Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa

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Fluidity in Institutional Roles and Positions

6 FLUIDITY IN INSTITUTIONAL ROLES AND POSITIONS

One of the characteristics Goffman (1961) identifies as typical of a total institution is the staff–inmate split, the fundamental divide between a small supervisory staff and a large managed group. Social mobility between the two strata is restricted as social distance is great and often formally prescribed. This chapter uses the concept of the staff–inmate split to examine a variety of aspects of the permeability between the strata of staff and inmates as I encountered them at Middletown. With the help of two case studies, the chapter will show the fluidity in social positions and roles of boys and staff and tease out the factors that account for this fluidity.

The first case study presents differences in the interaction style of two male care workers with the boys and the differences in responses by the boys to each of these care workers. The second study introduces a female care worker and focuses on the role gender plays in the staff’s interaction with the boys. This latter case leads us to examples of institutional role-reversal: boys caring for staff and for other boys, instead of staff caring for boys. Throughout the chapter we will see illustrations of the influence of social standards and community culture outside the institution on day-to-day interactions within the institution; illustrations, in other words, of the blurring of boundaries between social life outside and social life inside Middletown.

6.1. Differences of style in the interaction among male staff members with the boys

In the following case study we see the interaction between two different staff members and the same group of boys; we see, too, how the individual care workers impact differently on the behaviour of the boys and the interaction of the boys with them.

6.1.1. Case study: Madala and Papa in interaction with the boys

On 7 January 2008 I returned to the facility after the festive season to continue my fieldwork. This day was my first work day of the New Year. As usual, I went to the Sharks dorm. Here I met a staff member, called Papa, who had been working with the older boys. Our paths had not crossed until this day. Papa was accompanied by his colleague, Madala. Both staff members used to work in other dorms. The day I met them, Papa had just been moved to Sharks and Madala was standing in for an absent care worker. Papa is in his mid-forties. He is a tall coloured man with piercing green eyes who appeared to be physically strong and capable. Complementing his physical build, he had developed a strong macho image. When he interacted with others, his loud voice carried authority and instilled fear among certain boys. Madala is of a similar age. He is a black African male, shorter than Papa, with a bald patch in the centre of his dark curly hair. Madala’s physical appearance is less
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intimidating than that of Papa. He is also less outspoken, and has a calm but assertive manner in his interaction with boys and staff.

When I entered the dorm, Madala had started a programme with the boys. Two of the boys explained to me what the programme was about. They had to read statements aloud from a dissertation that Madala provided after which they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and to motivate their response. One of the topics that the programme explored was lobola.¹ Madala patiently and thoroughly explained what lobola was and how different cultures had different ways of expressing and practising marriage. Most of the boys agreed with the practice of lobola, whereas Nasief – whom we met in Chapter 3 and will meet again later – asked questions about the cost of cows and whether it was not too expensive for some people to have a herd and trade with it.

After much discussion, Madala moved on to the next topic: whether girls were better with computers. Many of the boys felt that girls were not able to properly use computers. At that point I decided to challenge the boys. I mentioned the times that I had brought the laptop and projector to watch movies and how I had handled them, whereas they had been unable to set up this equipment. They started laughing and said that they were indeed unable to handle the devices. Darius and some other boys who had changed their minds now said that in their view girls were indeed as good at using computers as boys.

At the end of the discussion that day Madala posed a specific problem to the boys, asking them to imagine being a father and one day receiving a call from their son’s school principal informing them that their child had been caught smoking dagga on school premises. Madala asked the boys, ‘As a father, what would you do?’ This question stimulated much debate on issues of fatherhood, good and bad parenting, perceptions of children, and the use of drugs and so on. The boys were visibly stimulated by this question and started interacting intensely.

Nasief said that he would talk to his child and tell the child not to do that again. If his child smoked dagga again he would say, ‘I’m going to break your jaws’. The rest of the boys started laughing. I did not understand why, until the boys explained that it was Madala who usually gave those types of responses to them. For instance, if a boy was talking too much he would say, ‘Your horses are running too fast and they are going to fall, then you are going to cry.’ The boys said that Madala used these phrases when the boys were becoming too agitated and disruptive and thus attempted to diffuse undesired behaviour. Denver, also known by his peers as ‘Springbok’, said that he would not take issue with his child, to which Papa responded, ‘Denver will buy the dagga for his child. He will do nothing’. Papa then laughed. The rest of the boys started to laugh at Denver but Madala waited for them to focus again.

