

## **Masculinity, sexuality and vulnerability in 'working' with young men in South African contexts: 'You feel like a fool and an idiot...a loser'**

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### **Abstract**

South Africa has seen a rapid increase in scholarship and programmatic interventions focusing on gender and sexuality, and more recently on boys, men and masculinities. In this paper, we argue that a deterministic discourse on men's sexuality and masculinity in general is inherent in many current understandings of adolescent male sexuality, which tend to assume that young women are vulnerable and powerless and young men are sexually powerful and inevitably also the perpetrators of sexual violence. Framed within a feminist, social constructionist theoretical perspective, the current research looked at how the masculinity and sexuality of South African young men is constructed, challenged or maintained. Focus groups were conducted with young men between the ages of 15 and 20 years from five different schools in two regions of South Africa, the Western and Eastern Cape. Data were analysed using Gilligan's listening guide method. Findings suggest that participants in this study have internalised the notion of themselves as dangerous, but were also exploring other possible ways of being male and being sexual, demonstrating more complex experiences of manhood. We argue for the importance of documenting and highlighting the precariousness, vulnerability and uncertainty of young men in scholarly and programmatic work on masculinities.

### **Introduction**

Since 1994, there has been a large amount of literature focusing on gender as central in understanding South African health and social challenges such as the HIV epidemic, high rates of gender-based violence and violence in general. Local research emerged within a larger field of feminist work on boys, men and masculinities, which both drew on and contributed to the international field of critical masculinities studies (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). The growing scholarship on masculinities in South Africa has been evident in a range of research and practice related events, including conferences and a growing body of edited texts (see, for example, Gibson and Hardon 2005; Morrell 2001; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005; Reid and Walker 2005; Richter and Morrell 2006; Shefer et al. 2007).

Much of the proliferating research on masculinities in South Africa has tended towards focusing on areas of social concern where boys, men and masculinities have mostly

been framed as a 'problem' and represented as violent and dangerous (Shefer, Stevens, and Clowes 2010). Local scholars have located themselves in foundational work of international masculinities scholars (see, for example, Connell 1995, 2000; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005) to unpack how dominant discourses and practices of masculinity and male sexuality shape young men and young women's understandings and are drawn on to 'legitimate unequal and often violent relationships with women' (Jewkes and Morrell 2012, 1729). Much of the local literature on masculinities has foregrounded a lens that acknowledges the complex intersections of gender with race, class, age and other markers of inequality (see, for example, Wilson 2006; Mfecane 2008; Morrell 2007).

In line with work of scholars like Hearn (2007), South African masculinities scholars have further acknowledged that dominant forms of masculinity and male practice not only have negative impact on women and girls, but also undermine boys' and men's health and wellbeing. In this respect, Ratele and colleagues (Ratele 2008a; Ratele et al. 2011; Ratele et al. 2010) have tirelessly raised concerns about the risks that dominant forms of masculinity present for boys and men and how this is raced and classed, pointing out the high rate of mortality among young, poor men through violence and other risk-related factors.

There has further been a growing concern about the way in which South African masculinities have been foregrounded as inherently problematic. Resonating with larger global critiques and in line with Foucauldian understandings of bio power and governmentality, there is an increasing appreciation of how the generation of 'knowledge' on sexualities, gender, masculinities and health is not necessarily 'liberatory' and progressive. As Posel (2005) argues, the popular (and academic) emphasis on sexual violence and the predominant focus on boys and men as perpetrators in South Africa since 1994, has had less to do with the imperatives of gender justice and more to do 'with wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of the national subject and the moral community' (240) in the postapartheid context.

With respect to the focus on boys, men and masculinities, questions are being raised about how the research and public interrogation of boys and men within the contexts of male violence and hegemonic male sexualities has reproduced a problematic gaze on poor, black<sup>1</sup> young men, both in national contexts as well as internationally. Researchers argue that the particular lens on boys and men, especially given that most research has been conducted on young, poor, black men in South African contexts, may have reproduced a blaming and 'othering' discourse, in which such men are set up as 'the problem' and associated with 'danger' (Bhana and Pattman 2009; Pattman 2007; Pattman and Bhana 2006; Ratele 2014; Ratele, Shefer, and Botha 2011).

