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Becoming Men. Black Masculinities in a South African Township by Malose Langa

Information on the author

Dr Malose Langa is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg. He lectures undergraduate students from various disciplines and as such is known by occupational therapists who graduate from Wits. Dr Malose also works at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV). His research and publications included his work with juvenile offenders, ex-combatants and causes of violent crime in South Africa. His well-known report *Smoke that Calls* which investigates causes of violent protests post 1994 and how these protests are linked to hegemonic masculinities and power struggles. His research interests include risk-taking behaviours amongst youth, the trauma of collective violence and the psychology of men (masculinity) in postapartheid South Africa. His PhD was focused on exploring masculinity amongst adolescent boys in Alexandra Township, South Africa. Which is the subjectmatter of this book.

The Review

Malose Langa, the author studied a group of male participants (in Alexandra township, collegially called Alex) for 10 years from when they were teenagers to when they became young adults. The book focuses on unpacking the complexities and adversities that had an impact on the participants' masculinity and eventually who they became in society. Overall, each participant's life turned out differently, despite all being brought up in a similar harsh environment. Participants' experiences range from those who were killed, jailed, had a qualification, being in a stable relationship, having a job to some *making it* and moving out of Alex. The layout of the book is easy to follow and understand. It is admirable how the author could repack his PhD into an easy-to-read book. Photographs are used to elicit participants' authentic contextual stories and to further unpack sensitive issues, such as sexual preferences or orientation.

In *Chapter 1* Malose sets the scene by giving an overview of the book, and what inspired him to do his PhD. A longitudinal research approach was used. The participants (started at n=32 and decreased to n=12) were teenagers in high school when the research started and young adults (some were working) when the research ended. Focusing on *what makes a man a man*, Malose contextualises the complexities of masculinity, to Alex township. He highlights the ineffectiveness of initiatives meant to assist adolescent boys, in *Chapter 2* as they don't align to the society (and the environments) they live in. Historic issues such as patriarchal practices play a negative role and make it challenging for alternative hegemonic masculinity to be popular and accepted in society.

In *Chapter 3*, Malose gives background and an overview of Alexandra Township. When, how and why Alex was established and how it changed over the years. He highlights how the current complexities of Alex emanate from its past. Under the South African Apartheid Group Areas Act, Alex was a hub for black South Africans to provide labour to the, then designated whites-only suburb of Santon, which to date is still one of most affluent suburbs of South Africa.

Malose unpacks issues his participants faced that are associated with present mothers, and absent fathers in *Chapter 4*. The emotional difficulties expressed by the boys ranged from longing for a present father, to suicidal thoughts. One participant relates having considered performing rituals to carry his late father's name so that he can align with his heritage and be accepted by his late father's ancestors.

Malose also highlights the value of a mother who instilled discipline, and was regarded as an important role player in assisting the boys to stay focused, and prevent them from going astray. And in *Chapter 5 and 6* he highlights the social complexities his participants face. At the top of the social hierarchy are those engaging in heroic risky behaviours (*tsotsi masculinity*). Being academically oriented is perceived as 'uncool' and associated with negative connotations such as being called derogatory words and classified as 'teacher's pets'. These result in some boys attempting to appear cool publicly (showing *tsotsi behaviour*) but studying in private to get better marks. Growing up in Alex there are weekly parties where alcohol is easily available. Sex is male-driven. Those who engage in it, especially with multiple partners, are perceived as 'cool' and respected, but those who do not are called names such as *di bari* (fools). On the masculinity hierarchy, Christians and gays, in that order, are at the bottom. In order to belong and not be embarrassed by their peers and friends, these boys (Christians and gays) would deny and lie when it comes to such subjects. To overcome such pressures some participants resorted to their faith and/or talking to an elderly person for advice. In *Chapter 7* Malose unpacks the subject of homosexuality which is viewed as less masculine and being inferior. With maturity, one participant gained confidence and identified openly as gay despite homophobic experiences. Such homophobic experiences entailed e.g., lack of support structure, being judged from how they dress (colourful clothes) and being called derogatory words such as *isitabani* (gay).

