

Black Boys with Bad Reputations

Rob Pattman and Deevia Bhana

Introduction: Polarising Black Boys

In the West in recent years, boys have been the subject of a moral panic fuelled by their apparently poorer educational performances than girls (see Epstein et al. 1998). In South Africa there is also a moral panic about boys, but this centres on black boys and young men and focuses not on educational underachievement (though there is much recent evidence to suggest that black schoolboys are performing more poorly than black girls and certainly much worse than white and Indian boys) but on the presumed anti social and delinquent nature of young black males (Pattman & Khan 2007).

In the sociological literature moral panics are defined as exaggerated reactions to perceived threats to imagined social norms posed by groups polarised from 'us' and cast in the role of 'folk devils'. The effect of a moral panic is to construct a sense of 'us' as against 'them' and to accord the 'other' a minority status as outsiders who fail to integrate socially and threaten 'us' (Hall et al. 1978), even if, as is the case in South Africa, 'they' may be imagined, by whites and blacks as young males belonging to a racialised majority (Pattman & Khan 2007: 40). The poor educational performances of black boys receive little or no publicity, perhaps because this is not perceived as a problem. Concerns about black boys and young men in South Africa draw on deep seated and taken for granted assumptions about this group as 'bad,' and posing enduring threats to safety and well being. These assumptions, Callebert (2007) suggests have been reinforced by white (and black, Indian, and coloured) fears about the proximity of (mainly working class) blacks in the post apartheid era.

We do not want to argue, however, that associations of black boys with 'bad' behaviour are the figments simply of post-apartheid imaginations

faced and fixated with prospects of 'racial' 'integration,' (though there is no doubt that these draw on the paranoia of whites, Indians and blacks in contemporary South Africa.) In interview and ethnographic studies in schools in Durban and South Africa (see Morrell 1998 and 2000; Human Rights Watch 2001; Jewkes et al. 2002; Bhana 2005) and South African townships (see Wood & Jewkes 2001; Selikow et al. 2002) tales of violence and sexual violence have featured prominently, with black boys and young men being constructed as the perpetrators (as well as victims).

Some social commentators such as Jeremy Seekings (1996), have argued that much juvenile delinquency in South Africa has its roots in apartheid and is the expression of black African young men whose identities as the '*shock troops or foot soldiers in the struggle for political change*' have become redundant in the post-apartheid context. Feelings of estrangement and uncertainty for many young (and older) black South African men have been reinforced, as Liz Walker (2003) persuasively argues, by unemployment as well as the emphasis in the new Constitution on women's rights. Violence and sexual violence among young black African men is presented by these writers as a response to such feelings and a way of asserting themselves. Young black African men in Southern Africa have been particularly problematised in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, with campaigns and literature addressing them, especially, as people with multiple partners and engaging in forms of sexual harassment and violence.

The bad reputations of black boys emerged as a major theme in a recent interview study we conducted with Grade 11 (16-17 year old) boys and girls in 'racially' differentiated schools near Durban. In mono-ethnic interviews we conducted with black pupils in predominantly Indian and white schools, both boys and girls protested being labelled bad or dirty, and singled out for suspicion whenever any wrongdoing occurred in the school. In a middle class mainly white (boys') school, in a white leafy suburb, the black boys we had requested to interview complained that when they were asked to report to the school office their class teacher's response was: 'Whose car has been broken into?'

Our paper draws on this study, and our focus here is on black boys, notably those with 'bad' reputations in Bafana, a black township school (see below). We wanted to explore whether they saw themselves as bad and how they managed 'bad' reputations. What sorts of relationships did they have

with the school authorities and with other boys and girls? Was being 'bad', a self identification that emerged from what they said and how they spoke about these relationships? Could we get some insight into how 'bad' they were from the ways they performed in the interviews, for example whether they messed about or did not concentrate on the questions? Studies of violence in schools in South Africa have focused, as Chisholm and Napo (1999) note, on 'violence in black schools although it is by no means unique to them.' Indeed we heard stories about forms of emotional and physical violence in all the schools in our study, but we concentrate on Bafana because of the 'bad' reputations of black township boys which we want to investigate from the point of view of the boys themselves, rather than taking such perceptions for granted¹.

