

Constructing Peaceful Masculinities in the Face of Conflict among High School Boys

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ABSTRACT Masculinity is a contradictory gendered phenomenon and it is possible – and indeed quite common – for contradictory positions to exist side by side and to be occupied simultaneously by boys. Individuals occupy multiple positions and therefore have a range of identities, with different ones acquiring significance in different contexts. This study examines how masculinities were implicated in handling conflict among boys at a co-educational secondary school in Durban, South Africa. In dealing with conflict there were hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions that boys could inhabit, and some boys inhabited one more than the other because they embraced particular masculine positions. Drawing on qualitative research, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and informal discussions this study sought to identify how some boys managed to acquire non-violent, peaceful versions of masculinity in the face of conflict. The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the boys in the study. All three semi-structured interviews with the boys were conducted in the first year of the study and spread over the school year. The unstructured interviews and the informal discussions with respondents spanned over the three-year period of the study. The researcher focused on those boys that had an allegiance to particular constructions of masculinity which were at variance with the school's hegemonic masculinity. The findings indicate that in those cases where the conflict was defused peacefully, different, alternative, non-confrontational understandings of masculinity were salient. The values which the boys asserted included respect, being able to exercise restraint, and being independent, strong-willed and individualistic in their thinking and actions. When these boys chose peace over violence they were behaving autonomously, drawing on different discourses of conflict resolution embedded in alternative understandings of what it was to be a man, which involved being independent, strong-willed and individualistic in their thinking and actions.

INTRODUCTION

The 'boys will be boys' discourse is enacted in different ways, depending on where the boys live, who their peer groups are, their social class position and race. This article is based on a three-year ethnographic study set in Sunville Secondary School (a pseudonym) which is situated in Chatsworth, a suburb of Durban in South Africa. It is part of a broader project which examined the violent behaviours of boys (Hamlall 2010), and focuses on how specific masculinities delegitimise the enactment of violence. There were high levels of tension, friction and disagreement at this school. Those areas that created tensions, conflict or disagreement among boys included

conforming to or rejecting institutional expectations at school, supporting or rejecting the school institution, that is, supporting or rejecting teachers, school rules and school values, relationships with girls, insults about family and race, and disputes over possessions, territory, and academic work.

Swearing often sparked conflict and aggressive reactions from learners; this was a daily occurrence at Sunville, especially among the boys. The script for swearing normally ran as follows: one boy would make a derogatory remark about the other. The other boy would curse back at him and there would follow a series of cursing back and forth – sometimes accompanied by threats and intimidation. This type of slanging match often resulted in the dispute escalating into violence.

Few empirical research or surveillance data exist on conflict among South African school-going youth. In a study of gender identities in a black primary school in South Africa, Bhana (2005a) found that conflict and violence underscored much of the social relations among boys and girls and influenced the construction of

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different forms of masculinities and femininities. Gibson and Lindegaard (2007), researching schoolboys in Cape Town, South Africa, reveal that for boys in their study being a man was about being perceived as a man, which for these boys meant being bold, speedy and strong. To be accepted as masculine also meant being able to react violently or use violence in the face of conflict, otherwise you were perceived as feminised, as a 'soft boy'.

Lindegger and Maxwell's (2007) study of adolescent school-going boys in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, reveals that violent behaviour was prevalent in the list of negative behaviours provided by the boys. The boys offered insight into aspects of masculinity which included expressing aggression but not hurt or weakness. The boys were under enormous pressure to conform to public standards of hegemonic masculinity, which included being in positions of power and being able to use violence as a controlling mechanism, especially in conflict situations. The transformation from the apartheid education system to an inclusive one in South Africa has created new challenges for the youth of this country. Many of the youth are stressed by these challenges and a new struggle has begun, which includes identity definitions, competition for resources, cultural intolerance and dealing with economic and social ills, like crime and substance abuse, all of which contribute to increased levels of conflict among learners (Mathews et al. 1999). While there were high levels of tension at Sunville, not all conflict situations led to violence, some having peaceful resolutions. It is therefore important to further the research in this area.

Drawing from the peace studies and conflict resolution literature, 'conflict' is treated as synonymous with 'disagreement'. It arises out of a real or apparent incompatibility of parties' needs or interests, and involves a perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously (Bush and Folger 1994; Rubin et al. 1994). The term 'conflict' is often used in a 'bigger' broader way. Rummel (cited in Folberg and Taylor 1984) defines conflict using three levels: (1) conflict structure – interests that have a tendency to oppose each other; (2) conflict situation – opposing interests, attitudes or powers that are activated; (3) manifest conflict – a set of behaviours or actions – demands, threats, aggression and physical violence.

