

“NOWADAYS THEY SAY ... ”: ADOLESCENT PEER COUNSELLORS’ APPRECIATION OF CHANGES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

Nicholas Davies and Gillian Eagle*
Department of Psychology
School of Human and Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand,
P O Wits 2050
Gillian.eagle@wits.ac.za

* Correspondence: Gillian Eagle

Abstract.

The article describes findings from a research study conducted into young South African men’s understandings of masculinity. The study was part of a broader project aimed at investigating how young men or boys in South Africa view masculinity, including dominant or hegemonic forms and alternatives to these constructions. Given concerns about a “crisis in masculinity” and social problems associated with the enactment of masculinity, the researchers were interested in how young boys seem to position themselves with respect to a masculine gender identity. Three focus groups were held with volunteer peer counsellors who were invited to start the groups by talking about photographs they had taken to represent their “life as a boy/young man” in contemporary South Africa. The main focus of the discussion is on aspects of the data that appear to reflect an appreciation of the fluidity or malleability of masculinity. Three key themes are addressed, that is, emotionality, homosexuality and occupational sex roles. In addition, some parts of their discussion about becoming counsellors and their concerns about reconciling this identity with their sense of themselves as masculine is also elaborated. The discussion suggests that these boys appreciate challenges to traditional constructions of masculinity and that in their conversation they both accept this and attempt to defend aspects of conventional or previously dominant versions. It is proposed that their conversational work suggests that there is some awareness of change, some anxiety associated with this, and some strategizing to reconcile a range of differing positions on masculinity. The sense of some openness to transforming aspects of masculinity is seen as hopeful, even if this is to some extent a product of these boys’ predominantly middle class upbringing.

Key words: *masculinity, peer counsellor, hegemonic masculinity*

INTRODUCTION.

This article discusses the findings of a study conducted into adolescent masculinity as portrayed through the words of boys or young men who have elected to become peer counsellors in a high school setting. The article focuses particularly on the ways in which their commentary about what it means to be a boy at this time in South Africa reflects an appreciation of the fluidity of masculine identity. In contrast to literature which suggests that boys may view masculine identification as something fixed or circumscribed to aspire to (Brittan, 1989; Gilmore, 1990), we were struck by the degree to which common representations of masculinity, while appreciated by these boys, were also interrogated by them in their talk. The article draws on notions of hegemonic masculinity as outlined by Connell (2000; 2002) and explores how these boys' talk both subscribes to such discursive constructions and simultaneously contests them. Several key themes that arose from focus group discussions with such boys will be explored.

The study was part of a broader South Africa Netherlands Partnership (SANPAD) research project aimed at investigating how young South African men or boys engage with conventional or hegemonic constructions of masculinity and the possibility of identifying strategies and practices that might reflect contestation of such versions and the assertion of alternatives. It was anticipated that boys who had volunteered to become peer counsellors might be more open to flexible constructions of masculinity, given that the domain of emotions and psychological caretaking is often viewed as feminine. However, the main thrust of the article is not so much to investigate alternative constructions of masculinity but to illustrate how conscious these boys appeared to be of contestations around what it means to be a "typical" man or boy.

LITERATURE REVIEW.

The topic of a possible "crisis in masculinity" has received extensive discussion over the last two decades (Dowsett, 2002). Terms such as the "new man", the androgenous man (Kirsch, 2003) and the "metrosexual" (Hoh, 2003) have been introduced in both academic and popular literature and there has been evidence of criticism of attributes associated with so called "macho-masculinity" or machismo (Chrisafis, 2003). Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman (2002:15) suggest the crisis is characterized by instability and uncertainty in the gender domain "over social role and identity, sexuality, work and personal relationships", significantly because of the influence of feminism, but also because of historical changes in material and ideological conditions.

The contestation (be it real or symbolic) in the domain of masculinity, throws up the obvious question of: What is masculinity?, or What does it mean to be a man?; How can we define masculinity? Do men indeed identify with masculinity or how important to men is that pattern of behaviours in any particular society associated with being masculine? How do boys and men engage with conventional constructions of manhood and what are the constraints and opportunities for living out a male identity in the face of dominant and non-dominant versions?

It is generally accepted that masculinity is a relational construct in so far as it is often defined in contradistinction to femininity, that is, as that which is non-feminine (Connell, 1995). The notion of machismo, or "macho" masculinity, derived originally from Latino

stereotypes, represents a strong version of masculinity that celebrates many of the attributes traditionally associated with masculinity, such as physical toughness and sexual prowess. Although somewhat dated, Brannon's (1976) summing up of "typical" masculinity as contained in the four adages of: "No sissy stuff", "The big wheel", "The sturdy oak" and "Give'em hell", still carries resonance if one looks at what much literature continues to identify as the characteristics associated with masculinity. The four adages refer respectively to the codes of: non demonstration of feeling states (except anger) or of behaviour associated with the feminine; working for status, dominance and power; never showing weakness or dependence; and embracing the masculine predisposition to the "wild side of life", including risk taking and the enactment of violence.