Bafana School and the other Schools in our Study

Our study aimed to investigate, through loosely structured interviews with groups of boys and girls from different 'races', how Grade 11 young people in different racialised schools constructed their identities. We selected four schools, a formerly white boys' and a formerly white girls' school, a formerly Indian school and Bafana, a black township school, from where we draw the pupils to whom we refer in this paper.

Bafana was the poorest of the schools in our study and the contrast between it and the two former white schools we researched was striking. The pupils (and staff) at Bafana were all black African whereas in the formerly white schools there were, along with white children, blacks, Indians and coloureds from relatively affluent families. Where 'racial' mixing has occurred in the 'new' South Africa, it has tended to be confined to specific institutions like schools or universities and occurs between whites and Indians and the most affluent blacks and coloureds. The very fact that Bafana was all black signified, then, its low status, and this was immediately apparent when visiting the school and seeing its lack of material resources. Bafana looked rather like a prison compound with a main building comprising basic classrooms constructed in a rectangle and surrounded by high fences with barbed wire. There was some space between the classrooms

¹ The names of the school and the interviewees are pseudonyms.

and fences where the children congregated at break times. But there were no wide open spaces and no rugby, cricket, football or hockey pitches, no trees, no buildings with stairs, no long corridors, no assembly halls, no areas to retreat from the large numbers of other people and no library, study areas or computer rooms as there were in the former white schools. Like all black township schools, and unlike most former white schools, Bafana is co-educational, and this, as we found in interviews we conducted in the former white schools, was also regarded as signifying lack of status and lack of academic and sporting achievement.

Method

In our study over thirty group interviews (with usually six participants in each) were conducted (in English) in formerly white boys' and girls' schools, a formerly Indian and a black township school. Teachers in these schools were requested to select young people of differing levels of academic ability and commitment and also (in the mixed 'race' schools) according to 'race', and (in the mixed gender schools) according to gender, for the interviews. The interviews were conducted in English by the authors (Rob, a white British man and Deevia, a South African Indian woman), taped and transcribed.

All the boys we initially interviewed at Bafana (contrary to the 'bad' reputations of black boys) seemed to us to be 'good' pupils who spoke highly about the school and the work ethic. So we decided to ask the teachers specifically for 'bad' Grade 11 (aged 16-17) boys as well as 'bad' girls for two subsequent interviews. While concentrating mainly on the interview with the 'bad' boys, we will draw comparisons with the girls' interview. We were interested not only in *what* our 'bad' boy and girl interviewees said, but also *how* they presented themselves, for example, their emotional tone body language and engagement with us, the interviewers and the other interviewees. We saw the interviews not simply as instruments for eliciting information but as sites in which identities and relations were being negotiated and performed (Frosh et al. 2002).

Rather than focusing simply on how 'bad' they were in the interviews, that is, only asking questions around this theme, we tried to provide a nuanced and multidimensional picture of their lives and identities

by conducting loosely structured and non judgmental interviews with them. In these they were addressed as authorities on and experts about their lives and their relations with others. We encouraged them to set the agenda, picking up on issues which they raised, while covering certain general themes such as their views on school, their relations with boys, girls and adults and people from other 'races,' their orientations to the future etc. (For a more detailed account of this approach to interviewing young people – and young people who have been stereotyped as problematic – see Frosh et al. 2002).

We also interviewed teachers. These were two middle aged black African women, one of whom was responsible for Life Orientation, a subject currently taught from Grade 8 - 10 (aged 12 - 16) which addresses social issues and concerns such as heterosexual attraction and relationships, HIV/AIDS, drinking, smoking and fighting, and the other for Guidance and Counselling of pupils. These interviews also focused on the topic of 'bad boys'.

Bad Boys being Good

The 'bad' boys we interviewed seemed to us surprisingly good. They often took some time to respond to our questions not because of lack of interest or commitment but because they seemed to be trying hard to give thoughtful answers. In fact it was our concentration, and not the boys', which began to waver towards the end of the 70 minute interview as we went into break time. This was because of the loud talking and laughter from a group of boys outside the interview room. Unlike us, our interviewees were not distracted by the noise outside and, at one point, one of the boys seeing that one of the interviewers (Rob) was glancing out the window, got up and told the boys who were making the noise to go away.

