

'I act this way because why?' Prior knowledges, teaching for change, imagining new masculinities

Lindsay Clowes

Abstract

This article begins by outlining some of the prior knowledges brought by undergraduate students to an introduction to gender studies class in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I show that, at the beginning of the course, students clearly understand gender to refer to women and femininity, imagining femininity (but not masculinity) to be responsive to social change. I suggest that, in the face of these prior knowledges, it is important to focus on masculinity as performance, as a cultural artefact and one that is deeply harmful to South African men. Student experiences of this teaching and learning suggest that it offers possibilities for imagining men as allies and beneficiaries – rather than enemies – in the struggle for gender equity.

Introduction

Men's violence is a global issue. But while it is possible to make such a generalisation it is also important to note that the particularities and scope of men's violent behaviours are rooted in time and place. In South Africa, men appear to be particularly quick to adopt extremely violent behaviours. The country has been identified as 'the most dangerous country in the world for women and girl children' (Joubert, 2007, p. 17) with South African men ranked 'as among the most violent in the world' (cited in Clowes, Lazarus, & Ratele, 2010, p. 1). Claims about the high levels and wide scope of South African men's violence are reinforced almost daily by South African media, from reports about unprovoked attacks on an adult woman in the middle of a day in a Cape Town suburb to accounts of the rape and murder of teenagers and toddlers (Krever, 2014; Thorpe, 2014). The recent murders of Reeva Steenkamp and Anni Dewani playing out on an international stage as well as the subsequent trials for murder of Steenkamp's boyfriend and Dewani's husband and co-accused (Clowes 2014; Gouws, 2014; Judge, 2013) have done little to disrupt dominant understandings of the ways in which – across communities – South African men regularly resort to violence.

While the headlines and media reports cited above might be dismissed, by some, as sensationalism in the pursuit of increased circulation figures by South African media, research tends to support claims that South African men are quick to employ violence. From a randomised controlled trial study on 1370 men aged 15 et al. (2006) reported that 16.3% of the participants admitted having raped a non-partner or participated in group

Prior knowledges

As observed earlier, evidence from the short answers submitted by students in the first class of the course suggests that they start the course with very clear understandings of gender as a concept referring primarily to women and ways in which women (as opposed to women and men) are unequally positioned in society. Three words ('women', 'female' and 'equality') stand out in particular for being the most commonly offered by students over the last three years. The impression that students' understand gender to refer primarily or mainly to women and to change in women's (in contrast to women's and men's) lives is further reinforced by their answers to another 'quick quiz' question asked for the first time in 2014 about whether it was men's or women's (or both) lives that have changed the most in the last couple of hundred years? In each year, as indicated by the following selected examples, it was just four students (out of 54 who responded in 2014 and 51 who responded in 2015) who thought that both men's and women's lives had changed:

Both. If either's lives have changed then the other is naturally affected. (2014)

Both. Men have become less dominant and women have become less submissive. (2014)

Both. Women have more rights and some men understand that women are not born to carry children and do housework. (2015)

Both. Women can now do 'men's jobs like mechanical engineering and plumbing, and men can take care of the children and cook etc. (2015)

Both. Women have had structural changes in roles, men have seen acceptance of changes in sexuality. (2015)

Both. As women have acquired legal rights and equal work, men's work has changed. (2015)

Students with these views were in the minority in both 2014 and 2015, with the vast majority – over 80% – of students who responded agreeing that it was women's lives that had changed the most. In 2014, 45 (of 54) students stated that they believed women's lives to have changed the most. They pointed to a range of factors to support their position:

Women are more empowered nowadays and are taking on the roles of men in terms of the economy.

Women are more independent have more power, are leaders, managers and heads of households.

Women are not merely seen as housewives anymore but as equals able to work.

Women have become more liberal and less oppressed.

Women are now allowed to dress in any fashion they desire ... can occupy the same jobs as men.

Women have made phenomenal progress with regards to freedom from oppression.

Women have earned more respect, more independence, can study to become someone.

The following year, 2015, saw a similarly high proportion of students (46 of 51) offer a similar perspective with similar supporting evidence:

Women don't have to stay home anymore ... women aren't dependent on men anymore. Women are free to pursue their own dreams and goals. We now occupy boardroom seats, lead global multimillion companies. Women are recognized and appreciated ... treated as equal to men. Women are recognized as individual beings, not just part of the family expected to quietly obey and not think. Women can wear pants now, go to school, be in top managerial positions, but are also more vulnerable to rape and abuse and other vicious attacks. Women don't have to be mothers but are highly sexualized. Women have come forward in the business world and taken charge. Women, because of their strong entry into the workforce. Women's mindsets have changed, men's mind sets haven't changed. Women have more opportunities to be in higher positions Women today stand up for themselves, they have agency, are empowered, have a voice.

