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Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: 1369-1058 (Print) 1464-5351 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tchs20

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To cite this article: Andrew Gibbs, Henri Myrttinen, Laura Washington, Yandisa Sikweyiya & Rachel Jewkes (2019): Constructing, reproducing and challenging masculinities in a participatory intervention in urban informal settlements in South Africa, Culture, Health & Sexuality, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2019.1614671

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1614671

Published online: 18 Jun 2019.

CULTURE, HEALTH & SEXUALITY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1614671

Constructing, reproducing and challenging masculinities in a participatory intervention in urban informal settlements in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Participatory interventions with men and boys to transform masculinities are increasingly common to improve health and reduce intimate partner violence and HIV-related risk. Yet, despite this, there has been little consideration of how facilitators' own masculinities shape interventions. In this analysis of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures, a gender-transformative programme delivered to young men (aged 18–30 years) in urban informal settlements in Durban, South Africa we explore how facilitators' masculinities were employed to engender change in the masculinities of participants. We argue facilitators had to negotiate two tasks existing in some tension, the first, overt and the main aim of the programme: namely, challenging elements of the youthful masculinity at play in the lives of participants, such as exerting violent power over women. A second task was more covert: namely, establishing facilitators' credibility 'as men' in order to do this work with participants. Through strategies including clothes, mobile phones, jokes and storytelling, facilitators demonstrated to participants their 'successful' masculinity and could then engage with participants around emotions, non-violence and consistent condom use. This enabled facilitators and participants to undergo a limited processes of change, without 'compromising' their sense of masculinity, and without fundamentally challenging men's patriarchal privilege.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 October 2018
Accepted 30 April 2019

KEYWORDS
Gender; masculinity; South Africa; young men; emotion

Background

Participatory programmes and interventions with men and boys to 'transform masculinities' are increasingly common to improve health and reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) and HIV-related risks (Dworkin, Treves-Kagan and Lippman 2013; Jewkes,

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Flood and Lang 2015). The common thread behind these is the assumption that men's behaviours are driven by their pursuit of normative masculinities, which encompass men's ideas and aspirations about gender relations, including men's power and entitlements, and related practices; these collectively constitute what we refer to here as masculinities. Such participatory programmes, therefore, need to transform these attitudes and practices into more gender-equitable, non-violent and health-enhancing ones (Gibbs, Vaughan and Aggleton 2015; Jewkes, Flood and Lang 2015; Fleming, DiClemente and Barrington 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of programmes focused on transforming men's masculinities, the ways in which facilitators' own masculinities shape intervention delivery, and their everyday practices of facilitation, has received relatively limited attention. More commonly there has been description of whether facilitators encourage dialogue, ask questions and support critical thinking (Campbell 2003; Gibbs et al. 2015; Hatcher et al. 2011).

A small number of studies have touched upon the role of facilitators' masculinities in the delivery of interventions. Namy et al. (2015) describe how facilitators provided 'aspirational' masculinities that participants wanted to emulate. Schroer-Hippel (2017) in her comparative study of three peacebuilding interventions in the former Yugoslavia, which integrated elements of 'transforming masculinities', noted that only certain aspects of dominant masculinity were problematised as part of the interventions, while others such as assumed heterosexuality, sexual virility and gun ownership were left untouched, or even celebrated, to ease the process of change for men.

Male participants in behaviour change programmes may actively or passively, resist or undermine intervention aims, leading to conflict between facilitators and participants. As McGeeney (2015) shows in a discursive reading of one session of a sexual health promotion programme, facilitator and participant masculinities were in contestation, with facilitators often colluding in gender-inequitable masculinities, but also occasionally challenging these. Pierotti, Lake and Lewis (2018) examine how male participants in a 'gender sensitisation programme' in the Democratic Republic of Congo may also seek to set limits to the degree and terms of transformation and remain in control of the pace of change, subverting the aimed-for transformation of gendered power relations.