We asked them initially what they liked or disliked about school, and when one boy started '*the thing I don't like in this school,*' we imagined he and the other boys were going to talk about their lack of commitment to the school's work ethic and their opposition to the school authorities. However, though they did go on to speak about their concerns about getting into trouble, their concerns mainly arose not from their opposition to the school's academic culture but from their commitment to it. They were

concerned because they were missing valuable school time by being locked out for arriving late, and all of them said they would prefer being beaten for this (a form of punishment regularly administered in the school despite its official illegality in South Africa) so as not to miss lessons. As Shomo said *'it's better getting two strokes of the pipe [being beaten] and it's faster, to make us go in the classroom and get some knowledge.'*

They protested that they could not help arriving late for school because they had to travel far distances and sometimes the taxis were late. Though the Principal, they stressed, was unsympathetic, surprisingly little resentment was expressed towards him, as if the boys deferred to him as a powerful male who was rightfully exercising his authority.

The Principal featured a great deal in their accounts of getting into trouble and was clearly constructed as the key figure of authority whose role was that of watchdog sniffing out trouble. Regarding patrolling the boys' toilets for the smell of dagga smoke and smelling the boys for dagga (though not the girls) in the classrooms, this was literally the case. Smoking dagga or zol was the other thing the boys spoke about for which they got into trouble. Some mentioned boys smoking dagga in the girls' toilets in order to avoid detection by the Principal who either felt the girls' toilets were out of bounds for a man like him or that girls, unlike boys, do not smoke dagga.

Girls – a Good Influence

Their stories of getting into trouble featured either themselves or other boys not girls. And though Shomo claimed *'even girls are smoking at school'* they did not elaborate on this nor did the Principal's focus on boys rather than girls as the main culprits seem to be a bone of contention for them. Perhaps this reflects an assumption that boys were *naturally* more likely to get into trouble than girls. This seemed to be expressed later in the interview when we asked the boys whether they would prefer going to a single sex school. They all said they liked being with girls, and the main reason they gave was that girls were a good influence on boys, helping them to 'concentrate' on their school work, and, as we see in the following passage, this idealisation of girls was linked to a critique of boys in general for being noisy. Though constructing boys as less focused on school work than girls and more

disruptive in class, they were, ironically, demonstrating their own commitment to school work by expressing their preference for girls in class:

Ezekiel: I can concentrate if I'm learning with a girl. I concentrate

Shomo: I think it is right to be boys and girls because when they boys only, hey the boys they interrupt very much, ay.

Rob: They interrupt a lot?

Shomo: Ay, ay, ay

Rob: Do they? Can you give us an example of what they do?

Shomo: When the teacher is in the class, they are making noise and the girls...there is no noise there

Fred felt torn between the company of girls and boys, on the one hand preferring being with girls *'because when I stay with the girls during school time I can't just do wrong things like when I'm sitting with the boys,'* and, on the other, feeling freer with boys to go outside or go to the toilets during lessons he did not like. *'When I'm sitting with the boys, I got a best friend in class...let's go to the toilet and maybe we gonna come back later.'*

Opposing Girlfriends at School

But while constructing boys as different from girls in terms of their commitment to the school's work ethic, they also spoke about relationships with girls in ways which revealed their own commitment to this ethic. For example, when asked if they had any girlfriends, they spoke about the difficulties of sustaining girlfriend relations at school. This was not because they associated having girlfriends with being hedonistic rather than hardworking but as incurring responsibilities and entailing hard work which might conflict with the demands of school work. Ezekiel implies this when speaking about a girlfriend as someone to *'look after'*:

Ezekiel: No, no, no I don't have a girlfriend at school because...I think she will interrupt me during my learning time. I think it is better to have one at my home and when I come back from school, I will look after her.

Shomo: I do have a girlfriend but not here at school.

Rob: right.

Shomo: She lives next my house because at school I can't have a girlfriend and try to concentrate.

Chrisopher: Ja, I got one girlfriend in school but she knows that I don't have a time here in school for her. I only see her after school.

Fred: Yes, I've got one by my house...when by school I have to concentrate on my school work and not on her.

