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Article in *British Journal of Criminology* · January 2015

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## 'SO NOW I'M THE MAN': INTIMATE PARTNER FEMICIDE AND ITS INTERCONNECTIONS WITH EXPRESSIONS OF MASCULINITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

SHANAAZ MATHEWS\*, RACHEL JEWKES and NAEEMAH ABRAHAMS

*Intimate femicide, the killing of a woman by an intimate partner, is the leading cause of female murder in South Africa. Research on men who kill in South Africa has highlighted the psychological damage caused by exposure to severe adversity in childhood, but this alone does not explain the gendered context of these murders. This article presents analyses from in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated men who killed their partners and explores their views on and relationships with women. We show that the men sought to perform exaggerated versions of predominant ideals of masculinity, emphasizing an extreme control of and dominance over women. We show killing as an ultimate means of taking back control in a context where gendered relationships legitimize men's use of violence to assert power and control. Interventions to prevent intimate femicide need to be highly cognisant of the gendered context.*

**Keywords:** intimate femicide, intimate partner violence, masculinity, femininity, male violence, childhood trauma, gender inequality

### *Introduction*

The trial of Oscar Pistorius for the shooting of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp and murder, rape and disembowling just one week earlier of 17 year old Anene Booysen, by an ex-boyfriend, reminded the world that South Africa remains a country with a capacity for extraordinary gendered violence. These were not exceptional cases, but two of about 500 intimate femicides that occurred in 2013 (Abrahams *et al.* 2013). The overall levels of violence manifest in the homicide rate, high rate of rape reported to the police and disclosed in surveys, abuse of children, violence in the workplace and among strikers, widespread corporal punishment in schools and violence against women (Breckenridge 1998; Seedat *et al.* 2009; Jewkes *et al.* 2011; Machisa *et al.* 2011). Present day violence is deeply rooted in its apartheid and colonial past (Moodie *et al.* 1994; Breckenridge 1998; Morrell 1998; Glaser 2000). Apartheid's laws and racial hierarchy were brutally enforced, creating widespread oppression and grinding poverty. The majority of South Africans lived and many still live in poverty stricken townships or rural areas, marked by crime, violence, very low wages and high unemployment (Breetzke 2010). Apartheid labour and residence laws created a system of migrant labour, with massive disruption of family life and men's roles vis-à-vis their partners and children (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Morrell *et al.* 2012). The structural violence, restrictive laws and political oppression created circumstances in which racially based hegemonic masculinities emerged which reified strength and dominance over women

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(and often other men) (Morrell 1998; Coovadia *et al.* 2009; Morrell *et al.* 2012). They also resulted in strong femininities, as women have had to be strong to survive and protect their children, and are often a heads of households, yet they are expected to submit to men's violence and patriarchal control (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). These tensions and contradictions have created a fault line in gender relations in which intimate partner violence is common and not infrequently has been marked by eruptions of severe violence against women which at its worst is fatal.

A recent systematic review of global data on intimate femicide, showed between 30.8–45.3% of all female homicides is perpetrated by an intimate partner (Stöckl *et al.* 2013). In South Africa intimate femicide is the leading cause of female homicide, and occurs at more than double the global rate (Abrahams *et al.* 2013). This high level of intimate femicide is linked to both the high prevalence of intimate partner violence in South Africa, and very high rates of all forms of homicide (Abrahams *et al.* 2009). Despite the high prevalence, most men do not kill their partners. For many men, achieving dominance through verbal dexterity is most highly respected, yet there is a cultural condonation of some use of violence, especially that which does not injure as a means to control their partner, punish and to gain respect (Wood *et al.* 2008). Thus understanding the difference between men who do and do not kill is important for work in violence prevention. Interviews exploring the life history of South African men who have killed their partners have highlighted a web of inter-related circumstances and experiences which had contributed to their ability to kill their partner (Mathews *et al.* 2011). Most were men who could have been regarded as 'violent men' before they killed their partner, as their lives had been characterized by a ready use of violence in many different contexts. However, their pathway to violence seemed to have started with profoundly unhappy childhoods characterized by parental death, extraordinarily harsh discipline from different caregivers (which was often frank cruelty), emotionally detached parents, and absent fathers. These experiences are described as having indelibly marked their sense of self. Their feelings of parental abandonment and betrayal resulted in a deep sense of mistrust of others, insecurity, lack of guilt and empathy, and low self-esteem. These feelings played out in multiple ways as they searched for love and respect in relationships with others. They intersected with the structural and social reality of their lives, which for many was a context of poverty and gangs, and drew them to violent, anti-social and criminal activities in search of respect.

