Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
Sauls, H.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
This chapter describes what happens when a new boy is admitted to a secure care facility. The process of placement in the institution is multi-dimensional. First, admission implies a physical movement. On admission day boys enter the institution and are assigned to a dormitory where they will spend most of their time until the state has decided their fate. However, this movement also implies entering a pre-existing social world: a world of hierarchies between staff and boys, and among the boys themselves. Interactions between these actors are laden with power struggles and negotiations.

Boys are positioned and they position themselves within various roles and hierarchies. This chapter discusses the negotiation and expression of power between boys, especially between those newly admitted and those who have been institutionalised for a longer period, the ones I refer to as ‘seasoned’ boys. I will describe how a new boy’s admission influences the dynamic of the institution, how seasoned boys respond to the new admission, and what changes and negotiations are experienced among them. The title of this chapter, ‘Being placed’, therefore refers both to the experiences of boys entering the institution and the experiences of boys who receive the new boy in their midst. But before I analyse how boys are being placed, I consider the case of a boy making the transition from being apprehended, appearing in court and entering the institution.

4.1. The transition from the outside to the inside

4.1.1. The case of Dimples

It was my first visit to juvenile court, which is commonly known to inmates, legal representatives and frequent visitors as ‘J-court’. The day before visiting, I decided to join Ryan, one of the boys with whom I had been working for several months and who features later in this thesis. It was my intention to observe the procedures that incarcerated children are subjected to and the people they interact with in this space. But that morning I missed Ryan’s appearance in court because there had been a misunderstanding regarding what time I needed to be there. After talking to one of the prosecutors on duty, I was informed that if I waited, I could observe the case and legal proceedings of another young boy who would appear later that day. The prosecutor warned me that he was uncertain how long I would have to wait as there was no specific time that was allocated to each court appearance. He also informed me that chances were high that this particular boy would be sent to Middletown. This was the day I met ‘Dimples’.

I was sitting in the waiting area. This area was not a designated room but a short passage where family members, witnesses and friends gathered while waiting their turn to be called by the prosecutor. It was furnished with long, hard wooden benches – not very comfortable for visitors who had to be seated and wait for hours on end. On the sides of the
walls, there were printed pages, new and old, of names of accused that would appear for that particular day. Three hours went by before I finally heard the prosecutor shout, ‘Heidi Sauls!’ I stood up and walked towards the prosecutor, who signalled me to follow him. Before we entered the room, he explained that the boy Dimples was appearing before the magistrate because he had been physically assaulting his mother and she had laid the criminal charge against him. Soon after, we entered the court room.

As I opened the door, there sat Dimples and his mother. He was dressed in blue jeans with a white T-shirt. He was sitting on the wooden bench, while desperately clutching his mother’s arm as they waited for the magistrate to enter the room. The first thing I noticed about Dimples was his scrawny physique. I remember thinking that he seemed smaller than most 12-year-olds. He had longish, brown curly hair that complemented his tanned skin. His deep dimples peeped through on both cheeks every time he spoke to his mother. As I stood near the door, the prosecutor looked over at me and pointed, indicating for me to sit on the bench directly behind Dimples and his mother.

The prosecutor then came over from the table where he was positioned nearer to the magistrate’s podium and introduced me to Dimples and his mother. He informed them that I was working for the institution that the boy was being sent to. He told Dimples that he did not have to worry because I would look after him once he was admitted. The boy’s mother acknowledged that she did not know that such an institution, dealing with such young children, existed. She even said that she wanted and needed him to be institutionalised because she was unable to deal with him at home. Dimples did not utter a word. He sat there quietly, clearly anxious. His mother tried to smile at me and then turned to wait for the hearing to proceed. As we sat waiting, Dimples’ eyes flicked across the room, trying to catch a glimpse of everything and everyone. All he could do was wait on his fate to be decided upon.

Shortly after entering the court room, the magistrate walked in and, not long after, Dimples’ fate had been decided. He was sentenced to Middletown and was told to reappear two weeks from that day. The magistrate took Dimples’ folder and placed it with the folders of the boys who had already appeared, already looking for the folder belonging to the next case. Sitting calmly next to his mother, Dimples seemed unaware of what had just happened. It was only when the police officer approached Dimples to escort him to the cells, situated beneath the court rooms that the boy realised what was going on.

In the meantime, the prosecutor suggested I move away from where Dimples was sitting, explaining that many boys become aggressive and attempt to fight off the police officers who will take them away. Before the police officer could grab hold of Dimples, Dimples started to cry. He turned to his mother and apologised profusely. He screamed, ‘Mummy, ek is sorry! Ek is sorry! Ek wil met mummy bly’ (Mommy, I am sorry! I am sorry! I want to stay with you). His mother held onto his arm as she tried to calm him. Dimples was trapped between the benches as the policeman tried to get a hold of him. A second policeman came to assist while Dimples continued to resist. He cried and shouted, ‘Nee, ek wil nie gaan nie! Ek wil by my ma bly’ (No, I don’t want to go! I want to stay with my mother).

