‘I HAD A HARD LIFE’

Exploring Childhood Adversity in the Shaping of Masculinities among Men Who Killed an Intimate Partner in South Africa

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South Africa has a female homicide rate six times the global average, with half of murdered women killed by an intimate partner. The gendered nature of such murders indicates the need to explore the masculinities of men who kill an intimate partner. This paper explores the childhoods of 20 men who were incarcerated for such murders and draws on 74 in-depth interviews with these men, family and friends. This study found that traumatic childhood experiences increases emotional vulnerability, resulting in their feeling unloved, insecure and powerless. We argue that they adopt violent forms of masculinities to achieve respect and power. Yet, there is no linear relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and adopting violent masculinities.

Keywords: masculinity, male violence, intimate partner homicide, child abuse, intimate partner violence, parenting

Introduction

The South African female homicide rate is six times higher than the global average, and half of all murdered women are killed by an intimate partner (Abrahams et al. 2009). Intimate partner violence generally is a widespread problem in South Africa. Targeted studies estimate that between 43 and 56 per cent of women have experienced this (Abrahams et al. 2006; Dunkle et al. 2004) and 42 per cent of men report perpetration (Jewkes et al. 2009). Preventing intimate partner violence and intimate femicide poses important challenges, and research has much to contribute. In North America, intimate femicide perpetration has been associated with preceding intimate partner violence, gun ownership, threats with weapons, stalking and alcohol use (Campbell et al. 2007), but these epidemiological associations do not provide insights into the social processes underlying the problem. Given the inherent gendered nature of intimate femicide, it seems essential to understand the masculinities of men who have killed their partner, and to reflect on the influences shaping these across the life course from childhood. In so doing, we understand masculinities, or male gendered identities, as socially constructed and both fluid and dynamic (Connell 1995; Morrell 2001). Masculinities are shaped through an intricate interplay of influences including culture, family, the social environment, class and, in many settings, race.

It is impossible to write about violence in South Africa without recognizing the country’s history of racial oppression and grossly unequal power and economic opportunities that promoted the formation of gendered identities along racial lines (Morrell 2001).

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The Apartheid State policy constructed four racial categories—Black, Coloured, Indian and White—and enforced racial segregation through oppressive laws that were brutally enforced. Apartheid strengthened the economic and political power of the ruling white minority, creating vast inequalities. In the Western Cape, where this study was based, half the population is coloured. This group has its origins in the country’s colonial past among slaves and indigenous people and anyone of mixed race (Goldin 1987). The social position of coloureds was tenuous, as they were not considered white or black. Many worked on farms where workers were partly paid in very addictive crude wine—a practise known as the ‘dop’ system, which gave rise to highly prevalent alcoholism (Mager 2004). This pattern of alcohol abuse was mirrored in urban coloured townships, contributing to the social destruction of communities and families (Mager 2004). South African townships are deprived and poor, plagued by social disorganization caused by apartheid policies such as forced removals, which contributed to family breakdown with and the rapid formation of street gangs (Pinnock 1984). Governmental policy to control alcohol and drugs in townships produced a flourishing ‘criminal’ economy, enhancing the power of gangs in the Western Cape (Standing 2006). Dysfunctional families and limited opportunities for youth in townships draw young men into gangs to provide them with a sense of success, power and respect that they are otherwise denied (Luyt and Foster 2001; Bourgois 1996).

For blacks and coloureds in South Africa, apartheid has had a devastating impact on family life. Studies on fatherhood have shown that the migrant labour system particularly impacted on black men’s availability to their families, resulting in fathers’ abandoning and neglecting their children (Morrell and Richter 2006). With child-rearing practices gendered and largely considered a woman’s domain (Morrell and Richter 2006), considerable space has been created for fathers to be absent and uninvolved in the care of their children. Over 40 per cent of households in South Africa are female-headed; however, many children are raised not only without a father, but also without a biological mother, with grandmothers or aunts taking on the parenting role (Coovadia et al. 2009). Such alternate care arrangements can be the context for emotional traumatic experiences for these children (Nduna and Jewkes in press). Given this context, children often turn to others in their social environment for affirmation. Socialization outside the home, including exposure to violence and gang culture, is of particular importance in shaping identity during adolescence.

