Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa

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Chapter 16

Theorising 'other' masculinities among adolescent boys and young men in Southern Africa: Implications for sexual health

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Morten Skovdal, Deevia Bhana and Kaymarlin Govender

Introduction

The starting point of this book was that the experiences of young masculinities in the context of sexual health in Southern Africa have not been fully explored. Southern Africa is particularly relevant for researching young masculinities and sexual health due to several interconnected factors such as the high prevalence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Karim & Baxter, 2021; Wand et al., 2021), complex gender dynamics (Stoebenau et al., 2023), youth vulnerability (Lynch et al., 2024), prevailing cultural beliefs (Moore, 2022) and policy gaps in adolescent and youth health policies (Aantjes & Govender, 2024; Davids et al., 2020). We invited 14 contributors to report on frontier research in this area. Their research represents different geographical areas (ten southern African countries) and disciplines (sociology, anthropology, social psychology, public health and social epidemiology) and drew on a variety of methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, review, methodological reflections). Despite their many differences, we were struck by their shared message to recognise the plurality and, to a certain extent, a level of fluidity of young masculinities, and the need to destabilise discourses around masculinity and black African masculinity, which vilify many Southern African men as reckless, sexually dominant and even violent. An argument convincingly made by almost all the chapters in this volume, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, is that approaching masculinity as a natural and ubiquitous category is unhelpful and counterproductive. Nonetheless, what the research still highlights is that idealised ideas about what it means to be a 'real man' *do* exist, even if the young men in the empirical studies do not overtly strive to conform to such a hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Mahalik et al. (2003) argue that such idealised ideas serve as a benchmark for all other masculinities to be compared with. Authors contributing to this book refer to these 'other' masculinities in different ways. Dlamini (Chapter 3) writes about 'alternative' forms of masculinity, Ngcobo et al. (Chapter 10) talk about 'non-confirming' masculinities and Motimele et al. (Chapter 2) introduce 'inclusive,' 'alternative' or 'positive' masculinities. Mabenge and Brouard in Chapter 8 also touch on Ratele's (2016)

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notion of 'liberating' masculinities. What makes these masculinities 'other'? How are they produced and altered by adolescent boys and young men in different social contexts? Under what circumstances are these 'other' masculinities forged as they develop and nurture male peer connections while also seeking to establish and sustain romantic and sexual relationships? And what are the implications of understanding and recognising 'other' masculinities for sexual health research and practice? In this concluding chapter we seek to answer some of these questions, and in the process begin theorising 'other' masculinities, and present it as a specific problem space for research, analysis and initiatives on sexual health. To do so, we now outline five entrees for future consideration of 'other' masculinities, guided by themes cutting across the empirical chapters presented in this book. We will later discuss how these different entrees can inform future research, analysis and initiatives on sexual health that consider 'other' masculinities.

Uncomfortable complicity

Several chapters underscore how continued cultural pressures to conform to prevailing gender norms challenge possibilities to practise masculinity in 'other' ways, forcing young men to play up to idealised and hegemonic notions of masculinity. However, several chapters highlight that this complicity to reproduce prevailing gender norms is often done uncomfortably and with much self-awareness. For instance, the work by Ngcobo et al. (Chapter 10) in South Africa highlights how peer pressure and acceptance induce some young men to embody *amajita*, a cultural practice, of demonstrating 'real manhood' through heterosexual experience and by engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviours. While the pressure for some young men to conform to amajita has real implications for their sexual health, Ngcobo et al. also find that many young men feel uncomfortable practising amajita, and as a result pretend that they live up to expectations of 'real manhood,' for instance, by making up exalted stories about their sexual prowess and actions to reinforce their brotherhood.