In more contemporary literature the notion of a dominant form of masculinity that captures what previously may have been referred to as "masculinism", the masculine ideal or the masculine stereotype, has been commonly referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" (Donaldson, 1993; Connell, 1995, 2002). Extrapolating from Gramsci's notion that certain ideological forms become dominant to the exclusion of others, the notion of a hegemonic version of masculinity asserts that even within the domain of masculinity itself there are relational dynamics, with some versions of masculinity assuming dominance over others (as well as over the feminine). Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, but rather the masculinity that occupies the dominant position in a given pattern of gender relations (Connell, 1995). While there may be contestation over what the hegemonic version is in any given context, such manifestations of masculinity occupy a privileged space and may represent the "type" of masculinity that boys most aspire to or that they measure themselves against. Hegemonic masculinity as an ideological force tends to subordinate alternative or competing masculinities, to promote the subordination of women to ensure the patriarchal dividend for men, and to coerce men into adherence to dominant versions through threats of punishment of one sort or another. Wesley (2000) highlights some forms of this punishment when he refers to marginalisation (othering of some boys' experiences), oppression (restricting opportunity for self expression) and dominance (restricting some boys' participation in activities).

Complicating research into dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity and their power to shape people's lived experience is the recognition that masculinity is not a homogeneous set of traits or characteristics. At an individual or subjective level the meaning of masculinity is a function of upbringing, generation, culture, race and class, amongst other dimensions. Some dominant versions of masculinity have also changed over history; "masculinity is a concept which gets transmitted from one generation to the next through talk and text" (Edley and Wetherell, 1995:208) and thus is open to constant reinterpretation. In keeping with this understanding of gender constructions as time and context related, the notion of a universal crisis in masculinity is questionable. As would be expected from something imbued so strongly with cultural artifacts, the masculinity crisis, and research around it, is driven by culturally idiosyncratic forces.

In Britain the identification of a crisis around masculinity has been galvanized by increasing crime figures and boys' deteriorating educational performance in comparison to girls. "Boys have been criticized for being anti-intellectual, emotionally illiterate, uncommunicative, antisocial and delinquent - characteristics that have been seen to mark them out as

different from girls” (Frosh et al, 2002:132). In the contemporary South African context, any crisis that masculinity may have been experiencing pre 1996 was acutely focused with the transition to democracy in 1994 with the introduction of the 1996 Constitution and Bill of Rights, as well as associated public discourse espousing human rights, including the rights of women and minority groups. Although South African society incorporates many cultural forms and groups, it might be argued that the traditional South African “meta-masculinity” at the point of the introduction of the new constitution was one based on “conservative” patriarchy and aggression (Walker, 2005). It has been suggested that dominant forms of masculinity were thrown into disarray with the new legislation because “[T]he Constitution’s implicit understanding of sexuality is premised on a figure of manhood which is as liberal as the Constitution itself” (Walker, 2005:228), not necessarily a figure easily embraced by either South African men or women in general. While the new Constitution has reduced the “patriarchal dividends” inherent in the traditional masculinity of the past, (certainly at the legislative level) (Walker, 2005), it has also put adolescents and young men on the cusp of creating a gendered identity, into a more debated terrain in defining and embodying such identity. While constitutional principles may be viewed as somewhat abstract, there is evidence that both ideas and practices are being shaped by pervasive debates and interventions around gender politics, both locally and globally. It might be argued that never before has masculinity been as fluid as it is now in the new South Africa.

In contemporary South Africa, particularly within the domain of the social sciences and social policy interventions, there has also been a growing concern with the impact of masculine identifications and associated behaviours on the lives of girls and women as well as the lives of boys and young men. Of particular concern are the extremely high rates of gendered violence and the observation that the vast majority of such acts are perpetrated by men against women. In addition, the enormously high rates of HIV infection and problems in reducing the spread of the epidemic at the point of transmission have also highlighted problems in the enactment of masculinity, such as resistance to barrier protection methods and sexual promiscuity (Walker, Reid & Cornell, 2004). There is also considerable concern about very high levels of substance abuse, in turn associated with risk-taking behaviour, motor vehicle accidents and male on male violence. All of these “problems” of South African society have begun to be mapped to some extent onto gendered practices and in particular, more recently, onto young men’s enactment of masculinity. While there has been some over-simplification in the attribution of men collectively as responsible for social problems, the shift in gender debate and interventions has also drawn social scientists into interrogating aspects of masculinity and gendered subjectivity more carefully.

The tradition of research in which the study is based is influenced by social constructionist understandings of identity in which human subjects are seen as both influenced by and actively engaged with discursive constructions in taking up particular subject positions and living out their subjectivity/ies (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Whitehead, 2003). Several studies on young masculinities conducted within this tradition have sought to comprehend how boys attempt to retain self esteem and social status in positioning themselves relative to normative, dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity they encounter in everyday life, particularly amongst their peers (Mac An Ghail, 1994; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Frosh et al, 2002; Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007). Wesley (2000)

is one of many who posit that boys actively negotiate individual interpretations of masculinity, refusing to passively accept their gender as a set of predetermined roles. Moreover, recent research questions the notion of a somewhat reified set of masculine identities as positioned within a gender order à la Connell's (1995) sociological approach, in arguing that identities are "dynamic and performative self narratives, positioned in subjective time and space" (Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007:27). There has been considerable interest in how "alternative" forms of identity may be constructed or enacted in such a way as to allow for the occupation of non-mainstream positions that still carry value for the individual or the group. The study was conducted with a similar interest in assertions of dominant and non-dominant versions of masculinity amongst adolescent boys in this particular context. Since this was the main focus of the study the literature concerning the gendered nature of "helping" or counselling related professions or activities is not addressed. However, the choice of volunteer peer counsellors as informants on issues of adolescent male identity was made on the admittedly un-interrogated assumption that counselling is commonly perceived as an activity more commonly associated with feminine attributes. It was anticipated and perhaps even hoped that these boys or young men might hold and voice less traditional views on masculinity. In addition, some of their thoughts about the relationship between masculinity and working as a counsellor were explicitly explored in the study.

