Adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality

Yeshe Schepers
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
South Africa
yeshiki@gmail.com

Maia Zway
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
South Africa

ABSTRACT

Adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality are key in understanding high rates of gender and sexual violence; however, research into adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality is lacking in South Africa. Therefore, this project aimed to understand adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality in one low-income community in Cape Town, South Africa. The research was part of a larger study which collected data on the effectiveness of an intervention implemented by a child rights organisation, RAPCAN (Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) in improving knowledge about gender and sexuality. This study explored constructions of gender and sexuality from a feminist, social constructionist theoretical perspective. The research was conducted at a high school in an impoverished Cape Town community. Four focus groups were conducted with learners aged 13 to 17 about their experiences of gender and sexuality. The findings suggest that gender and sexuality are constructed through discourses of power and passivity, where boys are constructed as powerful and girls as passive. In addition, participants challenged the idea of ‘romance’ in heterosexual relationships. This research contributes on practical, theoretical, and methodological levels to the field of gender and sexuality research and practice.

Keywords: adolescents; gender; qualitative research; sexuality; social constructionism; violence

South Africa has extremely high levels of gender and sexual violence. Gender relations and constructions of masculinity and femininity have been found to play an important role in these phenomena. In order to understand these social problems and
to attempt to ameliorate the current situation, it is necessary to investigate gender hierarchies that exist in a multiplicity of spaces, and to examine the constructs and beliefs that produce and preserve inequalities. The present study aims to address some of these issues. The literature review will look at gender and sexual violence in adolescent relationships.

GENDER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

Violence and coerced sex are highly prevalent in South African youth relationships (Wood, Maforah, & Jewkes, 1998; Wood, Lambert, & Jewkes, 2007). In terms of violence perpetration in adolescent relationships, 20.7% of youth in Cape Town admit to having committed violence against their partners, and 37.8% report having experienced violence from a partner (Flisher, Myer, Merais, Lombard, & Reddy, 2007; Wubs et al., 2009).

Several qualitative studies have investigated how violence manifests itself in youth relationships. An issue that emerges overwhelmingly is the normalization of violence, where being assaulted by boyfriends is considered normal and even to be expected, especially in cases where a girl did not want to have sex and needed to be persuaded, or needed to be punished for some perceived indiscretion (Bamberg, 2004; Bhana, 2012; Wood et al., 1998; Wood et al., 2007). These behaviours were often seen by girls and boys as ways of showing love. These practices are deemed acceptable by ideas of men’s superiority and the subsequent need for women to be submissive.

Traditional views on the position of boys and girls in the social hierarchy also dictate that men and boys should be accorded respect, and men should be obeyed without question or argument, including obedience to demands of sex (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, & Rose-Junius, 2005; Petersen, Bhana, & McKay, 2005). Overall, a strong sense of sexual entitlement on the part of men emerged in much of the research. Although these kinds of experiences are considered normative by many adolescent girls and boys, Bhana (2012) describes how many of the girls in her study feared their boyfriends and lacked sexual agency.

The background information provided above has focussed on gender and sexual violence as a concerning social problem which shapes, and is shaped by adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality. It therefore follows that constructions of gender and sexuality need to be understood in order to help combat these problems; however, research into adolescents’ constructions of gender and sexuality is lacking in South Africa. More research is needed on this topic in order to inform what kinds of interventions are needed to address issues of gender violence.
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AIMS

This article explores constructions of gender and sexuality in adolescence in the context of a school-based intervention known as Today’s Children, Tomorrow’s Parents (TCTP). The research was done in collaboration with RAPCAN (Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect). The article explores the following questions: “How do adolescents construct gender and sexuality?” and “How do these constructions shape gender interactions and sexual relations?”

DESIGN AND METHODS

Theoretical framework

We approach the topic of gender and sexuality from a feminist social constructionist theoretical perspective, focusing on the role of language and power relations in constructing social realities (Burr, 1995). Social constructionism is critical of everyday knowledge and truth claims which are taken for granted. In order to understand the social construction of gender, feminist research seeks to conceptualise gender as a means of control through which the subordination of women is made possible (Kiguwa, 2004). Gender is therefore the main focus of analysis in this research.