Conflict becomes manifest when one or more of the parties involved seeks to resolve the incompatibility by forcing the other to change (Tillett 1999). The outbreak of manifest conflict behaviour therefore can result in violence. The most extreme method of conflict resolution is by one side conquering the other, which puts an end to the conflict by coercion and force. Because of its overlapping dynamics and processes, conflict is complex. It often involves a struggle for power, the way decisions are made, the way we talk to each other, or unresolved problems from past interactions. Several of these factors may be accruing at the same time, so that we are not sure what the real problem is. Thus, defining conflict in a specific situation can be a difficult task (Isenhardt and Spangle 2000).

Studies of school conflict have offered wider definitions. In a study of conflict among young children in school, Lozano et al. (2011) define conflict as an interactional event, which follows after an opposition to a request, a remark or an action and ends with a resolution. Johnson and Johnson's (1996) review of research based conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in elementary and secondary schools considered conflict to be a state of incompatible behaviours which are related to competition, aggression, influence and dominance. These working definitions, like most definitions, are imperfect but served as a practical basis for this study, which considers conflict to be an unstable and unpredictable stage that precedes either escalation to physical violence or de-escalation to peaceful resolution.

What was common in all of the incidents of conflict and violence at Sunville was that boys projected certain images of themselves, and sought to live up to certain versions of what it is to be a man. This study argues that the form of masculinity that boys subscribe to influences the manner in which they deal with provocation and conflict. The escalation or peaceful resolution of conflict depends largely on whether a boy subscribed to or rejected the values of the hegemonic masculinity that exist at Sunville, which included heterosexuality, toughness, authority, competitiveness, maintaining peer group prestige and subordination of other boys.

While there was a clear, identifiable link between modes of the dominant masculinity and violence, there were other versions of masculinity that were being performed within the school

that were democratic, peaceful and respectful. This article explores versions of manhood that were resistant to the traditional patriarchal, violent and rigid versions of manhood, and were not vested in asserting control over other boys and trying to prove manhood by using violence.

Masculinity and Non-violence – Alternative Masculinities

While it is important that research draws attention to the oppressive ways in which masculinities are constructed, it also needs to be attentive to the ways, contexts and times in which men inhabit alternative (not necessarily subordinate) masculinities. For much of this century, there has been a gradually increasing awareness of the possibility of change in gender roles (power relations and division of labour) (Connell 2000). The popular commentators on masculinity, such as Connell (1995, 2000), Mac an Ghaill (1996), Frosh et al. (2002), Morrell (2002), Swain (2005), Morrell et al. (2012), have made substantial contributions to the new generation of social research on masculinities and change in masculinities.

It is not hard to show that there is some connection between gender and violence and that men in general gain from the patriarchal dividend; however, not all men are corporate executives or mass killers. Specific groups of men gain very little from the patriarchal essence (Connell 2000). For instance, working class youth, economically dispossessed by structural unemployment, may have no economic advantage over the women in their communities (Barker 2005).

Other groups of men pay part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order. Gay men are systematically made targets of prejudice and violence. Effeminate and 'wimpish' men are constantly put down. Black men in the USA (as in South Africa) suffer massively higher levels of lethal violence than white men (Seedat et al. 2009). Morrell (2002) argues that men have a vested interest in gender role changes because they, along with women, also suffer the consequences of the present gender order. There are, then, divisions of interest among men on gender issues, and there are individual as well as collective efforts to create new models of masculinity and new ways of 'being men' (Morrell 2002).

Barker (2005) argues that there are always voices of resistance – young men who are able to see the gender matrix for what it is: a flimsy sometimes harmful way to organise the world and their personal lives. These young men who 'resist' these rigid or violent versions of manhood often like being boys or men in some traditional ways, such as participating in sports, but question the notions that women deserve to be beaten, or that caring for children is the work of women, or that a man must fight to defend his honour. The boys in this study who resisted the violent versions of masculinity outlined other ways in which they asserted their masculinity. Barker (2005) stresses that it is important to listen to these voices and to seek to understand what factors make it possible for young men to become respectful, non-violent and caring in their interpersonal relationships.

Frosh et al. (2002) found that one strategy used by boys to resist the notion of hegemonic masculinities was to claim to be above them. Boys, in his study, did this in a number of ways: they asserted their authenticity (in contradistinction to acting), claimed a particular skill, or made claims to maturity or to being egalitarian or enforcing justice.

Sewell's (1997) study of Black boys in London refers to strategies used by boys who disparaged others' obsessive interest in sport and similar signifiers of hegemonic masculinity because they believed it was a fool's option leading nowhere. These findings resonate with the research of Edley and Wetherell (1997), who reported how non-rugby-playing boys challenged the domination of rugby players at a private single-sex school, by portraying them as 'unthinking conformists, incapable, or even scared perhaps of doing their own thing' (p. 211). Kahn et al. (2011) found that young men who worked on a youth team to prevent domestic violence questioned the exaggerated aspects of hegemonic masculinity. These young men adopted a position that provides for an adaptive form of masculinity that does not challenge the status quo and yet provides for an alternative way of experiencing masculinity.