South African research suggests that exposure of boys and girls to neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse in childhood is very common (Pinheiro 2006; Jewkes et al. 2009). The notion of childhood adversity, or trauma, encompasses experiences ranging from neglect, abuse, orphaning, family dysfunction as well as witnessing violence in the family and community (Schilling et al. 2008). This poses a major threat to immediate and long-term psychosocial functioning (Edwards et al. 2003). Research mainly from developed countries has shown that the effects of adverse childhood experiences are cumulative, with risk of depression, suicidality, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse as well as violent anti-social behaviour (Edwards et al. 2003; Schilling et al. 2008; Fonagy and Target 2003). Exposure to childhood trauma has been shown to have a differential impact on boys and girls, with girls at increased risk for internalizing problems and expressing this as depression (Bordin et al. 2009) and boys for externalizing problems, such as through delinquency and aggression (Schilling et al. 2008).
Abuse and neglect in childhood affect brain development, which impacts on cognitive and psychosocial adjustment, increasing the risk of violent and anti-social behaviour (Raine 2002). There are genetic risks that influence these pathways, such as the presence of the long version MAOA gene, although social support and having a higher IQ may provide some protection (Caspi et al. 2002). The relationship between genes and anti-social behaviour, however, is inconsistent and research indicates that the environment is more important (Arehart-Treichel 2008). Exposure to childhood trauma, including witnessing violence in the home, has consistently been found to be associated with subsequent aggressive behaviour, particularly rape and intimate partner violence perpetration (Malamuth et al. 1995; Jewkes et al. 2009; Abrahams and Jewkes 2005). Developmental psychoanalytic theory suggests that negative early childhood experiences impact on the development of sense of self and personality and this influences later interpersonal relationships and the development of psychopathology (Fonagy and Target 2003). In particular, Attachment theory postulates that the care-giver–child relationship facilitates the development of mental representations of the self and others, which provides the basis for relationships and emotional regulation (Bowlby 1969). The attachment pattern is influenced by the care-giving environment and mental representations of what the child expects of the self and others in relationships (Bowlby 1969). Sensitive and responsive parenting promotes secure attachments and the development of a secure sense of self and others (Ainsworth 1969). Harsh or rejecting parenting promotes disorganized and insecure attachments and the development of an inability to regulate and interpret their own feelings and that of others, as the care-giver is a source of both fear and comfort, which has important implications for the development of personality disorders (Ainsworth 1969). This inability to regulate emotions and a lower reflective function are suggestive of a borderline personality disorder (Fonagy and Target 2003). Borderline personality is characterized by a lack of guilt or sadness, manipulative communication, lack of impulse control as well as polarizing persons they are close to into either all good or bad (Klein 1950).

We suggest that the origins of violence are complex. Violence within intimate partnerships is as a consequence of a web of interrelated factors (Jewkes 2002). In this paper, we use three main approaches to inform our reasoning. At the structural level, drawing on Connell (1987; 1995), we view gender identities as socially constructed, within a context of grossly inequitable power relations between men and women. Second, we recognize the importance of the social context of the Western Cape, where gangs provide an opportunity for young men to explore and assert power and, within this, harsher violent masculinities are valorized (Luyt and Foster 2001). At the individual level, perspectives from developmental psychoanalysis provide us with an understanding of how the development of the mind and affect regulation is influenced by childhood traumatic experiences impairing the development of a coherent psychological self leading to an inability to contain and regulate feelings (Bowlby 1969). This cognitive disconnect, it is argued, can lead to borderline personality disorder characterized by unstable or chaotic interpersonal relationships, due to disturbances in the person’s sense of self (Fonagy and Target 2003). Given the substantial problem of gender-based violence and the high prevalence of intimate femicide in South Africa, it is important to understand more about the psychosocial processes underlying men’s perpetration. This paper explores the childhoods of men who have killed an intimate partner, drawing on interviews with incarcerated men.
**Methods**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 incarcerated men. A cluster of interviews were conducted for each man by the first author with a total of 74 interviews. Two interviews of one to two hours’ duration were held with each interviewee in prison as well as between one and three interviews with friends or family members of themselves and the victim. The purpose of the interviews was to understand men who kill their partners, to explore how men explained their use of violence as well as how they perceived events leading to the act. This allowed the researchers to explore the incident and its context from different perspectives. Data were collected over an 18-month period from July 2006 to March 2008. For convenience, interviews were conducted at two prisons in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, the region with the highest homicide rate (Thomson 2004). Both prisons were located in rural areas of the province but housed a diverse group of men from both urban and rural settings.

The men were aged between 18 and 51 years at the time of the act, and between 21 and 61 years at the time of the interview. Using the apartheid race classification, although White and African men were included, most were Coloured (a person of mixed origin). This overrepresentation of coloured men is characteristic of the region, with violent crime and homicide rates excessive within this race group (Thomson 2004). All the men attended school but half did not complete junior school and only two completed high school. Half of the men had killed their wife and half a girlfriend, while one man killed both his wife and daughter, and another his wife and stepson.