Similar observations are made by Kanyemba et al. (Chapter 12), who, also in a South African context, find that young men's sense of social identity and belonging to peer groups are tied to their performances of masculinity. Yet, they also note that many young men express conflicting accounts, vulnerabilities and anxieties about how they are expected to perform masculinity within their peer groups. The 'other' masculinities identified by Ngcobo et al. and Kanyamba et al. are constrained and often hidden. They do not subvert or openly challenge idealised notions of masculinity but complicitly play along to a greater or lesser extent, often out of fear of being ridiculed, stigmatised or excluded if they deviate from accepted practices. Often the young men express great discomfort about idealised expressions of masculinity and go to enormous lengths to develop strategies to make it appear that they subscribe to accepted ideas and performances of 'real manhood.' While these 'other' and at times, lesser perceived masculinities unhelpfully serve to reproduce prevailing

gender norms, such internalised conflicts can provide significant opportunities for reflection and avenues for change.

Resistance

A number of chapters present accounts of resistance to and subversion of traditional understandings of masculinity. They present empirical evidence of young men practising their gendered scripts in 'other' ways than what may be expected or assumed. For instance, through the concept of *abangani* or *bakgwera*, meaning the formation of intimate and supportive friendships, Motimele et al. (Chapter 2) found young black men to develop deep relationships with other young men where expressions of affection and vulnerability were not only accepted but encouraged. Mortimele et al. challenge the idea that young male friendships necessarily have to contribute to negative peer pressure leading to risky sexual behaviours, but reveal they can be a source of emotional support and nurturing, which can have positive impacts on young men's romantic and intimate relationships.

In the context of romantic and intimate relationships, Dlamini (Chapter 3) finds that some young men actively seek to distance themselves from so-called *ukuhala* relationships, which are relationships characterised by inequitable power, men's sexual gratification and risk-taking, and instead embrace *ukuthandana* relationships which, in contrast, emphasise care and emotional intimacy in sexual relationships. Dlamini argues that ukuthandana relationships are affective sites where young men's experiences and expressions of love are used to actively shift heteromasculinities away from harmful sexual and gendered scripts.

Interestingly, for both Motimele et al. and Dlamini, local concepts offered platforms for resistance. In both studies, concepts and words were found to juxtapose and challenge traditional practices and to give meaning and legitimacy to new shared ideas and practices of 'other' masculinities. Local and situated concepts and words can thus play a useful role in identifying and communicating acts of resistance in relation to idealised gender norms. In other words, they can make room for 'other' and a more diverse set of more sexual health-enabling masculinities.

Diversity and intersectionality

Several chapters detail how young masculinities in Southern Africa are expressed and experienced differently because of diversities and intersectionality related to sexuality, socio-cultural, economic and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Such diversities not only lead to plural and varied expressions of masculinity but also make it difficult for men to live up to idealised gender norms. Mabenge and Brouard (Chapter 8), in their review of literature on young trans men in South Africa, detail how their non-heteronormative expressions of masculinity challenge traditional views of masculinity in ways that

hamper their access to health care. They note that the stigma and discrimination that young trans men face in their encounter with cis-heteronormative health care settings result in young trans men either avoiding health care services or making the difficult decision to either perform gender expectations or adopt a form of trans masculinity that is an enabler of their health.

In Zimbabwe, Chiweshe (Chapter 11) finds that ideas and practices of *mjolo* (dating/romantic relationships) are changing amongst urban, poor, out-of-school young men. This overlapping of disenfranchised social identities results in this group of young men being unable to live up to traditional markers of masculinity, both in the long-term, such as being a provider and head of household, and in the short-term, by living up to the economic burden of dating. They therefore cannot participate in mjolo in the traditional sense but reformulate what it means to be a man. According to Chiweshe, some express their masculinity and sexual prowess through transactional sex, pornography and masturbation, while others adapt mjolo to situationships, allowing them to fulfil their sexual and emotional needs without the economic responsibilities associated with dating, or a committed relationship and family formation. They redefine mjolo in ways that give rise to other expressions of masculinity, some of which have negative implications for their sexual health (preference for sex with sex workers, resistance to condom use).

