20 minutes per patient. All the interlocutors were working with obese and overweight patients who had, or were at risk of developing, type 2 diabetes. The conversations were about one and a half hours long and conducted in Spanish by the first author. Questions discussed involved ideas, perceptions and opinions about healthy/unhealthy food, clinical encounters, access to healthy food, patients' socioeconomic situation, social relations, lifestyle, food habits, perceptions of the body, and policy measures to increase health and promote the consumption of healthy food. All audio files were safely transferred and secured. The results were analysed through thematic analysis.

This study was approved by the Scientific Committee of the Directorate of Planning, Projects, and Systems at San Simón University, Cochabamba, (CP#: 0141-16-037-101-000-007) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the American Anthropological Association. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and verbally informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participation was voluntary, and all data was collected and analysed anonymously. No conflicts of interest occurred.

Results

Some of the medical practitioners expressed concerns about the fact that people today have become sedentary because more of them work in retailer and transport, while at the same time eating large amounts of carbohydrates. This, they said, meant that people were risking their health. They claimed that "Cochabamba is food" and that citizens of Cochabamba

ate large quantities of rice, potatoes, yucca and noodles, while almost avoiding all other vegetables and fruits. This preference was explained by the fact that these foods are low-cost, quick to prepare, and highly satiating. In this context, noodles were not described as a traditional food, but rather as a substitute for whole and less processed foods within broader economic and dietary transformations. This eating habit was often combined with various forms of junk food, including hamburgers, pizzas, biscuits and snacks, with large amounts of saturated fats, or instantaneous soups and precooked or ultra-processed food with preservatives, to “fill up the stomach.”

A medical doctor explained that food in Cochabamba is “very influenced by North American culture of junk food, [with] excess of carbohydrates, excess of fat.” He continued: “This type of food is eaten at least three times a week, and on top of that people eat their *chicharrón* [meat, bacon and pork skin, prepared with the same fat of the animal and mixed with maize beer] during the weekend, with carbohydrates and fat, in plenty.” Another medical doctor also claimed that many ate late at night and that this was associated with obesity and being overweight: “This is energy that is not burned, because after dining one doesn’t do any exercise. Immediately, one sits down or lays down to watch TV.”

Food consumption among migrants, children and youth

In Cochabamba, there are many migrants from the countryside, and many are from high altitude places in the Bolivian *Altiplano*, or from poor localities in the western part of the department of Cochabamba.



The Bolivian *Altiplano*. Photo by Johan Wedel.

These migrants often have limited financial resources, and it was said that “they have to consume the most accessible and cheapest foods.” Another medical doctor added that the migrants traditionally have been eating large amounts of carbohydrates, and that every day they are used to eat “potatoes, *chuño* [dehydrated potato] and noodles.” In a similar vein, another interlocutor explained:

The diet in the countryside is richer in carbohydrates. ... When you work in the countryside, you do all kinds of activities, so you maintain the equilibrium between what you consume and what you spend. When these people come to the city, the energy spent is not the same and the activity level is not the same.

It was said that many of the migrant women in Cochabamba were dedicated to commerce, while the men were often public transport drivers or taxi drivers. This meant that they were sitting most of the day and, consequently, could develop obesity and related illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes.

The healthcare professionals were particularly worried about food consumption among children and youth, and the easy access of junk food and food with a large amount of carbohydrates, sugar, saturated fat and trans-fat. They claimed that children's portions were unnecessary large in restaurants, and the menus were often limited to sausages, French fries, and ice cream, or other hypercaloric food. A medical doctor said: "The portions are not for children. When I take my five-years-old niece to an ice cream shop they give her a tremendous ice cream of 300 grams. ... The portions are distorted." A nutritionist similarly said: "A lot of hypercaloric food has entered the country, it's too much for a child."

In many settings around the world, it is believed that mothers "can and should control their children's weight, and that childhood obesity is caused by poor parenting" (Gorlick et al. 2021: 68). This was also a commonly held idea among the interviewees. Several of them were worried about the food mothers gave to their children. One of the medical doctors argued that many mothers did not have time to prepare decent meals to their children and that families seldom ate in their homes: "Mothers cannot make sure that the children can have a good snack and buy chocolate biscuits and soft drinks." Similarly, a nutritionist said that nowadays there is less money, time, and possibilities to prepare food, as both parents often work outside the home. Before, she said, "the mother stayed home and was cooking." She continued:

Before, food was healthier. There were not so much canned food, French fries and processed things. Now, a lot of food is rich in sugar and fat, and that's why we all the time have more people with diabetes, even among children. Mothers play an important role here. Many mothers do not give good food to their children. They buy popcorn, French fries ... pure junk food ... [and] what they mainly sell in pensions and restaurants is food with an excess of fat, sodium and sugar.

Food consumption, socioeconomic factors, and stress

The interviewees agreed that lack of time and economic resources were part of the reasons for bad eating habits, and that those with less economic possibilities had to feed themselves with what they could get. Regrettably, choosing cheap 'Western' junk food often meant a less healthy diet. When referring to a "Western diet," the physicians described an industrialized and highly processed food pattern, rich in fats and low-cost ingredients, rather than traditional Western dietary models. A medical doctor explained:

A healthy diet is much more expensive than a Western [junk food] diet with fatty food. ... To have a balanced diet requires having a greater purchasing power. ... To eat a ceviche or fish will cost you 35 pesos [7 USD] while a chicken with processed potatoes will cost you ten pesos [1,50 USD]. So, what options are there for eating healthy?

Similarly, another medical doctor added that “it’s easier to buy a ten pesos chicken made with fat, or butter in the worst case, than buying a salad with a grilled chicken with another kind of oil and less salt.” Several of the interviewed physicians, most of them men, were overweight, a condition that was visible during the interviews and, in some cases, explicitly acknowledged by themselves. This fact situated their accounts within the same constraints of time, work-related pressure, and restricted food environments that they described for their patients. However, a medical doctor also said that it was mostly the poor and socioeconomically disadvantaged population that suffered from obesity and diabetes, because of their eating habits and lack of choices.

Another factor the interviewees discussed was the relationship between food consumption, stress and obesity. They claimed that almost everybody experiences stress today, and that people in Cochabamba ate more because stress increased their appetite. Eating also became a way to calm anxiety. In addition, stress and lack of time caused people to exercise less, making them even more overweight. In the opposite way, people who were severely overweight could experience stress and depression when they did not manage to lose weight. A medical doctor said that there were many reasons for women to be overweight and to feel stress and depression: “They say that they eat [abundantly] because the husband beats them or because he has left, or because they have many children. So, they don’t have good eating habits.”

Tradition, culture, and perceptions of the body

Several of the interviewees also argued that people’s food choices were heavily influenced by tradition and culture, and that most people were not in the habit of eating healthy food, such as whole wheat bread, certain vegetables, or olive oil. In this context, foods that health professionals often describe as unhealthy were not without value for the population, but were associated with satiety, taste, sociability, and with ideas of prosperity and well-being in a context historically marked by food scarcity. One interlocutor claimed that especially elders were reluctant to change their way of eating and seldom ate vegetables and fruit, while another could also relate this disinterest in vegetables to his own family: “I was eating food from a healthy catering. My father saw what they had sent me and asked: ‘What is that? What is that green thing?’” Similarly, a nutritionist claimed that buying healthy food was not only about money and that people also needed to be better educated. She said that “there are people who won’t buy olive oil because it’s too expensive.” However, buying a product like olive oil can be very costly for someone with limited economic resources. The price of one litre of olive oil is approximately 24 USD, whereas the price of one litre of edible oil is approximately 2 USD.

Common cultural perceptions about the body were also related to being overweight and to obesity, both among adults and children. Women in Bolivia have been known to associate positive values with fatness (Brewis and Wutich 2015), and a medical doctor explained that “frequently health is evaluated based on the weight, [popularly meaning] that

one is healthy because one is fat.” Another medical doctor said that these days, in his clinic, he saw more macrosomic babies delivered by overweight mothers, and fat four-year-old children who looked like they were six years old:

Mothers think that the more her child eats the better, and that her child is healthy and strong. But this is not good health status. This is not equivalent to [good] health because the child will not be able to do exercise in a proper manner [and] ... will suffer from bullying.

A medical doctor had a somewhat idiosyncratic view of cultural beliefs in relation to obesity. He claimed that an obese person may be seen as living in opulence and believed to have a high income, and that obesity also has perceived positive cultural and socioeconomic connotations:

When a couple gets married, and one or both are gaining weight, it is seen in society as if they are doing well. ... A person who is chubby is fine, healthy, and apparently doing well. Sometimes it is difficult with preventive strategies to break with these popular cultural perceptions and imaginaries. They are deeply rooted in many places. ... Even some older healthcare personnel may think that a child should have a higher weight and that [eating in] excess is beneficial.

Obesity and gender relations

Some of the interlocutors related cultural perceptions of the body to the fact that many are overweight and obese in Cochabamba. This, in turn, was commonly related to gender relations and perceptions and ideas about wellbeing and family honour. This became apparent in the following case when a medical doctor met a married couple in his clinic. He related:

I was visited by a chubby patient. She was a *cholita* [a young indigenous woman] with her skirt and her husband. The *cholita* was chubby while her husband was skinny. I told her: “You are diabetic. You are already beginning with kidney problems. Your pressure is rising. You already have high cholesterol. ... Look at your legs, you already have problems with your arteries. They are already dilated. You have to lose weight.” Her husband said that she should not lose weight. He said: “I don’t like skinny women. The chubbier they are the better. ... It also means that I feed her well, that I support my family.”

The Bolivian population is largely patriarchal and unequal in terms of gender (Camargo 2019) and this interaction illustrates the gender dynamics present in clinical encounters. While the physician makes recommendations to the woman from his position of biomedical authority, the husband intervenes to reaffirm his masculine role as provider, suggesting that his wife’s body size is evidence of care, economic capacity, and family honour. Consequently, the recommendation to lose weight comes into conflict with culturally embedded expectations surrounding gender values, masculinity, femininity, marriage, and wellbeing.

Giving advice and recommendations in healthcare encounters

During healthcare encounters, the medical doctors and nutritionists also discussed eating unhealthy food and overeating in relation to their patients’ social and family relations. One medical doctor applied what may be called a ‘restrictive’ discourse (in comparison to a

selective one), as it consisted of “reducing or eliminating certain foods” (Meza-Palmeros 2021: 7) and said that he often told his patients to restrict their eating and drinking behaviour at parties and social events. He explained the importance of “saying no to a doughnut.” He gave an example of how he could talk to an obese and diabetic patient:

[I say]: If you're going to eat that, it's going to continue to affect you. You have to learn to say no. That means depriving yourself of eating delicious [food]. Or drinking when everyone else is having a good party, and saying, “Well, I can't anymore because I have to take care of myself.”

Several interviewees noted that this type of advice, which placed responsibility on individual self-control, and that emphasized individualism and an ethics of self-care (Ferzacca 2000), frequently proved difficult to follow and was sometimes contradictory in everyday life, especially in social settings where eating and sharing food were closely associated with sociability, care, and a sense of belonging (Quispe Condori, Wedel and Ledo 2025). Nevertheless, during clinical encounters with obese patients, the healthcare professionals emphasized the importance of educating their patients to reduce the intake of carbohydrates, eat healthier food, and do some kind of exercise. Several of the interviewees also expressed concerns about heavy metals and preservatives in food, and that vegetables sold in markets, such as broccoli and salad, were not sufficiently washed and needed to be disinfected. One medical doctor was particularly worried about the excessive consumption of processed food as this, he said, could also provoke gallstones.

Overall, healthcare professionals would recommend eating only one kind of tuber or cereal during a meal, choose grilled, non-fatty chicken instead of pig, choose banana or egg instead of bread, and eat more protein rich, healthy vegetable food, such as chia seeds, quinoa seeds and amaranth seeds. In their accounts, chicken occupied an ambivalent position: it was described as unhealthy when fried or cooked with added fats, but as a healthier alternative to pork when grilled or prepared with less oil. These recommendations were often presented as educational strategies during clinical consultations. Frequently, biophysical, biochemical, and physiological cultural models, or ontornorms, were enacted by both the physicians and the nutritionists (Mol 2012; Christensen, Hillerstad and Holm 2017). A medical doctor said that he explained to the patient how to count carbohydrates, to eat less and to eat more protein, vegetables and fruits. Another recommended using a drawing of a plate divided into proteins, carbohydrates and salad. Similarly, a nutritionist said:

I try to personalize the diet according to the socioeconomic capacities of the patients. Of course, I also consider their tastes and preferences. I think the most basic advice in our environment is the consumption of water, fruits and vegetables. Concerning carbohydrates, they should be consumed in moderation. It is not possible to eliminate them totally as the dishes in Cochabamba are very high in carbohydrates.