The first interview explored the men’s childhood, including their family of origin, parenting during childhood, social setting in which they were raised, violence in childhood, discipline, schooling, childhood friendships and relationship with siblings. This interview guided the planning and direction for the second interview, which explored the index relationship and murder. Interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the respondent. Consent was obtained for interviews to be tape recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

Opencode software was used as a data management tool in the analysis of data. This was an ongoing process and commenced before the second interview. Data were analysed inductively, with this technique characterized by a process of coding and sub-coding and interpretation of the findings through the development of mini-hypotheses, testing and modification of these hypotheses with reference to the data (Silverman 2001). The hypotheses we present as possible explanations for the men’s use of violence emerged from the data. All authors participated in coding and data analysis.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Medical Research Council’s Ethics Committee. Given that the primary respondents were incarcerated men, informed consent was a key concern and care had to be taken that men did not feel coerced into the study. Contact was made with potential respondents via prison social workers. They were informed about the study by the researcher and given time to decide whether they wanted to participate. Written consent was obtained for the interviews and for the researcher to make contact with family and friends. All respondents were assured that all the information they shared was confidential. Given their past violence, interviewer safety had to be balanced against the right to confidentiality with respect to participation in the study. Interviews were conducted either with a window allowing a warden to be in sight or with a warden stationed outside the room, but not within...
hearing distance of the conversation. Since the judicial process had been completed, the information from the research could not be used against the men in court. Given the sensitive nature of the study, all respondents were linked up with a prison social worker and, where necessary, were referred for psychiatric support. Importantly, the safety and mental health needs of the researcher were of primary concern. Conducting research on sensitive issues requires a system of debriefing. This mechanism was built into the study to provide the researcher with a space to deal with issues of vicarious trauma.

The Shaping of Violent Masculinities

This paper is largely about the shaping of violent masculinities. The men who were interviewed had all, by definition, used lethal violence; in addition, nearly all (17 of 20) were perpetrators of multiple episodes of violence within their intimate relationship and 15 of them had also been violent in their community. Eleven of these men had previous convictions for violence, with eight having served time in prison prior to the killing of their intimate partner. Some of these offences were committed as a juvenile and they had spent time in a reformatory or had a suspended sentence. Only three did not appear to otherwise display ‘violent masculinities’, if physical and sexual violence are privileged in this notion. For them, the nature of their intimate relationship was important, as all three men displayed marked controlling behaviour in these relationships. These men were rather different from the others and we will discuss these in more detail later on, but most men had been generally violent, and not exclusively with the partner they killed.

‘Good’ Mothers: Complex Relationships between Mothers and Sons

The men described their childhoods as ‘rough’ or ‘hard’. Talking about these experiences brought back strong memories and emotions, bringing some to tears. Mothers featured prominently in their accounts and relationships with them were complex. Many described limited positive attention from mothers, with many childhoods marked by neglect and abuse. Six of the men were not raised by their biological mother, which influenced their relationship with her. One was raised by his father, and had an emotionally strained relationship with his mother. Two men reared by their mothers spoke of physical and emotional abuse by them, four men had mothers who were emotionally unavailable and passive, and a further three men had mothers who either had problems with alcohol or suffered from depression. The latter is recognized to be associated with harsh and rejecting parenting experiences (Bordin et al. 2009).

Poverty and economic insecurity is a feature of many single-parent households, yet this also does not explain the men’s experiences of mothering. A man described how his mother would leave them locked in the house over weekends when she went out with friends. Similarly, another man (and his mother) described being left behind with neighbours when his family relocated. Talking about his mother, he said:

Someone else would have hated a mother like this if I think back I could have hated a mother that allowed such things to happen to me, but what I can be grateful for I never felt hatred.
These men’s narratives are of traumatic childhood experiences that are unresolved, which could cause confusion in their narratives (Main and Goldwyn 1990).

A paradox existed between their presentation of their mothers and childhood experiences, with most mothers presented as ‘good’. Repression of feelings became evident, as one man started off his description of his mother as very religious and devoted to him, yet, talking about his childhood, he described multiple episodes of abuse, with his mother beating him so hard ‘that this arm was fractured’. For this man, like many others, the need to maintain an ongoing relationship with his mother and family resulted in a repression of emotions. He continued to speak about his love for her. Nevertheless, not all mothers were ‘bad’. Some had to act as mediators in attempts to protect their sons against the brutality of some fathers. Stepfathers further influenced the relationships between sons and mothers. Some men spoke about the anger and resentment they felt towards their mothers when she remarried or entered a new relationship. One man speaking about his mother said:

I was mad at my mother when she married my stepfather … I never went to live with my mother when she married again, I stayed with my grandparents.

Although she was not an overtly poor mother, being raised by his grandmother resulted in an insecure attachment with her, which influenced his feelings of being abandoned once again by her when she remarried (Howe 2005). Experiences within the family influenced mothers’ emotional availability, affecting the parent–child relationship and the nature of their attachment (Fonagy and Target 2003). Such disorganized attachment is linked to the development of externalizing problem behaviours, such as criminal behaviour and the use of violence (Howe 2005).

