

Gender Roles Among Youth Activists in South Africa
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Abstract

Less than two decades into a new democracy, South African black youth are facing social, political, and economic problems handed down to them by the oppressive Apartheid government. While many youth participate in extracurricular activities through non-governmental organizations, this paper looks specifically at those youth that engage in projects that train them as community activists and leaders. Using two activist organizations as windows into this topic, I examine how some youth are actively becoming leaders in the hopes that they will not just better their own lives but confront social problems at both the local and national levels. In the particular case of boys, traditional notions of what it means to be male greatly affect how these young activists structure their understanding of leadership and social change. This paper examines the ways that ideas of masculinity in South Africa are shaping youths' experiences of and responses to activist programs. In particular, I look at boys' own conceptions of masculinity to see how youth activists make sense of gender roles in the work that they do.

Paper

Introduction

This paper focuses on research completed in July and August 2009 for my master's thesis in anthropology. The primary goal of this research was to answer the following question: what are the experiences of black South African youth involved in community activism projects that aim to ameliorate social problems?

Although my focus has not been on issues of gender in particular, my time in South Africa highlighted the many ways in which issues of masculinity, in particular, play a major role in the experiences and attitudes of youth activists. After seeing how much conceptions of gender in rural South Africa impact such work, I find it imperative that future activist projects pay attention to the myriad of ways it might alter their goals, methods, and outcomes as they train new generations of leaders. In this paper, I show how the messages youth receive in traditional institutions, such as circumcision schools and the home, often directly contradict the teachings in activist programs. Circumcision

schools and rigid age hierarchies remain fundamental markers of adulthood, respect, and leadership in black South Africa, even among those who participate actively in community projects that endorse gender equality and other liberal ideals. This poses particular challenges to such efforts; nonetheless, non-governmental interventions that strive for gender equality have demonstrated the fluidity in conceptions of gender among youth.

This study was completed over the course of five weeks; I spent the first half of the research period working with a group of youth participants in the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust (ABF), which operates out of an office in downtown Cape Town but runs programs in the various nearby townships. Started in 1997 in memory of a young American researcher killed in Guguletu Township in an act of racial violence, the Foundation strives to keep youth off the streets and support their education through after-school programs, camps, sports activities, etc¹. During my research, I worked with the HIV/AIDS Peer Mentorship Program within the ABF, which trains teenagers aged 13-18 on the specifics of HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and social ramifications in order that they can become mentors in their communities and educate other youth. The particular strategy of the mentorship program is training the next generation of leaders within the community, rather than simply using leaders from outside that come and go. As a South African staff member² explained in an interview, the purpose of this program is to benefit both participants and the larger youth community equally:

...in terms of building their confidence and, you know, giving them the ability to actually put into practice what they've been teaching themselves in the

¹ www.amybiehl.co.za

² While the Biehl Family founded and maintains ultimate control over the organization, 100% of program staff on the ground are South Africans from a variety of diverse socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

classroom....So from that point I think its going to be a huge plus for them to be able to now put it into practice. And then secondly its to reach children and to also through that, make people aware of the peer education program and our after-school program at the centers, so that the children that are roaming around on the streets, so that they actually know there is a program happening in the community.³

In the two weeks spent with the ABF, I attended daily two-hour meetings of the HIV/AIDS Peer Mentorship Program and observed activities as well as participated as a volunteer. In addition, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the seven regular participants at the time and a few staff members. Out of the numerous programs offered through the ABF, the Mentorship Program was the most relevant to my research since it deals specifically with teenagers and works to promote leadership identity among its participants. Sessions included training on the specifics of disease transmission, how to respond to peer questions, and role playing activities meant to mimic potential interactions participants might encounter in the community.

The second half of my research was spent in a rural municipality in the Eastern Cape province, working with a project sponsored by an organization called the Sonke Gender Justice Network⁴, which has offices in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. As stated on their website, the primary mission of the Sonke Gender Justice Network is:

To address the social aspects of the HIV epidemic, with a particular focus on gender issues. Sonke Gender Justice's vision is a SADC⁵ region in which men, women, youth and children can enjoy equitable, healthy, and happy relationships that contribute to the development of a just and democratic society. To achieve this, the Sonke Gender Justice project works to build government, civil society and citizen capacity to achieve gender equality, prevent gender based violence and reduce the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS [2007].