Constructing Boys of other 'Races'

When asked to compare young people of different 'races' almost all the pupils we interviewed at this school compared blacks with Indians and sometimes coloureds, and we often had to ask specifically about their views on whites. Whites were constructed generally by black students we interviewed at Bafana and in the formerly Indian school in our study, as distant and also idealised figures, reflecting, in part, these black pupils' lack of interaction with them (see Pattman and Bhana forthcoming). This interview proved no exception. The boys focused on Indian boys whom they described as naughty, and on their relationships with them which they presented as being marked by conflict. One boy who had been to a school with blacks and Indians spoke about Indian boys bunking school and getting drunk, another about how some Indian boys he was with blamed him for breaking into a house when they were the culprits, and another about Indian boys stealing his money when he was waiting for a taxi. They were quite clear, however, that they as blacks were most likely to be perceived as trouble makers and that this was because they were the least well off and seen as the most likely to turn to crime. As one boy said, *'they know we do not have a lot of money and what we need is money and they can just say "Ay, it's blacks, it's blacks" ...they think all of us need money, money but they don't care about us.'* It seems likely that by using 'they,' as they did several times in this context, the boys are implying that these are constructions of blacks and crime which are familiar and are commonly held. Significantly it was only when comparing themselves with Indians that the boys complained about being stereotyped as bad. When asked specifically

about white boys whom they had not really mentioned, they praised them as people who did not get into trouble.

Rob: What about white boys?

Christopher: I can say the white is better because it's not always....they do the wrong things like stealing and whatever, drinking alcoholI never heard that the white maybe poke someone, they stole someone's thing...the white poke someone, I never heard that.

Rob : You agree with what he is saying?

Ezekiel: I agree with him because the blacks...they kill people and they make a robbery and the whites cannot make a robbery because there is nothing they are suffering of.

Fred: I can say there is white peoples that is suffering because one day I saw a white person that was sitting in the park and sleeping and seeing this person is not having money, and he was sitting down and looking for the money in the pocket and now we are the same peoples, blacks, Indians and coloured.

David: I can say that whites are the same as us, because you see some white people are more poor than the blacks.

Whites were constructed as very different from blacks and Indians partly for not doing 'wrong things' and this was clearly attributed (not in a critical way) to their lack of 'suffering' compared to blacks. It was the sight of poor, homeless whites that caused Fred and David to revise this view and to suggest that whites were actually the same as Indians and blacks. But Indians and blacks were equated by some of the boys (and differentiated from whites) in terms of their assumed shared, relatively poor economic situations. As one boy said:

I arrived there in Chatsworth [an Indian lower to middle class area] they [Indians] are selling fruits and trying to make money, but when you arrive in Durban, you can see there is no white who is poor ... that's why I think the Indians and blacks are the same.

These boys, however, also implied that Indians were richer than blacks, in a way which made them more aloof, and blacks more likely to be labelled as

robbers and trouble makers. In other interviews which Rob (though, significantly, not Deevia) conducted with black young people at this school, Indians, though not whites, were constructed as affluent and criticised for flaunting this and for being arrogant and snobbish in relation to blacks.

Constructions of the Interview

Though we formulated questions in response to issues which the young people raised, asking them to elaborate on these, and provide illustrations and inviting them to respond to each other, it did not seem like a conversation, more like us asking questions and them responding individually, making little eye contact with their fellow interviewees. They had generally serious expressions, and the only laughter we heard was from the boys outside. The boys took the interview very seriously, partly, it seems, because they saw it as something which would help them in relation to their future and getting jobs. For when asked to reflect on being interviewed the boys spoke about the interview providing an opportunity for them to '*share ideas*' and learn important things from 'different' and 'other' people, such as skills for job interviews:

Ezekiel: It's good to share ideas ... with different people because we don't know what to do and maybe the other one, he can tell us which way we must do it.

Christopher: I like because it's helping when you are making an interview and when you want a job, and you mustn't be shy.