‘Good’ Sons: ‘I Helped Her as a Child’

Discourses of a ‘good’, caring son were a recurring theme in men’s accounts of their relationship with their mothers and many presented themselves at an early age as playing a quasi-adult male role at home. This sense of responsibility for most was visible in the need to help their family financially, as many were raised in severe poverty. A man who left school in Grade 5 at the age of 15 explained:

My mother struggled a great deal and my brothers did well at school, we then decided that one of us should leave school to help my mother work, I was the one it was decided that I should go and work.

His earnings may have compensated for his sense of scholastic failure, winning him the respect of his siblings and mother and attaining a sense of success. Another man dreamt of ‘changing the position’ of his family, ‘freeing’ his family from poverty. He left school early to contribute to the family’s income, but felt he never achieved this goal, which appears to have had a lasting impact on his sense of self-worth. For most men, there was no opportunity to study further or gain skills; thus, they were locked in poverty with restricted access to stable employment. With attainment of a provider role critical for self-perceptions of masculine ‘success’ in South Africa, the lack of opportunities made achieving this difficult (Morrell 2001). For some men, the only means they had available to provide for their families was through involvement in criminal acts.
Forgotten Fathers

The absence of fathers from the majority of these men’s lives had a profound effect. Some never knew their fathers, while others had no meaningful relationship with them. For a number of men, there appeared to be a shroud of silence and secrecy about their biological fathers. Men spoke about mothers’ never speaking about their fathers and neither did they feel free to ask about them. This resulted in fantasies of their father, as one man talking about his father said:

R: Now that was something she never spoke about.
I: Have you wondered about him?
R: Yes, I did especially in my teen years, growing up. But now what was the hardest part was to create your own dad. I want my dad to be that . . . I always wanted my dad to be a police man. So my dad was police man working on the borders of South Africa . . . . That was the image I created. A lot of my school buddies I would tell this to.

Creating a fantasy father was a way of dealing with his need to have a ‘normal’ family. Other men spoke about attempting to make contact with their fathers during adolescence and their need to be accepted by them. Emotional distress as a result of undisclosed and denied paternity has been described in other South African research (Nduna and Jewkes in press).

Some men described their families as ‘never really a real family’ and yearned to belong to an idealized, ‘normal’ family. A man whose parents were divorced said:

This did not make me feel normal because going to school at Goodhope there are a lot of children that come out of, sort of, normal families both their parents are present. . . . So I could not talk and I felt sort of left out and that angered me.

His struggle to fit in with his peers, accentuated by his family, appears to have had a profound psychological impact, as he went on to describe two suicide attempts during adolescence.

‘This Is How I Was Beaten’: Discipline and Abuse

Where fathers were around, they featured strongly in accounts of discipline. Men who were raised in rural areas particularly described strict discipline and, in some instances, extreme punishments. One man talked about being severely beaten after being sent on an errand to buy drugs for his father and losing some of it. He spoke of feelings of extreme powerlessness in the face of the violence, saying:

R: He pulled me by my shoulder, by my upper arm and he pulled me from my mother and then he started hitting me with this thing [a leather strapped soaked in salt water]. As I am sitting here today I am 43 years old and the mark is still here today.
I: How did you feel?
R: I cannot explain, no one could help me, I called for help but nobody could help me. I just had to endure the pain until he decided it was enough at the time he decided it was enough I could not move.

Some men were exposed to violence towards their mothers, impacting on their own sense of safety, with many ‘scared’ of their fathers. A man described how the expression
on his father's face was an indication that violence would follow. Others spoke about needing to flee with their mothers when their fathers became violent. One man spoke of the sadness his beating caused:

What stands out for me was the time he smacked me I was a child and was very depressed I went and cried in the bushes.

The violence used in disciplining children appeared to reflect the low status of children within families. Not only did it make men feel powerless, but, in the face of their mothers’ abuse, these feelings were further exacerbated by a sense that they should, but could not, protect their mothers. Where mothers were not around, some men experienced exploitation by relatives. A man described being raised in a very strict environment by his grandparents, expressing that he was always made to feel ‘responsible’ and left school early to help provide for the family, which appears to have impacted on his self-esteem.

Severe beatings were seen to cause low self-esteem, resulting in emotional insecurities. The oldest man interviewed talked about an incident in which his father caught him smoking at the age of 13, saying:

I saw him with the strap, I realised there is major trouble. I do not remember him saying anything . . . . He took me by the one arm, he beat me with his left hand, that’s right, he was left handed. He beat me over my neck over my back until I was lying on the floor and his words to me was I will beat you to death you too bad to be alive. This had a huge impact on me, after this in a way I developed an inferiority complex.