In a similar vein, Walker (2005) argues that in contemporary South Africa traditional notions of masculinity have been destabilised. She argues that the transition to democracy has given rise to a crisis of masculinity in which some men are defending established masculinities and oth-

ers are seeking to explore new possibilities, that is, constructing new and different masculinities. Walker (2005) argues that the new democratic order in South Africa has created a legitimate space for men to embark on reflective and introspective journeys, giving rise to new notions of manhood.

In a study of violence and the gendered negotiation of masculinity in a South African primary school, Bhana (2005b) found that many of the boys were not happy to be identified as 'rough and tough' boys. These boys positioned themselves as gentle, belonging to what she terms '*yimvu*' masculinity (p. 215). *Yimvu* masculinity was associated with good behaviour, respect for authority and in most occasions gender friendly. *Yimvu* boys displayed alternative patterns of conduct from the violent culture of most boys at the school.

Ratele et al. (2007) found clear examples of resistant, alternative masculinities to that of the hegemonic form among participants in a study of masculinity at seven different Western Cape schools in South Africa. Particularly evident was the resistance of violent, gangster-dominated forms of manhood in these communities, where the participants distanced themselves from this type of manhood, embracing instead versions of successful men with jobs and families. Despite the evidence of adherence to traditional hegemonic masculinity, the studies above highlight the emergence of resistant, alternative and arguably more positive constructions and performances of being a boy/man.

Pacifists offer Gandhi and the Dalai Lama as non-violent models of male behaviour. They link the goal of peace directly to the choice of refraining from violence. While the researcher is in sympathy with this message, this study explores the minor miracle of peace when the expectation in conflict situations is of violence. If we all have the capacity for violence, then equally we all have the capacity for peace. If we look at power and violence then we forget and don't see that men are caring, have emotions and probably want peace and security as much as all other sentient beings. As Morrell (2002) points out, referring to a research project in the USA (the five in six projects), five out of every six men were not violent towards their partners. Morrell (2002) further reports that his survey of men's movements and gender transformation has found evidence that men are already engaged in

reaching out and embracing qualities of caring, respect, non-violence and peace, thereby breaking free from the patriarchal models of men in charge, the aggressors and extollers of violence.

Male violence itself is quite prevalent in many societies. It is, however, important to note that although men commit most violent crimes and although such violence is widespread, this still does not mean that all men are violent (Connell 2000). There is no simple standard of being a man that guides all male behaviour, including violence (Hamlall and Morrell 2012; Messerschmidt 2000). Although society functions in many ways to promote male violence, there remain in any situation other ways of expressing one's masculinity (Connell 2000).

The boys at Sunville live in a school atmosphere heavily influenced by an aggressive form of hegemonic masculinity, but there are boys that 'do masculinity' in other ways. This article concerns itself with these 'alternative' masculinities.

METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were used extensively in this study to gather data. The boys that were interviewed were identified from the researcher's observation of conflict situations at the school, in the classroom and in the playground. These conflict situations involved verbal attacks, hurtful teasing and retaliation, arguments and physical fights. This was in keeping with the concept of purposive sampling. Boys who were violent in conflict situations and boys who defused the conflict or disagreement non-violently were identified. These boys formed a group and were interviewed for purposes of sampling and screening. From this group, 10 boys were identified to be the main respondents in this study. All of these boys were in Grade 10 and were aged between 15 and 17 years. Grade 10 boys were identified in the hope that the researcher would be able to follow them for their three remaining years at school (on the assumption that they would matriculate after completing Grade 12), gathering data on an ongoing basis.

The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the boys in the study. All of the interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were conducted in the computer room, which was situated away from

the classrooms and playing fields. The room was fitted with curtains, air-conditioned and was normally very quiet. This created an atmosphere in which the boys felt safe and comfortable enough to talk freely about their experiences. Each of these interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The first interview served to provide biographical information on the boys and to locate the boys in this study. The second interview provided data around issues of conflict and how the boys handled the conflict. The second interview also provided insights into the complexities of the school's gender regime and shed light on the process of negotiation, rejection, acceptance and ambivalence in the construction of the school's gender regime. The third interview enabled the researcher to gain richer and deeper insights into the respondent's unique meanings and to pick up on incoherent links that allowed the researcher to make more sense of the respondent's earlier responses. The third interview also gave the researcher an opportunity to seek further evidence to test emergent hunches and provisional hypotheses (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). It further provided valuable information that helped the researcher to address the role of various social factors, such as race, class, ethnicity and religion in the configurations of masculinity, and how this impacts on the causes of conflict and violence.

All three semi-structured interviews with the boys were conducted in the first year of the study and spread over the school year. The unstructured interviews and the informal discussions with respondents spanned over the three-year period of the study. In addition, there were other boys to whom the researcher spoke informally, especially after violent incidents. These boys also made valuable contributions to this study.