They were positive about the interview partly because they had not been 'shy' and been able to 'share ideas' with us, who they constructed as knowledgeable and very different from them. It was not just that we were adults, but white and Indian adults which made us, in their eyes, different from them and added to the importance of the interview. In the interview we conducted with the girls, the girls reflected on how being 'white' made us celebrity figures for the pupils. As one of the girls said: '*We look at white people and we think "Oh my God."*' We were lumped together as white ('*They [the pupils generally] can't see any difference between you, maybe*

they thought you were both white,' one girl explained) presumably because we were being constructed as so different and important, and whiteness tended to symbolise and emphasise this.

Comparing the Interviews with the 'Bad' Boys and 'Bad' Girls

We came away from the boys' interview surprised at how 'good' the 'bad' boys were. We were a little saddened by just how serious the boys had been and how despondent they had seemed about their current and future circumstances and also felt rather flat partly because there had been little interaction between them. A key theme the boys raised in the interview was 'suffering' – the poverty they said black people in their township were experiencing and their concerns about getting jobs and being able to fend for themselves in the future. Indeed this perhaps explained the absence of laughter in the interview and the serious expressions on their faces, and also, the importance they attached to the interview as something which might help them in their uneasy quest to secure employment.

A few days after we had conducted the interviews with the 'bad' boys and the 'bad' girls we could picture the girls, their personalities, what they looked like and where they were sitting, but neither of us could remember the boys in the same detail; in fact we could only remember what two of the boys looked like. For we learnt much more about the different girls' personalities through the ways they interacted with each other and also from the girls' self reflections. Even at the beginning of the interviews when the young people were asked to say something interesting about themselves by way of introduction the girls were much more eloquent than the boys, for example, reflecting on the kinds of friends they had and what they were like with their friends, as well as how they viewed school and particular teachers. In contrast, when asked to introduce themselves the boys provided short cryptic statements of interests such as 'liking football' which did not really mark them out as particular individuals.

Our focus in this paper is on the 'bad' boys we interviewed, and we are drawing on the interview with the girls in order, by way of contrast, to reflect more closely on how the boys construct and present themselves. As we have argued, masculinities and femininities are constructed relationally,

and by comparing the gendered performances of boys and girls in these interviews we are trying to provide a richer account of what the boys are like. The girls seemed to be displaying what Carol Gilligan (1993) refers to as a 'relational' style of identifying and behaving in contrast to the more individualistic and instrumental performances of the boys. Whereas the boys worked hard individually at answering the questions, the girls did not simply respond to our questions but also posed their own. The questions we and they asked blended in with the conversation, and acted as catalysts for the girls engaging with each other. Gilligan argues that once adolescence is reached girls' morality tends to become structured around an 'ethic of care,' at the expense of 'losing voice' and a sense of individuality, whereas boys tend to ignore the desires and needs of others and to make decisions independently. We want to argue, however, that the boys we interviewed, while much less 'relational' than the girls, had a powerful sense of their future (and perhaps even current) duties and obligations as breadwinners, and that this, at least partly, accounted for the boys' relative seriousness as well as their despondency. The significance the boys attached to the interview as a means of helping them prepare for job interviews, reflected, we suggest, anxieties about their futures, made particularly acute by constructing themselves as potential breadwinners in communities with high levels of poverty and unemployment. This seemed to be for these boys, a heavy gendered burden.

In terms of *what* they said, one of the most striking differences was how downbeat the boys were compared to the girls. This was highlighted when they were asked to choose a country they would like to visit. One boy, for example mentioned Ethiopia because *'they are suffering even more than South Africa... they are poor poor... and they need someone to bring them up.'* Another said he would like to go to the US *'to learn how they create money...because I want to learn how...because we are suffering,'* and another to Johannesburg because *'people say life is very easy there...because life is hard this side.'*

When asked which countries, if any, they would like to visit, the girls made no mention of *suffering* in South Africa, and eulogised, instead, with much laughter, about the exotic life styles and food they would like to experience in countries like the US and Mexico. While boys focused on the lack of opportunities available to them, girls were much more optimistic.

When asked about what jobs they wanted to do, all the girls mentioned professions or well paid jobs, such as lecturing, physiotherapy and fashion modelling. Some of the boys mentioned manual jobs like driving and catering, and while others aspired, like the girls, to doing professional jobs, their aspirations were always qualified and tempered by statements about the difficulties of realising these, given how 'hard' life was for people from the black townships.

