



Review article

Understanding domestic violence: masculinity, culture, traditions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Psychology
 Social science
 Sociology
 Domestic violence
 Culture
 Intimate partner violence
 Traditions
 Hegemonic masculinity
 Gender inequality
 Patriarchy
 South Africa

ABSTRACT

Domestic violence in South Africa is a consequence of the complex interplay of patriarchy, culture, and the negative masculine construct. The patriarchal cultural beliefs and traditions that emphasise on male assertiveness and domination of women influence the constructions of masculinity and reinforce domestic violence. The goal of this article was to highlight a relationship between culture, constructions of masculinity, and domestic violence in South Africa. Through adopting an African feminist lens, this paper unpacks how structures of patriarchy manifest in the traditional African context in which many men in South Africa construct and perform their masculinity and the embodied meaning attached to it. The paper argues that gender hierarchy and normative masculine and feminine roles prevalent in most South African cultures have implications for domestic violence. It argues that the inflexible gender hierarchy, which is enforced through culture and the dominant position of men in the home influence domestic violence. The article concludes that attempts to address domestic violence in South Africa must focus on changing patriarchal cultural norms and promote peaceful masculinity.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a persistent worldwide problem that affects many women regardless of their demographic characteristics (Dobash and Dobash, 2017; Mazibuko and Umejese, 2015). Research shows that the problem of domestic violence in South Africa persists despite the current strategies aimed at addressing it (Jewkes and Morrell, 2018). South Africa is ranked as one of the countries with high rates of domestic violence in the world (Jewkes et al., 2013). According to the report by South Africa Demographic and Health Survey (2016), over a quarter of women in South Africa reported experiencing domestic violence from their intimate partners. This report also suggests that the rate of domestic violence in South Africa may be higher than the recorded figures, given that many cases go unreported. Research shows that many survivors tend not to report abuse from their partners due to factors like, fear that the abuser will retaliate, desire to protect the family, financial dependence on the perpetrator, and fear of ending the marriage (Mshweshwe, 2018).

Feminist research reiterates that domestic violence is a consequence of patriarchy, a system that promotes male dominance by giving men powers to dominate and control women (Dobash and Dobash, 2017; Hamberger et al., 2017). Some researchers have attributed domestic violence to a set of interlocking factors, such as patriarchy, cultural beliefs, community norms, unemployment and low levels of education (Jewkes and Morrell, 2018; Mshweshwe, 2018). Also, domestic violence

is associated with the masculinity ideology, an endorsement of patriarchy related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours assigned to men during the socialisation (Graaff and Heinecken, 2017; Moolman, 2017; Ratele, 2015).

Research on the relationship between the constructions of masculinity, culture and domestic violence is limited in the literature of domestic violence in South Africa. To address this gap, the current research explores the link between culture, constructions of masculinity and domestic violence in South Africa. The research attempts to answer the question of, 'how do constructions of masculinity in the African cultural context influence domestic violence'?

2. Methods

This literature-based research provides a summary of current literature relevant to the research question framing this study; how do constructions of masculinity in the African cultural context influence domestic violence? Focusing on local and international scholarly discourses relevant to explain domestic violence in South Africa, we conducted a review of the main databases in the following fields: sociology, gender studies, women's studies, social work. The databases searched included: Google scholar, Sociological Abstracts, Gender Watch, Women's Studies, SAGE. Search terms were used in this research separated with and, or. The search terms used are as follows; (domestic violence,

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intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, culture, traditions, masculinity, manhood, South Africa).

This research reviewed articles that were published between year 2010–2020. Due to many results in each search, the search was limited to peer-reviewed, scholarly literature. Articles were limited to those published in the English language. Papers that are not specifically addressing the topic under the investigation were excluded.

3. Theoretic framework to understand domestic violence in South Africa

The feminist approach argues that domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is a consequence of patriarchy, a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Dobash and Dobash, 2017). Domestic violence is a consequence of men's desire to exercise power and control over their female partners, a behaviour that has been legitimized and justified within the patriarchal system (Quek, 2019). Further, the broader patriarchal structures and institutions contribute to shaping the uneven distribution of power between men and women by reinforcing gender roles associated with domestic violence.

While the concept of patriarchy remains essential in analysing gender relations, however, its critics have pointed out problems in this theory. According to Patil (2013), the concept of patriarchy fails to capture the historical and cross-cultural variations of gender inequality as well as the heterogeneity in masculinity. Further, Patil argues that recognising the diversity in masculinities is significant because it helps to reveal different ways in which men's violence can be explained. Also, it has been argued that intersectional analysis of the multiple realities of marginalised men who have little stake in the patriarchal dividend is essential for developing explanations of domestic violence in South Africa (Boonzaier and van Niekerk, 2018). Such analysis should recognise how gender intersects with factors like race, class, ethnicity, culture, economic status, and education to oppress men and women alike (Amadiume, 2015; Oyewumi, 2011). This recognition of intersectionality is crucial in explaining men's violence in South Africa as it helps to locate the problem of violence in the specific historical context of apartheid which involved the oppression of black people and subjecting them to systematic violence (Burchardt, 2018; Moolman, 2013). Further, explaining domestic violence in South Africa requires an approach that recognises how South African life has been woven out of the apartheid narrative.

