"You Mix Up the Thinking, and then You Look at the Journey": 'Pausing' to Reflect on Masculinities in a South African Township

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Abstract

Changes in political, social, and economic structures in South Africa during the transition from apartheid to democratic governance in 1994 have put men and masculinity/ies under public and scholarly scrutiny. Attention has generally focused on the links between masculinity and violence, particularly among black men from low-income backgrounds, in attempts to understand the widespread levels of sexual violence throughout the country. Together, but in tension with the focus on men and violence, has been a literature that documents gender change in South Africa. This literature argues for example, that men are embracing fatherhood and becoming more engaged in childcare. Nevertheless this is a minority literature that is overshadowed by a focus on men and violence. In this article, I reflect on the lives of a group of men living in Alexandra township in Johannesburg, who are exploring what it means to be a man in a contemporary township setting, and the issues and challenges they face in attempts to transition their masculine identities.

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Changes in political, social, and economic structures in South Africa during the transition from apartheid to democratic governance in 1994 has put men, their masculinity/ies and their behaviors under public and scholarly scrutiny. Attention has generally focused on the links between masculinity and violence in attempts to understand the widespread levels of sexual violence throughout the country (Britton 2006; Gqola 2015; Jewkes and Morrell 2010; Morrell et al. 2013; Posel 2005), primarily on the experiences of black men from low-income backgrounds (e.g., Dube 2016). Legislative and policy changes supporting gender equality since 1994 have been linked to uncertainties around identity, sexuality, relationships, home life, and the division of labor by both women and men, which are claimed to have been interpreted by men as favoring the rights of women and girls over those of men and boys (Bhana et al. 2008; Hamber 2010; Niehaus 2005; Ratele 2016). Men's various responses to these changes in both public and private spheres has been of interest to researchers (e.g., Jewkes et al. 2009; Morrell 2001; Ratele 2016; Reid and Walker 2005; Silberschmidt 2001) and it has highlighted the complexities associated with men's adaptive strategies and the ways men are (or are not) coping. This has fed into popular perceptions of a "crisis of masculinity" (Horrocks 1994; Sideris 2004a; Walker 2005) heightened by a public moral panic in response to widespread sexual violence as perpetrated primarily by men and boys (Gaffoor et al. 2013; Niehaus 2005; Posel 2005).

It can be difficult to reflect on the complexity of issues surrounding masculinities if the starting point in engaging with men is their relationship with violence, the perceived impact of this essentialist stereotype on men's lives, and the ways this may influence how they define, construct, and negotiate their masculinities. For example, scrutiny of masculine power and risk behaviors relating to HIV and AIDS may overlook the unique experiences and complexities of the virus on the everyday lives of men (Epprecht 2008; Morrell and Swart 2005; Steinberg 2011; Sui et al. 2013), the impact of socioeconomic change, and feelings of loss of social value (Silberschmidt 2001). There is a growing body of literature that approaches masculinities from interrelating life experiences such as fatherhood (see Morrell and Richter 2006; Ratele et al. 2012), 'inclusive' masculinities (Anderson 2010); sexuality (Epprecht 2008), changing gender roles (Bagilhole and Cross 2006; Hemson 2001' Reid and Walker 2005), and health (Bantjes et al. 2017; Dowsett 2002; Kupers 2005).

In settings where gender norms, shaped by culture and tradition are slow to change, there is further scope to reflect on and (re)consider the daily contextual realities and subjectivities for men who seek to respond to evolving challenges associated with rapidly modernizing societies. Within this context, the contributions

that men may make in their individual transitional experiences or transformational attempts at evolving their masculine identities requires further recognition and deeper, widespread, sustained inquiry and analysis. Masculinities are social constructs that can and do change, and are responded to in diverse ways (e.g., Connell 2005; Morrell 2001). Some men resist change (ibid.), and others encourage it (hooks 2004; Morrell 2001; Sideris 2004a; Tolson 1977). Some may interpret traditional masculine roles as ideals to sustain rather than characteristics of male traits (Davies and Eagle 2007), while others may not challenge socially anticipated masculine norms for fear of social stigma or perceived loss of a patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005; hooks 2004).