Throughout this ordeal, Dimples’ mother did not display much emotion while she sat on the bench watching as her son was dragged away. After he was taken away, she walked out of the room. The prosecutor remarked to her: ‘Ja, nou is dit te laat. Hulle hou vir hulle soos groot mans en as dit te laat is, wil hulle huil’ (Yes, now it is too late. They want to
behave like big men and when it’s too late, they want to cry). Hours after his court appearance, Dimples was escorted to Middletown.

4.1.2. Moving behind bars

The vignette that introduces Dimples displays the tense moments before the incarceration of a child as he hovers between the outside world and the institution. In an instant, the decision is made that he will be transported from a world of relative freedom to a world of confinement, far away from the streets known to him, and his community, family and friends. Ideally, boys such as Dimples are incarcerated in a police cell directly after being apprehended for an illegal act. The social worker on duty is called and once he or she has assessed the boy, a decision is made whether the boy can be sent home, which is one of the primary objectives of the Children’s Act: to divert children in conflict with the law away from the formal criminal justice system, where appropriate. If the social worker decides that the boy needs to be on trial, the boy will stay in the police cell. Within days or weeks, he will be summoned to appear in court where the magistrate will decide whether the boy will be immediately sentenced or await trial in a secure care facility. As explained before, a secure care facility is an in-between institution. Boys are temporarily disconnected from the rest of society until a final decision has been made about whether they should be sentenced or allowed to return to society. But notwithstanding its in-between status, the institution is a social space in itself, requiring specific behavior and adherence to certain norms. For the boy involved, to be sentenced to a secure care facility means that he must exit a familiar world of expectations, roles and norms and enter a new, temporary world where he has to re-socialise and fundamentally reconfigure his identity and behaviour.

Most boys in my research experienced the process of incarceration as very difficult and emotionally distressing. Staff working closely with the boys confirmed this commonly experienced distress. The transition phase is loaded with uncertainty and anxiety. When the boys appear in court, they may still have hope that the charges will be dropped or that they can await trial under parental supervision. They are usually unprepared for the possibility that they might be whisked away with only the clothes they wear and immediately thereafter be incarcerated. Their emotional responses are directly linked to the uncertainty they experience when being forced to leave the familiar ‘vryes’ (freedom), as the boys call it, and shift into unfamiliar terrain, physically and psychologically. Loss is the dominant feeling the boys described to me. The boys feel separated from family and friends; they feel a loss of freedom and control, and a concomitant vulnerability and fear of the unknown. Whenever I spoke to the boys about their transition from the community through the courts to the institution, they claimed they would have preferred to continue in the situations they were familiar with, even though they acknowledged how these were characterised by poverty, crime and violence. They would rather remain in a painful but familiar environment than to move to an unfamiliar setting with new challenges, people and spaces. The deeds that brought them to Middletown may impress us as the deeds of adult men, but when it comes to being away from home, the boys’ vulnerability is revealed.

1 See the Annual Report on the implementation of the Child Justice Act, 2008 (Act No. 75 of 2008). This report was compiled by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development and presented to Parliament on 22 June 2011. The main objectives of the diversion and alternative sentencing services are: to deal with a child outside the formal criminal justice system in appropriate cases; encourage the child to be accountable for the harm caused by him or her; meet the particular needs of the individual child.
4.2. Moving in

4.2.1 Boys entering the gates

Throughout my fieldwork, I closely observed boys being admitted to the institution. I watched as the boys anxiously entered. A boy would be escorted out of the police van, pass through the steel gates and enter the institution. Once inside, a staff member welcomes him and the official ‘handing over’ of the boy from the police to the institution takes place. ‘Handing over’ implies that the police officer completes official release documents for the boy, thereby relinquishing custody over him. The staff member at the institution has to complete an official admission application to take over custody of the boy and welcome him to the institution. This procedure confirms that the boy becomes the responsibility of the institution. When this has been accomplished, the boy is given a meal and allowed to shower. He is provided with clothing that all boys are given at admission. His personal belongings, including the clothes he was wearing, are stored for when he is discharged or makes a court appearance. After his meal and shower, the staff member orientates the boy within the building. He is introduced to other staff and eventually his peers. In most cases, the boy is escorted to the dormitory which he will be sharing with his peers. The staff member will then present the boy to the care workers on duty.

Generally, seasoned boys are eager to meet new admissions and they instantly express interest in him. When a new boy enters his dormitory, seasoned boys huddle around him to ask questions. Whereas in the beginning of fieldwork these questions and eagerness appeared as simple curiosity, repeated observation of the process and discussions with the boys proved the process to be more complex. When the seasoned boys surround the boy and start asking questions, they are in fact assessing him as a new member of their social world, in a way very different from the assessment conducted in the offices of the staff. During their interaction, they attempt to get a sense of who the new boy is and particularly who or what he could possibly become to them. At this initial meeting, the seasoned boys create perceptions and make assumptions about the new boy and the potential position he will assume among his peers.

