COVID-19: Violent Policing of Black Men During Lockdown Regulations in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on media reports published during South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown, this article argues that violent policing of black men in South African townships was driven by racial stereotypes which depict black men as unruly, defiant, violent and aggressive. Law enforcement officials' use of violence is rooted within the social construct of hegemonic masculinities in which victims are positioned as villains, while law enforcement officials position themselves as heroes who are simply enforcing the rule of law. This article argues that the use of violence affirms law enforcement officials' sense of manhood while undermining, shaming and marginalising young black men's sense of manhood. Furthermore, the article posits that the lockdown regulations gave law enforcement officials additional power and authority, bolstered by the panic and fear associated with the risk of contracting COVID-19, to further criminalise young black men. Policing is not just a safety act but a gendered phenomenon which draws on other discourses of race and class in justifying certain acts of violence against poor, black working-class men.

Keywords*:* COVID-19, law enforcement officials, masculinities, violence, police brutality, South African politics, lockdown

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**INTRODUCTION: SOUTH AFRICA'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

On 26 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a set of strict regulations that would see
South Africa enter a state of 'lockdown' in order to curb the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus.
Measures to be enforced included:

- Prohibition of all gatherings except for funerals

- Closure of restaurants, taverns, bottle stores and other stores not selling essential goods for the
  duration of the lockdown period

- A ban on the sale, dispensing, distribution and transportation of alcohol – except in cases where
  alcohol was required for industries producing hand sanitisers, disinfectants, soap, alcohol for
  industrial use, household cleaning products, and liquor for export purposes. In addition, no special
  or events liquor licences would be considered for approval

- A ban on the sale of tobacco products, e-cigarettes and related products

- Imposition of a curfew 20:00 until 05:00 daily, except in respect of a person granted a permit to
  perform an essential or permitted service, or attending to a security or medical emergency

- A moratorium on evictions and the staying and suspension of all orders of eviction until the end of
  lockdown level 4, unless overridden by a court

- A prohibition on people leaving their homes during the lockdown period other than to access health
  services, collect social grants, attend small funerals (no more than 50 people) and shop for essential
  goods

This is not an exhaustive list of the measures undertaken, but for the purposes of this article they are
the regulations most relevant regulations for discussion. The implications of enforcing these rules had
a considerable effect on South Africa's social and economic structure, especially in poorer communities
(Broadbent, Combrink, & Smart, 2020; Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). Twenty-six years after the end of
apartheid, South Africa is, according to the World Bank's calculations, the most unequal country on
earth (Beaubien, 2018). This is compounded by the fact that, as of October 2020, South Africa had the
highest rate of COVID-19 infections in Africa and the twelfth highest in the world (Worldometer,
2020). After announcing the lockdown regulations aimed at curbing the spread of the pandemic, the
South African government deployed the army and the police to ensure that people obeyed the
regulations (BBC, 2020). However, these law enforcement officials were deployed only in township
areas, raising questions about racial profiling, stereotypes and discrimination (Trenchard, 2020). Over

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100 000 troops were deployed by the South African government, leading many to speculate that the country would come to resemble a military state (Maseko, 2020). According to a vast number of cases reported in the media, it seems that this indeed came to pass. Many images and videos were broadcast of law enforcement officials running rampant through the dusty township streets, shouting at and manhandling residents (Mahamba, 2020). Law enforcement officials targeted rule breakers, arresting an estimated 200 000 people while warning or fining many more for relatively petty infringements (Businesstech, 2020). These arrests disproportionately targeted poor black South Africans. Police have been criticised for their heavy-handedness in enforcing the rules, at times resorting to deadly force and with many accusing Police Minister Bheki Cele of implementing a 'skop, skiet en donder' approach – an Afrikaans apartheid-era police term meaning 'kick, shoot and beat people up' (Hansen, 2006). This was the approach was employed by the Afrikaner National Party government in the apartheid era as a method of completely erasing any resistance by black South Africans, and also violating their rights (Mathabane, 1986).