Throughout the data gathering process the researcher was aware of the tension that existed between the roles of a teacher (peace-maker and authority figure) and researcher (data gatherer and analyst). Being a teacher and a researcher at this school had important implications for the way learners presented themselves in interviews and other contexts. While the researcher's position as a teacher/researcher in the school provided necessary access and opportunity to witness conflict and violence and to identify boys for interview, it was also a challenge. A teacher cannot watch passively as conflict and violence happen nor can he or she foment violence. A

teacher has a duty to intervene, maintain peace and prevent injury. In many instances when a teacher arrives at the scene of an argument, fight or scuffle, the altercation stops. In the performance of his duty as a teacher, the researcher always intervened to resolve disputes. Later he reviewed the field notes and reflected on how his presence may have influenced the process. This allowed for recognition of the extent to which the researcher's actions (as a peace-maker) shaped the outcomes.

The participants may have been reluctant to refuse participation because of power relations that existed between researcher/teacher and learner. Further, the respondents might have been tempted to present what they thought the researcher wanted to hear rather than their true feelings and attitudes. Feminist researchers have long argued that research always involves power relations and stress the importance of negotiating these power relations (Epstein 1998). These issues were addressed in the first informal discussion with the participants. The boys were reminded of their right not to participate in the project. They were further reassured about confidentiality and impartiality and not answering questions that they were not comfortable with.

The participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions before and after interviews. The boys were eager to 'tell their stories', becoming engaged and animated and willing to discuss a broad range of issues (for example, home experiences with parents and siblings and romantic relationships with girls). Another technique was to talk to the boys as collaborators in the research process (Hutchinson et al. 1995). These strategies did not equalise power but made it negotiable, rather than an inevitable effect of status difference (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

This study utilised inductive analysis in which 'patterns, themes and categories emerge from the data rather than being developed prior to collection' (Marlow 1993: 324). In the inductive approach, theories about what is happening are grounded in direct programme experience, rather than being imposed on the setting by predetermined constructions (Patton 1986). In the analysis of observations and interviews the researcher focused on recurring regularities in the data, which represented patterns of meaning in describing and understanding constructions of masculinity.

FINDINGS

In the discussion that follows the researcher pays particular attention to those boys who chose not to react violently when provoked. In exploring the ways boys in this secondary school conceptualised and articulated their experiences of conflict and violence, it became sufficiently apparent that many boys rejected, refuted and denounced violence as a means of resolving conflict.

Sandile (all names used are pseudonyms) is a 17-year-old African¹ boy who lives in Klaarwater (a suburb of Durban). He mentions that the crime rate in Klaarwater is very high, “there are robbers, everywhere there is robbers”. Sandile says that most of the people living in Klaarwater are poor but that there are wealthy people as well: “there are people with big houses with deep freezers in this area”. He has not seen his father for many years and does not know where he is. His only sibling is his brother who is older than him. Sandile respects and admires his brother and aims to be like him. “I am following my brother’s footsteps – he is working on his own business with his partners. He is successful. He doesn’t join the other boys and get into trouble like fights, stealing or drugs. If I do well in school I will join him”.

Sandile spends his spare time working on his own business plan to start a business like that of his brother. He also likes to watch sitcoms and soaps on television, often with his mother. Sandile does not like violent movies.

Sandile does not have career ambitions and believes that he must start his own business in order to be successful in life. He provided the following response:

I don’t like the fighting. Most of the boys in this school – African and Indian – like to fight. I had this experience once – there is this boy they call ‘Gummie’, we were playing tennis on the field. He came and took the ball and asked us, ‘How far do you want the ball to go?’ We said bring the ball back, and he kicked it away and said ‘What are you going to do about it?’ We just went and brought the ball back and started playing again. He challenged us but we did nothing.

I do not fight. The other boys may think that you are scared or gay – but still I don’t like to fight. Some boys say ‘you must bring it on’. That causes the big fights. I don’t like that.

Patric, a 17-year-old African boy, also mentioned in interviews that he avoided conflict and refused to fight, even though the boys were persistent in their provocation of him.

Patric lives in Kwasanathi on the outskirts of Chatsworth. Kwasanathi is populated mainly by African people. Patric mentioned that the crime rate is very high in this area. Many of the residents of Kwasanathi abuse alcohol and take drugs. He is also pressurised to consume alcohol and take drugs but abstains from it. For these reasons Patric works very hard at school in order to succeed academically and get a job and earn a good salary so that he can move out of this area.

Patric never met his father, who died when his mother was pregnant with him. He has three sisters and two brothers, none of whom are in school (they are older than him). His eldest brother lives in Cape Town and is the only one in his family who is employed. He sends money for the family to buy groceries, pay for Patric’s schooling requirements and other expenses. Patric’s other brother is not employed and spends all of his time with friends drinking and smoking. Patric’s eldest brother encourages him to stay out of trouble by not befriending the boys in the community, drinking or fighting. None of his sisters are married but they have children. They use their social grants and whatever money the fathers of their children give them to support themselves and their children. Patric does not approve of his second brother’s behaviour and also dislikes the fathers of his sisters’ children. He believes that these men are “irresponsible and lazy”.

