

## **EDITORIAL: REFLECTIONS ON MEN, MASCULINITIES AND MEANING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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The articles contained in this special issue were first presented at a doctoral symposium held at the University of the Witwatersrand in August 2007. Both this special issue and the symposium on which it is based represent in some ways intersecting responses to at least three concerns. The first unsurprisingly resided in the need to contribute to and perhaps extend the seminal work on masculinities that is currently being undertaken in South Africa. The second and in some ways more powerful motivation related to what seemed to be a rapid succession of harrowing media reports of violence involving men and boys at the time. In February 2007, three boys were stabbed during a fight at a secondary school in Pretoria. In the space of a single week in late May 2007, there were as many as three different violent attacks (two of them fatal, with one of the victims only 8 years old) on school learners by their classmates in the Western Cape. In the same week, an adolescent boy was murdered, allegedly over a cell phone at a secondary school in KwaZulu Natal. News reports of similar events continued without respite in 2008. For example, in August 2008 the South African public was shocked by a brutal attack by an 18-year old boy at a Krugersdorp school who slashed open the neck of a 16-year-old learner with a Samurai-style sword and proceeded to wound a number of others on the school premises.

These news stories provide distressingly graphic illustrations of the often-cited mortality profile of the country in which men are overwhelmingly represented as both perpetrators and victims of interpersonal fatal violence (Ratele, 2008). Boys and men with knives, guns, fists and rage saturated our television screens and newspapers throughout the days leading up to the symposium and thereafter, yielding for some a very visceral understanding of the challenges of masculinity for boys and men themselves, but ultimately also for all of us.

And it is not only the overt acts of violence of boys and men that assail us in the media but also the way in which risk-taking is bound up with masculinity and how this also intersects with poverty to create particular forms of danger for poor young men. One manifestation of such danger was powerfully captured in a recently televised documentary on *train surfing* or *staffriding*, as it is commonly called in this country, which presented chilling images of young boys precariously balancing on fast moving trains, defying electric pylons and the wild motion of trains to prove that they are men; the potential of these talented boys' lives, and the potential of their death encapsulated all at once in that somewhat macabre dance on trains.

All of these moments flagged the dangers of being male in South Africa – the way the world responds to boys and men; the way they are expected by their peers and elders to perform their masculinity; and the enmeshment of masculinity with violence, risk-taking, and danger. Quite simply, it is manifestly dangerous to be male, and masculinity is of course patently dangerous for women as well. The dangers take different forms across class, age, and geographical space, resulting in what Shefer, Ratele, Strelbel, Shabalala and Buikema (2007) refer to as South Africa's "missing males". This notion of *missing males* refers to the fact that while males outnumber females in South Africa from birth to approximately 34 years of age, from 35 years of age onwards women significantly outnumber men.

A third concern underpinning the colloquium and this special issue relates to the broader imperative of supporting and nurturing local researchers and authors, particularly those who are relatively new to knowledge production. It is well acknowledged in South Africa and in the discipline of psychology specifically that knowledge production has historically not only been driven by *eurocentric* interests but has also been overrepresented by white and male authors. The imperative to transform South African disciplines, research and knowledge means challenging such historical and continued privileging of certain kinds of knowledge and certain kinds of authors. The articles presented in this special issue are penned by emerging scholars and researchers from diverse backgrounds.

This special edition follows a prior edition of **PINS** which also used masculinities as its defining theme. Edited by Eagle and Hayes (2007), the previous special issue on masculinities contained a set of articles with fairly disparate foci, with some engaging with the "politics of conducting masculinity research and the transformative potential (or not) of such study" (Eagle & Hayes, 2007:2), and others focusing on men's experiences of their bodies, visually impaired adolescents' constructions of masculinity, constructions of masculinity in relation to occupational roles, and the fluidity of masculinities. As diverse as the repertoire of contributions to this issue may have been, Eagle and Hayes (2007) acknowledge that the issue still left many critical questions in respect of the study of masculinities unanswered. This is of course to be expected, given that masculinities constitute a complex area of study and that the study of masculinities is still in its infancy. Of course, it is hoped that the current special issue will contribute to filling some of the gaps in the field of masculinities studies alluded to by Eagle and Hayes (2007).

While noting the ambivalence that some of us experience with respect to researching masculinities (that is, focusing on men), the development of a critical men's studies that embraces a feminist, critical framework of analysis is of course a key project in challenging traditional constructions of masculinity, and therefore in contributing to the transformation of gender power relations in general. It is of utmost importance to many of our current national goals. These include addressing the challenges of gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS and homophobia.