He explained that his low self-esteem led him to be drawn to violent forms of masculinity. These esteem issues were carried over into his adult intimate relationship, displayed by his constant feelings of inadequacy and victimization combined with heavy alcohol abuse, which are all characteristic of borderline personality disorder that he explained would lead to violent acts; he said:

R: At that moment I felt I did not count in the house, I am a nothing here because this child wants to tell me how things must be done. . . . If I remember correctly my exact words I picked an argument about this and I told the wife if you do not want to listen what was my words again but it was to the effect ‘I will shoot you all dead’ (pause).

I: You threatened them.

R: mmm she ran to the neighbours. I know, at some stage I was standing with a gun in my hand, I took the gun and got into the bakkie and drove off, I do not remember where I went to.

Whilst chiefly talking of beatings by fathers, it is conceivable that some men could have had more difficulty talking about beatings by mothers, as a number of men struggled with contradictory images if a ‘loving’ and ‘feared’ mother. A few spoke about mothers and punishment. One explained that his mother sought out other male figures in their community to create fear in him and took him to the police station to be disciplined. Whilst he perceived that the police had abused him, he was unable to talk about his feelings towards his mother. He appeared to have repressed his emotions. Although he was crying, he went to great lengths to tell me that he was ‘not holding something against her’; he was not feeling ‘hatred’. Yet, he said:
The visions I had, the dreams I had dreamt, it was beaten out of me. Someone else would have hated a mother like this if I think back I could have hated a mother that allowed such things to happen to me, but what I can be grateful for is I never felt hatred .... My relationship with my mother was, it was okay. I understood her but as a child I did not understand her for what she did .... This is what estranged me from her. Because she knew I was aware of all her things I was always the one to get a beating.

Only one man spoke of severe abuse by his mother; this treatment by her was corroborated by his sister. He said:

Now ma’am you see my fingers my mother would take my fingers and put it in the oven not these ovens that you get today, but the ones that use wood. She took my hands and placed it in the oven.

Although he felt he was treated differently from his other siblings, he continued to talk about his love for his mother and expressed the feeling that she only tried to discipline him, which appears to be a defensive mechanism that allowed men to pursue an ongoing relationship with their mothers or abusive parents.

Abuse also occurred at school and was not only experienced as corporal punishment. Two men described sexual abuse by teachers. One explained being sexually abused by a teacher at the time of his father’s death, when he was most vulnerable and feeling out of control. The only person he disclosed the abuse to was his wife, when he experienced sexual dysfunction, which again made him feel less of a man and not in control. Similarly, another man also experienced sexual abuse just after his father’s death, when he moved back to his mother. This man attempted to minimize his experience by representing himself as being in control. He rationalized that he was using the situation to ‘get what he wanted’ materially. Importantly, he presented himself as having the power to end the relationship when he felt it was no longer serving its purpose. However, in his account, he talks about two suicide attempts during this period, highlighting his psychological and emotional vulnerability, with possible fantasy elements to the power he described having in this relationship. In his story, he repeatedly presented himself as sexually deviant, providing multiple accounts of sexual violence towards young girls and girlfriends. In contrast to the other men, he killed a much older intimate partner during his adolescence. Of note, he, like a few others, raised concerns about their mental state, as he expressed fantasies of hurting others with no evidence of remorse. This was evident with him expressing that:

I don’t know how to say this but to this day em whenever I am angry, when I’m angry I feel that I should kill that person . . . when I’m angry I feel that the person that is making me angry, I have to hurt them so badly that they will not bother me again. Something about the dark side excites me I don’t know, I know it is wrong it is as if I get excited.

Losing a Parent: ‘Searching for Love in Other Places’

Loss of a parent through either death, divorce or separation was a common childhood experience and appeared to have had a lasting impact on the affected men. Many were left emotionally vulnerable, as most mothers were unable to provide a supportive environment to mediate the effect of such losses, with this crisis creating chaos for most families. The social context in which most of these men were raised was characterized
by insecurities at both the physical and emotional levels, which were further exacerbated by loss. This impacted on how they experienced childhood and the development of a secure identity. The men spoke about not only the emotional impact of loss, but also the long-term psychological consequences.

A man who lost his father when he was nine spoke about how this not only affected him emotionally, but he continued to struggle at school. He suffered another tragedy during adolescence when his stepfather committed suicide and his mother had a ‘nervous breakdown’. For some men, loss was multiple. A man who was reared by his father after his parents’ divorce when he was young describes himself as ‘falling apart emotionally’ and attempting suicide twice after his father’s death during adolescence. For another, his parents’ divorce resulted in his living as a street child at the age of seven. He explained:

The one person who loved me, he was rejected, this is how it came that I grew-up and searching for love in other places I ended up with the wrong people in the end . . . my father was rejected so according to me what should I be doing at home?

