

Gender roles as local narratives in South Africa: a complexity theory perspective on gender

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July 2007

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the tension between two views of gender roles. Gender roles could be viewed as emergent properties of complex social systems, but they can also be viewed as generalised, grand narratives.

I describe a complex system that I call a *gender identity grouping* and I use an example named township gender in this paper. After describing the system in general terms according to conversations and focus groups held with people who live in townships, I highlight the complex characteristics of the system according to Cilliers (1998).

The complexity approach to gender is not a new approach, as seen in the first paragraph. I conclude this paper by examining how modernist and complex approaches are used in dealing with gender issues, by citing some examples from literature and placing our example of a complex system in that context. In an important feminist work, Patricia H. Miller and Ellin Kofsky Scholnick (2000) identified major concepts that underlie feminist perspectives relating to developmental theory, 'including the interconnectedness (versus separateness) of human experience, the contextual nature of experience and knowledge, and the understanding of gender as a social, political construction' (Zaytoun, 2006:52). These qualities echo some aspects of complexity thinking and I briefly examine the way in which gender can be considered from a complex systems perspective by touching upon this and other work.

Before I describe the system in general terms there are three ideas that need to be introduced: the socially constructed nature of gender, the notion of local narratives, and the idea of masculinities.

Gender as a social construct

A distinction is often made in feminist writing between gender and sex. Simone de Beauvoir states that 'one is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one' (De Beauvoir, 1973:301). She therefore regards gender as being constructed culturally. It is a result of the social and cultural environment in which a person participates and with which one interacts. Sex would be the biological state of maleness or femaleness. This view is widely supported (Sokal et al, 2001; Taylor, 2003; Hackney, 2005; Miller & Scholnick, 2000). Gender roles would then refer to socially prescribed behaviours that are appropriate to one's sex (Cleaver, 2002; Freedman, 1993). In this paper I examine some of the aspects of this 'construction' in terms of complexity theory. This popular fundamental standpoint of the construction of gender has been questioned in detail by Butler (1999). Other authors have questioned the validity of the separation between biological sex and socialized gender (MacInnes, 1998; El Bushra, 2000). For the purpose of this discussion I do not intend to interrogate the validity of the theory of social or cultural construction of gender; I intend to examine gender identities as complex systems. I use the definition of gender as a socially constructed human aspect as a starting point. (Miller & Scholnick, 2000).

Local discourses

I use the notion of local discourses as defined by Lyotard (Cilliers, 1998:114). Local discourses, or narratives, are to be distinguished from the broader mythic narratives that explain the past, or grand narratives that predict an ultimate outcome (Longo, 1995). In the post-modern world we have to deal with narratives that are ‘determined locally, not legitimated externally’. (Cilliers, 1998:114). It is in reference to this notion of local narratives that I locate the idea of a gender identity grouping. I will continue to motivate and discuss this concept further in the paper.

Masculinities

An important recent development of feminism is the inclusion of research and theory surrounding masculinities (Connell, 1995; Whitehead, 2001). When I refer to gender in this paper I place it in this wider field that includes masculinities theory and research. In the conclusion of the paper by I demonstrate some of the applications of complexity and post-modern theory to enriching the concept of masculinity towards the notion of masculinities (Connell, 1995).

In the system I have chosen to describe I have also practised this focus on the masculine side of gender.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SYSTEM

I use two sources to provide a tangible example of a gender identity grouping. Firstly, I use the transcriptions of focus groups I conducted in 2004 with staff members from an organization working in the field of social development in townships outside Cape Town. Secondly, I use a collection of semi-fictional sketches that represent actual events in the same context.

Talking about Gender Boxes

‘Gender Boxes’ or ‘Act like a man, Act like a woman’ is a well known and popular exercise used in workshop contexts to provoke discussions around gender roles and the messages that construct these roles (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2004). In this sample the participant numbers were *equally* male and female. Four focus groups were conducted and the total amount of people participating was 36.

Different contexts of the message ‘Act like a man’ were described to participants and they were invited to comment on the message ‘behind’ the words, for example: ‘When a young boy gets hurt and his father says to him: “Act like a man!” what does it mean?’ The same conversation was held about the message ‘Act like a woman’. Some responses from the group about what the words ‘Act like a man’ could mean are listed in Figure 1 and Table 1 below.

