
Sense and sensibilities: Schoolboys talk about sex in the private conversational space

Kaymarlin Govender, Leigh Adams Tucker and Sarah Coldwell

Abstract

This article focuses on the narratives of 18 adolescent boys as they engaged with issues of sex, sexuality and peer relations in their daily lives. The ethnographic research was conducted in two public secondary schools in a working-class community within KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Participants were boys aged between 16 and 19 years, who self-identified as either Black African or Indian. Theories of positioning are employed in this paper to delve into the complexity and intricacies of boys enacting their masculinities and sexual identities within a one-to-one interview space with one of the researchers. Identity performance in this private space is read in relation to public positions (in the company of peers), exposing the malleable nature of positioning and its subjective use in different spaces. Findings suggest that boys' struggle with the concept and social practice of 'masculinity', and that while they may not want to be seen as aspiring to certain ideals regarding male sexuality, these values remain a standard against which to evaluate self and other. In the individual interviews, authenticity as a heterosexual man is negotiated through various rhetorical strategies, namely a tendency to self-position as mature and sensible. It is argued that positionality is a useful conceptual tool for highlighting diversities in the performance of masculinities, and that intervention strategies need to pay attention to how spaces are constructed and nurtured for boys to engage with the ideological dilemmas in their identity development.

Adolescence is typically regarded as a tumultuous developmental period, in which biological maturation intersects with increasing personal responsibility and exposure to diverse opportunities for social interaction. During this time, young men are often depicted as experiencing heightened sexual drives relative to their female peers with social pressures to demonstrate sexual prowess. Much of the research in sub-Saharan Africa on heterosexual masculinity points to the prevailing narratives of 'risky' young men adhering to social norms on sexual permissiveness and engaging in multiple sexual activities as they transition from youth to adulthood (Anderson, 2010; Brown, Sorrell, & Raffaelli, 2005; Langa, 2010; Shefer, Kruger, & Schepers, 2015; Sommer, Likindikoki, & Kaaya, 2015; Wood & Jewkes, 2001).

Hegemonic masculinity has been applied to the field of sexual health research as a way to understand men's sexual practices and health outcomes, and has been expanded in the

- Sommer, M., Likindikoki, S., & Kaaya, S. (2015). Bend a fish when the fish is not yet dry”: Adolescent boys’ perceptions of sexual risk in Tanzania. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(3), 583–595.
- Tillotson, J., & Maharaj, P. (2001). Barriers to HIV/AIDS protective behaviour among African adolescent males in township secondary schools in Durban, South Africa. *Society in Transition*, 32(1), 83–100.
- Tucker, L. A., & Govender, K. (2016). “Sticks and stones”: Masculinities and conflict spaces. *Gender and Education*, 29(3), 352–368.
- Wetherell, M., & Edley, N. (1999). Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 9(3), 335–356.
- Wetherell, M., & Edley, N. (2014). A discursive psychological framework for analyzing men and masculinities. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 15(4), 355–364.
- Wood, K., & Jewkes, R. (2001). ‘Dangerous’ love: Reflections on violence among Xhosa township youth. In R. Morrell (Ed.), *Changing men in Southern Africa* (pp. 317–336). Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Yamakawa, Y., Forman, E., & Ansell, E. (2005). The role of positioning in constructing an identity in a third grade mathematics classroom. In K. Kumpulainen, C. E. Hmelo-Silver & M. César (Eds.), *Investigating classroom interaction: Methodologies in action* (pp. 179–202). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.