Both the medical doctors and the nutritionists experienced that many patients had difficulties adhering to advice, and they struggled to get their message through. In some cases, it was of little use to suggest a certain change of lifestyle or physical activity, as this was believed

to require too much from the patient. A medical doctor said: “One cannot recommend gymnastics to a patient who is 60, and who is diabetic, hypertense, and obese, to reduce the belly and burn calories. It’s impossible to say this.” Another medical doctor also felt a necessity to employ a more provoking and even bizarre language related to uncontrolled behaviours, even though physical impairments may be something quite natural for a person of advanced age, to explain the risks of unhealthy foods, obesity and of being overweight:

I say to the patient: “How long do you want to live? You could live five more years, but if you want to live longer and in good condition, you have to change your lifestyle.” ... I could say: “If you want to reach your 80s in good condition, then begin to change here, because if you don’t change here, you will be wearing diapers in your 80s”.

Healthcare professionals’ thoughts about policy measures

The healthcare professionals also had various ideas, suggestions, and policy measures about how to reduce obesity and create a more health-promoting environment in Cochabamba, and in Bolivia in general. A medical doctor claimed that on the local political level, it was important to promote physical activity. Other suggested recommendations and policies were a tax on ultra-processed food, the promotion of seasonal vegetables and fruits, and healthy food kiosks. Several healthcare professionals also requested clear and unambiguous labelling for all food products, indicating, with symbols, signs, colours and big letters, information about nutrition, carbohydrates, fats and sugar, with the aim of warning people about unhealthy food. In a similar vein, to better protect children, they also asked for special children’s menus in restaurants with healthy dishes, and that menus should include information about the number of calories for each meal.

Discussion

The most important issues discussed by the healthcare professionals, based on their experiences with patients and their families, can be summarized as: unhealthy eating habits; a sedentary lifestyle and lack of exercise; lack of purchasing power to buy healthy food; lack of time to prepare healthy food; oversized portions and unhealthy food for children in restaurants; experiences of stress in relation to bad food habits; cultural perceptions of the body that contribute to fatness; the need to refrain from social activities that involve unhealthy drinking and eating; and the need to educate people about unhealthy and healthy food. In addition, more overarching structural interventions, such as governmental and fiscal policies, were also suggested. Overall, these were all relevant and important questions when promoting healthier food consumption and a healthier lifestyle.

The medical doctors’ and nutritionists’ experiences, thoughts, and advice covered a broad area of interrelated problems. Taken together, they illustrate the importance of holistically considering cultural, social, economic, and political issues in relation to the nutrition transition and obesity epidemic in Cochabamba, Bolivia and the Global South in general. Hence, their valuable experiences with obese and overweight patients, often over many years, point to the importance of a multi-dimensional and interrelated approach, but also that there is no ‘quick fix’ to the problems surrounding food consumption, obesity, and

illness. On the contrary, these conversations indicate the necessity to understand food consumption in all its complexities, considering both people's limited agency in relation to structural factors and the environment, people's ideas, values and perceptions, and the social and symbolic use of foods. Hence, there is a need to emphasize the whole context in which people's values and norms are expressed (Page-Reeves et al. 2013), and in particular to focus on socioeconomically vulnerable groups, such as migrants and poor women.

Although the healthcare professionals commonly strived for a patient-centred approach and for acknowledging the uniqueness of each patient in healthcare encounters, the patients' experiences and their lifeworld were also to some extent individualized, de-socialized, and medicalized. When this took place, the medical doctors and nutritionists risked reducing their patients to their individual, objectified, biological bodies (Felder, Felt and Penkler 2016).

When asking patients to refrain from eating sweets and unhealthy foods during social events, when helping them to count calories or draw a healthy food plate, or when generally discussing nutrients and 'food behaviour' (Fischler 2011), there was also a risk of downplaying the fact that eating is an important contextual and meaningful social act (Fischler 2011; West 2021; Quispe Condori, Wedel and Ledo 2025). Food brings people together, it is not "just another form of consumption; it cannot easily and completely be 'privatized' and regarded as an ordinary merchandise or commodity" (Fischler 2011: 532). Moreover, in this process, the healthcare professionals were promoting a certain, and potentially counter-productive, way of dieting techniques, approaches and advice, in particular norms based on the idea that the overweight body and certain food consumption is 'problematic' and depends on cognitive control and self-discipline (Mol 2012; Ferzacca 2000).

During the interviews, children's food consumption was also discussed at length. In general, parents are often considered to be the most important figures when controlling and regulating their children's weight, and mothers are frequently blamed if their children are obese (Ulijaszek et al. 2017). This "stigma by association" (Gorlick et al. 2021: 69) became apparent as several of the healthcare professionals claimed that mothers often did not prepare nourishing meals for their children, and that children were left alone to eat junk food that made them fat. Being obese as a child increases the risk of chronic illness as an adult (Tzioumis and Adair 2014), and child obesity after infancy must obviously be taken seriously, but blaming mothers without adequately recognizing their limited agency due to lack of time and resources does not contribute to a complete understanding of the problem. This pattern should instead be seen in its broader societal, socio-economic, and socio-political context as "it does not make sense to blame parents for childhood obesity when society has changed in a way that favours obesity" (Ulijaszek et al. 2017: 199).

A more holistic approach to child obesity requires raising one's gaze and focusing on reducing inequalities and contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive food policy. Interventions that seek to reduce childhood obesity require collective and political responsibility, focusing on capacity building and empowerment for poor, low-income families and disadvantaged groups (Ulijaszek et al. 2017), such as, for example, using taxes and subsidies to redirect prices to more healthy products (Popkin and Reardon 2018), as was discussed by some of the interviewed healthcare professionals.

In relation to the health professionals' experiences about people's positive cultural connotations to overweight bodies, there is obviously a need for information and education

about the health risks with obesity and overweight, in particular “heart, liver, and kidney disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes” (Waldstein 2018: 7), but it is also important to consider how body fatness is valued in different societies (Ulijaszek 2024). From a Western perspective, the ideal body for both sexes is “lean, strong, androgenous and physically ‘fit’ ... through which the core cultural values of autonomy, toughness, competitiveness, youth, and self-control are readily manifest” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 25). Hence, in the context of the current obesity crisis, there is a risk that healthcare professionals, influenced and affected by Western and biomedical ideals, contribute to a stigmatizing view where “body size is both increasingly medicalized and equated with moral categories such as sloth and indiscipline” (Felder, Felt and Penkler 2016: 405). In biomedical healthcare encounters, there is always a risk of emphasizing standardized procedures and dehumanizing patients by reducing them to their biological bodies, and, in so doing, neglecting the uniqueness of each patient and lessening the importance of sociocultural and subjective factors (Felder, Felt and Penkler 2016).

The medical doctors’ and nutritionists’ discussion on what people should eat, and what to avoid, also point to the importance of not individualizing and medicalizing consumption habits. Consumption of food, and ways of being and acting in relation to food, should be understood as multifaceted, and influenced by political-economic factors that decide what is available and at what prices. Large industrial fast-food chains aggressively promote ultra-processed products, such as burgers, pasta, pizza, nuggets, biscuits, and sugared drinks, contributing to poor nutritional health (Monteiro et al. 2013; Ulijaszek 2024). Moreover, this is further complicated by the fact that “industrially produced foods are [commonly] believed to be superior to foods that can be grown at home. The convenience foods produced by agribusiness corporations provide extra leisure time for women and may signify higher social status” (Waldstein 2018: 4). As was also touched upon by the healthcare professionals, there is an urgent need to promote healthier consumption choices, and it is important to find ways to make it more profitable for the food industry to produce healthy foods. The challenge for interventions and policies to be effective, also for socio-economically vulnerable and lower-income groups, is to find ways to make healthy eating cheaper, less time-consuming, and tasty (Popkin and Reardon 2018).

Conclusion

The consumption of unhealthy foods, obesity, and being overweight, are prominent problems today, all over the world, and particularly in the Global South. The interviews with the medical doctors and nutritionists in Cochabamba point to the importance of a holistic, multifaceted, interrelated, multi-dimensional, and culture-sensitive approach to unhealthy food consumption and the problems surrounding obesity. Their experiences as professionals, and particularly their meetings with patients, covered a broad area of cultural, social, economic, and political topics. This indicates the necessity to understand the whole cultural context in which people’s ideas, values, and norms are expressed, including the social and symbolic use of food, perceptions of the body, structural inequalities, poverty and lack of agency, experiences of stress and lack of time, as well as the risks of medicalizing food consumption and the body in healthcare encounters. Healthcare professionals’ perspectives and experiences are important as they can contribute insights about healthcare encounters and advice to patients suffering from obesity, as well as when developing food policies, and they are vital if interventions are to succeed.

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Concerning Violence: With Fanon in Uganda

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ABSTRACT: In 1986, Yoweri Museveni seized power in Uganda. Fighting his way to the state house, he argued that Uganda's political system was colonial and that this "old order" could be overthrown only "by force of arms." Inspired by Frantz Fanon and a visit to the liberated parts of colonial Mozambique, Museveni concluded that Ugandans who gained independence without fighting the British had missed out on "the cleansing effect of revolution." This article compares the civil war in Luweero, central Uganda (1981-1986), with that in Acholiland, northern Uganda (1986-2006). By highlighting three differences in the general description of these two wars, the article illustrates that control over the definition of war, including how it is discussed, is integral to waging war. It argues that Museveni's legacy is one of violence and interconnected conflicts. If violence can change man and make him free, as Fanon famously claimed, the article concludes that the most likely change in Uganda is a man who is more violent and more unfree than before.

Keywords: Acholi, Baldwin James, child soldiers, Fanon Frantz, internal displacement, Luweero (Luwero), Museveni Yoweri, Uganda, war

War in Uganda

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.

– James Baldwin

Northern Uganda was torn by war from 1986 to 2006, with the Ugandan armed forces fighting several armed groups, the most prominent and violent being the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony. I first arrived in Acholiland, the epicentre of the war, for fieldwork in 1997. I have returned regularly since then, including in the post-war period, most recently in 2025. The intensity of violence, terror, and suffering during the war in northern Uganda is difficult to comprehend fully. For example, in 2005, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for five rebel leaders. Since then, three have died, Kony remains at large, but a fifth, Dominic Ongwen, abducted as a young child, surrendered in 2014. In 2021, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for 61 war crimes and crimes against humanity (ICC 2021; see also Allen 2006; Clarke 2009; Eltringham 2021; Finnström 2010; Kersten 2016; Nouwen 2013).

In this article, I discuss the civil war in central Uganda that preceded the one in northern Uganda. In complementing the debate on justice and impunity, I select for comparative discussion three troubling characteristics of the war in northern Uganda that have stayed

in most observers' minds and have also been thoroughly described and analysed. First, the Lord's Resistance Army emerged from a complex history of uneven regional development in Uganda; however, it is also alleged to be a movement without a clear, legitimate political cause. If people joined the resistance, it was for religious rather than political reasons, because they were forced, or because they saw this as their best chance of survival (e.g., Behrend 1999; Dolnik and Butime 2017; Jackson 2002). Second, wartime internal displacement reached extraordinary levels, as did camp-related deaths and suffering. Government troops forced most people to leave their villages (e.g., Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008; Janmyr 2014). And third, thousands of rebels were minors, boys and girls, the great majority abducted into rebel ranks. Indeed, if anything, the war in northern Uganda is known for its many child soldiers (e.g., Amony 2015; De Temmerman 2001; Oloya 2013).

Here, I add another twist to the argument. In revisiting the war in central Uganda that preceded the one in northern Uganda, I trace the travails of war in Uganda back in time. The main protagonist in my article is Yoweri Museveni, the president of Uganda since 1986. Besides being part of the forces that ousted Idi Amin in 1979, Museveni has won two wars, and these form the foundation of my comparative argument: the war in central Uganda in the early 1980s and the subsequent war in northern Uganda. Ethnographically, I argue that they form part of the same unresolved conflict, and analytically, I survey Museveni's claim that the colonial order, which was built on an anthropological understanding of the world, had to be overcome through violence, "the highest form of political struggle" (Museveni 1971: 2). As a guerrilla with a revolutionary agenda, Museveni drew inspiration from Frantz Fanon's writings, and he followed the liberation struggles in Africa, particularly in colonial northern Mozambique, which he visited in 1968.¹ There, he interviewed Mozambican freedom fighters, who offered training in guerrilla warfare (Museveni 1971: 24; see also Mamdani 2025: 271-272). Building on his Mozambican experience and in referencing *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963) and to a lesser degree also *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1967), Museveni argues that the attitudes of any oppressed people must be unpacked through "their sociology" and a "materialist approach" that focuses on living and labour conditions, as well as the larger production structure. "Anthropology" and an "anthropological approach," Museveni argues, would only reproduce colonial and belittling stereotypes about African peoples; the so-called tribes whose lives are seen, by themselves and by the colonisers, as determined by cultural beliefs. Ultimately, only a violent revolution can purify and free colonised peoples and societies. With violence, the colonial legacy of the "anthropological approach" can be transcended, and people can be liberated, Museveni concludes. Uganda's independence in 1962, Museveni suggests, was too easily achieved. "One is bound to have a more mentally liberated population in the liberated areas of Mozambique than, for instance, in any of the so-called independent Republics of East Africa. This is because the peasants in Northern Mozambique have undergone the cleansing effect of revolution while some of the East African peasants are still as backward ideologically as the peasants during the Middle Ages" (Museveni 1971: 5-6, 14; see also

¹ Museveni chaired a student group in Dar es Salaam, which identified with the liberation movements in Africa. The group's intellectual inspiration expanded beyond Fanon. Museveni's political awareness "became more focused during the three years, 1967 to 1970, that he spent at the University of Dar es Salaam. His wide reading, which covered Fanon, Lenin, Marx, Rodney, and Mao, as well as liberal Western thinkers such as Galbraith, shaped his intellectual and political outlook" (Kanyogonya 1992: 16; see also Mamdani 2025; Oloka-Onyango 2004).

