

# Boys to men: Narrating life stories of fatherhood and work life amongst young black men

## Abstract

*This paper details the life stories of young black men, specifically how they negotiate their masculine identities over time. The researcher tracked a group of young black men over a period of nine years, from when they were adolescent boys (between the ages of 13 and 18 years), until they were young adults (between the ages of 23 to 26 years at the time of the writing). The aim of the study was to explore how the participants spoke about their relationships with their fathers as young adolescent boys and how they were now fathers to their own children as young men. At the beginning of the study, the participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take 27 photos (the total available on the film) under the theme, “My life as a young black man in the new South Africa”. The photos undertaken were used to facilitate semi-structured interviews in which the life stories of what it meant to be a young black man were shared. Between four to fourteen follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the participants. Key themes in the life stories included relationships with mothers, experiences of growing up without fathers, entering the world of work, and being fathers themselves which encouraged them to also reflect about their own relationships with their fathers. It is clear from their experiences that narratives of being a young black man are not static, but continuously change depending on the context, and time. In conclusion, it is argued that these positive voices of masculinities need to be promoted and celebrated.*

## Introduction

Over the last few years, a number of studies have been conducted on township masculinities (Langa, 2010; Chili, 2013; Ratele, 2013). However, many of these have

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tended to focus on problems associated with young black men, ranging from poor academic performance (Bhana, 2005) to gangsterism (Pinnock & Douglas-Hamilton, 1997; Salo, 2007; Pinnock, 2016), substance abuse (Morojele & Ramsoomar, 2016), and violent crime (Seedat et al, 2009; Langa & Masuku, 2015). The dominant discourse that has emerged out of these studies is that young black men are more likely [than young men of other races] to engage in risky and violent behaviours. The construction of *hegemonic* masculinity has been found to be a key element in these risk-taking behaviours. According to Connell, (1995), hegemonic masculinity is the term used to refer to the dominant cultural stereotype of masculinity. This includes, for example, the dominant social construction of men as brave, strong, aggressive and resilient, in many societies. The other dominant cultural stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity also suggest that a *real* man is evidenced in the ability to demand sexual intercourse with multiple partners. Accordingly, hegemonic masculinity is predominantly encapsulated in being a heterosexual, healthy, competitive male who sees women as sexual objects and competes against other males for access to women (Connell, 1995; Niehaus, 2005). In general, hegemonic versions of masculinity give primacy to the belief that gender is not negotiable and do not accept evidence from feminist and other sources that the relationships between men and women are, in many aspects, politically and socially constructed. Since then, a lot of criticisms have been levelled against Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity. Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger (2012) raised a concern about how the term hegemonic masculinity is often used in the existing scholarship in South Africa. The concept is given a specific, fixed content and purpose. As a result, it has lost its fluidity and flexibility as some researchers tend to use the term rigidly (Morrell et al, 2012). Another major criticism was that Connell failed to look sufficiently at the discursive strategies that men and boys employ to resist dominant voices of hegemonic masculinity and that the categories he describes (hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised, and complicit) may not always be easily distinguishable and may also be too limited in describing varieties of positioning and strategic engagement with hegemonic masculinity in particular contexts (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Donaldson, 2003). Later, Connell (2000; 2005) accepted some of these criticisms that hegemonic masculinity is characterized by the constant process of negotiation, translation and reconfiguration in order to adapt to new historical times and contexts. This shows that the identity of being a male is not static, which is also evident in the current study in how young men spoke about their relationships with their fathers and how they were fathering their own children. Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger (2012) raised a concern about how the term hegemonic masculinity is often used in the existing scholarship in South Africa. The concept is given a specific, fixed content and purpose. As a result, it has lost its fluidity and flexibility as some researchers use the term rigidly (ibid).