Relatedly, two chapters in this volume focus on how young men in South Africa experience and express their masculinity in the context of poverty and unemployment. Ngidi (Chapter 7) finds that the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculine norms – emphasising toughness and sexual prowess – is exacerbated by economic marginalisation and encourages young men to assert their masculinity through violence and sexual conquest. Ngidi goes on to show these behaviours pose significant health risks, including increased exposure to HIV and other STIs. Similar observations have been made by Bhana (Chapter 9), albeit in a different township. Bhana paints a complex picture of how young men, in the context of poverty, both strive to live up to idealised gender norms, such as being open and ready for sexual encounters, and work towards more economic stability, such as through 'hustling' behaviours like crime and gambling. Bhana notes how these dynamics reinforce each other, with implications for how masculinity is expressed and young men's sexual health. Despite these challenges, Bhana notes that the young men also express aspirations for love, family stability and traditional relationships, revealing a tension between hegemonic masculinity and the young men's desire for tenderness.

Diversity and intersectionality enrich the discourse on masculinity by allowing space for diverse experiences and expressions of masculinity that reflect the realities of race, class, culture, sexuality and more. As noted by Wong et al. (2017), a focus on diversity and intersectionality can help challenge traditional, rigid and uni-dimensional notions of masculinity. However, it is evident that these 'other' masculinities still experience their manhood through the prism of continued cultural pressures for young men face to conform to idealised ideals of masculinity. This may lead to alternative expressions of masculinity, some

of which try to conform whilst others are more unique and subversive. Regardless, diversity and intersectionality may leave young men feeling inadequate or frustrated.

Situatedness

While all the chapters note the situatedness and plurality of masculinities, demonstrating this was the focus of several chapters. These chapters underline that the male psyche and expressions of masculinity are intrinsically intertwined with the environmental, social and cultural fabric of a given context. Exploring young Zimbabwean men's varying attitudes towards female use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), Kaupp et al. (Chapter 13) found that young men's support of PrEP was contingent on the nature of the men's relationship to the female PrEP users. Young men were generally supportive of PrEP use among women in casual relationships, particularly if they might have sex with them, viewing it as a way to protect both themselves and their wives from HIV. However, men were far less supportive of PrEP use by women they were married to or in long-term relationships with, perceiving it as a challenge to their patriarchal control over their partner's sexuality. Kaupp et al. find that although hegemonic notions of masculinity form the backdrop of their varying attitudes, the social situation affects how young men perceive and express their masculinity.

Bhana, in Chapter 9, shows how situatedness plays a critical role in shaping the experiences and expressions of masculinity among young men. The context of structural inequalities exacerbates feelings of emasculation and thus, understanding young men's sexual health outcomes requires a nuanced exploration of the socio-cultural context in which they operate. Unemployment, socio-cultural pressures and masculine ideals all assemble together to impact upon how young men navigate their identities and sexual health. Like Bhana, several other chapters in this book make clear that the surrounding social, economic and cultural landscape makes a difference in how masculinity is experienced and what this means for sexual health.

Taking this a step further, Bagnay et al. (Chapter 5) explore quantitatively, using cohort data from Manicaland, Zimbabwe, whether and how social determinants shape different male gender norms and in turn affect sexual health. Specifically, they explored how four dimensions of masculinity – toughness, antifemininity, sex drive and social status – influence sexual risk behaviour and the utilisation of HIV services among young men. A complex picture emerges, with different social determinants affecting male gender norms differently. For instance, social capital, measured in terms of group membership, marital status and area of residence, simultaneously foster conservative and liberal views, depending on the male gender norm. The socio-demographic background of young men thus shapes the composition, strength and influence of male gender norms, which in turn affect young men's sexual health and engagement with HIV prevention services.

Heightened attention to the situatedness of masculinities helps stress the social construction of male gender norms, and recognition that all lived experiences of masculinity are essentially 'other' and in flux depending on a social situation or context. While some situations may lead to more sexual health-enabling masculinities, others may foster resistance to change. Understanding how different circumstances and situations lead to different expressions of masculinity is critical.

Socio-technical realities

A few chapters adopt a posthuman perspective and explore how the contemporary world of digital technology and social media affects how people relate, and in the process foster new ways of experiencing and expressing masculinity. Tolla and colleagues (Chapter 4), for instance, explore changes to how young men initiate romantic relationships (courtship), a practice that is increasingly moving onto virtual platforms. They find that although some traditional views still linger, sometimes reinforced by labelling and stigmatising girls who express their feelings and desires too forthrightly, social media was noted to enable some young people to break free from gender stereotypes and to afford more young women the opportunity to instigate courtship or communicate their interest in sex. Tolla et al. find that social media and how relationships are initiated, shape male gender identities and sexual behaviour. Generally, they noted that young men generally find it easier to negotiate and plan sexual encounters through social media, which has implications for their sexual health.