Women in South Africa are socialized to see men as objects of love, respect and resources as well as danger (Hunter 2010; Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Jewkes *et al.* 2012). South Africa is a strongly heterosexist society and women viewed as rightfully placed in relationships with men, and many rate their self-esteem in terms of the quality of the man they can partner with (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Masculine ideals are actively constructed by both men and women, and women are thus often drawn to men who display ideal characteristics of the strength, toughness and virility (Talbot and Quayle 2010). Most women are socialized to expect men to control them, and justify men's acts of control and punishment as demonstrations of love (Jewkes 2002; Wood *et al.* 2007, 2008). In a context of poverty, where the provider role is emphasized as part of successful masculinity, many women see relationships with men as a means of economic survival (Hunter 2010). Economically dependent women are much more vulnerable to violence within relationships and have fewer options for leaving (Jewkes *et al.* 2012). Women are also tied by ideas of 'good womanhood' which entail forbearance of men's

violent and philandering behaviour towards them, particularly in the name of keeping a home and family together (N. Jama Shai, personal communication). This combines with discourses of the romantic love and the construction through narrative, hopes and dreams of a 'perfect' relationship (at least at its onset) (Boonzaier 2008), which provide considerable space for men to use violence and women to excuse his behaviour, either through expediency or a narrative of not being 'bad all the time' (Boonzaier 2008).

The prevailing social environment and cultural context in South Africa provides space in which men's violence towards women is considerably tolerated (Boonzaier 2005). There is also often a remarkable leniency towards extreme (socially unacceptable) and even lethal violence (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Vetten *et al.* 2008). Social observations show that men who are known to be violent and those who have killed partners have little difficulty finding women to be partners. Furthermore, although there is strong legislation on domestic violence (Domestic Violence Act of 1998) and South Africa has had Protection Orders (or interdicts) since 1992, many men have in the past, and still largely do, 'get away with murder'. This was exemplified by a 2014 court case of a 24-year-old pregnant woman who was shot and killed by her policeman husband in front of their 4-year-old daughter in 1999 (Prince 2014). He was convicted only 13 years later, and during those years remained employed in the police, and remarried. Similarly the head of crime intelligence (Richard Mdluli) in the national police force (SAPS) has yet to be prosecuted for the murder of a love rival committed in 1999 for which he has been charged.

Men who kill an intimate partner have been observed to have a borderline or dysmorphic personality (Dutton *et al.* 1996). Yet this observation helps to explain why men are able to kill, rather than why women partners are the targets and the patterns of circumstances in which of these killings by men of these particular women occur. This article draws on in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated South African men who killed their partners in 1999 and describes how the men's psychological characteristics intersect with their social circumstances to influence their intimate relationships in a dynamic interplay between dominant ideas of South African masculinity and the complex sexual and social morphology of the lives of poor urban South Africans where having multiple sexual partners, alcohol and drug abuse, rape and criminal violence are ever present in the landscape.

### *Methods*

This article draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 convicted and incarcerated men in the Western Cape province of South Africa who were convicted and imprisoned for the 1999 murder of an intimate partner. Interviews were conducted over an 18-month period from July 2006 to March 2008 at two prisons in the region as they were accessible to the first author. A cluster of interviews were conducted for each man (a total of 74 interviews) by the first author who is fluent in English and Afrikaans. Two interviews, each lasting between one to two hours, were held in prison with each man and one to three interviews were held with her family members and friends of themselves and the victim. This allowed us to explore the killing and the context from varying perspectives and validate some of the men's reports. The participants were purposively sampled, to provide some diversity in relation to age and background. The men were aged between 18 and 51 at the time of the killing, and between 21 and 61

at the time of the interviews. The overall purpose of the study was to explore how the men explained their use of violence in their intimate relationship as well as what they perceived to have led to the killing.

The murders had occurred in the Western Cape, which has the highest homicide rate in the country (Thomson 2004). Apartheid has had a profound effect on how communities are shaped in South Africa. The Group Areas Act No 41 of 1950 segregated South Africans based on race, with black and coloured townships in urban areas faced with high levels of unemployment, poverty, lack of formal housing, drugs and crime. Coloured townships of the Western Cape are notorious for their gangs and associated high levels of violent crime and drug abuse (Thomson 2004). While the peri-urban and rural areas are largely wine producing, marked by extreme poverty due to low pay, under- or unemployment, and the residual effects of the 'dop' system where farm workers were partly paid in wine, thus alcohol abuse and its related problems remain entrenched (Mager 2004). Within this social context the region's masculinities are constructed to promote a patriarchal gender order, with successful masculinities re-crafted to incorporate both the 'gangster' and the 'respectable' man (Salo 2003). High levels of unemployment and the prevailing deprivation experienced in most townships has a marked effect on notions of successful masculinities with alternate exaggerated violent masculinities glamorized and viewed as respected.

The first interview explored the men's backgrounds; their childhood, family and relationships with intimate partners. This interview guided the second interview, which primarily focussed on the index relationship and the murder. The men spent a large part of the interviews speaking about their intimate relationships particularly with the woman they murdered. More than half were married to the women they killed or were in a committed long-term relationship. All interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the participant and were transcribed, and when done in Afrikaans were translated into English. Informed consent was obtained before recruitment into the study, and for interviews to be recorded.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Medical Research Council's Ethics Committee. As research participants were incarcerated men, care had to be taken to obtain informed consent in order for men not to feel coerced to participate, see Mathews *et al.* (2011) for a more detailed discussion on ethics. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, support for these men was considered important, and it was arranged that all participants be provided with support by a social worker or, where necessary, for psychiatric support. The safety and mental health of the researcher was of concern; a system of debriefing was built in to deal with possible experiences of vicarious trauma.

