

MASCULINITIES: COMPLEXITIES AND VARIATIONS

Shefer, T, Ratele, K, Strebel, A, Shabalala, N & Buikema, R (eds) (2007) **From boys to men: Social constructions of masculinity in contemporary society**. Lansdowne: University of Cape Town Press/Juta. ISBN 978-1-91989-503-1. Pages xiii + 280.

Norman Duncan
School of Human and Community Development
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
norman.duncan@wits.ac.za

This interesting volume is one of the products of a qualitative research project conducted in South Africa between 2003 and 2005. The expressed aim of the project was “to gain a deeper understanding of young men’s constructions and experiences of masculinity” (Shefer, Ratele, Strebel, Shabalala & Buikema, 2007:6).

While all clearly linked to the volume’s central theme of masculinities, the different chapters in the volume nonetheless illustrate the complex variations in the performance of masculinities as a function of context, time, social roles and personal histories.

In my opinion, the volume’s key strength resides in its inclusion of, and focus on, relatively recently conducted primary research. Indeed, virtually all the chapters contained in the book are based on recent original empirical work. This arguably adds significantly to the value of the volume. Furthermore, the contributing authors’ critical engagement with existing theory in the still embryonic field of masculinities studies adds further to the value of the volume – as do the contributing authors’ critical and rigorous examination of various research methods appropriate for this field of scholarship.

Additionally, all the chapters are strongly rooted in common, real-life problems faced by large sectors of contemporary African society. In this way, the book manages to steer clear of being just another esoteric exercise in academic writing on a topic that is currently à la mode. While academically rigorous and offering a range of fairly sophisticated and rich analyses of masculine personhood and masculinities, the book is nonetheless commendably accessible.

It should of course be noted that there is a measure of unevenness between the various chapters in the volume in terms of focus, as well as the sophistication and depth of arguments. However, it should also be noted that such unevenness is to be expected with an edited volume. Nonetheless it is a pity that the overall quality of the volume is somewhat marred by various technical errors that should have been picked up and attended to by the publishers.

Chapter 1 by Jeff Hearn provides an analysis of the nexus between “the problems which some men create” and the “social problems that some men experience” (Hearn, 2007: 19). Violence constitutes one of the key problems caused and experienced by men discussed in this chapter. Based on a wide-ranging review of the literature, the central arguments presented in this chapter are persuasively articulated. Succinctly and accessibly written, the chapter, alongside the foreword of the editors, serves as a useful theoretical introduction to the remaining chapters in the volume. Unlike the remaining chapters, however, this chapter is not based on primary research and therefore does not provide any substantively new insights.

Chapter 2 by Rob Pattman focuses on the ways in which black adolescent boys from low-income communities in Durban and Harare present themselves and construct their relationships with girls, as well as the implications of these self-presentations and relationships for sex education. The chapter is largely based on the processes and findings of a young-person-centred research project. The *young-person-centred* research approach is based on the assumption that young people are active agents and explicitly encourages a non-judgemental orientation to research with this cohort. While certainly not groundbreaking in terms of the research approach and the research findings that it presents, the chapter is generally well crafted and makes for easy and captivating reading.

In Chapter 3 Akosua Adomako Ampofo and John Boateng explore the potential impact of various meanings of manhood on the well-being of women in Ghanaian society. The chapter is based on a survey of adolescent male students’ perceptions of gender roles and reproduction decision making in two towns in the east of Ghana. In the main, the study found a diversity of meanings that boys attach to manhood and clear differences in how they respond to hegemonic masculinities. Of note is the apparent acceptance on the part of some boys of alternative, less dominant forms of masculinity. While manifestly well researched, this chapter reflects a few lacunae, key of which is that the chapter much too rarely proceeds beyond the descriptive. While this lacuna certainly affects the overall quality of the chapter and what it has to offer the volume as a whole, the chapter clearly still has considerable value and should be of interest to the readers of this volume.

Based on a study conducted in Durban, Chapter 4 explores the question of fatherhood. Utilising some of this study’s findings, Rob Morrell, the author, develops the argument that in the South African context, the individual’s constructions of fatherhood reflect his or her specific location within the “triple contexts of national political transformation, ongoing economic inequalities, and globalisation” (Morrell, 2007:91). Furthermore, the author argues that young men’s attitudes to fatherhood may be seen as important indicators of their constructions of masculinity. Starting with an insightful historical analysis of constructions of youth in South Africa, the author skilfully explores the key elements of the above-mentioned postulates and through careful argumentation adroitly illustrates the close links between lived contexts and constructions of fatherhood and masculinity. One of the chapter’s key strengths is its incisive burrowing below the surface of the obvious, thereby offering the reader a complex and valuable analysis of various constructions of masculinities in contemporary South Africa.