In this article, I engage with a group of men living in Alexandra township in Johannesburg, South Africa, who are exploring what it means to be a man in the context of change in a contemporary setting that remains embedded in traditional social and cultural gender norms. Their lived experiences expose some of the challenges they encounter as they begin to explore alternative masculine identities, despite constraints. The article opens with a contextual outline of South Africa's historical political process, which has implications for the ways through which masculinities have been constructed in this context and have evolved over time. The lived realities of race and gender segregation, township living, and migration for work is instrumental in this discussion. The political transition to democratic governance, while embracing an equality agenda, challenges traditional gender norms, simultaneously affording men opportunities to reconsider the parameters and limitations of masculinity and to reflect on their masculine identities. After outlining the methods used in gathering the empirical data, I consider the complexities and challenges for men to fully embrace change and be empowered to "liberate" their masculinities (i.e., Ratele 2016). Also considered are strategies through which some men initiate and reflect upon their masculine identities.

This research contributes to the expanding academic discourse and international human development responses that focus on men, masculinities and change.

Contextualising Masculinities in South Africa

Although white supremacy and the oppression of black populations were central features of life in South Africa under colonialism, it was not until the National Party came to power in 1948 (the same year that the rest of the world embraced the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights) that apartheid formally and structurally legitimated the subjugation of an entire population based on race. For nearly six decades, apartheid enabled, facilitated, and enshrined wholescale racial discrimination, defining and controlling all aspects of daily life, most especially for those who the state infrastructure classified as 'black African'[1] (Bonner and Nieftagodien 2008).

The structural, physical, and psychological impacts of apartheid, alongside the struggle against it, on the lives of those living in townships was particularly brutal. This history is said to have shaped gender relations and operated as a "master

narrative" (Campbell 1997, 227–228) in mapping out the course of men's subjectivities and the ways they defined their gender identities, how these played out in daily life, and has impacted the construction of contemporary masculinities as well (Carton 2001; Hunter 2011; Morrell et al. 2012; Osella and Osella 2000; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005; Xaba 2001). Policies of race and gender segregation and family separation, for example, shaped the ways that masculinities evolved, were redefined, and renegotiated. As men were forced to migrate to the mines for work, wage labor became a critical survival strategy and was a crucial defining characteristic of masculinity as men increasingly became the sole provider for their families back in the reserves (Moodie 2001). Mining and migration, therefore, had a profound impression on men and the ways in which a dominant masculinity was socially defined and anticipated (Moodie and Ndatshe 1994; Morrell 2001).

The tightening racial edifice of the apartheid state evolved into a political and social struggle that became increasingly defined by violent opposition. Masculinities were constructed alongside and amidst these realities, creating what Penelope Andrews terms "[t]he lethal cocktail of apartheid masculinities" (Andrews 2016, 28). In a township context, violence and the liberation struggle became key features of the ways that new modes of masculinity emerged and were redefined, mutated, and repositioned alongside a traditional patriarchal ideology that sustained a hegemonic form and an urban culture that responded to the oppression of apartheid and the realities of township living. This included "heroic" (Unterhalter 2000), "struggle," and "street" masculinities (Xaba 2001), defined and negotiated through displays of strength, violence, and enduring pain. Additionally, this transition shaped masculinities established within involuntary same-sex living and intimate relationships in urban areas aligned to traditional masculine hierarchies and privileges over subordinate 'female' roles for younger or perceived weaker men (Achmat 1993; Moodie 2001). The dependence of women and children on men's wages established the engrained role of man as provider, a contentious male social value that continues to influence male subjectivities and define dominant gender norms today (Sideris 2004b).

The political transition to democracy since 1994 is viewed as having challenged the established and entrenched definitions of manhood constructed through colonial and apartheid contexts. Men are being presented with liberal, constitutional directives to become a "new man," while simultaneously expected to remain immersed in the continuing traditional and cultural norms that defined masculinities of the past. This is reflected in the conflicting masculinities promoted by the late ANC leader and President Nelson Mandela for more inclusive, "soft" versions of masculinities (Suttner 2014, p. 342) contrasted more recently, with former President Jacob Zuma, who aligns with traditional and cultural expectations of manhood (Morrell, et al., 2012). This is challenging to both men and women seeking to renegotiate and reshape gender identities, relations, and sexualities (Sideris 2004a; Walker 2005).