³ George (pseudonyms have been used throughout this thesis to protect subjects' identities.), ABF Staff, July 28, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.

⁴ www.sonkegenderjustice.org.za.

⁵ South African Development Community, not in original.

As part of these general goals, Sonke implemented a program in Eastern Cape during 2008 where staff members collaborated with a local HIV/AIDS support group called Siyakhanyisa, as well as a staff member from the Silence Speaks project at the University of California Berkeley⁶, to create digital stories with a group of eight youth participants from local schools. Youth were selected with the help of their teachers as well as Siyakhanyisa staff, and were then trained in both issues of gender equality, HIV/AIDS, and other social justice topics as well as in the use of technology such as computers and scanners to assist in story creation. The resulting eight stories focus on challenges these youth have faced in their communities through a variety of mixed media, with the goal of both building their own sense of self-esteem and leadership identification as well as educating the broader public through story screenings in local meetings, educational institutions, and on the Sonke website.⁷ The 2-4 minute stories include topics such as rape, death, migrant labor, gender roles, and access to clean water; they feature a combination of voice-over narration, photographs, and illustrations that highlight obstacles these young people face on a daily basis.

My goals with Sonke in Eastern Cape were twofold: one, to conduct an assessment for the organization on the efficacy and results of the Digital Stories project among youth participants as well as to pilot their use as educational tools in local classrooms, and two, to collect data from participants about the experiences and consequences of this project for my own research. To achieve these goals, I conducted in-

⁶ www.silencespeaks.org

⁷ It is important to note here, however, that not all of this community engagement has yet occurred. Though stories are posted on the websites, minimal community screenings have taken place and little has been done to broadcast these stories within educational settings outside the initial community of origin. The potential of these stories as educational tools is great, and is a topic that I take up later in this thesis.

depth, one-on-one interviews with the seven youth participants,⁸ as well as audio-recorded their reactions during an informal screening reception of all the stories. Lastly, I traveled to several local schools in the municipality with the stories, conducting lessons on various social justice issues and implementing a project in which students were guided in drawing and writing their own one-page (non-digital) story. Stories reflected a wide variety of personal and community-wide challenges, such as violence, pollution, gender inequality, and HIV/AIDS.

This type of participant observation was extremely effective in examining both the issues of critical importance to youth from their own perspectives, as well as investigating the different ways in which leadership and activism can be encouraged with a “hands-on” approach. The anonymous nature of story-writing in the classroom afforded youth the rare opportunity to express ideas without worry of being identified as victims of rape and violence or being accused of revealing the illegal activities of their families, friends, or neighbors.

Background

The significant ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of South Africa make it both a complicated and fascinating locus for studying youth identity formation and the many influences that young people are confronted with on a daily basis. My two field sites differed immensely in many ways, and it is necessary to outline some of those differences here.

⁸ Tragically, one youth participant was killed in a car accident before my arrival in the area. His story, however, remains on the website and I included it in my piloting of lessons with the Digital Stories project.

Guguletu, a township just outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province, is home to approximately 80,000 people, according to a 2001 census.⁹ The Western Cape has a population of approximately 5.3 million, or 11% of the country's 49 million people¹⁰. The province is located at the intersection of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Because of its relatively high population density and successful tourist industry, the province is currently experiencing ever-rising migration rates from other parts of the country.



Figure 1.¹¹

Around the provincial capital of Cape Town, there are numerous townships that were erected by the Apartheid government to house those categorized as Bantu (of African descent) when they were forcibly removed from their homes within the city limits to make way for white-only districts. Further census data demonstrate the challenges Guguletu township residents continue to face after the dismantling of

⁹ 2001 Population Census. City of Cape Town. www.capetown.gov.za. 2008.

¹⁰ 2009 “Mid-Year Population Estimates.” Statistics South Africa.

¹¹ 2009 <http://www.sa-venues.com/maps/south-africa-provinces.htm>

Apartheid: only 22% of residents completed grade 12 and about 51% were unemployed in 2001. Of those employed, 67% earned 1,600 ZAR (about US\$210) or less per month.