METHOD OF DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS.

The exploration of subjective meanings and understandings was core to this research and consequently qualitative methods were employed in gathering and interpreting the data (Silverman, 2001).

The participants in this research were 16 year old, standard 11, self selected peer counsellors from a boys' high school. By "self selected peer counsellors" should be understood that the participants had made themselves available for selection as peer counsellors after a call for volunteers. The boys who were interviewed had been selected for counselling training but had not yet received such training. The research was conducted at a private school in an affluent Johannesburg suburb. Although an additional focus group of two male peer counsellors from the University of the Witwatersrand, (both "black" and aged 21 and 27), was also conducted, the data from this pair was somewhat different and therefore the article concentrates on the material gathered from focus groups with the high school boys. Two focus groups were conducted at the school after hours with 4 different participants involved in each group. The two groups included both "black" (African) and "white" learners – two a piece in the first group and one "black" and three "white" scholars in the second.

In taking up Varga's (2001) contention that research techniques that invite youth participants to take an active and participatory role in data collection and analysis are desirable, Blackbeard and Lindegger (2007), in a study similar to the present one employed the data collection method of auto-photography. Mimicking their approach, in this study of peer counsellors participants were issued with disposable cameras and asked to capture images of: "What it means to me to be a young man in South Africa today". After development of the photographs participants were invited to take part in a focus group discussion where the photos were used as the primary stimulus for eliciting participants'

representations of their lives in this regard (Silverman, 2001). Further verbal prompts and open ended questions on the part of the facilitator (the first author) sought to broaden or tease out narratives and shared and disputed views.

The focus group discussions were transcribed and then analysed using a critical thematic analysis. At the outset key themes were identified by consecutive readings of the material, extracting and finding labels for all the ideas that appeared to be of interest. The data was scrutinized independently by both authors who then discussed what appeared to be most salient. Following this all the data was subjected to a more quantitative content analysis in that excerpts were collated under the headings that had been identified as best capturing the material. In this way it was possible to highlight the themes that had generated most discussion. Based on both observation of investment in topics within the groups and the coding and sorting exercise, several dominant themes were identified. Thus, in keeping with most descriptions of thematic analyses, there was an early stage which involved a sorting of all the data and then a secondary phase that involved employing more discriminating criteria for sorting material into clusters that made sense in terms of the objectives of the study (Neuman, 1997). In addition, given the critical nature of the study, observations about common strategic and rhetorical conversational styles were also noted. For the purposes of this study a selected set of themes are discussed, namely those which struck both authors as illustrating an appreciation of the fluidity or malleability of the construction of masculinity.

The influence of the sex of the facilitator was briefly explored at the end of the focus groups. Although hypothetical, there was consensus among participants that their responses and participation in the groups would have been different had a woman been present. One individual suggested there would have been “more fighting”, another that the discussion would have been more protective of males and a third that certain material would have been withheld.

DISCUSSION OF KEY THEMES.

Three key aspects of the discussion were identified by the authors as reflecting how the boys’ constructions of masculinity appeared to be particularly fluid in the sense that traditional versions of masculinity were presented as open to reinterpretation or to some extent up for negotiation. They are: *emotionality*, *heterosexuality* and *sex role expectations*. In addition a fourth thematic section exploring how the boys saw the relationship between masculinity and counselling is also included.

Emotionality: No sissy stuff.

There is a large body of literature confirming the conventional understanding of masculinity as encompassing emotional detachment (Buchbinder, 1994; Pleck, 1995; Seidler, 1992,1994,1997). Brannon (1976) was among the first to highlight this conceptualization of masculine identity with his “No sissy stuff”, and Luyt (2003:52) refers to a similar injunction to men encapsulated in the metaphor to have the “heart of a lion”.

The normative ideology of emotional resoluteness was acknowledged early on in the two school focus groups.

K: "It's very evident. You hardly ever see a Black man showing emotion. Even with my father he doesn't express if he's very upset, it's even hard to tell whether he's upset or not. It's very blank and very stern and hidden. Emotions get hidden a lot. I don't know if it's the same for Whites ...?" [General laughter].

In this quotation *K* refers to both a general perception of African men as non-demonstrative of emotion and to the specific case of his father as someone who is stern and whose emotions are "hidden". The use of the term "hidden" and the reference to the fact that "he doesn't express if he's upset" suggest that in *K*'s understanding the emotions are present but not demonstrated, i.e., that men do feel emotions but that they exercise control over their expression. This is different from an argument that would present women as inherently more emotional than men and suggests that *K* is more willing to entertain a notion than men are emotional, as is borne out in some of the material that follows. It is also important to note that *K* has an awareness that cultural practices or behaviours related to racial grouping might mean that men differ in their behaviour. In these nuances in the communication it is already apparent that he is wary of conventional and essentializing notions of masculinity.