Today, cultural and traditional expectations of manhood remain aligned with the key masculine traits of strength, virility, the ability to withstand pain, and to provide

for and protect one's family. These culturally endorsed and sustained gender roles and patriarchal ideologies continue to be considered the exclusive responsibility of men and remain unchallenged by both men, and women (Posel and Rudwick 2014). They set the benchmark for a dominant masculine standard, which stigmatises those men who deviate from those norms and frustrates attempts of men who seek to embrace gender equality in a changing South Africa. In this article, I consider how some men are redefining and renegotiating the parameters of change in transitioning their masculine identities within this context. Next, I outline the research site and the ways the empirical data was gathered for the research.

Data and Methods: Gathering Men's Stories

Contextualising the Research Site

Established in 1912, Alexandra township is centrally located 11 miles north of South Africa's financial capital, Johannesburg. Throughout the years of oppression, hardship, and apartheid strategies for urban control, Alexandra survived. It's residents were instrumental in fashioning a wave of urban resistance, including the famous *Azikhwelwa* bus boycotts in 1944 and 1957; the student resistance in 1976; the 'six-day war' in 1986; and more recently, although negatively, the xenophobic violence that startled South Africa in 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Today, Alexandra exists on the margins of social provision, with formal and informal living conditions, acutely overcrowded and insanitary. While official statistics record a population of 180,000 people (Frith 2011), contained within less than three square miles, unofficial estimates reveal between 350,000 and 750,000 people (MIT 2000). Nearly half of the residents are of isiZulu (26 %) and Sepedi (23 %) origin. For some, Alexandra is a transient space to earn money and then "retire" to the "village." For others, this is "home".

Research Participant Selection

Identifying, selecting, and engaging men in a transitional urban context such as Alexandra was challenging. Since many of the men were not full-time employed, opportunities for piecework took precedence over their engagement with this research. Some would move between townships or within Alexandra, making regular contact difficult. Those with rural ties would occasionally return to their rural home for extended periods. Initially, in gaining access to men, I approached the NGO Sonke Gender Justice Network (Sonke) through their One Man Can (OMC) campaign. Sonke were undertaking a gender-based violence sensitization training in Alexandra township in collaboration with the local community-based organization Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT) during the initial phase of the research. ADAPT facilitated access to the men's forum meetings and group meeting space.

Research Methods

A mix of research methods consistent with qualitative enquiry were utilized to gather data between January 2012 and August 2013, including focus group discussions with men[2]; direct observation; life history interviews with 11 men aged between 24 years and 60 years; participatory methodologies, including an "identity box" workshop (a participatory method used in community education), a "vision board," and an attempt with the diary project (i.e., Plowman 2010). I also visited one of the men in his rural home in Mpumalanga. This mixed method approach supported an exploration of the multiplicity of interpretations, contexts, and subjectivities of the ways men experience and perceive their social context, attach meaning to their lives and those around them, and ultimately re-negotiate masculine identities within this context.

In gathering the empirical data, I engaged with men at two levels: randomly throughout the township, and with those prepared to engage at a deeper level in exploring their lives. Over the course of the research, I directly and regularly engaged with more than 50 men through focus group discussions and drop-in conversations through the men's forum. These weekly gatherings were initially facilitated by the ADAPT men's forum Assistant Coordinator. Eventually, the research became a focal point for the men to gather and there would be a core group of between 5–7 men each day, and sometimes more (on one occasion there were 25 men).

In addition to this, men also engaged in the research indirectly: through daily interactions, informal discussions with taxi drivers; their partners; waiting for local taxis; family members in men's homes; security guards; passers-by; local shops/shopping centres; public parks; train station; and a local "men's clinic." Permission to conduct research in South Africa was secured through the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria and locally through Johannesburg City Council. Research conducted in the "men's clinic" was approved through the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, National Health Laboratory Service, South Africa.

I now focus on how some men in Alexandra are actively engaging in a process of renegotiating their masculine identities and the boundaries where they feel free to express this. I explore some of the challenges they experience as they struggle to redefine alternative ways to construct and live out new masculinities that, in the meantime, co-exist alongside (and perhaps in the shadows of) traditional definitions of manhood in Alexandra township.