Looking more broadly at the role of mobile-internet in shaping gender attitudes and relationship dynamics, Pulerwitz et al. (Chapter 6) find that mobile-internet use affects gender relationship dynamics in both positive and negative ways. Mobile-internet helped couples stay connected when apart, but also amplified feelings of distrust and jealousy. Mobile phones and social media reinforced inequitable gender norms. Many young men were on social media to monitor and control their partner's infidelity, while they used the same platforms to facilitate side relationships.

More research is required around digital technology and social media and its impacts on practices of young black African masculinities, sexual relationships and sexual health. However, as discussed in the previous chapters, digital technology is shaping norms, influencing behaviours and providing access to information, while also serving as a platform to challenge gender stereotypes and impacting gender relationship dynamics in both positive and negative ways.

'Other' masculinities and sexual health

Black African masculinities, through their representation as violent and reckless, have long been 'other' to more dominant northern theories of masculinity (Langa, 2020; Ratele, 2016). Furthermore, *young* black African masculinities are 'other,' both because young men are still negotiating their masculine identities as they vacillate between childhood, youth and adulthood, and because

of their absence from the literature. There are levels of otherness in relation to the hegemonic norm, and in this edited volume, contributing authors have, through their focus on young black African masculinities, in different ways destabilised common notions of black African masculinity and begun to unpack 'other' masculinities. Collectively, the chapters highlight five entrees towards the theorising of 'other' masculinities (see Figure 16.1). What the entrees share is that 'other' masculinities are always local and deeply embedded in a social, structural, economic and cultural landscape, which shapes young men's opportunities to practise 'other' masculinities, and in different and complex ways that affect young men's sexual health.

Each of the five entrees – comprising uncomfortable complicity, resistance, diversity and intersectionality, situatedness, and socio-technical realities – offers a crucial lens for researchers and practitioners to recognise and consider the plurality of ways that young men in Southern Africa experience and express their masculinities. Importantly, they provide critical entry points for understanding how young masculinities, as variably 'other,' are lived, contested and transformed – key to identifying opportunities for social change and promoting sexual health.

Uncomfortable complicity illuminates the ways in which men may simultaneously participate in and quietly challenge idealised ideas of masculinity. In the context of sexual health, it underscores the nuanced role men play in upholding harmful gender norms, albeit uncomfortably and by pretending to play along when it comes to demonstrating their sexual prowess and risk-taking.

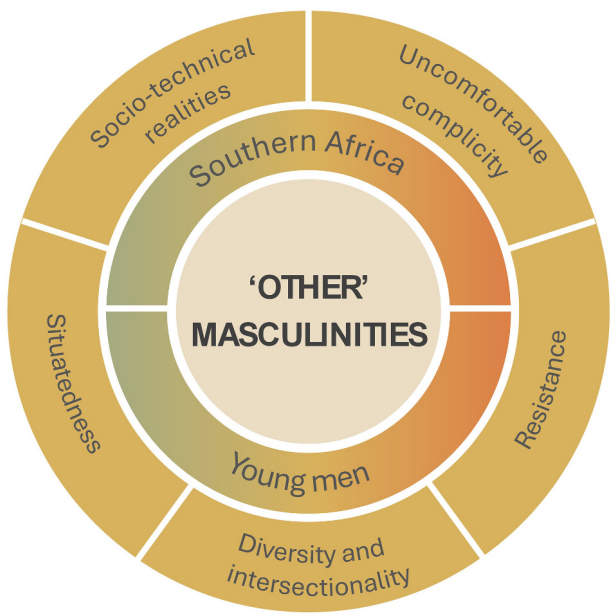

Figure 16.1 Five entrees towards the theorising of 'other' masculinities. ⏎

Uncomfortable complicity recognises this ambivalence. Sexual health interventions must recognise this opportunity for social change and be tailored to address how men navigate these tensions.