He seems to have internalized his father’s rejection and the psychological impact of his father’s loss was compounded by the rejection and abandonment by his mother. This resulted in his feeling unloved and getting involved in crime and violence, spending several periods of his adult life in prison. In his ‘search for love’, he sought affirmation from others that appeared to be a pathway to crime and gang involvement, one through which he also gained power and respect.

School: ‘For Me, Was Not a Good Thing’

Schooling is an important aspect of childhood and progress at school is often a measure used to assess social development. Notably, most men left school early and few presented schooling as a rewarding experience, but as alienating and violent. Some men spoke about finding school ‘difficult’ and not making progress. Men described teachers as unable to provide a supportive environment, with some teachers having had a negative impact on these men’s self-esteem. One man who left school at the age of 12 in Grade 2 spoke about his struggles at school and said:

I found the sums very hard and I could not copy it correctly . . . he would see the flop and I would get beaten . . . I decided school was not for me.

Importantly, this teacher appeared not to recognize his intellectual limitations and failed to provide the necessary academic support, which left him discouraged, influencing his self-worth. Receiving regular beatings from teachers at school, for him and others, explained the decision to leave school early. He further described involvement in criminal activities soon after leaving school; he said ‘I got 6 lashes and then 8 lashes with a cane for theft’, as he was too young to serve time in prison. For him, this was the beginning of his involvement in a life of crime and serving time in prison.

Another man whose educational attainment was five to six years behind his peers explained:

I was never happy at school, I was always the biggest in class and I always felt uncomfortable .... I never made friends at school, I did not worry with friends, I did not have friends.
For some men, these struggles at school led to further social isolation and social incompetence. A number of men reported that they did not ‘fit in’, as they felt teachers made them feel different, while peers at school would also ridicule them. This social isolation was also evident in relationships with peers outside school, as very few described lasting meaningful childhood friendships.

In contrast, some men described themselves as ‘good students’ academically but their social context was such that they dropped out of school early. One man spoke about being suspended from school at the age of 12 when he was in Grade 6; he said:

I completed nearly the whole year, but the last term things started unravelling. The alcohol and drugs I used made me lose interest.

Influences within their social setting affected choices they made that directly impacted upon schooling. For some men, the experience of moving to an urban area during adolescence meant being exposed to a free township lifestyle. One man explained what this was like for him:

Things changed when my father sent me from Oudsthoorn to live with my aunt. I was no longer in my parents’ home, I was now in my aunts’ home in Cape Town. Life in the Cape was very different to Oudsthoorn you cannot compare the two. I felt I had my freedom, you see, my parents were always very strict and they had rules. I felt I was free.

This experience of sudden ‘freedom’ was quite overwhelming for most, as it happened at a time at which they were struggling to establish their identity. This man continued to explain how the change in his social context and the increasing influence from outside his family got him involved with drugs, alcohol and deviant peers, which, in turn, resulted in his dropping out of school early.

The struggle to attain social competence and to establish and test social positioning is evident, with some men describing involvement in fights at school and within the neighbourhood. One man said:

I loved getting into fights and using sharp objects, I started ruling at school. Because I was always involved in fights, more people started liking me and this elevated me to a different level and I started being in control of that group at school.

He presented himself as enjoying the use of violence and, within this violent self, saw himself as having power, respect and even affection from others, which affirmed his self-worth, with evident social rewards for his emerging violent identity.

**Criminal and Gang Involvement**

For many, the absence of a male influence at home led them to seek male affirmation and camaraderie within their social setting, as argued by Barker (1998) in reflecting on masculinity in Brazil. Involvement in crime and risk-taking behaviour during adolescence was common in many accounts. Although not all men were involved in gangs, crime and violence marked most of their accounts. Involvement in crime was often linked to drug and alcohol abuse—common features of many South African communities. One man said:
We were involved in housebreaking and theft. It would depend on where I was and the friends I was with... on the Cape Flats I will be involved in drugs and theft... I was 12 years old, I received a 5 year suspended sentence, I just went to court and came home again.

Peer-group pressures associated with a need to belong influenced his behaviour and introduced him to drugs and crime.

Some men spoke of a more violent form of risk taking through gang involvement. For these men, family and school started having less of an influence, except where family members were also gangsters. Gaining a sense of self-worth and respect by being a gang member for most was a means of affirmation, as families were unable to provide the positive attention they desired. Two young men explained involvement in gang activity from the age of 12, with both introduced to gangs through older brothers, while others talked about being introduced into gang activity by older men or peers at school. Within this context, these young men got socialized into adopting accentuated violent and anti-social masculinities. This form of masculinity glamorized toughness and strength that translated into the ready use of violence and substance abuse. A young man explained:

I was a famous person... in the gangs and through gang activity. In other words I was a leader of the mongrels in Lavender Hill. From 14 years old I took on a leadership position until the age of 22 when I was sentenced.