This article explores the violent policing of black men under the Covid-19 lockdown regulations in South Africa as well as how the constructs of gender and race are deployed by law enforcement officials attempt to justify their violent acts against poor black working-class men.

VIOLENT POLICING IN SOUTH AFRICA: CONTINUITIES OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

South Africa has a long history of violent policing under apartheid (Bruce, 2002). However, it appears that despite the transformation of law enforcement agencies post-1994, violence against young black men continues to be a major human rights problem in South Africa (Dissel, Jensen, & Roberts, 2009). Statistics released by the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) show that over 4 000 cases of torture and assault were reported against law enforcement officials between 2012 and 2019 (Kempen, 2020). These numbers show that acts of violence against civilians by law enforcement officials were common, even prior to the implementation of the lockdown regulations.

Policing generally draws on practices of hegemonic and militarised masculinities based on notions of toughness, fearlessness, bravery and willingness to use violence (Langa & Eagle, 2008; Whitehead, 2005). The interdependence of masculinity and police or military violence has been recognised by many social scientists working in the field of policing and the military (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Whitehead

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& Barrett, 1994). A central contention is that law enforcement officials often rely on a set of social practices, symbols, discourses and ideologies associated with the category of 'man' to perpetrate any form of violence or abuse (Whitehead & Barrett, 1994). Other markers, such as race and class, are also used by law enforcement officials in policing certain bodies. In popular discourse, the black man is often constructed as the perpetrator of violence and thus a figure to be feared. The police also rely on these racist stereotypes in the policing of young black men, whom they consider to be potential criminals and of whom people need to be wary as a 'threat', the implication being that they may steal, rob or break into houses. A station commander in Cape Town was quoted in Jensen's (2008, p. 128) study as saying: 'Your average law-abiding citizen lives in specific middle-class areas, whereas the problematic groups live in the townships; you can say most people in the townships are gangsters.' Given this view, it is common for law enforcement officials in South Africa to use violence against young black men, who are stereotypically seen as unruly, aggressive and violent (Jensen, 2008; Langa & Merafe, 2011).

MILITARISED ENFORCEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The violent policing and killing of black men living in South Africa's townships by law enforcement officials during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the human rights violations perpetrated by these officials (Nicolson, 2020; Seleka, 2020). For example, Petrus Miggels, a 50-year-old black man, was assaulted on the first day of level 5 lockdown after being found carrying alcohol, which was prohibited (Knoetze, 2020). Following a violent altercation with police in Ravensmead, a township in the Western Cape, he was dragged into a police vehicle. A short while later Miggels was dropped off near where he had been picked up, visibly shaken, and died within an hour (Knoetze, 2020). In another case, it is alleged that a 40-year-old black man living in Alexandra township, Collins Khosa, had beer poured over his head by South African National Defence Force (SANDF) officials after he was found drinking with his friends on Good Friday (Seleka, 2020). According to court papers, he was forced to hold his hands behind his back while being choked, kicked, punched and slammed against the wall (Seleka, 2020). The officials also used the butt of a machine gun to beat him and he died from injuries sustained due to blunt force trauma to the head (Nicolson, 2020). Finally, Sibusiso Amos, a 40-year-old black man living in Vosloorus township, was shot dead on the veranda of his house by a metro police official and a private security guard (Mahlakoana, 2020). He was alleged to be smoking near his

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gate and the law enforcement official accused him of violating lockdown regulations (Ngqakama, 2020).

SANDF members also reportedly forced people to do humiliating things, such as lie down in the mud and do push-ups and frog jumps (Makinana, 2020). Despite calls for members of the SANDF to show restraint when dealing with civilians during the ongoing national lockdown, the ANC in Parliament praised soldiers for what it called 'simple measures to discipline community members' (Makinana, 2020). This represents two pervasive features of hegemonic masculinity, as conceptualised by David and Brannon's (1976) masculinity typologies: the tenets of 'Give 'em hell' and 'No sissy stuff', both of which played out during South Africa's lockdown. The SANDF clamped down with impunity on the smallest of infractions, even sometimes simply because citizens did not listen to officers even though they were not disobeying any lockdown regulations (Makinana, 2020). Push-ups and frog jumps were intended to punish offenders and coerce them into not showing 'sissy stuff' if they could not complete the exercises. These punishments were imposed despite the health risks involved in assuming that all people possess the physical fitness to do such exercises. In addition, underlying medical conditions may be exacerbated by strenuous activity (McInnis, 2000).