Although the notion of emotional stoicism as characteristic of a masculine presentation was voiced early in the groups, the negative repercussions of emotional inhibition, control and suppression were also soon articulated:

K: "And so I guess men just don't like to talk and as I say, they like to be alone, so being alone is almost a way to deal with their anger and deal with their feelings internally, and that's why they implode and get those psychological problems and everything."

In challenging the normative emotional fortitude demanded of men, *T* both echoes *K*'s point, as well as picking up on his earlier reference to possible cultural differences:

T: "I learned a lot in my culture that guys don't really cry. I've never really seen a Black guy cry, but I see White fully grown men cry. I've never seen a Black man cry. So many people say men don't cry, tigers don't cry, and stuff. Men don't really express their emotions properly and it still affects a lot of people's marriages and everything, and men still don't talk, they don't."

T suggests that there is a cost to emotional inhibition in that this precludes some forms of communication and intimacy, for example in a marital relationship. He is also emphatic in noting his perception of the difference between "black" men and "white" men and perhaps this splitting of men is a way of both identifying with some men as well as dis-identifying with others, in this case with "white" men because of their "crying", the dis-identification in this case ostensibly about demonstration of emotion rather than about race. While possible differences in racial and cultural expressions of masculinity were noted in the groups, in terms of group interaction there seemed to be a very relaxed engagement between the black and white participants. This may have been due to their sharing of a similar kind of class background as evidenced by their attendance of a "private school".

In the previously cited quotation *T* seems to be voicing both some surprise and possibly disapproval at the open demonstration of emotion while at the same time expressing concern about the problems with control. Again there is some sense of questioning taking place. The dis-identification with emotionality is understandable when it becomes clear from further discussion that for a (“black”) man to cry is for him to lose his maleness altogether:

T: “It would be like he’s such a girl.” [General laughter]

The laughter conveys some sense of the ridiculousness of such an equation, an appreciation of the censure involved and some denigration of the feminine. This is congruent with Connell’s (1995:143) position that hegemonic masculinity has so defined itself as to suggest that if someone is not attracted to the masculine “then that person must be feminine – if not in body, then in mind”.

It is noteworthy that in all three focus groups the discussion did not move in a direction which denied that men feel emotion but rather led to a consensus that men are emotional, but that their emotions remain hidden. The boys indicated that they lived this pattern out in their own lives.

M: “I don’t really show my emotions as much as I’m quite emotional but I don’t show my emotions that much. I guess I’m also kind of shy.”

Interestingly in this disclosure in which he asserts his hiding of emotion, *M* takes up a contradistinctive position to hegemonic masculinity by acknowledging his shyness, his vulnerability and, indirectly his feelings of fear around judgment. His muted expression of emotion seems to confirm the position, expressed by *K*, that:

K: “There is a view that you can show too much emotion.”

M continues: “It makes you seem vulnerable. Sort of exposing a part of yourself that you don’t want everybody else to see.”

M neither owns, nor clearly distances himself from this view yet in taking up this stance, he does exactly what he is alluding to in his comment, namely avoids exposing a part of himself which may make him vulnerable in the face of his peers and risk their judgment. Indeed he chose not to say something along the lines of “I’m worried that I might show too much emotion”. As *M* noted, and the rest of the focus group agreed, “Men are scared of judgment”, particularly about being judged effeminate if one of the first possible consequences of this was the likelihood of being called “gay”. As will be further elucidated in a subsequent section, in their male adolescent ethos the boys perceived an automatic link between emotionality and “gayness”.

In discussing the range of emotional expression to be found in men from hegemonic emotional stoicism to gay sensitivity, boys wondered whether an implicit set of rules existed which determines what is acceptable. *A*’s policing of his peers was clear in his reference to the loss of masculinity he associated with the expression of emotion in “shallow”

circumstances. If they want to retain their maleness boys are only allowed to express their emotions in response to events of sufficient severity, “pretty tragic” circumstances like death.

A: “I mean, I think it’s quite a female aspect that you will put seemingly stupid things on someone else. You’ll go talk to a friend like ‘Oh, I was dumped’. I mean ‘Oh! She didn’t go out with me’. I mean, you can deal with that yourself! Honestly! It’s not that terrible [general laughter]. I mean, if it’s like a death in the family then you can speak to someone else about that because that’s pretty tragic.”

All of the above tends to confirm Luyt’s (2003:57) research experience with young men when he observes in response to similar conversational content that: “in underlining the active suppression of emotion, this disclosure comes promisingly close to championing masculinities performative, rather than innate nature”. It seemed that the boys were aware of the conventions governing emotionality and emotional expression and understood these at some level to be conventions rather than absolutes, and conventions with some problematic consequences.

Heterosexuality: The straight oak / oke and further no sissy stuff.

It was clear that the issue of gayness was prominent in the minds of the participants in thinking about masculinity. Conversation about homosexuality came up early and repeatedly thereafter in all three focus groups, in several different contexts, and with no prompting from the facilitator. While there were few explicit references to heterosexuality or sexual or romantic relationships with girls, the conversations about homosexuality as something that required special explanation certainly suggested an assumption of heteronormativity.

The preoccupation with homosexuality was in keeping with observations about male identity made by Connell. “No relationship among men in the contemporary Western world carries more symbolic freight than the one between straight and gay” (Connell, 1995:143). Much of the censure of gayness seems to lie in the fact that, “[p]atriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (Connell, 1995:143). Gay men have been alienated, marginalized and punished for their expression of “non-masculinity” and “defection to femininity”; if someone is attracted to the masculine, in terms of object choice, “then that person must be feminine – if not in body, then somehow in mind” (ibid). While Connell’s reference to gayness relates to desire directed towards a male partner, the boys in the focus groups seemed to widen the “gay net” to include any attraction to, or incorporation of what are considered feminine traits, such as caring and emotionality.

