

# Gender Violence in Poverty Contexts

The educational challenge

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## PART III

## Negotiating gender violence

101

## Illustrations

- 7 'You don't want to die. You want to reach your goals':  
alternative voices among young Black men in urban  
South Africa

103

- 8 Young men and structural, symbolic and everyday violence  
in Lima, Peru

118

ANA MARIA BULLER

- 9 Sexuality, sexual norms and schooling: choice–coercion  
dilemmas

135

JO HESLOP, JENNY PARKES, FRANCISCO JANUARIO,  
SUSAN SABAA, SAMWEL OANDO AND TIM HESS

## PART IV

## Policy and interventions

151

- 10 From assets to actors: reassessing the integration of girls  
in anti-gang initiatives in Rio de Janeiro

153

POLLY WILDING

- 11 Violent lives and peaceful schools: NGO constructions of  
modern childhood and the role of the state

168

KAREN WELLS

- 12 Gender violence, teenage pregnancy and gender equity  
policy in South Africa: privileging the voices of women  
and girls through participatory visual methods

183

RELEBOHILE MOLETSANE, CLAUDIA MITCHELL AND  
THANDI LEWIN

- 13 Conclusion: emerging themes for the field of gender,  
violence, poverty and education

197

JENNY PARKES

Figures		
5.1	Children's experiences of physical punishment in last typical week by cohort	73
5.2	Children experiencing physical punishment in last typical week of school, aged 14–15 years	73
5.3	Children experiencing physical punishment in last typical week of school, aged 7–8 years	74
13.1	The production and perpetuation of violence	198
13.2	Mediators/mechanisms for countering violence	200

## Tables

2.1	Global declarations on violence: contested definitions	13
3.1	Some key ethical considerations in research involving children	39

## 7 'You don't want to die. You want to reach your goals'

Alternative voices among young Black men in urban South Africa

*Ariane De Lannoy and Sharlene Swartz*

In South Africa, popular media and academic readings alike have long portrayed young Black men as offenders, immoral, disconnected from the older generations and involved in violent crime, including gender based violence (Wood and Jewkes 2001; Sangar and Hadland 2008; Clowes *et al.* 2010; Letko-Everett 2012; Ward *et al.* 2012a). News of the many brutal acts of violence continue to feed what Posel (2005) has termed the 'scandal of manhood', the problematising of (especially Black) men in post-apartheid South Africa. Much of the violence literature sees young men as subscribing to, or performing, a violent hegemonic masculinity that arises out of struggle and is aimed at dominating other, more vulnerable members of society: children, women, or other less powerful men (Morrell 1998). Such analyses seldom include the experiences of those young men who choose not to join the ranks of 'troubled' men around them, nor do they address the dilemmas and complexities faced by those who do at some point in time engage with violence. Drawing on a longitudinal, in-depth study, in this chapter we argue for the need to hear and understand 'alternative masculinities' in post-apartheid South Africa, and to bear in mind that even hyper-masculine, violent identities are fluid, and dependent on context. It is in that fluidity that (additional) opportunities for change may lie.

### **Deprivations, aspirations and masculine identities in post-apartheid South Africa**

Hegemonic masculinities are dominant cultural images of what it means to be 'a real man', and include being successful, respected, in control, tough and providers for their family (Morrell 2001: 7; Morrell *et al.* 2012). These ideals are created in men's immediate local environments and through more globally connected institutions such as mass media and corporate world advertisements, influencing the ways in which men construct a desired male identity for themselves (Connell 1995; Salo 2003). In a context of severe levels of inequality and deprivation, the position of 'a real man' and the respect that comes with it are not easily gained through traditional pathways such as education, high income jobs or middle-class lifestyles that boast beautiful houses and fancy cars. Hegemonic masculinities may

also be earned and defended through violent behaviour, acted out towards the more vulnerable in society.

South Africa's discriminatory apartheid past led to the social, political and economic exclusion of millions of those deemed 'non-white'. Spatial segregation by race meant that vast numbers of people classified as 'Coloured' or 'Black' were forcibly removed from inner cities and suburbs that were proclaimed 'Whites only', to be left in under-serviced townships on the cities' peripheries. Racist rules and regulations restricted free movement of people of colour, their access to education and the labour market. The situation left Black lower-class men grappling to create different ways of asserting themselves (Xaba 2001). Morrell (2001) indicates how, throughout South Africa's history, hegemonic masculinities have therefore become related to violence, which is aimed at creating fear and demanding an instant recognition of status and respect.