Fanon 1963: 147). Museveni's examples of the "anthropological approach" build on Fanon's ethnographic gaze. If "barbed-wire entanglements" kept the colonised at bay, Fanon writes, then "the zombies are more terrifying than the settlers." A problem, Fanon continues, is the belief in the supernatural, "of considering three times before urinating, spitting, or going out into the night" and so on. For the young revolutionary, "the zombies of his ancestors" have offered only "the emotional outlets of dance and possession by spirits." And this "muscular orgy," Fanon suggests, "is exhausted in fratricidal combats." But with a machine-gun in his hand, the young revolutionary "does not hesitate to pour scorn upon the zombies of his ancestors" (1963: 56-58).

War and comparison

Museveni's appraisal of Fanon was selective, but it was also characteristic of the time, and this, too, is a part of the Fanonian legacy, something I will return to. Perhaps a parallel to Museveni is Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Fanon and Bouteflika served together in Algeria's anti-colonial struggle, and Bouteflika assisted Fanon in typing *The Wretched of the Earth* (Benabid 2006: 151, 161). Bouteflika became a leading Algerian politician and the country's president from 1999 to 2019, when mass protests against his corrupt and undemocratic rule, combined with his deteriorating health, finally compelled him to resign.

The Ugandan example suggests that if violence is about changing or revolutionising the social order, any violent change is likely to lead to an even more violent social order. Theories are suspect, to paraphrase novelist and essayist James Baldwin (1955: 9), a contemporary of Fanon, especially when applied militantly in ways that close rather than open the analysis, pulverising the demands of life rather than the other way around. If not, Baldwin adds, "people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves" into the revolution (1963: 104). Indeed, today, critical appreciation of Fanon's thesis on violence tends to nuance and broaden the analysis (e.g., Castelli 2022; Mbembe 2017). Here, Ugandan scholar Mahmoud Mamdani offers a conclusion relevant to my argument: if Fanon famously discussed violence as serving to dismantle the (colonial) state apparatus, Museveni came to see violence as a state-making project (Mamdani 2025: 272). Furthermore, in examining Museveni's claim to have revolutionised post-independence politics, replacing an old and essentially colonial order, I draw on Candea to present "an argument made *through* comparison" (2019: 18). To recap the three war characteristics introduced above, northern Uganda saw people join rebel ranks, yet so did central Uganda, not primarily because of political mobilisation, but because it was seen as the best option for survival during the war. Second, the state-orchestrated enforced encampment of civilians was institutionalised in northern Uganda, but it was first initiated in central Uganda. Third, the systematic use of child soldiers reached unprecedented levels in northern Uganda, yet it was common in central Uganda as well.

In anthropology, comparison is central yet always tricky. "There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method," Evans-Pritchard once declared, "and that's impossible" (in Needham 1975: 365; Candea 2019: 29). Historically, the entities anthropologists have compared – small-scale societies of the cultural other – tend to be "convenient shorthands and fictions," Candea (2019: 10) notes. Comparison reveals similarities and differences, and, if anything, it can only be preliminary. My comparison focuses on how the three war characteristics in Uganda have been analysed and either condemned or condoned, depending on whether the focus has been on the war in central

Uganda or the war in the country's northern parts. The different conclusions reveal that control over the definition of war, including how it is discussed and even analysed, is integral to waging war (Finnström and Nordstrom 2015: 377).

A rough guide to revolutionary accountability

In Uganda, Museveni is popularly known as M7. He was born in 1944, as the Second World War drew to a close. The Seventh Battalion, the Ugandan section of the colonial King's African Rifles, returned to Uganda from distant warfronts. The Seventh Battalion, called *Abaseveni* in Runyankore, Museveni's family language, lent its name to him. He was also given the Runyankore version of Joel, his baptismal name, and Kaguta after his father (Museveni 1997: 1). Yoweri Kaguta Museveni grew up as a pan-Africanist and a strong anti-colonial activist. Yet today, many of my young adult Ugandan informants have described him as "a typical coloniser," even an "African coloniser," a paradox I unpack in my comparative analysis.

In 1986, after five years of civil war, Museveni's National Resistance Army guerrillas captured the Ugandan capital, Kampala. He took up arms in 1981, arguing that Uganda's political system was colonial and that the "old order" had to be overthrown "by force of arms" (Museveni 1992: 37). He claims that his takeover was a revolution that promised a new start for Uganda and a complete break from the country's troubled and violent past. "No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guard," Museveni famously said in his 1986 swearing-in address. He proclaimed, "a fundamental change in the politics of our country" with the government no longer "the master, but the servant of the people" (Museveni 1992: 21-22). His National Resistance Movement, the NRM or the Movement for short, was now in charge. The Movement was the political wing of the National Resistance Army, the NRA. The Movement was defined as a no-party system, and other political parties were banned (cf. Fanon 1967: 165-166). In 1995, the National Resistance Army (NRA) was renamed the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF), and in 2005, when the multiparty political system was restored, Museveni's Movement was transformed into a formal political party, dominating Uganda's political landscape.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, there was genuine hope in Museveni's revolution and a more peaceful Uganda. Museveni emerged as one of the "new breed" of leaders in Africa (Oloka-Onyango 2004). From South Africa to Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda, the new breed of leaders was seen as young, energetic, and eager to break with the past, as exemplified by Julius Nyerere's foreword to a collection of Museveni's speeches, published in Uganda by the Movement (Museveni 1992), and later re-published for an international audience by the University of Minnesota Press (Museveni 2000). Anthropologist Kristen Cheney opens her comparative book on child citizens and national development in central and northern Uganda by describing Museveni as a visionary who ended twenty years of civil war and government abuse: "Uganda has risen from the dark night of postcolonial civil conflict to become a shining star among nation-states in Africa" (Cheney 2007: 1). However, in the book's epilogue, she adds that Museveni's international star status was increasingly tarnished. Cheney lends voice to a complex Ugandan reality, perhaps irreconcilable, in which hope is inextricably linked to despair, and peace is intimately connected to violence and war.

For example, in 1986, British journalist William Pike was invited to Uganda to run the *New Vision*. This newly established government newspaper aimed to break with the

country's history of government-controlled media. In 2006, Museveni publicly declared that he would "sort out" the same paper. Pike left his job, and Uganda, before he was sacked (Pike 2019: 152, 264). Four decades into Museveni's rule, journalists, human rights activists, and representatives of the political opposition are systematically harassed and arrested, in some cases even tortured and murdered, and human rights non-government organisations are banned (e.g., UN 2026).

In 1991, Museveni declared that a problem in Uganda had been that "armies belonged to individuals and not to Uganda" (Museveni 1992: 96). By the 2020s, his presidential guard, created without the required parliamentary approval and for long periods commanded by his first-born son Muhoozi Kainerugaba, had grown into Museveni's personal army, controlling all Uganda's strategic military assets, and parallel to the country's regular forces (Rolls 2021; Rwengabo 2013; Titeca 2026). In 1990, Museveni declared that corruption "is a cancer which, if it is not checked, will hinder progress in all sectors of society" (Museveni 1992: 92). Some thirty years later, kinship networks, patronage, and corruption had become crucial to the daily maintenance of his regime. State institutions are drained as their funds are used to finance Museveni's ruling party and its campaigns (Mamdani 2025; Rolls 2021). In 2024, Museveni's son was appointed chief of Uganda's armed forces. A Ugandan opposition parliamentarian described the move as yet another example of Museveni treating Uganda as "a personal enterprise of his family" (in Kupemba 2024; see also Titeca 2026).

Ugandan historian Mutibwa provides examples of the irregularities that preceded the 1980 general elections, which ultimately led to Milton Obote's return to power after the fall of Idi Amin. For example, candidates in opposition to Obote's ruling party were systematically arrested and detained, and prevented from campaigning. Indeed, combating irregularities was part of the official rationale for Museveni's launch of his guerrilla movement in 1981 (Mutibwa 2016: 325-326; see also Amaza 1998: 5-6; Museveni 1997: 118-119). Yet, and especially in northern Uganda, irregularities were violently re-enacted by Museveni's own government, and increasingly so from 2005, when it opened up to oppositional political parties standing for election and campaigning (Otunnu 2017: 63-64; Tripp 2010: 85-86).

In 1990, Museveni declared it illegal for army personnel to "get involved in import or export trade businesses." For any transgressions, he threatened to dismiss, demote, and imprison the culprits (Museveni 1992: 91). Yet in 1997, he ordered the Ugandan army to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). There, high-ranking Ugandan officers "skilfully exploited the opportunities offered by the Congolese war to further expand their economic and political power" (Vlassenroot and Perrot 2012: 35; see also Mamdani 2025: 254-258; Pike 2019: 273). A United Nations investigation eventually identified a Ugandan military elite network close to Museveni that trained local militia groups, provoked conflicts, and exploited Congolese resources. Over the years, Museveni's presidential campaigns have benefited significantly from logistical and financial support from the Ugandan army, and from resources amassed from Congo. By the 2020s, business success in Uganda had become dependent on proximity to the military, which was increasingly involved in civilian institutions (Mamdani 2025; Titeca, 2026).

After this rough guide to Uganda's revolution, to which can be added the removal of the two-term presidential limit in 2005 and the presidential age limit in 2017, I proceed to discuss the three war characteristics, including Museveni's insertion of Fanon into Ugandan politics. Mbembe (2017: 163-164) points out that Fanon distinguishes between "colonial

violence” and “the emancipatory violence of the colonized.” Anything but emancipatory, colonial violence is all-encompassing, more or less permanent, with everyday consequences that are difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. Mamdani (2025: 272) argues that violence in Museveni’s Uganda, especially after his 1986 takeover, is “colonial-type.”

Wartime politics and displacement: central Uganda through comparison

In 1981, Museveni took to the bush in central Uganda. On February 6, with only 27 guerrilla fighters, he launched the first attack on the Obote government. A bitter war soon broke out in central Uganda. The war’s epicentre was the so-called Luweero (or Luwero) Triangle. With their homeland being turned into the epicentre of war, many civilians in Luweero joined a rebel-led initiative to evacuate to a place called Ssinga. Kato Jacob Kalibbala tells the story of his father, Salongo Zakayo Kalibbala, who was killed during the war:

On learning of his wife and children’s ordeal during their long trek to Ssinga, Salongo Zakayo Kalibbala almost collapsed in his tent. He cursed the politicians who had brought suffering to thousands. All around him, people were either dying of starvation or being killed by government troops. The rainy season has also brought with it untold suffering. The flat terrain of Ssinga made it susceptible to flooding and when the stagnant water dissolved human waste, a cholera outbreak ensued, leading to many deaths. (Kalibbala 2022: 1)

Another witness recalls that the “suffering in Ssinga was almost unbearable” (Kalibbala 2022: 192). After a year, the war reached Ssinga, and soon government troops forced people to embark on another trek, this time to a government-run camp. For two days, they walked, being forced to carry the boxes of ammunition for the government soldiers who walked with them. Zakayo Kalibbala and many others who refused to go to the camp were shot dead (Kalibbala 2022: 20-21).

William Pike, the British journalist appointed editor-in-chief of the *New Vision*, was one of the first outside witnesses to wartime suffering in Luweero. War and repression often go hand in hand, Pike notes, as Museveni’s guerrillas secretly escorted him deep into war-torn Luweero at the height of the conflict. “But in the Luwero Triangle there seemed to have been an attempt to eliminate the rural population altogether, first by herding them into camps and then by wholesale slaughter,” Pike writes. “The evidence was the bodies and bones littered everywhere.” To illustrate the point, he took a photo of an elderly couple murdered in their house, but first, Museveni’s guerrillas helped him carefully organise the light. Next to the decomposing bodies, Pike placed a framed studio photo of the couple that he found in the house. He “propped it up beside the bodies” and took the picture. He regrets that no British newspaper would publish it. “The artifice was too obvious,” he admits in retrospect, yet he remembers it as “the most powerful photo” he took (Pike 2019: 95-96).

