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Source: *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 2005), pp. 303-317

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005415>

Accessed: 11/09/2009 16:21

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Contextualizing group rape in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Collective male sexual violence is part of a continuum of sexual coercion in South Africa. This paper is based on long-term ethnographic work in an urban township in the former Transkei region. Drawing on intensive participant observation and interviews with young men in particular, it attempts to make sense of emergent narratives relating to *streamlining*, a local term for a not uncommon form of collective sexual coercion involving a group of male friends and one or more women. The paper begins with an overview of existing anthropological literature on collective male sexual violence, going on to elaborate the different scenarios associated with group sexual violence in the fieldsite. It seeks to provide a multi-layered contextualization of the phenomenon by considering prevailing gender discourses, subcultural issues pertaining to the urban *tsotsi* phenomenon, the rural practice of *ukuthwala* (bride capture), young working-class Africans' experiences of marginalization, and the complex links between political economy and violence in this setting.

Keywords: *Gang rape, rape, sexual violence, gender, ethnography, South Africa*

Introduction

South Africa has a notoriously violent colonial and recent history, with an estimated 20 000 people dying as a consequence of political violence between 1984 and 1994 (Goldstone 1998). The country's complex political history of colonialism and industrialization has produced the conditions for violence of multiple kinds to flourish (Beinart 1992, Stadler 1987). The extent to which both political repression and inter-personal violence/violation have been pervasive aspects of everyday life is reflected in the social realist fiction and political autobiography produced by decades of black South African writers, and glimpsed through a long tradition of historiographic and ethnographic writing (Beinart 1992). A dramatic legacy has also been left by the country's insidious militarization, particularly in the dying years of the apartheid state (Cock and Nathan 1989). Today townships and many rural areas remain flooded with cheap, illegal firearms.

Inter-personal violence continues to affect daily life. High rates of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and continuing national interest in human rights, have contributed to an intensification in interest in sexual violence in the country. The pervasiveness of sexual coercion in young people's lives in particular is now known. This takes different forms (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002): much of it is committed within

established sexual partnerships or by men known to the survivors (Wood *et al.* 1998); some of it is child rape, predominantly of girls; and some is group rape by disaffected young men (Mokwena 1991).

High levels of sexual violence have been linked to patriarchal gender ideologies and to a “crisis of masculinity” in a context where working-class African men have long been marginalized (Mokwena 1991, Vogelmann and Lewis 1993). One broad argument is that for generations of working-class men—historically disenfranchised and profoundly disadvantaged by the exploitative migrant labour system that defined the colonial and apartheid economies—the family domain became the primary sphere in which they could (coercively if necessary) re-assert their sense of masculinity (Campbell 1992). Since the first democratic elections in 1994, debate around masculinity has intensified. In particular, it has been argued that the re-definition of gender and the liberalization of sexuality entailed by the democratic transition have posed serious challenges to orthodox, mainly authoritarian notions of masculinity, leaving many men with a disempowering sense of irrelevance in the domestic sphere (Walker 2003, Morrell 2001). Posel (2004) has examined the intense visibility and politicization of sexuality since the advent of democracy, arguing that as a consequence of the Bill of Rights, sexual violence has become a very public matter.

In particular relation to a crisis of masculinity among *young* African men, there is an associated body of literature documenting two largely divergent historical responses to marginalization: the first is the radical politicization of many young people during the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly subsequent to the Soweto uprising of 1976 (Straker *et al.* 1996, Reynolds 2000); the second is the historical emergence of mostly male street gangs that were founded in no small part on a rejection of socio-cultural consensus, including a celebration of violence of diverse kinds (Scharf 1989, Pinnock 1984, Glaser 2000).

This paper is based on an ethnographic study carried out in an urban township, and attempts to contextualize and make sense of the narratives of many young men who described participating in *streamlining*, the local slang term for a not uncommon form of group sexual coercion.

The anthropology of collective male sexual violence

While anthropological writing on rape remains a small and disparate body of work, it has an important contribution to make to discussions of sexual violence in two ways: first, it offers the ability to look beyond assumptions which link sexual violence unproblematically with masculine control; and second, it offers detailed cultural, economic and historical contextualization. Anthropological research on rape involving groups of men is primarily clustered around three themes: group rape in conflict situations; “ritual” or threatened group rape in some small-scale Amazonian societies; and group rape in the context of urban alienation and “street” masculinities. Much of this has focused on the iconography and symbolisms of collective sexual violence, rather than on the phenomenon as “lived experience” (Littlewood 1997).