The post-1994, democratically elected ANC government installed regulations and policies aimed at undoing the inequalities of the past. The education system is now officially unified, presented as a cornerstone of the democracy and a means to create a more equal society. Labour market restrictions have been lifted and an extended social welfare system of grants and pensions now helps to alleviate the worst kinds of poverty. The country's dominant discourse emphasises potential upward mobility for those previously discriminated against, supported by state-led interventions such as Affirmative Action and Black Economic Empowerment. Nevertheless, high levels of poverty and inequality remain. Young people are especially vulnerable, with high levels of school dropout and unemployment (Census 2001; Cloete 2009; National Youth Development Agency 2011). Violence and homicide are commonplace in young lives, and leading causes of death among young men in the country (Burton 2008), with young Black men most affected (Swartz *et al.* 2012). With surroundings and institutions that do not offer the necessary kinds of support, strategies and possibilities for upward mobility, it is often assumed that 'many young Black males must... look at their futures... with a sense of desperate manhood' (Ratele 2001: 249). Repeatedly, work on the position of young men in contemporary South Africa has linked barriers to upward mobility and the development of oppositional and violent forms of masculinity (Wood and Jewkes 2001; Xaba 2001; Noonan 2012; Panday *et al.* 2012).

We too in previous work have noted that continued inequality and deprivation leave Black youth with little social and economic autonomy, whilst having high aspirations for a better, successful and respectable life. These ideals tap into the post-apartheid discourse of 'equal opportunities for all' (Swartz *et al.* 2012; Soudien 2003, 2007).

We have argued that the continued disempowerment of the majority of youth, alongside the ambitious aspirations, can easily lead to a sense of alienation and exclusion from the larger democratic experiment. This alienation lies at the basis of young men's and women's engagement with what Swartz<sup>1</sup> (2010) has termed *Heasi style*, which 'comprises violence, sex, alcohol and substance abuse, as well as music, recreation, fashion and other diversions' (Swartz *et al.* 2012: 28) and is

an expression of young adults' attempts to create a sphere of belonging at least within the township environment. We have argued that Black township youth engage with alternative ways of 'becoming', and alternative networks of belonging to the broader South African collective while in fact they remain excluded. *Ikasi style* then, is a reaction against and perpetuation of the 'woundedness' of the South African state (Swartz *et al.* 2012) that makes especially young men link the use of violence to issues of 'respect' (see also Oduro *et al.* 2012: 283). This argument brings us close to the literature that describes the formation of a violent hegemonic masculinity in a context of deprivation, and that views gang affiliation and violent crime as young men's attempts to create a sense of belonging and status (Billy 1999; Ward *et al.* 2012b).

In this chapter, however, we examine the experiences of young men who, despite seeing their 'dreams deferred', despite the pressures and attractions of *Ikasi style*, engage in a precarious process of trying to define themselves in ways that are not, no longer, or not only related to anti-social behaviour. We argue that the strong emphasis on violent hegemonic masculinities underlying much of the work on young men and gang affiliation 'fails to capture masculine diversity' (Morrell 2001: 3; see also Walsh and Mitchell 2006). It may therefore overlook the identity creation processes of young men who try to find a way of belonging also within the broader South African context (Kinnes 2000; Pinnock 1982; Samara 2005).

This chapter begins to address this gap. It illustrates a number of ways in which young men negotiate conflicting masculine identities in a context of poverty, blocked opportunities and the temptations of 'Ikasi'. We use Bourdieu's and Giddens' theories of identity creation as theoretical tools to engage with the narratives of four young men. Before presenting the data, we introduce the empirical study itself and consider the theoretical frame used in this chapter.

### Researching young men in South Africa's townships

The data we draw on are from a longitudinal study on young men and women in low-income townships on the peripheries of Cape Town (De Lannoy 2008), which used both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the ways in which Black township youth make decisions about their education and construct their identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Here we report on a subsection of the work, and draw on interview and observational material collected over a two-year period (2005 and 2006) with 20 young people aged between 14 and 22, who were selected on the basis of having made significant decisions regarding their schooling the year before the study started. A period of collaboration with the non-governmental organisation Southern African Environmental Program (SAEP), which supports youth who wish to rewrite their final matric examinations, led to one young woman being invited to participate in the study. Other participants were selected using snowballing. They all shared comparable socio-economic backgrounds, school circumstances and peer and family pressures.

