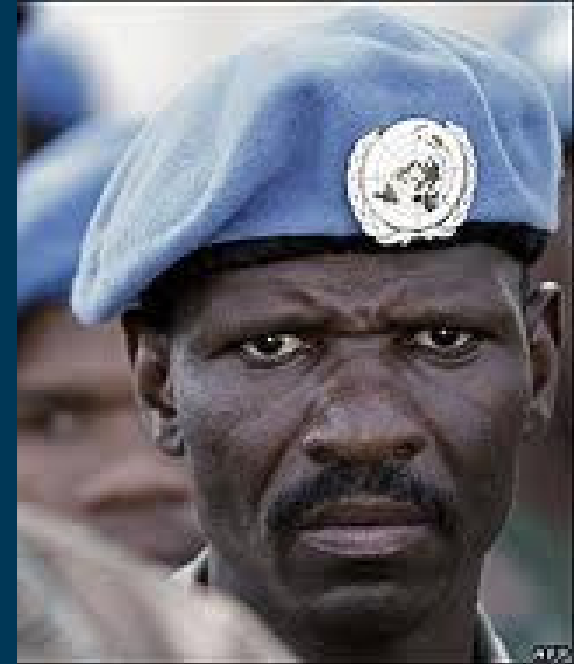


# Cultural understanding of sexuality among a group of male soldiers: Social constructionist approach



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# Aims

## Primary task of paper:

- To look at how social identities such as gender, culture, race, age and class intersect with discourses of culture and whether the intersection might have produced new discourses of sexualities specifically in the overtly masculinist context of the military
- To explore discourses of culture & how they impact on gender power relations
- Highlight connections between understandings of male sexuality & dominant discourses of culture

# Methodology

- Paper emerges out of a larger qualitative study
- 14 male soldiers between the ages of 24-33 years
- Junior officers enrolled in a tertiary institution
- > 4 years in the military
- 12 single & only 2 are married
- 2hr in-depth individual interviews transcribed verbatim
- The paper is underpinned by social constructionist & critical men's studies approach to masculinities
- Transcripts were interpreted primarily on the basis of Hollway (1995) & Edley & Wetherell's (1997) interpretative discourse analysis
- Pseudonyms are used

# Discourses of culture and sexuality

- Constraints of culture as key elements in maintaining sexual differences between men & women were identified .
- Men are characterised as lacking in knowledge about women's sexuality or their bodies.
- This discourse is not surprising in a cultural context which defines & shapes heterosexual expression as male-centred, & more specifically centred around male bodily pleasure, itself the product of a particular sexualised relation to women's bodies.

# Cont.

- Lack of readiness was also identified:
- *Bongi: Some ... men are not yet ready to start engaging with these questions of sex. Our history ... during the apartheid period. Sexuality also comes into play here, with the sexual relations & r/ships between men & women in black societies radically disrupted.*
- This draws on the notion that socio-historical conditions are linked with human sexuality & sexual r/ships.
- This suggests that inequalities in sexual negotiation between men & women could well be the result of historical factors.

# Cont.

- Men's contradictory & ambivalent r/ship towards women's sexuality has also to be understood in terms of their cultural situatedness whereby masculine & feminine sexualities are considered to be cultural constructs.
- *Mikobe: Other people well-informed, or civilised, .. you'll find that they talk about things like that. Others read mass magazines, other people read women's magazines, &, depending on how they interact ... to what extent is their r/ship developed? Then ... it will guide the way in which they ... What will be their topics & so on. & if that topic is also included, obviously they're going to entertain it.*

# Male sexuality in control vs female sexuality in silence

- Men are self-centred -sexual pleasure.
- Both women & men live & express their sexuality within the discourses of cultural location which dictates that it is only appropriate for men to initiate anything sexual between them.
- Women in the military are reported as more sexually active and appear to break some of the traditional constructions of female sexuality:
  - *John: They are called state mattresses*

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# Cont.

- This constrains women from being (too) open about their sexual desires & needs towards men. Men are expected to take the initiative:
- *Bongi: [There is a] mentality that says men ... are supposed to be superior & everything must be suggested, or must come ... from a man.*
- By adhering to this cultural stereotype, women contribute to men's lack of knowledge about their sexual needs & desires.
- *Bongi: Normally ... they just keep quiet, as they will be afraid [to] come out & say, 'listen, I'm not satisfied'.*

# Anxiety versus non-caring emotions

- Men are positioned as being in a state of tension with respect to women's sexuality:
- *Bongi: Most of the time ... guys would be afraid to ... communicate with the ladies, in terms of sex, and ask what it is that they want. It's sometimes ... awkward, or uncomfortable.*
- *Mikobe: Your objective is simply to have sex.... But, if you care for the person, you are involved in more ... moral r/ship, ..you will tend to be concerned. .... you need to find a way of addressing it*
- *Simon: It is not that much of a pressure when it is a one-night stand. But if you like a girl, you really have to do it right. You have to put some effort.*

# Cont.

- *Bongi: Some lady that you maybe see ... once and maybe never again, it somehow makes it easier for men to talk about sexual needs & desires. Whatever you say to her ... won't affect you, because you hardly see that person. So, whatever you'll be saying ... won't have any effect [on] your r/ship with her.*
- Most participants reported more casual sex during deployment or when attending military courses away from home.

# Control of & controlled by women's bodies

- Men rely on women's bodily responses, such as sounds, facial expressions & body movements
- *Simon: You listen to the sounds, look at facial expressions or something & you don't know what that means but, but when the girls starts falling with you in bed, then it's great & it's relaxed.*
- *Thulani: If you kiss, the kiss that is called French kiss. You 1st feel in her body, there are places, that when you touch, you'll feel her collapse. When she collapses then it means that is a soft spot that I must always use it if I want her to be fast.*

# Cont.

- Women seem to have control of men in more subtle, unspoken ways.
- How they relate to men situates their sexuality as based on their knowledge of male sexuality
- P's also reflect men's constructions of women as intuitive, more sensitive to the emotional realm and closer to the unconscious (less rational) than men:
- *Daniel: Women know what men want. Knowing this, sex is often used as a tool ... to get the man. Women realise ... a lot of our self-esteem is tied up with sex and sexual performance, that's why they fake it ...the extreme pleasure.*

## Conclusion

- Constructions of sexuality are an intersection of social identities □ including the political, historical, cultural, personal, and experiential □ that link behaviour & thought & action.
- Cultural discourse is reported to be the determining factor of power inequalities between men & women, in the sense that it is used to explain & legitimise men's ignorance & unwillingness to understand or accept women's sexuality.
- The military culture (deployment, military courses) seems to exaggerate this discourse.



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