West and Zimmerman (1987) describe gender as something that is ‘done’ and ‘achieved’ rather than something that is innate and unchangeable. The concept of ‘doing gender’ therefore refers to the ways in which gender difference is produced and reproduced through the repetition of daily actions (Shefer, 2004). Although much research on gender has focused on either masculinity or femininity, constructing them as polar opposites, it is important to highlight the relational nature of gender, where women and men play a part in reproducing dominant forms of masculinity and femininity.

In addition, Connell (1995) describes hegemonic masculinity as the dominant way of doing or practicing masculinity at a particular point in time and in a particular cultural environment, and the same can be said for femininity. It is therefore useful to think of the existence of a variety of masculinities and femininities, depending on the context as well as issues of ‘race’, class, and culture (Abrams, 2003; Cooper, 2009).

Gender is also linked to sexuality in that it is “a social process that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do” (Connell, 1995, p. 71) and sexuality can therefore be considered a physical playing out of gender relations. Heterosexuality is constructed as normative and is produced through the social construction of gender difference (Hollway, 1984). For example, the ‘male sexual drive discourse’ suggests that male sexuality is biologically determined by an innate, uncontrollable drive,
whereas in the female ‘have/hold discourse’ women are positioned as responsible for establishing and maintaining heterosexual relationships. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the role of these discourses in constructing heterosexuality.

**Qualitative research methods**

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach that seeks to understand the subjective and diverse experiences of individuals (Marecek, 2003). It also takes a critical stance in relation to the larger social context in which research takes place, connecting the individual to social history, culture and broader relations of power. The qualitative methodology was particularly suited to the social constructionist framework of our research because it provided data through which the construction of meaning related to gender and sexuality could be analysed.

**Sample and data collection procedure**

The sample for this study came from a high school in the Cape Flats area of Cape Town that experiences high rates of poverty, unemployment, violence and gangsterism, and lacks many basic services and resources. Access to the school was granted to RAPCAN by the principal of the school and RAPCAN mediated access for the researchers. Participation was voluntary. Four focus groups were conducted with learners in grades 8 to 11, with four participants in focus group one (grade 8, 1 female, 3 males), two in focus groups two and three (grade 9 and 10 respectively; both girls only), and five in the last focus group (grade 11, boys only). The majority of participants were coloured, first-language Afrikaans speakers with the exception of one black Xhosa speaking boy in the grade 8 group. Focus groups were conducted in English. A representative from RAPCAN co-facilitated most of the focus groups and assisted us with any language barriers. All focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Focus groups**

Focus groups are a method in which joint meanings and interaction are emphasised (Willig, 2001). Focus groups were the most appropriate data collection method for our study because we were interested in how the participants constructed gender and sexuality relationally (Wilkinson, 1999). In this study, the researchers introduced the topic by asking learners about their understanding of gender relations in their community. We then read out a case-vignette, leading into a discussion about sexual relationships in their community. We modified some of the questions from Abrams’ (2003) study, which looked at constructions of gender and sexuality in different socio-economic contexts. The questions and case-vignette were altered to make them as relevant to the context of adolescence in this particular community as possible. The case-vignette depicts a story about Aisha and Faizel:
Aisha and Faizel have been going out for two months and on one Saturday night Aisha goes over to Faizel’s house where no one is home. They start to kiss and Faizel would like to take it further. Aisha says she is not ready to have sex. Faizel grabs her and tells her not to play hard to get and that if she really loves him, she will have sex with him. Aisha is scared but has sex with him anyway because she does not want to make him angrier or cause him to break up with her. She asks him to use a condom but he tells her that sex does not feel good with a condom and refuses to use one.

