# FIGHTING FOR RESPECT

## Violence, masculinity and legitimacy in the SAPS\*

#### **ANDREW FAULL\*\***

Andrew.faull@crim.ox.ac.uk

This paper presents preliminary reflections on station-level discourse and practice in relation to violence and authority in two police precincts. The data were gathered during the six months following the Marikana massacre. The response of police who were not present at the mine shooting was to instinctively defend criticism of their colleagues who were involved. The article presents information to suggest that many SAPS members believe the use of violent force in the performance of their duties is necessary to gain the respect of the communities they serve. The article considers this in relation to constructions of masculinity.

On 26 February 2013, Mido Macia, a 26-year-old Mozambican taxi driver, was handcuffed to the back of a South African Police Service (SAPS) van and dragged hundreds of meters through the streets to the Daveyton police station. Two hours later he was found dead in his holding cell. An autopsy would reveal that he died of hypoxia, a lack of oxygen to the brain, after suffering extensive internal bleeding.<sup>2</sup> Prosecutors interpreted this, and blood spatters on Macia's holding cell walls, as evidence of a beating at the hands of police at the station.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the incident was captured on the cell phones of bystanders at the crowded taxi rank at which it began. Footage shows police officials attempting to restrain Macia in order to affect an arrest, apparently because his taxi was illegally parked. Macia resisted and police handcuffed him to the inside of the van, presumably in the hope that he would submit and climb into the van. He

At the 8 March bail hearing for the nine SAPS officials charged with Macia's murder, one of the accused, Warrant Officer Ncema, told the court that Macia had insulted him as a useless policeman when he had tried to arrest him.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, this alleged insult and the resisting of arrest, unfolded in front of dozens of bystanders.

Hopefully the investigation into Macia's death, and the trial of the accused, will make clear what happened that day. But one narrative appears quite likely: A member of the public challenged the authority of SAPS officials; he *disrespected* the SAPS. He was not rich or middle-class; he was not a South African. His challenge was made in a crowded public space, in daylight. The SAPS officials involved felt humiliated. Once they had secured him in the privacy of the police station, they punished him for publicly embarrassing them. They beat him and he died.

Of course this is only one possible hypothesis explaining what happened that day. But this article presents data gathered through participatory

didn't, and as he hung awkwardly from it, with only his wrists cuffed to the inside, the driver of the police van pulled away.

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Andrew Faull is a doctoral researcher based at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford.

observation that suggest that violence is seen by some police as a means of gaining the respect of citizens, even if this means using lethal force.

From mid-August 2012 to the end of February 2013, I spent over 600 hours with detectives, patrol officials and station staff at two SAPS stations in the Cape Town metropolitan area. The research was ethnographic in nature and involved shadowing station staff as they went about their daily routines. The first station where I worked serves a number of Cape Town's older and most violent townships.

I began work at this station in mid-August 2012, shortly before the 16 August killing of 34 striking mineworkers by police at Marikana in the North-West. In the months following the incident, I regularly raised the topic of Marikana with the police I shadowed at the two stations. Although some expressed sadness at the killing of the workers, almost without exception they tried to convince me that the police officials who had pulled their triggers that day had done so legitimately, lawfully, and correctly; that they had done nothing wrong.

These responses were not surprising, as solidarity and peer protection are long established characteristics of police organisations.<sup>5</sup> But I believe there is another reason SAPS officials so quickly defended the slaughter of 34 men at the hands of their colleagues: they abhorred the idea of being disrespected. It was clear within my first weeks at the station that the majority of officials working there did not believe the communities they served respected them, and did not believe South Africans in general respected them.

Station mythology abounded with stories of police attending complaints and returning to their vehicles to find the tyres slashed or wheels stolen. I was told foot patrol was not possible in the area because the community would stone patrollers. Many police refused to walk the 50 meters to a shop next to the station for fear of being attacked for their firearms, while others told me that when they were off duty they would not admit to strangers that they were police officials because

this would put them in danger. They saw these (imagined) violent attacks as signs of disrespect.