Considerable research has been done on fatherhood in South Africa (Ramphele, 2002; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Padi et al, 2014), but a lot of this work has mainly focused on absent fathering and meanings made by those who grew without fathers (Langa, 2010; Nduna & Jewkes, 2011; Chili, 2013). It is important to note that the definition of a father in this article is not limited to the biological relationship, but to “any older man who fulfils a role of care, protection and provision in relation to children” (Richter & Morrell, 2006: 2). This means one does not need to be the biological father to accept the fatherhood role and to act as a father. Mainstream literature (Garbarino, 1999; Fagan & Bernd, 2007) tends to argue that young boys who grow up without fathers are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours. Implicitly, this literature does not acknowledge the positive role that female-headed households play in raising boy children. In identifying the absence of fathers or significant male role models as causative of risk-taking behaviours, there is an implication that the remaining parent, the mother, is failing in her task in some way. However, the findings in this article reveal that some young men spoke positively about the role that their mothers played for them to be responsible young men. They attributed their positive identities to the support that their mothers provided in the absence of their fathers. It is important to note that there are young black men who do not engage in risk-taking and other problematic behaviours, despite growing up without father figures in their lives. These young men put more emphasis on academic success and long-term career goals as well as on more egalitarian ways of relating to young women and to other young men. Many studies into “alternative” constructions of masculinity are based on the constructivist premise that masculinity is fluid, multiple and flexible (Frosh et al, 2002; Shefer et al, 2007). This study focused on exploring the narratives of how young black men in the context of Johannesburg’s Alexandra Township, a predominantly working-class community, negotiated the multiple voices of masculinity pointed to in other masculinity studies. A key interest in the current study was on what it means to be a real young man as articulated in these young men’s narratives, with an emphasis on experiences of growing up without fathers, entering the world of work, and being fathers themselves.

## Method

I followed the novel approach of photo voice (Noland, 2006; Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007; Kessi, 2011) in order to capture the life stories of young black men in one of the townships in Johannesburg, namely Alexandra. After receiving ethical approval from the Department of Education, I went to two high schools in Alexandra and recruited 32 Grade 10 and 11 boys between the ages of 13 and 18 years in 2007. The researcher advertised the study by visiting classes of Grade 10 and 11 to meet with boy learners to explain the nature of the research project and to provide them with an information sheet, parental consent and participant assent forms which required the appropriate signatures. Only boys who returned the signed forms were included in the study. The number of participants exceeded 18, the initial number that the researcher wanted. Many boys

wanted to be part of the research project. It is possible that many boys wanted to be part of the research project because they were getting a disposable camera, but the interest in taking part seemed to extend beyond this small material incentive. All the 32 boys were given disposable cameras and asked to take 27 photos (the total available on the film) under the theme “My life as a young black man in the new South Africa”. The participants were given two weeks in which to do this, after which time arrangements were made for me to collect the cameras. Two sets of photos were processed from each camera, and one set of photos were given to each participant. Across the whole study, a total of 678 photos were taken. All of the photographs were used to facilitate semi-structured individual interviews in which the life stories of what it meant to be a young black man were shared. In the interviews, the participants were asked to provide a description of each photograph they had taken and why and how they had decided to capture that particular image. What was the intention in taking a particular photo and what were the thoughts, fantasies, feelings and emotions that accompanied it, both at the time and in the interview? Key themes shared in the life stories of the participants included relationships with mothers, experiences of growing up without fathers, talk about fashion, girls, avoiding or being tempted to engage in risky behaviours, academic performance, and aspirations to own expensive cars and live in big houses once they complete their schooling.

Following the first phase of data collection in 2007, I followed 12 of the participants over a period of nine years (2007 to 2017). At the time of writing this article, these participants were between the ages of 23 and 27 years. Eleven of them had completed high school, one had dropped out in Grade 11 and four had completed tertiary-level diplomas. Ten of the participants were working, one was unemployed and one was in prison. I conducted between four and fourteen individual follow-up interviews with each of the 12 participants since 2007. During this second longitudinal phase of the study, the participants used their cell phones rather than disposable cameras to take photos representing their lives. In each follow-up interview, each participant was encouraged to share at least six photos that significantly represented his life story at the time of the interview. The photos taken during this period represented a major shift from adolescence to being a young black man. Given the longitudinal nature of the study, the participants were opened to share their deep feelings and emotions about tensions, contradictions and challenges of being young men in a township context. Reflections and personal dynamics about the relationship that the researcher formed with the participants is beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of this article, only four case studies were chosen to highlight the participants’ narratives of growing up without fathers, the positive role that their mothers played in their lives, becoming fathers themselves, finding job opportunities and reflecting on challenges associated with being a young black man in the *new* South Africa.

## Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed. The initial stage of data analysis involved reading each transcript many times with the aim of determining the prevailing themes relating to masculinity and its contestation in terms of voices to which the participants publicly or privately subscribe. It was in the interest of this study, given its narrative approach to place the story of each participant at centre stage in the data analysis. This involved organising the analysis of each narrative coherently in terms of meanings that each participant made about his upbringing, relationship with mothers, absent fathers, search for work, working and becoming fathers. Particular attention was also paid to the manner in which personal stories were shared. The photos taken by the participants were also central in the analysis as many of the narratives were linked to back to the photos. The photos were seen and interpreted by the participants as an important representation of significant events in their personal lives. It is clear that in some of the depictions of themselves, the participants resisted, subverted and challenged the existing popular norms of hegemonic masculinity that are dominant within the township context of Alexandra. Contradictions and complexities were also of particular interest in analysis. Some of the participants were contradicted and resisted certain voices of masculinity, so data analysis involved a close examination of how they engaged in contesting hegemonic and non-hegemonic versions of masculinity.

## Findings and discussion

### ***Participants' life stories of absent fathers and the presence of mothers as positive role models***

It is perhaps significant to mention that although the participants had taken photos of cars, clothes, cell phones, girls and friends during the study, none had photos of their fathers. Despite this, the participants spent a lot of time talking about their disappointment in growing up without father figures and the positive role that their mothers played in their lives. The participants also reflected on their own experiences of being fathers currently and experiences of working as young black men.

### ***Story of Simon***

Simon was a 16-year-old boy at the time of the first interview in 2007, and 26 years-old at the time of writing this article. In total, the researcher has conducted thirteen interviews with Simon since 2007. He is the last born in a family of nine children and does not share the same father as his other siblings, who are older than him. He narrated that he grew up without knowing his father, but was very close to his two brothers, whom he described as his second fathers: *"So my brothers, I take them like my fathers, my second fathers. I never had that opportunity to like sit with my father but my brothers were able to fill up that space of my father."*

In the above narrative, Simon asserted that he sees his brothers as positive replacements for his absent father. Here the status of *fatherhood* is not limited to the biological process but to the social role that his brothers play in filling his father's place as suggested in Richter and Morrell (2006). In African families, fatherhood is a collective social responsibility for all male members of the household (for example, brothers) and other members of the extended family including grandparents and uncles (Mkhize, 2006; Richter & Morrell, 2006). All these male figures play an important role in socialising adolescent boys on what it means to be a boy. Although, some of these practices have been affected by urbanisation and the rise of nuclear family structures, it seems that this conception is still part of Simon's meaning-making. These male figures (his two brothers) were able to fill the void that has been left by his absent father. He sees his brothers as his positive male role models and central figures in his life. In the follow-up interviews, Simon spoke about the role his brothers played in helping him develop and embrace *alternative* voices of masculinity that were not risk-taking.

Two months after our first interview, I received a call from Simon to tell me that one of his brothers had been shot dead in Alexandra Township. Firearms play a significant role in the perpetration of violence in South Africa. In 1994 firearms were used in 41 per cent of all murders in South Africa; and this increased to 49.3 per cent in 2000 (Kirsten, 2008). Although gun deaths have halved since the introduction of the Firearms Control Act (FCA) in 2000, gun violence remains a significant threat, with 18 people shot and killed daily in South Africa (Pillay-van Wyk et al, 2016). It has been found in these studies that young black men were more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of gun violence (Seedat et al, 2009; Ratele, 2013). Circumstances surrounding the shooting and killing of Simon's brother were not clear. It was mentioned that he was hit by a stray bullet on his way home in Alexandra Township. In my follow-up interview with Simon to discuss his brother's death, he said with considerable emotion that losing his brother was like losing his father: "*You still remember when I talked to you the last time I told you that I see my brothers as my fathers. Yeah, now I feel like I lost another father.*"