Data analysis – Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is method through which general patterns in the data are identified and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although thematic analysis has generally been considered a method that is more consistent with a realist epistemology, rather than the social constructionist epistemology used in this study, it is a flexible method that can fit in with a feminist, social constructionist theoretical account. From this perspective, themes that are found in the data are not seen as a reflection of reality, but show “the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences, and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

REFLEXIVITY

Qualitative research acknowledges the researchers’ role in the co-construction of the data, and does not aim to eliminate bias (Parker, 2005). Although qualitative researchers acknowledge the importance of reflexivity, Parker warns that reflexivity should not be reduced to personal confessions, and should remain focused on the political implications of the research.

Both of us are white, middle class females living in post-apartheid South Africa. We were also representing two institutions, the University of Cape Town (UCT) and RAPCAN. Although apartheid is officially over, geographically Cape Town is still largely divided along ‘race’/class lines, and white people still enjoy considerable privilege. Despite an equitable and affirmative admissions policy, UCT is still often seen as a ‘white’ university. The combination of these identities and our affiliation with UCT meant that we represented privilege and, one could say, elitism.

Furthermore, our identities as females and our own personal experiences with gender and sexual violence informed our position within a feminist framework. Although we did not explicitly state our feminist position, it became evident in the ways in which we asked questions about the participants’ experiences of gender and sexuality. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the participants were telling a particular story for a particular audience (Parker, 2005), namely two middle class, white, feminist women.
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from the UCT psychology department ethics committee. We developed an informed assent form for the learners and an informed consent form for their parents. Both forms were translated into Afrikaans. Learners were only allowed to participate if both the parents and the learners had signed the forms. Participants were also informed that participation in the focus groups was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. In terms of benefits a donation of stationary was made to the school as a token of appreciation. In addition, RAPCAN will be using the findings of this study to improve some of the interventions that they run in the community. Although there were no direct harms involved in the research, some of the questions in the focus groups were of a sensitive nature. Therefore, RAPCAN developed a list of resources providing services to young people, which we gave to the participants after the focus groups. We also made ourselves available for debriefing following the focus groups.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In our thematic analysis of the transcripts, following the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), we identified three main themes: discourses of passivity, discourses of power, and challenging ‘romance’ in heterosexual relationships. Coming from a social constructionist theoretical perspective, we acknowledge that these themes do not necessarily represent ‘reality’ but rather our own interpretation of the data. Therefore, we recognize that our interpretation of the transcripts is one of many possible interpretations. All the names mentioned in the analysis are pseudonyms.

Discourses of passivity

Discourses of passivity were evident across the entire data set where girls were commonly constructed as ‘weak’. Girls and boys relied on several subthemes when referring to discourses of passivity, such as girls being boys’ possessions and lacking agency in sexual decision-making. Although most of the girls opposed these discourses of passivity in the opinions they expressed, they simultaneously drew on them to describe their experiences. In naming this theme ‘discourses of passivity’, we make reference to the powerlessness that many girls face in contesting dominant practices of masculinity and femininity and do not aim to infer that girls are inherently passive.

Girls as possessions

Both girls and boys made reference to girls as possessions by providing examples
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of how girls are subjugated to boys’ decisions. Boys in particular spoke of the possessive nature of their sexual relationships in terms of controlling for infidelity:

Daniel: sometimes a girl know if a boy go there [to a party] something bad gonna happen there. She’s gonna tell him not to go then he’ll decide if he’s gonna go or not.

Damien: Like my girl, I don’t let her go any place if she don’t tell me where she gonna go now. (FG 4, boys only)

Damien speaks of ‘my girl’ in a way that shows that she is his possession and that she has to be accountable to him rather than herself. This is also supported by other research which suggests that men consider women to be their possessions and expect them to be obedient (Jewkes et al., 2005; Petersen et al., 2005).

Discourses of passivity were also evident when girls had boyfriends that were gangsters:

Lizme: They [girls] also become like gangsters.