While research has clearly now turned the lens on boys and masculinities, the emphasis has continued to be on investigating problematic constructions of masculinity and sexuality linked to risk in the context of HIV/and male violence. Arguably, the emphasis on 'risk' and 'danger' for young women has not only limited our understandings of the risks and dangers for young men but has also inhibited further

exploration of a more nuanced picture of young men in relation to dominant discourses on masculinity. More specifically, the vulnerabilities of boys and men may also have been obscured. It seems important to also allow for the acknowledgement and understanding of the complex and uncertain nature of being a boy and man, of the ever present gap, fraught and contested, between subjective narratives and idealised masculinity, whatever it may be in a particular cultural and social context. Such an understanding may constitute a strategic imperative in challenging the reproduction of gendered, raced and classed narratives of boys and men in global Southern contexts.

### **The study**

This paper draws on data collected within a larger qualitative research project on sexualities education within the Life Orientation programmes offered in South African schools. The larger project aimed at assessing both learner and teacher experiences and perceptions of such programmes.

The project was located within a feminist, social constructionist framework (Burr 1995), conceptualising the social construction of gender and sexuality in terms of power and control, with patriarchal discourses being understood as key in the (re)production of gender inequality. A feminist qualitative methodology that foregrounds gender as it intersects with other forms of social identity and power inequalities was employed at all stages of research from data gathering to analysis (Fonow and Cook 2005; Hesse-Biber 2007; Naples 2003; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).

Five focus groups with schoolgoing grade 10 male participants ranging between 15 and 20 years were drawn on for this paper. Participants came from predominantly middle and low-income white, coloured and African communities and were recruited on a voluntary basis across five different sites in the Eastern Cape and in the Western Cape through various public secondary schools (see Table 1 for a description of focus groups). In the analysis, participants are identified with pseudonyms and the focus group they participated in and several quotes have been translated from Afrikaans. Focusgroup method was particularly relevant to exploring multiple voices and to gaining a deeper understanding of underrepresented voices (Wilkinson 1999). However, peer pressure may have limited the extent to which participants felt able to be open about their experiences of sexuality and masculinity.

Standard ethical procedures were followed, including assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, the right to withdraw at any point and referrals for counselling at the nearest suitable centre if necessary. Fieldworkers who conducted the focus groups were fully trained in group facilitation techniques and sensitive to issues of power and difference within this methodological approach. Ethical clearance was obtained from Stellenbosch University, the University of the Western Cape and Rhodes University. The relevant education departments also gave permission for the research project to be conducted.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed within a qualitative thematic analysis informed by Gilligan et al.'s. (2006) listening guide method as well as feminist

discourse analytic principles. Line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding, yielded a number of prominent categories, with researchers paying particular attention to how interviewees and researchers can play an active role in the construction of data and analyses. In particular, our first reading of the data seemed to confirm a dominant discourse of ‘dangerous men’, but in making a specific effort to hear what Gilligan et al. (2006) called contrapuntal voices, we identified categories that implied that young men also can feel vulnerable with regards to their sexuality. Once a final list of categories was thus identified, all quotations that were part of a particular category were further analysed, paying particular attention to underlying discourses.

**Table 1, Description of focus groups:**

Focus group	School	Participants (n)
1.	Eastern Cape public high school located in a middle-class neighbourhood including White, Coloured and African students	6
2.	Western Cape public high school located in an urban low-income neighbourhood with predominantly African students	4
3.	Eastern Cape public high school located in an urban low-income neighbourhood with predominantly African students	7
4.	Western Cape public high school located in an urban low-income neighbourhood with predominantly Coloured students	6
5.	Western Cape public high school located in an urban low-income neighbourhood with predominantly Coloured students	3

## Findings

Findings foreground the presence of dominant discourses in which participants described masculinity as simple, physical and dangerous, which reflects the findings of much other research in this area. However, alternative discourses were also present, evident through narratives on young men experiencing and performing masculinity in more complex and uncertain ways. The complexity and uncertainty of masculinity was intertwined, on the one hand, with what other young men say and do, including what we have called ‘silencing myths’ and ‘terrible teasing’. On the other hand, the fear of

what young women say and do also seemed to have impacted on young men's experiences of masculinity.