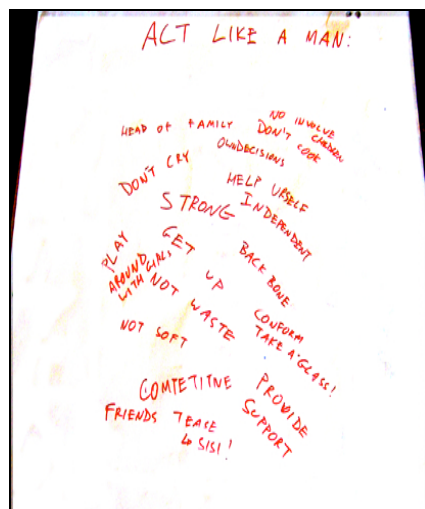


Figure 1: A flipchart sheet from the discussion groups

Table 1: Informal discussion group results, Gugulethu 2004

Act like a man	Show that men are better than women. Men don't make mistakes. Only wimps cry. Men have to be successful. Be responsible. Care and protect. You have to take charge of women. You have to take charge of the situation. Be virile. Get what you want. Have control over others. Use a gruff voice. Watch action movies.
Act like a woman	Be in the kitchen. Clean the house. Be submissive to men. Provide food. Be responsible. Know where the children are. Be tolerant. Be concerned. Don't drive a car.

I propose that messages like these are elements of a complex system called a gender identity grouping. At the same time they express the 'grand narratives' of being male or female (Cilliers, 1998:114; Whitehead, 2001:351). In this paper I shall focus on masculinities as complex, and draw on the above messages about being a man.

Descriptive Sketches

Based on the above discussions and informal conversations the following three sketches were composed. They serve as examples for the discussion to follow.

Taxi ride

A young man gets into a minibs taxi. He shifts over to allow space for an elderly woman who is carrying shopping bags. The taxi leaves and he notices the girl in a school uniform sitting on the front seat next to the taxi driver. He recognizes her from his school. As the taxi drives off he hears the lyrics of the music played over the radio in the taxi. It is a song by the rapper Eminem:

'Put Anthrax on her Tampax and slap her till she can't stand.'

(Katz, 2002)

Home and money

A young man wears the hat and jacket of an 'umagwala' proudly. He is now a man, as he has just returned from his traditional initiation into manhood. He still lives with his mother, but now that he is the man of the house she gives him the responsibility of managing the money of the house. He is unemployed, but his mother hands him all her money every time she gets paid.

Shebeen

It is winter and raining. A young man goes home from the tavern closest to his house. It is late Friday night and he has spent most of his money. He is feeling depressed, as he had hoped to use the money to buy plastic sheeting to fix his mother's house the next morning. He comes across a group of policemen who are assaulting a man. Although he knows the man is dangerous – he is a member of the Palestinians, a gang from Gugulethu – he jumps in and defends him, because they are neighbours. He gets hurt in the fight and tells his colleagues at work about the incident but refrains from reporting the matter to the police station.

I call the complex system described above 'township gender' and frame it as a *gender identity grouping*. To explain in general terms: this phrase represents in this paper the collection of messages, roles and people that constitute a particular local gender narrative. The boundaries of a gender identity grouping are shaped by a particular grouping of people, who gather for a similar purpose or activity, for example, a religious, sport or cultural gathering. The gender roles of men in a particular religion would, for example, differ radically from those outside the religion. To act like a man in a particular church you have to wear a jacket and tie. To act like a man at a rugby game could mean that you have to shout as loudly as you can and jump up and down a lot. The gender roles of these contexts are quite defined, even though one person can move between them. The behaviour of each would seem highly irregular in the context of the other, but both have a gender identity that informs them, and one person can indeed move between both in one day. Gender identity groupings are therefore not limited to one person. When one considers that each person has a unique gender identity, composed of all the gender identities in which he or she participates, a contradiction seems to emerge. How can something be present in more than one element yet not represented similarly in each? This is a valid question. I believe there is a system of gendering at work, and I aim to show its complex nature.

THE COMPLEXITY OF A GENDER IDENTITY GROUPING

In describing a gender identity grouping as a complex system I use the 10 characteristics of complexity named by Cilliers (1998:121). He describes characteristics of a complex social system in this chapter and it provides a useful frame against which to discuss gender, since gender is defined as socially constructed in this paper.

1. Complex systems consist of a large number of elements

Obvious elements in the system that constitutes gender are the people in the system. However I would go further and add another category of elements, namely gender messages. I would equate a narrative composed of a set of messages as the definition of a gender role, for example the role of the provider for a household, which has often been seen as a traditional male role. Hence the mother of the young man willingly hands over her earnings to him. To both of them in their local narrative he should be in charge of the household income. The kinds of elements that interact upon each other in the complex system of a gender identity grouping would therefore be people, and gender messages. Both of these are numerous.