A video of a 28-year-old black man from Cape Town named Bulelani Qolani was widely distributed on social media. The video shows him being dragged naked out of his shack by metro policemen who accused him and his neighbours of illegally building shacks on land belonging to the City of Cape Town (Kassen & Fisher, 2020). His removal was, however, not in line with President Cyril Ramaphosa's declaration that all evictions were prohibited during lockdown (Kassen & Fisher, 2020). Stripping someone of their dignity is a fundamental human rights issue. When Qolani was interviewed in the media about his experience of being dragged out in the public, naked, he stated that he wanted his dignity to be restored. He was quoted as saying, 'I thought they would have empathy, because if you drag a Xhosa man naked in public like that, you have killed him. By doing so, you are not only attacking me, but you are attacking all Xhosa men' (Kassen & Fisher, 2020). The construction of masculinity is overlaid with cultural practices, in this case the Xhosa cultural belief that a man who has not been to initiation school is considered a boy, regardless of his age, while a 'real' man is one who has gone to initiation school (Mgqolozana, 2009). Being seen naked in front of other men is granted under initiation rites only, and therefore given cultural significance. The experience of being seen naked was not only embarrassing to Qolani's dignity as an individual but to his whole culture as a Xhosa man.

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MALE-TO-MALE EMASCULATION AND HUMILIATION

In all the incidents described above, both the victims and the perpetrators are men. These instances of violence and abuse cannot be attributed solely to lockdown regulations. Rather, violence is used by law enforcement members as a means of instilling discipline and asserting power over other men. This links with Connell's (1995) definition of hegemonic masculinities being about having domination over other men. Men in law enforcement hold hegemony over other men, given the authority accorded them by the state to act on its behalf in enforcing the rule of law. The authority becomes gendered due to the relationship between gender and power (Connell, 1995). Therefore, the violence that law enforcement officials perpetrate highlights something significant about violence and manhood: it is through man-to-man violence that some men can demonstrate their hegemonic manhood (Whitehead, 2005). The man who is abused, tortured or killed loses his status as a man and is rendered unmanly; he is emasculated. It must have been a humiliating experience for the 50-year-old Miggels to be assaulted by law enforcement officials. Neighbours described him as a shy man who respected everyone in his community (Knoetze, 2020). The ages of his perpetrators are not known but they are more than likely to be younger than him. It is emasculating for an elderly male to be beaten up by a younger person (Whitehead, 2005), but law enforcement officials in this situation were drawing their power and authority from the positions that they occupied. The act of pouring beer over Khosa's head was to shame and humiliate him in the eyes of those who were witnessing this abusive moment. Jensen (2008, p. 129) argues that it is during these violent encounters that victims are treated as 'assholes'. This process of emasculation and humiliation can occur only if the violence or abuse is perpetrated by one male against another. Similarly, with respect to the other abuses reported in the media, victims were forced to do push-ups and frog jumps in order to humiliate and emasculate them. It is known within policing and military circles that one must withstand any pain associated with such training exercises (Faul, 2011; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Whitehead & Barrett, 1994). Those who fail to endure the pain are called derogatory names such as wimp, puss and sissy boy, all labels with a feminine connotation (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Whitehead & Barrett, 1994). Hegemonic masculinity can only be confirmed in relation to the other, confirming the view that this gender identity does not exist in isolation. It exists in the subordination of other men (Connell, 1995).

