

Negotiating masculinity: experiences of black gay men

Keketso Matlebyane

Abstract

Sexual orientation continues to be considered a taboo subject (Judge et al, 2008) and when it is discussed, engagements are often fuelled by unsettling stereotypes used to justify discrimination against sexual minority groups. Black gay men are a minority based on their racial identity and sexual orientation, and this study analysed how they perceive gender and masculinity in particular. The research questions examined the role of socialisation and social institutions in shaping ideas pertaining to masculinity through the life-stages of the participants, from boyhood until young adulthood. Masculinity is analysed using contextual tools – which describe sexuality and gender within the South African context – and conceptual tools – which provide theoretical explanations relating to masculinity and sexuality.

This paper explores masculinity as a dynamic and contextual social construct, which is learned and performed according to one's personal experiences and upbringing. The study used qualitative research methods in the form of focus group discussions, supplemented by semi-structured interviews for detailed narratives on the experiences of the participants. The findings revealed the important role that primary socialisation agents play in shaping an individual's understanding of gender and sexuality. The image of a 'good black man' remains entrenched in heteronormative ideals that reinforce homophobic, religious and conservative views. South Africa may have a liberal Constitution but the reality of 'coming out' is not without its challenges. These include the need to "pass as straight" in social interactions, religious/cultural humiliation, online bullying and socio-economic marginalisation.

Keywords: masculinity, sexuality, socialisation, coming out, gender othering

Introduction

South Africa was built upon racial segregation and oppression. At the advent of democracy the face of the black man stood as a sign of power, struggle and courage. The struggle against apartheid amplified the appearance and vigour of countless freedom fighters and equality activists. There is no doubt that a number of them were – like Simon Nkoli and Beverley Ditsie – homosexual¹. While the contribution of gay activists to the liberation of the country remains vital till this day, their existence seems to be censored and diluted for the very people for and with whom they fought to attain freedom (Judge et al, 2008).

In a climate of fear and violence, anonymity can be essential to expressing sexuality.



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The presence of LGBTIQ communities poses a challenge to prevailing norms on gender and to patriarchy and its hegemony, hence it is viewed as potentially threatening and immoral. Patriarchy underpins a hegemonic masculinity, with heterosexuality often assumed. Within this context, what is described as “hypermasculinity” or “machismo” is revered. The behaviours that depict hegemonic masculinity are often sexist, homophobic and violent (Connell, 2002; Mkhize et al, 2010). In society, the presentation of “machismo” can legitimise a male’s identity. Such conformity may assist in the favourable reception of men within society, even by women. Because homosexuality is regarded as deficient, it is perceived to undermine this sense of masculinity. Both heterosexual and gay men may choose to publicly project and comply with heteronormative behaviours that emphasise a hegemonic masculinity to gain acceptance.

Given this context, the study explored the extent to which black gay men publicly uphold notions of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. This entailed an analysis of their views on masculinity and how it can be performed within different contexts according to prevailing societal expectations. The research sought to understand how a heteronormative gender order shapes black gay men’s sense of themselves, particularly with regard to their masculinity and their subsequent sexual behaviour. What is regarded as appropriate gender behaviour is culturally determined within society (West & Zimmerman 1987). The social and cultural scripts for gender roles across institutions in society reinforce a sense that binary gendered arrangements are natural and normal (West & Zimmerman 1987). Masculinity is streamed into the consciousness of men through gender roles dictated by society and culture.

According to Leatt & Hendricks (2005:303): “even when not organised politically, public opinion in South Africa is overwhelmingly against homosexuality ...” This is demonstrated

by traditional and religious beliefs on gender and power. A brief example can be provided from traditional Zulu ideologies on masculinity and its expected expression/performativity.

Traditional Zulu patriarchal masculinity is constructed in terms of dominance, aggression, authority and power, whilst traditional femininity is associated with subordination and passivity (Leatt & Hendricks 2005: 166).

The abovementioned quote portrays the traditional perception of masculinity as being relational and different to femininity. The traditional dogma of many of South Africans' cultural beliefs is similar to that endorsed by the Zulu ethnic group – men are expected to assimilate to these expectations lest they face being isolated and viewed as outsiders. Black gay men are viewed in a negative light because they blur the line between masculine and feminine traits/sex roles, which are viewed to be “naturally ordained” (Van Zyl & Steyn 2005: 166).