Masculinity studies have acknowledged the role of apartheid in influencing black men's violence in South Africa (Clark, 2012; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2015). According to Morrell et al. (2012), apartheid was a political and social system which enforced racial discrimination against black people during the era of white minority rule in South Africa. Black men were subjected to ongoing violence which includes being randomly assaulted in the public sphere and within their homes. This systematic violence has resulted in men's adoption of violent behaviour which tends to be transferred from one generation to another (Ratele, 2015). Further, the apartheid system severely disrupted gender relations resulting to high levels of gender-based violence (Lau and Seedat, 2017; Swartz et al., 2012). It also created poverty and unemployment in black communities by excluding black people from accessing economic opportunities (Lau and Seedat, 2017). These structural factors have been argued to create a fertile ground for domestic violence to flourish (Jewkes and Morrell, 2018).

This current research takes an African feminist perspective in explaining domestic violence in South Africa. The African feminist theory is one of the postcolonial theories that offer insight into black people's realities which are often not fully reflected in Western feminist discourses. For example, in domestic violence discourses, culture and traditions have not been properly explained in a way that translates to interventions that are necessary to address domestic violence in South Africa. Thus, culture is crucial for building an understanding of how patriarchy manifests in the traditional context.

4. Discussion

A starting point for research to understand men's use of violence in intimate relationships is a theoretical understanding of the South African Society as patriarchal (Mudau and Obadire, 2017). South Africa has a strong patriarchal system of social structures that encourage men to dominate, oppress, and exploit women in the public and private sphere (Stromquist, 2014). According to Sultana (2010), the concept of patriarchy is useful in explaining the root cause of women's subordination and to describe the power relations between women and men. These power relations are characterised by hierarchical, and material base that serves to promote men's independence and enable them to dominate women. Such patriarchal social arrangements are based on the belief that since men and women are different biologically, therefore, men are entitled to more powers than women (Sultana, 2010). Noteworthy, patriarchy is generally not an explicit ongoing effort by men to dominate women, but a long-standing system that all people are born into and even participate in, unconsciously (Sultana, 2010). Meaning that people of all genders can perpetuate patriarchy, even though it is mostly men that reap its benefits. For example, Mshweshwe (2018) find that domestic violence in the rural traditional context is not perpetrated by men only, mother in laws also contribute by encouraging their sons to demand respect and submissiveness from their wives through violence.

While patriarchy operates in the public and private sphere, however, it is more serious in the private sphere where men subject women to abuse because of their perceived inferiority status (Mazibuko, 2017; Mshweshwe, 2018). Further, abusive men tend to take advantage of the family and enforce their perceived power in decision-making, and in establishing the rules and control of the family, especially the wife. Lelaurain et al. (2018) argue that the sexist constructions of romantic heterosexual love and the romance narrative that portrays men as women's rescuers who are strong, and powerful, contributes to domestic violence. Specifically, the marriage institution has been found to support patriarchal ideas about gender role norms by promoting male privilege (Lelaurain et al., 2018).

Research from all over the world shows that domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is a consequence of men's desire to exercise power and control over their female partners (Dobash and Dobash, 2017; Mazibuko, 2017). Sikweyiya et al. (2020), argues that addressing domestic violence has proven challenging because wife beating was historically legitimized through policies that positioned women as minors while allowing men to exercise power over them (Sikweyiya et al., 2020). Women were subjected to cultural and social acceptance of domestic violence with no policies to protect them. Although the protection of women through policies has improved over the years, however, domestic violence continues to be a persistent problem, especially in contexts where culture and traditions are dominant (Akangbe Tomisin, 2020; Mshweshwe, 2018). Culture has been found to legitimize patriarchy and preserve male supremacy through embracing and promoting hegemonic masculinity, a configuration of gender practices which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Tonsing and Tonsing, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinity has been defined as a set of values that serves to organize society in gender unequal ways (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012). Further, it involves a hierarchy of masculinities, and unequal access to power, as well as the interplay between men's identity, ideals, and power. Hegemonic masculinity is built on the negative ideology of what it means to be a man, usually imposed upon boys during the socialisation process; it is characterized by physical strength, sexual conquest [of women], and financial success (Ehrmann, 2013). These conditions create the dominant understanding of an ideal man that has influenced and shaped the society for generations. They serve to exclude men who fail to meet the criteria and the standards set by which men compare themselves (Ehrmann, 2013).