These discourses did not only play out in peer relationships, but were further enforced in larger discursive contexts through community and familial expectations and norms. The consequences of the interplay between dominant and alternative discourses were notable in the articulation of shame, silence and violence of manhood, as participants attempt to negotiate the uncertainty of living up to idealised forms of masculinities. While the current research was conducted in different contexts with young men across different socio-economic contexts, the findings that we report here seem to resonate across these differences. Although there is no doubt that socioeconomic, raced and other material and political differences shape performances and experiences of masculinities, this paper did not foreground an investigation of differences across socioeconomic and raced contexts, but rather reports on the multiple discourses emerging across the different groups of young men.

### **The dominant discourse of masculinity and male sexuality**

As elaborated above, South African research has focused on the centrality of male sexuality in understanding men's performances of masculinity, particularly in contexts where HIV rates are high and where hegemonic male sexuality has been understood as key in shaping heterosexual practices and mitigating against safe and equitable sex practices. Much research has unpacked the significance of heterosexual prowess, identified as biologically or socially determinist discourses on male sexual urgency, termed the *male sexual drive discourse* (originally coined by Hollway 1989). This, together with a distancing from 'feminine' or gay boys and men (termed 'moffie' in many South African contexts) and a physicality and violence in performances of hegemonic masculinities, has been widely documented in diverse South Africa communities and argued as central in shaping dominant masculinities (see, for example, Anderson 2010; Gibson and Lindegaard 2007; Lindegger and Maxwell 2007; Mankayi 2008; Ratele 2006, 2008b; Ratele et al. 2007; Shefer et al. 2005). Participants draw on such discourses in reflecting on their expectations of what it means to be a man:

*Tumelo:* Once you are told that you are a man, there are expectations that from yourself as man and from your family and some of us think about having a baby without thinking through about this thing, just to prove to yourself that you are not shooting blanks [slang for male infertility] ...

*Dingane:* I can say that is maybe one of the reasons why guys who are gay sometimes hide themselves 'coz they are ashamed and fear what the community and parents would say 'coz he does not meet the expectation of a man.

*Lenka:* There is this belief that only males are expected to have more than one partner. In fact as we are seated here, some of us laugh if you say you have one girlfriend and you become teased. It's funny when it's a girl with different men, she has to hide that while we do that openly 'coz from our side it's expected. (FG 3)

Large empirical studies in South Africa have reported high rates of men who admit to perpetrating rape or sexual coercive practices (Jewkes, Morrell, and Christofides 2009),

which has bolstered arguments that coercive sexual practices are endemic in normative heterosex (Shefer and Foster 2009; Varga and Makubalo 1996). Research has foregrounded the salience of double standards where men are rewarded for an active sexuality and women are punished, with a positive discourse on female sexual desires and practices being silenced (Harrison 2008; Lesch and Kruger 2004; Miles 1992; Shefer and Strebel 2001; Shefer and Foster 2009; Wood and Foster 1995).

As outlined earlier, this emphasis on young men as sexual and sexually dangerous has been criticised for having reproduced racist and classist discourses that operate both nationally and in global contexts as a form of ‘outsourcing patriarchy’ (Grewal 2013). The overriding picture emerging in the literature and in popular discourse on young men is therefore one that appears to ‘buy in’ to the male sexual drive discourse, assuming that young men are controlled by biological (or social) determined sexual drives that determine much of their sexual behaviour. Similarly, in the narratives of participants of this study, young men illustrate their knowledge that the performance of an active heterosexuality – ‘players’ who prize multiple sexual partners – is important for their ‘successful’ performance of masculinity. Male sexuality is constructed as ‘simple’, unfettered by emotional attachments and very significant in shaping gendered normative practices in heterosexual negotiation (see, for example, Clowes et al. 2009; Shefer and Foster 2009; Wood, Maforah, and Jewkes 1998). Participants illustrate their knowledge of this pervasive discourse on male sexuality and the importance of subscribing to such discourses for achieving successful boyhood:

*Keagan:* For us boys it was supposed to be simply about putting in and taking out. (FG 5)

*Baruti:* We want to be players and want flesh-to-flesh. (FG 3)

These quotes echo much local literature that has spoken about the way in which dominant forms of masculinity privilege male sexuality and constrain safer sexual practices (see, for example, Bhana and Anderson 2013). The language used is telling – it is distanced from the self and framed as an imperative – what it *is supposed to be* or what *we want to be*, not necessarily what the individual participants themselves feel is achievable or desirable. Distancing themselves from their own experiences may have been one way in which these young men felt more able to speak in a group setting and adopt a hegemonic masculinity. Yet the tentative and distancing language may also point to some discomfort and tension in this moment of locating themselves in this dominant macho masculinity, which may reflect alternative and contradictory discourses and experiences of precarity, as emerges below.