Open code software was used to assist in the handling of data. Analysis was an ongoing process and commenced before the second interview. Data was analysed inductively using a grounded theory approach. This was characterized by a process of coding and sub-coding, with lastly the interpretative phase characterized by the emergence of a story with the aim of developing an emerging theory (Cresswell 1998). A scope of enquiry was developed and used to guide the interviews. Using semi-structured interviews allowed the interviews to be flexible and for the probing of areas of interest. All the authors participated in development of the emerging themes and interpretation of the findings. The first interview focussed on an exploration of their childhood and data gathered in this interview guided the planning and direction for the second

interview. The second interview predominantly focussed on the relationship between the man and the woman killed. These areas informed initial broad codes and a first article on childhood adversities was published (Mathews *et al.* 2011). The second area of interest was his intimate relationship with the woman he killed and how he made sense of the act. The themes that emerged from both the interviews with the men and friends and family are discussed in detail.

*What made them feel like a man?*

Central elements of masculinity that were apparent in the interviews were the ability to be providers for their homes ('breadwinners'), having the 'right' woman partner (a woman partner they could respect) and one who respected and submitted to them, and a readiness to defend their honour.

Most men positioned themselves as 'hardworking' men who were 'good' workers and saw their role of financially supporting their families as an important indicator of success. A few men lacked traditional employment but still presented themselves as 'good' providers, chiefly through their involvement in gangs, crime and drug dealing. As one young man explained:

Selling fruit did not bring in much of an income but when I started selling drugs I started seeing more money. This was why I moved over to selling drugs.

Extended families and partners did not seem to question their criminal involvement as this has become accepted as part of the repertoire of survival within the Western Cape's context of poverty. Rather these men, as providers, were respected.

*Having the right partner: a woman you can respect*

The men had various intimate relationships, some were transient with little or no emotional involvement, while other relationships were characterized by intense emotional attachment. The women killed by these men were all viewed as important intimate partners in their lives. They were women to whom the men had made a substantial commitment and in whom they had been deeply invested emotionally, and they were presented in the interviews as women whom the men had respected. Most of the men explained that, at least early in the relationship, their partners had made them feel 'like men', by submitting to them and respecting them. As one explained:

She lets me feel like a man, firstly she is obedient, secondly she will not do something contrary to my better judgement, thirdly she respects me.

Another man's partner 'made him feel like a man' as she was not afraid to be known as his girlfriend even though he was a gangster, 'despite the opinion of others'. This public display of commitment by her made him feel 'very important'.

Respect was often not forthcoming in their social setting, with limited opportunities to secure stable employment and to become respected members of their community. Intimate partners were viewed as an important source of this.

Most men had an ideal or 'perfect' woman who they sought as a partner and who would be 'respectable', generally 'innocent' and 'pure'. This discursive idolisation of

their partners in the men's description of the early phase of their relationships was strikingly paralleled by the representation of their mothers as perfect mothers. This is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Mathews *et al.* 2011), and was unshaken even by accounts of extreme acts of maternal cruelty, such as a mother burning a young child's hand on a hot plate. Like their mothers, their partners were initially perfect. Although men did not explicitly talk about women's sexual history they alluded to it as one of the features, as one man explaining what he was looking for in a woman said:

In a girlfriend it was her personality I would look at, the respect they had and the way they spoke, the manner in which they did things, they should not be man crazy ('mannerig'), they should know their place. Like I said before, I do not like a woman with a bad reputation ('slegte vrou') because I was raised like that, I saw this. Now something I saw ... say a woman go out at the same time with two men, this is bad.

For this man, like many of the other men, choosing younger women as partners was one strategy used to secure sexual inexperience. For a number of the women the relationship described was their first experience with a man and their sexual inexperience allowed these men to be in control. Younger women were more submissive and 'obedient'.

Many of the men viewed their self-worth as reflected through their partner, thus winning and keeping a 'perfect' partner was critical to their often very fragile self-esteem. For example, one man from an impoverished working-class background could not believe his desired woman was interested in him as he perceived her to be 'out of his league', as her family was 'wealthy'. It was not only the 'class' of the woman but factors such as her 'beauty' which placed some women apart from others. Beauty was desired, but also attracted other male attention, as one man reported:

She was too pretty and everyone made eyes at her.

Men enjoyed being able to 'show off' their partner's beauty and be the envy of other men, yet this attention led to jealousy and mistrust due to their own insecurities and vulnerabilities. Their childhood experiences of unresolved trauma and poor parenting influenced their social competence and self-esteem, negatively impacting on their ability to trust in intimate relationships (Mathews *et al.* 2011).