At the end of the discussion, he summarised what the boys had said and introduced the topic of stigma. He told the boys that they were not always going to be 14 years old; they were going to get older and perhaps have children. He added they would have to work hard to rid themselves of the stigma attached to them. He explained that that would allow them to re-integrate into the community, for the community did not trust them now and would remember what crimes they had committed. He remarked that many of the boys were even unable to go back to their communities. Darius reacted by admitting to his peers that he was unable to go

¹ Lobola is a bride price, which among certain ethnic groups in South Africa entails a number of cows or a set amount of money paid by a prospective husband to the bride’s family.
back to his community because some people would want to kill him for his alleged rape of a young girl.

Later that day, Madala left the dorm to go back to Panthers. For the rest of the day, I hung out with the boys and Papa. When Madala left, the general mood in the dorm changed. During Madala’s visit, the boys had seemed focused and content but now they appeared restless. They started to play fighting games and became increasingly physical and argumentative with each other. In the midst of this increasing unrest many of the boys gathered around Papa. Papa was telling them that he was not fearful of Tigers dorms, where he had worked previously. But the boys knew he had been transferred from Tigers to Sharks, and they started teasing him by saying that he was unable to be as macho and strong with the Tigers as he was with them in Sharks. They argued that he was unable to get away with his aggressive behaviour when he was working with the older boys. They gave these comments jokingly, but at the same time they seemed to me very confrontational.

Soon afterwards, the bell signalled lunch time. Ronald, one of the boys, was lying next to me on the floor. Papa called to the others, ‘Maak vir Mavis wakker!’ (Wake up Mavis!). Mavis is a derogatory nickname used for a male who is perceived to be too feminine or someone who has homosexual tendencies, quite similar to the word *moffie*. The boys started to laugh and nudge Ronald, screaming ‘Mavis! Mavis!’ Ronald became irritated and started swearing, but eventually he stood up and joined the boys.

### 6.2. Ethnicity and culture as factors determining differences in interaction

What this case study shows is that cultural processes related to the ethnic identities of staff and boys play a vital role in their interactions. Boys and staff understand and evaluate each other’s behaviour in the context of their ethnicity. Perceptions of ethnicity deeply influence the interactions and relationships they establish.

The case of Papa and Madala is exemplary. Even though they were of similar age, Papa and Madala were reared in different ethnic contexts as, respectively, coloured and black African. This was reflected in the way they dealt with intergenerational interactions. In Cape Town, coloured communities are believed to enforce less hierarchical relationships between young people and their elders than African communities, where a stricter hierarchy is perceived to structure relationships between children and their elders. Relationships between the generations are changing in all communities in Cape Town.

However, these perceived differences definitely played a role in the expectations of the different staff members of how boys would and should behave; these preconceived ideas in turn shaped how staff interacted with the boys. For instance, according to Madala and other black African staff at the institution, children in their communities are taught that irrespective of who the person is, respect should be always shown towards elders. They expect black African boys not to be disrespectful to their elders, but were less strict on this point with the coloured boys they interacted with.

Interestingly, this perception was shared among coloured staff members, who commonly stated that coloured boys appeared less respectful towards them than the black African boys. Clifford, a care worker of coloured background, commented in this regard:
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They [black African children] are much more attached to their elderly; they value and respect their elders more than in the coloured community. It doesn’t matter if you [are] Afrikaans speaking or not, that respect is there. I think our [coloured] children were raised too open [with less rules and boundaries]. We grew up too open but with them [black Africans] that family bond and respect is still there. They [black Africans] respect you as an adult. Our [coloured] children do so as well, but probably not more than 10 percent.

In Madala’s view, he is an elder to the boys and he expects them, both the coloured and black African boys, to respect him; this, in turn, influences the manner in which he conducts himself: generational distance is acknowledged and, paradoxically, this allows the boys space to confide in him and seek advice from him as an adult. Madala provides the boys the opportunity to be cared for and to be guided when needed. Thus Madala’s cultural expectation of ascribed respect, that is, respect that does not have to be earned but is unconditionally bestowed on him as an elder works both ways. Madala treats the boys respectfully as boys, allowing the boys, both the coloured and black African ones, to respond respectfully to him.