The adoption of the concept of hegemonic masculinity within the feminist work helps to locate the problem of men's violence in the

broader social inequalities in which some men are marginalized (Morrell et al., 2013). Further, the hegemonic masculinity theory helps to unpack the relationship between domestic violence and the weak position that some men occupy in the society because of unfair distribution of wealth and power (Connell, 2013; Morrell et al., 2013). One of the debates within the hegemonic masculinity theory has been the question of whether masculinity of men who are structurally subordinated in society, for example, men from economically disadvantaged groups, could be considered 'hegemonic', as these men do not see themselves to be in power. In this respect, it has been suggested that there can be more than one hegemonic masculinity within a society, which refer to sub-groups (Jewkes et al., 2015). These sub-groups of hegemonic masculinity often develop among marginalised men and emphasise power and force (Hearn et al., 2012). Further, they tend to be violent in nature, reflecting the powerlessness that marginalised men experience because of inability to meet the standard of hegemonic masculinity that is based on power, and income.

Studies show that poorer unemployed men are more likely to perpetrate violence due to powerlessness associated with unemployment and lack of economic resources (Knabe et al., 2016; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). Men who have been affected by unemployment have been found to have low self-esteem, insecurities, and higher levels of anger, which are all risk factors to perpetrating domestic violence (Myers and Demantas, 2016; Schneider et al., 2016). Also, lack of control over financial matters have been found to influence domestic violence in intimate relationships (Afkhazadeh et al., 2019; Demantas and Myers, 2015; Dery and Diedong, 2014). Studies report a high prevalence of domestic violence amongst couples where a man is unemployed (Bhalotra et al., 2020; Dastjerdehei et al., 2020).

Domestic violence perpetration by unemployed men has been argued to be a problem especially in traditional contexts where men are expected to adopt the breadwinner role (Jewkes and Morrell, 2018; Knabe et al., 2016). The breadwinner model is a paradigm of family centred on the belief that a man must work outside the home and earn income to provide for the family while a woman stays at home and takes care of the household duties and family (Myers and Demantas, 2016; Schneider et al., 2016). Since many men secure masculinity identity through breadwinner status, therefore, inability to achieve this status has been found to disempower unemployed men and make them feel that they are not men enough (Cools and Kotsadam, 2017; Knabe et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2016). Research shows that men who feel that they have lost their manhood identity tend to use violence as their only way of demonstrating masculinity (Connell, 2017; Jewkes and Morrell, 2018; Morrell et al., 2012). This is particularly the case in most South African cultures where men and women have distinct traditional gender roles, with emphasis on male breadwinner role (Mshweshwe, 2018; Sikweyiya et al., 2020).

Similarly, perpetrating domestic has been argued to be a consequence of cultural values and norms that emphasise on viewing 'proper' masculinity through the lens of men's ability to dominate and have control over a female partner (Dery, 2019; Bassey and Bubu, 2019). These ideals of masculinity associated with assertiveness, strength, and sexual conquest (of women) have been linked to domestic violence (Bassey and Bubu, 2019; Breger, 2017). They are based on the patriarchal conceptions of masculinity and femininity which encompass characteristics, and behaviours that have traditionally been considered relatively typical of women and men, respectively (Bassey and Bubu, 2019). These constructions of masculinity and femininity continue to be strongly promoted in many African cultural contexts (Ajayi and Soyinka-Airewele, 2018; Akangbe Tomisin, 2020). They serve to provide the framing of gender inequality, male entitlements and unequal power relations between husbands and their wives (Akangbe Tomisin, 2020; Sikweyiya et al., 2020).

Studies show that in many African cultural contexts' husbands continue to be viewed as leaders of the home who are entitled to exercise power over wives (Mshweshwe, 2018; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). For

example, the use of violence by men is considered culturally appropriate in situations where a wife has transgressed gender norms since husbands are entitled to lead the family, maintain order, gender hierarchy which is a key characteristic of a functioning marriage (Akangbe Tomisin, 2020; Tonsing and Tonsing, 2019). In this sense, men tend to believe that they are entitled to special marriage privileges, for example, unlimited sex, that they can claim by using systematic violence and coercion (Mshweshwe, 2018; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). Thus, perpetrating domestic is a demonstration of masculinity and a way of proving that a man is in control of his households (Adjei, 2016; Breger, 2017).