In this paper, we draw on Connell's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity, and the hierarchy of masculinity the theoretical approach emphasises, to understand how masculinities may be operationalised in interventions that seek to transform masculinities. Connell (2005) argues in any given context there exist one or more forms of hegemonic masculinity, which, while often not fully occupied as a position, are the masculinity/masculinities widely recognised as the generally aspired-to version and against which all other masculinities are structured. In the context of urban informal settlements in South Africa, the hegemonic masculinity emphasises the man as an economic provider for the heterosexual household (Gibbs, Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2014; Morrell et al. 2013), which is an important way in which patriarchally conferred male power over women and children is maintained at a household level. Additionally, although men may gain power through the use of violence, the hegemonic masculinity does not typically utilise violence as a first-line strategy to achieve dominance and maintain control, but, if necessary, violence can be used in a limited way to maintain

dominance and control in relationships, and does not incur social sanction (Morrell et al. 2013).

In South Africa, the nexus of disadvantage based on race, class, poverty and age means that the majority of men are not able to live up to the ideal of the hegemonic masculinity. In this context, multiple masculinities emerge. In informal settlements, a subordinated but numerically dominant form of masculinity is that of youthful masculinity (which has also been termed hyper-masculinity), emerging out of poverty, experiences of trauma and gender inequalities (Jewkes and Morrell 2018; Gibbs, Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2014; Gibbs et al. 2019). This masculinity is also heterosexually successful but is not predicated on consistent and successful financial provision to women or households. The use of violence as a way to maintain gender hierarchy and control women, as well as to compete with or defend honour among other men, is common and acceptable, as is having multiple sexual partners (Ragnarsson et al. 2010; Gibbs, Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2014). While these features of a youthful masculinity are widespread, there is variation in how individual men draw upon and use these components in their everyday life, and there remains contestation around how these are operationalised on a daily basis.

While much research on masculinities describes a snap shot and so implies that masculinities are relatively static (or only changing through longer processes of historical transformation), there is growing evidence of much fluidity and complexity. First, masculinities are in continual competition with one another, and while there may be one or more hegemonic forms of masculinity, multiple other masculinities compete for dominance and hegemony, and changes on the ground, including in political leadership, can alter balances of power and influence among masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Gibbs, Jewkes and Sikweyiya 2018; Morrell et al. 2013). Second, masculinity is not something that is permanently achieved, and men continually seek to prove their masculinity (Vandello and Bosson 2013; Connell 2005). This is particularly the case with a subordinated masculinity, in which layers of class and race oppression create insecurity (Morrell et al. 2013). As such, all social interactions, including gender-transformative interventions, can be considered spaces in which different forms of masculinity are contested.

In this paper we describe how one gender-transformative programme – Stepping Stones and Creating Futures (Gibbs et al. 2017), working with young (aged 18–30) Black African men in urban informal settlements in South Africa – constitutes a site in which different configurations of masculinity are displayed, used and in competition with one another in the daily practices of young male facilitators. We show how the programme's facilitators work to position themselves in the eyes of the male participants as 'successful men', both financially and with women, and then use this embodiment of attainable success to provoke male participants to change. However, we also highlight how such an approach also limits the potential for the radical reconstruction of dominant forms of masculinity.

Methods

Context

Data came from the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures randomised controlled trial (RCT), undertaken in urban informal settlements in eThekwini Municipality, South

Africa between 2015 and 2018. The main trial evaluated the impact of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures on young (ages 18–30) men's perpetration and women's experience of intimate partner violence (IPV), alongside whether it changed HIV-risk behaviours, created more gender-equitable attitudes and reduced male controlling behaviours (Gibbs et al. 2017). Embedded in the RCT was a qualitative process evaluation to understand intervention delivery by facilitators.

The Stepping Stones and Creating Futures programme comprised 21 sessions, each approximately three hours long. The first 10 sessions focused on gender, violence, relationships and HIV, based on the third edition of the South African adaptation of the Stepping Stones manual (Jewkes, Nduna and Jama-Shai 2010). The subsequent 11 sessions were aimed at strengthening livelihoods (Creating Futures) (Misselhorn et al. 2012). Both elements of the programme were created within a Freirean educational framework, focused on supporting dialogue and critical consciousness (Freire 1973). As such, sessions include a focus on critical reflection and unpacking problems to make solutions visible, with facilitators trained to pose questions, encourage dialogue and not impose their own ideas (Gibbs et al. 2015).