What we can draw from this is that gender equality rights, campaigns and policies appear to be working in changing in a positive direction the views of our students about women's capabilities. Although at least two students drew attention to changes understood to be negative, noting that women were more highly sexualized and more vulnerable to sexual attacks, the overwhelming majority of answers pointed to what appear to be understood as positive change. Women, these students insisted, had made 'progress' and were no longer subordinate partners to men either in the workplace or the home. Women could now work alongside men as equals and even as leaders. Their answers suggest that most of my students understand women today to be more independent and to have substantially more choice than in the past about how to live their lives. Implicit in these answers, I suggest, is an understanding in the minds of these students that – for women – biology is not destiny. Or, perhaps more accurately, that biology is *no longer* destiny for women. One student states quite clearly that women no longer have to be mothers, while others suggest that women are no longer defined or constrained by domestic obligations. If students understand women to have more choices now, they must simultaneously understand women to have had fewer choices in the past. And if students understand women today as able to act on these choices then it suggests that they understand the behaviours associated with femininity to be responsive to changing contexts, as social rather than biological constructs.

At the same time, while most agreed that it was women's lives that had changed, there were a few dissenting voices, with five students in 2014 and just one in 2015 explaining that it was men's lives that had changed the most, that:

Men still hold top positions but women are moving into these jobs. This striving for equality affects men who are expected to be powerful main sources of income. (2014)
Men, with women gaining more rights and being able to have more dominant roles in society men's lives changed because they only then realized who is really in control. (2014)
Men, because it seems they had much more power were much more in control. (2014)
Men, in terms of power relations and the amount of opportunities they get in relation to women. (2014)

Men have a lot more opportunities over the years than women, women are still oppressed and looked down upon. (2015)

It might seem from these latter responses that there is some disagreement about whether it is men's or women's lives that have changed the most. More careful analysis suggests that there is a great deal of commonality in students' understandings of gendered change. There is, for example, a sense in which the more distant past is marked by the absence of change, that distant human history is a history of women's subordination and male domination that, until recently, transcends time and place – and that what has changed recently has been women's behaviour. Another feature that stands out is the way in which, in contrast to women, men are positioned as passive, impacted on by social change, rather than agentic. Where women – today – appear to be understood primarily through the social, men tend to be understood as 'simply bodies' struggling with social change, rather than themselves products of or agents of social change. If in the light of these answers, we consider once again students' suggestions that gender means 'women', 'equality' and 'female', then perhaps it can be argued that a key gender difference, in the prior knowledges brought to class, is that women are gendered and men are not (see Dover, 2014).

Responding to prior knowledges

Since 2011, the second year introductory course has increasingly focused on questions of masculinity and this has begged a number of questions. Established in 1995, for instance, the Women's and Gender Studies Department (then programme) is itself the product of broad struggles for gender equality in South Africa as well as on campus. Should a space originally designed to foreground women's experiences and women's voices be focusing on men and masculinities? And if so what is the place of men and men's studies in gender studies? To what extent does such a focus risk reinscribing masculinity as the unmarked default and/or depoliticizing or diluting the political agenda of a feminist agenda? Does such a focus pose a danger, as Shefer and Aulette (2005, p. 107) asked a decade ago, of the historical domination of men 'as both subjects and objects of knowledge production ... reemerging to usurp and destabilise women's studies?' (see also Berila, Keller, Krone, Laker, & Myers, 2005). While such considerations should not be lightly dismissed, it is my conviction that a key objective of a feminist teacher is to challenge dominant understandings and normative discourses, and that given the prior knowledges outlined above a *critical* focus on masculinities is both legitimate and desirable.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that such a focus generates a range of challenges. These are built, in part, around the circulation of dominant discourses and the ways in which these are expressed, experienced, challenged and resisted by students. As Megan Boler has observed, in considering the ethics of shattering world views, each new semester brings three groups of students – those who find their world views shattered but remain engaged in 'rebuilding a sense of meaning and coherence in the face of ambiguity', those who appear disaffected 'already sufficiently numb so that my attempts to ask them to rethink the world encounter only vacant and dull stares', and those who 'angrily and vocally resist' any attempts to think critically about the world (Boler, 2013, p. 27). Populist stereotypes of feminism and feminist teaching as anti-men are deeply implicated in the last set of responses, reactions which have led Boler and Michalinos Zembylas to think critically about the challenges and opportunities involved in requiring students to engage in

critical self-reflection and inquiry regarding their cherished beliefs, deeply held assumptions and value systems in ways that destabilise their understandings of themselves and their worlds (see Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003). That such resistance is regularly encountered by educators of and for social justice in the North is testified to by the expansion of research reflecting on the challenges of teaching masculinities to young men and women, with, for example, a special edition of *Women's Studies* focusing on 'Men and masculinities in Women's Studies' appearing in 2013 (Farr, 2013).