Other follow-up individual sessions were held with Simon to debrief him regarding the death of his brother. It is important to note that the researcher is a qualified Counselling Psychologist, which helped him to contain the participants' feelings and emotions. However, it is also important to note that it was not always easy to respond to the participants' emotions as a Psychologist and still fulfil the role of the researcher. Overall, debriefing and making follow-ups provided useful data on the emotional world of the participants, which also facilitated a deeper understanding about their feelings, relationships and difficulties in their everyday lives. Reflecting

on his feelings after his brother's death, Simon was clear that he did not see 'anything wrong' with men crying, defying the dominant view that men should be stoic and emotionless (Brannon, 1976; Bennett, 2007). For him, crying was an expression of his healthy masculinity. He asserted that the loss of his brother, whom he knew and loved, re-evoked his deep feeling of missing his father, whom he had never met. He still expressed a desire to meet him:

*"I do not want to have that tight relationship with him, but I would like to meet him. By any chance if he comes back it is not like I am going to hate him or anything. I would forgive him, simple! But then it would not be like the same. It's not going to be like back to normal, happily ever after. No it can't be like that because he wasn't there."*

Simon said that his mother encouraged him to forget his absent father because he was not going to visit, as he had never done so in all the years since he was born. Simon explained that it was not easy to stop thinking of his absent father due to his recurring fantasy of wishing to meet him:

*"Like I used to ask my mother, is he a nice guy? And my mother used to say negative things about him. And then at times I used to say maybe she is saying this because he does not live with me and all that. But I think I am starting to believe those things that he was not such a great guy."*

Padi et al (2014), Nduna (2014) and Manyatshe and Nduna (2014) found that many mothers often struggle to talk to their children about absent fathers and answer all the questions that their teenage children ask. Despite lack of satisfactory answers from his mother, Simon described his mother as a hardworking person and he also reported that she had managed to support all of her eight children without help. Consequently, he saw his mother as his role model: *"I would not be who I am if it was not for my mother. I can say she is my hero."* His mother was a central figure in his life and his statement suggested that he did not feel any sense of emptiness in respect of his absent father because his mother was a present figure in his life. This sentiment is contrary to the existing literature, which tends to present single motherhood as a source of emotional problems for many adolescent boys (Garbarino, 1999). The present study confirms Bozalek's (1997) South African based finding that female-headed households can raise well-adjusted adolescent boys. This argument debunks the notion that boy children always need their fathers to develop healthy masculine identities. It is clear in this study and Bozalek's work that boy children do not necessarily require the presence of a father figure as the mainstream literature (Garbarino, 1999; Fagan & Bernd, 2007) normally states that adolescent boys without father figures are at high risk of

developing behavioural problems which involve risky behaviours. Simon's narrative as well as other participants in the study asserted that their single mothers play positive roles in their lives. This experience and how they related with their mothers facilitated deeper reflections for them wanting to be *different* men as compared to their absent fathers. For example, during one of our interviews, Simon spoke about his wish to be a different kind of father compared to his absent father:

*"I want to be a father that is always there for his son, if I have a son. I want to be always, always, always, there. I want to spend most of my time with my child. Even if I work on Saturdays and Sundays I would make time. Whatever job I do I must make time for my child. Even if I work a simple job 8 to 5. Even if I have work to do I must make time to ask, what did you do at school today and all that?"*

When asked why he wished to have a boy child, Simon replied:

*"to relive that life, refill that space, re-act that life, making my son me and I would be my father. But then acting it the way I would have loved it to be. Not the way it would have been, but acting it the way I would have loved it to be."*

In the two extracts above, Simon speaks about the importance of fathers spending time with their children and argues that children need paternal interest, attention, love and care. He seems to embrace an alternative understanding of fatherhood – that it is not only the mother's duty to assist children to manage their daily lives but that the father should also make time to bond with his children and engage with their emotional needs and concerns. Simon was highly reflective in our conversations. He attributed his critical insight to the fact that we met regularly over a period of 13 interviews in total. He asserted that his wish is to have a baby boy. He reflected in his narrative that having a baby boy would give him the opportunity to fill the gap caused by his own unmet emotional needs of growing up without his father. His view was that being a good father would also give him the opportunity to act in the way he would have wanted his absent father to treat him. He would compensate for the absence of his father by being a good father himself later when he has children. This is a clear indication that despite his mother's presence, Simon was still missing his absent father, hence his wish to meet him or have a baby boy later in life. He had a lot of internal tensions and contradictions, which seemed to have caused an emotional turmoil. He disclosed in one of the follow-up individual interviews that he was feeling down and also felt that he was losing direction in life as he was hanging out with 'wrong' peers (male friends who were smoking and drinking). In 2015, Simon was arrested and his court case is yet to be finalized. He is an awaiting prisoner in one of the prisons in Johannesburg. The researcher was still making arrangements to visit him in prison when this article was being written.