Though the Eastern Cape has similar population estimates at around 6.6 million, the demographics of this province differ greatly from that of the Western Cape, and particularly from the living conditions and ethnic makeup within and around Cape Town. While Guguletu residents are from diverse ethnicities and often speak several languages, live in government-built houses, and have running water and electricity within their dwellings, Eastern Cape residents are almost exclusively rural Xhosa farmers and herders. Historically speaking, the Xhosa have been described as “pastoral nomads” who would move between different patches of permanent grazing ground, centering existence on their cattle as the primary means of livelihood. They had an elaborate system of government based around chiefs, and practiced their own religious beliefs until missionaries arrived in the region in the nineteenth century.¹² Since their traditional homeland (roughly what is now the Eastern Cape) is so far from the original colonial settlements at Cape Town, they lived for over two centuries before white interference. When colonists eventually moved inland, a series of violent clashes began that have left an indelible mark in Xhosa history (Mostert 1992).

It is impossible to discuss the realities of youth in present-day South Africa without acknowledging the legacy of Apartheid and how it resonates in present local as well as national contexts. Apartheid, literally “apart-ness,” was a governmental regime that was based on the ideology that races should be kept apart in all facets of life. The adoption of Apartheid in South Africa was introduced by the National Party government

¹² Today, most Xhosa people are Christian but still actively subscribe to many traditional religious beliefs.

in 1948 (Clark & Worger 2004:3). It is important to recognize, however, that racist ideology was deeply entrenched in South African society long before this change in regime – indeed, the perspective of some historians has been that Apartheid just codified and made official what was already in practice across the nation.

Apartheid policy did not just separate the “races,” but gave them rights according to a hierarchical assessment of perceived superiority and inferiority. Blacks, or Natives as they were called under Apartheid, were systematically denied rights and their movement was severely restricted through the Pass System¹³. Although a plethora of other restrictive policies were enforced during the 46 years Apartheid was in effect, one of the most brutally oppressive and protested acts was the Bantu Education Act (1953 Assembly Debates). The measure codified an education system separated by race, and furthermore focused on preparing black students specifically for vocational jobs and denying them access to higher education and white-collar job opportunities. This particular act is salient to my research, because the widespread changes to the education system during Apartheid still resonates in the country today – both through those who were educated under it as well as those who attend schools that were critically under-funded because of racist policies.

Due to the relatively recent dismantling of the Apartheid regime (in 1994), the country is in the midst of dealing with the aftermath of segregation, inequality, violence, and massive poverty. Unlike the rest of the African continent, such conditions exist

¹³ Enacted under several pieces of legislation collectively referred to as Pass Laws, this system required all blacks to carry pass booklets stating their identification information as well as employment status wherever they went (1952 Assembly Debates).

within extremely close proximity of white opulence and incredible wealth.¹⁴ Catherine Besteman summarizes this situation clearly in her study of Cape Town post-Apartheid:

Today, South Africans are deeply involved in the struggle to bring the promise of South Africa's miracle to fruition. It is an uphill battle. Many recall the sense of hopefulness and euphoria they felt after the first national democratic election in 1994, when Mandela's insistence on reconciliation rather than revenge and his party's promise of a better life for all gave comfort and hope to people battered by the violence and trauma of Apartheid. White South Africans hoped that the peaceful transition and the language of reconciliation meant they could put the past behind them and move on. South Africans of color believed they could finally improve their material circumstances and opportunities. Standing between these two dreams, however, was the awkward truth that 'reconciliation' did not include a redistribution of resources, which had been unfairly apportioned to white people under Apartheid [2008:2].

Because of these conditions, many consider the situation of black youth raised immediately after Apartheid so dire that it has been labeled a "lost generation," as previously discussed. This generation is currently in adulthood, and it is easy to imagine how the lack of rights and opportunities may affect their own children. Indeed, according to a recent New York Times article, half of all South African students today never make it to 12th grade, and particularly those in township or rural schools graduate with so few marketable skills that they "qualify for little but menial labor or the ranks of the jobless, fueling the nation's daunting rates of unemployment and crime" (Dugger 2009).

Although schools are no longer officially segregated by race, geography and socioeconomic status perpetuates unofficial divisions along racial lines.