Sessions are delivered by one or two facilitators, to single-sex groups, with facilitators matched in terms of sex and age to participants. Facilitators run two groups at a time, with two sessions a week (i.e. four points of contact per week). In each group, approximately 20 participants were recruited, but attendance fluctuated widely, with the smallest group being 4 or 5 people, through to 16 or 17.

Data

Data were collected in three ways between 2016 and 2017 during programme delivery, and the focus was on six male facilitators. First, a trained male ethnographer conducted 22 session observations in two programme groups (focused on four facilitators), with notes written after each session. Additionally, following these observations, the ethnographer discussed sessions with members of the research team, which were recorded and transcribed (in total 11 discussions). Second, four focus-group discussions (FGDs) were held with the facilitators throughout the delivery of the programme (group size varied from 4 to 6 and included all the male facilitators and female facilitators). Third, eight in-depth interviews with five male facilitators were conducted over the course of intervention delivery. Interviews and FGDs were undertaken in a mixture of isiZulu and English, digitally recorded and transcribed and translated into English.

Ethnographic observations and team discussions had little direct structure. They encouraged reflection on the overall process of the intervention, activities during sessions and on the relationships between facilitators and participants. They also involved discussion of important events that occurred in communities, such as political elections and so forth, impacting on programme delivery. FGDs and interviews were guided by a semi-structured topic guide, focused on structural challenges related to programme delivery (venues, location, distance etc.), what facilitators found easy or hard from the sessions and how facilitators related to, and got on with, participants.

Ethics

The study received approval from ethics committees at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and South African Medical Research Council. Participants provided written informed consent for the study. Facilitators were employed by the NGO (Project Empower) delivering the intervention, while the ethnographer and interviewers were employed by a research organisation (the South African Medical Research Council). The ethnographer and interviewers did not report on their observations, discussions or interviews with facilitators to NGO staff. Data were only analysed after the programme was completed, and contracts for facilitators had ended. In addition, all names and locations were changed, and only at this point were findings discussed with NGO staff.

Analysis

A mixture of *a priori* themes and emergent thematic analysis (Flick 2002) was used to code the data. As masculinities are constructed through interaction and practices, we focused on identifying moments in which masculinities were established, maintained or contested during sessions, as a broad initial coding. Subsequently, from this initial coding a process of emergent thematic analysis and coding was undertaken, with initial inductive codes being identified and grouped around how these interactions played out. These grouped codes become the themes described in the paper and were clustered to be theoretically and practically coherent.

Findings

Facilitators were chosen after a selection process by the organisation delivering the intervention, focusing on three attributes: facilitators' commitment to gender equality, their similarity to intervention participants and their ability to make connections with participants in groups.

Selection processes included group discussions about 'controversial' topics such as abortion and violence against women, as well as a series of participatory processes observed by Project Empower staff. Once selected, facilitators underwent an intense six-week period of training, including experiencing the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures programme as participants, learning to facilitate the intervention and then training on specific topics (such as HIV). Throughout programme delivery, facilitators met weekly to debrief and get support for upcoming sessions. Facilitators were paid well considering their skills, background and current wage levels (∼R6,000/month ∼ US$430/month), compared to participants' mean earnings of R412/month (∼US$30/month) at baseline, and above the newly introduced minimum wage of R3,200/month (US$230/month).

Our analysis identified five key moments during the facilitation process when masculinities were established or contested, either implicitly or explicitly. We describe each of these in turn, reflecting on the ways in which masculinities were used or challenged.

Same but different

Facilitators were partly selected for their role based on their having similar backgrounds to participants, being of similar age, and many had lived, or continued to live, in informal settlements. However, they also differed from participants in that they did not come from the specific communities in which they were working, and had 'softer' masculinities, as evidenced by a degree of commitment to gender equality.