The seasoned boys create an English nickname (even though most of the boys are Afrikaans speaking) for a newly admitted boy, ‘the new one’, which even the staff used for each new admission. The label distinguishes such a boy from the seasoned boys, not only in a factual way but also in reference to the new boy’s low position in the hierarchy among the boys. By using the nickname, seasoned boys and staff create a symbolic boundary between the new boy and the boys who have been incarcerated for a longer period. In this way they reproduce a sense of community and belonging among the seasoned boys and simultaneously a temporary social isolation of the new ones. The nickname symbolises a particular perception and understanding of the new admission’s identity, the position he attains and what he is likely to experience as long as he remains defined as a new one. Indeed, the label and the experiences it stands for are not permanent. They persist until a newer individual or group of boys enters the institution, the boy is integrated into the community, or the boy escapes the name in some other way.

Staff pay more attention to the new one’s physical experience of being admitted than to the emotional turmoil such a boy experiences on admission day and the days thereafter. The institution merely introduces the boy to the physical place and people, whereas their
emotional challenges are unacknowledged and unattended to during these early days. Insight into these challenges is important since they fundamentally influence the dynamics and interaction between the boys.

4.2.2. Emotional turmoil

Upon entering the institution, boys experience a range of emotions when making the transition from a world of relative freedom on the streets to confinement during incarceration. Because of their different backgrounds and personalities, each boy’s emotional struggle and experience during the transition is different. Still, common threads were observed. From my observation emerges a distinct difference between the experiences of re-offenders and first-time offenders. For re-offenders the experience of admission and incarceration is familiar and therefore they seemed to adjust more easily. First-time offenders are confronted with more challenges. Also, boys express their concerns in different ways. Some showed their emotional turmoil in body language and behaviour, for instance by isolating themselves from the rest of the boys and avoiding verbal interaction.

This is what Alex did. Alex is a quiet boy who remained silent and aloof when he was asked to get involved in an activity within the dorm. When staff or peers tried to coerce him, he would respond aggressively. Most boys, however, would show their turmoil through expressive behaviour, for example by displaying feelings of anxiety and responding nervously to their peers when confronted with a possible threat.

While spending time with the boys in the dorm, I would sometimes ask the boys what they thought a new boy was thinking and feeling when he walked through the gates of the institution. By posing the question in this indirect way, I allowed a space for the boys to reflect on someone else’s emotions rather than to directly expose themselves in front of their peers. I hoped this would help them circumvent feelings of vulnerability. At one of these informal group discussions, the boys sat quietly as they waited for the first response. Then Michael responded, ‘You think that they [the other boys] are going to hit you a lot and take your things from you. It looks like a prison’. On my probing why he thought the boys would hit such a boy he replied, ‘I don’t know’, while he looked around the room to catch the responses of his peers. I channelled my attention to the rest of the boys, but before I could pose a question another boy said, ‘Yes! It’s just like a prison when you come inside. I felt scared and nervous the first time I came in here’. His friend commented, ‘I was just quiet and unhappy because I’m going to the institution’. During another discussion, one boy answered, ‘I was nervous! I thought they would take my things from me.’ And another shouted: ‘You feel a bit nervous because you don’t know anybody yet. So you just sit one side and watch them. There are a lot of things that go through your mind, things like, what can these people all do to you? But as the days go by, it starts to disappear from your memory.’ I explored this statement by asking him why and how this feeling disappears from his memory. He replied: ‘You start making friends and speaking to people. And that’s how you start knowing each other.’

The boys eloquently expressed a variety of emotions, including fear, sadness and vulnerability. It was apparent that many boys experienced similar emotions and concerns about safety and especially of being abused. Stories they had heard about prisons and institutions where criminals are incarcerated had shaped their ideas of the facility and evoked anxiety and fear. Indeed, when they entered, the physical appearance of the institution – its
Barbed wire, steel gates and security staff – confirmed their perceptions. But the boys were not only concerned about their own safety and experiences in the institution. Many of the boys’ concerns are closely linked to the outside world and the people living there. They expressed concern for their families. ‘I worry about my parents and I miss my family’ said Tim. Wesley expressed much concern for his grandmother who was elderly and depended on him in various ways: ‘Now that I’m inside here, my grandmother is alone at home. There’s no one to help her if something goes wrong. And now I’m stuck here. I miss her.’

Thus, during the time boys are removed from their communities and enter the institution all of them share a peculiar mixture of, on the one hand, a sense of vulnerability and, on the other, homesickness and concern for parents and siblings they have left behind. For all boys the emotional intensity of these experiences fades with time. In particular, the development of friendships with seasoned boys may create a new sense of belonging and diminish their feelings of vulnerability. Most new ones are welcomed through a process of learning and initiation administered not only by staff but also by their peers. It is through this initiation process that we can learn how the new ones become enmeshed in the existing hierarchy of the seasoned boys and how the seasoned boys negotiate their own positions in the midst of a new admission.