However, in some cases participants were clear in expressing acceptance of gayness, asserting their belief that to be gay did not undermine an individual’s masculinity. Despite the pejorative and punitive use of the label “gay” highlighted in the previous section, when directly talking on the topic of homosexuality, tolerance of homosexuality well as an attempt to make sense of this sexual orientation was expressed.

M: “I think maybe society is accepting it [homosexuality] more. People are turning that way because ... like in the past people would turn out straight instead of gay just because of the

way society brought them up and now, because of maybe, like ... guys are turning homosexual or something ... because of emotional stuff or something"

The language used by *M* here warrants closer reflection. He suggests that one's sexual orientation may be a product of socialization ("the way society brought them up") and that acceptance of homosexual practices may differ across history. However, he also uses phrases such as "that way" and "homosexual or something" which suggest some distancing and othering, perhaps to defend against group members thinking he identifies too closely with this position. He needs to guard against being labelled "a little dodgy" (as suggested by *A*) in being perceived to embrace gayness too closely, despite "society accepting it more". The possibility that a person might *choose* to be gay was not entertained and *M*'s defence of homosexuality may be seen as rather conservative in this respect as it suggests that some passive process of identity formation leads to homosexuality. The communication thus suggests a qualified acceptance of gay identity.

Immediately after *M*'s contention that homosexuality is more acceptable, *A* qualified this perspective, suggesting that there is less intolerance rather than acceptance.

A: "It's not necessarily frowned upon. It's not accepted, let's say, but it's not frowned upon as it used to be. A lot of people are saying 'well, it's not that bad'."

Homosexuality is "allowed" to exist as an alternate masculine identity, although perhaps only because it is "not that bad" and does not threaten prevailing masculine norms in that it is still a minority position.

A further interesting observation was made in that one participant even went so far as to suggest that voicing same sex attraction and engaging in same sex sexual behaviour had become "fashionable":

K: "Like they say ... nowadays they say it's fashionable to be homosexual, because ... at my friend's school, it's just fashionable. Everyone's just lesbian or anyone's just gay. Everyone! Everyone!"

In this excerpt *K* suggests both that gayness might be more than acceptable but also that taking up such a position might represent some kind of playing with identity. Homosexuality is redeemed and not taken seriously at the same time. What is evident, however, is some debate about the perception of homosexuality or gayness as aberrant and a willingness to entertain a more liberal stance. Although their language suggested that they were merely reporting other people's views the conversation indicated that this is a contested area.

The difficulty of some participants in assessing appropriate physical boundaries between men also seemed to be implicitly associated with the ever present, looming hegemonic sanction of being labelled gay. In explaining one of his photographs depicting a group of friends pulling faces for the camera, kicking legs in the air, and behaving somewhat "out of the ordinary":

K commented: "I don't know whether I should put this one – it's friendship... but then there's also a sort of flamboyance [he laughs] and I don't know whether this is a strictly male thing. It sort of conflicts with that picture of uniformity, but still, I think among friends there's more willingness to show your weird streak, your differences, you can ... if you're with your friends you can show your flamboyance or your whacky side, or your strange view of the world."

K's choice of the word "flamboyance" is an interesting one. In colloquial language it is an adjective often used to describe gay men's behaviour. What K may be saying is that the more weird, "gay" or "non masculine" behaviour eschewed by the hegemonic masculine order, may be acceptable in specific circumstances, such as when you are with close friends. The implication of this is not that gay relationships are acceptable but that homosociality, male bonding and behaviour which is less conventionally masculine, (more flamboyant, more gay), is acceptable in settings where a boy is known to be straight, that is where such joining does not undermine the assumption of a heterosexual identity. One is allowed to enjoy male intimacy providing this does not translate into desire and providing there is a degree of constraint exercised in the display. K's laughter and qualification of his introduction of the picture suggests that some of his spontaneity in depicting young men in this way is compromised when he becomes self-conscious about other boys' scrutiny. He begins to defend or "police" himself in this context.

There is undoubtedly still a high level of suspicion and non-acceptance of gay men by heterosexual men, but the above excerpts suggest some willingness to interrogate such assumptions, even if at the level of "political correctness". While there was some loosening of hegemonic doctrine in relation to homosexuality it was also observed that what regularly occurred was that any loosening of boundaries was immediately followed by some commentary appearing to undo this.

Despite the increasing acceptance of gay people, the polarity between "straightness" and "gayness" was often conflated with the polarity between maleness and femaleness, as shown in the brief interaction cited below in which the interviewer probed comments about conventional sex roles in the occupational setting:

Interviewer: "So what would you think if you walked into a company and the person at Reception [i.e. the secretary] was a guy, was a man? I mean what would your feeling be about him."

S: "I mean like ... uh ... I mean it would probably depend, and not to be offensive, like if the man was like gay or not, I think that plays a part too. But if it was a straight man it would be embarrassing, you know. If the guy was like gay, it would be sort of understandable."

Interviewer: "Why would it be understandable if he was gay?"

S: "I mean, that feminine thing."

