

# A Few Good Men in a World of Gangsters: Discourses of Respectability and Risk amongst Student Teachers in the Western Cape, South Africa

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## Abstract

*This paper considers the concurrent discourses of risk and respectability which are prominent in South Africa's Western Cape region and asks how one becomes a 'respectable' man in a community which values strong masculine role models and in which there are endemic levels of violence. Through a process of risk 'mapping' we explore the means through which a group of young male student teachers consciously 'locate' risk in their built environment. We look at the strategies these young men use to negotiate risk in their lives, and the close connection between risk and respectability which they articulate on an ongoing basis.*

**Keywords:** *discourse; male, risk, respectability, violence, masculinity.*

## Résumé

*Cet article examine les discours simultanés de risque et de respectabilité qui sont au premier plan dans l'Ouest la région du Cap en Afrique du Sud et demande comment on devient un homme «respectable» dans une communauté qui valorise forts des modèles masculins et dans lequel il ya des niveaux endémiques de violence . Grâce à un processus de «cartographie» des risques , nous explorons les moyens par lesquels un groupe de jeunes élèves-enseignants de sexe masculin consciemment 'localiser' risque dans leur environnement bâti . Nous regardons les stratégies de ces jeunes hommes utilisent pour négocier le risque de leur vie , et le lien étroit entre le risque et la respectabilité dont ils articulent sur une base continue .*

**Mots-clés:** *discours ; mâle, le risque , la respectabilité , la violence , la masculinité .*

## Introduction

The greater Cape Town area, better known as the Cape Flats, carries the legacy of South Africa's apartheid past, namely "a violent social context characterised by high levels of unemployment, extreme differences in wealth and poverty ... easy access to guns and ongoing public and interpersonal violence" (Sass 2005:1). Whereas the common notion is to depict townships in this area as violent, and men with particular social behaviours as violent and abusive (Jensen 2001, Lindegaard & Hendriksen 2005), these characteristics are not pervasive (Sauls 2005). Van Wyk and Theron (2005) for instance have shown that social identities within the same township are quite diverse and provide space for several realities to live themselves out. Thus, in townships that may be stereotyped as violent and risky by outsiders, men on the 'inside' may be striving for identification as respectable men within their community (Kinnes 1995, Sauls 2005).

In an era of widespread sexual violence, studies of power and masculinity seek to understand the processes through which these are culturally produced and reproduced. Over recent years, the focus has shifted to gender relations, examining masculinity and showing the processes through which men are constructed and behave as gendered beings in relationships with other men, women and children (Hearn 2004, Gibson & Hardon 2005). While much of the literature has pointed to the conflicting aspects of masculine hegemony (Spronk 2005, Shefer *et al.* 2005), many of the young men in our study were found to behave contrary to gendered stereotypes of their community and as such could be seen as examples of the 'positive masculinity' referred to by Shefer *et al.* (2005). We argue that the men in our study were making genuine efforts to be good role models and 'respectable men', under sometimes difficult circumstances. We argue that while each gender takes on co-responsibility in confirming the hegemony of the other - reinforcing particular practices while vitiating others - the dominant discourses of risk and respectability reflect social values and concomitant labelling. In effect, these young men are in the process of negotiating a passage to 'respectable' adulthood in what is an inherently 'risky' environment. This paper traces the progress made by a group of young male student teachers as they consciously locate risk in their built environment, and navigate risk in their lived experience in order to attain the goal of respectability within their community.

## Description of research setting

Gang activity is widely perceived to have embedded itself in the culture of the people living in the greater Cape Town area. A 1994 BBC documentary entitled 'The Cape of Fear' (Dan Reed) described the reign of terror that violent gangs exercised in Cape townships. News reports and documentaries continue to broadcast around the world the activities of Cape Town gangs (*BBC News*. Gangsters 'terrorise' Cape townships, (2003);

*BBC News*. Gang Violence in Cape Town, 2009; *Ross Kemp on Gangs: Cape Town – Numbers Gang*, 2007). Crime rates within the greater Cape Town area escalated in the mid-nineties (van Wyk & Theron 2005) with Kinnes (1995) reporting that more than half of all attempted murder charges in Western Cape townships were gang related. The Western Cape Anti-Crime Forum at this time reported that gang syndicates use members of street gangs to drive their illegal operations (personal communication, July 25, 1996). Pinnock (1982) described syndicates as more organised gangs who ran extortion rackets, payroll heists and large scale warehouse robberies. These syndicates ‘funded’ the gang wars by supplying the street gangs with guns and ammunition to drive out rival gangs within their neighbourhoods.