Today many of Cape Town's township schools struggle with chronic teacher absenteeism, drunkenness, and sexual abuse – challenges that exhaust those teachers who

¹⁴ Though it should be noted here that not *all* white South Africans are wealthy; nonetheless, the vast majority of whites are richer than almost all the country's black residents. This is seen in statistics on education, housing, and other basic necessities divided by race (Community Survey, Statistics South Africa, 2007).

remain highly committed to their vocation – and many of Cape Town’s black children experience an education of humiliation and failure [Besteman 2008:72].

The long-term ramifications of Apartheid affect all the young people I observed and interviewed, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Masculinity & Circumcision Schools

Nearly every male youth I spoke with stressed the importance of traditional circumcision schools in the transition from boyhood to adulthood. At these schools, young boys anywhere from 13 to 20 years of age are taken to the bush and ritually circumcised by traditional practitioners. After the circumcision, males remain in this setting for weeks or months as they heal¹⁵ and are taught by their elders about what it means to be a man in the Xhosa community. Anele¹⁶, an ABF staff member, explained the importance of this experience: “I’m talking about thousands and thousands of boys, they want to be a man. They have to go to initiation schools...When they come back, everything is changed...when he goes to initiation school he’s a man. So a man must think for himself.”¹⁷ When speaking to ABF youth participants about how the program teaches them to be leaders in their communities, references to circumcision schools came up again and again. In fact, despite all the youth insisting they’d made a positive difference in the lives of those around them through the ABF training, the boys still pointed to the schools as the primary way one becomes a leader. “At the initiation schools they teach you how to talk to people. You can learn it here, no? But you cannot use what

¹⁵ Due to poor sanitation, untrained practitioners, and follow-up rituals that can exacerbate wounds, many boys have medical complications from this procedure and some even die (Peltzer, Nqeketo, Petros, Kanta 2008).

¹⁶ Names have been changed to protect privacy.

¹⁷ Anele, ABF Staff, July 23, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.

you learn here for those people. Especially men. Because they think ‘okay this is a boy. And we men don’t talk to boys.’”¹⁸ Here, Nkosana points out that although youth activists can command respect among some community members, their ability to affect change beyond their age-mates is limited before they are officially considered men. Though some youth participants did think that children can be leaders in their communities, it was clear that perceptions of their efficacy and status largely hinged upon traditional notions of life stages. Comaroff and Comaroff argued that it is in this “sacral context, culminating in circumcision, that the core secrets of vernacular lifeways are narrated and reproduced; also, that youths are inducted into adulthood by the proper cultural means, taught discipline, and enjoined to respect authority” (2009:19). My research echoed this quote, showing that such rituals continue to function as sites for induction into adulthood and cultural education. Approximately half of the students I interviewed in Guguletu did not consider themselves leaders, and they pointed to their position in the traditional social hierarchy as the primary reason. These hierarchies and initiation school teachings largely impact the prescribed roles for men and women and maintain the boundaries between genders, despite the presence of gender equality projects in local communities.

Gender Roles: What Men Do, What Women Do

In South Africa, many people’s views on gender roles are very much at odds with the teachings at organizations such as the Amy Biehl Foundation and Sonke Gender Justice. As one student explained after watching one of the Sonke digital stories screened in her classroom:

¹⁸ Nkosana, Youth Participant, July 27, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.

I think a male and a female should be equal! Because according to my understanding, there's no difference...now because we have the same jobs, we're all the same! But my family doesn't agree with that. There are a lot of males in my family, more than females. A lot of the work that we are facing is the work of the females...the men are told to cook, to wash dishes, to do this and this. And I don't think they could ever agree with it because they are still adopting the tradition of the olden days, the tradition of our forefathers. They don't believe in this generation now. They don't believe in the things that this generation is doing. It was difficult at home when I was young. But now its not difficult because I'm used to it and I appreciate the way it is, because I can't do otherwise. I can't change it. Those people are my fathers, they are my uncles, so I've got to give them respect. I've got to satisfy their needs. There's no way you can change their mind.¹⁹

In this instance, Zukisa believes in the messages Sonke teaches, and yet feels helpless to actually change the gender roles in her family because of traditional notions of respect and age. Such instances demonstrate the tensions between the goals of NGOs working to advance the progressive ideals of the South African constitution and the actual beliefs of many citizens.