Hope: They fit in with their boyfriends. They are like . . . call girls [. . .] they must give the boys what they want [. . .] if he now decides he wants to have sex he can have sex now with her-

Lizme: And she can’t tell him no. (FG 2, girls only)

In the above extract, girls who have boyfriends that are gangsters ‘belong’ to their gangster boyfriend. However, this subject position is not necessarily approved of: Lizme and Hope describe these girls as ‘call girls’ who are expected to have sex when their boyfriend demands it, limiting their sexual agency. Poverty and lack of resources, as well as the history of forced segregation and removal during apartheid has created a gang culture in the Cape Flats (Cooper, 2009). Gang culture and the glorification of violence shape a certain kind of violent masculinity which legitimates boys’ use of violence and coercion in relationships.

‘Girls as possessions’ was furthermore notable in the way that girls’ bodies were commonly objectified and labelled in terms of sexual practices:

I think they [girls] feel unsafe in the environment as well because – some of them are actually being targeted [. . .] they say ‘this girl has a good body and now she’s my partner and if I can’t have her then I’m gonna hurt whoever wants her [. . .] if one girl at the age of 13 has sex . . . they take it this way . . . ‘OK you all live in an area like [this] so I guess that all the girls at the age of 13 is having sex’ [. . .] they say ‘ouwerk’ which means that you had sex . . . so every single girl they will call ‘ouwerk’ even if you know that she hasn’t had it. (Sam, FG 4, boys only)

Girls are referred to as ‘ouwerk’ (‘old work’) which is slang for ‘whore’. Even
when girls have not had sex, they are referred to in this way as something that has been used and is no longer dignified. Similarly, Bamberg (2004) analysed a narrative account of adolescent boys who used ‘slut bashing’ as a means to construct their own morality in relation to ‘promiscuous’ girls. This is linked to the double-standard, where it is acceptable for boys to be sexually active and have multiple partners, but it is not acceptable for girls (Salo, 2002).

The extract above also shows how this community has come to be constructed in a particular way in people’s imaginations, to the extent that young women in the community have come to be seen in a specific way (i.e., ‘ouwerk’). Thus, the femininity of all girls is publicly constructed through communal perceptions, making it difficult for girls and boys to challenge these discourses. Additionally, this allows boys who refer to girls as ‘ouwerk’ to construct themselves as morally superior. The morality of boys and girls was further questioned in relation to sexual decision-making.

**Lack of agency in sexual decision-making**

Girls and boys drew on discourses of passivity to describe girls’ limited agency in sexual decision-making. For example, in response to the case-vignette participants reflect on the responsibility of each character:

**Amira:** Faizel was wrong but Aisha was just as wrong. She should’ve known before she went to his house what the consequences would’ve been [. . .] I wouldn’t even go to his house at all if I knew that no one else was with him there.

**Konrad:** Faizel was right and she went on the wrong track. She was supposed to defend herself because she don’t want to but she fell for Faizel. (FG 1, mixed)

Konrad puts the responsibility solely on Aisha. Aisha is furthermore blamed for having gone over to Faizel’s house where she should have known that she would have to have sex with him. Although Amira says she would have done it differently, positioning herself against the discourse of passivity, she bases her decision on the notion that she would not be able to stand her ground against Faizel’s request for sex. Bhana (2012) similarly found that girls feared their boyfriends because boys habitually coerced girls into having sex with them. Although most girls in her research strongly opposed these dominant practices of masculinity, they also complied with the available codes of conduct that legitimized such practices. The idea that ‘going over to his house’ is associated with having sex was also found in a study by Wood et al. (2007). Thus, once a girl has decided to ‘go over to his house’ she has given her consent to sex.

In addition, girls spoke about the difficulties in exercising agency when other girls did not:
**Taryn:** It's not just affecting her as a female but just the whole thing where she didn't stand her ground is gonna make it ‘okay she was easy to convince’ it’s gonna make him think that of the next one and the next one and the next one [. . .] it's gonna become this whole cycle and men are already thinking that women are weak so they give us a bad face.