Indeed, the war in Luweero was devastating, with the government troops not only killing but also systematically dehumanising “the native,” turning “him into an animal” (Fanon 1963: 42; Museveni 1971: 2). Post-war researchers would eventually support such conclusions, but they also acknowledged the difficulty of getting behind the official story, using Museveni’s vocabulary, of the “protracted people’s war” in which the “basic weapon” against “the dictatorship” was “the support of the people and their political consciousness”

(Museveni 1992: 133; see also Schubert 2006: 96-97). Tidemand, who arrived for fieldwork in Luweero in 1991-92, could not access any in-depth accounts from people who had resisted Museveni's guerrillas, or anyway had supported Obote's government and the ruling Uganda People's Congress party. But those who did offer their perspectives agreed that massive state-orchestrated repression in Luweero essentially drove people to support Museveni and his guerrillas. As a local functionary of Museveni's Movement told Tidemand: "What 'killed' Obote's government was that his soldiers were always killing people" (2013: 72).

Schubert conducted interviews on demobilisation from 1992 to 1997. He, too, found it difficult to hear from anyone who had resisted Museveni's guerrillas. He concludes that many people in Luweero felt caught between two fronts. Especially young men who tried but eventually failed to dodge the war would accept being recruited into Museveni's guerrilla movement, fearing that they would otherwise be treated as traitors. Political mobilisation was less critical. For many men in Luweero, the "agenda was to protect themselves with a rifle and thereby attempt to survive the war" (Schubert 2006: 101, 98; see also Kalibbala 2022: 19).

Some 300,000 civilians were killed in Luweero alone, while about one million Ugandans were forced into internal displacement (Bernard 2017: 189; Mutibwa 1992: 159; Ofcansky 1996: 55; Pike 2019: 20). According to official state statistics, at least 188,000 civilians were forced to live in state-controlled "relief centres," places Ugandan scholars have described as virtual "concentration camps," comparable with "the Nazi death camps" (e.g., Kasozi 1999: 180, 183; Mutibwa 1992: 159). This state-sponsored oppression would be repeated and eventually reach unprecedented levels, as the war travelled from Luweero to Acholiland in northern Uganda, and as Museveni's guerrillas became rulers. In the north, the government referred to the camps as "protected villages" rather than "relief centres." Ugandan historian Kasozi's description of the camps in Luweero could as well describe the camps in northern Uganda, the difference being that Museveni's army would not put up any barbed wire around the "protected villages" in northern Uganda, but instead use civilians forced into camps as a buffer against frequent rebel attacks:

Whenever the government 'reclaimed' a part of the Luwero Triangle it concentrated civilians into camps, ostensibly for protection but actually to control the population. Anyone found outside these camps was presumed to be a guerrilla. All civilians who tried to leave the Luwero Triangle were rounded up and moved into the camps... The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers under order to shoot anyone breaking the dawn-to-dusk curfew. The huts were thatched with grass, there were no medical facilities, food was poor, and there was often very little firewood. Inmates had to forage for miles for what little water and food they got and were often escorted at gunpoint. (Kasozi 1999: 183-184; see also Otunnu 2017: 105-107)

Another difference between the camps in Luweero and those later established in war-torn northern Uganda was the pressure from international organisations such as the Red Cross and various United Nations agencies. These organisations compelled the Obote government to close the Luweero camps in 1984 – approximately a year after their establishment (Kabera and Muyanja 1994: 99; Kasozi 1999: 184-185). In contrast, the camps in northern Uganda became institutionalised between 1996 and 2006, a process of forced displacement enabled by substantial support from the same international organisations and United Nations

agencies that had previously criticised encampment in Luweero. With outside organisations intervening to provide aid to the northern camps, Museveni's government had greater freedom to manoeuvre. External humanitarian aid helped facilitate the brutalisation of the Ugandan army's violent counterinsurgency campaign (Allen 2006: chap. 3; Branch 2011: chap. 3; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008: chap. 4; Janmyr 2014; Mamdani 2025: 220-229). In both northern Uganda and Luweero, individuals found outside the camps by government forces were treated as rebels (Finnström 2008: 141; Mutibwa 2016: 344).

War memorials, remembering war

Officially, Museveni's fight was a non-sectarian struggle for democracy. Yet in Luweero, he and his fellow commanders also sought support by preaching a Bantu commonality against a non-Bantu invader from the north, very much along the "anthropological approach" that Museveni, as a student, had dismissed as colonial (Museveni 1971: 16). In actively recruiting from the Baganda population in Luweero, for example, by promising to restore the royal institution of the Buganda Kingdom, Museveni's guerrillas left the northern Ugandans living in the area increasingly estranged from them (Kalibbala 2022: 170-171; Kasfir 2005: 283). Pike, the British journalist escorted by Museveni's guerrillas to interview people in Luweero, found that people there were "unanimous in blaming the killings on the 'serikali ya Obote' or the 'Acholi soldiers'," that is, the government of Obote and, more specifically, the Acholi soldiers of that government's army (Pike 2019: 96). Museveni's fighters commonly referred to the enemy army as the *Bacholi*, a Bantu language version of the Acholi (Amaza 1998: 62).

Inserted into this narrative were the thousands of human skulls from Luweero, put on display, as Bernard shows, "to mark the contrast between the terror of the previous Obote regime and [Museveni's] ruling NRM government" and for the international diplomatic, development, and journalist community to see. It was a government-controlled, "centralized public policy" intended to grant legitimacy to Museveni's rule, a voyeuristic display that was eventually made more famous when replicated by the regime in post-genocidal Rwanda (Bernard 2017: 188-189; see also Pike 2019: 147).

Inspired by Frantz Fanon's famous thesis that, regardless of the form decolonisation takes, it is necessarily violent – in short, violence is the language and practice of the colonialists and the only language the colonialists understand – Museveni promoted the instrumental visualisation of violent death as a way to arouse support and anticolonial passion. The skulls in Luweero testify to this. In 1968, as Museveni visited the liberation fighters in colonial Mozambique, he developed his version of Fanon's thesis on violence. "Once the peasant sees guerrillas holding the head of the former master," Museveni, the university student, writes, "the white man's head cold in death, the white skin, flowing hair, pointed nose and blue eyes notwithstanding, he will know, or at least begin to suspect, that the picture traditionally presented to him of the white man's invincibility is nothing but a scarecrow" (Museveni 1971: 8; see also Adyanga 2015: 393; Mamdani 2025: 271-273). In the famous original, Fanon writes that for "the native" – colonised, suppressed, tortured, and ultimately killed – "life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (1963: 93).

In Luweero, as the twists of history would have it, the skulls held up were not those of the enemy killed, but of those killed by the enemy, Museveni claimed. "It is necessary to create social convulsions," he argues, because there can be "no fundamental changes without a violent shake-up" (Museveni 1971: 17). Mbembe argues that Fanon's anticolonial violence was to be directed against those "who had always only submitted others to death." Yet he also notes that Fanon was acutely aware of the fact that "the colonized were opening the door to

a disastrous reciprocity, a ‘recurring terror’” (Mbembe 2017: 166). Importantly, for Fanon, the anticolonial struggle was to offer tombs for the fallen victims of colonialism, proper burials (Mbembe 2017: 168).

“If you go to a place like Luwero now,” Museveni said in an address to an audience of Acholi elders in Gulu town in 1986, “you will see skeletons and skulls upon skulls of human beings.” In one place, he told the elders, he encountered the enemy “in their trenches, eating and drinking with 237 skulls of their victims around them.” All over Luweero, Museveni continued, the story was the same. “If you saw these skulls, you would understand why we fought Obote, Okello and the rest” (Museveni 1992: 28-29).

Museveni’s new government claimed that the public display of human skulls had occurred spontaneously, a claim often accepted by outside observers (e.g., Pike 2019: 147). Even if many of the human skulls in Luweero were gathered from the trenches or the hilly, war-torn rural surroundings, others were coercively exhumed from graves. When Museveni’s newly installed government formalised the war memorial sites in Luweero, graves were exhumed, to the resentment of surviving relatives, who wanted to have their dead properly buried and thereafter left in peace. However, Uganda’s new political leadership insisted, in the process assuming authorship of the stories of these deceased individuals and redefining their qualities for recognition. These victims of war were now to function as instruments of the state.

In a way, Museveni’s anticolonial agenda morphed into “the quintessential colonial method,” which, in Faridi’s description, involves waiting for people to die to “make a museum” of their deaths and to “set up departments of decoloniality over their mass graves” (Faridi 2023). In Luweero, this reached a point when even the museum conservator in charge of the Ugandan government’s skull and bone collection programme reacted, calling it a disgrace to the dead and to the survivors. “It’s not our tradition to leave the dead unburied,” he told a reporter in 1988. “The Baganda believe (that) the dead are not completely dead. If you leave those people unburied, they are cursing you. That’s the social feeling” (in Bernard 2017: 196; see also Adyanga 2015: 393). If the dead are not given a proper burial, Bernard adds, “the grief of the deceased can become dangerous, not only for those who caused their death, but also for their surviving relatives” (2017: 196; see also Finnström 2008: 24, 88, 159-160).

The surviving relatives of the dead in Luweero were denied the chance to grieve. They were denied any closure, and in cases where the Catholic Church had helped people who returned home after the war to bury their dead, such closures were undone. The war had taken hundreds of thousands of lives. Now, after death, Museveni’s propaganda machinery continued the process of dehumanisation. As a Luweero elder remembered it, when talking to the historian Onek Adyanga in 2013, “when I saw the exhibit of human remains, I felt sad, for it is anti-Baganda tradition to put on public display human remains. Our culture respects the dignity and rights of the deceased for a peaceful and decent burial. We utterly reject any form of displaying human remains.” Another Luweero elder added to the resentment. “There was not a single public consultation in Luwero that I am aware of about what to do with the human remains that Museveni dug out for public exhibition” (quoted in Adyanga 2015: 393).

In unearthing the dead and in collecting and piling up these skulls, thousands of war casualties were made nameless. They were dehumanised and made “ungrievable,” to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase. In other words, the collecting of skulls established the limits of human

intelligibility, what Butler calls “the unmarkable” (Butler 2004: 35). And with the making of the unmarkable, history is written, and the unmarked dead were re-marked and categorised in ways that suited the new government. “This monument is in memory of the freedom fighters who died during the people’s protracted war NRM/NRA struggle 1981-1986,” reads the inscription on one such permanent monument with human skulls, inaugurated by Museveni in 1995 (Bernard 2017: 198). Ugandan scholar Laury Ocen argues that the Luweero war mausoleums totalised the memorialisation of war time deaths in ways that are “forensically questionable” (2022: 49). Even if the great majority of collected skulls came from dead civilians rather than from Museveni’s rebels, at play was a “performative interpretation of the historical facts by the government” (Bernard 2017: 197).

A photo accompanying a cover story in the January 2000 issue of *Tarehe Sita*, a monthly revolutionary magazine of the Ugandan armed forces, shows two children standing behind a pile of human skulls. I bought the magazine in Gulu town, five years after the inauguration of the Luweero memorial monument mentioned above. “Two orphans pose before skeletons,” reads the caption. “New generation do[es] not know the evils of party politics” (Okei-Rukogota 2000: 9). A similar photo appears in journalist Pike’s memoirs. Two children “with distended bellies” stand next to “eight skulls hovering on poles” in a most Kurtzian way (Pike 2019: 156).

Travelling images of war: from skulls to the small ones

As history would have it, any human skull found or unearthed and displayed in Luweero would, posthumously, be defined as belonging either to a civilian or to a fallen freedom fighter, in any case, and by definition, killed by the forces of the previous government. At the same time, the often-photographed children standing next to the human skulls were not merely representatives of a new generation. If now made part of post-war propaganda, perhaps they had a past as *kadogos*, anglicised Swahili for “small ones.”

The small ones were child soldiers in Museveni’s rebel movement. “I heard that Museveni’s people were collecting boys and girls, so I joined them,” one of them said (in Furley 1995: 37). Schubert estimates that Museveni captured Kampala with the help of some 3,000 *kadogos*, which would mean that 25 to 30 per cent of his fighting force consisted of minors (2006: 106; see also Mamdani 2025: 231). Cheney (2007: 168) reports that the number of post-war *kadogos* was 6,500. Citing media sources, Furley writes that of Museveni’s 10,000 troops in 1986, almost 50 per cent were under the age of 15, with many of the armed frontline fighters as young as eight, while “the rest were mostly under 20, and even the commanders were in their early twenties” (Furley 1995: 37).