**Photo 1: Martin's mother**

### ***The story of Martin in being a good father***

Martin was 16-years old when I first interviewed him in 2007 and currently he is a 25-year old. In total, we had 14 individual interviews. Like Simon, he also grew up without a father figure but three of his brothers also served as his positive male figures. His mother was also a central figure in his life. He had photos of his mother in the album (see the inset photo). This is what he said about his mother when we spoke about the photo.

**Martin:** *“This is a photo of my mother. She is the one who made me the way I am today. And I admire her. I thank her for what she has done for me. She is the one who has been taking care of me and telling me how one should live. Because now I am able to cook, I know how to do my chores at home. She is the one who*

*would tell me that Martin do this, and this is how to do it. She taught me step by step until I got to know everything. So that when she is not around I could do things myself. ... I also talk to her about girls and other things. She says that I should not be scared. She tells me that once I get involved with a girlfriend I should know what the consequences would be if I do something. She tells me to take care of me. Those are the things that she tells me. But she knows that – each and every time when I have a girlfriend - I would come with her to her and say mama this is so and so. And maybe she would see that that girl is well behaved and has manners. That is what I do. If I separate with that girl I would tell her that this is what is happening with that girl. She tells me about life that if you fall into such a thing you must know that you will have to be responsible for it. Those are the things she tells me, including about HIV/AIDS and condoms.”*

Like Simon, he asserted that his mother also played a significant role in shaping his identity and helping him to acquire a positive sense of self. Mothers as argued earlier were described as positive role models, especially in providing guidance and talking to their sons about sensitive topics, such as sex, HIV/AIDS, condoms and girlfriends. And like other boys in the study, Martin also spoke about wanting to be a different father as compared to his absent father. He excitedly called me in 2015 to say his girlfriend was pregnant. We met and spoke about this.

**Researcher:** *“So you also go to gynaecologists?”*

**Martin:** *“I do go. I have to support her. I think I’ve learnt that when my mother told me; ‘you know what as women we tend to be fathers again. We play two parts of being a parent. You can also do that, to be a mother at some point – in that if your partner needs you - you have to be there. Do not say she has to go alone. Give her support and see what happens.’ So I decided to be supportive. From the moment we knew about the pregnancy we went together to the gynaecologist, went for check-ups. And everything is fine.”*

**Researcher:** *“And do you know the child’s gender?”*

**Martin:** *“It’s a boy.”*

**Researcher:** *“How do you feel about that?”*

**Martin:** *It’s nice. Because I think it’s every man’s dream to have a first-born as a boy.”*

**Researcher:** *“So you’d prefer to have a boy?”*

**Martin:** *“Yes. That was my wish, and God answered my prayers and gave me a boy.”*

Martin spoke about the importance of being supportive to his pregnant girlfriend and that they went together to see doctors for check-ups and scans. It is through this support that Martin was defying the dominant depiction of men as absent in supporting their partners (Makiwane et al, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). It is often argued that many young men refuse to accept paternity of their children or be supportive of their girlfriends (Makiwane et al, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). They often leave their partners once they fall pregnant (Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). However, Martin was actively involved in supporting his girlfriend because he did not want her to feel she was alone during the pregnancy. He wanted to be a responsible and supportive partner. It appears that Martin’s mother still plays a significant role in his life as a young adult man. She encouraged him to be supportive to his pregnant girlfriend. Like Simon, his fantasy was to have a boy child and asserted that his prayers were answered because his child was a boy. It is possible that this desire to have boy children is associated with a psychoanalytic argument [see Blos (1985); & Diamond (1986; 1998, 2005)] that some men approach the birth of their children filled with all their fantasies and fears about their own childhood like the case of Simon earlier. Fatherhood may allow them to resolve intrapsychic conflicts and early childhood



**Photo 2: Martin carrying his son**

memories of a father role model they were denied. Francis (1997) argues that the need to have a boy child may also be associated with gender conversation that in other cultures boy children are more valued than girl children. However, the need to have boy children amongst the participants was not particularly informed by cultural beliefs. Having a boy child was a preference but they would also have been happy to have girl children as some of the participants had girl children and were extremely happy to raise them.