Induction into this lifestyle also meant the early involvement with drugs, alcohol and violence. The rituals attached to becoming a gang member were therefore pathways to manhood. The majority of men presented themselves as ‘real’ men who were involved in risk-taking behaviour, including using drugs and multiple forms of criminal activities. One man talked about his gang activity at the age of 16 and said:

I decided that I had to buy in my own things and later on I bought my own firearms, ammunition and I bought my own drugs as well and I started my own gang. As I established my own gang I started becoming famous. People started to hear about me many people wanted to get to know me, even gang leaders wanted to get to know me.

Another said:

I just wanted to entertain because I had some money, understand... I was 16 years old, I was no longer living with my parents and they knew of my activities. In other words my brother and I we had our own house. We were living and trading from there... Yes, I was 16 I led a very fast life.

The attraction to exercise power in gangs seemed to compensate for the men’s relatively powerless position within their families. Whether these men’s accounts of being a famous gangster and drug dealer were a true or exaggerated representation is unknown, but the meaning they attached to these depictions is nevertheless important. Thus, they presented an exaggerated violent masculinity (see Connell 1987: 197, emphasized femininity).

Not all men presented involvement in crime and violence as an element of their childhood. This experience appears to be racially and class bound. Most men were racially classified as ‘coloured’, living in poverty-stricken working-class townships, which influenced their discourse of masculinity. The few men who were classified ‘white’ did not describe involvement in crime and violence as a part of their childhood. Although crime and violence were not a part of their social context, the childhood of ‘white’ men was still
touched by adverse experiences. Only one man described a childhood that was free from hardship. Speaking about his childhood, he went to great lengths to describe his ‘normal’ childhood, saying:

I almost had, can I say a perfect, my folks had been great. I mean between us er the three of us, my sister and brother and myself, we would sort of gang up the normal sort of teasing ... it was normal.

This man did not describe himself as violent in his intimate relationship, yet, in exploring his intimate relationship, there appears to be marked controlling behaviour. The other men had childhoods that were marked by multiple traumatic experiences, such as the early death of a parent, depression of mothers, as well as severe physical punishment. Although these men were seemingly protected from violence within their social environment, emotional vulnerabilities due to multiple losses appear common. For these men, ‘coping’ emotionally involved developing psychological defence mechanisms to protect the self and influenced their intimate relationships with women in adulthood.

For the men interviewed, traumatic childhood experiences had an intense impact on their self-worth, emotional well-being and the development of a secure sense of self. The response to trauma inflicted by those who were meant to provide love and protection appears to have had a profound effect, with most men displaying a marked suppression of true emotions. Understanding the impact of trauma is complex; drawing on a construct from developmental psychoanalysis, trauma during childhood such as abuse and neglect can result in disorganized attachment patterns that can compromise the child’s psychosocial development and increase the risk for personality disorders (Fonagy and Target 2003). In addition, low self-esteem and the need for ‘love’ emerged as pathways to crime, gangs and violence. A complex interplay of social and emotional factors thus influenced the forging of their identities, as one man poignantly explained:

If I compare me to a child who had both parents, love and support what would my future have held, I could have made a success of my life.

Discussion

These men’s representations of their childhood have provided insights into the influence childhood experiences have on the construction of their violent masculinities. Traumatic childhood experiences emerged as a feature that indelibly shaped these men’s sense of self as well as their ability to regulate and interpret their own feelings and those of others. Seidler (2007) argues that the emotional vulnerabilities of men are a neglected area in the discourse on masculinities. In this paper, we come to see how the subjectivity of childhood experiences psychologically influences men’s performance of masculinities. This is not an excuse for men’s use of violence, but rather a means to understand forces that shape their male identity and practices.