Anthropological writings on “mass” wartime rape describe rape in this context as a social rather than individual action, suggesting that group rape is more likely to occur in conflicts in which the state is liminal—as during what Littlewood (1997: 11) calls “decentred privatized conflicts” such as certain kinds of civil war and counter-insurgency—or in conflicts that feature the partition of a territory and its population, such as Bosnia in 1992–3 and the Punjab in 1947 (Das 1995, Hayden 2000). Here group sexual violence is

strategic, as for instance in the so-called “genocidal rape” in Bosnia, and can be used as a way of shattering the possibility of co-existence in ethnically or religiously diverse populations—as in the rape of tens of thousands of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim women during the partition of India (Hayden 2000). As Das writes (1995: 56): “The woman’s body became a sign through which men communicated with each other”. During Partition, for instance, abduction and rape became part of the “imaging of the project of nationalism in India” (Das 1995: 68).

Rape was a widely used weapon in the wars waged in Southern Africa by the apartheid regime and its allies (Sideris 2002, Ross 2003, Nordstrom 2004). Ethnography of the “work” done by rape in conflict situations and its broader symbolisms in peace-time demonstrates that specific episodes of sexual violence have to be located within other contexts in which harm is committed. Writing about her native Croatia and Bosnia, Olujic (1998) considers popular “body folklore” and local concepts of honour, shame and sexuality as expressed in folk-songs, epic singing, boasting, stories and jokes (which construct women’s bodies as the symbolic terrain of male competition and microcosm of lineage). Significantly, she argues that war-time rape is a continuation of expressed or enacted violence (symbolic or real) during peace-time.

Analyses of peace-time group rape focus on those Amazonian societies which maintain a threat of gang rape for women who set eyes on the sacred trumpets or flutes—which, being considered the most important ritual objects and the source of reproductive power, are guarded by men. This form of “ritual” group rape has been interpreted using feminist analyses that point to the use of the penis as a weapon of control, and that link the threat of sexual brutality to indigenous ideas about patrilineal descent, the inherent “otherness” of women and the fundamentally conflicted nature of heterosexuality (Jackson 1992). More recent work has questioned this view of male sexuality as an *a priori* locus of power (McCallum 1994).

Qualitative analyses of group rape in the context of historical and contemporary urban alienation have particular relevance to this paper. Mostly embedded within ethnographies, examples include teenage gang rape in Harlem (Bourgeois 1995) and group rape in Papua New Guinea (Jenkins 1994). Glaser’s (2000) social history of urban South Africa points to the commonness of abductions and rapes of girls and young women by groups of young men labelled *tsotsis* in the late 1940s and 1950s. The term *tsotsi* is a label still much used in South African communities to refer to a disaffected, unemployed young man who survives on his wits, lives through criminal means and often uses fear and coercion to maintain personal power. The term also embodies a particular subcultural sense of “streetwise” style of dress and music, a style that grew out of urbanization and that continues to have a broad appeal for many young South Africans.

Historiographical work has started mapping out the genealogy of *tsotsi* gangs in the metropolitan townships to which young men have long been drawn (Guy and Thabane 1987, La Hausse 1990, Glaser 2000). While sharing important continuities with rural forms of male youth association and with groups coalesced by migrant workers in urban labour markets, territorial criminal gangs emerged in townships in the midst of urban deprivation and destabilized family lives. Defining themselves oppositionally, *tsotsis* flouted, often with ostentatious contempt, the social principles which underlay the hegemonic consensus lived by most community members: adherence to the law, the sanctity of private property, the work ethic, and non-violence (Glaser 2000). Glaser (1992) describes how typical *tsotsi* traits included being a good fighter, having a means of income while scorning the humiliations of wage labour, maintaining a certain style, and having desirable and

plentiful women. They established localized power bases, effectively by terrorising their targets (elders, women and school-children). Violence was partly recreational, reflecting rural traditions of stick fighting among boys as both a form of sport and a way of establishing hierarchies among peer groups (Mager 1999).

Group rape has been a phenomenon particularly associated with these groups of young men. Mokwena's important (1991) paper on *jackrolling*, a form of group abduction and rape of young women in Soweto in the eighties originally associated with a gang called The Jackrollers, describes how the practice was designed to put out-of-reach or "snobbish" women in their place. Mokwena locates his analysis firmly in the context of the challenges faced by African working-class youth at the time of the political unrest of the eighties, including familial disintegration, deepening poverty and intergenerational conflict. Likewise, an interview with Mary Mabaso, a community activist in Soweto, traces the origins of *jackrolling* to the closure of schools during the unrest of 1976 and the targeting of schoolgirls by unemployed young men (Russell 1991).