De Lannoy conducted interviews in English, with occasional help with translation from a fieldwork assistant when language proved a problem. Being a foreign (Belgian), White woman conducting research in African areas may have affected the research, potentially having 'enabled some things to happen and perhaps closed down other things' in the course of the project (Parker 2005: 30). To help mitigate this, care was taken to use a variety of fieldwork methods over an extended period of time, including individual and group interviews, alongside observational work. Informed by the young adults' frequent complaints that there was 'nothing to do' in the townships, participants were regularly invited to accompany the researcher to local activities including hip hop jam sessions, theatre and beach outings.

The conceptual framework for analysing the qualitative data bridges sociological and psychological perspectives on youth identity and school engagement (see De Lannoy 2011). Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical work on class reproduction, the analysis looked at different forms of 'capital' or resources available to young people. Bourdieu (1977) argued that cultural, social and symbolic capital, alongside economic capital, influence one's life chances and social outcomes. Children from lower-class backgrounds, he argued, lack the necessary kinds of 'capital' to enable upward social mobility. They lack the requisite knowledge and information ('cultural capital') of the educational and labour market to make informed choices. They lack the financial means ('economic capital'), the status or prestige ('symbolic capital') and the networks ('social capital') that would provide them with more leverage to be allowed into the better educational institutes or jobs. Bourdieu argued that young people born into a lower-class environment are aware of the barriers surrounding them; they therefore adjust their aspirations downwards and change their behaviour accordingly. However, Giddens (1991) asserts that the process of identity creation is 'a trajectory of development from the past to an anticipated future', consisting of 'a complex diversity of choices to be made (with) . . . little help as to which options should be selected' (1991: 80). He argues that even in situations of deprivation, individuals retain the ability to explore options for different life paths. However, when making such choices, especially in the absence of clear guidelines, individuals are confronted with 'rational doubt' (1991: 86): Giddens claims it is impossible to escape the thought that the strategy or lifestyle chosen is but one of the possible options available, creating always a level of anxiety.

Bourdieu's and Giddens' theories are useful for understanding the endless processes of trial and tribulations, doubt and 'rudderlessness' that have been described in earlier work on the lives of Cape Town's poorest township youth (Henderson 1999;<sup>2</sup> Ramphele 2002<sup>3</sup>). For example, in her study of township youth at the time of the transition, Henderson (1999) found young adults trying out various life paths in their search for identity. Some, who consciously attempted to find better schools outside the townships, were accused by others of being a 'sell out', no longer committed to the struggle for freedom for all. Henderson discussed the range of responses:

A social situation characterised by fragile social relationships demands of children that they be dexterous, resourceful, adaptable, that they take responsibility. Such dexterity can however lead to a lack of focus, a mercurial adaptation to circumstance and a lack of future orientation. (1999: 32)

Our narratives similarly reveal the 'endlessness' in the process of trial and error as young men juggle, alternate or 'try out' different types of manhood. The following sections present the cases of four young men, Thando, Nezile, Lungile and Lutho, all living in the sprawling, low-income townships of Khayelitsha and Nyanga. Both areas rank high on the country's crime statistics. Unemployment rates are 51 per cent and 56 per cent respectively, and fewer than 25 per cent of youth in the areas have completed their high school examinations (Statistics South Africa 2012). The four cases have been chosen from the larger sample as powerful illustrations of the complex realities South African youth face. They illustrate the strong attraction of violent crime and gang affiliation, but also demonstrate how individual young men attempt to resist these temptations.

### **Juggling identities in a context of deprivation and violence**

#### *You don't want to die, you want to reach your goals*

Thando was 19 years old at the time of our first interview. He was living in Nyanga, approximately 26 km out of the city centre. He was born and spent his childhood in the rural Eastern Cape with his grandparents, but had moved to Cape Town at the age of 12 'to get a better education', and came to live with his mother, half brother, aunt and his aunt's children. A year later his mother and both grandparents died. His aunt took on the care for both himself and his younger brother Lungile, but the family was barely managing to keep heads above water. The little income there was consisted of the rent charged to a befriended family for using a backyard room. The main house looked in desperate need of care, with visible holes in the ceiling and doors hanging without hinges. Conversations with a neighbouring home-based care organisation indicated that Thando and his brother regularly went without food.