Much has been written about the breakdown in economic and social structures precipitated by forced removals and the resultant shifting employment patterns from subsistence living to commercial employment in factories in the greater Cape Town area (Pinnock 1985, Schärf 1990, Standing 2003). It is widely accepted that the resurgence of gang activity in the Coloured township of the Western Cape has its roots in these forced removals (Healy 2000, Pinnock 1985, Schärf 1990). While most of this literature refers to the greater Cape Town area, known as the Cape Flats, parallels can be seen to exist in the high density Coloured townships in the Winelands district as exemplified by the ethnographic description of gang activity in the Coloured residential areas of Stellenbosch (Van Wyk 2001). One key distinction between the gangs in rural towns and those of the Cape Flats is the status gang members have within their respective communities. Where studies have shown that members of gangs operating in the Cape Flats achieve a level of standing (albeit one based on fear and intimidation) as ‘real men’ within their communities, they are rarely seen as respectable men (Sauls 2005). This same status is not afforded to gang membership in the Winelands communities where our studies were carried out (Van Wyk 2001).

One such town is Paarl, situated approximately 80 kilometres outside of Cape Town. As with most of South Africa’s towns the legacy of apartheid planning remains clearly visible on the Paarl landscape, long after the laws have changed. After the implementation of the 1950 Group Areas Act, the western banks of the Berg River which flows through the town became the ‘white’ side of town. The central business district of the town rests on this side of the river, as does the recently opened mall. Coloured suburbs were established to the east of the river. Black residents were removed to the nearby township of Mbekweni on the eastern side of the river but some kilometres out of town, on the road towards Wellington. In the years since the abolition of apartheid some small changes have occurred in this pattern, mainly on the eastern side of the river where socio-economic forces have taken the place of race-based legislation. This is evidenced by one respondent who clearly indicated on a map of Paarl the ‘Black’, ‘White’ and ‘Coloured’ areas of his town, before pointing, without a hint of irony, to the two streets where different racial groups lived together, which he described as ‘the grey area’!

## Methodology

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted between 2002 and 2006 amongst 23 Coloured young men and women, who were student teachers at the University of the Western Cape. Each respondent participated in multiple extended one-to-one interviews which lasted anything from two to four hours. These were conducted in the language of choice of the participant (generally a mix of English and Afrikaans), transcribed in full and, where necessary, translated into English. Transcripts were subjected to a complete data analysis in which key themes and issues were identified, enabling a preliminary picture to emerge on the subjective experiences of participants, their views and opinions on certain key issues and the impact of all of these on their lived experience. Transcripts were also subjected to a narrative analysis which further developed this picture and gave a better understanding of the stories these students tell themselves about themselves. The findings reported in this paper are framed within the context of the greater Cape Town area being conceived as a place that is notorious for gang activities. This framework was drawn from the contextual review of gang and anti-gang movements in the Western Cape over three decades 1970–2000 (Van Wyk & Theron 2005).

## Mapping Risk

During the initial interview each participant was asked to write down three places that they would consider 'risky', three types of people they would consider 'risky', and three situations they would consider 'risky'. During a second interview participants were asked to indicate on a town map 'risk' as they perceived it in their daily lives. This involved individuals (and later groups) indicating which areas were risky and for what reasons. In an effort to allow an open interpretation, no guidelines, criteria or definitions of 'risk' were given to the participants at this point. The responses from these two sets of interviews informed ongoing research questions. In analysis it became clear that the discourse of 'risk' was closely aligned to, and interlinked with, constructions of 'respectability'. This exercise gave a clear understanding about the physical landscape onto which the young men map their own ideas about risk and respectability.