4.3. The initiation of new ones

When a new one enters the institution, before he is introduced to his peers, staff members welcome and orientate the boy. They inform him of the institutional rules that include changing his physical appearance by wearing the institution’s clothing and getting short haircuts, compulsory medical examinations, and placement in a specific room. These rules are generally unfamiliar to a new boy and revolve around such matters as when and where to smoke or areas of the premises that is out-of-bounds. But the boys themselves also have their own rules that the new one will be introduced to.

On 8 January 2008, while I was sitting with a group of boys in a corner of Sharks, playing games, a new one arrived in the dorm. Immediately, the boys jumped up and surrounded him. They crowded the boy, pushing each other out of the way to get a better glimpse of who he was and what he looked like. The new one was then taken to his room and allowed to shower before he could answer any of the many questions his peers had asked in the first few minutes of his admission into the dorm. The rest stood around peeping down the passage to catch another glimpse of him. The care worker then turned to them and screamed, ‘Gaan sit!’ (Sit down!).

Once they calmed down, the boys started commenting on the new one. The first observations were about the new one’s physical appearance. They said that he was big because he was taller than most of the boys. Angelo, one of the seasoned boys, started teasing the others and said that the new one had big fists like him and that the new boy was going to beat the other boys. The others objected and said that the new one was not able to beat them. Dylan and Nasief shouted, ‘Hulle gaan vir hom nat hou’ (They’re going to bully him). I asked what the boys would do if they bullied the new boy and why. They replied that Darius (one of the seasoned, more feared boys in the dorm), together with some other boys, was going to abuse the new admission. Dylan subsequently shouted, ‘They did that to Nasief as well’. Nasief sat quietly and then turned away. Nasief later explained:
The older boys bully me, yes. See what happened last week with this boy, his name is Zipho. Everybody is scared of him, that Xhosa. And everybody just listens to what he says. So he sent that other boy to hit me against my chest. So he hit me and I jumped up and smacked him and gave him a punch in his ribs. But he told that boy to come and hit me. So when the Sir [a staff member] asked who was bullying here, that boy said I was bullying him. But Zipho sent that boy to hit me. So this morning when I woke up, Art did not know where his face cloth was, so he took mine. When I took it back, Art started hitting me and Zipho who wasn’t even a part of this, also started hitting me. It goes like this every day. They [the seasoned boys] are always on my case.

4.3.1. Explicit rules, implicit hierarchies

Let us look a bit further into the vulnerability of new ones in the institution during the process of being placed. In any social institution certain hierarchal positions, rules and expectations exist that are understood among the various players in the institution. In Middletown there are certain rules, regulations and procedures that are officially imposed by the institution and implemented by both staff and boys. These rules are considered official rules that I will refer to as explicit rules. An example of an explicit rule is the admission procedure that the boy has to undergo once he is admitted to the institution. When a new one is admitted, he is taken out of familiar territory and incorporated into an unfamiliar community and structure. He is aware that he has to adapt to new rules and existing hierarchies. As long as they are learning these explicit rules they are at a disadvantage compared to the seasoned boys. However, they are at a further disadvantage due to the existence of non-official rules beyond the regulations and procedures enforced by staff. These are the informal rules that have been created and are understood and practised among the seasoned boys. I refer to these rules as the implicit rules.

Staff members may be aware of some of the implicit rules and condone them, but they are not always certain about the meanings attached to the different rules that are expressed and maintained among the boys. A new one is unaware of these implicit rules and can only learn them through trial and error, or from explanations by the seasoned boys. The longer the new one is institutionalised, the more familiar he becomes with the underlying rules that are enforced, understood and communicated among the boys themselves. Such rules include the loyalty practiced between boys who come from the same communities. When boys live in the same community, they commonly take care of each other inside the institution. Seasoned boys of a particular community will not allow new ones who come from the same community or a neighbouring community to be bullied inside the institution. Similarly, when new ones are institutionalised, they learn from their peers about the different social groups in the institution. The new ones will learn which of the boys they will more easily build relationships with and with whom this will be problematic. These relationships will determine their positions in the hierarchy within the first few weeks.

The implicit rules can be understood as the rules regarding hierarchical relations that the boys develop among themselves in response to the explicit and rigid institutional hierarchy in which they collectively occupy the lowest position. Through implicit rules some produce and reproduce a degree of empowerment for themselves, but an empowerment that is
often built upon the disempowerment of weaker boys. Weakness is not only tied to personal characteristics of the boys or the loyalties extended to them because of their belonging to certain communities. There is also a time dimension involved. All new ones, irrespective of who they are, are in principle more vulnerable to the power struggle, because of their unfamiliarity with the institution’s explicit and implicit rules.