Thando described how stressed and lost he felt after the loss of his close family members, and he visibly trembled when he spoke about his mother:

Sometimes you lose loved ones, you feel left alone; you don't feel good anymore . . . Because I have no mother and all my friends have mothers . . . My mama was always on my side you know, always had good impressions [of] me.

He talked about how losing her had made his life much more uncertain and how it had increased his responsibilities to levels that were clearly too high for him to carry alone. The impoverished situation of his aunt's house made him realise that

he not only had to look after himself – ‘buying yourself clothes and food’ – but that he might also have to take on the care of the others in the household:

Sometimes when I look at this home, I think of how many years it will take me to build this home? . . . will I finish this home? Will I build this home? Will I be responsible for my brother and my cousin? After that . . . myself.

The wish to escape his perceived responsibilities, to be independent and not remain stuck in a situation of structural poverty emerged in Thando’s story, when he said: ‘sometimes I wish I had my things, don’t bother no one, just do my thing’. This wish to ‘have his own things’ led him to reflect on the temptation to commit crime:

It’s very hard sometimes because there are a lot of things that are happening. The things that other youngsters do; robbing, sometimes you wanna do robbing [so that you would also have some money] but you think . . . you don’t want to die; you want to reach your goals.

During the two years of the study, however, Thando resisted the attraction of gang affiliation and crime. He maintained a focus on his goals for a better future life. He fostered friendships with young men who had similar ideals in life, concentrated on going to the gym in his spare time, and made conscious choices to stay away from certain friends, as he perceived them as people who might try to ‘corrupt’ him: ‘I talk to them, but they don’t listen to me. Some of them, I don’t walk with them . . . anymore because they gonna corrupt me too’. He maintained a steady focus on his education. He was a learner at one of the local high schools and at the end of his time there, Thando passed the national grade 12 examination. He wished to study further and, through that path, be independent and in a position to take care of others in future. He repeatedly said he wanted to take on his responsibility ‘as a man’ and caregiver in the house, look for a job and help put his brother through school before taking up tertiary education himself.

Thando was very much aware of the restrictions and responsibilities poverty was placing on him. He was aware, also, of the choices he could make – engaging with violent crime, or not, for example. In the absence of any clear guidance from adults in his life, he decided against violent crime and in favour of the long-term oriented life path based on education. His choices were not made without doubt. Thando believed that educational success would offer a route to the masculine requirement to succeed, provide and control, but frequently wondered whether he would ever reach that aspired adult life.

*If someone always calls you stupid, why would you still make an effort?*

One young man in particular had chosen exactly the path Thando spoke of avoiding, embodying aspects of Ikasi style and engaging in crime and violence. At the

start of the study, Nezie was 19 years old and shared a house with his mother, stepfather, stepbrother and the latter’s girlfriend in the sprawling township of Khayelitsha. All adults in the house earned an income and his house was in a considerably better state than that of the other young men in the study, more spacious, well maintained, with working sanitation and electricity. However, Nezie described his home situation as problematic and abusive, with low levels of understanding between him and the adults in the household.

When asked to tell us a little bit more about himself, Nezie almost immediately referred to the place of violence, crime, drugs and weapons in his life. He admired the toughness of older men in the community who ‘had done bad things’, and at the age of 13, he had started smoking drugs and stealing money. At 14, he was ‘introduced to weapons’, and decided he wanted to have his ‘own gang’, the main aim of which was ‘to get known’. He had wanted to gain a position of power, ‘to be someone’ who was known and feared in the area:

The thing is that we wanted to get known . . . like when we enter in a place where they [another gang] are known, everyone would just fear, they are scared. We wanted it to be like that with my gang . . . We wanted to be the most feared, like . . . It’s saying we want to rule every gang there is, be the only gang that is feared even if the other gang comes.