The Struggle to Renegotiate the Parameters of Masculinity

The ambiguities of social and cultural expectations, which oftentimes conflict with contemporary political mandates for gender equality, are acutely evident in an urban township setting. In Alexandra, some men spoke openly about their frustrations that to be accepted as "real men," they are required to comply with the essential elements

of the traditional and cultural expectations of manhood as defined in the past. This was apparent in the contemporary experiences of male circumcision, for example, where being medically circumcised is not regarded as a substitute for the cultural transition from boyhood to manhood. This dimension was discussed at length by the men of Ndebele and Sepedi origin. Among younger generations some men are opting for the "modern" choice to be circumcised at a local clinic. However, the men are all too clear of the future repercussions of this choice, recounting how their futures as "men" hinge, in culturally meaningful and impactful ways, on the omission of this single life event. Having not been traditionally circumcised, a young man is not recognized as an adult in his cultural context, which complicates his future capacity to engage in social and cultural practises and rituals such as, for example, the controversial expectations of families for *lobola* (bridewealth).

For some men, aligning with patriarchal expectations associated with local interpretations of hegemonic masculinity create what some refer to as "man pain," and instead, they explore different ways of being and surviving as a man within this context. The "50/50" (gender equality) agenda introduced with the political transition to democracy, along with the "new man" profile symbolized by Nelson Mandela, provides an opportunity for men to reflect on the wider expectations of manhood and their individual positionality in relation to it. Many of the men I interacted with agreed that changing the traditional definitions of masculinity was necessary but argued that the specificities surrounding how this would impact their lives and relationships had not been "well introduced." Many expressed a "need to get information," particularly as it relates to the issue of employment. As Paul (30 years) explains:

> There is nothing wrong about our new South Africa and all the legislation that have been introduced. The unfortunate part is, it just came as a bang. After democracy, the legislation was introduced to us. Human Rights were introduced to us. Everyone [is] starting to realise that we have rights. Especially women.... And to us men, it's difficult because we [were] never given enough time to adjust. I wake up in the morning and there's these rights of a woman...she needs to go to school, she needs to go to work, and as a husband I have to face that challenge now.

Despite men's uncertainties and frustrations with the continuing material demands on them, they recognize that an equality agenda impacts *both* men's and women's lives and social roles. Consequently, the men in this study understood that changing traditional definitions of masculinity would require adaptation and change among women as well. For instance, as Boipelo (32 years), outlines:

> [W]hen I grew up, we were always taught that you need to be the head of the family. You need to be the one who'll be doing the providing. But in reality, now our girlfriends, our women, they are sharing the same dreams that we are having. She won't dream to be just a housewife. And maybe I won't want someone who'll say, 'no, don't

worry I will stay home and look after children'. I'll want someone who I'll be able to be equal with. So now is an opportunity to share.

While change that opposes traditional masculine norms may impinge on their social and cultural acceptance as men and may perhaps result in being socially stigmatized, recognizing that they have a choice can free some men from some of the burdens/pressures associated with masculinity. The struggle to "be a better man" was emphasized by many of the men in this research. To illustrate this perspective, I draw on the life stories of two men, Abel (40 years) and Boipelo (32 years), who demonstrate the despondency, resilience, determination, and aspirations that some men experience in their struggle to redefine and transform themselves into the men they want to be.

Reflecting on the Complexities of Becoming a "Different Man"

Abel's narrative characterized a life of violence, which he experienced growing up at home and on the street. As a child, he earned money through selling peanuts at a local train station and by extorting "protection money" from fellow pupils at his primary school. As a teenager, Abel was committed to and active in what became an increasingly violent liberation struggle that characterized township living during apartheid and into the democratic transition. By 17 years of age, he was actively engaged in the Soweto Youth Congress (SAYCO) and joined the African National Congress Self-Defence Unit (SDU—an informal, non-statutory "community policing" structure). He was also, like his biological father, a gang leader of a local street gang. Abel was acutely aware of the repercussions of his lifestyle, which he described as "unfulfilling" and which isolated him from his aspirations. He tried several times to change in order to be what he described as a "better man."