The recurring theme emerging from these interviews was that of gang activity; in particular, areas where frequent muggings and where violent crime took place were identified by the participants. Various strategies were adopted to avoid such areas and to minimize their exposure to perceived risk. These strategies included leaving the train at an earlier stop to get a taxi because the environs of the train station were perceived as violent; ensuring that they travelled in groups in certain areas; not wearing conspicuous or expensive looking clothing, such as *tekkies* (sneakers), which were often targeted for robbery.

While each of these strategies may appear entirely reasonable in the context of gang activity, less comprehensible was the fact that each of the men independently pointed to those parts of town where prostitutes ply their trade, and informal sites of entertainment such as yards and shebeens. The yards and shebeens were residential properties where alcohol and other substances were sold and consumed. In many instances, these sites were also the focal point for recreational activities by various gang members. These sites were identified as 'risky' by the men despite the fact that they have never used the services of either. This begs the question of why these [sites] would be included in a discussion of personal risk and strategies to avoid personal risk. It became apparent that the threat from prostitutes was not a physical one, but was perceived as a risk to their status as 'respectable' men. Similarly, the yards and shebeens which were identified as risky could be seen as posing a dual threat because of the physical risk of alcohol-induced brawls and clashes with gang members, but also the risk to status which being seen in such a venue would pose. The risk of loss of face or loss of status within their community was of paramount importance to our participants.

There is a substantial body of literature that traces ideas of respectability within the Coloured communities of South Africa (Lewis, 1987; van der Ross, 1990; Ross, 1999; Erasmus, 2001; van der Spuy, 2004). Ross (1999:4) argues that the 'imposition of British ideas of respectability onto the Colony was particularly apparent in matters of gender [thus giving] those outside the inner core of society the opportunity to make a bid for acceptance, by adopting the behaviour and the outward signs of respectable society'. Those 'outward signs of respectable society' included everything from 'appropriate' dress to moral probity to Coloured temperance and regular attendance at church; and a failure to comply was inevitably equated with physical and moral degeneracy. The narratives of our participants suggest that the imperative of respectability still holds amongst Coloured communities throughout the Western Cape. In fact, given that our student teachers are from working class backgrounds and are the first generation of their respective families to attend university, it could be argued that the drive towards respectability is even stronger amongst them than it might otherwise have been.

This dual discourse of risk and respectability, although initially identified in relation to prostitution, and yards and shebeens, emerged emphatically as the issue of gangs was further explored. While a man may avoid visiting yards, shebeens or areas of known prostitution, avoiding gangs was less within his control. Gang activities were endemic in certain areas - often the very areas these men called home. Here, Claus describes the situation he is faced with on a regular basis:

'...for instance like I said, if you were to drive around say about that side of the river, you know...Paarl is situated that all the whites are staying on this side and the Coloureds are staying on that side and the blacks are staying on the way back on that side. If you go on that side [indicates one suburb known to have gang activity], then somebody will rob you or something.

Then people would just walk past you as if nothing happened. You know, it's so into the society. That's why I don't bother to walk around anymore, because it's not safe anymore. Even driving around - I normally say to my friends for me it's safer to drive around in a black township than in our areas where...I don't know. I just feel safer. There's a place called [names suburb] I don't know if you've heard about it?

F. Ja.'

'If you drive around there it's like you just feel like that, you know? There's something coming over you. At the time all your senses start to work, because you don't want to stop. You just want to go, you know, almost as if it's like that. That's the thing with me. You know the people...it's just getting tougher and tougher every day.'

(Claus, 21)

The threat from gangs is expressed in this narrative as predictable and inevitable (*'you will get mugged'*) but also, in Claus' view, as existing in the absence of community structures to act as deterrent or containment. So in this area no-one will help if you are the victim of violence (*'people would just walk past you'*) because society as a whole is implicated (*'it's so into the society'*). Claus' response to the threat has been to curtail his movements to the point that he prefers to drive rather than walk, isolating himself in his car even in *'our [i.e. Coloured] areas'*. In certain Coloured suburbs he is not even comfortable stopping his car and would prefer driving in the black townships (perceived by many as more dangerous). However, the key point emerges at the close of his statement - to *'know the people'* appears to make things *'tougher and tougher every day'*. These are people he has grown up with and can identify on a social landscape, but where this might be expected to make him feel more secure he expresses a heightened sense of awareness and unease - *'there's something coming over you. At the time all your senses start to work...'*