What seems evident from this discussion of the theme of homosexuality is that young men are certainly aware that to openly express prejudice against homosexuals is not acceptable in contemporary South Africa and perhaps more globally. There is also some entertainment of the idea that gayness may be the product of socialization and possibly even an identity that can be played with at the level of experimentation. However, there is still a powerful

association between gayness and femininity and to be gay appears to bring one's masculinity into question and to position one as inferior. Overall in this domain the boys' talk seemed more conservative than they might like to have conveyed themselves to be and reflected quite contradictory positions.

Sex roles: The big wheel.

Conventional sex role assumptions as regards occupational identities have defined the role of men as that of primary breadwinner and that of women as that of home maker, the former in the public and the latter in the private domain (Smith & Winchester, 1998). This assumed stereotypic division of labour by gender has persisted across different cultural groups (Connell, 2002) despite women's increased presence in the workplace for the last several decades. Whether men in general have embraced and supported this move to a "mixed sex workplace" as a step towards increased egalitarianism, or have been forced to perform psychological gymnastics to find ways of tolerating this, is an engaging question and the participants in the focus groups offer some interesting insights. Their comments reflected some appreciation of the fallacy of past perceptions of strict occupational role divisions.

T: "... like the idealized man who has to come home with the money, but now days you have women working and you get your wife earning more than you do and all of a sudden the guy's role has changed into like, say, a stay at home" [inaudible].

It has been argued that despite buying into the norms of hegemonic masculinity few men actually live up to the hegemonic ideal (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In the past, the workplace has been an arena in which men could realize the ideal of being the primary breadwinner and reinforce their sense of power as provider for the family. However, in the comment above it seems that *T* expresses an awareness that it is now only in fantasy that it is the man who always brings home the bacon and that in reality it can no longer be assumed that men retain relational power through their occupational roles. He continues:

T: "And when they [men] are not working it's almost like a whole taboo. 'He's not working. He's a guy. He should be working, bringing money to the home!' If he's not working something's gone wrong."

In an endeavour to manage the emasculation associated with this toppling from the position of sole or primary breadwinner, group members sought to temper or even reverse the potential humiliation associated with this demotion. Some participants for example, elevated the position and status of "family leader" over that of breadwinner.

K: "I think there's less of a view as well now days, as the man as the breadwinner but rather the leader of the family. I know it sounds kind of confusing 'cause we usually associate the bread winner with the leader because he brings home the money and makes sure everyone is fine. But even in homes where the woman is earning more, the man is still seen as the leader, the person exerting control."

In this set of statements it seems that *K* works rather hard to restore the dominance of men or patriarchy in contexts in which men's power cannot be assumed through economic

provision. Despite his awareness that his logic may be somewhat confused, he holds on to his reframing of the basis of gendered power within the couple or family. Other reframes aimed at addressing the “under achievement” of being a “house husband” or “stay at home” man, alongside a wife who earns more, included underlining the importance of being the one to raise the family, and equating the role of family-raiser with that of breadwinner as illustrated in S’s comments:

S: “I find actually that one of the most important jobs is raising your family, keeping them safe et cetera. So, personally, I don’t really think there’s a difference between a housewife and a house-husband as such. It’s both an important role being a breadwinner and raising a family.”

S also does verbal work to salvage the status of non-working men, extending the role of house husband to include that of protector, “keeping them safe” and thus incorporating another traditional masculine role into this domain. He also suggests that the roles of primary breadwinner and of homemaker are equitable, inadvertently in the process promoting the status of women who conventionally occupy the latter role.

There were several illustrations of acceptance of changing roles:

G: “I think there’s a new generation coming in that’s starting to accept the fact that everyone is equal and it’s ok being below where women are ...”

However, it was also apparent that changes in gender roles and occupational status might be experienced as anxiety provoking. Although indirectly linked to the theme of gender roles, a fascinating exchange took place in response to K’s explanation of his photograph of a “GENTS” toilet sign. The conversation suggested that the “gents” is the only place where men can band together as men and hold onto their masculine identity by spatially excluding women.

K: “I think we as men, we’re looking for an identity which makes us men because now days, with female rights and women taking jobs and becoming bread winners, there’s a sort of intermingling of roles so we maybe feel a bit lost so we don’t know what makes us a man and if we have demarcated bathrooms ... [laughter], for obvious reasons ...”

M: (Interrupting) “Like trying to get away from women, hey?” [laughter]

A: [inaudible] “... saying ‘this is ours’ [loud agreement] – you can’t touch this!” [More agreement]

K: “It’s weird. It’s like we’re losing identity despite the fact that the anatomy’s different.”

The laughter and enthusiastic discussion of this issue suggested that despite their apparent acceptance of changes in gender identity their talk reflected, there was also some sense of threat and a need to create a space that excluded girls or women and perhaps the “feminine” in general. There is some poignancy in K’s recognition that anatomy or the corporeal representation of gender does not guarantee a gendered identity and that he and

his contemporaries might “feel a bit lost”. The use of the personal pronoun in his reflection (“we’re losing identity”) suggests that confusion and contestation of gendered identity might be experientially real for these boys, extending beyond speculation.