### *Masculinity and vulnerability*

Masculinity required that men defend their honour and show their strength, and often this was through the use of violence (c.f. Wood and Jewkes 2001; Jewkes and Morrell 2010). Brave men readily used violence especially to resolve conflicts and this demonstrated their ascendancy. Most men were exposed to violence in their environment, some men belonging to gangs, while others were involved in less formal peer associations that also included petty crime and acts of violence. More than half of the men had served time in prison prior to this conviction. Participation in crime involved risks and thus required bravery, but was inherently viewed as manly and some of the men proudly asserted that they were even feared.

Violence against intimate partners was sometimes also committed in defence of honour. For example, one man spoke about beating his partner while she was pregnant because he suspected that she was prostituting herself. This he felt was 'just cause' for

his actions. In this case violence was seen as deserving punishment and a strategy to regain respect and control.

Although the men had a clear and shared view of successful manhood, they often struggled to occupy this position, and their pursuit of respect made them vulnerable. Attainment of the provider role was often very difficult. Only two of the men had completed school, and this limited access to legal, secure, well-paid employment. Where men had legal employment it was very highly valued and so retrenchment was a very difficult experience and often plunged families deeper into poverty. One man explained:

*I lost my job at the regional services council [Local Municipality], er ... I had to take a retrenchment package—this was also a huge disappointment for me ... er ... At that stage I had to jump out to find other work, I had to work after hours, I worked from home, Saturdays I worked at the farm and at night to maintain the same income.*

Despite his multiple jobs, his wife had to work too, which he found demeaning. Several of the men perceived their partner's employment to [belittle] them. Three of the murders occurred within a year of the men being retrenched from long-term employment.

Unemployment and low pay also created a climate of financial stress, which was often aggravated by the practice of taking micro loans and very high rates of interest, as one man explained:

Respondent: I received a subsidy at work for the house ... but it was the other debt which I struggled to repay. I also made loans at other micro loan places to help me get out of debt, but I found myself further in debt because from one loan I would continually run back to the loan sharks. After a while I could not see myself out of the situation ....

Interviewer: Did these financial problems have an effect on your marriage?

Respondent: I would say it did to a degree impact on our marriage; this was why she would at times go and work. She was forced to work at times for an extra income because we could not live on my income alone.

For a number of men who moved to the city from rural areas there was the added expectation of financial support to their extended families, who moved in and out of their households, placing additional stress on their finances and intimate relationships.

Although these men presented themselves as hardworking and honest, contradictions were evident too. Some were unable to keep a steady job due to their own behaviour, such as reporting to work under the influence of alcohol. In the constant struggle to make ends meet, crime was an ever present and attractive alternative way of generating income, and to earn the respect of their families.

### *Jealousy*

Whilst the men sought beautiful partners, they were also very jealous of the attention these women received from other men. Several men expressed a fear of losing their partner and contact with other men was perceived to pose a huge threat. This jealousy also stemmed from the men's own inability to trust their partner, which appears to be related to their own insecurities about their self-worth, and it affected their relationship with their partner (Mathews *et al.* 2011). Most men maintained that their jealousy and possessiveness were just expressions of their love for their partner, but it often resulted in controlling behaviour and violence which made life with them unbearable for their partners, attested by friends and relatives of these deceased women.



Controlling behaviour reflected an intense vulnerability. This took many forms, men frequently described controlling their partner's movements, such as dictating and limiting contact with friends, even the extreme of isolation of some of their partners, as one of the youngest men explained:

Mmm ... I became jealous; I did not want her to be with other guys, I wanted us to sort of stay in her house and not go out ... I just wanted her to myself; I became possessive over her and I cut her braids, and after cutting her braids I told her now I know the guys will not worry her anymore ...'

Some men recognized that their partner gave them no reason to doubt her fidelity, but felt compelled to act in ways that restricted her freedom because of their paranoia. Most men monitored their partner's movements, with a few stalking them just before the killing. One man explained that he felt threatened when his partner was around other men. He described how he would become physically violent towards her, accusing her of involvement with other men, whilst knowing that it was not in her character, he said:

*We had arguments; there was no other men in her life—of this I am certain; it was just that I was malicious ... I can remember one day I came from work and that Sunday I wanted to visit a work friend [male] and she wanted to accompany me. I insisted she could not go with me. What I did was very wrong; I went into the house and I came out with a broomstick and I gave her two blows here [pointing to his side].*

Despite so jealously protecting their partner's virtue, the men themselves were not monogamous and openly had affairs. Most of these relationships were described as meaningless and largely to satisfy sexual needs, but this also fed a continuous need to demonstrate that they were desirable to women. These characteristics of 'successful' manhood have been described in ethnographic research from other parts of South Africa (Wood and Jewkes 2001). Multiple casual relationships were portrayed as part of behaving as a man, and thus essential for demonstrating manliness. Yet having multiple sexual relationships did not meet these men's needs for 'love' and 'security'. In fact their behaviour was often destructive as it impacted negatively on their relationship with the woman they saw as their primary partner and in whom they invested in emotionally.

