

## **EDITORIAL: MASCULINITY IN TRANSITION – 1**

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The special edition on “Masculinity in Transition” engendered considerable interest and the material consolidated in this edition offers some interesting insights on masculinity as understood within a particular historical time and within the particular social and political context of South Africa. As noted in the call for papers, within the social sciences the field of masculinity studies has burgeoned over the last two decades. This has allowed for the deconstruction and elaboration of what constitutes masculinity with the intention of problematising the gender category, as well as opening up the possibility for a less binary conception of what it means to be a person. Many of the contributions speak to this literature in examining masculinity as it is lived out and represented in particular contexts, and the majority of the articles are located within a broadly constructionist/deconstructionist tradition. This interest in interrogating masculinity goes beyond a kind of semantic, symbolic or discursive aim in that in the world in general, and South Africa in particular, gender theorists are perturbed by the apparent intractability of gender relational patterns and the problems associated with this. While feminist theory, policy and activism has succeeded in highlighting the oppression of women and in improving protective legislation and some aspects of women’s lives, sexual violence remains a serious social ill, and domination of women by men continues in numerous spheres from the workplace to the bedroom. Thus, for many, the study of masculinity is intended to shed better light on gendered aspects of identity and how these take relational form.

The field of masculinity studies encompasses a broad range of scholarly traditions and theoretical frameworks, including conventional understandings of sex-role identity, several different psychoanalytic takes on gender development, ethnographic explorations of cultural expressions of identity, cultural theoretical elaborations of representations of men and masculinity, and post-modern interrogations of how gender is constructed in discourse, amongst others. The field thus encompasses a “broad church” that cannot be said to speak with a common voice and encompasses a range of *political* stances. However, an influential trope within sociological and psychological research into masculinity has been

the notion of “hegemonic masculinity”, associated most strongly with the writing of Robert Connell, although also elaborated by others. Several of the articles draw upon and engage with this notion as it is operationalized in the lives of sub-groups of men or boys in South Africa. The idea that hegemonic versions of masculinity operate to dis-enfranchise not only women but also sub-groups of men, has been proposed and is explored within the edition, with some suggestion that this is indeed the case. However, it is important that in postulating some of the ways in which men (and young men most particularly) are pinioned by dominant versions of masculinity the agenda of more conservative proponents of “masculine crisis theory” is not supported.

The more purely theoretical articles in the edition, those of Mcleod, Morrell, and Chadwick and Foster, engage with some of the politics of conducting masculinity research and the transformative potential (or not) of such study. Even with the specific alignment of pro-feminist men within masculinity studies with a gender emancipatory agenda it is important to pose the question as to whether thinking about masculinity allows social theorists to engage with critiques of patriarchy as critically as they might intend. Much of the research cited in the edition points to the intractability of aspects of male identification and the continual re-emergence of familiar associations with and enactments of a masculine identity. Thus, while expressions of masculinity may be viewed as culturally and historically specific, it is also apparent that some dimensions appear to emerge as almost timeless and universal. One such dimension seems to be the dissociation from the feminine and an assumption of superiority over women (and by association, of men who are “feminine” in any respect). There is also widespread assertion of the association of masculinity with domination, whether exercised through physical, economic, cultural, political or other means, and linked to this an acceptance that status adheres to interpersonal dominance. Without reverting to an essentialist version of sexed or gendered identity, the edition does point to the need to engage with “something” about masculinity that seems deeply entrenched, despite the more recent trend for research to emphasize the contextual specificity of expressions of masculinity. Whether this requires re-engagement with notions of patriarchy, as suggested by Mcleod, entertainment of a more essentialized understanding of gender identity, or other interventions, this seems an important juncture for those interested in studying masculinity to take stock of such concerns. It is this “something”, referred to above, that needs further theoretical reflection and elaboration to avoid a slide into essentialist notions of gender identity, and yet at the same time capture the enduring commonalities, dare we say “universalisms”, of what men *do* and *are* in different contexts and societies.

Against this background, however, a number of the studies described in the more empirically based articles, suggest that masculine identity and identifications are indeed in some flux, and to some extent always have been. Furthermore, it seems that different historical conjunctures and material conditions provoke greater or lesser shifts and questioning about gender identity, and so there does seem to be “something” in the current South African social formation that is provoking these shifts and questionings regarding masculine identity. And hence, the title of this special issue of **PINS**: “masculinity in transition. The research into groups of boys or young men indicates that they are aware of competing versions or templates of masculinity and have some anxiety in aligning themselves with positions and attempting to live out aspects of their gendered identity. As

described in the literature on hegemonic masculinity, they seem to be very much aware of “the ideal” and have some aspiration to achieve this, however, they are also aware that an ideal is only achievable by a minority (if at all) and is something of a “straw man” (or person). One can read their experiences and talk as simultaneously upholding and contesting “conventional” masculinity. Interestingly both the articles on body image investment and peer counsellors suggest that “softer” versions of male identity can only be maintained if stricter dimensions can be assumed to be in place or have already been demonstrated. Similarly, amongst the vision-impaired boys, superiority or manifestations of “typical” male identity are claimed and aspired to, in part it is proposed, to counter-balance a vulnerable identity. Feminist researchers could see in such work evidence of both critique and support of traditional masculinity, and the tension in the lived experiences of the boys and men researched is echoed in the interpretive reflections of the researchers. Again such reflections highlight the need for ongoing debate about the politics of research in this field, not to mention the powerful ideological hold that (fantasized and idealised) notions of “typical”, “conventional”, “hegemonic”, and “dominant” masculine identity have for both men and women, boys and girls.

Pursuing this issue somewhat further it was also interesting to note some of the omissions in content for this special issue on masculinity in South Africa. Despite the fact that the call for papers emphasized some of the political problems associated with the living out of maleness in South Africa, there were no articles submitted on sexual violence or on sexual practices, and HIV/AIDS contraction and prevention. There is also no material dealing explicitly with “race”, class and masculinity, a fascinating area for study in a transforming South Africa. Where such topics are introduced, they tend to be inferred rather than tackled in depth. Without wanting to detract from the valuable content that is presented it is worth pondering whether such topics are being sufficiently researched and if so where such research is being disseminated. And if these topics (“race” and class, in particular) aren’t being researched, what is the basis for their theoretical and political repression?

A noteworthy aspect of the edition is the meeting of developmental objectives in terms of academic writing. Four of the articles have been co-authored by student-lecturer dyads. It is gratifying to see students producing publishable work and supervisors working in collaboration to ensure that such work is written up in a scholarly tradition. It is also good to see that young researchers are invested in new aspects of gender study and in looking critically at masculinity in particular.

The edition brings some new material and insights into the current field of gender studies and indicates that those who make up society, both researched and researching, are actively engaging with ideas about gender transformation. Whether masculinity is untransformed, transformed or transforming is being debated. The articles in this edition reflect considerable contestation around this issue. Perhaps all that those invested in *psychology in society* can be grateful for is that such contestation exists and is in the public domain. Given the strong interest in the topic of masculinity a number of contributions emerged subsequent to the filling of this edition and a second special edition on masculinity is to follow. Hopefully some of these issues will be pursued further and the scope of the debate extended, with the joint contribution of the two editions bringing at least 10 new articles into the field of masculinity studies.