Stereotypes of feminism and feminists as anti-men are complicated in post-colonial societies in general and Southern Africa is no exception to this. These complications both frame and underpin the possibilities for effective teaching. In the first place, feminist theory is itself popularly understood as a Western import, as unAfrican. Second, 'race' has been the dominant explanatory narrative of South African history, with struggles and conflicts that had acknowledged complex and intersecting subject locations structured around class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on becoming increasingly more narrowly defined as conflict over primarily racial (and class) inequalities over the course of the twentieth century. Over the second half of the century, in challenging white monopolies over truth, a new generation of South African activists further foregrounded racial inequalities in a struggle predicated on the necessity of a psychological transformation within the minds of black South Africans. Today these long histories foregrounding 'race' continue to underpin and inform powerful discourses through contestations over 'authentic' African culture in which patriarchal behaviours are positioned as more (and egalitarian behaviours positioned as less) authentic. That teaching for diversity in contemporary South Africa continues to foreground 'race' gender, sexuality, religion ethnicity, and so on underlines just how powerful racial discourses are and does little to highlight the possibilities of feminist approaches to social justice (Clowes, 2013b). Emerging from all of this then is a popular understanding of feminism in South Africa as not simply unAfrican and anti-men but as very specifically anti-African men.

These popular understandings and prior knowledges inform the demographics of the student body in that less than 10% of the students in the Women's and Gender Studies Departments at both the University of the Western Cape (and its close neighbour the University of Cape Town) are young men. They also frame and underpin the possibilities for effective teaching and learning in feminist South African classrooms (see, for example, Bozalek, Carolissen, & Liebowitz, 2013; Macdonald, 2013; Pillay, 2012). At the same time, given the prior knowledges outlined earlier, a critical focus on men and masculinities means finding ways to teach that challenge, rather than reinforce, understandings of feminism as anti-black men and finding ways to facilitate learning that evade the trap of serving as nursemaid or caretaker to students, whether male or female, who might feel threatened by a critical focus on gendered cultures.

As bell hooks (2004) and others have noted, one route through these tensions is through teaching that foregrounds patriarchy, rather than men, as the problem, teaching that foregrounds ways in which patriarchy is in fact deeply harmful to young men. It was with this in mind that the course was redesigned in 2011 to explore the relevance, for

South African men, of hooks' (2004, p. 66) point that the 'first act of violence patriarchy demands of males is not violence towards women' but 'psychic acts of self mutilisation'.

Writing by international theorists was complemented by local researchers as well as more accessible locally generated material such as newspaper and magazine articles. The overarching focus was to draw on this theorising to consider whether and in what way local patriarchies might be 'bad news' for South African boys and men (Hearn, 2007, p. 17). I was astonished at the end of the course when 58 (out of 60) students who chose to answer a question asking about the ways in which gender equity might benefit men wrote instead about how gender equity would benefit women. It appeared, after an entire semester of focusing on how contemporary performances of masculinity were harmful to South African men, that the notion that gender equity might have something to offer men remained either unsayable or unthinkable or both (Clowes, 2013a).

In 2012, having reflected on the limited achievements of 2011, the critical focus on masculinities was further developed and refined such that only minor changes, or changes to, e.g., assessment practices, have taken place in the teaching and learning that is reflected upon in this paper. Since 2012, students have been offered theorising that challenges simplistic dualisms structured around sex, gender and sexuality. These are supplemented by more accessible materials such as documentaries, digital stories, newspaper and magazine articles offering critical insights into the complexities of contemporary performances of South African masculinities. A series of guest speakers from Gender Dynamix (a South African NGO working on transgender experiences) as well as Sally Gross (an intersex activist who had lived the first 40 years of her life as a catholic priest) and by Patrick Godana of Sonke Gender Justice (a South African NGO working with boys and men to promote gender equality) further challenged normative understandings of what it meant to be a man.