R W Connell (2007:vii) talks about an "ethnographic moment" in masculinity research which he suggests has been "extraordinarily fruitful, and has provided massive documentation of the diversity of masculinities, the interplay between different forms of masculinity, the patterns of hegemony and contestation, and the embedding of masculinities in economic and cultural contexts". Such an ethnographic moment is powerfully present in the articles that make up this issue. While of course they shape our thinking and make contributions to theoretical knowledge, they also provide valuable narratives of local masculinities that speak of dominant ways of being boys and men, how these are profoundly located in local discursive, cultural, political, institutional, and economic contexts, but also how these are challenged and resisted. In these articles we see a number of critical "ethnographic moments" at work.

In Malose Langa's study of young boys we see the innovative use of a photo-narrative methodology that allows us to view the contours of a masculinised world through the eyes of adolescent boys in Alexandra, Gauteng. The fact that the study design required these boys to photograph and narrate their world through interviews provides an interesting and inventive mix of images and voiceovers on masculinity. Of course, it provides a fractured picture and noisy soundtrack that at times replays the constructions of hegemonic masculinities but at others broadcasts alternative showings. In the case of the latter, the participants draw on protective discourses such as those of religion and spirituality to argue against some of the normative male practices, even though meeting with punishment. Langa's study also troubles the male perpetrator discourse by revealing participants' vulnerabilities and the "soft" side in their narratives on missing and longing for absent fathers.

Nyameka Mankayi's picture of military men is primarily an exploration of hegemonic masculinity in a hypermasculine institution, where a man's relationship with his gun is metaphorically equated with the excitement of a new relationship with a woman. Here too there are moments of contradiction: "I want to be a man, but I want to dress well". We could of course debate the emergence of new forms of masculinity and the impact of consumerist discourses on men, but between the lines are alternative discourses on what it means to be a man; discourses contradicting the familiar, dominant versions of masculinity. Mankayi's results resonate strongly with the contradictions of a society in which militarised modes of manhood extend well beyond the barracks and battles (cf. Stevens, 2008).

Sakhumzi Mfecane's work is a particularly intriguing example of transformations and shifts in local masculinities. His study shows how living with HIV and, in particular, taking ARVs, the loss of breadwinner status and limitations related to sexuality has impacted on subjective experiences of masculinity. In Mfecane's study we see a very different relationship between masculinity and death defiance. Unlike the adolescent

staffriders, these men display a more nuanced and measured relationship to their masculine identities. Mfecane argues that challenges such as being forced to seek help and care, which goes against traditional masculine performance, stimulated reflection on the beliefs and practices of his participants, resulting in shifts in thinking and practices.

In the expanding repertoire of masculinity studies, it has become commonplace or indeed almost imperative to seek resistances to hegemonic masculinity everywhere. Bjarke Oxlund's article serves as a stern reminder that we need to be cautious in our readings of resistance or what appear to be alternative discourses on masculinities. Oxlund's work is enlightening in this respect. His study at the University of Limpopo illustrates how male student politicians utilize apparently progressive liberatory and struggle discourses to bolster their masculinity and their power and dominance in student politics, while female students are kept at the margins. The study attempts to reveal how male students engage with "hegemonic discourses of masculinity based on idioms of struggle, liberation and African traditionalism" which has the effect of silencing women students. Importantly, this article raises conceptual questions with respect to theorizing masculinities, debating the traditional wisdom related to hegemonic masculinities, and restates the importance of acknowledging the strategic appropriation of multiple and overlapping discourses in performances of said masculinities. In addition, in reading Oxlund's contribution, it becomes evident that constitutional, legal and material change in the lived experiences of being gendered will necessarily give rise to resistance and resistant discourses that attempt to conserve, re-establish, and reinstate normative roles, relations and access to power. More prosaically, Oxlund's article also provides us with the conceptual tools to make sense of one of the more perplexing features of the political rhetoric that South Africans have increasingly been witness to over the last year, namely the deployment of slogans drawn from the lexical register of warfare rather than democratic political practice – in a country that prides itself in its democratic political structures.

It is essential that we take resistances to non-hegemonic gender identities seriously. We need to explore the dynamics of resistance and unpack the meanings of masculinity, femininity and gender that lie beneath the surface. We need to acknowledge the powerful investments by both women and men in traditional gender roles and relations, and engage constructively with these, while continuing to document, advance and facilitate the hearing of resistant voices and meanings that make transformation possible.

While all the contributions to this special issue offer unique insights and very different readings of meanings of manhoods and masculinities, there is a central thread that binds them to a more liberatory form of theorising masculinity. All the articles resist the historical tendency to foreground the voices of white western men. Together these articles shift the terrain and illustrate the diversity of research and authorship in the field of masculinities. Such a dismantling of the historical centring of the white male voice, especially in South Africa, bodes well for the future of the field.

This special issue embodies a contribution to what we consider to be a critical academic and political debate on the contours and expressions of masculinities in South Africa and how these intersect with the lived realities of South Africans; a debate

in which we hope the contributors to, and the readers of this special issue will participate in an ongoing manner.

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