Insecurities and feelings of worthlessness were particularly pronounced for three of the men who had sexual performance problems. This set them up for failure in their intimate relationship as they felt profoundly inadequate as men. Their inability to meet their partner's sexual needs accentuated their perceived need to control their partner through the use and threats of violence. Ironically, one of these men was involved in an extra-marital affair which he ended when his girlfriend fell pregnant shortly before he killed his wife and daughter.

Threats of violence served as a means to control when men felt they had lost control. A man discussed the impact of stepchildren on their relationship and the humiliation he felt when he perceived them to be disrespectful, and when they reached late teens he felt he lost control over them and his wife. Referring to an incident that occurred a year prior to the killing of his wife and stepson, he explained:

At that moment I felt I did not count in the house. I am a nothing here because this child wants to tell me how things must be done. I went to my wife and told her that he is disrespectful. She became difficult and said I am the father in the house, I had to act .... If I remember correctly ... I told my wife if you do not want to listen ... I will shoot you all dead.

The use of violence or other controlling behaviour was often a performance for others to witness: control had to be shown and respect publically demanded. Nonetheless the use of violence against a partner *per se* did not make men feel successful, and many were ashamed of what they did. It reflected an intense vulnerability. The men became violent towards their intimate partners when they felt their manhood was challenged, or potentially challenged in the case of jealousy. One man felt humiliated when his partner publically disobeyed him, when she refused to accompany him with a friend. He explained how he punished her in an attempt to redeem his manliness:

*I was still in turmoil from the incident [her not wanting to go with him] that happened earlier. I don't know why I did it but I smacked her in front of my friends without thinking twice what I was doing. I told her she should not make a fool out of me.*

### *Psychological vulnerability*

Men's response to threats and perceived threats to their sense of success as men were strongly influenced by their psychological vulnerability. As discussed above, their experiences of adversity in childhood both enabled them to commit acts of violence, and made them to be insecure, distrustful and with very low self-esteem. Many of the men had other psychological vulnerabilities, which included substance abuse and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These also worked to undermine their ability to have enduring and fulfilled relationships. Five of the men served in the army, two of whom enlisted voluntarily and three had been conscripted. All the men presented their army experience as positive and construed it as giving them discipline and character, making them tough and courageous. However, they described exposure to atrocities, including witnessing mass killings, and their own experiences of killing in war which remained hidden and unresolved. One man explained:

It was cruel in my eyes, inhumane, mmm I had my dreams about these things many times, thinking about it I would ask myself what has become of this world, people were shot in front of me. I would drive over landmines ... I was lucky to come out alive.

He, like the others who served in the army, described suffering from nightmares and flashbacks, alluding to unresolved PTSD, which may have compounded or caused their aggressive behaviour and heavy drinking. Alcohol abuse was for these men a common means of dealing with the pain of their experiences and impacted on their intimate relationships. Two of the other men attempted suicide prior to the killing of their partner. While levels of depression are unknown, in this group of men their mental health had an effect on their intimate relationships and possibly influenced their behaviour which possibly led to the killing of their partner.

The use of violence was often entwined with accounts of substance abuse. Alcohol was on one hand constructed as recreational and again part of '*what men do*', yet its abuse—and drug use—had a very destructive impact on the men's lives. For the men who moved to the city from rural areas, this behaviour often alienated them from their families who had conservative moral codes, as one man explained:

*When I came ... I got involved with a bad crowd, I won't say bad but I started to experience drugs, not drugs sorry, I started to experience smoking [dagga] and shortly after smoking I also started drinking. This all happened*

*soon after I moved to Cape Town. I started with the alcohol use and this upset my mother because she did not raise me like this and now when I came to the big city I started to experience all these things.*

For many the involvement with alcohol and drugs caused turmoil in their lives. As one man explained:

I actually lost my job ... By just not being interested anymore, I mean staying out of work and every time finding excuses why I was not at work and stuff.

Some men reported drinking on their way to work or at work suggesting that alcohol abuse was quite problematic. It had a major impact on their intimate relationships as men described becoming violent towards their partner when they were under the influence, then using their drunken state as an excuse, as described by this man:

*The fright that was on her face—and I can still see it—because she knew when she saw me in that state [drunk]; she knows me as being a sweet person; she knows me when I am sober and stuff like that, and just the state that I was in now ... she knows this guy he is capable of doing anything ... she got to a point where she accepted the good with the bad.*

The women anticipated violence when men were drunk and were said to likewise use it as an excuse for their male partner's behaviour. A few men said their partners felt they would be the 'perfect' husband if they did not 'drink'. Whilst these men did not take personal responsibility for their alcohol use and associated behaviours, they took their partner's use greatly to heart. Men construed their female partner's use of alcohol as a huge 'disappointment', reflecting on them as a man. A few men presented such behaviour as a reason for being violent, as one explained:

How does it look—I come home from work on a Saturday and she is sitting at the shebeen. It would be for a good time, one child would be on her lap and the other holding her skirt. This was not a nice picture to me, she was my wife ... I would take her by the hair, I would take the baby from her and would take her by the hair and pull her home ...'