After 14 months in police detention as a political prisoner, Abel was determined not to return to gang life and tried to survive as a street hawker selling a variety of foods and merchandise and working in a spaza shop (small, informal convenience store). He soon realized, however, that this was economically unsustainable, and he reverted to crime to make money to survive. Yet Abel desperately wanted to get married, to settle down, and to have a family that he could protect, care for, and provide for, all of which seem beyond his immediate reach. Like many of his peers and comrades committed to the liberation struggle, many of whom sacrificed their education in their fight for freedom, at 40 years of age, unskilled and with a criminal record, Abel's employment options were limited. He explained how this thwarted his capacity to "be a man" as traditionally and culturally defined by fulfilling his social role of provider and to achieve his "dreams" of marriage and fatherhood. Reinforcing his aspirations for change, Abel was introduced to a workshop in the township that he recalled was entitled, "What Men Must Do." This event re-energized his hopes of turning his life around and re-inventing his masculine

identity. Abel explained how he began to envision that by *being a good man* he would earn the respect that he had being trying to achieve throughout his life, providing him hope for a better future:

> I got [a] vision that if I can live according to these guys, then no-one will point a finger at me . . . . If you [are] leading a good life, they still respect you. Take you as a role model.

Abel was unhappy and disillusioned by his life of crime and violence but was now conscious of his capacity to reconsider ways of transforming his life by becoming a "better man." His experience demonstrates the positive impacts of community talk-based gender transformative workshops during the conceptual phase of a man's process of gender transformation. Yet it also demonstrates the limitations of sustaining and supporting this transformative process toward desired, more egalitarian masculine identities.

In April 2013, when I reconnected with Abel, he was once again at a crossroads. He had no job, no money, and no "steady" girlfriend, which diminished his hopes of marriage, fatherhood, and forms of gendered respectability associated with traditional cultural modes of masculine identity anticipated in many South African townships. This time, Abel made the decision to leave Alexandra and move to Soweto township to "reflect" on his life and contemplate the necessary changes required to achieve his future aspirations. For Abel, the solitude of moving out of Alexandra, and the anonymity and freedom that this provided, facilitated a space to reflect and recalibrate his life, his future and what this might mean for transitioning into his aspired masculinity.

At this point, Abel met his current partner who subsequently became pregnant with their first child, which re-energised his hopes for a better future. Abel talked animatedly about how his dreams were beginning to take shape and how this milestone would ensure a better life for his child(ren). He resolved to be a more "caring and protective" father and talked of the necessities, challenges, and dreams of fulfilling this responsibility. At the same time, he was all too clear about the need to satisfy the traditional, cultural, and social requirements of a respectable masculinity such as paying *lobola*, to secure his children's lineage and provide a homestead so that his child(ren) do not "feel any pain." Abel's narrative demonstrates an evolving masculinity as he works to merge traditional masculine markers to protect and provide with his ambitions to become a "better" man who cares for and loves his family, and seeks happiness in their collective lives.

Boipelo's narrative was dominated by accounts of the stigma he experienced growing up as an only child in a single-parent family and his outside interests in drama, singing, and dancing—in particular, Latin dance. He feels that his love of the arts challenges the normative interpretations of a socially dominant township masculinity and alienates him from his peers. In response to the humiliation that he encountered growing up, he chose to suppress his creative desires and submit to peer

pressures to conform. But this way of life made him unhappy and caused him to feel unfulfilled. His determination to become a "different man" was initiated through what he calls a "*pause*" in his life. Faced with the prospect of unemployment and having to make fundamental life choices, he decided to put his life "on hold," which enabled him to—like Abel—reflect on his life, his achievements, and the challenges he experienced along the way. Referring to his *pause*, Boipelo talked of his masculine journey as a "puzzle" and discussed the difficulties he experienced in understanding how the pieces of his life "fit together" or whose responsibility it was to complete the puzzle. He claimed that it was not until his *pause* that he understood that only he could connect all the pieces and resolve contradictions between "traditional" and "new" modes of masculine identification and practice. He talked about his "consciousness" of this experience and the limitations (or complications) in attempts to effect change:

> [N]ow I'm at the crossroad, I can move out and try and go look for other greener pastures. But where am I going to start? Am I going back there to the bottom? Or, I should stay on here and try to fight to move forward?' It's another learning curve for me . . . . I paused everything. It gave me time to look at my life and look at the things that I need to do . . . . And while I was pausing, I did the rewind of my life . . . cultural upbringing, traditional upbringing, peer pressure upbringing, societal upbringing. You mix up the thinking, and then you look at the journey . . . . So the pause made me start looking at the place that I'm in.