Despite these challenges, my research showed much fluidity in gender roles among youth as compared to their elders, specifically within the subset of youth who had participated in the Sonke digital stories project. In these cases, I encountered young people who felt successful in their quest to spread the ideal of gender equality: "At home we usually had to herd sheep before, you know? The boys herd sheep. At home there's no boys, only us girls, so I would do that for my mother. I would tell my mother 'its just that my friend told me that gender equality is good for everybody.'"²⁰ Another digital stories participant explained that the experience

helped my community because in my story I was talking about gender roles. Other people, especially men, think that there are certain roles that are supposed to be played by women. For example, they believe that a woman is supposed to

¹⁹ Zukisa, High School Student, August 8, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.

²⁰ Thandiwe, Youth Participant, August 5, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.

clean the house, to clean dishes...then they changed their minds. Because I have said that you cannot lose your gender because of these jobs – we must do whatever roles. There are no certain roles for women and men.²¹

As Thabo illustrates, his digital story changed the opinions of some of the men around him. He points, significantly, to the actual construction of gender, saying that masculinity is not something you “lose” when doing so-called “women’s work.” Thabo continues, explaining that before the Sonke workshops he believed females and males were different and should occupy different social roles, but now feels “I can do whatever roles. Now when I come home from school or during weekends I cook.”

Paki, who already believed in gender equality before participating in the digital stories program, discussed the challenges to promoting such ideals in rural areas.

Men out in the rural areas – they stereotype so, so much. If a little boy is not there, the sheep will not sleep at home that day because no one is there to herd them. Even though there is a girl in the family. And if you are cooking as a male in the rural areas, you find that people are starting to tease you. It was something that always bothered me. My mind did change after Sonke though, because before I thought ‘fine, a man can cook, but its not important ritually.’ And when I met with Sonke my mind completely changed. Because if you are surrounded by people who stereotype you also end up stereotyping. They say if there’s only one potato rotten in a bag they all get rotten. And I don’t think I can ever stereotype now, because everyone is equal. What you can do I can also do.²²

This quote highlights the unique challenges in changing conceptions of gender in rural South Africa, where farming, herding and cooking tasks have been strictly divided along gender lines for centuries. Boys who do not adhere to these gender norms are teased for being effeminate, and some boys in classrooms I spoke with even believed that doing women’s work can turn you into a homosexual.

²¹ Thabo, Youth Participant, August 5, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.

²² Paki, Youth Participant, August 6, 2009, Qumbu, South Africa.

Lebo, another Sonke participant, affirms the same transformation in his perceptions on gender: “I believe that if you are a boy, then you are equal to a girl. They have to do the same work, and not say ‘I can’t do this, its for girls.’ We’re all equal. I didn’t think girls and boys were equal before Sonke...but now I’m sweeping, I’m washing dishes, I’m doing everything in my home. Seeing people’s stories has changed my mind.”²³ Stories such as Thandiwe’s, Thabo’s, Paki’s and Lebo’s provide evidence of the fluidity in youths’ conceptions of gender and show the impact of intervention programs that bring in new perspectives.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that amid the continued presence of traditional conceptions of masculinity promoted by age hierarchies, puberty rites, and labor roles, there does exist the potential for fluidity in the minds of youth about what it means to be masculine (or feminine, by extension). Significantly, however, such ideas usually come about through the influence of community outsiders, such as the workshop teachers at Sonke. It is crucial when examining such phenomena that we strive to understand the complex ramifications such teachings might bring to these communities, rather than assuming a progressive, human rights based agenda is overwhelmingly beneficial to all. What might be the consequences of influencing the beliefs of the young in ways that could pit them against older generations? How does altering the meaning of masculinity in local communities affect the social structure? It should be a valuable site for further research to take note of how traditional conceptions of gender might shift in upcoming years as a result of increased NGO presence in local communities across South Africa,

²³ Lebo, Youth Participant, August 7, 2010, Qumbu, South Africa.

and furthermore, what broader implications such shifts might have at both local and national levels.

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