## Recruitment

Claus articulates a dilemma that many young men are presented with. In an area with gang activity, where you are likely to have gone to school with many of the gang members and where there is pressure to join, how does one avoid becoming involved with these gangs? This requires the ability to negotiate a precarious situation - staying friendly enough with the gang to avoid becoming a target for crime, while simultaneously deflecting gang membership. Xavier explains:

'There wasn't one [gang] where I lived but at school ... the friends that I had in the classroom were staying in places where the gangs were and so sometimes at weekends they said I must come up...so...at the end of Grade 7 Primary School I started to see them, children, drinking, smoking, using drugs and that kind of stuff. So at High School I started to smoke and I started to drink. And the gangs, when you start drinking with them and hanging around them you

see...if they see a person across the street and they know that person has money they will just go up to him and rob him. And I wasn't used to that because although we didn't have money, we didn't rob people to get money. You just had to live without it. So I was supposed to leave my friends?

(Xavier, 22)

Here Xavier explains how his early association with gang members became strained when things began to escalate from what might be considered the minor social transgressions of smoking and drinking, to criminal activity of theft and mugging. His weekend involvement in a neighbourhood outside his own meant that his status was merely peripheral. Nevertheless, extricating himself from the group required that he develop a number of different strategies:

'There is pressure and I did go along with it for a while, with the smoking and the drinking. But when I saw the robbery and the stuff I stepped back. I thought 'Ja, I will stay away from that neighbourhood. I will stay here at home and get other stuff to do.' I started to go to the rugby on Saturday afternoons to keep away from them.'

Several accounts of alternative masculinities in the Western Cape region look to diversionary tactics employed by young men who wish to avoid gang violence (Gibson & Lindegaard 2007, Lindegaard 2009). Among the more prominent strategies is that of 'domestication' – staying close to home or indoors and thus out of sight of gang members. The danger inherent in domestication amongst men is that it carries with it the risk of feminisation and being identified as a *moffie* [gay], and as such weak and not a 'real man' (Gibson & Lindegaard 2007: 139). While Xavier chose to stay at home to avoid the gang, he countered any potential accusations of being a *moffie* by becoming involved with rugby and thus identifiable as a competent athlete. In this community, sporting prowess was recognised as a means of achieving status and recognition as a real man and of less interest to the gangs. When Kyle dropped out of college a year after we first met, his former fellow-students expressed concern that he would now be a target for gangsters. Kyle himself was conscious of the potential risk:

'I can say that I was a bit worried at first, but I am keeping busy with my football and we are doing really well in the league so I must just keep involved with that and then I will be ok because that will keep me busy.'

(Kyle, 21)

Being a gang member can provide a level of status unachievable by ordinary means. These groups of youths from the American-named suburbs of Paarl, model themselves on American gangs with names such as '*Americans*', '*Niggers*<sup>107</sup>', '*No Fear*' and '*PeFeJe's*' (*Peaceful Juniors*). Many young men are drawn into one of the numerous gangs

107 'Nigger' is not a word generally used in South Africa, even pejoratively. Its use here relates to the Americanised culture with which these youngsters identify.

in the area. Xavier again:

‘...there’s the Junkie Funkies, the HLs (Hard Living), there’s the Bad Boys, the Problem Child, they’re all the gangs. The leader of the gang will overnight hunt for you. You’ll start to dress up nicely – you’ll get the Levi jeans, rings, earrings. Maybe the leader of the gang will have a big house or something and he’ll throw a big party where you’ll be introduced to everyone...lots of girls.

The obvious attraction here for young men with limited finances, is the availability not only of material goods, but of status amongst girls otherwise unavailable. More striking however, was the idea that the gang leader would ‘hunt’ out potential gang members and ‘court’ them with gifts of clothes and jewellery – not unlike the way men are expected to woo their women.