The 'bad' girls spoke about the things which made girls (and them) bad, and these tended to involve boys, mixing with them or doing things with them like smoking (tobacco) and drinking. One girl, Cindy, *displayed* badness by smiling surreptitiously and looking down when, for example, talking about smoking with boys in the girls' toilets, and also when she said 'guys' when asked why she liked going to nightclubs. This gave rise to lots of laughter from everyone as if she was saying something very naughty. Cindy and the other 'bad' girls seemed to identify more with boys, than some of the other black girls we have interviewed, and envied their freedoms. Prisca, for example, who had been expelled from a 'multi racial' school for smoking spoke about girls and boys having similar sex drives, though she was also critical of girls for not 'carrying themselves' properly and showing their underwear. She also emphasised that both boys and girls were as likely to get beaten with 'the pipe,' pointing out that she was beaten recently for smoking. Janet, the other bad girl who said she used to smoke enjoyed mixing with boys and wished she was one, though not, she said, 'a gangster,' with the implication that this was a common masculine identity.

While partially identifying with boys, these 'bad' girls, however, *performed* very differently from the 'bad' boys in the interviews. The boys did not engage with each other as the girls did, nor did they express the variety of emotions the girls showed – laughter, surprise, disgust, shock, sympathy. The boys seemed rather unemotional, certainly in relation to each other, and even when they were speaking about perceived injustices they spoke in curiously flat and detached ways.

Women Teachers Constructing and Deconstructing 'Bad' Boys

The Guidance and Life Orientation teachers we interviewed preferred calling the girls they had selected for us 'naughty' rather than 'bad,' with the

implication that badness was a feature of masculinity not femininity. While the teachers expressed such essentialist understandings of gender during the interview, they nevertheless challenged gender dichotomies and polarisations of 'good' and 'bad.'

The 'bad' boys originally selected for interview, they informed us, arrived late that day and had been refused admission to the school's premises. So they selected other boys by looking down the punishment register and choosing those who featured for 'bad' things like smoking dagga or arriving late. They described the boys we interviewed as 'bad,' but not as 'bad' as the ones originally selected. Referring to the latter, they said '*only about 10% are really bad.*' Implying that (black township) boys, in general, were not '*really bad*' there was an insinuation, here, that they may be a bit bad. They accorded this small minority much attention when speaking about the lives and identities of black township boys in general, as if they provided markers of masculinity in relation to whom other township boys positioned themselves, (or embodied hegemonic masculine values, Connell 1995). When asked if they thought that black boys (in general) were more likely to get into trouble than people from other 'races,' one of the teachers elaborated on prevailing pressures on township boys to become drug dealers and gangsters.

Yes even in our townships there are people forcing them to do things for them , they start selling this thing [drugs], they start doing it themselves, even their father tells them to do it cos no-one is working at home – how can we get money.

Interestingly, the teacher presents the gangster figure not as irresponsible or pathological, but, on the contrary, as a male breadwinner trying to fend for himself and his family in conditions of poverty and high unemployment.

When we asked the Guidance Counsellor if both boys and girls came to consult her, she replied that they did, and in roughly equal numbers. But the problems they presented were very different and seemed to stem from the polarisation of masculinities and femininities in relation to power, with boys being expected to be powerful as material providers and also sexually in relation to girls as well as being tough and strong in relation to other boys (see Pattman & Chege 2003, on how these identities generate problems for

both boys and girls). The Guidance Counsellor reported that boys' problems relate to the anxieties they feel about selling drugs and engaging in other 'bad' forms of behaviour and not being able to express these anxieties as they try to maintain a veneer of invulnerability and power, whereas girls' problems relate to being made the objects of male sexual desire:

Boys' problems relate to pressures from the community, they may be pressurised by a neighbour to be a merchant and he says he's afraid. A boy says I'm selling and abusing drugs. Girls say I've been assaulted or raped or sexually abused by my father.

The Guidance Counsellor provided a powerful critique of the construction of boys as strong and hard by elaborating on the anxieties they feel. But the boys could only reveal their anxieties, she said, with women:

Boys have been forced by circumstances and the area to be drug merchants and they can't open up to males. Us Africans they've got this fear they have to be strong all the time, they think maybe a male is going to laugh at me, why are you not strong. In counselling sometimes they cry and really open up. As Africans there is this belief they can't cry, they are male.