Patric has a positive outlook of life and believes that his hard work at school will deliver him from his poverty and hardship and enable him to acquire a better standard of living.

Patric had the following to say about his experiences of conflict:

They [the boys] swear a lot and like to fight. I don’t let the swearing affect me – if I mind then I would get angry and get into a fight. I just keep walking. Sometimes if they talk to me in a bad manner, I ask them why you are doing this. Sometimes they get more angry and try to make you fight – they force you to fight – but I don’t want to, so I keep walking.

At Sunville it was common for boys to provoke other boys intentionally in order to draw out a response. Below is one such experience of

a provocation mentioned by Sai from face to face interviews.

Sai is a 15-year-old Indian boy who lives in Arena Park, Chatsworth. He lives with both his parents. He has a brother who is a year younger than him and who also attends Sunville. Sai and his brother have a good relationship and walk together to school every morning. Sai's mother is a nurse and his father is a driver for the post office. He has a good relationship with his father and admires and respects him. Both parents teach their sons to respect and not to hurt others.

Sai spends his spare time doing body-building and kick-boxing. He takes part in kick-boxing competitions. He likes body-building because he says, "It builds up your body and gives you a muscular appearance". It attracts the girls and you get respect from the other boys". Sai is also a very good classical dancer. He has taken part in many dance recitals and has twice travelled to India to represent South Africa in dance competitions. Although classical dancing is not very popular among boys, Sai's parents have taught him to follow his beliefs and do the things he enjoys and feels comfortable with.

I have had several experiences where I was 'vloeked'² but normally I just walk away. I remember one situation where when I walked up the block, one boy caught me by my belt to bully me. I could easily take him, but I walked away. They want a reaction from me, so it can lead to a big fight. They bring their friends, and if I bring my friends then it becomes a gang fight. They don't target you, they just randomly pick anyone.

It is clear from the above evidence that some boys chose not to react violently when provoked. We see that both Patric and Sandile chose peace over violence, even though their status was threatened and they faced humiliation from their peers for not retaliating in violent and aggressive ways when being taunted and provoked by other boys. They justified their non-violent approach to conflict by giving the impression that they do not really care to compete with the antagonisers for hierarchical ascendancy, or to prove bravado and heterosexuality to these boys. They simply did not approve of fighting and violence and refused to be drawn into any confrontation for reasons of trying to belong to a hegemonic masculinity that operated within the school realm. They were prepared to let

things go, suggesting a deviation from hegemonic masculinity that holds promise for peacefully resolving conflict.

Even when the provocation was severe – for example, being physically accosted as in Sia's case, these boys chose not to respond. They defined their reluctance to fight as a form of strength. They were not prepared to buy into the hegemonic versions of masculinity: of satisfying peer group expectations of using physical violence to defend one's honour.

Lindo was another participant who chose peace over violence in conflict situations. Lindo is a 16-year-old African boy who lives with his parents in Klaarwater, a suburb on the outskirts of Chatsworth. Lindo has a brother and two sisters. His brother and one of his sisters have completed their schooling and his younger sister is in a primary school. Lindo's father works as a machine operator in a glass factory. His mother is a housewife and sometimes sells blankets to supplement the income at home.

Lindo is particularly close to his mother and spends most of his spare time with her at home. His hobbies are reading and watching television. He watches the programmes that his mother watches because he enjoys spending time with her as his father is hardly ever at home. He spends his weekends in the following way: on Saturdays he cleans up his room and washes his clothes and on Sundays he goes to Church because he says "it is compulsory to go to church". Lindo and his family are devout Christians and try to promote good moral values in their actions. Lindo mentioned in interviews that he felt sorry for the type of boy who was pressured into violent behaviour by his peers:

Most of the boys are violent because of peer pressure. They are pressured to fight. There are two types of boys – the one who always wants to fight, the one who is always a bully. But the other type is pressured to fight – his friends are pushing him to fight: 'go, go hit him'. He is not really a violent boy. The first type I do not admire, because I don't like fighting. The other type of boy, I feel a bit sorry for him – he must get new friends; this is the only solution.

This response from Lindo not only accentuates that he denounced violent behaviour, but he also claimed moral superiority for not allowing himself to be influenced by other boys. He pitied those boys that got into conflict and fights in order to prove allegiance to their peers by showing themselves as competent fighters.

Lindo pathologised some boys as violent, and looked down on those who were pushed to fight by their peers. While he did not subscribe to the hegemonic version of masculinity at Sunville, he was also not subordinated by it. The 'non-violent' boys in this study claimed moral superiority by rejecting the values of the hegemonic masculinity of this school. Any counter-hegemonic position has to assert its own morality, so when Lindo claimed to be superior, he was rejecting hegemonic values and asserting a rival set of values which he believed were good and right.