Conceptualising masculinity

Conceptual notions of gender highlight its relationality. This is meant to draw the gender binaries that are thought to separate males and females. Masculinity cannot be understood in the absence of femininity (Kimmel, 2007). Gender is a social construct that is learned and understood through the process of socialisation, while sex is related to the body and therefore one's genitalia. Masculinity is a concept that has been historically linked to heterosexuality and a reverence of hegemonic masculinity/machismo. According to Connell (1987) this hegemonic masculinity legitimises men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women. This inequality is maintained through gendered socialisation, power inequality and the preservation of patriarchy in society.

It is important to take cognisance of the impact of social context in the creation of value systems (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998, Adler & Kwon 2002). The meaning attached to masculinity affects men differently. Masculinity is plural in nature and social institutions, such as the family, religion and the media, have considerable influence during the journey to self-identifying as a black gay man.

An individual's values (e.g. religion and culture) will inevitably have prescriptions related to gender. The idea of a 'good black man' continues to reinforce the undesirability of homosexuality and indirectly promotes homophobic values in society. The differentiation between this good black man and the 'bad black man' creates an insider/outsider effect, which reiterates heteronormativity. The 'bad black man' is therefore perceived to either reject or be unable to fit in the categories that recognise patriarchy and heterosexism as social norms.

South Africa's history of racial segregation and discrimination has shaped the role of a black man in society and rarely portrays black homosexuals in a positive manner. This leads to a kind of racial othering. The performativity of gender is layered with cultural, religious and wider institutional values that result in the monitoring and censoring of one's sexual identity.

Gender roles are learnt through the process of socialisation. We are streamed by our families and institutions, and our interactions within these structures to fit within particular gender roles. These roles set expectations of how we must perform as males or females (Kimmel, 2007). Sex roles play a significant part in discourse that promotes heteronormativity. This

underpins patriarchy and male dominance that characterises homosexuality as deviant and abnormal. Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1988: 17) assert:

gender roles or sex roles are the parts society assigns us to play in the drama of life according to whether we entered this life as a baby girl or a baby boy.

It has been argued that masculinity is socially constructed rather than being predetermined. Hence, it is fluid and multiple in nature (Halperin, 2003). Being gay raises questions around masculinity, posing a challenge to male hegemony and patriarchy. This leads to strong condemnation of homosexuality and a questioning of gay men's masculinity.

In striving for the assertion of power, violence may be utilised as a form of rationalised coercion which legitimises the idea that real men should embody the accepted behaviour or risk the possibility of being viewed as a gendered other. Morrell (1998: 609) contends:

... violence is related to or legitimated by gendered practices and discourses, men are far and away the major purveyors of violence.

Hate crimes against gay men are usually inflicted upon them by men who practise a hegemonic masculinity of machismo and chauvinism, and are at times driven by traditional dogma. A rationale often provided following a hate crime is that the action taken was to "straighten out" the homosexual. This causes many to avoid coming out to others entirely as they fear being attacked or discriminated against because of homophobia (Mkhize et al. 2010).

Methodology

This study investigated how masculinity is perceived and performed by black gay men using theoretical and substantive ideas relating to homosexuality and gender. A qualitative research design, according to Silverman (2010), allows for the expression of subjective experience. Qualitative research delves into the meanings people give to their experience. Hence, providing rich, detailed and textured data is essential (May, 2011). Such an approach provides insights into how social institutions have shaped their perceptions of masculinity by prioritising the voices of the participants. This allows them to reflect on the journeys they have travelled through their life course.

Sampling procedures

The following selection criteria were set for participants in the study: (1) all participants had to be black (2) self-identify as gay, (3) be out to at least one person and (4) be between the ages of 18-35.

People within the LGBTIQ community, women and young children can easily be regarded as lacking power and being vulnerable in society. This is made apparent for example by hate crimes, so-called 'corrective rape', domestic and sexual violence. There was a challenge in locating participants for this study because, as stated by Faugier and Sargeant (1997), individuals self-identifying with such groups may risk becoming a target of discrimination in society (Almeida et al 2009).

Snowball sampling assists researchers to access target groups that are hard to reach. It is helpful because “initial contact may be with a member of the population who will lead the researcher to other members of the same population” (May 2011:101). This technique was utilised because of difficulties relating to locating black gay men who were openly out to at least one individual. Some participants were recruited through LGBTIQ organisations that advocate for equality for sexual minority groups. These organisational networks assisted in locating potential participants for the study.