Unsettling prior knowledges

Given a key aim of the teaching and learning was to challenge prior knowledges, what evidence is there that the normative discourses around gender outlined earlier have indeed been unsettled? And to what extent has any unsettling involved new ways of imagining the self and the future? Both male and female students had expected an introduction to gender studies course to focus on women, and in the focus groups conducted towards the end of the course in 2013 several expressed their surprise that this had not been the case:

I thought that gender was going to be about women because it's Women and Gender Studies. (Thabo FG2)

I thought it will help in my psychology studies to the point that it will describe how women – how females and males differ in how they think and ways like that. (Arno FG2)

At first, before I did [the course] I was always thinking men, women, separated. (Zane FG2)

I've identified as a feminist for a long time, but I really had not given much thought into masculinity as a gender, as much as I had given femininity as a gender ... like before I thought that it was about women reaching equality with men. (Ntombi FG1)

Understandings that gender refers primarily to women and girls are widespread (see Clowes, 2013a; Dover, 2014), and such understandings certainly underpinned student expectations of the course. The realisation that gender refers to more than just women, that it can refer to relationships between men as well as between men and women thus demonstrates the disruption to prior knowledges brought to class. This new understanding is further underlined through students drawing attention to their realisation that contemporary practices of patriarchal masculinity were harmful to men:

I doubt that I can ever forget or discard what I learned ... about masculinities and how this patriarchal society that we live in is detrimental to men's health. (Anonymous online survey 2013)

The multiple ways that patriarchy hurts men! That masculinity too is a gender, in every way that femininity is. (Anonymous online survey 2013)

I enjoyed immensely the visit from the Sonke Gender Justice people where they came and talked to us about the work that men are doing to embrace gender equality and teaching other men and boys the value that would come out of that. That patriarchy is not all rosy for men, that patriarchy hurts men in many ways. So I loved that, I feel like it has strengthened my own conviction in why I believe in gender equality ... now it's, it's everyone stands to benefit from it. (Alice FG1)

The corollary to understanding that that patriarchy is harmful to men is an awareness that gender equity is about more than women obtaining the same privileges that have always been available to men, that men are equally embedded in gender systems, implicated in and subjects of systems of power, expressions of gendered cultures (Lorentzen, 2011). Alice, for example, has clearly begun to imagine the possibility that men might also be beneficiaries of gender equity.

Understandings of patriarchy as a problem for men as well as women, and the challenges for men of trying to live up to normative masculinities, opened up the possibility, for some students at least, that men might not be the enemy (hooks, 2004) as well as the possibility that men might have important roles to play in contributing to change:

My perspective has changed a lot about men, and that men are not all that bad even if I disagree with some of their actions. (Anonymous online survey 2013)

Doing the interview ... helped me to know more things about men. Also knowing that there are men feminists and how important it is for men to be feminist. (Anonymous online survey 2013)

I am very happy to hear from the Sonke group, I actually wish to have my father, brother, grandfather, fiance, etc. to get to hear that there are men trying their best to actually make a change ... These men of Sonke have been through a lot and you would take them for aggressive and angry, but yet they stand in front of us today, totally humbled and open. (Chante online discussion forum 2013)

What was noteworthy about his learning, Thabo suggests, was a growing awareness of masculinity as a cultural artefact that could be explored, critiqued and considered:

Yes I was [surprised]. Masculinity and umm, patriarchy, I was – you know it's always been there but you've never actually noticed that that's how society works ... it was an eye opener. (Thabo FG2 2013)

Arno made a similar point:

You're conditioned in a certain way when you are brought up ... like your family's norms and morals ... you tend to overlook things ... until someone opens your eyes to it ... same as this, you didn't realize that you know men are allowed to do so many things which you take for granted because that's supposedly how it is, especially because a lot of religions and cultures dictate it like that. So when it's actually put in front of you and say listen but look at this you know ... I think it opens your eyes to it. (Arno FG2 2013)

Both Thabo and Arno insisted that they had become more aware of masculinity as a social construct, both had, in other words begun to recognise some of their own 'inscribed habits of emotional inattention' (Boler, 2013). Rather than a simple product of human biology Arno indicated that he now understood masculinity as an expression of power complexly interwoven with and mediated by other constructs such as class, race and culture. Now he sees masculinity as:

something that's obvious, but I didn't think of it ... not all masculinities are the same. It depends on your culture, your race or your even your demographic or social status ... Now I've sort of come to a realisation ... masculinity is all about the power, the authority ... So I think that's what it comes down to authority and power figures. (Arno FG2 2013)

Thabo also foregrounded social factors such as class and race rather than biological factors in his explanation of how he understood masculinity. Rather than an essentialised identity emerging out of male biology, Thabo explained that:

Race plays a part in masculine behaviour. I don't know if you understand, because for a black person masculinity is different, for a white person it's different, for a coloured ... even in class you see like, if you look around in class, you see oh yeah, he's wearing like that and you know I'm wearing this and I've got these values and he's got those values. (Thabo FG2 2013)

Applying the insights he had developed, Arno drew attention to the rocky marriage of an unemployed friend who was being supported by his wife, suggesting that his friend's

inability to live up to the socially constructed ideal had created a social vulnerability that was expressed through aggression:

I've realised ... him not having a job, it undermines his masculinity and that's why he's so sensitive you know, he can't provide ... and we've been conditioned to think this is how we have to act and he's unable to act that way so that's why probably he's got all this aggression. (Arno FG2 2013)

Finally, engaging with the idea of masculinity as learned (and harmful) performance rather than an automatic preordained script prescribed by human biology saw Arno begin to consider some of the ways in which he was situated within relationships of privilege and marginality as well as the ways in which he might reproduce these relationships. In beginning to pay more attention to the 'inscribed habits of inattention' (Boler, 2013),

Arno begins to consider that change is possible, to imagine the possibility that he (and presumably other men) might behave differently:

It makes you realize, you know, how petty it is when you, you think we have to act this way, ... you are being, someone else's ideologies is imposed upon you to act a certain way instead of acting in a natural way you know, and that's gone so far now that our natural way of acting is in this specific way. And it makes you think you know, I act this way because why? (Arno FG2 2013)

Conclusion

As a white middle-class feminist educator 30 or more years older than most of my undergraduate students, I have limited understanding of what it means to be a young, gendered and raced person in contemporary South Africa. The knowledges and understandings that I bring to class – and that underpin course design – are very different to those of my students. And so it is important to establish the knowledges brought by students because effective learning is structured around what they already know, around the practices and behaviours – including male violence – they have learned to take for granted in the communities from which they come. As observed at the beginning of this paper, it is violence against women, children and other men – heteropatriarchal violence – that is so problematic and that is so resistant to change. The reasons for this are clearly complex and linked to a range of factors including poverty and social inequalities structured around gender and other salient subject locations, the lack of political will, as well as normative discourses in which violence is a legitimate method of resolving challenges to heteropatriarchal authority. They are also linked to essentialised understandings of what it means to be a man, meanings which legitimise violence while simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of change.

Taking these knowledges seriously over the last three years has revealed some of what Boler (2013, p. 30) calls the 'inscribed habits of emotional inattention', to point to ways in which at the beginning of an introduction to gender studies course the behaviour of men (but not women) tends to be essentialised, unmarked, understood through biology as fixed and unchanging by the vast majority of the students who have signed up for the course. While one must be careful in extrapolating the prior knowledges held by students

to the communities from which they come, the understandings students bring must be representative on some level of the wider discourses operating in society, discourses that contribute to the maintenance of heteropatriarchal violence. The prior knowledges revealed by my students show just how deeply embedded these cultural habits of seeing – and not seeing – have become, how even though they are social and cultural as much as they are personal, these habits ‘come to feel like one’s chosen self-identity’ (Boler, 2013, p. 30). Challenging these habits of attention and inattention are a central aim of the course, and that this is experienced as deeply challenging is underlined by the swift agreement from a range of students when someone commented on the online discussion forum in 2014 that the course ‘should come with a health warning.’

On the one hand then, while the vast majority of young women (and the tiny minority of young men) who signed up for this course over the last three years did so because they were interested in questions of gender, they expected the course to focus on questions of femininity and women’s empowerment. Such a course could very easily have been put together. Undermining these expectations, however, by introducing students to theorising that challenges normative understandings presents possibilities for imagining men and masculinities in different ways. And yet, as Ratele (2013b) observes, such understandings gain little or no traction in broader discourses. One component of an explanation for this can be found, I suggest, in the prior knowledges discussed above, knowledges that are further underlined by the skewed ratio of female to male students in such courses. That the vast majority of young men are able to self-select out, are never systematically exposed to the idea that masculinity is a performance of gender that is just as fluid and flexible as femininity means that far too many students – the leaders of tomorrow – will continue to see patriarchy as women’s problem and gender equality as irrelevant for men. Unless we find ways of foregrounding and critiquing these prior knowledges more broadly, feminist educators and activists risk re-inscribing the very discourses (and violent behaviours) that are so resistant to change.

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Notes on contributors

An historian by training, Lindsay Clowes is an Associate Professor in the Women’s and Gender Studies Department of the University of the Western Cape. She writes about gender, men and masculinities and has a current research focus on teaching gender.

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