Nezie’s words express an idealised hyper-masculine identity in which power over others is gained through instilling fear. His comments reflected the impact of peer pressure, a violent society and the inability to connect to either his home or school environment. Although he never rejected the potential value of education for upward mobility, he described his own schooling as boring, with frequently absent teachers, or ‘an irritating teacher, and a very slow teacher, or a teacher that is always upset’. He complained that there had been too much theoretical teaching and too little practical work. To make things worse, his mother and stepfather would regularly call him ‘dumb’ or ‘stupid’, conveying that he was not living up to their expectations: ‘And then, if someone always calls you stupid, why would you still make an effort?’

Nezie’s account shows how his attraction to gang life was influenced by his inability to perform well in school, the demoralising language in his home environment, the influence of peers, the seemingly easy access to guns and drugs, and the lack of chances to combine work with studies.

Even then, he told us that he had been trying to quit ‘the life’ lately. Someone had been shot because of him, and he felt guilty. He now also realised the threat to his own life, fearing he might get killed himself. Gang life no longer awarded its promised position of power and success, but increased the anxiety, insecurity and confusion around his life and future possibilities. He said that he was constantly worried that ‘maybe one day, something is going to happen’. He never knew ‘what tomorrow is going to bring’. Yet, while he said that he was now aware of the wrongfulness of crime, he still enjoyed and exerted his position of power among younger friends whom he could introduce to crime:

they gonna do it and I'm not gonna stop them. I like it when they do it also . . . let's say you are walking down the street, I come and rob you. My friends are still here: they don't know about robbing, they don't know that stuff. I rob you. I'm gonna tell them to do it and force them to do it, seeing at the same time that it is wrong, but I want them to do it.

Nezile did take a job later, first as a (badly paid) waiter, and then as a DJ, looking for 'gigs outside of the location [township]'. The physical distance from the troubled area in Khayelitsha seemed to make it easier for him to shift his attention to another desired way of achieving manhood. Moreover, he had revived old ties with an ex-girlfriend who, he said, was 'ambitious, studying and all that. She wants to get something out of life'. He was now considering going to night school to pass his matriculation exam and wondered if, in that way, he would 'one day be the man I want to be. I see myself running a business, me, sitting in my own office'. He made concerted efforts to keep a distance from the friends he used to hang out with: 'cause I told myself that I don't wanna go with the friends that are my age or older than me, you see. 'Cause they are gonna make me do bad things again'.

During the entire period of the study, Nezile experimented with various versions of manhood he could imagine for himself, sometimes inspired by the images presented in the media. Yet he remained uncertain about how his life would eventually work out. Having realised the dead-end road of gang-related power and status, he sought alternative ways to reach the kind of future masculinity to which he aspired. He remained uncertain of whether or not he would succeed by means of education, and how soon that education would pay off:

You see people on the TV, and I saw this advert yesterday, this guy who has a briefcase and a suit and he was driving. So I'm like, if I finished my standards and everything, would I have been that person immediately or would I have to struggle to be that person? . . . so I thought maybe next year I will try again, try to be that person on TV.

While Nezile's shifts in search of one kind of masculinity or another seemed to unfold sequentially in trial and error mode, some young men juggled and shifted between the apparently contrasting identities simultaneously, while others attempted to maintain a more coherent identity, as in the following case of Lutho.

*I am a learner here at school*

Lutho was 15 years old at the time of our first interview. He was born in the rural Eastern Cape and spent a large part of his childhood with his father's family, but when he came on holiday to Cape Town in 2002, he decided to stay. He lived in Khayelitsha with his mother and two younger twin brothers and described their relationship as 'open' and supportive, motivating him to do well at school. The family lived in a small, informal house and survived on the mother's part-time

income and food parcels she received from a local NGO. Lutho recounted how one day a young man in his school had protected the learners from an attack by a gang in which he was at the same time a member:

[A] group of gangsters called Izinyoka [came] to the school, there was a fight and one gangster at the school protected us and tried to stop them. They started shooting at the office and he stopped them.

The young man had stopped the others by saying 'No, I am a learner here at school and I want to protect the school. If you want to kill me, you can kill me, I don't care'.

Lutho's account illustrates how identities are multiple and related to place and space (Rosenberg and Gara 1985). The young man Lutho referred to, juggled his identities as a gangster outside of school, with belonging to a group of non-gang related pupils during school hours. This is a clear example of how gang affiliation does not necessarily imply adherence to an anti-school culture. It also indicates that youth who are considered gangsters can be viewed as friends by their peers. This might especially be the case when they are away from their context of gang-stenism, or when their gangster status may bring benefits, like protection. Lutho says that he considers this young man who protected him at school as his friend, and clarifies that 'maybe there is someone who wants to do something bad to me . . . then I just tell him'.