Co-authored by Graham Lindegger and Justin Maxwell, Chapter 5 is based on a gender analysis of the Targeted AIDS Intervention (TAI) project – an AIDS intervention project aimed at young men. Using the findings of this analysis, the chapter attempts to illustrate why it is useful to examine men’s responses to hegemonic masculinity in terms of Wetherell and Edley’s (1999) view that complicity with and resistance to this expression of masculinity are frequently intertwined, rather than Connell’s (1995:109) more restricted argument that “men adopt consistent positions in relation to hegemonic masculinity”. On the whole, the chapter is coherent and well argued. The authors’ discussion of the notion of the *culture of deception* and its interface with risky sexual behaviour is particularly informative. Also very instructive is the chapter’s critique of the notion of *hegemonic masculinity*.

In Chapter 6 Kopano Ratele and his co-authors examine the findings of a study of the constructions of masculinity produced by a group of learners at seven Western Cape schools. The chapter explores, inter alia, the manner in which the social divides of the old apartheid order continue to mediate these learners’ constructions of masculinity. Intersecting with the focus of many of the other chapters contained in this volume, this chapter’s incisive examination of alternative forms of masculinity is particularly valuable.

Based on an empirical study conducted with a group of boys and young men in Cape Town, Chapter 7 by Diana Gibson and Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard argues for a relational analysis of boys’ engagement with dominant masculinities. Specifically, the authors argue for the importance of extending analyses of masculinities beyond an examination of dominant discursive practices, to include a critical engagement with social relations and experiences. In this sense, this chapter adds an important element to the repertoire of perspectives contained in the volume. A critical shortcoming of the chapter, however, is that it does not offer any sustained and coherent analysis of the intersection between the expression of social relations and masculinity.

Chapter 8 by Pumla Dineo Gqola is a fairly dense chapter dealing with an analysis of the constructions of masculinities and manhood within extant debates on the process of *ulwaluko*. The chapter systematically illustrates how constructions of circumcision are harnessed for all types of agendas and constructions of masculinity. While complex, with various multifaceted arguments, the chapter is coherent and written in a fairly accessible register.

To a certain extent, Chapter 9 reprises the discussion on transitions from boyhood to adulthood explored by Gqola in Chapter 8. The explicit aim of Chapter 9 is to illustrate the “cultural construction of ... masculine personhood, in the context of a peripheral urban space, namely Manenberg” (Salo, 2007:179), in the Western Cape. Elaine Salo, the author, argues that the meanings of masculine personhood and more specifically adulthood in this context, as in any other, are inevitably refracted off other identities, including femininities. Furthermore, she argues that in Manenberg masculinities are very clearly anchored in local cultural meanings of motherhood. Consequently, the chapter is as much about motherhood as it is about masculinities. Manifestly well researched, this chapter is very informative. Of particular value is its engagement with the theory of agency and power. However, to my mind, the chapter has one critical shortcoming and that is that it does not really engage in any sustained manner with the issue of race, as the chapter’s title promises.

Chapter 10 by Reshma Sathiparsad focuses on a study conducted with 30 male learners at three schools in southern KwaZulu-Natal. More specifically, the chapter examines variations in masculine discourses and positions exhibited by this group in relation to women, as well as how these discourses and positions mediate sexual behaviour in the context of the current HIV/AIDS pandemic. While this chapter is certainly informative, it is perhaps more descriptive and less analytical than some of the other chapters contained in the volume.

In the penultimate chapter of the volume, Raymond Suttner sets out to examine the development and articulations of various masculinities in the African National Congress over time. The author argues that South African liberation movements had given rise to various fairly distinct representations of manhood and that these are ineluctably refracted off conceptions of the feminine. Tracing the history of the ANC from its establishment in 1912 to the present, the author more than ably meets the stated objectives of his chapter. The chapter is well written and its key arguments are persuasively developed. While lengthier than the other chapters in the volume, the chapter is informative and well written and consequently captivates from the beginning to the end.

In Chapter 12 Mxolisi Mchunu examines the interface between the political struggles of the 1990s in KwaZulu-Natal and the age-old struggles between “fathers” and “sons”. While the central argument of the chapter (namely that political struggles are rarely simply political in origin and intention) is competently articulated, the chapter, to my mind, is marred by a fairly conservative underlying message (never overtly articulated, but certainly discernible), namely that all that is traditional is indisputably useful or valuable.

Given the relative paucity of research and literature on masculinities, this book will undoubtedly prove to be an invaluable and essential resource for scholars in the field of gender studies. Focusing on various South African and African contexts and employing a diversity of theoretical orientations, the volume presents the reader with a rich array of insights into current research on, and constructions and manifestations of, masculinities.

The authors of the chapters contained in **From boys to men** as well as the editors of the volume should be commended for this timely, well-constructed contribution to the literature in the field of masculinities studies in the African context.