While these studies locate group rape in the contexts of broader structural violence, including profound economic marginalization and diverse forms of deprivation, Sanday in her important study of gang rape (called "pulling train" or "playing train") in contemporary American college fraternities shows that gang rape is not necessarily linked either to class, or predominantly to non-Euro American societies. For Sanday (1990), gang rape is best understood as an "irrevocable" and brutal group bonding ritual that is made possible through deeply sexist and discriminatory assumptions about women's sexuality and autonomy that operate in the broader heterosexual culture of contemporary America. There are important similarities between these kinds of assumptions and those operating in South African settings.

Note on terminology

This paper describes a practice known in this fieldsite as *streamlining*. In local usage, this term refers to two or more men having sex with a woman, usually but not always by coercive means. The data focuses on young men's perspectives, and on the coercive, non-consensual end of the spectrum. Here the practice is referred to as "group rape" rather than the standard "gang rape", because the latter would be a misnomer, as the practice is primarily carried out by loose groupings of friends who are not in any strict sense in "gangs" (as for instance the original Jackrollers in Soweto were in the 1980s). In its more extreme forms, the term *streamlining* can be taken as commensurate with the general verb "jackrolling", which is now used in other parts of the country to refer to group sexual violence that is not necessarily "gang"-related.

Researching group rape in South Africa

This paper draws on anthropological fieldwork on sexual health conducted with young men and women (mostly in their late-teens and early-20s) and their families over an 18-month period in a working-class neighbourhood of a township in the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape. Ethical permission was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Medical Research Council of South Africa.

Multiple methods were used, including long-term participant observation (recorded in a detailed field diary), which entailed "hanging out" with young people, accompanying them

to football matches and on prison visits, to *amapathi* (house parties) or *amabashi* (street “bashes”), to a variety of *imisebenzi* (ritual slaughterings for the ancestors), to funerals (many of them HIV-related), and to their rural homes. Tape-recorded interviews on a range of topics related to sexual health and sexual violence were conducted with 46 girls and 30 boys (who had given verbal consent for the interviews), as well as focus groups with around 50 young people and elders.

This paper draws on a sub-set of interviews conducted mostly by a local male research assistant with out-of-school young men, mainly in their early twenties, which explored (among other topics) their experiences of group rape. These informants formed part of the research assistant’s and anthropologist’s social networks in the township.

Young women’s experiences of *streamlining* were more difficult to access than men’s, reflecting what Das (1995) describes as the zone of silence around rape and the “poisonous” nature of such experiences, which can damage the lives of those who speak openly of them. While living in the township, the school friends of one of the girls in whose household the author lived was gang-raped, and other cases were heard of. As a researcher, the author was also the subject of coded male talk (in prison gang language) at a party among a group of armed youth about gang rape, although the situation did not escalate.

Setting: young men’s lives in the township

The former Transkei region, an area severely affected by the HIV epidemic, is one of the poorest and most economically marginalized of South Africa: it is rural and agriculturally unproductive and it lacks industry. These conditions are the culmination of decades of interventionist state policies, and a direct reflection of Transkei’s historical processes of engagement with the onset of industrial capitalism. Its marginalization also reflects its historically disadvantaged position as a so-called “Black homeland” during apartheid (Southall 1982). Today, female-headed households are the norm in the main town’s township, and the absence of biological fathers from young people’s lives is glaring. The township is visibly class-differentiated, the poorest neighbourhood (where many of my informants lived) consisting of crumbling mud houses and shacks.

Many of the poorer families participated in diverse, self-initiated income-generating activities. Young men felt obvious tensions in relation to the poverty in which they were living. “Money is power”, they repeatedly said: indispensable to survival, enabling of happiness, and central to the fulfilment of masculine duty and the attainment of prestige. Hit by joblessness, young men living with their families characteristically went through extended periods of resignation, their “frustrated” feelings and “nerves” tempered by hanging around with friends, football practice and seeking out entertainment in local taverns. As a source of instant cash and excitement, criminal enterprise, on the other hand, was unrivalled, and unsolicited admissions to this effect came early in the research. Many young men engaged in criminal practice were “small-time”, operating within a tight-knit group of friends, stealing, mugging and holding up small businesses at gunpoint. Many community members associated them with a destructive “*tsotsi*” subculture.