Data collection

Since this study set out to explore how participants define masculinity, it was best served by a qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth narratives, to highlight norms, values and subjective experiences of the participants. This approach is centred on the insider’s experiences and requires the researcher to be aware of their own worldview. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews are flexible and open-ended, and the use of these methods to obtain narratives was consistent with the research goals of the study.

There were three focus group sessions, one paired interview and six individual interviews conducted among a total of 18 participants. An ice-breaker was used to introduce the participants in each focus group session. Its purpose was to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and relaxed. In addition, video clips that had relevance to issues relating to black homosexuality, homophobia and sexuality served as prompts to trigger discussion by the group. A list of short questions based on the content of the videos served as a reference to prompt further discussion where required.

Findings

The journey: along the pathways of masculinity

The recollections of the participants were to an extent shaped by their present circumstances. Their narratives of experiences growing up revealed a lot about how they situate themselves with regard to issues of masculinity and what it means to be a man. The themes in the findings expressed the growing sense of “difference” amongst the participants in their perception of masculinity.

Early childhood

Early childhood recollections of difference began to take place within the family network. The participants became aware of their difference as reflected through their ‘playtimes’ with relatives and close friends. During this time, behaviour perceived as feminine was often overlooked as cute and harmless and was therefore marked by limited or lack of rebuke by family members. In primary school, a division between the boys and girls was established and learned. The bathroom is an example of a single-sexed environment that emphasised physical differences (linked to genitalia) between the boys and girls. This also affected how basic descriptions of masculinity and femininity were perceived during this period. Behavioural expectations of peers introduced a need for self-censorship for some of the participants, as they wanted to avoid being bullied and isolated by the other pupils.

The participants’ experiences of difference do not necessarily mean that all of them were feminine in their mannerisms. It neither suggests that all gay men are essentially inherently

Table 1: Demographic details of the participants per session.

Demographic Table ²				
	Name	Married/Single	Nationality	Location of session
Focus Group A	Timothy	Married	Nigerian	Pretoria
	Sean	Single	Zimbabwean	Pretoria
	Kim	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Mbanda	Single	Zimbabwean	Pretoria
	Reggie	Single	Congolese	Pretoria
Focus Group B	Kev	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Sipho	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Mandla	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Fred	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Tiisetso	Single	South African	Pretoria
Focus Group C	Lerato	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Michael	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Ken	Single	South African	Pretoria
Paired-interview	Katlego	Single	South African	Johannesburg
	Zandile	Single	South African	Johannesburg
Individual interviews	Larry	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Rue	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Ronald	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Lerato	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Michael	Single	South African	Pretoria
	Ken	Single	South African	Pretoria

feminine. Societal expectations shaped the way individuals saw themselves and their masculinity and whether they accepted or rejected existent sex norms.

Many participants experienced a *double-bind* with regard to how they perceived they ought to behave to meet the expectations of family and friends versus how they personally felt. Most made the decision to conform, fearing isolation and being viewed as outcasts.

During the primary school years, most of the participants self-censored their behaviour to meet expectations but to different degrees as the gender lines become less fluid or progressively more solid under different contexts. The bathrooms at primary school, segregated by sex, heightened the anxiety of some of them. This particular space was recognised as pivotal in attaining successful integration with those around them. It clearly inscribed the body in a very intimate way. Many were weary of the possibilities of being “discovered” as being different, even when that difference was not completely understood.

The bathrooms magnified the differences between boys and introduced an element of how one could “measure up” and effectively fit in.

When behaviour was recognised as “deviant” from the norm, most of the participants utilised self-censorship in order to mask their *difference*. Family members and close friends are among an individual’s vital primary socialisation agents. The values and beliefs entrenched during a person’s upbringing often have a long-lasting effect on their decision-making and thinking until they are adults. During socialisation, practices and values relating to gender roles prescribe what is appropriate for a male or female.

The teenage years

During the teenage years, the policing of gendered behaviour becomes considerably more important due to the influence of peers. This phase is also the start of an individual’s sexual maturity and an expected interest in the opposite sex. Therefore the increasing need for behavioural self-censorship in order to fit in with peers becomes more apparent.