In contrast, Papa, having been raised in a coloured community, allows the boys more freedom in how they respond to him. As a result, the boys respond to him as a peer and friend. This, however, can be problematic. When Papa needs to discipline the boys and cannot do that from a position of authority, his only recourse seems to be violence. For example, one afternoon two boys started to fight. The older boys grabbed the two fighters and carried them to Papa. When they stood in front of Papa, he started to hit them with the ruler. As the situation became more intense, one of the boys started to cry, and Papa insisted that he sit in the corner. In fact, Papa would often initiate and entertain aggressive interactions with the boys in the dorm. One day I watched as he physically hit boys with a ruler on their heads, knuckles and bodies. At one point, he kicked one of the boys when they did not listen to him and hit another with his fist over the boy’s head. He then laughed about it and teased the boys later.

Different ethnic and cultural backgrounds also shape the communication styles between staff and boys in other ways which may lead to misunderstandings, which in turn may generate conflict. One of the staff members, Clinton, whom I earlier quoted, gave the following example of one such misunderstanding:

Their [the boys’] backgrounds play a role. In our coloured communities if you don’t look me in the eye, you can’t be trusted, but in the African culture you must look down as a sign of respect. That is one difference between the African and coloured culture. So if boys look me [the elder] in the face and they don’t even feel bad, someone with another cultural background may not understand that, because in that other culture elders have to look a younger person in the face whereas the younger one has to look away. You as a younger person have to show respect in this way and if the staff member does not figure that out then he does not know [understand] the boys.

Another issue that may underlie misunderstanding and conflict between staff and boys is that members from coloured and black African communities may differ in their predominant languages. Black African boys and staff speak an African language, mostly Xhosa, when interacting with each other. They, however, also speak Afrikaans, the language they use when interacting with boys and staff of coloured background. These language
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The boys are very aware of ethnic and cultural differences in their interactions. Differences may create feelings of insecurity and distrust between staff and boys, as well as among boys and among staff, which may result in conflict, as I explain below.

During an in-depth interview, Rico and Ryan, both coloured boys, mentioned that they always face problems with a staff team (called ‘shift’ in the institution) composed of only black Africans, instead of an ethnically mixed group or coloured shift. They felt that the former would give the black African boys more freedom and listen to them more closely than to coloured boys. For instance, there was one team that solely comprised black African staff in the facility. When coloured boys would report black African boys to this team, they felt unease when staff would talk to the offending boys in their native language so that the rest would not understand. They said that grievances of the offended party would eventually be dismissed and they may even be punished themselves by being forced to stand in the passage of the dorm, isolating them from their peers and the activities in the common room. This same black African shift would scold boys in their native African language irrespective of the fact that coloured boys would not understand them.

The ethnographic material above shows the influence of the social histories of individuals on the construction of the character and behaviour of the boys and the expectations they have of others. My discussion with Clinton suggests that staff members generally understand that the boys’ cultural upbringing is a factor in their behaviour. Cultural histories are enacted through the boys and staff in their daily interactions. The cultural dispositions of boys and staff may create a sense of belonging (for example, when black African staff speak to boys in their native African language, or when colored staff speak familiarly with the boys), but also frequently cause conflict based on different understandings of values and norms (for instance, regarding intergenerational communication) or based on expectations of behaviour. Both ethnic belonging and intercultural conflicts feed into interpretations of one another’s behaviour in terms of ethnic differences. Within the institution, boys expressed dissatisfaction at what they perceived as unfair treatment, on a daily basis, due to ethnicity. This eventually influenced and changed the way they interacted with others.