The 'non-violent' boys in this study claimed to be mentally strong, individualistic and independent in their thinking; in other words, they had their own set of values which were in contrast to the hegemonic values.

The researcher identified the *modus operandi* of this group of boys as being autonomous. They had embraced a set of values that allowed them to walk away in that moment when they were provoked. Under different circumstances and in different times these boys may have inhabited other subject positions, but in this context they were at variance with the hegemony established by their competitive and violence-prone peers.

These boys took up autonomous positions in situations of conflict that did not support the hegemonic imperative at Sunville to escalate conflict into violence. Autonomous masculinity is a performance in a specific time and place which stems from a more general framing of masculinity (in a boy's own life), but which will inevitably contain contradictions which may well (in other contexts, circumstances and times) manifest in different ways which actually support a particular hegemony and, more generally, provide support for the subordination of women (which is a feature of patriarchy).

This study is context-specific and the researcher is not making a much wider claim that these boys are inherently non-violent. The argument made is that non-violence in a particular school setting is unusual, that it challenges much more physical, aggressive and violence-prone forms of male display and in this sense, is alternative. This study did not explore the behaviour of the boys in other broader contexts. For example, Gibson and Lindegaard's (2007) research of dominant masculinities among South African boys identified how boys took up different sub-

ject positions in different contexts and were able to make wider claims about resisting the culture of violence. This is reminiscent of the findings of Lindegger and Maxwell (2007) in their analysis of gender-based HIV interventions among adolescent boys and young men in South Africa. In individual interviews they found that there was some question about the validity and practice of hegemonic standards in public and private settings. It was found that boys did not necessarily conform to all public standards of hegemonic masculinity and positioned themselves differently in private spaces. These varied positionings were termed the "culture of deception" (p. 110).

In a paper that analyses what it is to be a man in a rural area in South Africa, Sideris (2005) highlights the contradictions men experience between the received interpretations of gender and lived relations and reveal inconsistencies in their behaviour. The boys in this study may have had contradictions which would see them acting differently in other settings (not explored in this study) and possibly even in ways that supported the general imperatives of patriarchy. But when a boy chose peace over violence, for the purposes of this study the researcher argues that he was behaving autonomously. The core idea of autonomy in this study is to have personal rule of the self while remaining free from controlling interference from others. The autonomous person acts in accordance with a freely self-chosen and informed plan (Beauchamp and Childress 1989). One of the best-known philosophical theories of autonomy was developed by Kant (1956) who defined an autonomous person as one able to act according to his or her own direction in accordance with his or her own will. Subsequent philosophers developed a more radical concept of autonomy as the freedom to choose one's own moral and rational principles (Darwall 2006). The boys in this study drew on different discourses of conflict resolution which were embedded in their understanding of what it was to be a man. They were committed to a non-confrontational, non-physical approach to a difference of opinion, and drew on a set of values that often originated in and from masculinities that operated outside the school realm, and were likely to be drawing on a range of religious, cultural and ethnic discourses (further elaborated in the discussion section). Autonomous masculinity is that masculinity that is per-

formed at a particular moment of conflict or violence, at which moment a particular non-hegemonic masculinity (in terms of the school's masculinity) is drawn upon to avoid conflict.

Gender is an active construction, according to Connell (1996), who asserts that masculinities come into existence as people act. Thus agency accompanies the construction of masculinity. She suggests that boys freely choose between masculinities, but one must remember that institutions and other factors restrict their choices. A theoretical framework which recognises the social construction of subjectivity in social relations and through discourses does not result in an inevitable lack of agency (Hollway 1984a). The boys in this study exercised their agency within the constraints of general acquiescence to the hegemonic masculinity of the school in conflict situations.

The researcher chose the term 'autonomous masculinity' because in the context of this research practices that separated these boys from those who resolved conflict using force, aggression and violence was being observed. When conflict turned to violence it gave expression to and support for a set of hegemonic, normative, prescriptive masculine values, which at Sunville included being confrontational, resolving conflict violently, and asserting oneself at another boy's expense. In understanding an autonomous approach to resolving conflict, the researcher observed elements of masculinity that were reflective of a broader set of understandings of how they are themselves boys. These boys exercised their freedom to choose their own moral principles in conflict situations. It is not just a label. From the content of the data the researcher is drawing configurations from not just one individual but a group of boys.

Lindo strongly inhabited an autonomous position in conflict situations. He did not care to challenge the dominant form of masculinity. As he says: "*He means nothing to me and I don't even follow by his rules then I won't even care*". However, the desire not to challenge the dominant masculinity does not mean that Lindo was subordinated by it, as we see in the following extract:

Many boys fight but even if he is the strongest boy and he gives someone a black eye – he is not respected even by that boy that he hit. If you look at my background – my father is not violent – he always taught us that fighting is

not the way – talking is the best way – if they provoke you – calling you a coward – I don't react.