What is apparent from the discussion of this theme as well as the previous two is that these young men are aware of the fact that conventional, stereotypic and perhaps hegemonic versions of masculinity are transforming or even transformed and cannot be assumed in their contemporary worlds. While their talk often reflected attempts to shore up or re-assert dominant versions of masculinity (rationality, heterosexuality, economic provision), the fact that they needed to do conversational work to ensure this ironically reinforces the probability that they understand that such ideals are just that, ideals rather than realities. There was also evidence of some space to debate ideas and tolerance of a range of opinions. The fourth thematic section illustrates how the prospective assumption of the role of peer counsellor evoked further debate in relation to all three themes discussed thus far.

Masculinity and the role of counsellor.

Having to locate themselves somewhere within dominant discourses concerning masculinity proved somewhat challenging for these self selected counsellors when the discussion became more focused on their potential counselling role/s. A’s response to the question as to where they might position themselves as peer counsellors given the discussion on masculinity that had previously taken place in the group was immediately met with the reflection “Ah! A spanner in the works”. He went on to say that answering the question posed by the interviewer required a “deeply meaningful conversation”, this despite the fact that a considered discussion of a range of issues had already taken place in the focus group, suggesting some avoidance of further discussion of this topic.

In the conversation that subsequently took place concerning their sense of themselves as potential counsellors the first reflection that came to the fore was that being a counsellor did not detract from being masculine. The fact that it was even necessary to assert this betrayed some of their anxiety about non-masculine associations to counselling as an activity. The boys continued in this vein by arguing that caring for others was not a feminine attribute, and that, indeed, being a counsellor made one more manly and could bestow some status that made one superior to one’s non-counselling peers. Furthermore, participants were initially at pains to articulate that counselling did not equate to caring. It seemed that they were willing to demonstrate caring behaviour, but initially eschewed the label of “*caring*” lest it be confused with “softness”. Certainly they, as counsellors, would not be “*soft*”, which, as they understood the word, meant to be a pushover, sentimental, “touchy-feely” or feminine:

K: “I don’t know if caring and softness link ... sort of, you can still be caring and still be sort of stern and hard faced. You don’t really have to be soft to care.” [General agreement]

A: “I think that’s the biggest stereotype there is, that if you care you’re soft.”

In underlining the retention of his manliness in this potential role, *T* goes on to explicitly articulate the type of macho language that he will use when talking to a troubled peer:

T: "You can see an oke's not looking ... he's kind of looking down. I think he'll be quite happy that one of his friends has come to them and say 'What's up Bru? What's happening?' Know what I mean?"

The distinction between being a counsellor and attending counselling as a help-seeker was also an important one for the boys. Going to visit a counsellor was viewed as a display of weakness, (which they would tolerate in their peers but not publicly in themselves).

M: "... going to a counsellor would not be the typical man thing, being a counsellor is fine to be I think. I mean going is like showing a weakness ..."

However, being a counsellor, to all intents and purposes, was just being a man.

M: "... well, I mean it's just ... knowing who you are. I mean helping someone is also seen as reaching out, and that's being a man; you're taking that step, that like, thing to help them, and that's nothing that should be looked on as not being a man."

G not only echoes this sentiment, but also alludes to the power of the helper, a dimension that allows the role to fall within the hegemonic norm of men taking on the roles of supporter and provider for those around them.

G: "... you have to have time to support other people's interests. But you still have to have time to keep the world around you intact. I think it's a man thing to help people around him, or want to help people around him."

As the discussion progressed it seemed that the boys in one particular focus group found it increasingly difficult to integrate the possible requirements of being a counsellor with stereotypic views of masculinity.

K: "I think you just need empathy, an ability to sort of identify with someone else, although that may be associated to a degree, with softness."

Towards the end of this particular part of the discussion, however, *M* seemed to suggest that being a counsellor did not require any transgression of hegemonic norms, one could be a counsellor without demonstrating or engaging with emotion.

M: "To be a counsellor, I mean you don't really have to show that emotion at all."

In contrast, *G*, who was in another focus group, was outspoken in his contempt of such splitting:

G: "You can't just turn it [emotion] on and off though. Surely you have to live your whole life that way otherwise you come across as hypocritical, saying, 'Look at me. I'm a strong emotional person but I do live as a weak person who doesn't go asking for help and who isn't in touch with my own emotion'."

Justification for their role as counsellors, a role which their discussions (including their denial) suggested they were aware would inevitably mean engaging at an emotional level, often took the form of one-upmanship, with the contention that in order to be a counsellor one needed “control of your own feelings to such a degree that you can help other people with theirs” (K). In rationalizing and renouncing any agency in his choice to care for his peers through counselling, M explained that perhaps he, and others like him, “were just born to help other people, to care.”

G, on the other hand, was the most vociferous in his verbalization that counsellors needed to have some awareness and understanding of their own emotional worlds. He seemed comfortable, certainly at the intellectual level, with men integrating their emotional life into their masculinity.

G: “I think it just means that we have accepted the new man who has a feminine side.”

It seems pertinent to note here that G presented physically as a very typically masculine boy, stocky and well built. He attended the focus group in his school track suit indicating he had either come from, or was due to go to, some sporting activity. He was the dominant or “alpha male” in the group and directed much of the conversation. More than any participant G tended to challenge the opinions of the others, including arguing for alternative roles for men and women. How did he get away with such pro-feminist thoughts and utterances? It seems that some degree of “feminine” character or pro-femininity will be tolerated in a boy, provided it is balanced with a healthy dose of adherence to hegemonic masculinity. This may have been the case with G.