Walking these thin lines of friendship, Lutho displayed a very strong belief in self-control, being careful not to get too involved with peers who might demand the return of a favour. He explained: 'I don't feel comfortable, because I don't trust, he would kill, maybe he is doing that because there is something he wants from me.' He clarified that he would spend only short periods of time with this friend: 'I will leave on time, I won't stay the whole evening . . . maybe about 30 minutes later I go.' He continued to make it clear that he was not intending to join a gang or become involved in gang-related acts of violence. He hoped to complete high school and continue studying 'something with electricity' so that he could help the people in the communities around him who were living without electricity. For him, education was clearly a path to a better future: 'I think school is important because as you can see nowadays, in order for you to get a good job, you need to get well educated.'

Lutho's ability to 'remain focused' was supported by his social network: friends, church, a supportive home, a cousin who was a doctor and to Lutho a clear example of the kind of positive impact education could have on his life. Lutho described how he and his friends supported each other by talking about school and homework; they spent hours together in the library or church:

We are doing lots of things together like going to the library and going to the church together. And we just sit and talk together, we don't do those bad things or get involved in crime. We support each other and if one of us is having a problem, we help each other.



The support he finds at his church, and his religion, further strengthened his belief in self-efficacy (Bandura 1995), his inner conviction that he could walk his own path. When others tried to convince him to join in criminal activities, he said he 'just ignore(d) them'.

### *I just let them*

Lungile, Thando's 17-year-old half brother, did consider young men who commit serious crimes truly as his friends, and unlike Lutho, he did not ignore them, nor did he choose to 'leave on time'. His support system was weaker than Lutho's and the temptations to hang out with those who engaged in violent crime, stronger. He described how the loss of his mother and grandparents made him sad and lonely, and how the desire to join a gang emerges from loss and a sense of alienation:

You see . . . most of the gangsters don't have parents so some other day it makes me wanna be in a gang and sometimes, I just . . . [think I want] to be hijacking [cars], to smoke tik tik [a local drug] because . . . they're the same as me. They don't have parents.

Even though Lungile identified with those who 'don't have parents' and referred to friends in gangs, he claimed that he did not join in their activities, because he 'see(s) it is wrong. Killing a person is not good'.

He did, however, take care not to distance himself from them openly. His quiet acceptance of their acts of violence and their apparent acceptance of his non-involvement offered him the chance to feel he belonged:

Most of my friends are hijacking . . . and I'm still with them, but I don't do hijacking . . . I can't just discriminate them or . . . I just leave them, I let them do what they do you see, because if I stop them, like I say 'guys, what you're doing is wrong', that . . . it's like I'm a better person to them. It's like I'm making myself a better person to them. So I just let them.

Lungile's positioning towards his friends testifies to the pressure not to stand out and risk evoking feelings of jealousy and envy (cf. Bray *et al.* 2010). If he distinguished himself from the young people with whom he would otherwise identify, Lungile might pay too high a price of social exclusion.

Unlike his older brother Thando, Lungile desired to 'live a fancy life'. Brand name clothes and a nice car were elements through which he wished to express himself yet financial deprivation made that impossible. Between the pull of a 'popular culture' and the wish to remain 'on track' with his education, Lungile looked for ways to balance the two. While his brother chose to stay away from gangsterism, to endure his current situation, to consider – and, where possible, consciously plan – the next steps to be taken in his life, Lungile found it more difficult to reconcile his present situation with his wish to be part of Ikasi style, or what he called 'the trend'. He attempted to accommodate the seemingly

competing goals: he chose to 'walk with his friends', but not to get involved with their crimes. He tried to look for a school which he felt would suit him better than the school he attended, one with more facilities – computer rooms, a library, 'proper sports fields' – that might make his time spent on education more enjoyable and 'less boring'.