Critically, Boipelo explained his *pause* as a necessary process in the evolution of his masculinity, rather than a negative reflection on his manhood or social positioning. He understands that he has a choice to redefine and renegotiate his masculinity within Alexandra society, despite his situation of poverty and feeling that the responsibility for this change is his alone. Other men also spoke of choices to reject "traditional" male stereotypes and idealised masculine standards, despite the social and peer pressure to "fit in." For Jubalani (21 years), for example, it was the "love" for his son and the will to be a "good father" that influenced his aspirations to embrace an alternative masculine identity. Similarly, some of the other men claimed that having children anchored them to a desire to become "better men."

Challenging traditional male norms incurs a "social stigma" that at times influences men's capacity to transform their masculine identities. Men who engaged in activities that they considered "women's work," such as washing clothes (regularly referenced by men), often experience peer pressure and humiliation from other men and women in the township. Yet some men are committed to change and, as Jubilani notes, it was a "matter of choice" for him to be a stay-at-home dad while his girlfriend was the sole provider in their relationship. His peers chided him for "being afraid" of his girlfriend and undertaking "women's work" in what they viewed as a "domestic space" reserved for women. Despite peer pressure, however, Jubilani took pleasure in the time that he could spend with his son and the relationship that the two

were developing, which he viewed as important regardless of whether he is a working father or not.

The oftentimes animated debates around gender norms demonstrates the uncertainty and hesitation among some men in making sense of transforming gender roles and the ways that this directly impacts who they are as men in their society. Boipelo spoke of the challenges that his transitional status might pose for his masculine identity in this context. Focusing on the impacts on his relationship and the potential for more intimate relations, he explained that alternative masculinities conflict with the social and cultural masculine norms expected of men in Alexandra, promoted and sustained by both men and women. This is referenced in his single relationship status, which he referred to as a "taboo" status for men, and demonstrates how a transitional masculinity limits his choice of partner to "a small pool" of like-minded women:

> I've started thinking different. I've started opening up to myself to say, "sure I'm single" . . . . It's something that is . . . taboo for people. I've been single for 1 year and few months. I've been staying alone. I've been thinking of me and my life . . . . The kind of lifestyle that I've done, it is not a very big pond. It's a very small pool . . . and I think I'm also the same person that she's looking for, it's in that small pool . . . . Coz I'm in the view, my thinking is different from most of the other men. And I think even the lady that I'm gonna date, she's the same, she'll be having the same thinking to say, "I'm the few."

While Boipelo's *pause* may have facilitated space to reflect on his masculinity, his masculine journey led to an undetermined and uncharted destination. Additionally, as some men highlighted, there is a risk that remaining in this *pause* phase may lead to their increasingly structural invisible positions in society and social exclusion. The challenge, therefore, is in how men can reinsert themselves into an unchanged social and cultural environment. To do this, men described confronting stereotypical gender norms that shape aspirations associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity in each social context, which empowered and supported some men to redefine their masculine identities. For the men in the research yet to transition and transform into new masculinities, however, the implications of their social positionality within Alexandra township remains unclear. What is clear is that they face a constraining social and cultural reality that continues to be entrenched in traditional patriarchal ideologies, practices, and expectations.

The Limits of Consciousness: What Happens after the Pause?

In his book, *The Limits of Masculinity*, Tolson (1977) examines the challenges and opportunities of the masculine experience in the wake of the second wave of the Women's Movement in the United Kingdom, alongside a continuing patriarchal culture that defines and facilitates hegemonic interpretations of masculinity. He

finds that a critical factor in adapting to change is for men to have an "awareness" and be "conscious" of the limitations of their masculinity in order to transform it (1977, p. 142). This, he finds, is supported through a process of self-reflection that facilitates a consciousness of masculinities—a foundation, as Tolson argues, for transformation. Through his experiences and engagement with the feminist concept of consciousness-raising, Tolson observes that "the experience of masculinity . . . can be clarified within a consciousness raising group" (1977, p. 134).