After his boy child was born, I had a follow-up interview with Martin. He reflected that being a father has re-evoked old memories of growing up without his father. He asserted that he wants his child to grow up under different circumstances

as compared to his own upbringing. He spoke at length about helping his partner to take care of their child. At that time, he had paid *lobola* (bride's wealth) to her partner's family and they were living together with their newly born son. Photo 2 is of Martin and his son.

In talking about the picture, Martin asserted that it is important for fathers to provide their children with love and care beyond buying them food and clothes. He spoke about spending time with his son and carrying him in the house while his partner is busy with other household duties which he also assists with when she is busy with their son. He spoke about cooking and changing his son's nappies. He asserted that his involvement in household duties was a proof that he is a different man and not a traditional man who believes it is the duty of the woman to cook and look after the children. Four other participants were also fathers at the time of writing this article. They also spoke about the importance of meeting their children's emotional needs by just being there for them. They were all invested in being good, caring and loving fathers. Their voices also represented a paradigm shift with how these young men were defining and making sense of their positionality as fathers.



**Photo 3: Themba's dream car**

### **Work life**

All the participants were young adolescent boys when I met them in 2007. At that time, many spoke about education as an investment for the future. Some of the photos in their narratives at that time included cars and big houses. In talking about Photo 3 (above) in 2007, Themba said: *“This is my dream car and house when I complete my matric [final year of high school] and start working. Yeah, it is hard now because other boys are teasing me that I’m [a] bookworm but I don’t care because this is about my future.”*

Many of the participants were future oriented as schoolboys. Therefore, in order to achieve their aspirations, they resisted any involvement in risk-taking behaviours. It is not surprising that a total of 28 (out of 32 of the participants) managed to complete their matric. However, many were not able to pursue tertiary education due to financial constraints – only six managed to complete tertiary qualifications. Access to tertiary education in South Africa is limited to the few, which was highlighted in the #FeesMustFall protests (Langa, 2017). Despite this, some participants were able to make their own successes and resisting dominant stereotypes of young black men in the townships as school drop-outs and involved in crime and gangsterism. Narratives about experiences of work life and creating their own job opportunities were also shared in the follow-up



**Photo 4: The entrance of the bookshop owned by Peter**



**Photo 5: Books inside Peter's bookshop**

interviews, as highlighted in the life stories below.

### ***Life story of bookshop owner***

Peter was also one of the adolescent boys who participated in the study. He was 16-years old when I met him in 2007. He is currently 27-years old. In total, we had nine individual interviews. He narrated that after completing matric he did not have money to go to the university. He then volunteered to work at the Red Cross. While working there, he got a job at Juta bookshop as a sales representative. He worked at Juta for four years and then decided to open his own bookshop in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, where he sells books to university students (see photos 4 and 5).

**Peter:** *“These are the photos of my bookshop. Yeah, the journey has not been easy to reach this point of my life but I’m happy that things are going well. After completing matric I was frustrated that I did not have money to go to the university but I now have my own bookshop and selling books to university students.”*

Peter narrated that despite the lack of financial support to pursue his tertiary studies, he was happy that he has managed to make a better life for himself without resorting to crime. He asserted that “this dispels this stereotype that all boys in Alex commit crime or steal”. He wishes to grow his bookshop business.

**Peter:** *“I managed to get NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) Accreditation (so that he can easily sell books to university students and he can claim*

his money from NFSAS). So for next year, everything will be well. And I do not want to be based on a campus, but I can always be opposite a campus. I saw an advantage of being outside a campus; you attract many customers. Because where I am, it is kind of a centre of Braamfontein on Smit and Rissik Street. Gautrain passengers pass there. I just have to work on capital and get a bigger shop. But at the same place; brand it so that it can be more visible. That's it!"