It became clear during my research that many officials believed respect was earned through force. For example, one night I was on patrol with two crime prevention members,7 both young male constables. It was shortly after 1am and the streets of the township were empty. Members of the Tactical Response Team (TRT) drove past us in the street. While not belonging to any station, they were deployed in the area as a 'force multiplier' to perform 'crime prevention' duties. I asked the constables what they thought of the TRT, referring to a popular investigative journalism television programme, which had recently portrayed them as abusive.8 The driver responded, 'They are good but we don't have a backbone in the police. They don't appreciate what the TRT are doing and so they are demotivated.<sup>9</sup> The 'we' he was referring to was the SAPS at large, and the 'they', the TRT. He went on, 'Since they have been deployed here there has been a big decrease in crime. People respect them.' I asked why he thought people respected them and he said, 'Because they beat people [...]. If they have suspects they torture them and the person gives up everything. It's good.' I asked whether he knew what kind of techniques they used and he said, 'They use that one with a bag over the head of the old days.'

Of course this is only hearsay. The constable might never have seen such acts taking place, nor was he able to provide me evidence of a post-TRT crime decline. And yet even if it was without basis, it is important that the constable presented the story in this manner, suggesting that torture and violence reduce crime. In the police organisational context, stories that are rich with symbolic power lay a foundation of strategies and knowledge, which guide police action. The selection of some themes, like torture, over others, lends them credence. It gives them power in informing organisational identity and culture. The chosen theme in this case is that violence earns respect.

Noting this, let's consider another story told at the same station. During the Monday morning detective branch meeting, an officer announced that 'we almost lost detective X yesterday'. The story that followed went something like this:

Police were called to the area following information that a man was in possession of an illegal firearm. After apprehending the man a shootout broke out and the suspect was hit eleven times. Detective X was passing by on the way back from his own crime scene. Caught in the line of fire, a bullet from the shootout passed through the back window of his unmarked state vehicle, missing his head by a couple of centimetres, and exiting through the windscreen. When the standby officer from the detective branch arrived on the scene to support his traumatised colleague, the police who had fired the shots were found picking up their bullet casings, covering their tracks.

A few days later, following a reconstruction of the crime scene by senior detectives in the branch, a new version of the story emerged, shared with me during a private conversation. It went something like this:

Plainclothes police were called to the area following information that a man was in possession of an illegal firearm. They took the man into the street and started beating him. The man tried to flee the beating and the plainclothes police opened fire, hitting him eleven times. Detective X was passing by on the way back from his own scene. Hearing the gunshots and seeing the commotion in his rear view mirror, he stopped his unmarked state vehicle. The police involved in the shooting saw what they thought was an interfering passer-by stopping to watch them. Wanting to send a message to him that he should stay out of their business, that they didn't want witnesses to their crime, they fired a shot directly at the driver's seat. The bullet passed through the back window, missing the driver's headrest by a couple of centimetres, and exiting through the windscreen. The bullet was intended for Detective X. When the standby officer from the detective branch arrived on the scene to support his traumatised colleague, the police who had fired the shots were found picking up bullet casings, covering their tracks.

Although the shooting is not in doubt, some details of these narratives remain conjecture. Yet they are important. That this latter narrative emerged within the detective branch of a SAPS station is particularly telling. It indicates that the narrative is plausible to those within the SAPS. It suggests that some police officials expect such behaviour from their colleagues, that it makes sense to them in their experience of the organisation. They accept the fact that SAPS officials might go as far as using lethal force against strangers if they deem those strangers to be interfering and disrespectful of their occupational choices, even if those choices are illegal and involve murder.

My second research station was near the inner city and served busy commercial and residential spaces. Many of those who populated the space of this precinct had more social and economic capital than the police working there. And yet it was at this station that I realised what might be a golden rule for those not wanting to unleash the violence of the state: don't challenge a police official.

I came to this conclusion based on two observations:

- Police at the station used the charge of 'riotous behaviour' to arrest anyone whom they wanted to punish or teach a lesson, including those who disrespected them;
- 2) Persons who continued to challenge police once they had reached the confines of the police cell holding area had a good chance of being physically slapped into silence, despite the holding area's CCTV camera recording the abuse for station and cluster management.