Many facilitators described initially feeling 'scared' of the participants they were working with and the communities where they worked. For instance, Ayanda described concern about the violent context of one community, and his fear of participants:

> They can't not fight, there are taverns that are well known to … (be violent) … like if you go there you have to make sure that you are careful in every way and you must be very selective with your words you utter … What affected me a lot was that those participants were a menace and I was scared of them. (Ayanda, facilitator, June 2016)

Sifiso similarly described his concerns about safety as a facilitator, even though he had lived for a year in an informal settlement when he first moved to Durban:

> … you know in Little Bethlehem there is a place where the crime rate is very high, do you understand what I am saying? I was a bit scared, when I went to class feeling scared, but then I tried to settle in and be alright. (Sifiso, facilitator, 11 November 2016)

Facilitators were legitimately concerned about their safety. They did not come from the communities they worked in and had not established the networks and relationships that young men develop in their own communities to provide themselves with security. Additionally, they struggled to read local dynamics of risk as they moved in and out of the communities.

Their fear may also have been recognition by facilitators that they may have portrayed a different form of masculinity to participants, having been selected for being more gentle and gender-equitable than many men. This contrasted markedly with dominant masculinities in informal settlements which emphasised toughness and, as Ayanda mentioned, a readiness to fight.

Differences in facilitators' and participants' economic position came through in multiple ways. One clear difference concerned the facilitators' dress, compared to participants:

> The dress code of the facilitator [Vuyo] did not match that of participants. Participants were in slippers, old torn shoes, torn tops, dirty looking jeans, shorts, cap and a vest. The temperature in the room was fairly hot and one participant kept a face cloth to wipe his sweat and use it as a fan. The facilitator was dressed casually and looking presentable. (1 March 2016, observation notes)

Cell phones also marked that facilitators were different to participants:

> Sifiso [facilitator] read from his iPhone to the group about the history of HIV and where it first came from. (1 Nov 2016, observation notes)

While facilitators liked these markers of difference from participants – their clothes, phones and refinement – they also recognised the need to connect with participants:

> I won't lie I want to be liked by them, I'm a facilitator that does not mean that maybe I'm better than them. (Ayanda, facilitator, 19 May 2016)

Building connections between the facilitator and participants was, however, successfully done, and members of the research team often commented on this:

> I think he [the facilitator, Vuyo] gets along well with them. We share things or he shares things with them even outside of class like during lunch … I feel like there's a relationship going on. (13 April 2016, research team discussion)

The importance of building relationships of trust enabled participants to talk relatively openly with the facilitators and share important details about their life:

> After we had completed Stepping Stones a participant said he wanted to talk to me … The participant that came to me and told me that he was HIV positive, he also said that I was the first person he talked to about this because he has never even told his girlfriend about it … (Sifiso, facilitator, 30 November 2016)

Telling stories

Facilitators often told stories about their lives to participants. These stories performed a number of functions, depending on when and how they were told. When asked about why they told stories, or when reflecting on the role of stories in groups, facilitators focused on stories' role in bonding with participants. For example, at the start of the first session of a week, almost everyone would share what they had done over the weekend:

> Before we start, we talk about our social life, how was the weekend, 'no man I had a problem like this', 'I was at a party it was going down', I sometimes share and sometimes I don't. (Lwandle, facilitator, 1 April 2016)

Lwandle also described how he told stories to encourage participants to talk about their own lives:

> Rather than feed them the manual all the time, I would think: let me take their minds off the manual and tell them my story, so that it will be easy for them to open up to me. It's easier to talk to a person who also shares his own problems … (Lwandle, facilitator, 15 July 2016)

Sharing stories helped build participants' interest and engagement, as the ethnographer reflected:

> The facilitator [Vuyo] used his own personal examples to encourage participants to engage further with the topic about love and cheating. (8 March 2016, observation notes)

The stories facilitators told were carefully (even if unconsciously) constructed and selected to position facilitators, in terms of masculinity, in desired and differing ways to those of participants. One set of stories positioned facilitators as young, successful, heterosexual men. In one session as everyone reported back to the group on what they had done over the weekend, the ethnographer recorded:

> Ayanda asks participants how their weekend was, and participants replied telling him what they got up to:
>
> - Got dumped by girlfriend
> - Had trouble with some men who are known for violence as they wanted to beat him up for impregnating their sister

- Sleeping with his girlfriend
- Insulted by a drunkard while sitting on the yard of his home
- Had a few beers
- Philani [facilitator] slept with his girlfriend, drinking and eating food on Florida Road [a middle-class location in Durban]
- Ayanda [facilitator] had sex with his girlfriend (15 November 2016, observation notes)

Both of the facilitators shared very specific stories about themselves with participants, demonstrating they were in heterosexual relationships and well-off financially. These stories contrasted sharply to those of participants, which tended to focus on their unsuccessful love lives, their drinking or else experiences and threats of violence. Such subtle positioning enabled facilitators to portray themselves as more successful men than participants – while also, to a degree, as being embedded in the same social milieu.