Young men’s stories of their trajectories into criminal “missions” indicate that the roots of these practices are to be located in prevailing forms of pre-adolescent peer bonding, in particular non-criminal street-corner networks that operate within broad age-sets. For boys from unstable homes, peer relationships assumed inordinate importance in guiding their pathways into a criminal life. The pull of *ubusotsi* starts to make sense when the fact that it is not merely a means of survival through criminality is recognized: as a broad phenomenon

of working-class township youth, it constitutes an entire street-level subcultural style (whose symbols are sought after by many middle-class young people), encompassing clothing tastes, streetwise ways of talking and dancing, music (especially a nationally popular form of rap called *kwaito*) and leisure practices. While many young men appropriated aspects of this style without becoming involved in illegal practices, some were sucked into the more exclusive aspects of the subculture, including smoking *mandrax* (an imported barbiturate) and communicating in prison gang slang.

Tsotsi life entailed particular kinds of gender relations. Young women were often willing girlfriends and drinking partners of these young men, but many feared them. Teenage girls faced immediate sexual risk from *tsotsis* who hung around outside schools having no hesitation in threatening their chosen girls, or girls who were deemed to have a “clever” (superior) air because of their impudence in answering back or failing to respond to sexual propositions. Known for a lifestyle which excelled in taking “short-cuts”, some young men embroiled in a *tsotsi* lifestyle barely paid lip-service to propositioning or “seducing” women in the conventional ways, and appeared more likely than some of their peers to take rejections badly. Feminine assertiveness in the face of unwanted propositions from such characters could be readily interpreted as an unhealthy arrogance which signalled “disrespect”, and were sometimes punished through rape.

Group rape: scenarios

In this setting, group rape—or group sex with one or more women for those who do not perceive it as rape (as described below)—is usually called *streamlining*, but is also known as “the train”, *uyityise ngamajita* (literally “she let it be eaten by the guys”), and *bayilayite* (“they are lighting her”). The English term “gang rape” is also sometimes used in cases where men unknown to their target(s) are implicated. Four main scenarios were described in young people’s talk about the phenomenon.

The first scenario was of an opportunistic and usually alcohol-motivated group rape, exemplified by the case during fieldwork of a group of nine girls who attended school with one of the sisters in the township household in which the author lived. One Sunday evening, the girls, accompanied by two male friends, were returning from church along a quiet road leading to the township when they were stopped by a group of six young men with guns and knives, with the words “Get down! We are going to start our job now”. The girls were told to strip and several were raped. One of the girls managed to hide; another prayed aloud and was left alone. During the event, the attackers were singing a *kwaito* song. They tried to force the two male friends of the girls to participate in the rape, and when they refused, they assaulted one of them and cut the other’s penis. The case was soon the talk of the township and several days later some of the young men were arrested. One of them, an 18 year-old, pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to 10 years in prison during a court hearing attended by the author and many local young people.

The second scenario happened in circumstances where a group of friends took sexual advantage of girls with whom they had been drinking, who were drunk to the point of being unable to resist. These young women were often characterized as *izifebe* (“bitches”). Alternatively, they were girls who were found sleeping in a friend’s or brother’s room, and who were not in a position to say “no”.

The third *streamlining* scenario typically happened where a girl who had refused one of the group’s sexual advances was punished by being raped by the man who propositioned her and by one or more of his friends. One young woman described how she had been

raped at gunpoint when she was 18 by the friend of a young man whose sexual proposition she had turned down, only narrowly avoiding group rape:

[In Xhosa] I had a friend “A” who had friends who were *stout* [“delinquent”]. One day he invited me to his home to a party. We went to the party and left ... He tried to have sex with me, in the bushes, so we argued and then we fought. He said: “I wasn’t sure about you anyway”—another thing is that I did have another boyfriend, you see. So he took me to his friends ... We arrived and he beat me there, and he said that his friend must sleep with me by force. Then there was chaos and this thing happened, you see ... “A” was beating me, telling his friend to get undressed and telling me to get undressed. I told him that I didn’t want to, so he even tore my clothes. I was wearing trousers and he tore them with a knife, because I didn’t want to undress. He was telling his friend to do it by force ... It seemed that the friend was afraid of him because “A” had a gun. Then “A” left—when he left he hoped to call his other friends so that they could take the timing out of me [*bandikhuphe umshayo*: slang for “taking out confidence/cheek”, “teaching her a lesson”] because I was making myself to be “better” [superior].