**Researcher:** "Is it a big space?"

**Peter:** "Almost the size of this office. But the rent is killing me; it's R4000.00."

**Researcher:** "And it is hard to find places in Braamfontein!"

**Peter:** "It's very hard. I like the place because I've been there since 2013. So if I move here I will loss my customers."

Peter said that there are challenges that he encountered as an emerging businessman. He asserted that one of the main challenges is lack of capital to grow his business. He however mentioned that he has developed new strategies such as helping other young people to officially register their businesses.

**Peter:** "A lot has changed indeed. People would come to the workshop and say do you guys do business plans? Do you guys register companies? So those were [automated] services I am doing. So I now register companies, I help people with BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and all those things."

**Researcher:** "Do you register businesses?"

**Peter:** "Yes."

**Researcher:** "How much do you charge?"

**Peter:** "It's very affordable, R750.00. Those are the services I am doing."

**Researcher:** "So hustling."

**Peter:** "I hustle opportunities than to sit and start feeling sorry for myself."

The current statistics show that unemployment amongst the youth is on the increase and estimated to be at 36% (South African Statistics, 2017). Many studies (Seedat et

al, 2009; Ratele, 2013; Langa & Masuku, 2015) reveal that there is a strong link between unemployment and violent crime that some young men get involved in. However, Peter and his peers vehemently rejected the dominant image of boys in Alexandra as violent and involved in gangs. Referring to stereotypes of race and class, Jensen (2008) found that people tend to associate black adolescent boys with gangs, crime and violence. For Peter, hustling meant starting his own bookshop business and helping other young people start their own businesses. He was future-orientated and ambitious to achieve certain career goals. In this study it was evident that participants such as Peter, who embraced alternative and non-violent voices of masculinity, generally displayed a high degree of self-reflection and insight to think about the self and the world around them. Pursuing careers was seen by this group of young men as an investment in the future and as a possible means to breaking the cycle of poverty in their lives in Alexandra Township.

### ***Life story of hairstylist***

Marcus currently works as a hairstylist. In total, we had fifteen individual interviews. He often reminds me of our first interview in 2007 when he mentioned that he wanted to be a hairdresser. The following extract is from this first interview I did with him in 2007.

**Marcus:** *“I want to be a hairdresser when I complete my matric.”*

**Researcher:** *“Does this say anything about your identity?”*

**Marcus:** *“Yes. People would think that he is a hairdresser, he is gay or something. They do not understand that in life you need to have a career that you will follow.”*

**Researcher:** *“And you say it also says something, partly; it is not that it’s because of your identity. When I was asking you about who you are and all that, you did not say anything about your identity as a gay boy?”*

**Marcus:** *“No, I am not gay. I am Marcus, a person who likes people, and I am bright.”*

**Researcher:** *“I mean when you are a hairdresser people automatically think you are gay.”*

**Marcus:** *“Most people think that you have chosen to be a hairdresser, and most hairdressers are gay.”*

**Researcher:** *“And you say you are not?”*

**Marcus:** *“I am not [gay].”*

First, I need to acknowledge that I went into this interview in 2007 with an agenda of wanting to find out whether Marcus was *gay* or not because other boys involved in the research told me that Marcus was *gay* and was not supposed to be involved in the project as this project was only for *boys*. I guess these boys telling me about Marcus being *gay* revealed how boys police each other in terms of sexualities (Britton, 1990; Davison, 2007). It is therefore important that strict boundaries are maintained in research as *gay* boys are subjected to homophobic attacks within the school environment (Pascoe, 2007). My questions in the above extract reveal that I was explicitly pushing Marcus to say something about his sexual identity. With hindsight and self-reflection now, I was also able to uncover my own prejudices in associating certain occupations (for example, hairdressing) with being *gay*. In the interview, Marcus denied that he was *gay*, “No, I am not [*gay*]”. He said that he knew that the other boys at school thought he was *gay*, but he was not bothered because he knew he was not. However, five years after leaving high school, in one of our follow-up interviews, Marcus disclosed that he was *gay*. He said that he was not ready to tell anyone else about his sexuality while he was still at school because the school environment was hostile and homophobic towards *gay* boys. He asserted that he felt safe to disclose his sexuality to me, as I have been non-judgmental in our interactions since we met while he was still at high school. He reflected that the research process has helped him to think and introspect about many things in his life. At the time of writing, 27-year-old Marcus was working at a salon in Sandton as a hairstylist after completing a diploma in Cosmetology at the College of Johannesburg. He felt liberated that he had come out about his sexuality as a *gay* man and acknowledged that our follow-up interviews had made him feel safe enough to reflect about himself and had built his confidence to come out. He asserted he was happy about being *gay*, especially his job of being a hairstylist. Marcus took Photos 6 and 7 concerning his job as a hairdresser.