A second 'type' of story facilitators told provided participants with 'narratives of change', demonstrating to participants that the facilitators had previously been in similar positions to them, but had managed to make a success of their lives:

> Lwandle: Especially when it comes to relationships … I give examples about my personal life and tell them about my story, so that they can feel that they are not the only ones that make mistakes or went through this …
>
> Interviewer: In using your own personal experiences as an example, how does that help in sessions?
>
> Lwandle: It makes participants realise that I am not perfect, I was just like them …
>
> Interviewer: Okay …
>
> Lwandle: I have also been there I have scratches too, I have been drunk and slept in shebeens to a point where my girlfriend came to fetch me, so that would make them open up to me too about their lives … (Lwandle, facilitator, 17 July 2016)

Stories enabled men to be more open in what they shared in sessions, but also characterised the facilitators as having successfully established a different masculinity to participants:

> Sometimes maybe to share your life experience in terms of women abuse, you need to start and tell them that you were one of them who was abusing woman. By doing that, you will be giving them a chance to speak freely and not say that they don't abuse women. (Ayanda, facilitator, 19 May 2016)

Storytelling was therefore central to facilitation. It built group cohesion but established the facilitators' masculinity as a more successful version of the participants' youthful masculinity, by being heterosexually successful and more economically able to provide in relationships.

Jokes

Jokes were a common currency between facilitators and participants, and being able to create laughter was prized within the facilitator group. For facilitators, jokes were a way of keeping participants engaged and made facilitators feel valued, as Lwandle described:

> No matter how much you speak, like you know when you are a comedian and trying to make jokes and people just look at you, and then when you are done stand up and applaud you and then you feel … ay! It means I have done well [excited]. (Lwandle, facilitator, 17 July 2016)

Jokes also allowed facilitators a way of introducing potentially awkward topics participants were shying away from. One facilitator used a joke as a way to start a discussion about negotiating condom use with a partner, after participants had initially refused to come up with ideas:

> During one session, Ayanda asked participants: If you want to tell your partner you want to use a condom, how would you say it? Politely say let us use a condom? Participants didn't want to make up sentences with words they would actually use. There was a sense of being shy. So Ayanda made his own example to which participants were smiling and laughing at a little bit. (September 2016, observation notes)

Jokes, particularly about sex, also functioned to assert facilitators' masculinity and enabled them to position themselves as successful men. During a session of The Joy and Problems of Sex, participants joked about different sexual desires, and what they were willing or not to do with women. The facilitators also joined in and started making jokes:

> One participant was laughed at for claiming he never goes below the breasts of a woman … The facilitator [Philani] said suddenly, in jest, that they do not know how to please a woman's body and if he were to live in this community, he could get lots of girlfriends. In saying that, the participants then said he should tell them how he touches a woman, and Philani did just that. (18 October 2016, observation notes)

The comment – 'I can get lots of girlfriends' – was highly competitive and sought to establish a hierarchical relationship between the facilitator and the participants. Yet, as Philani moved on from jokingly establishing his sexual prowess over the other men to a discussion about sexual pleasure and specifically mutual sexual pleasure, this entailed the portrayal of a very different form of masculinity. A form of masculinity that challenged participants' own masculinity.

Facilitators' jokes also included put-downs, demonstrating how facilitators 'knew better' than participants. During one Creating Futures session, there was a discussion of what work people aspired to. One participant said he wanted to be a professional soccer player, and was already playing as an amateur, which the facilitator laughed at and made a joke about to the whole group:

> Professional soccer player: he is already playing in division three and believes he can reach professional status. The facilitator [Vuyo] questioned this and laughed at him because he said he knows a lot about soccer … The whole group was smiling or giggling at this young man's goal because it seemed too farfetched within six months. (5 May 2016, observation notes)

Such jokes and 'put-downs' by facilitators were inappropriate as they risked embarrassing the participants but were commonly used by facilitators as a strategy by which to establish themselves as better than participants. Jokes therefore played a complex role in facilitators' practice, entertaining participants, introducing potentially sensitive topics, but also acting as a way for facilitators to establish themselves as having a more superior masculinity to that of participants.