In a fourth *streamlining* scenario, a young man “organized” for his friends to have sex with his girlfriend, as a way of ending the relationship when he was “tired” of her—because she would not wish to continue the relationship following this ordeal—and/or as a way of “teaching her a lesson” when she had been sexually unfaithful and made herself into *isifebe* (“bitch”), or if she had been behaving in other ways which publicly undermined his sense of masculinity. On some occasions, this kind of *streamlining* involved enacted “trickery”, as the following two extracts indicate—although this was pretence which all parties could see through. The aim of this form of *streamlining* was to discipline the woman, destroy her “confidence” and humiliate her, while reinforcing group bonding through her being “shared” with the young man’s male friends. Several informants described their participation in this practice:

[In Xhosa]: Girls don’t like it. This girl ... says she’s a bitch and sleeps around, and you think you should discipline her. You call may be two of your friends, and you tell them you want to deal with that girl—this is what we’ll do. I’ll go in the room, have sex with her, fuck her and fuck her—and then leave the room as if I’m going to pee, switch the light off, then the next one follows, fucks her, and then the next one will go in and do the same. Even if the girl has had enough, she won’t be able to do anything because she’s naked at that time.

Another young man said:

[In Xhosa]: We were not many guys and it was in a village. It was my girl that we did that to. I am the one who made it possible. I came with her. I being accompanied by these two guys ... We met her, I told her “Let’s go” and she agreed. It was a two-roomed house. I prepared her for them [had sex with her] and told her that when I come back we will continue. As I went out, this other guy went in and everything went ok ... Another guy went in and that’s when she caught us. He had a bigger body than us. When she held him, she realized it wasn’t me. She was shouting at him. She said “turn on the light”. I said “There are no matches”. She opened the curtains and you know there’s moonlight in the village ... She was asking “Did you fetch me from home to do this?” I was pretending, not answering. She ended up talking rough, so I told her to go.

Why did you streamline her?

I didn’t like the girl. She didn’t have truth. She’d talk about me to other girls and she’d go to my *queen’s* [most important girlfriend] house and say that I didn’t love my *queen*. So I decided: let me do something bad to her.

Ideas about gang rape as discipline and punishment circulate in other settings, for example in prisons where vulnerable gang members who transgress gang rules may be anally gang raped.

The dividing line between *streamlining* and “gang rape”: the politics of legitimation in young men’s talk

Since violence is a highly contested concept which can be “easily manoeuvred into an ideological ambience” (Riches 1986), looking at who is labelling whose acts as violent from which position is clearly an important focus for analysis. At the site of enactment of violence, and subsequently in the re-ordering and interpretation of a coercive sexual event in narrative, differing interpretations and value judgements are exposed (Devine 1996). The politics of talk about rape is highly performative and may easily “seduce” the ethnographer (Robben 1995). This kind of “seduction” may be avoided by remaining aware of its possibility, by analysing talk taking place in different settings among diverse people and groups, and by interrogating and comparing accounts.

The (il)legitimacy of violence is situationally defined: for the performer of violent action, the implication that his acts are unjustified and chaotic are likely to be played down or absent, particularly in his public transcripts of the event (Riches 1986). The fact that young men talked about their involvement in *streamlining* partially lies in the politics of legitimation. While admitting that women “do not like it”, many young men insisted that *streamlining* was not “rape”, deploying arguments relating to the tactics used (often trickery and coercion rather than outright violence), the lack of voiced refusal on the target’s part, and the fact that targets “deserved” it. In occasional moments, however, a minority did candidly admit that in some circumstances, it was “actually” rape. In fact, insofar as *streamlining* can be defined as sex with more than one man, it is quite possible that some episodes were consensual.

Mostly, young women did seem to equate *streamlining* with rape. This is supported by the wider perception that survivors of *streamlining*, like individual stranger rape, were seen as having been “damaged” by the act, both physically and reputationally. Rape brought a “dirtiness”, vaginal “stretching” associated with “promiscuity”, and thus the literal cheapening of female bodies. Even for an “innocent” survivor, the experience of it was often shameful.

Beyond a concern to protect their reputations, one reason underlying some women’s unwillingness to report coercive *streamlining* was that it might lead others to question what they had done to “deserve” it. Targets of *streamlining* were often described by men as having deserved it, and this is linked to broader ideas about female “disrespectful” behaviour that might “invite” rape. This notion was particularly applied by elders and young men to girls and young women who were perceived to be behaving in ways which challenged ideals of proper femininity through “promiscuous” (*ubufebe*) practices, excessive alcohol consumption in taverns, and “provocative” dressing. Such women—symbolized in people’s imaginations by girls who hung out in taverns, were thought to be signalling their sexual availability, hence the lack of public disapproval of violence directed against drunk girls (Wojcicki 2002).

Survivors of stranger “gang rape”, on the other hand, were constructed by many community members as innocent and undeserving. For example, in the court case in the regional court involving the gang-rape of the school-girls returning to the township from a church service, the (female) magistrate stated in her summing up:

From the doctor's notes here it would appear that the complainant was a virgin. Virginity is the pride of the girl, and you decided to take away her virginity. And they were coming from a church service. I'm not talking about girls who were coming from a *shebeen* [tavern] or a party or whatever, I am talking about girls who were serious about their lives, to them their motto was to abstain from sex.