Within the traditional context, hegemonic masculinity is enforced during the socialization of boys through ascribing behaviours and attitudes that are 'perceived' appropriate for men (Kachel et al., 2016). They tend to be transferred from one generation to another through using specific traditions, for example, rituals like traditional male circumcision, often practised by many tribes in South Africa serve as a vehicle to reproduce masculinities (Bhana, 2010; Mshweshwe, 2020). Traditional male circumcision is a custom whereby boys transition to manhood is marked not only by circumcision but also a training period that involves teaching young men the culturally acceptable ways of doing masculinity (Magodyo, 2013; Moolman, 2017). These teachings focus on traditional gendered expectations, assertiveness, dominance over women, family leadership, breadwinner role.

The notion of traditional circumcision has been found to contribute to the problem of patriarchal domination that affects women (Kangethe and Nomngcoyiya, 2016; Siweya et al., 2018). For example, a qualitative study conducted by De Wet et al. (2016) on the behaviour of male learners who underwent traditional initiation schooling find that high school male learners who have gone through traditional initiation demonstrate dominance and sexist attitudes towards their female teachers whom they perceive inferior because of their status as women. This study concludes that the sexist attitudes of male learners who have gone through traditional circumcision may be influenced by the traditional teachings that emphasize on superior status of men. Such teachings include the idea that men are superior to women; therefore, they are entitled to respect, as well as the notion that men must reject women's leadership (Mshweshwe, 2020). These teachings demonstrate how dominant masculinity identity is legitimized in traditional discourses which tend to be reconstituted through customs and cultural practices (Hamlall, 2018; Moolman, 2017).

Although, some men divert from their earlier notions of cultural masculinity construct, especially when they have other ways through which they can define themselves, for example, education (Magodyo, 2013; Naidoo, 2018). Magodyo (2013) noted that formal education has a significant influence in helping men redefine what it means to be a man and adopt positive masculinity. Further, Magodyo argues that formal education plays a crucial role in influencing positive masculinity behaviour by instilling positive values that help men reject cultural stereotypes such as aggression and entitlement to exclusive rights over women. Instead, they adopt the gender equality approach in negotiating family life and in rejecting violence.

The positive attitude towards gender equality has been found to increase based on the level of education, the higher the level of education acquired, the more liberal and favourable men's attitudes are towards gender equality (Kyoore and Sulemana, 2019). These ideas are also expressed in the work of Naidoo (2018), who draws on the life story of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, a prominent former president of South Africa to illustrate the role of education in shaping masculinity. Naidoo argues that although Mandela's initial masculinity socialization was shaped by the notion of Xhosa culture where manhood is inextricable with patriarchy, yet Mandela rejected gender stereotypes and instead adopted gender equality. Despite his socialization into traditional masculinity, which involved traditional teachings, Mandela evolved and became a phenomenal gender activist because of his academic stature. Given this, attempts to address gender inequalities and encourage men to engage in

expressions of healthy masculinity must recognize the role of culture in the masculinity construct. The interventions aimed at transforming masculinities need to be culturally relevant.

5. Findings and conclusion

The goal of this article was to highlight a relationship between culture, constructions of masculinity, and domestic violence in South Africa. The African feminist perspective has enabled this research to gather valuable knowledge that can be used as evidence for the development of interventions to address domestic violence. The dominant feminist discourses on domestic violence have often focused on the concept of patriarchy as an explanation for domestic violence, however, this research is different because it recognises the role of cultural norms and the social environment in which domestic violence occurs in South Africa. This research acknowledges the distinct nature of South Africa as a society that has been affected by apartheid, which produced violence that continue to be transferred across generations. Therefore, to address domestic violence this research argue that the cycle of violence needs to be broken through implementation of interventions that promote humanity.

The findings of this study show that domestic violence is not only a consequence of men's desire to demonstrate power over women but also a result of the complex interplay of culture and the masculinity construct centrally to patriarchy. The concept of hegemonic masculinity illuminates how gender power operates at various levels while also offers an overarching framework for understanding ways in which gender inequalities are produced and reproduced. We argue that gender hierarchy and normative masculine and feminine roles prevalent in the South African society have implications for domestic violence. The findings demonstrate an inflexible gender hierarchy, which is enforced through culture and the dominant position of men in the home. The traditional teachings that emphasise assertiveness and domination of women seem to influence domestic violence.

These findings suggest that the patriarchal cultural norms that promote male dominance need to be recognized in attempts to address domestic violence. While this analysis acknowledges the significance and symbolic nature of African cultural systems, but we argue that there is a need to deconstruct traditional practices and to critically engage with its patriarchal tendencies that promote gender inequality and domestic violence. These findings are a significant contribution to the literature of domestic violence as they highlight how some structures of patriarchy inform the constructions of hegemonic masculinity within the cultural context in which many South African men construct and perform their masculinity and the embodied meaning attached to it.

6. Recommendations

The paper recommends that attempts to address domestic violence in South Africa must focus on changing patriarchal cultural norms and promote peaceful masculinity.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

L. Mshweshwe developed and wrote this article.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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