6.3. Education and personality as factors intersecting with ethnicity and culture

Perceived ethnic and cultural differences are obvious first reference points both for boys and staff when I explored their own interpretations of the institution, and it is clear these perceptions exert an influence on how boys and staff manage their interactions. Moreover, as a South African researcher who has been socialised in the context of the same dominant cultural divides, I also took these differences as an almost self-evident point of entry for analysis. In the preceding sections, I highlighted the contrast in how Madala and Papa interacted with the boys, attributing many of the differences I observed to differences in ethnicity and culture. Nevertheless, careful comparison of the cases of Madala and Papa with my data on the interactions of other staff members with the boys and with one another shows more complex dynamics at work. Differences between the behaviour of Madala and Papa cannot be attributed solely to ethnicity. Madala also has a higher educational level and better communication skills than Papa. Coloured staff other than Papa, with comparable education levels to Madala, all dealt with the boys in ways more similar to Madala than to Papa, even
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though they shared their ethnic and cultural background with the latter. In other words, irrespective of ethnic or cultural divides, education and communication skills acquired through training play a major role in how staff interact with the boys. The more skilled the staff member, the more unproblematic his or her authority and the more respect he or she is shown by the boys.

However, a careful analysis of my extensive descriptions of interactions and observations shows that none of the higher educated staff, whether coloured or black African, was so consistently calm and structured in his approach to the boys as Madala. With no other member of staff were different boys as open to change as with Madala. Similarly, in many respects Papa’ interactions with the boys were atypical of any other interactions between boys and staff in the institution. Therefore, my first and second levels of analysis – focusing on group differences relating to ethnicity, culture and level of education – should be complemented by a third level focusing on boys’ and staff’s impressions and evaluations of personal dispositions and the demeanour of one another as individuals. Madala’s consistent display of a general sense of calmness, trust and stability could also be perceived as a personality trait. Boys from different ethnicities respected Madala and perceived him as someone who motivates and encourages them. His workshops and discussions spoke to the boys of his earnest involvement and interest in the boys’ activities. They appreciated how he created a space for them to express their opinions and challenge each other’s ideas in an institution where this was not generally encouraged. The boys’ interactions with Madala were different to their interactions with Papa. Different aspects of their personalities were able to emerge, irrespective of their ethnic identities, in the latter interaction. During the programme with Madala, for instance, Nasief, as a coloured boy, displayed interest and thoughtful analysis; he became engaged in the discussion. Similarly, Darius, a coloured boy who was cautious about sharing information about his alleged rape charge, spontaneously brought up the topic during his engagement with Madala in the presence of other boys.

In contrast with Madala, Papa presented an image of an individual who was less adult-like. He engaged with the boys in a similar manner to how they did with each other: boyishly playful but also aggressive and unpredictable. Through this inconsistent and playful image, Papa created a diminished status for himself in the eyes of the boys: of a friendly but lesser adult. As a consequence, boys from both ethnicities perceived and interacted with him as a friend and not an adult. They were always teasing Papa as he teased them and they repeatedly tested Papa’ boundaries, as they did each other’s boundaries (see Chapter 3).

In particular, the boys relentlessly tested Papa’s macho facade. According to the boys in the younger dorms, Papa transfer from Tigers to Sharks was because he was weak and unable to manage the older boys. The boys from Sharks teased Papa about this and made comments such as, ‘Papa tries his luck here [Sharks dorm] because he can’t hit the older boys’ and ‘He [Papa] acts like the ou [macho guy] here [Sharks] but let him go to the other side [meaning the Tigers dorm where boys are physically bigger and generally more feared].’ Through such comments, the boys diminished Papa by suggesting that he possessed a hidden, more docile, effeminate side that would cause him trouble when in the space of the older and physically stronger boys. Papa’ habitual defensive reactions only seemed to spur on the boys, thus causing them to enact more aggressive behaviour.

For example, in one of the situations described above, Papa participates in and contributes to the demeaning of one of the boys, Reggie. Instead of avoiding and defusing conflict within the dorm, Papa encouraged the boys’ use of a tarnished word, ‘Mavis’, which in turn led to an angry reaction by Reggie. Similarly, during an otherwise constructive
workshop, Papa teased Denville, who like Reggie is a coloured boy, that Denver would buy dagga for his child. In other words, instead of Papa using this moment constructively, he teased Denver instead about what he would likely do if he were a father.

The case study of Papa and Madala illustrates the complexities that guide the daily interactions of boys and staff in the institution. Whereas ethnic and cultural differences play a role, particularly in what is expected of how roles are fulfilled, levels of education, acquired skills in communication, personalities and how they are perceived, are important as well. The dispositions of these individuals shift in particular interactions with others and, as a result, the boys and staff change the images and characters they project within particular situations on specific individuals or groups. This was the case as much for Darius – who felt safe enough with Madala to disclose concerns regarding his community’s reaction to his alleged crime, but started swearing when ridiculed by Papa – as it was for Papa himself, whom boys recognised to be a different person among younger and older boys.