As teenagers, most of the participants still dealt with feelings of wanting to *fit in* with their peers at school. Grappling with whom they were romantically attracted to heightened feelings of difference. Two participants unsuccessfully attempted to come out to family members during this life-stage. The brushing off of their disclosure and denial of its significance reaffirmed the power of the heteronormative ideal of masculinity.

A majority of the participants expressed an allegiance to conservative religious beliefs. This is the source of their values and has been instilled in them since childhood. Christian beliefs are at times in opposition to traditional cultural practices.

During traditional initiation rites, a man is instructed on how he is expected to behave, as well as on the person he should strive to become. The process of becoming a man begins with socialisation and, crucially, initiation, often incorporating circumcision, as a rite of passage to adulthood in traditional African cultures. Initiation marks a transition and its practice “gives a sense of how masculine identities are formed” (Morrell 1998: 620). During initiation, heteronormative ideals are laid down quite strongly. After entering adult manhood, fatherhood is another important rite of passage.

Initiation may be understood to clash with monotheistic religious beliefs, given its recognition of traditional African beliefs, such as communication with one's ancestors and the acknowledgement of spiritual forces. Only one participant attended initiation school. The participants who did not attend alluded to the fact that it was never perceived as necessary by their families because of their Christian beliefs. They also believed that they had not attended initiation school because of the areas they had resided in during their upbringing – though some mentioned that they were from rural areas. During the field-work the participants in the sample all resided in urban areas in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

The common view held by these participants was that it was unquestionably risky for gay men to go to initiation school. For the others, the possibility of being out or sanctioned, was a perceived threat and therefore an incentive to avoid attending initiation school and other single sex environments as well. They felt that feminine boys would be a target for ill treatment and bullying from the other boys to the extent that they might actually be treated like they were women.

Young adulthood

During the young adulthood phase there are increased opportunities for sexual exploration and freedom. During this life-stage, education, residential area and financial stability may grant people licence to express themselves in different ways. This opportunity may have previously been limited by the presence of strong connections to the primary socialisation agents such as the family and church that one regards as places to hide their sexual orientation. However, during young adulthood, the participants still self-monitored their behaviour and most chose to hide who they were to family.

Because of an increased importance placed on secrecy, social media provided opportunities for the participants to meet new people.

The expectations of family members which relate to traditional values of what it means to be a man (e.g. having a girlfriend/wife, having children and getting married) continue to influence the act of behavioural self-monitoring as expressed during this time by the participants' decision to pass as straight to family and colleagues to whom they have not disclosed their sexuality. Most of them were not fully out to family members; they believed that this posed a risk of them possibly facing rejection/stigma leading to them being disowned.

Young adulthood is a period of gender exploration and sexual experimentation. This marked a phase in which participants perceived and practised their sexual preferences. The need for anonymity became essential for sexual expression without facing the risk of "being found out". The opportunity of immigrating to a different country granted some of the participants the freedom to explore their sexuality without risking incarceration if same sex relations were criminalised in their country of origin, or being stigmatised by close family and friends. Social media also provided a discreet gateway for meeting people but also carried the risk of unwanted sexual labels (e.g. top, bottom etc.), which essentialise the roles of individuals within romantic/sexual relationships.

Stereotypes about members of the LGBTIQ community denigrate them by linking their sexuality to perversion. Some of the participants mentioned constantly being asked "who the man in the relationship was". One believed this to be shaped by the wider assumptions about

homosexuality. In his opinion, labels such as “top” or “bottom” are symptoms of an overall expectation from a society that promotes heteronormativity.

Many participants acknowledged the common view that the actions of homophobic men were a response to their own homosexual desires. Their actions were therefore perceived as a type of defence mechanism, which was an attempt to conceal their fears of being “found out”. The participants who reiterated this belief also stated that homophobic men were possibly “acting out” their “homosexuality” in hidden spaces (like after-nines).

According to some participants, the after-nine man is identified as a bisexual man who wants to enjoy the benefits of sleeping with women but escape the prejudice that comes with having sexual relations with men. Other narratives on the after-nine man were linked to promiscuity and unfaithfulness. What remained consistent in the views of most of the participants was that one cannot ‘play for both teams’, they did not accept anything outside the homosexual and heterosexual divide to be real and authentic. The masculinity of an open or out gay man was therefore regarded as superior to the masculinity of a man who lived out his preferences with men secretly.