*Betrayal: "I was the one that suffered in the end"*

Although the men did not treat their partners well, their self-esteem and sense of manhood were critically predicated on their relationships. The men might not have been able to control work or substance abuse but they felt they should control their partner. Although they had tried to choose 'perfect' women, ultimately discourses of betrayal featured prominently in the accounts of all the men. They were extremely disappointed and hurt by their partner's real or imagined indiscretions. In many ways they went from being 'perfect' to being 'all bad'. To punish these indiscretions, as on previous occasions, the men resorted to violence.

Their deep sense of insecurity and mistrust stemming from adverse childhood experiences, arguably due to insecure attachment to mothers for some men, described in the article on childhood experiences (Mathews *et al.* 2011), all influenced how they responded. These perceived threats of indiscretion were viewed by them as a profound breakdown of trust in the context of their disordered sense of trust, combined with their harsher form of masculinity, legitimized punishment of their partner's indiscretions, as a man explained:

*This happened [the killing] because of messing around with other men ... I asked her what had happened but she did not answer. This made me angry; I had spoken to her on many occasions. I started hitting her, but I hit her too hard ...*

The men indicated that the murders were due to a loss of control over their partners. Most men externalized blame and attributed their relationship breakdown and the actual killing as being triggered by the women's behaviour. Men felt betrayed by partners who wanted to end the marriage or relationship. Half of the women were either separated or were about to leave at the time of their murder. For some, the murder was a deliberate and final act to regain control. One man said:

There is no one and nothing left for you ... Believing if I could not have her, nobody could.

He had stalked her just before the killing, and maintained that he still loved her even though he killed her, but he needed to assert control. This fear of being abandoned by their partner was evident in most of their accounts, with one young man who was in relationship with a much older woman said:

I was afraid of losing her. I only had her, I had no one else.

He isolated himself from his family as they disapproved of his relationship with a much older woman. He, like some of the other men, came across as isolated and very emotionally dependent on his partner.

A sense of betrayal by their partner consumed these men, impacting their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. In order to regain a sense of manliness the betrayal had to be punished. For some men their women had 'fallen' from grace and have become flawed. It is within this context that a man who once idealized his partner explained:

I pasted a cent on the wall of our bedroom and I said this is what you're worth to me.

This incident happened a few weeks prior to him killing his wife, whom he suspected of having an affair with their neighbour. Although he belittled and humiliated her, he complained she did the same to him; with a fragile self-esteem, this stung him and he explained:

*'She liked to humiliate me in front of my friends; she would vilify ["sleg maak"] me in front of them. She would say to them I am a nerd or whatever; she would call me names like a softy ["slapgat"]. She did not know how to keep quiet, she enjoyed belittling me.'*

This man spoke about suffering from depression over the years and needing to be hospitalized for it. His depression combined with a very low self-esteem led to insecurities in his intimate relationship which appeared to be internalized.

#### *The Act of Killing*—'taking back control'

All the men presented themselves as lacking agency in killing their intimate partner. Men felt they were driven by their partner's actions and in their descriptions reported 'losing it' and 'snapping', suggesting that they were not in control of their actions at the time of the killing. A man speaking about the killing of his wife explained:

That evening when it really happened I lost it. She came and asked me for beer money I told her not to ask me, but to ask her lover. I just said it glibly, ask your lover. Then she admitted that she was having an affair with him and she asked me what am I going to do about this. It was probably with that that I snapped. I had the knife in my hand and I did not think twice about this. According to the

autopsy report she sustained 14 stab wounds, 9 to the neck and the others to the hand and the chest I just continued, continued to stab.

Similarly, another man described his lack of agency, saying:

There and then I snapped, I could no longer handle the situation. I firstly turned around and took the gun from the bag. The stepson still wanted to reason. I shot him against the TV cabinet, I climbed over his legs and walked to the kitchen, my wife was standing behind the hob; I do not know why the first shot went through her cheek, I was probably confused ... er ... she realised what was happening, she ran out the backdoor to the neighbours. I followed her as she was running there ... I shot her from behind, she fell. I turned back at that stage, I was still very confused.

Men described being driven to kill by their partner's behaviour towards them and feeling that they no longer felt respected by them. Men spoke about feeling 'belittled' and 'humiliated' by their partners which impacted on their sense of manliness. For most men these idealized, once 'perfect' women were now flawed due to their perceived indiscretions or behaviour which was not fitting. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory we developed an argument in the previous article on these men's childhoods: that their unresolved traumatic childhood experiences have had a lasting impact on their ability to form and maintain relationships based on their inability to integrate love and trust (Mathews *et al.* 2011). Their emotional insecurities and fragile sense of self allowed these men to polarize their partners into all good or bad (Siegel 2006). This unconscious psychological split allows men to see their partner as flawed and all bad, and thus allowed them to kill the partner they once adored without remorse, and to externalize blame.