### **Conclusion**

The narratives of the young men discussed in this chapter indicate that deciding what kind of man to be in post-apartheid South Africa 'does not come easily' (see also Walker 2005: 235). In some respects, our findings are similar to Walker's (2005), who described the existence of 'alternative (that is, non-violent) masculinities' among young working-class men in Soweto. She sees them as new 'embryonic forms of male selfhood' (2005: 236), shaped in a post-struggle era and clearly tapping into the discourse of possibility in post-apartheid South Africa. Our own and Walker's observations invite us to move beyond viewing young Black men as perpetrators, gangsters, and lacking a vision for the future. All four young men described in this chapter aspired to hegemonic masculine identities of being a successful, respected man, able also to provide for their families and sometimes for their broader communities. In a context of violence, crime and enduring deprivation, however, they faced multiple constraints, and they tried various pathways in order to achieve their aspired manhood. Some, like Nezile, chose to try to gain respect and status through exerting violence and power onto others. Others, like Thando and Lutho, consciously chose to stay away from that path. Nezile's story illustrates, however, that even though the use of violence and crime may be chosen in an attempt to gain a position of respect at one particular time in life, such choices are not static. Decisions around which path to follow are dependent on time and place.

While all four young men lacked the economic capital to enable easy upward mobility, we saw no downward adjustment of aspirations that might be predicted by Bourdieu's theory of class reproduction. While they were well aware of the deprivations in their lives, their aspirations were influenced by a belief in the dominant achievement ideology that regards individual effort and education as the way to success. However, in line with Giddens' theory on identity creation (1991), their choices entailed doubt or anxiety. For some, like Lutho, bolstered by his support network within the family and church, the decision to pursue an education seemed easier than for the others. Others, however, moved between different identities, or created 'in-between' versions that would leave room for adaptation when necessary. Their choices and pathways seemed more precarious and 'fragile', much as Henderson (1999) pointed out about the youth she worked with at the time of the country's transition to democracy. Some, like Thando, feared that choosing a path of education would exclude them from their peer group and communities, and others, like Nezile, doubted whether education would deliver on its promise. This may explain why some took the risky position of 'walking with gangsters' in the present, whilst imagining a future life away from gangs.

For these young men there was a trial and error process of juggling identities, and decisions about which path to follow were made in the absence of clear guidance, amid family breakdown, high levels of unemployment and institutions that do not manage to offer effective support. We do need to acknowledge that we presented findings from a small, unrepresentative sample of youth in Cape Town. Further research would need to explore how applicable these findings are to broader youth cohorts in South Africa, looking very specifically at the ways in which young men construct their aspired male identities and following them for a prolonged period of time along the pathways they try out.

Nevertheless, listening to these young men's aspirations and anxieties has enabled us to start to think about the ways in which various institutions could intervene at several levels in young people's lives. Preliminary suggestions for interventions that can help reduce violence among young men might be to look at the possibilities for strengthening the care structure surrounding them (social and cultural capital), attempting to mitigate the levels of anxiety that come with having to make choices on their own. Within the educational system, clearer guidance around educational and career choices (cultural capital) is needed to help young men think through their future life paths and possibilities within and beyond their 'bounded' contexts. Policies and interventions might bear in mind the fact that young men find it easier to choose against a path of violence and crime if the economic means are available for them to create their aspired male identities. This can inform the thinking around interventions such as the Youth Wage Subsidy or an educational system that would combine apprenticeships with study. Finally, interventions aimed at 'changing men' might be informed by the fact that young men might not need much 'changing', as the possibility for change lies within their own understanding that violence is not or need not be part of their aspired identity.

## Notes

- 1 Swartz (2010) conducted a qualitative study in Cape Town with 37 township youth aged 14 to 20, over a period of 16 months. Her work focused primarily on the moral influences in the lives of young people in Ikasi.
- 2 Henderson (1999) described the lives of 16 young people growing up in the deprived township of New Crossroads, Cape Town. She described youths' social context as characterised by 'fragility' (the low economic standing of their households, their experiences of mobility and caregiving, the violence surrounding them, power dynamics in relationships, and 'senses of self that are continuously being worked upon' (1999: 25–6)). Yet within such contexts of fragility, Henderson stresses the ability of youth to maintain a sense of agency.
- 3 Ramphlele (2002) also documented the lives of 16 young adults, boys and girls, growing up in New Crossroads. She describes in detail the stories of two 'successes': young people who managed to 'make something of themselves' and who managed to get into the stream of upward mobility, despite growing up in a context of extreme poverty, and in a society where institutions such as family and school are often blatantly failing to offer support.

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