Conclusion

How do self-identified black gay men in South Africa define masculinity?

The responses of the participants to this key question of the study uncovered how even adults who have come out at least partially are still influenced by traditional values/beliefs about what it means to be *a real man*. Socialisation played a major role in the construction of values, which became increasingly difficult to avoid even in the adult stages. The findings also reflected the long-term effects of inter-generational norms on sex roles and hegemonic masculinity. Though technological and social advances take place in society, such as social media and increased individuality, heteronormativity seems to adapt and assimilate to modern beliefs regarding gender, sexual expression and identity formation. This inevitably reinforces the identification, performativity and individual self-censorship of gendered expressions that conform to heteronormative ideas to escape familial rejection and becoming a societal pariah.

Most of the participants feared openly asserting their sexuality around family members. They had fears of being found out, hence intensifying the importance of concealing who they were to others. Although many stated that they were against heteronormative roles, they still held on to labels within their romantic/sex relationships, which followed a heteronormative division into a more dominant male and submissive female role (e.g. top, bottom, the after-nine man). This is not unlike the mine-wife role in the past (Moodie et al. 1988; Niehaus, 2002) albeit not as emphasised, nor unlike the *lady* and *gent* division more recently in Reid’s (2013) study.

The majority of the participants maintained a view that bisexuality did not exist but was a way in which men who were less courageous than themselves dealt with social pressures – they were largely perceived as ‘sell outs’. The practice of creating a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ rendered the other unworthy of ‘being real men’. This is rather ironic because it has also been the basis of a lot of the participants’ difficulty in integrating into their own families, social spaces and society as a whole. Within what is classified as subordinate masculinities, power relations further marginalise certain participants. This social power is attained by all men regardless of their sexual orientation. The responses of the participants

detail a persistent need to be ‘above’ some *type of man*; in this case the *after-nine man* and those who identify as *bisexual* were sidelined as weak men who lacked authenticity and courage to come out as gay to society.

Advocacy for equality remains an issue that is dealt with increasingly in virtual communities, through platforms such as social media. When there is a perceived view of *difference* towards a certain group, this has wide-ranging consequences that affect individual development throughout the life course, in both the private and public spheres. In the end, South Africa’s LGBTIQA community remains in many ways a minority group that is faced with many obstacles and dilemmas, most notably those relating to stigma and discrimination.

Heteronormativity continues to be linked to a hegemonic masculinity, which invariably expresses ideals that are homophobic, conservative and traditional. Despite legal protections and increased visibility, the process of coming out is not inevitable for those in same sex relationships – the meaning of homosexual is in itself contextual and carries several definitions which generally fall within the category of MSM.

Gender is a performance (Butler, 1988), which is shaped by contextual factors (Kimmel, 2007) that are transferred to an individual through the process of socialisation (Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1988) making masculinity a difficult concept to fully understand. Those who felt comfortable around their family and faced limited stigma were able to experiment (feminine hairstyles, clothing etc.) with confidence. Due to a myriad of differences relating to family background, culture and class not all the participants consciously self-censored. Active policing of behaviour usually followed incidents where that behaviour was deemed inappropriate and unacceptable, which led to individuals being reprimanded.

An individual who recognises himself as ‘different’, monitors and modifies his behaviour around different groups of people. This invariably leads to endless possibilities to portray an accepted “type” of masculinity. Self-stereotyping is also a possible phenomenon for an individual who is a member of a sexual or racial minority group. This can lead to a greater emphasis on othering people *within* the group who may not adhere to what is considered acceptable, such as in the case of bisexuals and after-nines within the LGBTIQA community. It is clear from the narratives of the interviewees that hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity continue to have an impact on how black gay men view their own behaviour, personal beliefs and sexuality – and those of others.

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Notes on contributors

KEKETSO MATLEBYANE graduated with a Master’s degree in Gender Studies from the University of Pretoria. Her research expertise has granted her the opportunity to assess the impact of consumer financial education projects through monitoring and evaluation in her current role at the Financial Sector Conduct Authority. This emphasis on financial literacy and economic empowerment relates to her interests in gender equality and has manifested in the topics she has selected for her academic research endeavours. Email: Keketso.Matlebyane@fsca.co.za

Notes

¹ The terms “homosexual” and “gay” were used interchangeably by participants throughout the study

² The total number of participants is 18, pseudonyms were used to identify them

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