There is perhaps more to his bold statements. At one point G shared his opinion that men, generally are “emotionally challenged”. He later went on to say, vis-a-vis the “new man”:

G: “... the new perception of a male, almost puts you at a greater level if I can say this without sounding arrogant, at a greater level than the others in that you’ve accepted that you do have emotion, that you almost have to acknowledge or live with your emotion – you can’t just push them aside and try not to live with them. I think it just means that we have accepted the new man who has a feminine side a lot quicker than the other people.”

In this text, a strong counter normative discourse using a narrative of maturity is employed by G. He is clearly portraying “the new man” and all those men who embrace him, so to speak, as being more mature than “the others”, namely the conventionally hegemonic masculine men. In two of the groups a narrative of superiority, intellectual and emotional, also built up a counter normative discourse:

G: “... you meet a guy who’s a counsellor, who works professionally as a counsellor or psychiatrist, are you going to see him as soft or as someone who is able to deal with other people’s problems, someone who might have a higher mental intellect?”

A: “Oh yeah! Like us having a stronger, what you call it, emotional intelligence.”

In emphasizing this non-hegemonic or perhaps counter hegemonic discourse it becomes easier for the boys to assert less conventional opinions. It also puts fellow focus group members in a difficult position by effectively emulating the policing inherent in shoring up traditional hegemonic masculinity, but now in the service of a possible new hegemony. Indeed, the boy who fails to embrace the “*new man*” is emotionally challenged and not at the same “*greater level*” as the others. The subtle policing and othering inherent in these non-normative discourses in the cause of the “*new man*” ironically mirrors the same policing tendencies identified as being employed in the service of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995).

For these boys that they could be counsellors, with all the non-hegemonic implications of this position, and still retain the respect of their peers, was put down to their current popular status in the school as well as their assumed heterosexual orientation. The emphasis on these aspects of identity in this context suggest that adopting a somewhat alternate masculinity is risky.

S: “I mean our friends know us really well so they know that us doing this isn’t going to change us, it’s not going to change the way we feel about ourselves, about the opposite sex, even.”

It was apparent that in thinking about their decision to become peer counsellors the boys were aware of possible threats to the assumption of their masculine identity. Their talk reflected attempts to reframe counselling in some respects by masculinizing the activity. However, some boys were also willing to assert that the integration of more feminine qualities might render them superior, rather than inferior to other men. To some extent the boys asserted the value of their choice to become counsellors by creating a division between the “*professional*” aspect of this identity and their identity as young men. Again what was evident was quite active interrogation of stereotypes and vacillation between adopting non-stereotypic positions and striving to maintain aspects of the masculine ideal.

CONCLUSION.

Without wishing to belabour the discussion that has taken place thus far it is hoped that the presentation of material has succeeded in illustrating some fluidity in the construction of masculinity in this group of adolescent boys. Across the four themes discussed it appeared that there was a clear appreciation of the fact that conventional representations of masculinity could no longer be uncritically assumed. At the same time there was also evidence of attempts to shore up what could be understood as hegemonic dimensions of masculinity. The boys’ conversation reflected debate, contestation and rhetorical work that underlined the fact that assertions about masculinity could no longer be assumed or stated without qualification and that this in their minds was predominantly to do with historical changes in gender identity and roles. While perhaps it is somewhat optimistic to interpret their defence of conventional masculinity as indicative of an appreciation of the impossibility of an essentialized or idealized version, it is possible to see traces of such critique in the discussion. It is also perhaps debatable whether their discussion reflected some need to appear “*politically correct*” in the eyes of the researcher, a political correctness associated with an appreciation of gender diversity. Even if this were the case this greater awareness of the pitfalls of appearing conservative is important. Further it is

worth asking whether what they express is reflected in their lived experience. What one does see is some evidence of reflection about their own lives and about the male and female figures they relate to everyday as well considerable affect associated with some issues, suggesting that the ideas were entertained beyond the level of the abstract.

As academics it is also intriguing to see that the kinds of debates about gender that take place within the academy are not restricted to this setting. There is considerable sophistication in these boys' accounts of, and interrogation of masculinity and gender roles. This may be a consequence of their private school education and predominantly middle class upbringing as well as their choice to volunteer as peer counsellors, as is suggested by some comparison with data generated from other SANPAD research groups in which less contested accounts are put forward. Nevertheless it is refreshing to observe that these boys in their middle adolescence are willing to debate and question assumptions about their gendered identity and masculinity.

From an ethical perspective, the researchers were concerned that the introduction of the study might have led to some self-consciousness about the choice to become peer counsellors. This is possible, but it should be reiterated that the boys volunteered to take part in the study out of a broader group of potential counsellors and it could be argued that the reconciliation of this activity with their masculinity, or alternatively engaging in some debate concerning this, was an important exercise. None of the participants appeared to be reviewing their decision to become counsellors and in both groups participants voiced their pleasure in having a forum to discuss such issues.

In this study it appeared that there was little evidence of a crisis in masculinity although there was an appreciation of transforming gender relations and a suggestion of some anxiety associated with this. Overall, however, there was a robustness to the boys' debate and evidence of strategic engagement with change. It seemed possible for these boys to both allow for change and simultaneously retain what for them were important attributes of masculinity. Although one might observe some of this manoeuvring with a degree of scepticism, one cannot help but admire the virtuosity they display in embracing the contradictions inherent in living out contemporary masculinity as a South African teenage boy.

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