### **Uncertainty and performances of hegemonic masculinity**

Participants also articulated alternative discourses, highlighting that performing masculinity and related sexual practices is more complex, uncertain and infused with vulnerability than merely simple, physical and uncontested. However, these alternative discourses were infused with and clouded by what other young men (including the community) said and did, and by the ways in which they enforced dominant discourses. The result of silencing, undermining and teasing strategies meant that participants felt confused about what they felt they should do, what they

thought they ought to do and how this limited what they could actually do. Such apparent contradictions and the shifting between different discourses on masculinity and male sexuality reinforces arguments about the contextual shaping of the self within poststructuralist accounts of a non-unitary self, which Helle-Valle (2004), for example, has termed 'dividuality' in documenting sexual and gender practices in his work in Botswana. Participants also spoke about dominant discourses in relation to the fear of what young women will say, the risks involved in having sex with young women and the danger of an unwanted pregnancy. Sex and sexuality therefore were closely linked to threat and uncertainty, leaving many young men in our focus groups to articulate that they felt exposed, vulnerable and lacking control, all of which are affective experiences typically not associated with dominant notions of successful masculinity.

### **What other young men say and do: 'silencing myths' and 'terrible teasing'**

Although young men cautioned against directly challenging dominant discourses, they repeatedly spoke about the tentative position they are in as young men negotiating their masculinity and sexuality. Hegemonic social norms were described as often reinforced through peer pressure from other young men:

*Baruti:* For me I think we have two types of information, one, we have this information we get from school, we have to be faithful, have one partner, condomise, when we are out there with other guys we ignore this information deliberately, we want to be players and want flesh-to-flesh.

*Dingane:* I agree with what this guy is saying, you see, *Meneer* (Sir), I can be faithful you know, concentrate on only one girl, but when I am with the guys they tease me for having only one girlfriend so I end up dating one, two, three girls although I know this is wrong 'coz we talk about this thing at school but to please my friends I do the opposite. (FG 3)

Baruti and Dingane reflect on the difficulty of staying faithful to one girlfriend due to the threat of being teased. While both young men agree that they would like to explore other ways of being in sexual relationships (i.e., practising safe sex and staying faithful), they 'deliberately' choose to do the opposite, staying in line with dominant discourses on male sexuality, foregrounding the way in which 'private ambivalences are socially shaped' (Helle-Valle 2004, 204). Other local studies similarly highlight the disciplinary function of peers in regulating young men's sexual practices, foregrounding how young men's masculine status amongst other young men frequently depends on the public denial of 'more respectful' ways of relating to female sexual partners and maintaining a player status (Shefer, Stevens, and Clowes 2010; Anderson 2010). Young men's performance of masculinity therefore centred on disguising desires and vulnerabilities that contradict expected male performance by actively engaging in dominant male sexual practices.

The need to discuss sex and sexuality in a more nuanced way was also impeded by pressures from other, more experienced young men, who reinforced myths around sexual practices:

*Lenka:* ... There are a lot of other things that we lie to each other about especially us guys. These things that if you don't get a girl after a long time the sperms will go into your head and you will be mad even those myths if they are myths about masturbation for me I wish for clarity in those things so that when guys put pressure on us using lies we are able to know that, no they are lying, there is no such [thing], because when you don't know and these older guys are telling you these things we become scared and don't want things to start with you so we end up believing them. (FG 3)

Young men like Lenka importantly admit to the experience of pressure to engage in sexual activity, illustrative of the imperative of hegemonic sexual performance in achieving successful masculinity. The vulnerability articulated here suggests the instability of masculinity and the fear and insecurity embedded in the imperative to achieve this.