Most men presented themselves as having lost control of their relationship at the time of the killing. All the relationships had fallen apart by then and nearly half the women had a protection order when they were killed. Men felt that protection orders against them gave women immense power and were unjust towards them, as a man explained:

*Respondent: She got an interdict, the interdict where the man cannot come to the house [protection order] ... I could not come to the house. Then I could not keep my hands from her. I had never before lifted my hands against her [pause]. I got 12 months at Allendale prison for the breach of an interdict, I got 12 months, but it was my house. I could not go and stay with my brothers or friends when I have a home. The three children and she makes four; they were alone at home. They were living on their own; there is no man in the house and you know how it goes with a shebeen next door ..... I could not come to the house, she did not want to sleep with me any longer and I had to sleep in the lounge. It was my house and the children were living there, how could she have me evicted.*

His deep sense of being aggrieved, combined with his distrust of her, fuelled his anger and the violence towards her intensified after his release from prison. Although she had started divorce proceedings he could not accept this and stalked her just before her death. The night of her death he felt totally out of control, reporting:

*'Respondent: She came home at 4am, I was sober; I did not drink or smoke [referring to smoking dagga] I was completely sober that morning when I killed my wife. .... I was waiting for her all night but she had lied to me; she told me she was going to a friend but she went to Wellington, she went with these friends of her. When she returned home I did not know what had happened to her; you had to see the way she looked, her jeans was dirty. You can think when a woman is drunk she was probably raped or something but I could see she was very drunk; the car dropped her maybe two doors from our house and I was waiting on her. I was very angry and then I exploded [referring to the killing].'*

The possibility of women having being raped, and men's feelings that they needed to be punished for this, were spoken of by three men. Sexual proprietary fuelled their jealousy and suspected infidelity, even rape, was considered punishable, as one man explained:

*This happened [the killing] because of messing around with other men. This man, I had warned him already but I was not at home. When I got home the woman was just sitting on the chair. I asked her what had happened but she did not answer, she just pointed. This made me angry, I had spoken to her on so many occasions, I started hitting her, but I hit her too hard .... he obviously had sex with her. You see one can smell something when you enter your house ... Why was she sitting on the chair because she was lying down when I left? She had some beers in, she was drunk.*

Speaking about alleged infidelity, another said:

*I cannot understand that my temper could overpower me like that, that I took a piece of wood and hit my wife like that. I still told the people, 'see that woman did not have sex with that man' ... No, I did not see them in the act but they said [the neighbours] what do I want to do with such a bad woman, they said all these things to me. This was when I took this piece of wood and started hitting her.'*

For this man, like many others, the public humiliation of sexual indiscretion, although she was possibly raped, could not go without punishment. The sense of sexual ownership and jealousy made this man feel out of control and punishing his partner was a means to feel and demonstrate his manliness to others, showing he is in control of the relationship. The killing is thus a desperate act of taking back the control they perceive to have lost, as a man explained:

Now the firearm, so now I'm the man, you can't tell me anything. .... 'I am always the one that must be belittled in front of your friends as long as you have friends around you, you're the happiest person but as soon as we are alone then I am the monster whereas you're the monster in this whole thing.

This loss of control was particularly evident where women had left them or were about to leave and men felt they were losing control over their partner. The sense of losing a partner impacted on their self-esteem, resulting in immense emotional turmoil and anxiety. These men did not view divorce as a solution, although they acknowledged the marriage was falling apart, as one man said:

We were sleeping in separate beds, we started sleeping apart in October '98, just before her death. I thought she could do as she please, I was fed-up... She wanted a divorce, but I told her I won't do it, why should I do it, I would have wasted my life. I did not want a divorce, why should I divorce her, we had two children together... I would get angry, but I remained quiet, I would keep it all inside, I never showed my anger. They would always think everything is fine by me.... She told the counsellor her mind was made up. I thought there was nothing I could do to influence her, her mind was made up.

Here divorce was seen as an ultimate betrayal, which allowed him to kill her as a desperate act of taking back control of the relationship.

### *Discussion*

Several researchers have described the act of killing the female partner is an extreme manifestation of male sexual jealousy and 'proprietaryness', linked to notions of ownership of the partner and a sense of entitlement (Wilson and Daly 1992; Dobash and

Dobash 2011). The killing is a final attempt to exert control over a partner (Russell and Harmes 2001), a need for which is exacerbated by fears of abandonment. Our research provides support for these explanations, but extends the analysis to show the interrelationship of gender ideals and psychological vulnerabilities. This creates the context in which these men's relationships deteriorated to the critical point where they are able to commit the ultimate act of homicide as a means to take back control.

These men's representations of their masculinities and how their sense of self impacted on the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships are critical in developing an understanding how they come to kill an intimate partner. Relationships with intimate partners emerged as important in affirming their sense of manliness, as other authors have discussed (Wood and Jewkes 2001; Harrison 2008). Desirable and valued female partners were glorified, with ideal women constructed as obedient, acquiescent and innocent, women they felt they could respect and gave them the respect they were searching for. Female partners are instrumental in supporting these men's fragile sense of self-worth and their relationships hinge on the men's ability to feel in control of the partner and relationship. In this article, we come to see that these intimate relationships are fraught with tensions due to the men's inability to trust and the need for control, respect and submission by intimate partners setting them up for failure. In our analysis of these men's childhoods, we showed how traumatic experiences impacted on the formation of emotional vulnerabilities, such as low self-esteem and an inability to trust (Mathews *et al.* 2011). This lack of trust, combined with a need to control an intimate partner, influenced these men's practices and shapes the trajectory of their relationship.