Lindo identified with and admired men who were non-violent and endorse peace in their achievements and pursuits, and had the following to say about his role model:

My role model is Nelson Mandela because he stood up for what he believes in – they tried to urge him to go the wrong way, but he did not change. He even stayed all those years in jail for what he believes in. I don't have role models that are movie stars and athletes. The other reason Nelson Mandela is my role model is because he took the role of non-violent resistance although he had all that rebellion against him.

Lindo was independent, strong-willed and individualistic in his thinking and actions. He admired and looked up to people with these traits (his father and Nelson Mandela). He was steadfast in his commitment to peace in the face of provocation, intimidation, threats and conflict.

Lindo did not get into conflict or respond to provocations aggressively because he believed he was more mature and sophisticated than the violent and aggressive boys and that he was morally superior to them. In all his interviews he mentioned that he was really not afraid of these boys but chose peace because it was the right thing to do, and because he had been brought up the right way. He was unwavering in his choice of non-violence in the face of conflict:

I realise that this is their way when they swear and all that. I don't even let it affect me. I just walk away. The next time when he swears me he knows it is not worth it because I will do nothing. There are a lot of threats – if somebody threatens you, you can't even say anything. I do not challenge them, I keep my cool. I do not respond to whatever they are doing – they get surprised when you just walk away or laugh.

When Lindo refers to 'they', he means boys who subscribed to the hegemonic norms of masculinity, those boys who used threats, intimidation and violence to gain ascendancy among their peers. Lindo mentioned that the provocations (which were mainly swearing in the above case) did not affect him. He further showed that he was not intimidated by or afraid of these boys: "*They get surprised when you just walk away or laugh*". His non-response and casual approach to the provocations surprised the other

boys so much that they generally left him alone, and in this way he minimised the provocations and conflict. Lindo acted autonomously, as did other boys in the face of conflict and provocation. The boys chose their own moral principles and values in conflict situations.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this article is on boys who resisted and rejected the school's hegemonic masculinity and refused to be drawn into the game of 'jockeying for position'. The researcher looked at the ways in which boys averted provocations from escalating into violence, and the peaceful ways in which they handled actual conflict situations.

The boys whose voices are heard were not inherently peaceful or incapable of violence; it is unlikely that they would have chosen non-violence in any and every situation. Individuals occupy multiple positions and therefore have a range of identities, with different ones acquiring significance in different contexts. Thus boys take up different positions in different contexts, and identities are multiple and fluid (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Connell 1996; Mills 2001; Hamllall and Morrell 2009).

The subjects of this study had an allegiance to and were vested in particular constructions of masculinity which were at variance with the school's hegemony and this made it more likely that they would choose peace over violence. In this study the 'non-violent' boys created the impression that they wanted to distance themselves from the 'violent boys', and they regarded themselves as being the 'real boys'. This resonates with Mac an Ghaill's (1996) study in the English Midlands, where the 'Real Englishmen' differentiated themselves from the 'Macho Lads' in terms of their attitudes to and relationships with women, maintaining that they were in fact the 'real boys'.

Connell (1995, 2000) distinguishes a hierarchy of masculinities, identifying, among others, four forms of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and protest. Hegemonic masculinity can be looked at in two ways: (a) a configuration of practice; and (b) an embodiment, an example of which is given by Connell (1995) as 'frontline troopers'. A frontline trooper is a particular individual who subscribes to a particular set of values and consistently performs them,

even though there may be contradictions. At Sunville many boys operated as frontline troopers of hegemonic masculinity by embracing aggressive and violent conditions which they attempted to generate using different types of provocation. However, while the concept of hegemonic masculinity is taken up in many different fields, it remains controversial and open to many different critiques, and yet remains highly influential (Hearn and Morrell 2012).

While the concept of masculinity has been used theoretically in different ways, Connell's framework was helpful in understanding the boys who contributed to an alternative discourse, and who had alternative viewpoints to those boys who subscribed to the hegemonic view of using violence to resolve conflict. However, the researcher required a different way of describing the complexities of behaviour in each conflict setting at Sunville, since this study is a micro-analysis of the dynamics of conflict. The researcher needed to name a particular way of resolving conflict, which involved the mobilisation of non-hegemonic values. Understanding these voices and actions of resistance to violence yields tremendous insight into the power of subjectivity, that is, the power of individuals to construct their own meaning out of the situation around them and the power of subjectivity to question and resist rigid gender norms.

These boys chose a particular subject position which the researcher has called autonomous, and which stemmed from an understanding of themselves as boys (that is, their gendered identity as a male, their masculinity). The researcher argues that the boys chose autonomous positions only in conflict situations. In other contexts they may inhabit other subject positions, which is beyond the ambit of this study. For example, Hollway (1984b) found, in an analysis of the construction of subjectivity in heterosexual relations, that different discourses concerning sexuality affects women's and men's powers and therefore the investment they have in taking up gender appropriate positions and practices. However, there are contradictions in the subject positions that people occupy as a result of changing desires and practices in different contexts. There exist a number of social factors that attach meaning and incorporated values to a person's construction of subjectivity.