4.3.2. Specific practices of initiation

Placing a new boy firmly into the position felt appropriate for him by his more seasoned peers occurs through a process of initiation, which reveals the established relationships of power and understanding in the hierarchy among the seasoned boys and also how the new ones become a part of this existing hierarchy. To earn belonging, new boys undergo various forms of bullying and intimidation. Different secure care facilities have similar initiation practices. In Middletown, one of the ways that a new boy is welcomed and at the same time tested by his peers is through the initiation practice commonly referred to by the boys as ‘nat hou’ or, as they sometimes phrase it, ‘hou hom nat’.

‘Hou hom nat’

The literal translation of ‘nat hou’ or ‘hou hom nat’ is to keep something or someone wet or not allowing something or someone to dry. In other words, seasoned boys do not allow a new one to become comfortable and thereby keep them in a state of disquiet. They are attempting to keep the new ones in a space where they feel anxious and vulnerable. ‘Nat hou’ includes different forms of harassment, ranging from verbal taunting to physical and sexual abuse, but not uncommonly a combination of all of these. The duration of this initiation process may vary considerably. It can extend over days, weeks and even months but is fragile enough to be disrupted for several reasons, such as the admission of another new one, the victim himself successfully challenging this process or peers protecting and defending the new one. But if the new one is unsuccessful in challenging the process, he may be victimised continuously or at least for a longer period or be severely hurt. It is well-known that in an institution like a secure care facility or prison a certain form of initiation takes place. Most new ones are aware of this, but they do not know the exact nature of the initiation or when it will take place.

The various initiation practices take place throughout the institution but are more common in those parts of the building where there is less surveillance than in a dorm. The seasoned boys sometimes steal the belongings of new ones and even use the stolen goods openly, wanting to cause a confrontation. While exploring the initiation process, I asked one of the boys what seasoned boys would do to new ones. He explained: ‘They steal your things and keep it in the same dorm. They hide it in the roof. Or they give it to one of their friends in another dorm, until they go to court. When they go to court, they go and get it’. I asked him to elaborate and he said, ‘They say if you are going to keep strong [resist], they will hurt you. Like Darius, he likes to bully us’. Darius turned angrily: ‘Tell me when I ever bullied you?’ Another boy agreed with his peer: ‘Hulle se hulle gaan hom nat hou [‘They say that they will continue to harass him’]. If he is quiet he’ll be alright but if he keeps himself strong with one of us, we are all going to hit him. When he goes and washes his hands in the bathroom, we get
him and hit him’. Then another boy screamed from the other side of the room: ‘And when they tell a new one to give his plate of food and he does not want to, they hit him.’

Seasoned boys use verbal abuse and threats over physical force to intimidate the new admissions. They use language and body gestures to ‘taart’ the new one. The word ‘taart’ means to provoke or hassle. A taart might take these forms: ‘Jy! Ek gaan jou kry! Ek sal vir jou ‘n Popeye maak!’ (Hey! I will get you! I’ll make you look like a fool); ‘Is nag vir jou, my broer!’ (It’s over for you, my brother!). Boys understand some verbal intimidation as more serious than others. Boys and staff too, frequently exercise verbal threats and intimidation in the institution without aiming to start a physical fight. But when a boy says, ‘Ek sal vir jou in jou ma se poes skop!’ (I will kick you in your mother’s pussy), this is considered to be a serious threat. Threats that contain the word ‘poes’ (a derogatory term for vagina) or a boy’s mother are considered to be serious and confrontational. These words generally result in a hyper-aggressive reaction from the target of the verbal insults. In some cases, verbal abuse is a step towards the perpetration of bodily violence, which often includes sexual violence.

Boys consider sexual violence as the most severe form of violence against a new one. They told me about various such cases. One case involved a seasoned boy who sat next to a new one and repeatedly rubbed the new boy’s thigh with his hand. In another case, a seasoned boy brushed his penis against a new one’s buttocks as they stood in line at the bathroom. In another, a boy slid his naked penis over a new boy’s lips while he was sleeping. An apparently more frequent practice is for seasoned boys to masturbate on a new one’s bed. I was told of a case when a new boy climbed into bed that night and had to lie on another boy’s semen. The new one said that it did not smell of semen but when he lay in bed, he saw it on his bed. Sexual flirtation and taunting could be considered a form of sexual grooming, whereby boys prepare and communicate various messages to each other regarding possible sexual abuse. However, from how boys discuss these practices it is clear the real issue is the establishing of power relations and hierarchies through sexual intimidation.

Another form of initiation that was practised between the boys is called ‘poisoning’. Seasoned boys cough up mucus and phlegm and spit it into the new one’s food or coffee. The other boys are commonly aware that this is happening whereas the new one is not and ends up swallowing those bodily fluids.