Social and structural inequalities persist in South Africa and limit men's ability to attain a traditionally successful masculinity (Hunter 2010; Morrell *et al.* 2012). Men presented their being 'hardworking' and financially supporting their family as indicative of their fulfilling their responsibilities of being a man according to ideas of a successful masculinity. Yet, insecure employment combined with limited education caused tensions and thwarted these men, leading to further emotional insecurities. Reshaping traditional ideals of success meant for many participation in crime, violence and often gang affiliation which provided them with respect and power within the community and from their female partners (Bourgois 1996; Steinberg 2006). Within this context the use of violence within intimate relationships is instrumental as it provides men with control over women whilst they lack control in other aspects of their lives (c.f. Wood and Jewkes 2001). This need for control was also marked by intense jealousy where men construed this as an expression of love and often misogynistic violence towards female partners. It is this jealousy, entwined with mistrust and suspicions of infidelity that allow men to justify the killing of an intimate partner, with men's behaviour marked by an emotional need to take back control of the woman. This is supported by Wilson and Daly (1992) who propose that men come to kill based on their sense of proprietariness and the need to take back control of the female partner.

The men presented idealized, perfect women as valued and desirable partners, who bolstered their own sense of manliness. These idealized partners were constructed as respectable women who were admired by others, thus it was through their partners that men had their manliness affirmed when it was not forthcoming from other avenues. However, these relationships were doomed to fail, partly due to the men's insecurity, which fuelled jealousy and distrust of female partners. From a psychosocial

criminological perspective, these emotional insecurities are shaped by early childhood experiences with partner violence viewed as a defence to deal with the induced anxiety that gets transformed into rage (Gadd and Jefferson 2007). They were also doomed to fail because the context in which the men lived meant that it was very, very unlikely that the women who would have been available to them as partners would have been able to live up to their lofty ideals. The psychoanalytic concept of splitting is described as a psychological defence mechanism which emerges after traumatic childhood experiences, such as severe abuse or emotional neglect, to protect the child against intrapsychic conflicts (Siegel 2006). In adulthood, splitting is seen to manifest within the defences of idealisation and devaluation, i.e. individuals are thus perceived as all good or all bad (Siegel and Forero 2012). Splitting can provide part of the explanation for the dichotomisation of female partners into either the “madonna” or “whore” (Gadd and Jefferson 2007; Boonzaier 2008). Initially women are seen as ‘madonna’s but as relationships develop problems, men feel an intense betrayal by their partners. This heightens their levels of anxiety and female partners are then constructed as all bad and this enables an escalation of violence, as it provides a psychic justification for it. Splitting is a process which enables, and the consequence is used to justify, these acts of severe violence, and contributes to our understanding of how men come to kill. This occurs within a context of their overall psychological circumstances of being very insecure men and a social context that gives them particular entitlements and expectations as men. To the extent that the act of killing is construed as the ultimate mechanism of taking back control in a relationship where they felt they have lost all control over their female partner, their expectations and entitlement of being in control over women are rooted in the gender order.

Thus, psychological explanations are not sufficient to explain such murders. They provide an explanation for how a man can kill but not why their partners are the target. We have shown that the act of killing appears to be the actions of a desperate man to show his ultimate control. This suggests that social norms regarding the gender positioning of men and women are important in developing our understanding of this extreme form of violence. Gender relations legitimize men’s use of violence to assert power and control in intimate relationships (Wood and Jewkes 2001; Jewkes 2002; Wood *et al.* 2008). Violence within intimate relationships is tolerated within boundaries, particularly when there is a perceived threat to manhood (Boonzaier 2008; Wood *et al.* 2008). Yet transgressions by female partners such as infidelity, whether real or imagined, legitimize the most severe discipline and killing is considered as just punishment by these men. The act of killing therefore allows men to reaffirm this power within the relationship at a point where they felt out of control and powerless. Yet, men view themselves as lacking agency in the killing and that they are driven to kill by the actions of the women they still love. They appear to lack the emotional intelligence to appreciate the needs of their intimate partners as most women were at the point of leaving, or have left. These actions of women are construed as belittling and humiliating with men still needing the acquiescence and obedience women displayed at one point in their relationship.

In developing an understanding of intimate femicide in South Africa we have to take note of the gendered nature of the act. The narratives of these men provide insights into the connection between the act and positioning as a man in their social context and their emotional vulnerabilities which allow this misogynistic act to unfold. It is



important that we understand the act as a consequence of intimate partner violence rather than just part of general violence and homicide in South Africa. This points to a contribution to prevention in changing constructions of masculinity in South Africa that emphasize control of women by men, as well as shifting social norms of female acquiescence, which render women vulnerable.

### *Funding*

The study was funded from the South Africa Medical Research Council baseline research funds. There are no competing interests to declare.

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