According to an often-repeated official version, Museveni’s rebels came to the rescue of these children. For example, Furley argues that the *kadogos* “form an extraordinary episode in Uganda’s history, but Museveni surely deserves praise for his humanitarian and protective role towards them” (1995: 39; see also Kalibbala 2022: 74). Mutibwa adds that children in Luweero joined Museveni’s “freedom-fighters” out of desperation. With their parents being “butchered,” he writes, these children had been orphaned by the “backwardness and death” of Obote’s army, an army “totally alien to a civilized society.” In Luweero thus, it was “natural” that those who supported Museveni’s rebels were “Bantu-speakers, mostly Baganda,” while the enemies “were the Luo-speakers, mainly from the north.” Mutibwa then excuses any possible war crimes committed by non-northern soldiers in Obote’s army,

the Uganda National Liberation Army, the UNLA for short. Especially Luo-speakers such as the Acholi are to be blamed, he writes, “the non-Luo soldiers in the UNLA had to match their Luo masters in cruelty, otherwise they would have shared the fate of their victims” (Mutibwa 1992: 157). Following this logic, being a Bantu speaker from central Uganda is naturalised as civilised and associated with freedom. The Luo-speaking Acholi of northern Uganda are naturalised as the opposite, in terms of death, butchery, and backwardness. This, if anything, must be what Museveni in his young days dismissed as the “anthropological approach” of analysing things.

Tidemand concludes that the children in Luweero had no alternative but to join the rebel army. He quotes an old woman: “They knew that even if they did not join the war as fighters, they were at one time to face death. So they joined to fight and die brave” (in Tidemand 2013: 72). Cheney adds that most kadogos were orphaned because of the war, and that Museveni’s guerrilla movement was providing for the basic needs of these orphaned children. “Though they played auxiliary roles in the conflict,” she writes, “much was made in the international media of the gun-toting children on the front lines on the eve of liberation” (Cheney 2007: 168-169; see also Pike 2019: 92; Tidemand 2013: 78-79). In one TV interview, from around the time of his takeover in 1986, Museveni parades three uniformed and anxious-looking kadogos in front of the journalists. “In Africa here, even by the age of four, you learn how to fight. It is our tradition, if you don’t know,” Museveni tells the journalists. “Fighting with sticks, with spear, with arrow, that’s the tradition. So, if you try to think that this might disorient them psychologically and so on, that is not the case. They are never deployed until the right age, but they learn, they learn the skills of war, warfare.”²

Again, one could argue that Museveni falls back on the “anthropological approach” he so vividly dismissed as a political science student. Despite his claim to the contrary, the kadogos were regularly armed and deployed on the battlefield and on reconnaissance missions beyond enemy lines (Kalibbala 2022: 190-193). These children became seasoned fighters. China Keitetsi wrote an account of her life as a child soldier and rebel bush wife under Museveni’s command. The book was banned in Uganda, and a government committee dismissed Keitetsi as a criminal and a hoax (Nakazibwe 2003). Her account offers a graphic counter-narrative to the more common claim among observers that Museveni only came to the children’s rescue. Short of soldiers and unable to spend much time training their recruits, Keitetsi writes that Museveni’s guerrillas sent her into battle after only rudimentary military training:

A month had passed since I’d left the training grounds. I was then picked for a special assignment along with a few other children. I was excited because I would be seeing the action I had heard so much about from the other children. We walked through the bush, getting our instructions along the way. Soon we hid on the perimeter of the bush that surrounded the dirt road. The commander told us to go to the middle of the road, sit down and pretend to have a good time playing with the sand. After a while, government troops approached in a huge convoy, but we continued playing as though we were alone. The convoy stopped – the first cargo truck was right in front of us. When most of the soldiers jumped out, we did as we

² The interview with Museveni appears in the film *In a Soldier’s Footsteps* (dir. Mette Zeruneith; 2005), and can also be seen on YouTube (accessed 26 March 2024): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upITVcXw_Gk.

had been instructed, running back into the bush to our fighting group, who then opened fire on the enemy. (Keitetsi 2002: 97)

After the ambush, Keitetsi's comrades rushed to strip the dead enemies of their clothes and equipment. "I stood and watched from a distance as the enemy's boots and underwear were shared out," Keitetsi recalls. "I was confused, having been told that I was fighting for freedom. I never imagined that it would include stealing from the dead." Surviving enemy soldiers were tied up, abused, kicked, and spat at before being taken to a rebel camp. There, captured enemy officers were shot dead. Keitetsi and her fellow child soldiers were celebrated as "the heroes of the day," with Museveni himself welcoming them and inviting them to dine with him. There, Keitetsi and her child comrades were given the uniforms and boots that had belonged to the enemy officers just executed (Keitetsi 2002: 97-98). After another battle, Keitetsi recalls, captured enemy soldiers were told that "no bullets would be wasted on them." Instead, they were forced to dig their graves before they were all killed, hit on the head with a hoe (Keitetsi 2002: 101).

During the final attack on Kampala, Furley adds that Museveni's child soldiers were sent in advance, dressed in civilian clothes to mingle more freely with the city population and report back on the positions of government troops. Later, when Kampala fell, the child soldiers again appeared and "threw grenades into the trucks of the fleeing [government] troops" (Furley 1995: 37).

The wretched, in conclusion

In this article, I focus on three characteristics of war and political violence in Uganda, tracing them from northern to central Uganda. First, while the Lord's Resistance Army rebels in northern Uganda are said to have had no legitimate political cause, the opposite has been said about Museveni's rebels in central Uganda. In dissecting Museveni's understanding of the "anthropological" versus his "sociology," I nuance this either-or argument, suggesting a both-of perspective instead. Second, influential international humanitarian agencies condemned government-initiated forced displacement in central Uganda but condoned and even supported it in northern Uganda. Third, for northern Uganda, child soldiering has been condemned, whereas in central Uganda it was condoned, even explicitly excused (see also Finnström 2012: 130-131). More specifically, for central Uganda, former child soldier China Keitetsi was condemned, but not those who ordered her to fight. Overall, I show that controlling the definition of war, including how war and its consequences are described, is integral to waging war, as illustrated by Museveni's Uganda.

Colonisation, and therefore also decolonisation, are necessarily violent, Fanon famously suggested in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). His thesis on violence was published around the time Uganda gained independence. In 2025, which marked the centenary of Fanon's birth, Museveni, in power since 1986, announced that he would again run for the presidency. The posters I saw in Kampala in November 2025 announced that Museveni – M7 – was running for a 7th term. Government-initiated intimidation, violence, arbitrary arrests, and heavy military deployment defined the campaign period leading up to the January 2026 elections, with Museveni again securing the presidency.

In closing, I return to Museveni's article on Fanon's theory of violence. "To say that one

can introduce fundamental changes without a violent shake-up is to say that one can turn ore into iron without melting it,” Museveni argued, adding that to melt iron ore, one needs fire of a “very high temperature” (1971: 17; cf. Fanon 1967: 11). Yet for Uganda, it seems, violence cannot be used to transcend violence. Rather, violence has continued to colonise most aspects of Ugandan politics. And violence colonised Museveni’s thinking and being, at least if we are to believe Jha’s critical appraisal of Fanon. If violence may change man, “the most probable change would be a more violent man.” It is also likely that revolutionary violence becomes institutionalised “as a mode of social control in the post-revolution era” (Jha 1988: 363-364; also Arendt 1970: 80).

Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin attended the same congress of Black writers and artists in Paris in 1956, but it is unclear whether they met, or whether Baldwin listened to Fanon’s speech. In his congress report, Baldwin (1961) does not mention Fanon. In commemorating the centenary of Fanon’s birth, Shoki (2025) wisely proposes that “Fanon’s work was never meant to offer comfort or closure.” Perhaps, if Fanon and Baldwin could meet in Uganda today, they would agree with Baldwin’s appeal that theory must be treated with suspicion. Indeed, theory must always be open to modification, while ideological principles may have to be pulverised by the demands of life, but not the other way around, as in Uganda.

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Making Crime Scene Technicians: Playful Professional Socialization

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses Swedish crime scene technicians' socialization into members of the profession. During crime scene simulations, students were taught not only how to work with crime scenes but also – and as importantly – which personal qualities they were expected to display in their professional practice. Desired and valued personality traits were, among others, diligence, humbleness, thoroughness, and reflection; traits that tie into ideals of how a crime scene examination should be performed. While personal, these traits were anchored in a (shifting) professional community that was evoked and reinforced by the same humor and playfulness that permeated the crime scene simulations, turning the students not only into proper crime scene technicians but also into members of their professional community. In other words, crime scene technician students are socialized into the personal qualities they are expected to display in their future role, as well as into their new position in the criminal justice system. This illustrates that a profession's reproduction may entail quite a bit more than teaching specific skills; in this way, this article contributes to understanding occupational values and cultures and their perpetuation.

Keywords: crime scene technicians, simulation, professional training, professional socialization, professional personality, humour

Introduction

Crime scene investigators are a staple of crime fiction. Wearing coveralls, gloves, and face masks, they are meticulously searching crime scenes and delivering crucial clues to the investigation just as it threatens to stall. They are also portrayed as knowledgeable, skilled, and, most of all, deeply dedicated to their work. Their non-fictional counterparts receive much less attention, both in the public eye and in scholarship. The results of their work – in the form of crime scene reports or court testimony – are visible, but most of the work itself takes place in cordoned-off sites, often shielded from sight. This obscurity in public perception is mirrored by how, for example, British crime scene examiners describe themselves as “quite happy being sat in the back and let[ting] somebody else take the glory” (quoted in Wilson-Kovacs 2014: 770).

This article discusses Swedish crime scene technicians' socialization into members of the profession. Through humour and playfulness, I will show, students are socialized into the personal qualities they are expected to display in their future role, as well as into their new place in the criminal justice system. This socialization provides insight not only into the profession, but also into the perpetuation of occupational values and cultures.

Swedish Crime Scene Technicians

Swedish crime technicians¹ examine the scenes of suspected crimes, documenting, recovering traces, and conveying their findings and conclusions in a crime scene report. They also mediate between other professions in the criminal justice system, for example explaining laboratory procedures to police investigators and prosecutors, and assisting investigation leaders in choosing laboratory analyses (Kruse 2020a). Typically, they are police officers (civilian crime scene technicians are rare), having undergone basic training at the police academy or, more recently, the training the Police Authority commissions from five Swedish universities. After that, they have worked as regular police officers, often in a succession of different positions, before applying to transfer to crime scene work and receiving specialized training for their new role.

Academic scholarship has focused rather little on crime scene examiners and their work. Exceptions are Williams's (2003, 2007) and Wyatt's (2014a) analyses of specific aspects of crime scene practices, Gassaway's (2007) account of crime scene examiners' management of disgust and other emotions at the crime scene, and my discussion of forensic objectivity at the crime scene (Kruse 2020b). With a slightly wider focus, Williams and Weetman (2013) have examined how crime scene work contributes to homicide investigations, Ludwig *et al.* (2012) have explored the role of crime scene examiners in the British criminal justice system, Wilson-Kovacs (2014) has examined British crime scene examiners' professional identities, and Kelty *et al.* (2011) have mapped personal attributes of successful crime scene examiners.

Crime scene technicians' training has received even less scholarly attention. Elsewhere, I have discussed Swedish crime scene technicians' training as a professionalization from the outside (Kruse 2020a), that is, by the forensic science laboratory rather than by crime scene technicians as an autonomous profession. Wyatt (2014b) has followed crime scene investigators' training in England and Wales, describing shadowing senior colleagues, theoretical training, and practical exercises, including crime scenes. From an Australian context, Stanley and Horswell (2004) emphasize the importance of developing scientific awareness in addition to training forensic skills; apparently, the Australian criminal justice system has developed work profiles simultaneously with training packages for its crime scene investigators. Unlike in Sweden, however, civilian crime scene investigators seem to be the norm in both contexts.

However, a profession's reproduction is not only about training new members in relevant skills – seeing (Goodwin 1994), performing surgery (e.g., Prentice 2005), or recovering fingerprints – but also about turning them into members of the profession. From historical material, Burney and Pemberton (2016: 11ff) name physical attributes as well as intellectual capabilities as crucial for crime scene work. Similarly, Kelty *et al.* enumerate “knowledge, life experience, professionalism, approach to life, communication, cognitive abilities, and stress management” as key attributes of Australian “top crime scene examiners” (Kelty *et al.* 2011: 175), and Skolnick describes the “working personality” of a US police officer as being “suspicious” (Skolnick 1994 [1966]: 41ff). In contrast, Traweek (1988) shows that physicists are socialized into being “meticulous and very hard-working” and displaying “self-assertion and bravado” (Traweek 1998: 75), that is, into *becoming* the kind of person regarded as suited to the profession by senior practitioners rather than being suited through

¹ In Swedish, they are called *kriminaltekniker*; literally, “forensic technicians.”

inherent traits.

