

## **MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES IN A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA**

### **Book review**

Morrell, R (ed) (2001) **Changing men in Southern Africa**. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press. London: Zed Press. ISBN 0 86980 983 0 pbk. Pages xv + 356.

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As a white, female, lesbian, post-modern feminist psychologist I have always taken particular interest in the explanation that masculine identities are largely responsible for the explosive HIV prevalence rates in South Africa. Despite my engagement with social constructionist theory, I have to admit that I have been inclined to “demonise” masculine, macho sexuality without much understanding for the way in which these masculinities are constructed, reconstructed and maintained by complex sets of interpersonal relations and social organisation. I have tended to rather focus on the way in which women are positioned in relation to men, as ultimately having limited control over their bodies and sexual activity. This focus has tended to relegate women to asexual beings who are passive victims of male strength, while men are positioned as primarily aggressive and uncontrollably sexual. Despite understanding these positions as social constructs, I have never really spent time thinking through the complexity of the way in which the masculine identity is constructed and lived out, until I read this book.

**Changing men in Southern Africa** is a well overdue book. It is the first book of its kind to examine South African men and masculinities. This book brings together a number of papers (some better than others) written mostly by South African writers that deal with the multiple ways in which South African masculinities are being deconstructed, reconstructed and constructed in a changing social and political climate. When I speak to my students about gender issues, I am always interested (but never surprised) in their tendency to assume that we will be talking about women’s issues alone. Gender studies have over time been equated with women’s studies. This book provides a necessary focus and emphasis on the masculine gender.

In the introduction Morrell introduces the theoretical orientation of the book by negating the view of masculinity as an essential, natural, fixed or singular identity, which all men have. Instead of going on to provide the standard outline expected in most introductions Morrell provides a comprehensive overview of masculinity theory, a history of masculinity in twentieth century southern Africa and a description of South Africa in transition. He successfully demonstrates the way in which a changing social and

political context forces gender responses. The introduction provides a context for the subsequent chapters that aim to demonstrate the dialectical relationship between society and self. The rest of the book is divided into four thematic parts, each dealing with different (although interrelated) aspects of masculinity. All four parts provide an engaging, interesting, at times horrifying, and at others times, humorous read.

### **Part One: The body in action: Guns, sport and violence.**

A central tenet of this book is that there is no singular masculinity. This section consists of 5 chapters that demonstrate the complex negotiation of a *multiplicity* of masculinities as well as the fluidity of masculine identity, while at the same time demonstrating the way in which particular discourses of masculinity become pervasive and difficult to dislocate. A particularly well-written and informative chapter in this section is that of Sandra Swart “‘Man, gun and horse’: Hard right Afrikaner masculine identity in post-apartheid South Africa”. Swart starts off this chapter with a popular joke “What has four legs and a prick that falls off? ... Eugene Terre Blanche’s horse” (p75). Swart uses the now-famous incidence of Terre Blanche taking a tumble off his horse while protesting against government in the early 1990s to describe the response of a particular sector of Afrikaner society to a multicultural, non-sexist dispensation. Through the course of the chapter she demonstrates the way in which some men accepted and accommodated themselves to the changing context, while others rejected, and continue to reject it. Swart goes on to pose a question: “How does a once hegemonic man cope with a fall from his horse?” (p77). The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to exploring the powerful way in which some Afrikaner men held on desperately to their sense of history, what it meant to be a Boer, and therefore, a man. This chapter demonstrates that although identities are not fixed and can change, they are also very difficult to change and challenge, especially when a particular position has such power invested in it.

Thokozani Xaba touches on the complex way in which masculine identity is negotiated in his chapter “Masculinity and its malcontents: The confrontation between ‘struggle masculinity’ and ‘post-struggle masculinity’” (1990-1997). Under the subtitle “Displaced masculinity” Xaba describes the identity crisis many former comrades and exiles are experiencing in a society with changing gender norms. He argues that “boys who modelled themselves in terms of an earlier, ‘struggle’ version of masculinity may grow up to become unhappy men” and that “Transitional societies tend to make the heroes of the past the villains of the present” (p114). Again, this provides an interesting illustration of the way in which old forms of masculinity are subtly (as opposed to radically) reconstructed in changing contexts.

### **Part Two: Fathers, families and kinship.**

This section explores the way in which men operate in socially defined circumstances and institutions where they have historically been in a position of authority. It attempts to highlight the way in which these institutional locations open up the space where men can “reflectively and reflexively act out their masculinity”.

Benedict Carton in his chapter: “Locusts fall from the sky: Manhood and migrancy in KwaZulu” demonstrates the consequences of changing (and often competing) constructs of masculinity in the Thukela valley. Carton describes the rival interpretations of manhood that existed between homestead heads (patriarchs) and wage-earning young men. Increases in young male migrants lead to the increasing erosion of the

authority of the established patriarchs. This chapter dramatically illustrates the way in which wider political, social and economic changes result in “new” constructs of masculinity that need to be carefully negotiated by more pervasive masculine identities. Carton describes a tournament of stick fighting organised by the older men during a Christmas holiday when young men return from the cities to visit family in their homesteads. The clearing becomes a sight for a physical display of masculinity, but also a space, which demonstrates the conflict between the young migrant men and the homestead heads. The migrant workers saturate the fighting pitch with their mix of traditional and contemporary garb while the older men become mere onlookers, highlighting “the dichotomy between the vision of dignified manhood that they sought to maintain and that of the returned migrants spoiling for a fight” (p137). This chapter reinforces the idea that there is no hegemonic masculinity within a particular social or historical context, but rather a multiplicity of masculinities that have very real consequences for interpersonal relations.

### **Part Three: Performing masculinity.**

The last section of the book focuses on the link between constructs of masculinity and sexuality within the South African context. South Africa is unique in that HIV infection rates are racially skewed with the majority of infections being amongst sexually active, heterosexual Africans. The authors in this section attempt to highlight the way in which constructions of masculinity may partially explain the racially skewed nature of HIV infection in South Africa. In their chapter (“Dangerous Love: Reflections on violence among Xhosa township youth”) Wood and Jewkes demonstrate the way in which young men (in a particular context) treat and experience their sexual relationships as “games” or “competitions”. A “successful masculinity” is, in this context, “partially constituted through sexual relationships with girls and deployed in struggles for position and status among male peers” (p319). Multiple partners and the ability to “control” partners become important components in displaying a “successful masculinity” (p319). While Wood and Jewkes are not arguing for a simplistic explanation of male violence primarily in terms of sexual aspects of gender identity, they are arguing for recognition of the way in which (changing) constructs of masculinity can negatively impact on their relations with women.

South Africa has the most people living with HIV in the world. In addition, it has the highest per capita rate of reported rape in the world. Rape (because it is often violent) increases the chances of HIV infection when the perpetrator is infected himself. This highlights the urgency for social scientists to engage in research that aims to provide what Wood and Jewkes refer to as a “more complex and nuanced picture of violence, by focusing on micro-level constellations for action and exposing the contradictory, multiplicitous and shifting ways in which people “live” their gender and class” (p332).

In conclusion, this is an interesting, engaging and accessible collection of papers. Each paper effectively deals with the complexity of masculinity and highlights the way in which it is contested, challenged or affirmed in differing social and historical contexts. It will be a valuable read for students in a variety of disciplines within the social sciences, and an especially useful tool for those interested in the construction of identity.