Participants further spoke in various ways about being shamed and/or silenced around sex and sexuality in relation to their successful achievement of heteronormative masculinity. In particular, young men who were virgins were often constructed as lacking power and participants spoke about the pressure from peers to have sex or else face humiliation:

*John:* They'll start teasing you.

*Jason:* It makes you like that you're gay.

*Alex:* Being teased.

*John:* No, friends start judging, like, you're a virgin, like ... calling you names, and thing like ...

*Brandon:* You feel like a fool and an idiot. Yes. A loser.

*Participants:* Yes, peer pressure.

*Shane:* When you start talking about sex, they say, shut up, you don't know anything about sex. (FG 1)

In this extract, young men indicate how they are both shamed and silenced for being a virgin ('makes you like that you're gay') and that being a virgin discredits young men in discussions about sex. In order to take part in such discussions, young men need to prove their masculinity through sex, and specifically through heterosex. Continuing the conversation, young men spoke about the power in and competition of having sex with a particular kind of young woman:

*Brandon:* And sometimes to guys it doesn't matter ... sometimes I think – in fact, I see that – some guys, even if you've had sexual intercourse with a girl, if she's ugly and they don't like her, they tease you about that. You get confused, like, what do they want? You do have sex, so what ...? It doesn't matter if she's ugly, or what, you're both going to the same place. (FG 1)

Even though young men are shamed for being virgins, they are also shamed and teased for having sex with an 'ugly' young woman, suggesting that there is power in the achievement of a particular kind of masculinity that is also shaped by access to a

particular kind of femininity. International literature reiterates this finding, for example Chu (2005) in her study on young men's friendships also found that young men felt the need to prove their masculinity in front of peers and protect their more vulnerable thoughts and feelings in order to avoid judgement. This constant scrutiny inhibited young men from developing strong open relationships with male peers and did not allow young men to explore alternative ways of relating to each other. Flood (2008) has theorised these regulatory practices, arguing that relationships between male peers are strong organising factors in men and young men's lives and that such 'homosocial' relationships influence the meaning that is given to the ways in which young men engage in sexual relationships with young women. He found that young men gained homosocial status from sex with high-status young women, resonating with the way in which Brandon describes a loss of status from sex with an 'ugly' young woman.

The idea that a particular kind of masculinity and expression of sexuality is emphasised, thereby silencing alternatives, was also highlighted by reported pressures from family and community members:

*Tumelo:* Yho! They do a lot. Once you are told that you are a man, there are expectations that from yourself as man and from your family and some of us think about having a baby without thinking through about this thing, just to prove to yourself that you are not shooting blanks. So Meneer (sir) it's a question of interpreting these expectations.

*Dingane:* I can say that is maybe one of the reasons why guys who are gay sometimes hide themselves 'coz they are ashamed and fear what the community and parents would say 'coz he does not meet the expectation of a man. (FG 3)

To prove their masculinity and become a man, Tumelo suggests that young men can use sex and becoming a father as a way of avoiding the shame of questions about one's masculinity. Dingane further extends this idea to proving one's heterosexuality and that by having sex with and impregnating a young woman, the threat of being labelled as 'gay' is reduced. Tumelo and Dingane also emphasise the impossibility of alternative expressions of masculinity such as homosexual masculinity, which has been well illustrated in South African contexts, as elaborated earlier. Homosexuality and non-normative masculine performances are therefore silenced and 'othered' and the associated humiliation, so well illustrated here, serves to enforce heteronormativity and heterosexual masculinity (Plummer 2013). Thus, 'forced' heterosexual masculinity (Martin and Muthukrishna 2011), which is monitored by peers, makes it hard for young men to challenge and resist hegemonic discourses around gender and sexuality.

### **The fear of what young women will say and do**

The contradiction between the potential risks of not having sex and the lack of knowledge on how to protect themselves when having sex points to a different understanding of young men's engagement in risky sexual behaviour, where they fear what young women will say and do:

*Brandon:* People are judgemental, they're so judgemental. To me, it's just the girls. Extreme shouting, and all of that.

*John:* Yes, it's always the girls that are talking back.

*Jason:* Especially when ... like there are only four boys in the class.

*Brandon:* Whew. Uncomfortable. You feel like klapping (hitting or beating) them.