In short, this case study, like the one of Heather that follows below, displays the fluidity of the roles and positions of the boys and staff and how various individuals enact a particular image in particular interactions.

6.4. The role of gender and sexuality in interaction between staff and boys

The same day that Madala asked the questions about lobola and fatherhood, I returned to the dorm after lunch. Again, I sat with the boys on the floor, talking about what had happened during the day and especially the programme they had participated in. Chris, who at first was sitting among the boys, moved closer to sit next to me, leaning against the wall. Papa called him to the table and started teasing Chris that he was less interested in the discussion than wanting to sit next to me. Chris laughed, denied this allegation and returned to the group, while Papa continued to tease him even when he came back to the group. This experience made me feel uncomfortable. It was the first time in the institution that I felt objectified as a woman. In the months I had spent at the institution up to that moment, the boys had always behaved respectfully towards me. When in my presence Papa whispered to Chris and Darius, ‘Chris, hou jy vir jou ougat?’ (Chris, are you being promiscuous?) or made remarks with sexual innuendo to the boys about other staff members, I felt he not only displayed inappropriate behaviour himself but also invited the boys to become disrespectful towards me. This raises the question of what role gender and sexuality play in the interaction between staff members and boys. The relevance of this issue is illustrated in the case study presented below.

6.4.1. Case study: Heather and the boys

One Tuesday morning I interviewed the occupational therapist, Heather. She is in her mid-thirties: a slender, well-toned woman with dark shoulder-length hair. She is an attractive young woman with a high-pitched voice that complements her flamboyant nature, her brown eyes and contagious, ‘larger than life’ laugh. She is always well-groomed and her make-up is usually flawlessly applied; her clothes are trendy yet appropriate for the workplace.
Heather was one of the first staff members to invite me to chat in her office. She also welcomed being interviewed. As our relationship developed, Heather felt comfortable enough to share with me experiences that had troubled her. She spoke about the way the older boys would talk about and sometimes interact with her in a sexual manner. They would make reference to her physical make-up. She said that she was being ‘sexualised’ by the more ‘troublesome’ boys in the older dorm. She defined ‘sexualised’ as the way that she was being spoken about and perceived by the boys. One of Heather’s colleagues informed her that the boys had been talking about her in a sexual way and some admitted they masturbated while thinking of her. Heather was disturbed by this because she had regularly assisted a colleague in facilitating group discussions with these boys. She explained their behaviour as one of the ways the boys were ‘showing off’ to one another, as well as testing her boundaries.

Generally, there appeared to be a silence in the institution around sexual behaviour or sexual violence. Heather, however, was one of the few staff members who frequently confronted this issue. For example, when I participated in her programmes, she repeatedly screamed ‘Boud spasie!’ (Leg room!). She shouted this when physical proximity between boys was too close. This was one of the ways she attempted to create physical distance between the boys. By doing this, she hoped that the boys would learn to physically distance themselves from each other and that this would eventually decrease the sexual violence between them. On a few occasions the boys themselves would tease each other and scream, ‘Boud spasie!’ During one of her programmes she said to the boys, ‘Julle weet wat gebeur as daar geen boud spasie is nie! Julle raak benout en dan vat julle aan mekaar’ (You know what happens when there is no leg space between you! You get all hot and bothered and then you start grabbing each other). In this example, Heather was clearly raising and engaging with a sensitive topic in an overly patriarchal order inside this institution.

6.4.2. Gender, age and power relations as intersecting factors impacting institutional interaction

The case study of Heather and the boys illustrates that gender played a significant role in the interactions between the staff and boys. I observed repeatedly that men and women interacted very differently with the boys. Men display themselves as more or less authoritative and strict (see previous section), whereas many female staff members displayed more of a nurturing role, such as hugging the boys when they were sad. Male staff did not show this type of affection. As a result, the boys often responded and communicated differently to male and female staff.