**Wafeeqah:** They say the girls play hard-to-get [. . .] they actually try to stand their ground but they don’t know how to say no [. . .] they think they’re doing the right thing but actually they doing the wrong thing, like Taryn said [. . .] I will say no. (FG3, girls only)

Although Taryn and Wafeeqah position themselves against the discourse of passivity, they illustrate again how the actions of some girls are used to publicly construct the femininity of all girls in communal discourses. The result is that many girls find it difficult to actively challenge normative discourses of femininity. This was also found by Wood et al. (1998) who showed that girls’ sexual agency was often limited by the construction of all girls as submissive based on the actions of some.

The participants demonstrated oppositions to discourses of passivity by living contrary to the norm as described in the aforementioned subthemes: I just do the total opposite . . . girls are forever pregnant [. . .]. I’m not pregnant and I’m 17 already [. . .] I abstain, don’t do what other girls do because it’s a thing girls [. . .] do (Taryn, FG 3, girls only). Taryn is attempting to oppose a hegemonic norm of femininity in her particular context. This highlights the significance of the interaction between the social context and how gender is constructed and constrained within a particular setting (Abrams, 2003).

It is evident that in many cases girls were positioned as passive in relation to boys being powerful. However, discourses of passivity came across much more strongly as a distinct theme and did not necessarily refer to boys’ power. Therefore, we identified ‘discourses of power’ as a separate theme.

### Discourses of power

Boys and girls expressed various ways in which boys were constructed as ‘powerful’. Girls in particular illustrated this through their experience of *druk haar vas* (pin her down) as something that is often done with force. *Druk haar vas* involves one person (usually a boy) grabbing another (usually a girl) and kissing and touching them sexually against their will. Girls pointed to the notion of *druk haar vas* as sexual harassment and spoke of the unpredictability of boys’ power: [. . .] you don’t know how far he can go because he goes from kissing, touching, to [. . .] if he can kiss you and touch you in front of everybody else then he can do anything else (Amira, FG 1, mixed). In this extract Amira draws on the male sexual drive discourse, constructing boys’ sexuality as dangerous and uncontrollable (Hollway, 1984). Constructing male sexuality in this way puts boys in a position of power.
Boys also described *druk haar vas* as a means to show their dominance:

*sometimes [boys] do it to impress the girl ([noises of agreement]) and show their friends they can druk this girl vas. They can do it and [. . .] [other boys] cheer for him because he ‘druk this girl vas’. (Daniel, FG 4, boys only)*

There is a sense of achievement and accomplishment in being able to *druk haar vas* and boys’ power is reinforced when they are successful. However, when girls reject boys and boys are not able to *druk haar vas*, boys lose this power.

In addition, participants disregarded discourses of male power by referring to situations in which girls were constructed as more powerful:

**Brandon:** *Say now for example a man hits a lady then the woman will take it serious and take it to the court and sort this man out and [. . .] he will just beg at the police to say sorry and then [. . .] they will come and she tells him that he can’t say sorry now.*

**Amira:** *I think it’s unfair because when it’s the girl, he don’t go back to the girl and go lock her up [. . .] they would like hit the boy, they won’t do that to the girl [. . .] And you very seldom find girls being locked up for abuse.*

Brandon: *Sometimes I don’t feel okay with it – then I just get nervous sometimes and then just now it can happen to me if something wrong happens in life someday. (FG 1, mixed)*

On the one hand, participants attempted to show how boys are not that powerful because girls can take them to court. On the other hand, Brandon supports the discourse of male power by describing his own fear of losing control and acting on violent urges. In a study conducted by Shefer et al. (2008) participants similarly constructed women as ‘abusing their legal power’ as well as having more resources to fight abuse than men had. Thus, men viewed the empowerment of women as the undermining of their own identity as powerful.

The discourses of power and passivity described in the above themes shaped heterosexual relationships in the participants’ community. Heterosexual relationships were often perceived as negative and participants challenged the idea of ‘romance’.