**Marcus:** *“Yeah, I can say I’m living my dream. It was in 2007 when I told you I want to be a hairdresser and we laughed about it. Now here I’m working at the salon and making hairs and nails of famous people of TV [mentioned names of celebrities*



**Photo 6: Hairstyle from one of Marcus’s clients**



**Photo 7: Cover page of 'Nubian Bride Magazine'**

who go to their salon]. I was involved in the make-up of models for **Nubian Bride Magazine** [Photo 7] and many other important events, including Mercedes Benz Fashion week. Yes, it is me rubbing shoulders with who's who of South Africa and people that many of you see on TV. I can make their hairs and nails."

On the whole, Marcus was happy about his job as a hairdresser. For him, this work was a dream come true as he always wanted to be a hairdresser since he was in high school. These narratives of work life demonstrate the journey that many of the participants travelled to reach

their current positions. They all reflected that it was not an easy process for them to get their current jobs due to the high rate of unemployment in the country. However, despite these obstacles, their perseverance and determination helped them to secure their current jobs. Many participants challenge dominant discourses that tend to depict young black men from townships such as Alexandra as aggressive, violent and involved in gangs. Their life stories provide alternative possibilities for the future, for development and for change. Similar to sentiments expressed in Bradbury and Miller's (2010: 689) work, many participants in this study argued that follow-up interviews provided an opportunity for them to reflect and "think beyond the confines of their limited worlds and to envision the range of possible paths their lives could follow". Follow-up interviews were used to offer some guidance about possibilities that the participants could follow in realising their career goals. Furthermore, I used my clinical skills as a counselling psychologist to contain some participants and help them deal with feelings of disappointment and other challenges of life. This reinforces the argument that Ratele (2013) makes about the need to create safe spaces for young black men to talk about themselves and to reflect on their identities. Such safe spaces may contribute immensely to the development of positive masculinities that are non-violent, non-aggressive and future-oriented in an egalitarian way. It is also through initiatives such as this study that young black men may begin to imagine new lives that are characterised by positive futures.

## Concluding remarks

Photography provided the participants with the opportunity to share their detailed life stories. This research methodology has proved to be a novel way of allowing participants to be champions of their own narratives in terms of events that they chose to focus on and share in the interviews. Numerous life stories were shared about the experiences of growing up without father figures. Despite this lack, however, the participants appeared to be reflective about their inner self, which proved to be a protective factor against involvement in delinquent and other risk-taking behaviours. This contradicts the ways in which young black men are often presented in the mainstream literature. The present study also showed that many mothers are able to fill the void left by absent fathers and play a significant role in raising well-adjusted boys. These boys value their mothers' contribution in their lives, especially in guiding them to navigate challenges of life and look up to them as role models. Participants attributed their positive self-image in terms of the career positions to their mothers, who instilled in them a sense of perseverance and determination to be *different* young black men who are able to imagine different future possibilities. At the time of writing this paper, many participants so far were able to live up to the ideals of fatherhood, which for some were a psychological attempt to distance themselves from anything associated with their own absent fathers. All of them emphasised that they did not want to be like their own fathers who were absent in their lives. It seems that the lack of a positive fathering experience engendered this desire to become different fathers. For these participants, being a good father was a dream come true, as many had shared these fantasies of fatherhood with me when they were still in high school.

Achieving specific career opportunities also allowed the participants to develop positive self-identities. Their attitudes represent a major shift towards embracing progressive notions of what it means to be a young black man in prioritising opportunities and careers. This suggests that some of the young black men are slowly breaking away from traditional conceptions of boyhood and manhood. The participants evidently had the capacity to reflect about what their relationship with their absent fathers, support provided by their mothers, and birth of their children meant for them, their identities and their future.

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