For Swedish crime scene technicians, I will show, personal qualities are not an official part of the curriculum, but they are nonetheless conveyed – consciously or unconsciously – during training. In this article, I will focus on one part of crime scene technician training: crime scene exercises that, through being simulations – and thus relying on make-believe – made it easy to encourage the playfulness that facilitated conveying and developing professional qualities and identities.

Methods

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork of crime scene technicians' formal training at the National Forensic Centre (NFC; the Swedish state-run forensic laboratory²), half a year's coursework spread out over a year. This formal training is preceded by aspiring crime scene technicians applying for transfer to a crime scene division and working there for at least a year, learning from senior colleagues; thus, even though the course is described as basic training, it is the continuation of a police career and builds on – albeit limited – prior practical experience with crime scene work.

I followed the class of 2013, ten women and ten men from all over the country, from the beginning of their training in January to its end in December. With few exceptions, I have observed all of the lectures, practical exercises, and crime scene examinations that made up the course – designed and taught largely (but not only) by forensic scientists, in collaboration with senior crime scene technicians. As many practical parts of the course were taught to half the class at a time on an alternating schedule, I have been able to observe central elements of the training, among them the crime scene exercises, twice, once with each half of the class. I have also listened to and participated in discussions in and out of the classroom and conducted informal interviews before and after classes and during breaks.

Among other things, this fieldwork has given me a sizable amount of material on how students learn to be crime scene technicians.³ Professional values, identities, and qualities were present (albeit often implicitly) throughout the course, but they became particularly visible during the three crime scene exercises.

Simulating Crime Scene Work

The course's three crime scene exercises took part in a structure composed of five rather sparse suites of rooms forming a house-like shape and placed in a large attic space in the NFC's training facility: three apartments, a hairdresser's salon, and a garage with an attached laundry room.

The first exercise focused on traces such as fingerprints, shoe and tool marks, the second included DNA as well as IT traces such as cameras, cell phones, and computers, and the third added narcotics, guns, and blood patterns, all of which had been covered in lectures and practical exercises leading up to each crime scene exercise. The crime scenes became successively more complex and the crimes more severe: a break-in, a sexual crime, and a

² At the time of my fieldwork, it was called the National Laboratory of Forensic Science.

³ While the course is continuously being developed – the involvement of crime scene technician teachers has been considerably deepened, for example (personal communication, 2024) – the crime scene exercises remain largely the same.

homicide. For each crime scene exercise, the teachers prepared five different scenarios, one in each suite of rooms. The students – half of the class at a time – were then assigned to the crime scenes in pairs, the crime scenes being refreshed in between.

Much like they would in everyday work – except for working in pairs⁴ – the students then searched for, documented, and recovered traces, with a (simulated) investigation going on in parallel with which they were in interaction. After the examination, the students discussed with the forensic scientist teachers about which analyses to order from the laboratory in which order of priority. Here, the teaching situation was on the forefront: While crime scene technicians do confer with forensic scientists in complex cases, the discussions on the course were much more extensive; the students also changed roles to analyse some of the traces they had recovered in the NFC's teaching laboratory, supervised and advised by forensic scientists. For most traces, however, the teachers gave the students made-up answers, trying to make it neither too easy nor too difficult to draw conclusions about the crime scene.

The students, still working in pairs, then wrote reports on their crime scene examinations to be discussed in the classroom – the last case study also included a trial exercise in one of the local district court's courtrooms – after which the teachers revealed what, in their words, “really happened” through photographs or films showing the teachers wearing (mismatched second-hand) clothes from the prop stash – some of which the course participants had been given to examine – and acting out (parts of) the crimes.⁵ The students then could ask about specific traces they had not been able to figure out. Thus, by the end of the exercise, there were no questions left open.

In this way, the crime scene exercises were training simulations, recreating crime scene examinations in both a safe and pedagogical manner (cf Dieckmann et al. 2012; Kihlgren et al. 2015): In medical training, simulations allow students to learn and practice procedures without putting patients at risk (e.g. Rall and Dieckmann 2005; Schuwirth and van der Vleuten 2003) and as often, and with as much variation as they wish (Prentice 2005: 861). Military training uses simulations, for example, to prepare soldiers for fraught and fragile, and thus potentially dangerous interactions with locals (Stone 2017, 2018). The crime scene simulations discussed here enabled the students to practice forensic skills without jeopardizing investigations or their own safety.

The professional practices that a simulation recreates and trains may crystallise around the simulator, but they are not defined by it: In medical simulations, for example, the simulator itself may not, and does not need to recreate the body in every detail; what is important is that it allows for recreating relevant practices (Johnson 2008a). In addition, a simulator does not need to cover all aspects of the targeted practice; participants seem to perceive the experience as just as valid, regardless of whether the cues on which they act come from the simulator, or are provided as written or verbal instructions (Dieckmann et al. 2007; Kihlgren et al. 2015). Thus, it was not surprising that both teachers and students in the crime scene simulations seemed to effortlessly combine interacting with the simulator – i.e. the suite of rooms they were assigned – with acting on supplementing information provided by the teachers.

⁴ Crime scene technicians often work alone; the teachers paired them up to force them to discuss their approach with each other and thus make their thinking explicit.

⁵ Enacting and filming the sexual crimes and homicides was, of course, not feasible, but the teachers still enacted and filmed parts of them, glossing over the violent parts with a narrated passage.

A simulation also encompasses more than the simulator itself. In the simulator's immediate vicinity, the absent parts of the patient's body may be reconstituted through the instructor's gestures (Johnson 2007: 598ff); similarly, the students in the crime scene exercises "cordoned off" an imaginary front lawn by gesturing at the linoleum floor. However, intrusions can also become part of a simulation. For example, when beeping pagers or someone entering the room disrupts a simulated operation, medical students learn how "to place themselves in relationship to others around them while they are becoming doctors" (Johnson 2008b: 73).

The latter also points to a less explicit function of training simulations, namely socializing students into their future professional role. Johnson (2008b) discusses medical students' (incidentally) learning to relate to other professions, Stone (2017, 2018) remarks on soldiers (deliberately) learning how to relate to civilians at their future place of deployment, and in the crime scene simulations, interacting with other professions in the criminal justice system was part of the exercises.

What facilitated this socialization in the crime scene exercises was the simulation framework of not being quite "real." In addition, like Bateson's metacommunication of "This is play" (Bateson 1972: 177ff), the teachers explicitly encouraged the students to "have fun" and "play around" – i.e., to try different technologies and methods – an approach that would jeopardize legal security at a "real" crime scene, but that makes it possible to gain deeper insight into different methods and their potential use.

This "play" with methods was continuously reinforced by playfulness on the part of the teachers. They had, for example, given flamboyantly fictitious names to streets and people in the mock police reports that provided information on the simulated cases: break-ins happened on Mischief Street, whereas sexual crimes took place on Smutty Street, and the police officers who had signed the mock reports were officers Kind and Handsome (*Snäll* and *Snygg*; both possible but unusual surnames; the pairing made the fictitiousness obvious and the names thus funny) or Kling and Klang (the fumbling police officers from *Pippi Longstocking*).

This playfulness may, in addition to being facilitated by the simulation format, be connected to the police context. Police humour as a specific form of workplace humour has been reported from different countries (e.g. Gayadeen and Philips 2016, Holdaway 1988, Granér 2014, Pogrebin and Poole 1988, Uhnöo 2019, Wieslander 2019). It aids emotion management (Innes 2002, Uhnöo 2019), helps to maintain social relations and deal with conflict within the organization (Granér 2014; Holdaway 1988), or can, conversely, create a space within which to bring up sensitive or controversial topics (Granér 2014; Wieslander 2014, chapter 13, Uhnöo 2019).

The link between humour and the social order (e.g., Billig 2005) is as ambivalent – humour and especially ridicule can subvert the prevailing order, but they can also reproduce and reinforce it (cf Billig 2001, 2005): On the one hand, it can challenge or ridicule the people in power, which may lead to changes, but on the other hand, it can also function as a metaphorical steam valve, letting off the pressure of unpleasantness or discontent and thus making it easier for the status quo to continue. Humour in the form of ridicule can also exert social pressure to conform or specifically to initiate newcomers into a workplace, both within the police (Granér 2014) and in other contexts (e.g., Paton and Filby 2019 [1996]): Through jokes, the professional order and people's place in it are conveyed to the novices,

and they are taught what is acceptable and desirable behaviour in their new role.

In the crime scene exercises, I will show, role-specific workplace humour became part of the playfulness of the simulation, encompassing jokes and teasing that socialized the crime scene technician students into their new profession. It playfully conveyed and reinforced the (desired) professional order in terms of appropriate crime scene technician personality, of placing crime scene technicians in relation to other professions in the criminal justice system, and of solving ideal cases that allowed the students to act as ideal crime scene technicians.

Performing Practitioners Appropriately

Like Traweek (1998: 75) points out for physicists, there was an appropriate performance of the self for Swedish crime scene technicians, intertwined with the appropriate performance of crime scene work. This appropriate performance emphasized diligence, humbleness, and impartiality as desirable – in fact, central – qualities.

These qualities and their desirability were conveyed through the teachers' modelling as well as through their jokes, like a senior crime scene technician's explaining his and a colleague's participation in the course as, "We're not here because we're better than others, but because everyone else declined." Such a remark might be dismissed as personal modesty if his self-mockery had not been echoed in many other comments that targeted qualities specific to crime scene technicians, for example jokingly calling the students "overly diligent types," very clearly including all crime scene technicians (himself included) in the epithet, thus playfully suggesting that their profession called for both diligence far beyond what others may find reasonable or tolerable and a capacity for self-irony.

Calling this a *performance* does not mean to suggest a (false) façade; I use the term in the sense of presenting the self in interaction with others. Butler, for example, argues that (gender) identity is a matter of performing oneself in a particular way, drawing on and embodying a repertoire of sociocultural norms. Moreover, to her, the discursive constitutes reality, so there is *only* performance (Butler 2006: 185); the self is being presented or performed in interaction with others.

The teachers added to the individual performance of the self a collective performance, for example through the plural "overly diligent types." This collective self-deprecation may be akin to Australian crime scene examiners' being described as "unassuming and modest about their ability" (Kelty et al. 2011) or British crime scene officers' embracing of a "back seat" position (Wilson-Kovacs 2014: 770). It should, however, also be seen in connection with the teachers' emphasis on the importance of admitting and acknowledging uncertainty. The students should, the teachers underlined – also, and especially in their future work – not be too proud to ask for help, and they should communicate uncertainty clearly. That is, humbleness was not an end in itself but was valued in relationship to crime scene examination: a diligent and humble person is more likely to think twice about what they are doing and less likely to exaggerate their findings or downplay their uncertainty.

Through teasing, the teachers reinforced these desirable qualities and norms further, compelling the students to perform themselves appropriately, too. A milder version of the ridicule discussed as a means of discipline by Billig (2005), the teasing gently steered the students towards the desired approach to the crime scenes, in particular impartiality. For instance, a senior crime scene technician reminded the students working one of the scenes, "We don't want the son in there as the murderer [i.e., find traces that tie the victim's son

to the place of the homicide], we want the *murderer* in there as the murderer.” That is, they stressed the need to (diligently and humbly) look for traces and think through their implications both for and against a suspect. This was particularly noticeable in the second and third case studies, where in most of the scenarios there were suspects from the beginning, either through plaintiffs or witnesses, or through the known circumstances of the case.

The students’ use of humour during the simulations differed from that of the teachers. A few times, their jokes subverted the prevailing order (cf Billig 2001, 2005); for example, a student quipped “Look at these tough guys!” at a photograph of their teachers in mismatched clothes posing as burglars about to break into an apartment, (mildly) ridiculing the people in power. Most of the time, however, the students used humour and playfulness to demonstrate their understanding of and compliance with professional norms and ideals.

An example was a pair of students examining a homicide scene in the hairdresser’s salon. Having dressed in protective clothing and set out footplates so they could enter the salon without stepping on the floor and potentially destroying traces, the students looked around the room with its reception desk, hairdresser stations, hair cuttings on the floor, blood spray on one wall, and foam dummy slumped in one of the chairs. One of them said, “I see a lot of hair – I wonder why that might be?” Her partner replied, without missing a beat, “I think you should tape it to an overhead sheet!” – that is, recover it in the way recommended for hair that is to be sent to the laboratory for comparison.