4.3.3. A continuum of intimidation and violence and ways to escape it

On analysis, it emerges that the initiation practice attempts to humiliate and emasculate new ones so that they are placed at the bottom end of the existing hierarchy. I have described different practices of intimidation, but to fully understand what this initiation entails, it is helpful to understand it as a process. At one end of the continuum, one finds threats and verbal intimidation such as swearing at a new one; at the other end, there is violent, sometimes sexual transgression of physical boundaries, in particular sodomy and physical assault. At this end of the continuum the physical body is used as a tool to threaten or perpetrate sexual harassment or assault. The reason I prefer to speak of a continuum is that although certain initiation practices may be presented or perceived as less violent, through the interactions that follow they can nonetheless lead to serious violence. For example, many boys respond with physical aggression when their peers insult their mothers. In the final instance, abuse is not only inter-subjective but subjectively perceived: what might be seen by one boy as less violent and intimidating might be seen differently by another.
Significantly, some boys who challenge the bullying of seasoned boys are not subjected to such violent practices. These boys appear to possess particular qualities that the other boys admire, and which earns them respect.

An example of this is Philly, a very polite and intelligent young boy. Due to his intelligence and ability to read well, he was able to negotiate and avoid the rather intrusive forms of initiation. But I know of others with similar traits who are nonetheless bullied. To find the balance between using and over-using such a trait to gain respect is complicated. Overuse may create a sense of insecurity and uncertainty for the boys, yet lead to ‘nat hou’. The new one should not exaggerate his being different (e.g. his intelligence) in the early days following admission, because once his peers feel that he is too confident and comfortable, they will have him forcibly manoeuvred into the position they believe fits him: the subordinate position of a new one.

The processional quality of the initiation also shows in its temporality. For most new boys it ends with their incorporation into the ranks of the seasoned boys. As time progresses, they develop relationships to create safety, allies and companionship while being incarcerated. It is through these relations that they learn and practise the explicit as well as implicit rules of the institution. If a boy does not develop these relationships with his peers, he is at a higher risk of breaking implicit rules and having to fend for himself. Consequently, he will remain at the bottom of the hierarchy and continue to be victimised. But most new boys gradually become part of the community of seasoned boys and eventually will have earned a place among them.

In the light of the initiation process I have described, the admission of a new one is not only a physical placement of an additional boy in Middletown. New ones have to be transformed into seasoned boys. Through initiation practices, seasoned boys assess a new boy and place him within their own hierarchy. A mesh of different factors, including the boy’s build, language and length of incarceration, influences how a new one will experience his admission day. To give deeper insight into the complexities involved in the initiation process and what a new one experiences on admission day, the following is a case study about a fight between two boys, a seasoned boy, Boere, and a new one, Zipho. This case highlights the type of violence a new one is commonly exposed to. I will analyse the incident and discuss the interplay of underlying factors that led to the episode of violence.

4.4. The case of Boere and Zipho

I was standing outside the dining hall talking to the occupational therapist. When I turned to look through the windows of the hall, Boere, one of the seasoned Tigers, started fighting with a new one named Zipho. It was Zipho’s first day at Middletown and his first lunch in the dining hall. As the institution houses only about 70 boys, the seasoned boys always know who the new ones are. It is easy to single out the new faces. Zipho was one of those faces that day.

I watched through the window as Boere walked from the far corner of the hall to the table where Zipho was seated. When Zipho realised that Boere was walking directly towards him, Zipho stood up in an attempt to be prepared for whatever was coming his way. Boere then came face-to-face with Zipho and hit Zipho in the face with his fist. Zipho did not fall to the ground but was still standing strong. When Boere saw this, he hit Zipho twice again. Care
workers came charging and tried to stop Boere, but they were unable to do so as both these boys were physically strong and bigger than most boys at Middletown. Boere hit Zipho for the last time and finally Zipho fell to the ground. Once Zipho fell, Boere retreated and was taken back to the dorm, smirking. When the care worker asked what had happened, Boere said that Zipho swore at him and that was when Boere stood up to beat him. The care workers knew that Boere was not telling the truth. The staff then helped Zipho get up and told him to go to the nurse. At the same time, the rest of the boys in the dining hall evacuated the building.

This incident appears to be rather simple: a fight between a new boy and a seasoned boy in which the new admission is being bullied. However, we need to unpack the interactions in more detail to understand what transpired here. First, I will describe the boys. Boere is a coloured boy of 16 and thus one of the older boys. He had been incarcerated for over six months already, and with his blue eyes, light brown hair and a hefty physical build, his physical appearance was unique in this setting because the majority of the boys are of dark complexion. Boere looks like someone who would have been previously referred to as white, hence his nickname. Female staff members consider him attractive and there have even been rumours that he was involved with one of the younger female kitchen staff.

When the incident happened, Boere was housed in the dorm called Tigers. This dorm accommodates the older boys and boys considered to be more difficult to manage. It was obvious he was highly regarded among the boys and staff alike, if for different reasons. The staff perceived him as someone they could trust as he had been incarcerated for a longer period and they had been able to develop a relationship with him. They had been able to observe his behaviour and to a certain extent understand his character. In comparison with the other boys he had been able to create an image of maturity and predictability. Among his peers, he had a different image, however. In his interactions with the other boys Boere had created the frightening self-image of an unpredictable and aggressive individual.