Contempt for a disrespecting public is not unique to the SAPS. Loftus writes of English police putting civilians through the 'attitude test', stopping people for casual questioning with little intention to arrest. Civilians pass the test by 'being polite, apologising or admitting guilt, essentially by feigning respect for the police.' The act serves as a reminder of police authority.

At the township station a version of the 'attitude test' played itself out in a frenzy of stop and searches. Young men in their teens or early twenties were routinely stopped and patted down as police searched for weapons and drugs. The young men invariably consented by throwing their hands in the air or leaning against the police car. Knives and other stabbing tools were routinely collected but the men were never taken into custody. It seemed that this exchange was so routine that each knew his or her part and none were in danger of failing the test.

But it was in the holding cells of the city station, the space in which detainees are 'processed' before being allocated a cell, that I witnessed a more violent version of the test. People were slapped and punched, sworn at, laughed at and ignored, often only because they dared to ask a man in uniform why they had been brought into police custody.13 In addition to the CCTV camera recording the scenes playing out in the room, these abuses took place in front of other police, none of whom ever intervened in the business of their violent colleagues. Indeed, removed from the public gaze, it might be said that this violence was for the most part a performance by (male) police for (male) police, an intra-group enactment of how violence earns respect. The performance of, and silence around, violence in this private space served to remind police of their occupation's unique allowance for use of force. And while this force was illegal, the silence around it made it organisationally acceptable.

On a number of occasions police officials told me how effective it was that otherwise non-compliant civilians suddenly obeyed their instructions after a slap to the side of the head. The information was shared with me as though it were a confidential trick of the trade, the magic slap that brings respect. In less violent jurisdictions police command such respect by issuing a fine. But in South Africa, where SAPS officials see fines as belonging to the lesser realm of traffic and metro police, it seems the *klap*, or the threat of one, is still considered the currency of the day.

### WHY VIOLENCE EARNS RESPECT

There are a number of interrelated interpretations of why many police believe the use of force earns them respect.

In addition to enforcing the occupational culture's view of the law, police officials in any jurisdiction in part enforce their personal conception of order on those they police. Hanny of these conceptions are formed outside of the police organisation, drawn from personal upbringing, primary socialisation at home, at school and in society more broadly. Drawing on a range of research, Anthony Collins suggests that many forms of violence have been normalised in South African society at large; that in many contexts it is 'socially accepted [...] commonly understood as benign, necessary, justifiable.'15

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's (CSVR) study on the nature of violent crime in South Africa also identified 'perceptions and values related to violence and crime' as one of the factors behind the high levels of violence in the country. The summary states that:

[The widespread tolerance of violence] reflects widely held norms and beliefs which see violence as a necessary and justified means of resolving conflict or other difficulties....
[including] the perception by young men that they need to be able to use violence to protect themselves and to obtain the respect of others.<sup>16</sup>

So, while the acceptance of violence is widespread in South Africa, it is most accepted by young men. It has been convincingly suggested that constructions of masculinity in South Africa contribute to young men suffering grossly disproportionate levels of violence and victimisation.<sup>17</sup> This is in part a result of their inability to live up to popular expectation that men should earn good money, be virile, show leadership and be physically and mentally tough.<sup>18</sup> Ratele and Letsela have suggested that twelve per cent of premature male deaths in South Africa are the result of 'masculine beliefs' characterised by

sexual dominance and risk taking, and that such traits are amplified in male-heavy environments.<sup>19</sup> Police stations have historically been populated by men and saturated by cultures of machismo.<sup>20</sup> Although the SAPS has made massive strides, with its workforce now consisting of 34% women, a disproportionate number of police working on the streets are still male. This may in part be because women are considered a risk to themselves and their partners when working on the streets, while men are expected to bravely face danger and risk.

In light of the above, SAPS officials, particularly men, should be viewed as members of communities and families where violence, particularly violence by men, against men, has been normalised as a tool for earning respect. It is therefore unsurprising that many members of the SAPS embrace the view that violence teaches lessons and solves problems, and that it builds respect.