Emotions

A well-documented component of young men's masculinity in this setting concerns a lack of emotional engagement (Morrell et al. 2013), yet in a number of sessions emotions came very much to the fore. Two sessions were often described by facilitators and participants as 'unpleasant' because they touched on emotionally charged subjects, particularly death and loss. The Stepping Stones session Let's Look Deeper explored losing people of importance, and in Creating Futures the Story Telling session encouraged people to tell their life story as a way to focus on livelihoods but often ended up with deeply emotional matters:

> … you know in the journey session I could see people were getting emotional, because we have emotions you know, because at the end of the day it touches you, I know I have been there and I must not cry with them while they are crying too … [imitates crying] … that was challenging to me because I had not experienced something like that before, it's like I am doing counselling. They were saying everything, they were crying, and I had to calm them down and comfort them so that they will be alright … (Ayanda, facilitator, 15 November 2016)

In feedback, Creating Futures was often described by facilitators as being challenging. While this was partly down to the content, which was often quite technical, it was also because activities forced participants to reflect on their own lives in ways which could reveal great loss, and a bleak future, as they reflected on their past and current position:

> Sfiso: [exhales] Yah, Creating Futures they enjoyed it and they said this book was very deep.
>
> Ethnographer: [laughs]
>
> Sfiso: They said things like: 'Ey this book [Creating Futures] is too serious about life, and yet the other one [Stepping Stones] we were talking about, we are not saying that it's not serious but it's about our daily experiences … now I have to think about my dream, now you know, it's getting serious'. (Sfiso, facilitator, 30 November 2016)

While facilitators worked to enable emotions to emerge and be 'held' in sessions, they also enabled men to avoid issues that were too painful or challenging. For instance, in one session, some men refused to close their eyes to reflect on risk in their lives:

> The facilitator [Vuyo] then placed a chart on the wall and wrote 'Taking Risks'. He asked participants what comes to mind in seeing this phrase. Responses were 'girlfriend, death and danger'. The facilitator then asked them to close their eyes and reflect on some of the risks they have taken in their lives. Some participants were not willing to close their eyes and so in reaction to that the facilitator said, 'it's ok not to close them if you don't feel like it'. (17 March 2016, observation notes)

Facilitators also used games to bring emotional work to a close and restore normative masculinity in sessions. After a tense debate between participants about physical IPV, requiring the facilitator to intervene, stop the discussion and talk to one participant separately, the facilitator re-established a positive group dynamic using a game:

> The facilitator [Philani] then called everyone to a game in order to relieve the tension. Laughter and calmness was then restored. (20 October 2016, observation notes)

Emotions were therefore central to facilitation, with facilitators often pushing participants to express emotions and also into emotionally vulnerable positions. At times, this extended to facilitators offering counselling to participants. In so doing, it challenged the dominant masculinity of young men, which emphasised toughness and denial of emotions, and opened up the possibility of alternative forms of masculinity to emerge. Facilitators were only able to get participants to discuss emotions and emotional topics because they had established a strong relationship with the participants.

Violence against women and condom use

Facilitators generally reported that good sessions were the ones in which participants had been lively and actively engaged in discussion. However, when it came to talking about IPV and condom use, facilitators tended to stop discussions about these topics from occurring, and rather simply stated that violence was wrong and to always use condoms. For instance, in one session on Abuse in Relationships, when one participant announced that sometimes violence against a girlfriend could be justified, the facilitator, instead of encouraging discussion to reflect on this, announced it was wrong, and the participant parroted the response back:

> There was one point where the facilitator [Vuyo] asked a guy about violence and the participant said, 'sometimes when a woman is wrong, you have to slap her'. And then the facilitator said: 'hold up; so you're saying there are moments you feel that you need to hit a woman just because you feel that she's wrong or something?' then the participant just withdrew his argument, 'okay, beating a woman is wrong altogether'. (6 April 2016, research team discussion)