Age is one of the factors that intersect with gender. The boys who challenged and created unease with Heather were from Owls, a dorm that houses older boys. Because she was one of the youngest staff members, in her mid-thirties, Heather was at risk of being perceived not as a usual staff member but as a woman young enough to be a potential girlfriend. This was particularly the case for the older boys. The lesser frequency of the interaction between Heather and the boys who sexualised her also played an important role in the manner the boys interacted with her. She worked closer with the younger boys than with the older group. As a result, she was unable to develop a deeper bond with the latter and this created social distance from her. In other words, Heather became somewhat ‘exotic’ to the older boys.
I asked Heather how she dealt with being ‘sexualised’ by the boys. She explained that some time ago she had decided to confront the boys during a group meeting about their behaviour, but the boys denied ever having spoken about or treated her in this manner. Heather was clearly frustrated with their response and reported this to the manager of the institution. The manager disagreed with the manner in which Heather dealt with the situation, and felt that she had been too confrontational and accusatory. She expected Heather to deal with the boys on this issue individually and first investigate the accusations before talking to them as a group. Heather concluded that she felt betrayed by the lack of support she had received from the manager. She knew she was not the only female staff member who was being ‘sexualised’. In Owls, a female care worker hit one of the boys after he was found lying underneath the staff table to look under her skirt. According to Heather, ‘This was an incident where a boy challenged a care worker not as an adult–child but as an adult–adult.’ Since these events, Heather did not want to go into the dorm alone; she was always accompanied by a colleague.

In most of my discussion with Heather she maintained a professional and clinical understanding of her experience. She used words such as ‘troublesome boys’ and the boys ‘showing off for each other’. It seemed as though during the discussion she was able to emotionally distance herself from the experience. She constantly mentioned how the boys were distancing themselves from their own experiences and that this was how they gained power over their experiences. But she did not reflect on how the boys were able to gain power over her and how she was distancing herself from her own experience.

In her effort to cope with the situation Heather focussed on her role as someone who needed to understand the boys and care for them. Outside, the community was protected from the boys but inside the emphasis shifts to the boys who need to be protected from further involvement in crime, abuse, violence and so forth. Yet the boys are also in a position where they are able to oppress staff members at times. When Heather found herself lacking the support of the manager of the institution, she felt that the boys were being ‘cared for’ but not the staff members. Heather’s case shows us how the staff member can also become the one who needs to be cared for. Interestingly enough, it is the younger boys with whom she had a more intense relationship with and also cared for her. The older ones however would challenge Heather’s authority.

6.6. Boys as protectors and carers

6.6.1. Boys caring for staff

I accompanied Heather and her colleague Inga, a social worker, on an excursion to two of the boys’ homes. These trips are called forensic assessments, previously referred to as ‘home visits’. This type of visit is usually undertaken when the communication between the boys and families is, for various reasons, minimal.

That morning we departed early to two rural communities in the Western Cape. We headed to Elim and Caledon to meet the families of two of the boys from Sharks. Half-way there, we stopped to have lunch in the back of the van. When we were about to have lunch, Heather wanted to find a shop to buy some goods for herself and draw money from an ATM. She turned to the boys and asked if they would escort her to the machines. They agreed and followed her. She shouted, ‘They are my protection now.’ She once again faced them and
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said, ‘You better protect me, hey!’ and giggled. The boys shook their heads and escorted Heather to the ATM.

She laughed when she suggested that the boys protect her. Heather did not know the area, but even though the boys did not live in this area either, they lived nearby and felt a bit more comfortable here in Caledon. This is why she trusted that the boys were more familiar with that environment and its people, which was indeed the case. Heather assumed that she needed to be protected from the criminals in the community when she was walking around. She felt vulnerable in the new space and depended on the boys creating safety for her. Her position here changed to someone who needed to be cared for, and the boys under her protection exchanged their position from being cared for within the institution to the protectors outside. In other words, the context in which the interaction takes place impacts on how staff and boys enact their relational identities. These are shaped by different meanings and understandings when inside the facility compared to outside, in the community.

Similarly, sometimes the boys took the roles of protectors for staff inside the institution as well. Heather was also cared for by the boys she worked with, the younger ones, when she was confronted by seasoned boys, especially when the seasoned boys were rude or wanted to test her boundaries. The seasoned boys would try to intimidate Heather or would defy something she had said. For instance, during lunch, Heather tried to calm and quieten the seasoned boys and asked them to be less rowdy as they entered the hall. The boys looked at her and continued to talk as if she were not there. She started to shout at them to quieten down; still they continued. When the boys from Sharks noticed that Heather was in a difficult position they shouted at the Owls boys, shushed the hall and asked the other boys to cooperate.