At the time, Boere had been incarcerated for a longer period than most of the other boys and because he was also older than most, he had a better understanding of the rules in the institution. In other words, he understood the expectations the institution had of him as an incarcerated boy. Boere projected different personas to different individuals in the institution and therefore received different responses from various people. He would alternate between these personas whenever he deemed it beneficial. Boere also gained power through being housed in the Tigers dorm. When a boy is housed in that dorm, he might be older or younger but perceived to be streetwise and dangerous. From the perspective of the seasoned boys, being housed in Tigers means that a boy is physically stronger, more experienced and aggressive, either because of his age or because of character traits. As a result, even without having to prove his strength, Boere was ascribed power by the mere fact of his being housed in this dorm.

Zipho’s case was quite different. Zipho, a 14-year-old black African boy, was also physically bigger and stronger than many of the boys in the institution; in addition, he, too, was considered fairly attractive. But unlike Boere, Zipho was yet to accumulate power for himself as he had only been admitted a few hours before the incident with Boere occurred. Zipho was unaware of the existing hierarchy and implicit rules among the boys and had not yet had a chance to develop any relationships within the institution. However, he possessed a potential power: his tall, strong, muscular physical body. Even though Zipho was assigned to a dorm of younger boys Boere immediately assessed the potential of Zipho’s body to achieve something significant within the social space of the institution. Within this space, a bigger and
stronger physical body is understood as a body that can either inflict pain onto others or protect them. This is why Boere perceived the new boy as a threat to the power he held within the existing hierarchy and why he publicly tried to reinstate and reconfirm his power through the use of violence in the dining hall for the rest of the boys to witness. Boere challenged Zipho’s potential power and tried to make Zipho’s forthcoming process of accumulating power more challenging. After having been publicly disempowered, Zipho would have to explore various ways to reinforce his position among the boys and to accumulate power for himself. However, Zipho did not respond with fear, nor did he fall to the ground immediately after being hit. This created a fragile and questionable moment. Other seasoned boys discussed this incident in the dorm and were clearly impressed. One of them said, ‘I can’t believe that he (Zipho) was still standing after that punch. Boere was shocked.’ In the eyes of his peers the incident had rather contributed to Zipho’s latent powerful body image. It carried a promise of him being able to challenging the existing hierarchy. Zipho’s reaction created instability and insecurity in Boere’s position of power and the hierarchy in general.

Moments of confrontation such as this are opportunities where positions of power among the boys can be challenged and changed. The consequences of these moments can have long-standing effects that can either help or hinder a boy’s experience in the institution. One such long-standing effect could be the continuous victimisation of a boy, thereby creating permanent victims and perpetrators of violence. Zipho’s upright body after the hit can also be seen as him not fully being aware of the hierarchy and implicit rules among the boys or as him being aware and thereby displaying his own power, power which he had accumulated outside the institution. Whatever the reasons, he provoked and disturbed the existing hierarchy and upset Boere’s position of power. As a result, Boere had to hit Zipho again until he fell to the ground. It was important for Boere that the general population witness this display of his strength and Zipho’s fall. It reinstated Boere’s strength and position in the hierarchy and also showed that Boere did not fear Zipho and his potential of power.

Boere’s exertion of power over Zipho and the onlookers did not extend to his interaction with the staff. When Boere lied to the staff about the reasons for his aggression, it showed how he wanted to maintain the positive image the staff had of him and how his position of power diminished when interacting with the staff. Boere knew that staff trusted him and he had developed a good relationship with them. Boere created and accumulated what I will call the ‘currency of power’ with the staff. He was able to create and gather power for himself through the socio-psycho-political status he had developed and the interactions he had been involved in over time. The power he had gathered he now used in his daily negotiations for his own benefit.

4.5. The dynamic nature of power

As is the case for all initiations, the admission of a new one means a change of relations within the entire institution. A new admission creates a volatile opportunity where any boy in the hierarchy can either challenge or sustain the existing power relations. Usually, the placing of a new one creates a general atmosphere of fragility and a state of flux among all seasoned boys and new ones. New or seasoned boys can either hold onto their existing rank or this rank can be challenged by others or themselves in order for a boy to be placed higher or lower in rank. In itself, when a new one enters the institution, this impacts on the physical situation in the dorms. Staff will have to shift seasoned boys physically to make space for the new boy.
Power is constantly being taken from, given to and created among boys in the institution. We have seen how cognitive capacities (intelligence), physical build and the appearance of a boy can be decisive as to whether a boy is susceptible to giving, taking or creating power. But vulnerability is not only present in the lower ranks of the boys’ hierarchy. Boys who are initially perceived to be less powerful may find alternative ways of exerting power. They come to the institution with a unique personal history and may have access to resources, which stem from their background or experiences that are not yet obvious to their peers or staff. Traits that may not have been meaningful in the outside world may transform into important resources in the context of the institution. This potentiality is a source of vulnerability for seasoned boys. Let us now look at how Zipho and Boere fared.