*Jason:* Klapping them, telling them to shut up.

*Participants:* Yes.

*Brandon:* They make it feel like sex is all about them.

*Jason:* Ja.

*Brandon:* It's not about us.

*Participants:* Agree. (FG 1)

In this conversation, young women are portrayed as outspoken, critical, sexually demanding and even selfish, and are thus experienced as intimidating by the young men. Interestingly, participants relate how the discomfort that they experience in such encounters leads to them wanting to klap (hit) and silence the women, who they regard as vociferous and selfish. In this way, young women become, instead of powerless victims, subjects able to humiliate young men who may draw on violence as a means to regain power and silence young women. In his work with inmates in prisons, James Gilligan (2003) argues that violence is often the result of masculinity that is shamed and that this shame becomes an obstacle to loving and/or respecting others. Although his argument draws on findings from work with extremely violent men, his ideas are striking when considering the sense of humiliation and exposure young men expressed in the previous extract. As a way of destabilising their shame, of regaining respect, these young men admit to feeling like klapping the young women who have shamed them.

In the following extract, young men discuss the consequences of young women finding out they have been videotaped while having sex with a young man:

*Jason:* She'll get angry. She's gonna get angry.

*Alex:* She'll feel embarrassed.

*John:* Yes. She might even kill herself.

*Participants:* [Laughter]

*Alex:* Yes. I think she'll dump you.

*Brandon:* Embarrass you.

*John:* Do something else. Maybe talk about what the guys do, to her friends. [unclear] ... about how bad you were in bed.

*Brandon:* That you don't satisfy her. She'll gossip about you, how bad you are ...

*Jason:* ... in bed, ja. (FG 1)

Here the participants speak of the potential power of young women's anger. Angry women were constructed as having the power to punish, humiliate and shame. According to the young men in this study, women's anger may manifest itself in public humiliation (she may gossip that you were bad in bed or unable to satisfy her), in self-destructive behaviour (she may kill herself) or in abandonment (she may 'dump' you). The pressure to please young women was therefore felt to be a strong influence on how young men constructed themselves as weak. Much of the literature has foregrounded male power and female submissiveness, with suggestions that young women lose their voice in their relationships as they enter adolescence (Gilligan 1993). However, the young men in our

study seemed to be suggesting that young women do have a voice, experienced as powerful and potentially dangerous, at least at an imaginary level in their attempts at successful performances of masculinity. Nevertheless, the laughter following the statement that 'she might kill herself' also suggests that young men's storytelling about sexual activity defends against any feelings of vulnerability (such as empathy for their sexual partner), which further allows them to construct young women as powerful and dangerous rather than vulnerable too (Flood 2008).

Another way in which young men reportedly felt disempowered by young women was in young women's 'strategies' to 'hold onto' young men. For example, in the following extract Keagan emphasises that young women have the 'power' to become pregnant:

But the girls have just as much influence. They just say they are pregnant but they are not, they just want to hold on. (FG 5)

Contrary to the findings of Morrell (2006), who suggested that young men may pressure young women to become pregnant, the young men in our study seemed to regard pregnancy as one of the ways in which young women may take power over them, thus constructing it as a threat to young men's sense of power and control.

### **Uncertainty, vulnerability and the need for safe spaces**

The imperative of the dominant available discourses around gender and sexuality, such as the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway 1989), versus the young men's own experience, wish, need or feeling, came across strongly in most of the data. Participants often asked the interviewer important informative questions about alternative ways of being in (sexual) relationships and being teenage fathers, as well as what possibilities there were to explore their sexuality on their own. This suggests a need for safe spaces to explore sex and sexuality. For example:

*Sam*: I would like to know, say you and you partner are not HIV-positive and you want to enjoy sex without a condom, how do you do it without getting your partner pregnant?

*Adisa*: The teacher should also teach us how people can manage faithful relationships from their youth up to adulthood that will not require using condoms and fears of disease and also I will like to know, say if a couple is married and the husband is HIV-positive, how can they have HIV-negative children?