Such jokes demonstrated the students’ grasp of how to not only correctly recover traces but also approach crime scenes: a crime scene technician should work in a systematic and ordered way and process a crime scene in a mindful and meaningful way instead of collecting “everything” unthinkingly – including the hair cuttings that are to be expected in a hairdresser’s salon. What is more, the students demonstrated this in an entertaining and modest way, mirroring the teachers’ self-ironic performance. Their humour might also have contributed to their own learning experience – humour can fruitfully be used as a learning tool (Tidy et al 2024).

The students also used humour to manage discomfort, such as embarrassment about perceived failures. In one of the sexual crimes – a rape in the same salon – the students were packing up when a crime scene technician teacher dropped by to chat about their crime scene examination. Among other things, she asked if the students had found any IT-related traces. Just as they were shaking their heads, one of them noticed the camera mounted over the reception counter. The students were mortified – IT traces were one of the foci of the exercise, and yet they had not thought to wonder why they had not found any. In their classroom presentation of the case a few weeks later, they declared, with heavy irony and a meaningful glance at the teacher, “the first thing we noticed [at the scene] was the surveillance camera.”⁶

By joking about what they felt were shortcomings, the students engaged in what Goffman (1967: 5ff) calls “face-work,” that is, maintaining a positive image of themselves – in this case as competent and skilled professionals – by addressing these shortcomings before the teachers could. But the jokes also showed that they did not only know, but could play and joke with professional norms in an appropriate way, again mirroring (and thus reproducing) the teachers’ humbleness and self-deprecation.

⁶ This was clearly a performance for this particular teacher; she smiled appreciatively at the remark, whereas its irony seemed to pass unnoticed by the other teachers and students.

The students' face-work was supported by the teachers in a way that further underlined professional ideals. They reassured the students with the surveillance camera as well as another student who had found a gun under a pillow only on a second visit to the crime scene that the important thing was that they had been thorough and persistent – and that these qualities had led to finding those items and contributing usefully to the case in the end, which was what counted. In other words, they again foregrounded the students' diligence and perseverance as desirable professional qualities and as leading to the goal.

In this way, the crime scene exercises trained both the performance of crime scene work and that of crime scene *technicians* – the former as the explicit aim of the simulation, and the latter through the humour that was encouraged by the simulations' playfulness. These professional selves were anchored in a professional community and reinforced by often playful references to and performances of that community and its relation to other professions in the criminal justice system.

Invoking a Professional Community

Interactions with other professions were part of the crime scene simulations. The students discussed the progress of their crime scene examinations with investigation leaders, asked for car or house searches, or data from the different police databases, attended post-mortems (of foam dummies) conducted by medical examiners, or went through the traces they had recovered from the crime scenes with forensic scientists; except for the last, all of them impersonated by the senior crime scene technicians in charge of the simulation.

One of the lessons the teachers tried to convey through these interactions was the importance of asking the right questions – since no one else was familiar with the crime scene, they emphasized, no one else could know what was relevant to investigate. To underline that point, they deliberately only answered the questions they were asked, not the ones they thought the students should have asked. In this way, the simulated interactions explicitly placed the students' crime scene work within the larger context of the ongoing investigation and the criminal justice system and underlined the importance of the crime scene technicians' thinking about and taking responsibility for how their expertise could contribute to the investigation as a whole.

This context of the larger investigation and the involved professions also conveyed to the students how to relate to other professions in the criminal justice system (cf Johnson 2008b, Stone 2017, 2018) and provided a professional community in which to anchor one's professional identity. Both the teachers and, to some extent, the students, repeatedly alluded and referred to this professional community throughout the course, for example the teachers' emphasizing cooperativeness and being "on the same side," underlined by providing cell phone or extension numbers together with the encouragement to call with questions. There, the teachers' willingness to support the students in their work performed both teachers and students as belonging to a community with the same goals and with a clear norm of willing cooperation.

Many allusions to and performances of professional community, however, were made playfully: The course coordinator, for example, featured as a murder victim's late wife in a nightstand photograph; and there was a photograph of one of the NFC's former heads in the role of a plaintiff's boyfriend. The students' discovering them was not only entertaining to both them and the teachers, but the pictures also commented on the community to which the students now were expected to belong – outsiders would not recognize the people portrayed and thus would not be entertained. When the students appreciated the photographs, they

also demonstrated that they were knowledgeable members of their professional community.

This community, however, was far from clear-cut or constant. Where the photographs created a community tightly tied to the course and the NFC, other instances of humour shifted between encompassing only crime scene technicians to also including other police or the forensic scientists. In one case, for example, a crime scene technician teacher acting as a plaintiff whose phone had been stolen in a break-in described it to the students as “It was a black one, or was it red? A *mobile!*” As a simulation facilitator keeping track of five scenarios simultaneously, she might for the moment really have been confused about the colour of the telephone, but the students seemed to understand her as exaggeratedly portraying a plaintiff unable to describe her belongings in a useful way. This (inferred) portrayal was apparently highly entertaining, but it also performed a community of professionals – mainly crime scene technicians and police investigators – sharing exasperating experiences with muddled plaintiffs.

Conversely, during a coffee break, students talked about police patrols sawing out suspected bullet holes to be sent for analysis “because they have *training*” – the “training” stressed with an exaggerated eye roll – but not thinking to change the locks at an unguarded crime scene. Making fun of the uniformed police in this way performed a community of crime scene technicians who know better, and who at times are frustrated with police patrols. This community includes – or at least does not exclude – forensic scientists, who may not have practical experience of being responsible for crime scenes, but who underline the importance of reflection and thoroughness.

Yet, the students also joked about the NFC, for example tongue-in-cheek telling a crime scene technician teacher acting as investigation leader during one of the crime scene examinations, “I can do that [analysis] right now, or you can get an answer from the [NFC] in four months.” Here, the community performed was that of crime scene technicians who are exasperated with both the NFC’s turnaround times and some investigation leaders’ preference for analyses to be performed by the NFC (presumably in anticipation of the defence’s questions in court). There, the joke actively excluded the forensic scientists from the community that was being performed. Thus, the same community that was invoked by one joke could be subverted by another; the only constant were the crime scene technicians themselves.

This shifting belonging reflects the students’ changing identity. Their professional past is in police work, and they are still part of the police force, but the NFC is in charge of their training and professionalization.⁷ It also reflects the crime scene technicians’ in-between position in the criminal justice system. Apart from examining crime scenes, they mediate between the criminal justice system’s professions, particularly between the police and prosecution on the one hand and the NFC on the other (Kruse 2020a), for example explaining forensics to investigation leaders or translating the investigation’s questions into requests for laboratory analyses. These jokes enacted and reinforced in- and exclusions between professions, but, taken together, they also suggested that boundaries might (need to) shift with shifting situations and circumstances.

However, in this ambiguous place, the crime scene simulations conveyed, the crime scene technicians filled a central function in the criminal justice system. That is, the crime

⁷ For more about such a professionalization from the outside, see Wilson-Kovacs (2014) or Kruse (2020a).

scene simulations also idealized crime scene work and, by extension, crime scene technicians and their role.

Idealizing

The most palpable idealization in the simulations was that there was a clear answer to each crime scene, accessible through the photographs and films shown and discussed after the exercise. Together with the abundance of traces, these revelations made the crimes unambiguously and satisfactorily solvable, echoing fictional portrayals of criminal justice (Kruse 2010).

The solutions of the homicides also included motives, conveyed through clues at the crime scene and confirmed in the classroom discussion of the reports. For example, the teachers made the bedroom of one of the homicide victims – a former military officer – very plain and neat in contrast to the messy room in which his rather shady son had been staying. They also placed a newspaper on the father's bedside table, open on a page with advertisements for apartments, some of which had been circled. All of this was meant to describe the relationship between the two: they had very different outlooks on life, the father was getting tired of his drug-dealing son's disrupting his life, the only way he could see of getting rid of the son was moving to an apartment with room for only one person, and the son getting desperate and killing his father. The students duly and diligently picked up on those clues, and the strained relationship was brought up in the discussion, affirming the students' interpretation.

The desirable personal qualities discussed earlier were an integral part of solving these idealized cases, not least because the teachers actively emphasized them. At one of the crime scenes, for example, they very carefully nestled a "used" condom into the trash already sitting in a can. Things that are thrown away, they explained to me, often slide down between other items, and they wanted the students to not only understand but also experience the necessity of being tenacious and looking beyond the surface. In other words, the idealized teaching situation also encompassed the attitude expected from a crime scene technician.

Thus, the professional self-understanding the simulations facilitated was centred on perseverance and diligence being rewarded with a key role in solving crime. In other words, they substantially improved on the crime scene technicians' role in the criminal justice system: While they did allow for the students to train and display a range of skills, they also made it possible for them to solve the crime satisfactorily and almost single-handedly, whereas in everyday practice, crimes typically are solved through the cooperation of several professions in the criminal justice system contributing different competences (Kruse 2016).

In this achievability of certainty, the idealized crime scenes constituted a practice that differed at least in some aspects from the students' future work. While the clear and certain solutions were a satisfying conclusion to the exercise, such unambiguity is unattainable in everyday criminal justice. It is, of course, possible for crime scene technicians to encounter crime scenes whose traces allow them to conclude not only a course of events but also the reason for these events – however, they will never be entirely certain. As Taylor (2014) points out for medical training that has gone from clinical work to simulations, the unambiguity in training simulations also means that students are not trained in dealing with future ambiguity and uncertainty. There, the idealization of crime scene work is at odds with the training's emphasis on communicating uncertainty clearly. The idealization did, however,

reflect and magnify the emphasis the teachers placed on the crime scene technicians' work and expertise. As they frequently pointed out, crime scene technicians are the only members of the criminal justice system to see and process crime scenes;⁸ in the simulations, they even solved the crime.

Such idealizations reconstitute the facilitators' understanding – conscious or unconscious – of what the practice “really” is (or perhaps should be), which elements are essential, and which can be glossed over. The model on which a simulation is based may however, be idealized in a way that makes it different from the situation for which the participants of the simulation are being prepared. Stone (2017, 2018), for example, shows how the simulations she studied privileged the reconstitution of particular military practices – in the instructors' words, the “real thing” (Stone 2017: 156) – over the experience of the role-players' hired to stand in for civilians to train interactions.

That is, when instructors insisted the simulation be made “real” (as they put it), “cultural representations of the Middle East were shoehorned into specific conceptions of authenticity” (Stone 2017: 156). In consequence, the simulations' constituted and conveyed a “real thing” that differed at least partially from what participants will encounter in their future work: Although the role players on which Stone's work centres were specifically hired as cultural experts, their expertise and perspectives were subordinated to military objectives, perspectives, and understandings (Stone 2017: 156ff, 2018: 540f). In other words, the military simulations were idealizations that overrode the practice they were supposed to reconstitute.

A potential difficulty with that is that the understandings that shape the training situation may carry problematic values or stereotypes that then contribute to shaping professional practices – like, for example, understandings of Middle Eastern civilians. When it comes to the police, scholars have discussed stereotypical attitudes toward minorities (e.g., Sollund 2007; Uhnö 2015), problematic understandings of domestic violence (Loftus 2009: 128ff), a culture of silence (Ivković and O'Connor Shelley 2008, Wieslander 2019), (covert) resistance toward official discourses and values (Wieslander 2021, Workman-Stark 2022), and potentially problematic intra-professional loyalty (Löfgren and Wieslander 2020). Such problematic yet elusive aspects of professional cultures might very well be transported (also) through playful aspects of professional training.

In the simulations, the neat and tidy ex-military father in contrast to the slovenly drug-dealing son might touch upon a stereotypical understanding of victims and perpetrators, and naming an address Smutty Street may suggest the dismissal of sexual crime as not violence but indecency. Still, neither the teachers' nor the students' treatment of these crime scenes and scenarios themselves was dismissive, and there were also opportunities for stereotypes, not least minority stereotypes, that were not taken – fictitious names from the different cases that garnered comment were, for example, the rather neutral nickname “The Steak” (*Biffen*) for a suspect, or a person found dead at a gambling table carrying an identity card in the name of a former prime minister – names that did not carry connotations beyond the suspect's presumable brawn and the incongruousness of a former prime minister (who, in addition, was reputed to have business sense) gambling in a highly questionable garage. This may be due to the absence of stereotypes or, conversely, the teachers' awareness of them and

⁸ In complicated cases, the investigation leader or even the court may inspect the crime scene. Such an inspection, however, takes place after the crime scene technicians have processed and thus made sense of the crime scene.

their consequent adherence to official discourse.

In other words, the idealizations enabled by framing a simulation as not quite “real” are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they make it possible to convey and develop personal qualities and identities as part of crime scene practice. On the other hand, they harbour a risk of both deviating from the practice they are meant to train, and additionally, of conveying and perpetuating problematic ideals. That is, like for example canteen banter (Sollund 2007) and workplace joking in general (Paton and Filby 2019 [1996]), the playful parts of professional training are unregulated (and unregulatable) spaces where practices and values that might clash with an organization’s or profession’s official and formal values (cf Wieslander 2021) might be maintained, perpetuated, and internalized along with or instead of the official ones. This also suggests that bias might have a cultural dimension in addition to the case-specific, organizational, and cognitive factors that for example Dror (2025) discusses as sources of bias in forensics and criminal justice.