The issue of consent was the other main justification voiced by young men that streamlining was not rape. The ease with which this explanation was used reflected the often fine line in local sexual culture between "force", "persuasion" and "seduction", and the reputation-protecting "game" expected to be played by women—in particular saying "no" even if they were interested in a potential sexual relationship. The use of the consent argument was also made easier by the fact that group rape sometimes took place after drinking sessions. Writing about perceptions of rape among college women in America, Kahn (2004) describes how young women were less likely to call a sexual assault "rape" if they had been impaired by alcohol or drugs; they attributed the event not to force, but to their own lack of "presence of mind". In a South African setting where resource exchange (including buying beers) can be taken to imply subsequent sexual consent, the taking of sex by force can be condoned in certain settings such as taverns (Ashforth 1999, Wojcicki 2002).

Young men claimed that women showed their consent through silence or failure to resist, or did not protest because they wanted to "please" their boyfriends by having sex with his friends. As Lambert (2001) points out in relation to sexual communication in India, the often "indirect" means by which intentionality with respect to sex is expressed in routine sexual relations provided a space wherein individuals can contest each other's claims. In particular, the largely non-verbal character of sexuality enables a mis-reading—wilful or otherwise—of a girl's intention (Day 1994, Lambert 2001). In their legitimizing rhetoric about their own coercive practices, young men turned to their advantage the fact that sexual consent was rarely voiced. In a sense, this represented a rhetorical tactic to let themselves off the hook, but when probed, some informants admitted that the girl were fearful, out-numbered and had "nowhere to run".

Discussion

Understanding streamlining

Streamlining is underpinned by notions of masculinity and femininity that operate not only in a distorted manner within *tsotsi* discourses, but within the community more widely. Ideas in wide circulation that become distorted in some circumstances include the patriarchal notions that men and women are inherently in hierarchical relation with each other, and that men can and should play a disciplining role *vis-à-vis* women's "transgressive" behaviour—such as "disrespecting" their partner, being sexually unfaithful, undermining their boyfriends' relationships with other women, and refusing sex.

Traditionally in Xhosa society, according to urban and rural elders, a married man was entitled to punish his wife with a "slap" or action that did not draw blood or cause visible bruising or injury. In cases where injury occurred, women had the right to return to her kin and in some cases be compensated in traditional courts. Today, in certain circumstances, it is said that this entitlement can be abused, which for many elders is symbolic of moral "disintegration". Controlling female behaviour through coercion and violence remains common within sexual relationships, and while women often strenuously resist this defining

of “acceptable” behaviour, their resistance can momentarily be tempered by what Sanday (1990: 13) calls the “agency of fear” deployed by some key men in their lives. In this respect *streamlining* interfaces with a range of other coercive practices.

Sexual relations begin relatively early in this setting and constitute an important arena for gaining prestige and establishing a sense of self-worth (Wood and Jewkes 2001). While some young men achieve largely egalitarian sexual partnerships, there are occasions with their male peers when they are led, or choose, to participate in group actions in which they would not participate as individuals. In these moments, young women—particularly those deemed to “deserve” rough treatment—become nothing more than sexual objects. The misogynistic underpinnings of such practices were occasionally acknowledged: as one young man said about a man who rapes, “He’s trying to show he doesn’t care about them, sees them as corpses [*izidumbu*] walking around. As if they did something wrong by having a vagina [*ikuku*]”. Sexual relations are important sites of negotiation of peer relations and identities, and the centrality of sharing “resources” (in this case women) as a means of consolidating group bonds in some forms of *streamlining* can be partially understood in this light. These practices draw on a range of other prevalent ideas and language (co-existing with more egalitarian discourses about sex) that posit women’s bodies as “useful” for sexual consumption, and construct heterosexual sex as inherently non-reciprocal: slang terms include “to hit”, “to hit with a pipe”, “to eat”, and “to stab”.

Given that young men who practise *streamlining* can be in other moments respectful partners to women, masculinity is most usefully seen not as a “stable essence, present throughout a lifetime or a stage or life, but a series of negotiated identities, acts of will, assertions, performances, fragments of a person who at other times and in other contexts may have other gender attributes” (Loizos 1994: 67). At times, young men often drew on the prominent counter-discourse to *tsotsi* masculinity that is promoted by elders and that constructs manhood as non-violent and respectful (Wood and Jewkes 2001). Certain subcultural and aesthetic aspects of *tsotsi* life did however exert a strong pull on them, and to understand *streamlining* fully, this has to be taken into account. In particular, the pursuit of hedonism (including of the sexual variety), celebrated in the often crude lyrics of contemporary *kwaito* music, was an important part of the freedoms imputed to the criminal lifestyles on the fringes of which many young men lived.