The session then continued with men acting out examples of men abusing women. Abuse could be both physical and non-physical, but was meant to focus on men's use of violence against partners, the most common form of violence in young people's lives. Through these dramas and subsequent discussion, it would lead to critical reflection on the drivers of IPV. However, in one observed session facilitated by Vuyo, the forms of violence young men dramatised were other forms of violence, and not IPV:

> AG (first author): In the stories, the dramas, the role plays, did any do the more common boyfriends beating their girlfriends?
>
> Ethnographer: No, the closest to that was the father-mother-children. The father was abusing the mother, taking the social grant money. (6 April 2016, research team discussion)

Facilitators' unwillingness to have any discussion about IPV, beyond stating it was wrong, was almost an absolute, which they did not want to challenge.

A similar boundary was put in place around consistent condom use. The ethnographer repeatedly noted how there was no discussion, but rather a strong enforcement of the – almost moral – necessity to use them:

> The facilitator [Ayanda] said do what you can, it's better to use a condom than to accumulate what you can't erase on you. Ayanda seemed to take on a preachy stance when he made his first comment of the day because he was directly promoting condom

use and everyone just listened without having any reaction, other than silence. (15 November 2016, observation notes)

Observing another session, a similar situation occurred when a different facilitator also stopped discussion from taking place:

AG (first author): When the session finished, there wasn't a discussion?

Ethnographer: He [Vuyo] just wrapped it and then he just asked them, 'So guys I hope this means you are going to be using condoms' and everybody just laughed. (11 March 2016, research team discussion)

Discussion

This study of male facilitators delivering the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention provides insight into how such interventions are actually implemented, and how male facilitators attempted to facilitate 'transformations' of men's gender attitudes, practices and ultimately masculinities, particularly through the use of their own masculinity. While the majority of research on facilitation has focused on the ways in which participatory interventions achieve (or not) Freire's (1973) ideals of problematisation, dialogue and critical consciousness (Gibbs, Vaughan and Aggleton 2015; Gibbs et al. 2015; Hatcher et al. 2011), our data suggest a more complicated reading.

Broadly, we suggest a key aspect of facilitation lay in facilitators working to establish and maintain a particular form of successful masculinity and deploy this to encourage participants to change. As seen, facilitators had to negotiate two tasks existing in tension with one another. The first task was overt and set by the intervention, namely challenging elements of participants' youthful masculinity, such as exerting violent power over women. The second task of facilitators was more covert, specifically establishing their credibility as men in the eyes of participants. This second objective remains largely unrecognised by those who develop interventions but was felt acutely by facilitators in this study who were required to negotiate dangerous spaces and the ongoing threat of male–male violence. Only through facilitators establishing themselves as 'successful men' could they begin to challenge certain aspects of the dominant form of masculinity that participants drew on. In doing so, however, it left other aspects of participants' masculinity, such as heterosexuality, and male power and control more generally, unchallenged. This reflects Schroer-Hippel's (2017) argument that gender-transformative interventions are often piece-meal processes, in which only certain elements of dominant masculinity are targeted for change, while others are not problematised, and some indeed are celebrated.

Bonding with participants was the way in which facilitators described building relationships with participants as well as establishing themselves as 'successful men'. Bonding with participants by ensuring participants enjoyed sessions and felt a sense of commitment to the intervention increased attendance. Additionally, participants are more likely to change when facilitators are liked and trusted peers (Campbell 2003). However, bonding was also about facilitators establishing their own masculinity in the eyes of participants, through jokes, stories and other demonstrations of masculinity, positioning themselves as successful men.

A key issue facilitators worked on with young male participants was emotions. Emotions were not always engaged with directly by facilitators, and facilitators often sidestepped them, or stopped emotions 'going too far'. However, given that emotions became a central component of facilitators' work, this could be conceptualised as central to the 'transformative' work of the intervention, embodying a direct challenge to the normative masculinity where emotions were off-limits (Morrell et al. 2013).