In this study, in a moment of conflict boys draw on biographies which bear the imprint of

family structure, relationships and a host of other influential experiences, to walk away and not respond physically to a provocation. For Sandile and Patric their older brothers were the adult male role models in their lives who provided strength, stability and a model for appropriate behaviour. They portrayed images of being a man as one who is successful, earns well and supports the family. They distanced themselves from the social ills of the community and disapproved of using violence, force and aggression to settle disputes. The roles these males played in the lives of the boys are not within the scope of this study but serves to highlight that social and family factors may influence the positions that boys occupy in handling conflict within the school.

Lindo's religious convictions contribute to his choice of peace over violence in conflict situations. Lindo also had a mutually supportive relationship with his mother, which existing research, for example, Reay (2002) suggests has a positive efficacy in the manner in which young men construct their masculine identity. Sai's family background conveys that his parents taught him to be independent in his thinking and actions and to pursue his classical dancing interests, despite not being popular with most boys. Sai chose to display his masculinity by doing weight-lifting and kick-boxing rather than getting into physical fights and brawls.

The social and family backgrounds of these boys shed more light on their choice of embracing certain non-hegemonic masculinities that allowed them in that moment of conflict to be autonomous, which is to say independent of and from the prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity. However, at other times and in other places they may well subscribe to particular configurations of hegemonic masculinity. For the purposes of this study the researcher refers to the condition of masculinity which is performed in a specific time and place as autonomous masculinity.

A boy may behave in a particularly way in one situation and differently in another situation, and there are a number of contextual and psychological factors that affect this behaviour. The complexity of individuals and contextual factors means that labels never fit completely. However, a label always carries the danger of pathologising – reducing an individual to one identity – and as shown above, this is not the

case here. Behaviour is not absolute and fixed in all contexts. At different times and in different contexts behaviour may be different. It is also unlikely that the 'violent boys' will choose violence in every situation.

The researcher's approach to exploring masculinity focuses on understanding the pressure to choose specific 'hats' or versions of masculinity and the power to resist the pressure to buy into hegemonic versions of masculinity in conflict situations. Boys who identified with the hyper-hegemonic forms of masculinity were more prone to handling conflict in an aggressive and violent manner than the boys who did not.

CONCLUSION

This study describes a particular moment of male learner interaction involving conflict, in which constructions of school masculinity are enacted in non-violent ways. The concept of 'autonomous masculinity' is used to refer to the ability of some boys to resist provocation and to eschew violence. The researcher argues that at the moment when conflict is defused particular configurations of practice are at play, which are significant for understanding how conflict occurs and how it can be prevented. The ability of boys at Sunville to resist violence rested on a set of masculine values that were autonomous from the school's peer hegemony, which stressed dominance, competition and violence as ways of enacting masculinity.

The boys who adopted autonomous positions of masculinity seemed to have a high level of self-belief and assurance, and saw themselves as distinct rather than inferior. For these boys, avoiding humiliation or seeking to bolster their masculinity was not as important as for the boys who subscribed to the hegemonic masculinity at Sunville. They were confident and secure enough not to allow ridicule and other abuses hurled at them to provoke them into violence. They adopted autonomous positions in situations of provocation and violence. While they seldom reacted to provocations, they also did not seek to provoke conflict. They had no wish to be like the dominant boys, but rather pitied and looked down on them. They were wary of dominant boys, but were not frightened of them and recognised their weakness. However, there are contradictions. In different instances they

may draw on some hegemonic discourses and in the process give support to some of the elements of hegemonic masculinity.

This study highlights that there are different alternatives or possibilities of 'doing or being a boy' that are contingent upon each setting and using the meanings and practices available, although some are more obvious and conspicuous than others.

The findings and analysis in this study revealed identities that did not fit the form of hegemonic masculinity among school peers, especially in the way conflict was handled. These identities were not subordinate to, complicit with or secondary to the hegemonic masculinity of Sunville; they offered an alternative vision of it by embodying an autonomous configuration of 'doing being a boy'.

Research has become so preoccupied with the way in which boys aggressively and competitively assert themselves that it has failed to acknowledge alternative masculine identities, except as subordinate identities in opposition to the hegemonic masculinity that exists in that context. This study builds on an existing understanding that non-violent, peaceful boys have a place in the categorisation and construction of masculinity.

NOTES

1. The racial classification created by colonialism and apartheid are still in use in post-Apartheid legislation as a means of effecting redress of injustice and inequality. The categories remain controversial but still have social reality, and are: White, Indian, Coloured (mixed decent or birth) and (Black) African.
2. *Vloeking* is a slang term used by the boys at Sunville and has different meanings in different contexts: when one 'vloeked' a boy it meant to interfere with/challenge him, but when one 'vloeked' a girl it meant flirting with her.

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