Looking beyond the surface glorification of hedonism and “living in the moment” (which many working-class young men are forced to do as a result of the poverty in which they live), many young men who participate in *tsotsi* practices experience profound disempowerment in many aspects of their lives. The immediacy of the power which *tsotsi* reputations and access to weapons brought was undoubtedly seductive for some. Glaser has rightly argued that young African men who may be identified as *tsotsis* have long been disempowered in terms of race, class and (in a traditionally age-based society) generation, leaving their gender and their urban backgrounds as the only “areas of privilege” to exploit (Glaser 1992: 62). Going beyond the idea of rape as an act of power, Bourdieu (2001) has described certain male group bonding activities, including gang rape, as motivated by some men’s need to prove their virility to other men; thus the act is underpinned not necessarily by power, but by fear—of failure to achieve a certain form of masculinity, of exclusion from the group, and of losing respect. It is difficult to establish how central these concerns were to the young men described in this paper, but it seems likely that they were important in a context where masculinity is negotiated and established in group situations.

The narratives collected of some young men point to multi-layered deprivation, including emotional neglect as children, the harsh realities of fragmented family lives,

dropping out of school, leaving home or becoming street children, a descent into petty criminality, and experiences of police custody and prison. Despite the camaraderie which young men felt with other men in their everyday living, with peer relations providing a kind of alternative family for some, there were poignant moments of realization in which the effects of an early lack of emotional care and trust on subsequent adult (including sexual) relationships were made visible.

One young man, when asked whether he had a girlfriend, replied:

[In Xhosa]: I told you that I don't have a 5-60 [a serious relationship, named after the top Mercedes-Benz car model]. I'm dealing with *shebeen* [tavern] girls ... You find that I don't even propose them, I just buy liquor and call her to come and drink with me. The next day you come and you find another one. I only fuck them. They are not my girlfriends ... I don't have that much love. I missed love when I was still young so I don't have love. My parents died when I was still young. I don't love anyone. The only thing I want is to fuck her.

Group sexual coercion in cultural context: possible continuities with traditional "bride capture"

As other researchers have pointed out, contemporary actions occurring in one context, such as group rape, are linked contextually to other domains of cultural practice. In this particular South African context, the practice of *ukuthwala* or "bride capture", which persists in some rural areas of the former Transkei, is worth exploring, not in a directive explanatory sense, but as part of a context in which male collective coercion has long been deemed historically acceptable (as long as certain rules are followed).

Ukuthwala is a culturally legitimated abduction of a woman through which a circumcised (therefore adult) man can take a wife, demonstrates that here a woman's lack of consent does not automatically turn an act of sexual coercion into rape. In some (rare) cases of *ukuthwala*, the woman being "abducted" conspired with her suitor, and thus the forcefulness of the act was performative and the process resembled an elopement. More commonly, the man had the permission of the girl's family to abduct her, without her prior knowledge, in cases where the girl might not otherwise agree. Usually, the young man abducts the chosen girl with the help of male peers, takes her to his home and sends a message to the girl's parents saying that he has taken her and offering them a cow (*inkomo yesithwalo*). The extent to which the young women had and have a choice in the match is unclear. Elders told the author that if both families desired and consented to the union, "she'll be watched until she gets used to it" (reflecting a notion of perseverance central to one discourse about ideal femininity).

Forced sex seems to generally take place as part of the process. One township elder woman, who herself had been married through *ukuthwala*, explained:

Some guys would hold you down for your husband-to-be. If a girl has strength, the men would turn out the light, holding your legs open for the guy to sleep with you. Whatever you may try to do, they are holding you down. Even if you cry, old people wouldn't care, they knew what was going on.

Even in cases where the girl had to be held down by other men for penetration to take place, most elders the author spoke to did not equate this with rape. Only one said that "today it would be called rape". This was primarily on the basis of the man's intentions: the act of penetration—violently enacted or not—was one crucial part of the process of turning a girl into a wife, and thus enabled her attainment of an adult status (assuming her prior

virginity), and thus could not be equated with contemporary urban rape, which had no decent intention. The act of sexual union marked the woman as belonging to that man: if the girl returned to her home after *ukuthwala*, the implication was that she was disgraced and “damaged” by the man’s sexual marking and “owning” of her—a marking without substance.