They seemed to take it for granted that boys could only 'open up' with women, and made this explicit when asked why there were no male Life Orientation teachers or Guidance Counsellors. Indeed the very question made them smile, as if men were unimaginable in these roles. They – the two women we interviewed – were able to do the work they did because, they said, they were like 'mothers' who related much more closely to both boys and girls than adult men, and the pupils felt much more comfortable talking to them about issues like sexuality.

At times [as Life Orientation teachers and Guidance Counsellors] you should act as a mother to them. [the pupils] There are things they can't tell you, you need to give them time Some topics men [teachers] can't handle when it comes to life orientation [lots of laughter] people are very shy to talk about it [sex education] openly.

When I have to deal with the topic I talk to them [the male teachers] and they say 'how do you do that, I can't do that.' It's easy for us.

The idea of men teaching sex education and not being able to 'handle it' raised much laughter partly, presumably, because of the contradiction with the assumption that males are strong and capable of handling anything. While challenging the notion of (bad) boys, as strong and hard, they were also making quite fixed associations, between femininity and emotional engagement, care and support, on the one hand, and masculinity and the absence of this, on the other. Taking the former for granted and constructing it as maternal, they were denying the possibility of male teachers demonstrating more caring and empathetic ways of being male. For the boys (and girls) we interviewed it seemed the dominant adult model of masculinity they witnessed and experienced at school was a conventionally powerful and authoritarian one as displayed most dramatically by the Principal. This kind of masculinity, ironically, seemed to have much in common with the 'tough' and 'bossy' hegemonic forms of masculinity which the two female teachers associated with the very bad boys.

Conclusion

While investigating 'bad' black boys, our aim was neither to problematise them nor to contribute to popular discourses which construct the spectre of black violence and danger which so haunt white and Indian imaginations in post-apartheid South Africa. We were concerned not to come across in our interviews as white and Indian experts (even though we were, according to the girls we interviewed, accorded considerable importance by the pupils because of our 'race'). Rather we wanted to centre on the lives and identities of the young people themselves and to encourage them to be reflective and set the agenda. We were also very concerned not to flatten out and homogenise our interviewees. We were interested in pursuing with the girls the different ways of being boys, whether they constructed boys differently, and if so how they related to different boys, and also whether they were different in different contexts. And taking masculinities and femininities not as fixed essences which predetermine gendered forms of behaviour and

values but as identities which are always constructed and performed in relation to each other, we interviewed boys about their attitudes to and relations with gendered and 'racial' Others.

The 'bad' boys we interviewed seemed surprisingly good, speaking about school and work in ways which suggested a high commitment (if not always recognised by the school authorities) to the school's work ethic, as well as displaying conscientiousness and concentration, despite the noise outside, during the interview. In individual interviews with black boys who went to black township schools in KwaZulu-Natal, Danckwerts (2005) also found high levels of commitment to the work ethic, even though, as we also found, the boys constructed themselves as less '*studious*' than girls. She contrasts this with the much more '*casual approach to academic work*' of the relatively affluent white boys she interviewed who went to multi-racial schools, who constructed working hard as 'uncool.' In all our interviews with black boys and girls coming from economically poor backgrounds, we found that much importance is attached to education as a means for self betterment, and even though the 'bad' boys we interviewed were pessimistic about the future, they were still strongly invested in school and the school's work ethic. Far from being immature, irresponsible and hedonistic which is how young men (and notably black young men) in South Africa are problematised, they seemed to be overwhelmed by concerns and anxieties about the future and how they were going to cope.

In contrast to the girls the boys were quite despondent, and this, we suggest, was partly because they were more focused on constructing themselves as actual and potential breadwinners in a community which offered few prospects of decent employment. In a recent in depth interview based study with older teenage boys from different 'race' backgrounds in the Durban area, Morrell (2005) also noted how 'responsible' the black boys seemed to be, speaking about a future in which they imagined themselves as breadwinners looking after their families, in contrast to the white boys who were much more hedonistic and individualistic and did not speak at all about family obligations. Such findings contradict, as Morrell argues, the popular myth of black young men as 'bad,' and also imply, we suggest, that we should focus on the anxieties such anticipated responsibilities generate for black young men (especially in conditions of high unemployment) rather than constructing them as tough and as lacking in feelings. As Gary Barker

(2005) notes, in his work with boys from 'low income' communities mainly in Latin America and Africa, the prospect of no employment 'for many young men' is not only problematic for them economically but also because it undermines their very identities, making them less attractive as potential 'long-term partners' for females and more likely to be seen as bad and irresponsible.