The boys from the Sharks dorm would protect Heather verbally as well as physically by opposing any negative perceptions or comments about her. For instance, during lunch in the hall, I listened to the discussion between boys from the Sharks and Owls dorms. They were talking about Heather, with the Owls remarking how Heather was always screaming at them, making them relieved they did not have to deal with her every day. The boys from the Sharks dorm responded by saying that the Owls did not understand her and the way she worked with the boys. The Sharks continued to say that she would allow them to play different games. They then explained to the Owls that if she were shouting at them, it was her way of trying to encourage the boys to do better and be better. The Sharks explained her behaviour as that of someone trying to improve the lives of the boys. The boys from Sharks then started to tease the boys from Owls about the older social worker that was working with them. The Sharks were laughing and said that the Owls had to deal with an old woman whereas the Sharks had Heather who is young and vibrant.

The younger boys assisted Heather in this way because she works closely with the younger boys and therefore is able to develop a deeper relationship with them. This relationship includes a sense of ownership, belonging and protection, not only from her side but theirs too. Interestingly, this closeness and protection did not only exist within the walls of the facility, but extended beyond the institution to the outside community, as was reflected in the protection she received when cashing money.
6.6.2. Boys caring for boys

Boys did not only undertake the role of protector of certain staff members; they also accepted the same role among their peers. I often watched how boys engaged with each other to maintain some sort of social order within the facility. For instance, Jason attempted to get his peers to participate and focus in a workshop. The boys were making a noise while the facilitator was trying her utmost to get their attention and, more importantly, have them participate. After her various unsuccessful attempts, Jason eventually shouted, ‘Stilte in die hof!’ (Silence in the court). Immediately his peers were quiet, and he turned to the facilitator, saying, ‘You can continue now.’

During this programme, the facilitator mentioned to me that she needed an assistant in these types of programmes because it was difficult to contain the boys. I witnessed a boy dividing the dorm into groups so that they could start a workshop presented by a care worker. On numerous other occasions, boys would tell the next shift of staff in their dorm about what had happened earlier in the day. In one instance, a boy reminded one of the care workers that his peer still needed to be disciplined for not having adhered to the care worker’s instructions.

Boys also assisted their peers during workshops. As one of the programmes progressed, the boys read the stories they had written. Many of the boys were illiterate and, as a result, their peers who were more confident academically came forward to assist them without any encouragement from staff. For example, Jason’s entire team was unable to read and write. Therefore, Jason took it upon himself to read and write for all the boys in his group. He asked the questions and asked them to answer verbally. Once he received their information, he would record it on paper.

The boys also assisted one another when they were trying to stay out of trouble. One afternoon, a care worker took one of the boys to the manager because he was misbehaving in the dorm. As soon as she left, the boys rushed to the table where she sat (and where I was sitting at the time) to peek at the staff book. Staff used this book to record all the happenings during the day and made it available for the night staff. The night shift would then be able to see what had happened during the day, including those who had been misbehaving. When she left, the boys wanted to see whether their names had been recorded for that day. I sat at the table where I watched and listened. They shuffled through the book in search of their names. Some of the boys were taking too long to check whether their names were there. They appeared to be struggling to read what was written but then one of the academically stronger boys said, ‘Let me read it! I read faster than you all. We need to get through this before she comes back!’ Without hesitation, the boys handed the book to Philly and he read the names to his peers. The others listened attentively.

The boys also assisted each other by communicating information to peers. While hanging out with the boys in the dorm, I asked them to describe their experiences in the facility. One of the boys explained how the care workers would hit the boys. Before he could complete what he was saying, one of his peers responded angrily, ‘The care workers have to help you properly but they hit and scold you.’ I asked him, ‘How must they help him?’ and he responded, ‘They must show you the right way. If you mistakenly do something wrong, they don’t listen to what you have to say, they just hit. They let you sit in the hall from the...