Concluding comments

For both ethical and academic reasons, the importance of careful contextualization in shedding light on a sensitive and contested topic such as group rape as practised by marginalized men is clear. This paper has suggested that *streamlining* is bound up with the distortion of prevailing ideas about masculinity and femininity, and with a complex set of “*tsotsi*” subcultural practices that have emerged as an oppositional strategy in contexts of profound marginalization.

While group rape is not a class issue in any direct sense—as shown by Sanday’s work (1990)—particular settings’ relationships with violence are highly significant. Within these contexts too, sexual behaviour acts as an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 1980: 103). Writers have described the centrality of violence to Southern African political and social history, pointing out how multiple forms of violence have been deployed by different actors (notably representatives of the apartheid state) in colonial and post-colonial times. The deprivations and violations suffered by generations of black South Africans as a result of the processes of apartheid and industrialization have been widely documented (Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 1998).

Bourgeois, in his work on El Salvador (2001) and El Barrio in Harlem (1995), has used the idea of a “continuum of violence” (2002) to convey how structural violence is experienced by its victims through its interfaces with other kinds of violence—symbolic, everyday and political. This idea is consistent with the body of work on “social suffering” produced by critical anthropologists (Kleinman *et al.* 1997, Das *et al.* 2001). The empirical and intellectual challenge, however, remains of elucidating the mechanisms by which different forms of violence interact and how they contribute to the production of “internalized” violence such as (in South Africa’s case) faction fights, urban gangs, and domestic abuse. Famously described by Fanon (1967) in relation to the colonized, this has been described as a form of rage which ultimately causes damage to the communities in which the protagonists live, as well as to themselves.

Eminently applicable to contemporary South Africa too, is Bourgeois’ proposal that structural violence “often becomes expressed in an everyday violence of interpersonal rage and delinquency as well as in a set of institutionalized relations and norms that dehumanize”, and that “these different expressions of everyday violence then reverberate into the symbolic violence of self-blame and shame” (2002: 223). Ultimately Bourgeois (1995) interprets the complex set of rebellious practices which emerge as “street culture” in terms of a personal quest for “respect” and rejection of racist subjugation, while simultaneously refusing to romanticize it, pointing out its role in both personal degradation and community ruin.

Acknowledgements

The doctoral study on which this paper draws was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK. Particular thanks are due to Helen Lambert, Rachel Jewkes

and Peter Aggleton. This work was made possible by the study's research assistants Nwabisa Jama and Litha Maqoma, and by the many young people and their families who participated.

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Résumé

La violence sexuelle de collectifs masculins fait partie d'un continuum de coercitions sexuelles en Afrique du Sud. Cet article s'appuie sur un travail ethnographique mené dans un township urbain de l'ancienne région du Transkei.

Établi sur une observation participante intensive et des entretiens, en particulier avec des jeunes hommes, il tente de comprendre les récits qui émergent à propos du «*streamlining*» (terme utilisé localement pour désigner une forme assez courante de coercition sexuelle à laquelle participent un groupe d'amis de sexe masculin et une ou plusieurs femmes).

L'article débute par une revue de la littérature anthropologique disponible sur la violence sexuelle masculine en groupe, puis passe à l'élaboration des différents scénarios associés à cette violence sur le terrain. Il cherche à développer une modélisation stratifiée du phénomène en prenant en compte les discours dominants de genre, les questions subculturelles relatives au phénomène urbain du *tsotsi* (voyou), la pratique rurale de l'*ukuthwala* (enlèvement de la mariée), les expériences de marginalisation des jeunes africains de la classe ouvrière, et les liens complexes entre l'économie politique et la violence dans cet environnement.

Resumen

La violencia sexual masculina en grupo forma parte de la continua coerción sexual en Sudáfrica. Este documento está basado en un trabajo etnográfico a largo plazo en un municipio urbano en la antigua región de Transkei. Basándonos en una intensa observación de los participantes y entrevistas, especialmente con hombres jóvenes, se intenta dar un sentido a los relatos emergentes relacionados con *streamlining*, un término local para la forma no poco común de coerción sexual en grupo que implica a un grupo de amigos varones y una o más mujeres. El documento comienza con un esquema general de la literatura antropológica existente sobre la violencia sexual masculina en grupo y elabora los diferentes escenarios relacionados con la violencia sexual en grupo en el lugar donde ocurren. Se intenta dar una contextualización multifacética del fenómeno al analizar los discursos predominantes de los diferentes sexos, los problemas subculturales que pertenecen al fenómeno urbano *tsotsi*, la práctica rural de *ukuthwala* [caza de novias], las experiencias de marginación de los jóvenes africanos de clase obrera y los complejos enlaces entre economía política y violencia en este ambiente.