Research validates the essential benefits of these interventions (Dworkin et al., 2013; Dworkin et al. 2015; Flood 2011) in working with men towards transforming masculinities aimed at achieving gender justice. This was evident among men who had participated in the ADAPT men's forum or attended the Sonke "One Man Can" training or other training and support groups that demonstrated an insight into the restrictions and repercussions of hegemonic configurations of masculinity and the associated negative impacts on gender equality. The value of consciousness-raising interventions and self-reflection is corroborated by this research, where men were willing to participate in a self-reflective journey towards transforming their lives as men, agreeing that "knowing yourself first" was a critical, initial step in this process.

Tolson's experience with a men's support group in Birmingham, United Kingdom, revealed that for feminists, consciousness was a political struggle, whereas for men it was centered on "gaining some self-distance within the dominant culture" (Tolson 1977, 135). This was apparent during gatherings of the men's forum. For many of the men, the benefits of a physical, shared "space" served to reflect on and share life experiences, explore the implications of change on their masculinities, and disassociate themselves from what they considered negative characteristics of a dominant (and dominating) township masculinity. It supported comradery among like-minded men to be empowered to explore and debate key aspects of more modern, less hierarchical versions of masculinity aligned with gender equality. Somehow a reflective space, for the men in this study, signifies difference from the conditioned masculinity that dominates cultural perceptions of masculinity and places them in a transitional process.

This meant that the men had distanced themselves, at least emotionally if not structurally, from the negative elements of what they perceived as hegemonic masculine norms linked with violence, and had begun to reflect on how this impacted their lives and relationships. For some men in a similar kind of phase, symbolic actions included seeking counseling, or becoming active members of a men's forum or other support groups. For others it involved detaching from friends and family who do not share their same ideals. Some moved out of a parent's home or, like Abel, relocated to the anonymity of a new township. Some returned for extended periods to the rural areas, reconciled with estranged parents, or withdrew from old high-risk behaviors like alcohol or drug abuse. Others were directed "to church," enabling them to reconsider change while maintaining respectability within the community.

Current efforts to include men in the vision for gender equality through talk-based interventions indicate progress towards an awareness of gender-based experiences, inequalities, and the need for men to transform their associated masculine behaviours (Dworkin et al. 2013; Dworkin et al. 2015; Flood 2011). This may predispose some men to reflect on their masculinity and on their direct and indirect roles in perpetuating gender inequality or perhaps differentiate them from other township men. However, it inadequately supports their enduring struggle to make sense of the effects of wider changes in their lives or in defining what form future alternative masculinities may take. In other words, the efforts I document among men here have not guaranteed forms of safety for men to implement a transformation of their individual masculine identities because this transformation is taking place within a social and cultural context that remains largely unchanged. Thus, these men sometimes remain in a "pause" phase with no blueprint or structural support to transition out of it. They have inadequate long-term support for those wanting to transform their masculine identities. It is for these reasons that the pace of "change" in gender transformation remains in "slow motion" (Segal 1990). Providing a space for men to reflect on their lives within the context of gender transformative work is an initial step in encouraging men's change processes. But what happens after men recognize the inevitability of change and seek new ways to live as a man in Alexandra? What alternative versions of manhood are available to men in this context? Can these coexist alongside traditional dominant versions of manhood and, how? And what kinds of support structures exist (or need to exist) to encourage men who embrace change?

Many of the men I talked with throughout the township demonstrated an awareness of the issues of gender equality and were not oblivious to repressive elements of traditional masculinities for both themselves as men and the impact on women. They were not, however, aware of the specificities of how to actively effect and implement change in their lives, relationships, and communities. It is important to note here that the men I interacted with throughout Alexandra were genuinely interested in the prospects of change and would engage animatedly in discussions about issues, struggles, and aspirations they faced as men living in the township.