*Loyiso*: I would like to know how you can support a girl that you have impregnated as a school boy seeing school boys do not work and don't have money how can they assist and be supportive. (FG 2)

In this extract, the participants negotiate their vulnerabilities and question how they can be empowered by engaging in alternative discourses of masculinity and sexuality. For example, Sam is curious to know more about safe-sex practices and enjoying sex. Adisa further suggests he does not know how to be in 'faithful' relationships and this is something he would like to explore. Loyiso also indicates that he is interested to find out how he could be a teenage father, given the uncertainty of poverty. Some participants were also curious to explore their sexuality and discover other ways to experience sexual pleasure:

*Tumelo*: What we are taught okay is well and good, we are taught about abstain, I wish we could be taught about something we can do while we abstain because for sure we are going to get an erection and be tempted so what do we do. If we can be taught abstain and do this. (FG 3)

Tumelo draws on the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway 1989) suggesting his desire and sexuality are somewhat out of his control, but also wants to find out if he can engage in other sexual practices. Asking questions like these highlight not only the punitive framework in which young men's sexuality is cast but also the tenuous positions that young men are in and the lack of control they sometimes feel around their masculinity and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

The current paper attempts to illustrate how, embedded in well-rehearsed dominant discourses of masculinity and male sexuality, are also contestations, vulnerabilities, anxieties and a range of affect, that 'trouble' the dominant notion of young men as engaged in a 'simple', powerful, physical and dangerous masculine performance. Participants' narratives foreground how they shift between different versions of masculinity and respond to contradictory demands on them as young men, at times resisting certain desires that emerge as being in conflict with hegemonic versions of masculinity and male sexuality. This multiplicity in performances of masculinities and male sexualities has been well illustrated in contemporary research (see, for example, Anderson 2010; Gibson and Lindegaard 2007; Helle-Valle 2004; Ratele et al. 2007; Shefer et al. 2005). The young men in this study are aware of the power of their male peers, but also experience vulnerability in relation to young women, who they see as having the power to humiliate and punish them. They also articulate their association of such humiliation and shame with violent male behaviour.

Acknowledging these contestations and vulnerabilities is arguably an important project in resisting deterministic and unitary representation of young men. We suggest that it is also a potentially powerful resource in working with young men: it is only through young men's acknowledgement of their precariousness and particular vulnerabilities that they themselves may be able to confront and change their seemingly violent efforts to 'immunize ... against the thought of [their] own precariousness' (Butler 2009, 48). It is these nuanced and complex experiences narrated by young men that we argue are important, not only to facilitate more sophisticated scholarship, but also to strategically engage young men, and young women, as agents in gender justice. In particular, we suggest the value of documenting and exploring the complexity and uncertainty of young men within research, policy, educational and other work towards gender justice. Importantly, young men need to engage as active agents in change, to recognise benefits in such change, but mostly to recognise their own vulnerability in a rigid binary system of gender where masculinity is constrained by adherence to particular kinds of performances, not only dangerous for young women and women but equally for young men and men. To acknowledge such vulnerability means, in Butlerian (2004, 2009) terms, to locate oneself in one's own precariousness, thus destabilising the consequences of disavowing such vulnerability.

While acknowledging the importance of complexity and uncertainty in scholarly and activist projects with young men, it is imperative that we avoid falling into the trap of an apologist discourse for young men in relation to male violence and other problematic hegemonic male practices. It is as important to resist a simplification of the acknowledgement of young women's power in shaping male experience, which is drawn on to fuel resistance to gender transformation and the obfuscation of institutionalised patriarchy. As illustration, some local research documents evidence of the sentiment that current national practices in support of gender justice, such as employment equity and protective measures against gender-based violence, have impacted negatively on men and their status, resulting in an excess of power for women in social and domestic contexts (see, for example, Dworkin et al. 2012; Shefer et al. 2008; Sideris 2004; Strebel et al. 2006). Such narratives, echoing popular discourse, may fuel a larger attempt to undermine gender justice gains in South Africa.

In arguing for the strategic importance of centring male sexual and other vulnerability and foregrounding the evidence of such vulnerabilities among young men in local South African contexts, we are also aware of the challenges in operationalising this in gender justice work. Thus, while there are many efforts to engage boys and young men in South African contexts, with a strong focus on developing more 'positive' masculinities, such as encouraging positive fatherhood and caring practices, there is possibly not enough that attempts to work with the kinds of vulnerabilities highlighted here (Shefer 2014). Finding creative ways to facilitate acknowledgement of male precariousness may be an important challenge for researchers and practitioners and those engaged in more formal educational forums such as sexualities education at school.