Facilitators' enforcement of a strict line on consistent condom use and non-violence in relationships was only possible because facilitators had proven they were 'successful men'. In challenging participants on these accepted behaviours, facilitators risked being laughed at, or even questioned around their sexuality/masculinity by participants, potentially leading to tension, and even violence, as facilitators sought to maintain their reputation. It was unclear whether facilitators' refusal to discuss violence and condom use was done because facilitators so ardently believed this, or whether they did not fully believe it themselves and so felt unable to lead a reflective discussion on these topics. If the latter, this may be an area in which the masculinity of the facilitators and the participants did not greatly differ.

Facilitators also drew on narratives of personal transformation of their own masculinity throughout the work they undertook. The stories facilitators told engaged participants and provided 'models' of success participants could relate to. These narratives had two roles: first, they legitimised facilitators in the eyes of participants as men; second, they framed change, not in terms of self-reflection or emerging critical awareness of the individual and collective harms of adherence to particular forms of masculinity, but rather in terms of personal salvation and redemption. These narratives of change have parallels with the wider literature on changing masculinities, be this engagement in Pentecostal religion in Puerto Rico (Hansen 2012) or HIV diagnosis in South Africa (Sikweyiya, Jewkes and Dunkle 2014), both of which include elements of being 'saved'.

Importantly, whilst behaviour change interventions have often been described as working by providing 'safe social spaces' (Campbell 2003), this was not often the case in this project, with competition between different forms of masculinity being the norm. When safety was established, for example during emotionally charged sessions, it was intermittently achieved rather than as a consistent feature of the programme.

Limitations

Like all instances of research, this study has its limitations. While a large number of sessions were observed, they involved only a small number of facilitators to ensure depth, rather than breadth, of focus. It is also unclear the extent to which there was diversity in facilitation approaches, which was not captured in the analysis.

We also do not know the impact of the ethnographer on session delivery by facilitators and responses and engagement by participants during sessions. The impact of his observations and engagement – reactivity – on delivery and engagement cannot be assessed; however, given sessions were observed over time, reactivity was likely limited and minimised over time.

Finally, we only interviewed facilitators and did not ask participants about their experiences of them. In addition, we cannot be sure what personal biases the ethnographer had when making notes of session observations. We did, however, seek multiple sources of information, including observation and discussion of session delivery with the ethnographer, and also interviews and focus-groups with facilitators, and used this to establish a form of methodological triangulation.

Possible implications

The analysis has a number of practical implications for interventions seeking to transform masculinities through working with facilitators. First, training needs to emphasise the importance of facilitators building bonds with participants to enable change, but it also needs to support reflection on where strategies to bond with participants lead to the reinforcement, rather than questioning, of inequitable masculinities. Second, the emotional work facilitators put into the delivery of sessions, both personally and in dealing with participants' emotions, signals the need to provide debriefing and where necessary counselling for facilitators. Finally, the complex balancing acts facilitators had to achieve throughout the programme delivery, establishing themselves as credible men while provoking participants to change in subtle ways, highlight how short-term training of facilitators is unlikely to achieve success. Rather, the longer (6 week) training and ongoing support provided as part of Stepping Stones and Creating Futures regular work is crucial if such processes are to succeed.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how programmes with men and boys work to enable incremental change rather than the wholesale radical transformation of masculinities, as suggested by some of the literature on work with men and boys. Facilitators had to balance the overt process to support gender transformation with the more covert process of positioning themselves as successful men. This meant that in sessions patriarchal power in and of itself was never challenged or questioned. Rather, sessions explored and encouraged a softer more benign form of masculinity to emerge. This enabled facilitators and participants to undergo limited processes of change, without 'compromising' on their sense of masculinity. Interventions such as Stepping Stones and Creating Futures, while relatively intensive, are – against the backdrop of patriarchal power writ large across South African society and the histories of apartheid and economic oppression – incredibly short and limited. Given this, whilst such interventions may not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal social order, the small incremental changes described in this paper may be the best we can hope for, and do start to create somewhat more equitable masculinities.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Thobani Khumalo who was the ethnographer on the project, and the project participants, including facilitators who gave their time and information.

Funding

This study was conducted as part of the What Works to Prevent Violence? A Global Programme on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) supported by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the department's official policies. The funders had no role in study design; the collection, management, analysis and interpretation of data; the writing of an end-of-project report; and the decision to submit the paper for publication. Funding was managed by the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), who also supported the project team.

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