**Heterosexual relationships: Challenging ‘romance’**

Participants consistently remarked on the lack of ‘romance’ in heterosexual relationships in their communities, which resulted in negative perceptions of these relationships. We recognise that the idea of ‘romance’ is a construct in itself, replete with certain connotations regarding what is and is not ‘romantic’. We also acknowledge our own use of the construct in the way we phrased the questions (e.g., ‘describe romantic or sexual relationships in your community’ which was taken directly from Abrams’, 2003, study). We did not think of the implications of using the term ‘romantic’ for the participants’ negative perceptions of relationships in their community and the possible unintentional ideological effects this may have had.
It is important to take into account local constructions of moral and responsible personhood in each community, which will in turn inform what idealised ‘romantic’ relationships look like (Salo, 2002). In this case, mutual respect, as well as privacy and restraint in displaying the relationship seemed to be valued a great deal. For our participants, there seemed to be a disjuncture between what they viewed as ‘romantic’ and the relationships that were modelled to them, leading them to believe that there were no ‘romantic’ relationships in their community. The following exchange illustrates the disillusionment that participants presented themselves as feeling about relationships:

**Taryn:** There’s nothing romantic about having to go to work and your husband or boyfriend is laying around, tonight he’s drunk […] there’s no romantic relationships.

**Wafeeqah:** Here and there.

**Taryn:** The only romantic relationship is with the people of over 60 to 70 and it’s very seldom that both of them are still alive.

**Wafeeqah:** Here and there!

**Taryn:** Very seldom, very very seldom, I mean very seldom. (FG 3, girls only)

Participants illustrated how the lack of ‘romance’ in relationships came about through public displays of violence and sexuality.

**Public displays of violence and sexuality**

Many participants commented that public displays of violence and sexuality made them view relationships negatively, and most participants were openly disapproving of such displays:

*You don’t find people that have romantic, uhm, relationships or anything like that because […] the way they will like walk pass and they will kiss in the road or give each other a bloody nose, they have no respect for each other stuff like that you don’t do in the road.*  

(Amira, FG 1, mixed)

Taryn (FG 3, girls only) also talks with contempt about public displays of sexuality: *It’s not romantic standing in the corner kissing and people that know your parents, people you grew up in front of, what’s so romantic about that.*

Reputations seemed to be very important in this community and participants picked up the threat to a person’s reputation through engaging in such public acts in front of ‘people you grew up in front of”’. In her research on adolescent sexuality and condom use in Manenberg, which is another community in the Cape Flats, Salo (2002) similarly emphasises the importance of reputation in the community, especially amongst girls and women. Salo suggests that for women, their moral reputation, which is linked to sexual restraint, is how they constitute ‘personhood’. A
woman with a ‘good’ reputation will therefore receive support from the community. By condemning these public acts, participants seemed to be constructing themselves as moral and responsible persons, worthy of their reputations.

The notion of public violence and sex as a ‘show’ was brought up repeatedly, again with disapproval. Some participants emphasized how many couples try to draw an audience to witness these displays:

Konrad: Because if [. . .] the girlfriend had an argument and then they fight in the street and then the man hit the lady or the lady hit the man, and the people, they now want to make a show and on the streets.

Brandon: And they’re drunk, and they just want to show off and that. (FG 1, mixed)

Amira (FG 1, mixed) also comments on the performance and how she views the public displays with contempt: They don’t trust each other enough and because if they did, their arguments, stupid arguments wouldn’t have to happen [. . .] they would talk it out like face to face, not out loud in the road like they do today.