We do not want to argue, however, that violence and sexual violence do not feature prominently in the lives of some black boys whether as perpetrators or victims (of violence *and* being stereotyped as violent). Sexual harassment (usually outside school) of girls by boys and men was according to the teachers we interviewed, a major problem for girls which was raised in counselling sessions, though, interestingly, our girl interviewees, who spoke a great deal about their relations with boys, hardly referred to this. What we do want to argue, based on our current research findings, is that the 'badness' of black boys is complex, contradictory and much exaggerated.

The teachers implied that the very bad boys carried great symbolic significance, as if they illustrated (in an acute form) problems and pressures for boys *generally* in black townships, and embodied toughness and hardness as masculine ideals which influenced *all* black boys in the townships. The very bad boys, however, were constructed by the teachers as a small minority. Furthermore their violence and badness seemed very context specific. The very bad boys, according to the teachers, were violent, though not in the schools, and some of them were not hard and tough with sympathetic female teachers and even broke down and cried. The teachers suggested that the very bad boys, despite (and perhaps also because of) their veneer of toughness and invincibility were extremely anxious and concerned, and that while they did derive status from being naughty in the sense of flouting authority, one of their key motivations for becoming gangsters and drug sellers was to fend for themselves and their families. In other words their badness was not so much a manifestation of pathological irresponsibility, hatred and hedonism (as the badness of black young men in South Africa is more generally understood) but of their desire to be good and responsible breadwinners. The 'goodness' of the 'bad boys', the 'respect' they showed us, their commitment to work (whether working in the interview or working in school) and also their sense of responsibility and

concern about their futures as breadwinners was confirmed in the interview we conducted with them.

The girls' interview, when contrasted with the boys', did not demonstrate lack of voice (as one might expect on the basis of Gilligan's account of adolescent gendered styles). Instead the girls were much better at expressing and asserting themselves and taking the interview in various directions and registered more clearly in our memories than the boys who displayed relative inability to support and engage with each other and us. It seems that there were few models of empathetic and caring masculinities available to boys at school. The girls themselves, even those who were identified as bad and envied boys their freedoms, idealised girls and women as caring and supportive. So did the women teachers we interviewed who could not imagine men as Life Orientation teachers or Guidance Counsellors because they were perceived as simply not possessing the motherly and empathetic qualities of women. While deconstructing the idea of boys as tough and invulnerable by illustrating how even the very bad boys 'cry' and 'open up' with them, the teachers reinforced conventional associations of masculinities with toughness and insensitivity by making it clear that such boys (and boys and young people in general) could only open up with women. It is a matter of concern, we think, that not only are there no men teaching Life Orientation and taking Guidance and Counselling, but that they are constructed as quite incapable of doing this. For how can boys be encouraged to become more relational, supportive and caring of each other (including boys and girls) if these are constructed as feminine qualities and the dominant images of males at school, as we see in their stories featuring the Principal, are of power, authority and control?

What we want to argue for are ways of understanding and working with young black South African men and women which address bad ways of behaving and which link these to particular ways of identifying as and being boys, without problematising and pathologising the individual boys themselves in ways which draw on and reinforce racist associations of blackness with badness. This must involve:

- 1) teachers and facilitators who are young person centred (as we were in the interviews) and who address the young people with respect, as authorities on their lives.

- 2) male as well as female teachers as carers and sympathetic listeners and
- 3) boys and girls working together to break down polarised gendered identities.

Working in schools and youth clubs with black boys and girls, along the lines we have suggested, must take place in conjunction with massive financial investment in black township communities to improve resources such as the schools and to provide job opportunities. Unless this is forthcoming, the suffering which the boys we interviewed so sadly and eloquently displayed, will continue, generating anxieties, lack of self esteem and 'bad' ways of asserting masculinities.

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