Acknowledging male complexity and uncertainty should not serve as a rationalisation for any problematic practices that young men engage in. Rather, such acknowledgement is a labour, a strategic engagement, not only to avoid certain men becoming the repositories for all the problems attached to hegemonic masculinities, but towards facilitating male agency and investment in gender justice and their own health and wellbeing.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper draws on data collected as part of a research project led by Catriona Macleod, Rhodes University. We appreciate all researchers on the team and the generosity of research participants in sharing their stories.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) and the National Research Foundation (NRF).

### **Note**

1. The term Black is used to refer to all those historically disenfranchised in apartheid South Africa. While we reject racial categorisations, the terms coloured, Indian and

Black African are still used for purposes of redress and equity in South Africa and are constructs embedded within a particular social history from which meaning continues to be derived by the South African population.

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## **Résumé**

L'Afrique du Sud a connu une augmentation rapide des interventions académiques et programmatiques centrées sur le genre et la sexualité, et plus récemment sur les garçons, les hommes et les masculinités. Dans cet article, nous soutenons qu'un discours déterministe sur la sexualité et la masculinité des hommes en général s'inscrit dans beaucoup des compréhensions actuelles de la sexualité masculine des adolescents qui tendent à présumer que les jeunes femmes sont vulnérables et impuissantes, et que les jeunes hommes sont sexuellement puissants et inévitablement responsables de violences sexuelles. Dans une perspective théorique fondée sur le féminisme et le constructionnisme social, la présente recherche a tenté d'examiner comment la masculinité et la sexualité des jeunes hommes sud-africains sont construites, remises en question ou préservées. Des groupes de discussion thématique ont été conduits avec des jeunes hommes âgés de 15 à 20 ans et fréquentant cinq écoles distinctes dans les provinces sud-africaines du Cap-Occidental et du Cap-Oriental. La méthode utilisée pour l'analyse des données est inspirée du guide de l'écoute de Gilligan. Les résultats suggèrent que les participants avaient intériorisé la notion selon laquelle ils sont dangereux, mais qu'ils exploraient aussi d'autres manières d'être masculins et sexuels, affichant ainsi une expérience plus complexe de la masculinité. Nous soutenons que dans les travaux académiques et programmatiques sur les masculinités, il est très important de documenter et de mettre en avant la précarité, la vulnérabilité et les incertitudes des jeunes hommes.

## **Resumen**

En Sudáfrica, las investigaciones académicas y las intervenciones programáticas enfocadas en el género y la sexualidad han experimentado un rápido crecimiento, centrándose más recientemente en los niños, los hombres y las masculinidades. En el presente artículo, las autoras sostienen que el discurso determinista vinculado a la sexualidad del hombre y la masculinidad generalmente es inherente a muchos de los conocimientos actuales relativos a la sexualidad del hombre adolescente, los cuales tienden a suponer que las mujeres jóvenes son vulnerables e impotentes, mientras que los hombres jóvenes son sexualmente poderosos; a ello se agrega, además, la suposición de que estos últimos son, inevitablemente, perpetradores de la violencia sexual. Enmarcado en una perspectiva teórica de constructivismo social feminista, el presente estudio examina cómo la masculinidad y la sexualidad de los hombres jóvenes sudafricanos se construye, se cuestiona, o se perpetúa. Con este objetivo se realizaron varios grupos de enfoque con hombres jóvenes cuyas edades oscilaban entre los 15 y 20 años, procedentes de cinco escuelas diferentes ubicadas en dos regiones de Sudáfrica: el Cabo Occidental y el Cabo Oriental. Los datos fueron analizados con el método para guiar la escucha de Gilligan. Las conclusiones sugieren que quienes participaron en el estudio han interiorizado la creencia de que ellos son peligrosos, pero buscan otras maneras posibles de ser hombres y ser sexuales, manifestando vivencias más complejas de su hombría. Las autoras afirman que en el trabajo académico y programático en torno a masculinidades es importante documentar y resaltar la precariedad, la vulnerabilidad y la incertidumbre de los hombres jóvenes.