One morning I joined the boys when they were playing kerem, a game similar to snooker but with a smaller table and cues. While talking with the boys in the courtyard, I noticed Zipho walking over to the board. He tried to bully Dylan into giving up his place in the game so that Zipho did not have to wait his turn. A care worker came and asked whose turn it was to play. Dylan replied that it was his turn. Zipho started to get angry and began speaking in Xhosa. The care worker, a middle-aged male, did not understand what Zipho was saying and asked him if something was wrong and if he had a problem. Zipho insisted it was his turn to shoot, but the care worker explained there are rules to the game and that he cannot intimidate other boys to get ahead. Zipho continued to complain, so the care worker repeated that he had to wait his turn. The care worker seemed frustrated and irritated. When Zipho walked back to his friends the care worker turned to me and said, ‘Zipho is testing the staff members.’ He explained that staff members were unsure of how to deal with him as he was creating problems to the extent that many were refusing to work with him and excluding him from programmes. Staff members were also expressing concerns about the safety of the other boys.

A few weeks later I heard about an incident in which Boere’s safety was being threatened. He had fought with one of the other popular boys in the institution. This boy, Thembi, was well-known and liked among his peers, he had been incarcerated for a longer period, and other boys respected and feared him. Thembi had accumulated capital through his aggressive behaviour and strong body, but it was through his involvement in a gang that he increased his currency of power until it surpassed Boere’s capital. Thembi could include among his resources the loyalty of his peers that were in the same gang as him, his allies. As a result of the fighting and because he was the older one, Boere had to be removed from the institution and admitted to a new facility that housed older inmates. While Boere was being transferred, Zipho’s power increased.

4.6. The 14-day transition

In the early days of admission, the negotiation of power is quite intense. For certain boys this intensity may continue for a long period and the outcome of this process is far from predictable. As the days progressed after a newly admitted boy had entered the ranks of the institution, I observed how new ones underwent physical and emotional changes. In general, within the period of 14 days, there would be a significant change in the way new ones behaved in the institution. When admitted, they project an image of vulnerability, fear, uncertainty and powerlessness. As time progresses, many change to becoming aggressive, vigorous individuals. A few days after the fight between Zipho and Boere, Zipho was beginning to understand the rules of the institution and his possible position therein.
started using physical violence and verbal intimidation as a way of accumulating power. Within a period of two weeks Zipho had shifted from being victimised to becoming a feared, seasoned boy. Zipho started recruiting boys as his allies at the institution. They would fight for him, steal, and cover up for him if needed. For instance, if he did something that could get him into trouble, these boys would take the blame and be punished for him, or if a fight started that involved Zipho, his allies would help to protect him. Zipho became an *Mboza*: a leader among the boys.

His strategy emerges from my day-to-day notes of the interactions between the boys. First, he would bully new ones and later befriend them. These new ones would become members of his group because they also needed to create allies for themselves. Shane was an example of such a new one. When he arrived at the institution, Zipho threatened him to such an extent that, according to the occupational therapist and social worker, Shane had trouble sleeping because he feared for his life. The therapists stated that they constantly had to reassure Shane that, through all the years of their employment, no one had been killed. Shane found himself in the position Zipho had occupied only a few weeks before. Positions of power in the institution are fragile and changeable, and boys find various ways of creating power through creating allies and displaying aggressive and confrontational behaviour.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter has described and analysed what happens when a new boy is admitted to the institution, the daily negotiations he is involved in during the early period of his incarceration, and the intricate social dynamics between the new and seasoned boys.

I highlighted the emotional turmoil the new boys usually experience when having to leave their communities and enter the facility. The emotional experiences of these boys are often overlooked by the staff, given that most attention is given to the physical placement of the boy. The process of being admitted and settling into the institution is intricate and volatile. The new one has to deal not only with his experience of adapting to the facility but also with the official rules and implicit power struggles among the boys themselves. The data in this chapter showed the potential risks a new one is exposed to, including verbal, physical and sexual abuse by their peers. However, what is commonly perceived as bullying, unnecessary violence and intimidation by others is a complex negotiation process for currency of power and the forging of hierarchical relationships between the incarcerated boys.

In the process, both new and seasoned boys are vulnerable. A new admission to the institution creates uncertainty and changes at all levels in the institution. The case of Boere and Zipho showed how power is fluid and ever-changing. Boys are found to constantly reflect upon their own positions in the hierarchy and institution and actively negotiate their status by acting upon other boys and staff. However, in the end power inequalities between boys and staff restrict their negotiating power.

In the next chapter we witness another way in which these young boys move in and out of different labels that are attached to them. The chapter that follows will particularly highlight how staff influences the images that are created of the boys and how these images affect their daily interactions as well as boys’ futures.