All the men in this study spoke of their disillusionment with the immutable social norms and expectations for men in Alexandra society. They expressed exhaustion with the persistent associations between men and violent masculinities, along with the neglect of men's voices and their efforts in condemning violence. Focusing specifically on the links between masculinity and violence obscures men's transitional attempts already taking place as some men working toward "new," more caring and less dominant modes of masculinity that sometimes seemed to further isolate them on their journeys toward change. In the absence of alternative blueprints that define different or "new" masculinities, juxtaposed with enduring definitions of "traditional", cultural and social norms and expectations of manhood in Alexandra township, along with a lack of structural support for change, makes it difficult for men to fully transform. In the meantime, and in spite of this, my work documents the

ways some men quietly and voluntarily assume subordinate positions in the masculine hierarchy without having to fully "come out" as directly challenging dominant cultural traditions and norms that dominate township masculinities.

Conclusion

Identifying as a man in Alexandra township is a complex process often characterized by feelings of uncertainty and contradiction. Despite stereotypical notions of masculinity that remain embedded in a patriarchal culture, men continue to aspire to and hope and dream for a future for themselves and their immediate family predicated on masculinities positioned relative to their understandings of a "new" man who is caring, loving and supportive.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the gender equality agenda offers opportunities for men to reflect on their understandings of masculinity and to explore alternative ways of redefining and living out masculine identities in less dominating and more egalitarian ways. For many of the men in this research, contemplating change was a process initiated through life-changing events that positioned them at a "crossroads" and that initiated what some described as a "pause" where they could temporarily put their lives on hold to consider what transformation would entail. While *pausing*, they continue to exist as men within society, though this research demonstrates that their transitional masculinities remain largely unseen, much of these efforts are often invisible to others.

This means that many of the men in this study live in a structural "limbo" (e.g., Honwana 2014) while redefining their masculinities and waiting for conditions when they will emerge and be able to exist as "new" or at least "different" men. It is critical therefore, to acknowledge that there are men who not only access help, but are willing to talk about change, their masculinities, their fears, and how these impact both their own lives and their social and intimate relationships. Some realize there are choices available to them and are perhaps, as hooks (2004) writes, "willing to change." As more men become conscious of and reflexive about their masculinities and the potential to change, the hope is that this encourages other men to reconsider who they are and who they want to be as men, and perhaps impact on wider societal change.

While political and human development interventions have attempted to challenge existing oppressive masculinities and encourage more positive and caring, and less hierarchical modes of masculinity, there is insufficient evidence to evaluate their effectiveness in engendering long-term behavioral changes, although some evidence suggests short-term impact (e.g., Barker and Ricardo 2005; Barker et al. 2010; Dworkin et al. 2013; Dworkin et al. 2015). Such initiatives could serve as a trigger for men to reflect on the wider implications of the call to change as part of their individual self-reflective process. Longer term initiatives aimed at supporting men in this social and cultural transformation will need to explore the specificities of re-defining masculinities in each social and cultural context, and establish structural

support mechanisms that mentor and sustain those men who are embracing change. It also remains critical to work with both men and women in each context to encourage a wider social awareness and acceptance of new and alternative versions of masculinity (Sideris 2004a), as transformations in masculinities involve fundamental changes throughout gender relations.

This article is based on evidence gathered from an atypical group of men who were in some way linked with the local community-based organization ADAPT in Alexandra township in South Africa. Through their involvement with ADAPT or indeed as participants in the study, a group of men were facilitated with an opportunity to reflect on the costs and benefits associated with dominant social representations of township masculinity in Alexandra and the ways that this impacts their lives and relationships. The findings contribute to and advance continuing theoretical and programmatic interest in exploring men's lives within the context of gender equality and transitional masculinities. We need to reconsider intersecting and contextual daily experiences and realities of men mobilizing to transform their geographical context, along with the social and cultural expectations that feed into their subjectivities and the ways these determine how men are positioned to respond to change and transform their masculine identities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Racial classification became a distinguishing and determining feature of life for South African's, which for many, dictated everyday life—and death. I am therefore acutely aware of the associations linked to referencing race categories as they relate to South Africa, so in using the term "black" I refer to the official racial categories as classified by the Population Registration Act 1950 during apartheid, and which continue to be referred to in South Africa today.
2. This research focuses on men in Alexandra township, their life experiences, subjectivities, perceptions, and understandings of masculinities and change. As such, it did not directly engage with women in the township. However, I encountered women informally throughout the township, and facilitated a group discussion with a group of women through the ADAPT women's livelihood program.

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