On a number of occasions during my research in Cape Town, managers would compare their subordinates to children, suggesting they were illdisciplined. They threatened them with organisational sanctions in the belief that this would 'correct' them. At other times police told me they were doing the work of parents while on patrol, teaching errant school children what was right and wrong by taking them into custody and lecturing them, but also slapping and kicking them. Some officials told me that they beat their own children because it was how they had been taught discipline when they were children. Yet many social observers accept that South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, particularly its entrenchment of migrant labour, tore many families apart. In its wake it left children raised without parents, nurture or nutrition, often replaced by violence and neglect.21

The individual, familial and community normalisation of violence is at times bolstered by public figures in leadership positions, who believe that a threat of violence delivered by the state will reduce crime and build respect. This view is supported by aggressive rhetoric that has come

from politicians over the past decade.22 In March 2013 President Zuma stated, against all other evidence, that South Africa is not a violent country.23 His comments were delivered in defence of the country in the weeks following para-Olympian Oscar Pistorius's shooting of his girlfriend in February 2013, and the litany of negative international media coverage that followed. And yet in 2006 Zuma was reported as saying that as a young man he would 'knock out' a gay man if one had stood in front of him (inferring his presence would be taboo and violence would be corrective).24 Furthermore, it was reported in 2011 that Zuma had appointed Bheki Cele as national police commissioner to build a 'mature, visible police force that brought back its fear factor...[and portrayed an image to the public that says the police must be feared and respected.<sup>25</sup>

Other leaders have also romanticised violence. In March 2013 it was reported that the MEC for Education in the Eastern Cape, Mandla Makupula, told a gathering of school learners that they didn't have any rights. Referring to a learner who had taken his father to court because he didn't want to go to initiation school, he told learners, 'I wish he could have been my child, I would have hit him on the head with a knobkerrie and he would have gone to that initiation school crying.26 The department defended his comments, saying 'the MEC recognised that this was an engagement with young people with a limited attention span, it was important that his remarks were interspersed with a high level of humour and reference to day-to-day experiences.'27 This defence is equally emblematic of the problem, unintentionally confirming that violence is a daily experience in the lives of youth, but presenting it as being funny.

In a country where the threat of violence is literally and rhetorically used to teach respect, and where violent crime threatens the populace's respect for government,<sup>28</sup> it makes sense that some power structures, particularly those deployed within the SAPS, would tolerate, even encourage, the use of violence and force to 'beat' a respect for the state into the population.

Hornberger offers one compelling explanation for the prevalence of the use of violence by SAPS officials. Exploring attempts to introduce human rights policing into the SAPS, and having observed the normalisation of violence in daily policing, she suggests police resort to violence because they lack the personal reference point required to position themselves in the middle-class, human rights-oriented front stage of policing.<sup>29</sup> She suggests that instead

most police officers [invest] in the backstage [which allows] them to get respect from colleagues... The image of potency allowed by the backstage has helped police officers to remain motivated and avoid feelings of humiliation and inadequacy...[which arise] where formal education standards are missing, where promotions have come to a halt, where challenges to masculine identity are seen as threatening, where the difference between middle-class values and police officers' bias towards lower and working-class values becomes insurmountable.<sup>30</sup>

In both my most recent experiences with police, and in past conversations and interviews with others, there have been individuals who have bought into a discourse of mutual respect, believing that if they treat people with respect, they will be respected. Indeed, focus groups and social attitude surveys both suggest this is what South Africans want from police,<sup>31</sup> an approach known as 'procedural justice'.<sup>32</sup> But my recent experience suggests that the organisational script in which violence earns respect, remains stronger than that of human rights and mutual respect, and is growing.