Gender is ‘done’ by constantly repeating behaviours that are considered to be gender-appropriate, which Butler (1990 as cited in Shefer, 2004) terms performativity. However, performativity in this sense does not refer to an actual performance where the intention is to draw an audience, but rather to the way people produce and reproduce themselves as ‘men’ or ‘women’ through the constant repetition of certain discourses (Shefer, 2004). Nevertheless, the way our participants described public acts of violence and sexuality seemed to suggest that perhaps one aspect of ‘doing’ gender in this community is through actual performance and drawing an audience. Thus, men may be affirming their masculinity through publicly showing their domination of women; likewise, in cases where women are violent towards men, they may be publicly destabilising the construction of women as passive and inferior to men.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The findings suggest that gender and sexuality are constructed through discourses of power and passivity, as well as through challenging the idea of ‘romance’ in heterosexual relationships. The relational nature of gender was continuously illustrated in the ways that boys were constructed as powerful in relation to girls being passive and vice versa. However, the idea that girls are passive came across much more strongly, which was highlighted in the common view that girls are boys’ possessions and that girls lack sexual agency.

On a broader level, the findings indicate that the femininity of all girls was publicly constructed through the particular actions of some girls, making it difficult for girls to challenge and change normative ways of doing gender and sexuality.
Nevertheless, the participants in our study attempted to oppose the norms in their own relationships and behaviour, demonstrating some agency despite the discourses of passivity. It is therefore important to acknowledge the complexities of identity construction and the sometimes contradictory ways in which boys and girls construct gender and sexuality (Boonzaier, 2008).

In terms of challenging ‘romance’, public acts of violence and sexuality demonstrated the interplay between discourses of power and passivity. Men’s public acts of violence and sexuality reinforced their masculine identity and sexuality, whereas women’s public acts of violence and sexuality seemed to undermine male power and construct an alternative to discourses of female passivity. However, the use of violence remains a problematic means of establishing power, and these findings highlight the importance of examining and promoting alternative, non-violent masculinities and femininities.

The current study contributes to the literature on gender and sexuality in several ways. First, on a practical level these findings will be used by RAPCAN to enhance their intervention which aims to improve gender relations between young people. Second, on a theoretical level these findings suggest that, in some contexts, gender is publicly performed in order to affirm or destabilize normative ideas of masculinity and femininity. This finding could be used to extend Butler’s (1990 as cited in Shefer, 2004) concept of performativity to contexts such as the Cape Flats. The research also highlights the theoretical importance of reflexivity in qualitative research and looking at the ideological effects of particular concepts such as ‘romance’. A youth-centred methodology is also important in understanding constructions of gender and sexuality in order to establish adolescents’ rights to sexual autonomy and sexual and reproductive health (Boonzaier & Aulette-Root, 2010).

There were several limitations to our study. First, we had fewer participants than expected in all the focus groups, which limited the amount of data that could be collected and the amount of interaction that could take place. Therefore, some of the focus groups took the form of a semi-structured interview, which is reflected in our analysis. In addition, we intended to have mixed gender focus groups that would allow interaction between boys and girls; however, most of the focus groups were single gender groups. This meant that we could not sufficiently analyse the co-construction of meanings between boys and girls. Due to the use of a self-selected sample (volunteers) it is possible that those who chose to participate shared certain characteristics which may limit the transferability of our findings. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the language divides in this research. Linguistic, class and cultural divides may have impacted on what the participants felt comfortable sharing with us as outsiders, which resulted in some communication problems and may have affected the subtlety of our interpretations.

This research has focused specifically on one low socio-economic community and how gender and sexuality are constructed in this particular context. Focusing on
low socio-economic communities can end up reinforcing negative stereotypes about those communities. In addition, it may also give the impression that these kinds of unequal gender relations only occur in low socio-economic communities. Therefore, future research should look at how gender and sexuality are constructed in a variety of contexts.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Yeshe Schepers:** I finished my Honours in Psychology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2012 and am currently doing an internship in trauma counseling at the Traumaclinic in Kenilworth, Cape Town. I also tutor first year psychology at the UCT and would like to do my masters in clinical psychology in the near future. I am interested in qualitative research that adopts feminist methodologies in the area of gender and sexuality as well as trauma.

**Maia Zway** completed her Honours degree in Psychology at the University of Cape Town in 2012. Her research interests include issues of gender, sexuality, and feminist methodologies. She is currently interning as a counsellor, working in the area of gender-based violence.
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