In *Chapter 8* Malose focuses on challenges faced by those becoming fathers at an early age, navigating studies and the world of work. Those who impregnated their girlfriends at a young age had to deal with issues such as paying for damages to the girlfriend's family. Later on, they deal with being young fathers and were observed reflecting on their childhood traumas resulting from their own absent fathers. Those who made it to university had to deal with challenges around funding (for e.g. accommodation, food and transport), though they were expected to perform and pass regardless. They deemed the varsity system as being unfair as expectations remained the same across all students irrespective of their background, social and economic standing. Despite their dire situation, some participants made it out of Alex (as was their aspiration), secured good jobs and led prosperous lives. To give back, they considered setting up support structures (e.g., a Non-Government Organisation) with an aim to help those in need in Alex.

Chapter 9 is a case study. One participant who initially followed the Christian faith, passed his matric but ended up in prison when he was forced to take a gap year due to lack of funding to further his education. He succumbed to peer pressure and engaged in criminal activities. In prison, he regains his faith and uses the opportunity to study law, enrolling in an LLB degree. The author sums up the book in *Chapter 10*. He raises findings that are contrary to traditional beliefs and popular assumptions about masculinities that may emerge from communities similar to Alex. The author opens up on how this research touched him personally e.g. his father was also absent (unknown), a subject he never

spoke about with his colleagues before. Malose concludes making recommendations aimed at assisting in building better communities that support not only present mothers but fathers, boys and girls. With an intention to publicly celebrate and promote non-risk-taking, non-violent and non-sexist behaviour in society.

This book is highly recommended reading and has significant relevance to occupational therapy in South Africa. Like any non-white community in South Africa, the community of Alex was and still is disadvantaged, especially economically and socially. Post-apartheid in 1994, such communities started having access to basic services e.g., to health professionals like occupational therapists. Despite almost 30 years of democracy in South Africa, Alex is still a high-density, low-income township that is economically and socially disadvantaged. There are however many projects and institutions working to address this. One of these is the occupational therapy services offered at Alex Clinic through Wits University's 4th year Occupational students during their community placement block.

According to Ned et.al.¹ the majority of occupational therapists are females (95%), white and privileged. Although occupational therapists or the Occupational Therapy Profession is not mentioned, the book is relevant to the South African occupational therapy community in this sense:

- Awareness, continued awareness, learning and understanding of those communities that patients return to post-discharge from occupational therapy intervention at a tertiary hospital is crucial. A better understanding of patients' realities and living conditions will enhance occupational therapists' planning and therapy outcomes that are not only sustainable, but facilitates patients' community reintegration.
- In line with recommendations made by Birioukova and Barker² in their publication titled *The male occupational therapist: Demographics, issues and recommendations*, the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA), as part of their transformation agenda, could take into account issues raised in this book should they consider recruiting and making the profession appealing to males.

General personal views of the reviewer

As a black male, from rural Bushbuckridge, with family living in Alex, I can relate to many of the issues faced by the participants in this book. Things that I can relate to are a need to perform rituals (which may be perceived as psychoses by a less insightful and knowledgeable professional), peer pressure, university challenges (e.g., financially related). Also, as a male (minority) in the occupational therapy profession and coming from a disadvantaged past, I have experienced challenges in the profession relating to its feminine Western culture and practices, feelings of isolation, and being 'misunderstood'.

I know of two cases in Alex where two young male friends hanged themselves, a month apart. Their tragic stories were related to mental health issues which started when their parents passed on, followed by substance abuse and finally leading to them taking their own lives. On the other hand, I

am aware of Alex success stories such as that of Israel Matseke Zulu who turned around his life after imprisonment and is currently a successful actor and poet. His story aligns with that of the participants in this book in that he grew up in Alex, in a one-roomed house, had an absent father, succumbed to peer pressure (*tsotsi behaviour*) and engaged in criminal activities which landed him in prison. Today is he widely known for his roles in movies such as Amandla, Beyond the River, Hard to Get and Avenged and before that as GP in the SABC1 drama series Gaz'lam. His life story, and the fact that there are books such as *Becoming Men* being written and read in South Africa acts as a beacon of hope for the future of young people in what might often be perceived to be a hopeless situation.

Although not the main focus, the book also highlights (directly and indirectly) important inequality issues. Issues such as mental health, gender-based violence, homophobia, substance abuse, poverty and educational access and appropriateness (related to the *fees must fall movement* in South Africa), and housing (related to the land reform and distribution in South Africa). I found some chapters especially educational and enlightening, specifically around the issue of homophobia. A relevant topic that locally, in South Africa, we have platforms that were created (from government to individual) to sensitise and raise awareness such as MacG's YouTube based Podcast and Chill (Queer way of life with Bujoy Bikwa).

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