Then there is the fact that most pro-active police work (stop and search, roadblocks, etc.) is focused on men. In such contexts, a playing out of archetypal roles emerges: hero and villain, cop and crook, but always man and man. Whitehead suggests that in contexts like these, where a man's sense of being a man comes into conflict with another man *as a man*:

[v]iolence by [either man] may be regarded as functional in maintaining an idealised and internalised sense of manhood in the face of external realities that point to his inability to do so.<sup>33</sup>

I am not suggesting that every male SAPS official is inherently violent, nor that those who are violent necessarily represent a 'hegemonic masculinity' against which all other male SAPS officials measure themselves.34 As Morrell et al point out, violence in South Africa is commonly practised by many men, but this does not automatically make it an element of a national hegemonic masculinity.35 Rather, it is the realm in which violence is practised - in this case the police organisational context - that can establish violence as a legitimate part of hegemonic masculinity, while outside of the organisational realm the violence might remain viewed as illegitimate. Is this what was reflected by my subjects' defence of the Marikana shootings?

Another explanation for the acceptance of violence is the mythology that exists around apartheid policing, the idea that because police could previously shoot at almost anyone, crime levels were low and police were respected. This belief results in statements like this one from a warrant officer interviewed in 2009:

Crime is out of control. If they manage to change Section 49 [so that police can shoot more easily], we will be back where we were before. The reason we are where we are is that the criminals have no respect for us. They have far too much leeway; they have far too many rights in this country. Our hands are literally tied behind our backs. I'm not saying we should go out and shoot and kill everyone running around, but they need to give us back our respect. When they give us back our respect, the crime rate will come down.<sup>36</sup>

It is easy to idealise the past. Despite most officials acknowledging the abuses of the apartheid police, both black and white, police still imagine that organisation as one that was characterised by meritocracy, justice and respect.

And while the past is continually re-idealised, many SAPS officials have only negative things to say about the present, both about the government of the day, and about the managers who steer the organisation. Many disrespect the people they share offices with. One might say that some police officials are dangerously close to losing respect for themselves.

Consider, for example, that none of the officials I asked wanted their children to become police officials when they were older. Instead they stressed the importance of education and study as keys to 'better' occupations. Steinberg found the same emphasis on education in his work in Gauteng.<sup>37</sup> In that, and in subsequent work, he has suggested that some South Africans, in some contexts, do not consent to being policed by the SAPS; do not recognise their authority.<sup>38</sup> In effect they disrespect them.

As mentioned above, when off duty, some police in my recent study would not tell strangers that they were police officials. They framed this as if the revelation would put them in danger. But might there also be an element of shame to their concealed occupation? Consider the view of a senior officer interviewed in 2009:

It's becoming embarrassing for me when I am at a private place, for instance at church, and they ask me, 'What do you do?' and I say, 'I am a police officer.' You can immediately see for yourself – these people, if you don't know them well, they will immediately withdraw a bit and think you are corrupt, or illiterate, or a poor performer. It's sad that that's the association with the police.<sup>39</sup>

Many people who joined the police in the past decade did so because the illusion of a meritocratic society in which they could be whoever they wanted to be, had failed to materialise. Joining the SAPS provided the best job security and income they could find. In 2009 I interviewed a young constable who told me 'I can't provide for my family [...]. The sad part of it all is that I live in a shack. It is hard for me [...]. I stay in the police because the family has got to

eat.' At the time I suspected he was looking for sympathy, bending the truth. But during this research I visited the homes of enough police officials to know that many do live in backyard shacks and former RDP houses – and it was my turn to feel shame. While a new constable earns twice the average household income of a maleheaded black African family in South Africa,<sup>40</sup> that income falls far short of what is needed by a sole breadwinner who supports unemployed parents, siblings, and children, often split between two provinces. This is particularly true if a constable hopes to enjoy the more luxurious fruits of this young and grossly unequal capitalist democracy.