Resistance refers to the subversion of idealised ideals of masculinity and is a key site for transformation. Understanding acts of resistance – whether subtle or overt – reveals the affective needs and capacities of young men to love and care. This helps normalise 'other' masculinities and combat the labelling and stigmatisation of young men who reject idealised notions of masculinity. Attention to forms of resistance also identifies pathways for men to embrace masculinities that promote gender transformation and opens the door for more strength-based sexual health interventions (Gibbs et al., 2022).

Diversity and intersectionality underline that young men are not only young men. Their masculinities may be intertwined with other social identities, whether related to their socio-economic class or sexuality. These intersect and shape young men's sexual health risks and access to health care. Intersectionality allows research, analysis and initiatives for sexual health to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches, and instead acknowledge the specific vulnerabilities and strengths that arise from these intersecting identities (Bhana et al., 2023). This recognition is vital for designing inclusive and person-centred sexual health interventions.

Situatedness emphasises the context-specific and, at times, fluid nature of masculinities, acknowledging that male gender norms, and expressions thereof, are not static but shift depending on the situation and context. In sexual health, this lens is valuable for understanding how a certain set of circumstances socially determine young men's sexual risk behaviours, sexual health-seeking patterns and engagement with health systems. Situatedness calls for multi-level interventions that target the situations, circumstances and social practices that compromise young men's sexual health (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Social-technical realities refer to the ways internet-enabled mobile phones and social media have changed the landscape of how young people meet, negotiate sexual relations and obtain sexual health information. The omnipresence of social media makes it a critical actor in shaping how young men experience and express their masculinity. Work in this volume highlights that internet-enabled mobile phones and social media are sites of struggle and power, which can simultaneously foster usage that falls along conventional gender roles, but also challenge and shift norms towards more equity. This has important implications for sexual health (Döring & Conde, 2021). As internet-enabled mobile phones and social media continue to shape gender norms and sexual dynamics, sexual health interventions must adapt by addressing both the benefits and challenges posed by these changing norms. They must approach social media not merely as a way of reaching young men with sexual health information, but also as sites of misinformation and the reproduction of harmful stereotypes. They must recognise that social media can both further entrench harmful gender norms, albeit in new ways, but also expose young men to the value of open and online instant messaging conversations with potential sexual partners about consent and respect for boundaries, as well as utilisation of prevention methods.

Conclusion

The chapters included in this edited book have deconstructed culturally specific understandings, experiences and expressions of masculinity and in the process revealed a diversity of 'other' masculinities. Understanding how 'other' masculinities are formed among young Southern African men as they transition from youth to adulthood both challenges idealised ideas about manhood and reveals how 'other' masculinities are interlinked with broader structural inequalities that shape young men's experiences and gender inequitable relationships.

To help further unpack and theorise 'other' masculinities, we have in this chapter identified five entrees to support this endeavour. We hope they can help offer critical insights into how young men in Southern Africa navigate and express their masculinities in different ways, sometimes by finding new ways to reproduce harmful gender norms, and at other times by subverting idealised norms and embracing more sexual health-enabling masculinities. Nonetheless, by recognising ambivalences in the performance of manhood, the potential for resistance, the intersections of social identities, the context-specific nature of gender norms, and the influence of social media, these entrees to 'other' masculinities can be used to further understand and create more strength-based, inclusive and context-aware sexual health interventions.

This volume points to future areas for research, analysis and action, including exploring how young men in Southern Africa can be agents for creating more health-enabling masculinities that promote sexual health and support more equitable relationships with other men and women. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting healthy masculinities and improving sexual health outcomes among young people (UNFPA, 2021; WHO, 2020).

Efforts towards more sexual health-enabling young masculinities must take heed of the avenues for change identified through 'other' masculinities. It is evident that idealised ideas of masculinity persist and that the young men participating in the studies included in this volume largely still experience their masculinities from the prism of what they *are not*. There is an urgency for policy and practice to support a structural re-evaluation of societal norms surrounding masculinity so that young men can express 'other' more health-enabling masculinities as they *are*, and not be under pressure to conform to some harmful and unobtainable ideal, which leave them feeling both inadequate and anxious and at risk of poor sexual health.

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