Men described childhoods characterized by hardship, at both structural and social levels. Childhood adversity is a common feature of life for many children in South Africa. The difference for these men was located in the emotional experiences of mothering. Childhood was marked by neglectful and abusive parenting practices and emotionally unavailable mothers. Yet, a contradiction existed in these men’s representations
of their mothers compared to their subjective experiences. Theoretically, poor and abusive parenting experiences impact on a child psychologically (Howe 2005). The early parent–child relationship is crucial, as secure attachment is a predictor for healthy psychosocial development, as such children are more resilient, self-reliant, socially competent, empathetic, have high self-esteem and have deeper relationships (Sroufe 1996). For disorganized or disoriented attached children, care-givers are a source of both fear and reassurance, resulting in strong conflicting emotions when the attachment behaviour is aroused and can lead to later psychopathology in combination with other factors (Howe 2005). The lower self-esteem, lack of guilt and sadness and idealization, with polarizing those whom they are close to into good and bad, are all characteristics of borderline personality (Klein 1950). Some men thus presented idealized constructions of their mothers as ‘good mothers’, as most of their narratives were of unresolved childhood trauma, resulting in confused narratives (Main and Goldwyn 1990). For many, these painful experiences were internalized and influenced how their male identity was constructed. Drawing on a psychoanalytic discourse, such emotional vulnerabilities can result in the formation of harsher forms of masculine identity, with showing emotion construed as a sign of weakness (Frosh et al. 2003; Seidler 2007). Thus, some men presented their violent behaviour as a sign of their masculine strength, as their vulnerable emotional state provides a context in which acts of violence can be perpetrated, as they are unable to integrate love and trust within intimate relationships (Siegel 2006). Conversely, in developing an understanding of men who have come to take on a caring, ‘softer’, masculinity in South Africa, it was shown that the key feature is the ability to maintain an active connection with their emotions (Morrell and Jewkes in press). Significantly, men, in relation to their mothers, positioned themselves as a ‘good’ son who cared about their family’s well-being and had ‘perfect’ mothers. Whilst this may have been presented to signify that they were traditionally ‘successful men’, it may also be a sign of splitting between reality and the representations of their childhoods.

Psychological explanations intersect with the cultural context of these men’s lives in helping understand the impact of their childhoods on who they became as men. The absence and cruelty of their fathers were notable, and support findings on men who rape (Jewkes et al. 2009). For most, the psychological impact of an absent father was lasting, as families were unable to mediate the impact of this absence. The perceived rejection and abandonment by a father were thus internalized. Frosh and colleagues (2003) argue they it promote the need to maintain a ‘hard, virile’ masculinity. The absence of a male influence for some meant that they searched for male affirmation outside the home, leading to an identification with accentuated, violent models of masculinities (Barker 1998). Another possible pathway becomes evident, as some men were rejected not only by fathers, but also by mothers, leaving these men emotionally vulnerable, feeling unloved, abandoned and ‘searching for love’. Although gang and crime involvement can be construed as a means of positioning themselves in a struggle to establish their identity, it was a way of attaining the respect and camaraderie that was not forthcoming from parents or parental figures. Central to adopting this violent form of masculinity is the power and self-respect these men attained through their status within a gang (Bourgois 1996). It is therefore not the violence as such, but rather gaining respect and power that was seen by them as an important part of being a man.
To develop an understanding of masculinities in South Africa, it is important that the diversity of these men is taken into account (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005). Not all men presented childhoods marked by violence and crime. This divide appears to be racially defined, as such experiences appear to be missing from the accounts of white men. Although these men did not share similar structural hardships, traumatic childhood experiences appear to be a common factor influencing the shaping of their masculinities. A traumatic experience such as the death of a parent and the mental health of mothers during childhood increase their emotional vulnerabilities, which later influenced their emotional relationship with women. Harsh and rejecting parenting experiences associated with severe discipline and abuse as well as maternal depression have been described as increasing the risk for externalizing, anti-social behaviour as well as internalizing mental health problems (Bordin et al. 2009). However, understanding pathways to violent masculinities is complex, as there is no linear relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and adopting violent masculinities. A limitation of this paper is inherent in the analysis of only the childhoods of these men, as there are other factors within their environment as well as in early adulthood that further influence the shaping of masculinities. A further limitation to the study is that the interviews were conducted with incarcerated men who had time to reflect on the meaning of relationships. Furthermore, some had been through counselling, which allowed them to make meaning of some of the events in their lives. Thus, the prison experience, as well as the interview process, might have influenced how men represented their childhoods. The data-collection approach allowed us to corroborate many of the circumstances described with other relatives.

Conclusion

Traumatic childhood experiences in the form of poor parenting, absent fathers, neglect and abuse have a profound impact on identity formation and highlight the importance of recognizing emotional vulnerabilities in the discourse on masculinities. The experience of poor parenting practices and abuse during childhood made these men feel powerless, ‘inferior’ and unloved, thus turning to influences outside the home like gangs and crime as means to attain the respect, power and love that was not forthcoming in the home. This paper shows that such traumatic experiences can lead to a suppression of emotions in order to maintain a parent–child relationship. The pathway to taking on harsher forms of masculinities is thus influenced by these traumatic emotional experiences within the home; turning to gangs and crime is a means of gaining love, respect and power. This study has shown the need to acknowledge the impact that adverse childhood experiences have on the formation of violent forms of masculinities. It is therefore critical to reduce children’s emotional vulnerabilities by engaging in strategies to strengthen current parenting practices to promote the development of less violent gender-equitable relationships.

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