Bruce has suggested that many South Africans suffer low self-esteem and insecurity about their status among peers, and that this feeds the country's high levels of inter-personal violence, particularly violence perpetrated by men. Citing research that correlates low self-esteem and an inflated concept of self-worth as drivers of aggression, he suggests that the most disadvantaged citizens would not necessarily be the most violent.41 Extending this hypothesis, is it not plausible that some members of the SAPS experience a form of emasculation as they move from their home to their work lives? If true, this effect is likely most pronounced among black African officials, many of whom are drawn from the margins of the working class and are most likely to be the sole breadwinners responsible for the upkeep of extended social networks. Black African males currently represent over 50% of all SAPS personnel.42

Of course constructions of masculinity in South Africa are not neatly delineated by race. Reflecting on, and generalising, the violence of a white police official, Schiff suggests in her doctoral thesis that:

the need to conform to strong cultural standards of masculinity within the context of the police can lead to a severely restricted coping repertoire that is unable to conceive of solutions to problems other than within a narrow range of behaviours that are mostly rooted in violence.<sup>43</sup>

These male officials, who as South African men are often expected to provide for their families44 (often extended families: grandparents, nieces/ nephews included), find they are unable to. They have failed in the most intimate of spheres, because they cannot provide for themselves or their family the life that society imagines they should. Moreover, they feel disrespected in the most public of spheres, because they wear the blue of the SAPS. This compounded emasculation echoes that experienced by black African men in the colonial and apartheid-era labour systems. Emasculated by slave-like power structures and removal from family life, many asserted their masculinity in part through violence.45 Might there be some truth in the suggestion that some men within the SAPS seek their respect through violence at work because of the manner in which South Africa's gross inequality, past and present, leads to unmet expectations and emasculation? Does the workplace provide the stage for the acting out of a script that in part informs masculinity for many in the SAPS? These are questions that require further reflection, with profound implications for the SAPS.

#### CONCLUSION

I spent the week of 26 February with detectives at the city police station. When, on the morning of the 27th, I asked three of them if they had heard the news about Macia's death, they expressed disgust at the actions of their colleagues. Two of them literally dropped their heads in shame, preferring not to make eye contact as they wondered out loud how police officials could do such things. But just the previous day these same detectives had tried to convince me that it was normal to assault young men if they were found walking the streets of Cape Town's townships at night, asking rhetorically 'Why are they there, if not to commit crime?'

So while there are limits to what many police consider a necessity for violence in their work – dragging a man behind a police van, resulting in his death, perhaps representing that limit – many embrace an underlying logic that says the state allows police the use of force because force and

violence prevent crime. This logic suggests that if police are forceful enough, civilians will, out of fear, respect the state and South Africa will be at peace. Of course there are many police who abhor violence of any form. But they tend to turn a blind eye to the violence of their colleagues. And so the message too often communicated by police is that it's okay to use violence to solve problems. Their violence serves to remind South Africans that the agents of the state can be as threatening to their safety as any 'criminal', and begs the question: Does a police organisation and its members, in embracing such violence, deserve the respect of the population? Probably not, but considering the context in which they live and work, might police officials be forgiven for thinking they do?

When, at his bail hearing for Macia's murder, Warrant Officer Ncema told the court Macia had insulted him, it is likely he was looking for sympathy from his audience. When presidents threaten violence against gay men and MEC's threaten violence against learners, one might spare some sympathy for a police official, humiliated in public, possibly humiliated daily, for thinking that violence is the logical tool with which to teach lessons and earn respect.



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#### **NOTES**

- I consider these early reflections and hope to develop them in detail over the coming year. As such, comment and criticism is welcome and can be directed to andrew.faull@crim.ox.ac.uk.
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- Once, while on patrol in a street lined with busy shebeens, the van I was driving in was hit by a stone

- hurled by a reveller. On another occasion we were called to assist a patrol van in our group after a stone was thrown at, and smashed, the passenger window near a dark railway crossing. So there appeared to be some truth to the stories at the station. However, there were far more times that we did leave police cars unattended, or walked through communities to hand out leaflets, when cars were not vandalised and there appeared to be little threat to our personal safety.
- 7. 'Crime Prevention' units at the station work eight-hour shifts based on an analysis of crime trends. They are not expected to attend to complaints regarding crimes that have already taken place ('bravo crimes'), but rather stop and search young men, respond to crimes in progress, and increase the visible presence of police in key locations.
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14 Institute for Security Studies