Conclusion: Making Professionals

The crime scene exercises show that training simulations not only train skills, but also shape (professional) personalities, anchored in a specific professional community. This suggests that, instead of (or in addition to) being searched for in recruitment, as proposed by Kelty (2011), personal qualities regarded as crucial for an occupation can be conveyed and cultivated during training. Being the right kind of person for the job may be a matter of *becoming* that person – that is, one can be taught to perform oneself as a diligent, humble crime scene technician, or an assertive physicist (Traweek 1998: 75), and in all probability also a suspicious police officer (Skolnick 1994 [1966]: 41ff).

In the crime scene exercises, this socialization was intertwined with humour and playfulness; elements that marked the exercises – and in particular the joking and teasing – as different from other teaching situations during the course. There are clear parallels to cultural performances, that is, events like ritual or theatre, that are set apart from everyday life and that combine the entertaining with the transformative; in this particular case humour and playfulness with becoming fully a member of a new profession. Similar to cultural performances, the serious and the entertaining depended on each other: the encouraged personal qualities complemented the “seriously” taught approaches to crime scene work, and the values conveyed through joking and teasing were present also in non-playful contexts. For example, the teachers sometimes noted or discussed how students cooperated with others or how they responded to critique or setbacks, so they were clearly paying attention to more than forensic skills. Still, if they talked to the students about this, it was outside of my hearing, and certainly not in the classroom setting – perhaps because intervening in students’ personal qualities would be considered difficult to reconcile with respect for the students’ personal integrity. Yet, the relative homogeneity of what the humour and playfulness conveyed – and the students’ capable participation – suggests that they, despite being marked as “play” (Bateson 1972), were an integral part of becoming a crime scene technician.

This suggests that close ethnographic attention to other occupations’ professional training, and in particular the parts of that at first glance may seem insignificant or not serious – like the disruptions Johnson (2008b) discussed, or the joking and playfulness in the crime scene simulations – may reveal ways of becoming a member of the profession

beyond acquiring the necessary skills. These parts may play an important role in conveying and perpetuating professional ideals and occupational culture, be it consciously or not.

In the case of the crime scene technicians, this acquired professional personality tied into and supported the skills and approaches taught in lectures and exercises: Diligence and humbleness supported the impartiality that is underlined in training as well as deliberately part of forensic objectivity (see Kruse 2020b), as well as being a shared value in the criminal justice system. They also supported the perseverance to look beyond the surface – not only of trash cans – and to thus make sure that a crime scene is examined thoroughly and systematically. In other words, socializing students into how to not only suitably perform crime scene examinations, but also *be* crime scene technicians contributes to future crime scene examinations that are closer to the criminal justice system's ideal (and the simulations' idealizations). In other cases of professional training, they might clash – and provide a different insight into occupational culture than the curriculum would on its own.

In addition, humour and playfulness may not be deemed an appropriate vehicle for socialization in all occupations; in the simulations, they can be connected to the humour that permeates also other parts of police work (e.g. Gayadeen and Philips 2016, Holdaway 1988, Granér 2014, Pogrebin and Poole 1988, Uhnöo 2019, Wieslander 2019). Other occupations may have other ways of conveying and cultivating a desired performance of self that tie into their particular occupational culture.

What the crime scene simulations illustrate, then, is that a profession's reproduction may entail quite a bit more than teaching specific skills. Turning a novice into a fully-fledged member of the profession is also a matter of conveying their place in the social order, both within the profession and in relation to others, as well as socializing them to perform appropriate professional personalities. The prominence of humour – also otherwise prevalent in the police context – in socializing crime scene technicians further suggests that *how* this socialization is accomplished provides further insights into the professional culture in question. In other words, the crime scene simulations contribute to understanding occupational values and cultures and their perpetuation.

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PERSPECTIVES



Between Us – What is That?

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In 2021, Anand Pandian, anthropology professor at Johns Hopkins University, gave a lecture at Stockholm University about a research and writing project in which he was engaged. It was the time of the pandemic, so I could only attend the event by Zoom, but we had a quick e-mail exchange afterwards. I had already read his previous book, *A Possible Anthropology* (2019), where he drew on ancestors in the anthropological canon like Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, and on anthropologically inspired storytellers like Zora Neale Hurston and Ursula LeGuin, to explore the horizons of anthropological inquiry.

Now the result of that project he talked about has appeared: the book *Something Between Us* (2025). But what does that title mean? It could refer to something that connects us – but in Pandian's case, it is whatever separates people, keeps them apart: “the everyday walls of American life”. He had begun thinking about this book project on the morning of November 9, 2016, the day after Americans had first voted to make Donald Trump their president. So what kind of country was it that would make such a person its head of state?

It is a book with an unusual format: a set of dispatches from different places in the United States, a multisite series of brief ethnographies from locations where he finds the varieties of separateness particularly striking. His journey takes him to Los Angeles, to Fargo, North Dakota, to Shelbyville, Tennessee, to Columbus, Ohio, and to his home town, Baltimore. And more places. But then it is a shared ingredient that he is there himself: born in the United States, but the son of immigrants from India (his father is a medical doctor), and brown-skinned in places where most people are white. He may have grown up in comfortable circumstances with American playmates, but then at home he may have learned of the perspectives of parents to whom this was at first a foreign country.

The book is easy to read; and while it may be primarily intended for an American readership, the soft power of American culture probably makes it fairly readily accessible to readers such as those in Sweden as well. If it is easy to read, however, it may not be a kind of text that is easy to write. It involves a kind of writing which needs to be practiced, which may not come so readily to inhabitants of the academic ivory tower. We may find it more akin to what goes under such labels as “investigative reporting” or “creative non-fiction”. (I confess that I encounter it more often, and enjoy it, in the *New Yorker* magazine than in the journals of my discipline.)

Quickly Pandian points to housing as one area of growing separateness. Gated communities have become increasingly widespread: neighborhoods where no stranger is allowed in the streets inside the gates, whether on foot or in a car. But in other urban communities, too, housing now tends to turn away from the streets. One spends more time on the other side of the house, windows on the street side are smaller. The front porch used to be an iconic feature of the American home, a place where one could encounter and commune

with neighbors and strangers alike. But there are not so many front porches any longer.

How does one move around? Americans are car people, but the kinds of cars have changed. There is a growing number of SUVs, “sport utility vehicles”: very large cars with much space inside for passengers or other loads, and moving high above the ground. The people inside may feel free and safe, but the driver does not so readily see what is moving further down. This results in a higher accident rate. More pedestrians get hit.

There is of course “race”, in the American social sense. Pandian is in Denton, Texas, to watch the local celebration of “Juneteenth” – the day in 1865 when Blacks in Texas learned that they were no longer slaves. Since a few years back this is a national holiday. After slavery ended Denton had one stable Black neighborhood, in a fairly central location. But in another part of town there was Ku Klux Klan. And then in the early 1920s, the old-style segregationists in power decided to use the space for other purposes, so the Black residents were removed.

Yet in the long run there was some hope. When Pandian was there, Denton had its first Black mayor. Pandian met him for coffee. This man had briefly been a member of the radical Black Panther movement in his youth, but his military service overseas had then shown him unexpected solidarity between soldiers of different races. So on his return he had joined the more reformist old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). And he had spent some time teaching in a local school.

Pandian also discusses at some length his continuous contacts, in large part by e-mail, with Frank, a businessman in Southern Michigan, running restaurants there and in Indiana. They had first met at a Libertarian conference which Pandian attended for research purposes in 2017. Frank had been worried for one thing about the danger that Islamist extremists might bring to his small home town, and about violent elements that might come across that distant southern border of his country. What did not really seem to bother him, on the other hand, was the pandemic that became a topic of their correspondence some years later. Frank had only contempt for face masks as a preventive tool. They could affect his business. In January 2021, he drove with a friend to Washington, DC, to attend the Stop the Steal rally which first-term president Trump arranged to protest that he had lost the 2020 election. But Frank did not go with that march to the Capitol which ended with violence. Instead he drove back to Michigan.

Pandian concludes that Frank and he had different, opposed views about almost everything. Everything seemed to conspire against the very possibility of their conversing: “But the pursuit of such conversations can at least bring home how much work there is to do. We ought to try and grasp them as carefully as possible: when exactly they manage to work, when they might begin to break down.”

Perhaps *Something Between Us* is a future classic – that could depend on how the 2010s and 2020s will be viewed seen from later in history. Anyway, what I quickly come to think of as I read Pandian’s reporting on the United States, is if I can imagine some similar kind of ethnography of present-day Sweden.

This report on Sweden need not be a one-person project, in Pandian’s footsteps, but could be the joint effort of a team, a duo or more. It could be a good idea if one of the participants had an immigrant background of some sort, with whatever special perspective that could contribute. And all the participants should not be of the same gender.

Again, it would be multisite ethnography. No doubt it would include a “särskilt utsatt

område”: the kind of urban area particularly exposed to varied social problems, in large part inhabited by one or more ethnic minorities, the sort of area which at some times, in some places, could have been described as a “ghetto”. The ethnography here need not focus on organized crime – perhaps we could leave that to the criminologists. But it would describe the everyday lives of people who have it in their neighborhoods, possibly even in their personal networks.

Then the ethnography of today’s Sweden would also portray the kinds of places where inhabitants feel that they are no longer in the kind of place which they remember, and which they prefer – where they miss a past. I find much of this in *Älven i mig* (2023) by Jannete Hentati, a book detailing her return to the North Swedish region where she grew up, around Lule River, now threatened in its community life by the large-scale development of hydropower. Hentati has a PhD in social anthropology. But another book which offers a view of a lost past is *Saknad: på spaning efter landet inom oss*, by Katarina Barrling and Cecilia Garne (2023) – two political scientists. (I have learned, however, that Barrling, in her doctoral dissertation, found inspiration from Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz.)

My imagined ethnography project should also include interviews with people of different ages, which could show differences in views of the past and the future. Not least could this involve relationships to what is called “social media” – cellphones, laptops, whatever. There has certainly been much debate over this in Sweden recently. Children may become so preoccupied with what is on their screens that they fail to engage in face-to-face relationships. And they may make the wrong, dangerous contacts. So should they not be allowed to have personal apparatuses of this kind until they get a bit older? Old people, on the other hand, may not be quite as involved, and quite as skilled. Would some number of them possibly feel a bit excluded, and a bit handicapped? A bit culturally deprived? They may also be contacted by strangers who in one way or other are out to cheat them. So “social media” turn out to be asocial.

One may also want to find informants in groups which may have special insights into present-day diversity. School teachers, involved with all the things going on in class rooms, as well as with bureaucracies at different levels. Members of police forces, patrolling the streets. Reporters from local newspapers. Leaders of local football (“soccer”) teams, men’s and women’s, who also deal with diversity and keep young people away from undesirable activities.

Now it so happened that the week when I got hold of Pandian’s new book was also “Almedalen Week”, that mid-summer week when leaders of the eight Swedish political parties appear, one after the other, at a park site in the medieval city of Visby, on the island of Gotland, to speak to the audience seated in front of them, but also to a nationwide television audience. They do their best to appear attractive in a friendly way, and they tend to dwell on a topic which they all happen to share: the history of their small country, its passage from the early twentieth century as a poor country where many inhabitants chose to emigrate, to the present where most people can feel reasonably comfortable and satisfied. A history to be proud of.

But this is 2025. Next year, 2026, will be a national election year, and there will be less of togetherness, more of differences where party leaders and their associates will depict their adversaries as negatively as possible. A great deal will have come between them, in Pandian’s sense. I would like to see the team of anthropologists trying to report on that scene. To begin

with, one might think that those leaders make up an interesting set. At this point, five of them are women, two of them are men. That is not the way it was twenty-five years ago. The eighth party, the Greens, have long divided its leadership between one male and one female spokesperson. And then two of the leaders are of immigrant background. One of them was born in the South Swedish town which had the birth clinic nearest to the refugee camp where her Iranian parents were housed at the time. The other was born in Hamburg, but her parents (her father a Palestinian born in Haifa, Israel, and her mother from Southern Lebanon – one Sunni, one Shia) soon thereafter moved to Sweden. Of the other party leaders two are women from Uppsala.

So, what will be the features of their campaigns? Street appearances, door-to-door seeking for possible voters, media debates, perhaps a more or less intentional spread of rumors, “fake news”? How will our ethnographers combine participant observation, interviews, life histories, media studies? From different field sites around the country? I would look forward to seeing the results.

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