BLACK MALE-TO-MALE VIOLENCE

The vast majority of law enforcement officials in South Africa are black men (Newham, Masuku, & Dlamini, 2006). This means that a link can be drawn between notions of African masculinity and violence. It is clear that the lockdown regulations further entrenched violent policing practices. IPID reported that more than 300 cases of human rights abuses committed by law enforcement officials during this period were brought forward, including torture, assault and murder (Knoetze, 2020; Tracey-Temba, 2020). Many of the victims were young black men, while the perpetrators were mainly black male law enforcement officials. South African policing under apartheid was highly racialised, but the post-1994 era has not changed entrenched racial stereotypes on how black men are seen in relation to law and order. Ratele (2013) questions the applicability of Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity, especially in explaining male-to-male violence among black men. He argues that some black men (in this case, black male officers) may be perpetrating violence against fellow black men, but this does not mean they occupy a position of hegemony as proposed by Connell. Ratele (2013) asserts that they occupy a hegemonic position within the context of marginality. Black male officers, despite being black themselves, draw on the same stereotypes that black men are unruly, violent and aggressive. Ratele (2013) claims that the system of racism, linked with capitalist economic structures, psychologically and mentally brutalises black men, whether or not they have power. Andrew Faul's (2011) book, *Behind the Badge: Untold Stories of South African Police Service Members*, details stories of how black male officers came to join the service. Faul concludes that many did not want to be police officers, but a lack of opportunities and other career prospects due to high levels of unemployment left them with no option. In their stories, there was an element of the anger, hurt and trauma associated with their work (Faul, 2011). Violent black masculinities cannot be divorced from the history of colonialism and apartheid, which resulted in the formation of townships such as Alexandra where Collins Khoza was killed during lockdown.

Human rights activists have criticised security forces who were deployed to enforce lockdown regulations, mainly in poor black areas such as the high-density townships where high population numbers and overcrowding made it virtually impossible to self-isolate. 'COVID-19 has exposed the brutal inequality in South Africa,' said Chris Nissen, a commissioner from the South African Human Rights Commission in an online newspaper interview (Businesstech, 2020). Nissen went on to ask, 'People say all lives should matter, but what about people in townships? Don't their lives matter too?' (Businesstech, 2020). His remarks were made in the midst of worldwide marches in support of the

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Black Lives Matter movement, following the killing of George Floyd and other young African American males in the United States (Barbot, 2020; Camacho et al., 2020). Do the lives of young black men matter in South Africa? They also continue to die at the hands of law enforcement officials beyond the COVID-19 era. Why are there no marches or public condemnations of such killings or abuses? It appears that black lives matter, but they do not matter equally. The killing of 34 miners in Marikana, among them Andries Tatane and Mido Macia, remains a constant reminder of police brutality and violence post 1994. Class politics are at the centre of this violence: it is mainly poor young black men who are at risk, given their precarious socio-economic circumstances and living conditions. These violent policing masculinities have become more public during the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore important that alternative non-violent, non-sexist, and non-homophobic masculinities are promoted among law enforcement officials.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The world has become more precarious because of the coronavirus pandemic. The lockdown has already resulted in widespread job losses, while many economies worldwide are likely to face recession. This article has looked at how young black men in South Africa were policed during the lockdown period imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dynamics of this violence appear to be rooted within a hero–villain interaction, based on racist stereotypes in which young black men are perceived negatively. Men consider other men to be worthy opponents to fight or perpetrate violence against to achieve power and authority. According to Whitehead (2005), this leads to 'heroic masculinity' – the man who 'wins' the fight is accorded the status of being a 'real' man and the one who is defeated is considered weak. Dominance has to be constantly reiterated through threats or the enactment of violence against another male. This hero–villain dynamic, rooted within hegemonic masculinities, explains why male law enforcement officials perpetrate violence against young black men. Their working-class position as poor members of society exacerbate their vulnerability to these abuses by those in positions of power and authority. Most of the violence meted out for lockdown violations was perpetrated by a black police force against black citizens, prompting the question of whether institutional racism and discriminatory prejudices still inform law enforcement in post-apartheid South Africa (Bruce, 2002). Alternative non-violent, non-sexist, non-racist and non-homophobic policing masculinities need to be promoted among law enforcement officials beyond the COVID-19 era.

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