The prize of gang membership, however, comes at a price. The initial onset of gang membership includes an initiation task to prove one’s manhood. This initiation task must be an act that is both violent and criminal which effectively sets the initiate on course for a life of crime and violence within the gang. Xavier continues:

And then all of a sudden they will say to you something like ‘ok...we...em...say we are hating Fiona [!] and you must kill her for us... to show that you are fully committed to the gang.’ And if you can do that then they will be proud of you and maybe pay you some money and give you everything. And the girls will see that ‘no, he’s not scared of anything, like that.’... They will give you a gun. They will maybe give you a photo. They will stand in front of your house and wait until you come out and say ‘right, this is the girl or boy we want you to kill. You must do it tomorrow.’ It will be someone that upset them – maybe other gangs.

For Xavier, as for the other men interviewed, gang membership will inevitably require an escalation from delinquency (drinking and smoking) to misdemeanour (drug taking, anti-social behaviour) to criminal activity (theft, mugging, rape, murder). The threat from gangs, therefore, was not only related to the threat of physical violence and crime, but also the constant need to maintain a level of respectability to counter attempts from the gangs to recruit them as young men. Thus, respectability becomes a shield against recruitment; as gangsterism becomes the foil against which ‘respectability’ is measured. Once recognised as a respectable man within the community, the threat of harassment from gang members to join their ranks diminishes completely. While one may still be a target of crime, one will not be pressured, or ‘hunted’ to become involved.

## **Maintaining Respectability**

General discussions about risk inevitably brought about much wider discussions, primarily about ‘being a man’, which in turn revealed an underlying moral imperative to behave well. Just as expectations of ‘good girls’ come through in conversations with the

women (Larkan 2008), 'being a man' or 'what men do' was a subject that insinuated itself into seemingly mundane daily tasks. Even such seemingly straightforward situations such as wearing a seatbelt could be brought back to questioning one's manhood. '*It's just not something you do as a man.*' (Ben, 22)

There are, of course, 'multiple masculinities' (Connell 1995:77, Morrell 2001) with different characteristics of masculinity emphasised in different settings. In this setting the colloquial expressions of masculinity include 'real men', 'good men', 'safe men', 'gangsters' and 'respectable men'. Though not immediately apparent to an outsider, the attribution of these terms within the community is unambiguous. So what is it that makes a 'respectable' man in this context? And, how do these young men negotiate alternative masculinities in order to achieve the standing of a 'respectable' man?

While Sauls (2005) points out that both gangsters and respectable men can meet the criteria of 'real' men, our study shows that gangsters can never be seen as 'respectable' men; the two are mutually exclusive. The imperative then follows that respectable men cannot be associated with gangsters, or the markers of gang activity and lifestyle. All of these young men strive to be good role models for their younger siblings, extended families and wider community. They live at home with their parents and siblings. All pay attention to their grooming and would avoid the gang 'uniform' of hoodies, bandanas, baggy jeans, earrings, and jewellery. While the gang member may be considered a 'real man' he is rarely considered a 'respectable man' and it is respectability which earns legitimate status and privilege within the community. With respectability comes social capital and personal gratification.

There is a range of characteristics that defines a 'respectable' man. These include that he will be a breadwinner; he will be a positive role model; he will be able to provide for his girlfriends/partner/family. Furthermore, certain behaviours such as drinking, smoking and drug use are considered incongruous with respectability.

'A respectable person is the kind that doesn't drink, or use drugs or abuse women. He only has his wife...looks after his kids... that type of thing  
(Xavier)

As Sauls (2005: 116) points out coming from a home where the father is seen as respectable, and is a breadwinner, does give access to symbolic capital. The narratives of Charles, Xavier and others speak of the role models their own fathers provide, and of how they wish to be seen as role models for their own children and/or siblings. Although the relationship with many fathers and their children seems distant and tends to be limited to that of provider – breadwinner and disciplinarian – rather than primary carer, a respectable man is at least a presence in the lives of his children, whether living with their mother or not.

'But my father doesn't say much. I won't say he doesn't talk to us but he's working a lot and he's not always around when I'm home because I'm usually away at the weekends. He would be

very hard with us when we were younger though. We each had to do our work and if our work wasn't done when he got home he would beat us, so then my mother would always tell us "you better get your work finished quickly because your father is on his way".

(Xavier)

'He would beat me...until I was in Matric. But nowadays he wouldn't. Now I'm like a big person, although I have respect for him he cannot act now the way he did before.'