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2 I chose not to intervene because I wanted the boys to be able to act in a way that they would normally do, regardless of my presence. I did not want the boys to see me as another care worker. Instead, I wanted them to feel comfortable enough to act as ‘naturally’ as they wanted.
morning until the evening on that cold floor.’ Then another reacted, ‘They don’t have the right to hit us! We are not here for them to hit us!’ I then asked, ‘So what are you here for, then?’ He continued, ‘We are here until our cases are over.’ It was a rather common experience that when a boy was unfairly treated and his peers witnessed this, they would intervene by providing information and possible alternatives for their peer to consider.

Similarly, when new admissions enter the facility, the seasoned boys assume the duty of informing the new one of the rules and regulations at the facility. In an interview with two boys, we were talking about new admissions when one of the boys responded, ‘We tell them the rules ourselves’. In response to my question ‘What type of rules?’ he said, ‘If he wants to go to the toilets he must ask and he mustn’t talk to the care workers.’ I said, ‘But why shouldn’t he talk to the care worker?’ The boy reacted, ‘No! He can talk to the care workers but he mustn’t backchat!’ Then his friend gave an example of some of the rules: ‘You may also not touch one another’s private parts, and also no fighting.’

These examples clearly demonstrate not only that the boys are influenced in their behaviour through the behaviour of staff members but that staff members are also influenced in their behaviour by the behaviour of the boys. There are no clear boundaries demarcating roles and positions assigned respectively to staff (caretaker) and boys (care receiver), but these roles and positions prove to be interchangeable in some respects. The institutionally assigned roles and positions are continuously challenged in the daily interactions within and outside the institutions between and among staff and boys.

6.7. Conclusion

In theory, Middletown was perceived as a total institution; a place where staff members were assumed to possess power with clearly assigned roles compared to the boys, who were perceived as children, in need of care and being watched over. In practice, however, the examples presented in this chapter illustrate that there is much variety in the ways staff members use their power and interact with the boys.

I have not chosen the cases of Madala and Papa and their interactions with the boys as typical representatives of major ethnic and cultural divides. On the contrary, they empirically emerged from my ethnographic data as extreme cases, not because of their own differing characteristics, but because of the widely different way in which their interactions with the boys developed and affected the boys. Taking them as extreme cases, I explored the multiple dimensions that are at stake in the institutional interactions between staff and inmates on the ground, allowing for a fluidity of roles not covered by the classical picture of a total institution. How Madala and Papa have been socialised in their own communities, what they expect of boys’ behaviour, and what boys expect of them, do play a role in the interactions I observed. However, Madala, of black African background, also represents the more educated and skilled staff, many of whom were coloured as well as black in the institution. Papa, of coloured background and having had lesser training and education, also displayed personality traits in his interactions that were absent in other interactions of staff that he shared group characteristics with. I have shown how these differences are acted out in specific contexts within the daily life of the institution and how it leads to widely differing restrictions and opportunities for boys to act and express themselves, sometimes varying over the day, when shifts of caretakers replace one another. In contrast to the image of a total institution where rigid rules determine the relations between staff and inmates, my case comparison displays
the fluidity of the roles and positions of the boys and staff and how the various individuals enact and play out a particular image in particular interactions.

Likewise, the examples illustrate that there is a variety of ways that boys respond to their assigned position of powerless children in need of care. Occasionally, as we have seen, there is a relatively strong blurring of presupposed institutional identities. A striking example is the role-reversal in terms of caring. The pre-institutional lives of the boys in many ways influence their institutional lives. In their pre-institutional life the now institutionalised boys exerted violence from a certain position of power, and many of them do not give up that position entirely within the institution. They have not become what Goffman calls ‘mortified selves’. It may be that it is also the caring role the boys performed in their pre-institutional life (for instance, for their mother and other close family members) that influenced their role-playing in terms of care for certain staff members and for their peers. Caring for others, especially women, is related to the boys’ perceptions of masculinity and their social roles as men, and taking up caring roles in the institution is what from their perspective males are supposed to do.

Similarly, in the way staff members behave inside the institution we see a reflection of social standards and cultural values that exist outside of it. In short, staff and boys act and interact in the institution based on social dispositions, cultural backgrounds, educational levels and personality structures that they also displayed in their lives outside the institution. It depends on the specific context within the institution in which certain interactions are played out how strict or permeable the boundaries between social life inside and outside the institution, and between the roles and positions officially assigned to staff and boys, prove to be.