(Charles)

For Charles, brought up in an area where gang activity is widespread, the strongest factor influencing his decision to shun gangs was his father's authority.

'I did listen to rap music and got involved with tsotsi (gang) music when I was in High School, but I never got involved with gangs because my father was too strict. He would kill me.'

(Charles)

Whereas the model of respectability provided to these young men by their fathers is characterised by toughness, inaccessibility, and harsh discipline, their own training as teachers encourages an alternative, more forgiving model of discussion, negotiation and encouragement. This suggests a re-characterisation of respectability within this community. Many of our respondents were keen to behave as role models for their younger siblings and for other children in the neighbourhood.

'I try to be a role model for her...for all the children around there.'

(Charles)

'So, sometimes I try to be like a role model for my brothers. Sometimes I get it right but sometimes I don't and they just say to me "you're not my father."'

(Xavier)

It would seem then, that a respectable man is almost required to be all things to all men (and women). He must be seen to look after himself through avoiding alcohol and drugs. He must also pay attention not to abuse women or to mistreat his wife by having other women. Looking after one's children and younger family members is also seen as important. In addition to one's responsibility to one's family however, the respectable man is a positive role model to others in the community through charitable and/or church activity.

'In some communities there are one or two people who will help out others... like poor people... and he is in some way thinking of them also. Like in winter there are soup kitchens... so that person in charge will get a lot of respect from the community.'

(Xavier)

‘Although with my friends, some of them don’t see it like I do. They say like “I don’t need to be responsible or to look after people”. They say to me “just look after yourself.” But I feel like everyone here is going to be a teacher and they should be responsible. I feel like I should be...I should use it...just to take the pressure off myself so in my environment there at home I see a lot of things that is difficult and I say to them ‘Guys, there is ways out of this. You don’t have to be a gangster’ and things like that. I always asked the youngsters ‘why, you know, when you go from primary school and start the first year of High School, why do you need to smoke?’ Then they feel that because they’re in High School they’re older now, they must smoke. They have a difficult time out there and that’s what encourages me to speak out and say to them that they don’t have to.’

(Charles)

## Conclusion

### *Managing Realities*

Just as there are multiple masculinities - many ways of ‘being a man’ - these do not inhabit static frameworks, but are situational and fluid depending on various stages of the life course, and on transitions made between, say, home and social or work environments. While these young men are living with their parents, within a close community, they are conscious of the need to act responsibly in order to gain some status within that community. The completion of their studies mirrors the transition to adulthood, the same way that gang rituals do, affording them entrance to the ‘adult’ community as individual ‘respectable’ men, whereby symbolic capital can be exchanged for social capital. It is very important for these men to emerge from this transition phase, recognised by the community as ‘respectable’ men.

Being a respectable man, then, is a demanding and exacting process. These young men work hard to try to do the right thing all the time and are not always successful. As Sauls (2005:116) argues ‘the practices of being a [respectable] man can be even more peripheral and difficult to sustain than that of a gangster’. The realities of building and maintaining respectable relationships are equally taxing. As with all late adolescents, these young men are challenged with sexual tensions that arise out of the need to comply with social expectations of starting the journey of a relationship with a ‘good girl’, and the wish to take advantage of the multiple opportunities for sexual relationships that present themselves at this stage in their lives. While negotiating their current state to become a respectable man in the community, this is compromised by the reality of late adolescence.

For these middle class young men, the pressure to live respectable lives is ongoing and requires a constant negotiation of risk. The mapping of risk is an ongoing project and one which the men have been re-writing since their early teens. ‘Risk’ in this sense is constructed both as a social and physical force, each producing its own constraints and requiring a range of strategies. These strategies themselves contain elements of risk – how to avoid gang recruitment without unduly antagonising gang members; how to

remove oneself from the environment of gang activity without being labelled a 'moffie' for staying too close to home; how to take advantage of opportunities for entertainment only in areas deemed 'respectable' by the broader community.

Respectability thus becomes a key defining factor in the negotiation of both social and physical risk in the environment. At all times the view is expressed that short and medium term choices, while prescriptive and narrow, are absolutely necessary if the goal of respectability within the community is to be achieved.

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