2. The elements in a complex system interact dynamically

People in the system are constantly exchanging information. There is a high level of interaction between people. Just as important is the fact that there is constantly a high level of interaction between different gender messages that people transmit and receive; consequently a high level of interaction exists between the messages about gender that people carry, and this interaction is not limited or defined by individual people. For example, the young man's hesitance to report his victimisation could represent a conflict between messages or local narratives with which he interacts. In the eyes of his peers who share that particular discourse, maintaining his integrity and health by reporting the matter could conflict with the apparent loss of power ascribed to losing a physical fight. The interactions between gender messages might be called conflicts or affirmations. This distinction is important for this paper as gender messages themselves are also interactions of a kind.

3. The level of interaction is fairly rich

A barrage of images and sounds daily immerse people in gendered ideas from newspapers, radio and music, and perceptions of other people upholding the same local discourses of gender. A rich set of interactions occurs in the brief example of the taxi ride. Let us consider a potential set of interactions between different elements to be able to examine the sketch in terms of richness:

When the young man shifts over to make space for the elderly woman he could be acting on a value of respect for the elderly, and respect for women that his mother had taught him, as she acquired it when she grew up in her own family. An internalised gender message is interacting here with his external environment. The image of the girl on the front seat acts as an external gender message that has an impact on everybody who enters the taxi. The taxi driver, the young man and the elderly woman might all accept the role of the girl on the front seat as a taxi queen. In other words, it may be their perception that she exchanges sexual favours for money and attention from the driver. This perception acts upon their internalised gender messages or values. Whether they respond outwardly or not, there is an interaction.

The young man's acceptance of the picture of his sister on the seat could be further strengthened by the two external messages of the misogynistic (Katz, 2006:158) music filling the vehicle and the perception that the taxi driver fulfils a role of power since he is in control of the vehicle.

It is important to note the relationships between elements as determining factors in the gender identity of the grouping. For example the three elements named above: the girl on the front seat, the taxi driver's power and the music all relate to each other, interact with each other and affect other elements in the system such as the internalised gender messages of the people seated in the taxi.

It can therefore be said of this example that there are numerous elements that interact with each other and that these interactions are rich.

4. Interactions are non-linear

‘The social system is non-linear and asymmetric as well. The same piece of information has different effects on different individuals, and small causes can have large effects. The competitive nature of social systems is often regulated by *relations of power* ensuring an asymmetrical system of relationships’ (Cilliers, 1998:120; my italics).

This aspect of a complex system has particular importance for understanding gender identities. Using the same example of the taxi ride, the power of the taxi driver to determine the values of the local discourse within the taxi depends on his ability to control the resource of transport upon which all the passengers depend. There is a competition for resources. The interactions between internalised gender messages and the external gender messages, in other words the edges of the different local discourses, are determined by an asymmetrical distribution of access to resources and power.

This asymmetry is significant in the discussion on understanding gender as being complex. In the Overview of the Human Development Report of 1995 the statement is made that “[i]n no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men” (UNDP, 1995:2). It holds particular value for our engagement with gender and development as much of the work done on gender has particular reference to power dynamics and competition (Hackney, 2005).

5. The interactions have a fairly short range

The gender messages that interact with each other lead to the emergence of local narratives, people who interact with each other transmit or assimilate these messages. Gender messages are mostly assimilated from people close by, for example children experiencing the gender messages in their environment (Fantuzzo et al, 1991 in Peacock & Rosenbluth, 2002; Taylor, 2003), and as the messages themselves are elements in the system, they can also be seen to have a short range in that they are usually defined or

framed by a grouping of people in either a geographical area such as Khayelitsha or a topical focus such as a religion or a sport. As mentioned by Cilliers (1998:121), short-range *interaction* should not be confused with long-range *influence*. Gangsters in Khayelitsha, Cape Town and in New York, for example, like wearing oversized baseball clothes.

6. There are loops in the interconnections

In the intricate system of gender identity there are undoubtedly loops in the movement of gender messages. In other words, this could mean that a gender message could influence itself, and contribute to the local narrative, or the gender role it helps to constitute. In the example of the taxi ride the young man perceives a schoolmate as a taxi queen. His silence is a message that contributes to the local acceptance of the fact that young girls play this role, consequently strengthening the narrative of silence in the wider group of people, reinforcing the message that nothing should be said.

Cilliers (1998:121) mentions the problem of reflexivity, where it becomes impossible to define an ultimate truth as information is constantly moving throughout the system and impacting upon itself. In our discussion it could be said that gender messages are constantly moving throughout the system, feeding back upon themselves and transforming the very meaning of gender. The way Lyotard resolves this matter is to point out that it is only problematic if one aims to find a meta-narrative and that the conditions for knowledge are locally determined. In our terms one could say that if a universal definition of gender is sought, reflexivity would present a major dilemma, but gender messages are locally transmitted and are 'true' within the small local discourses in which they function (Cilliers, 1998:121).

In the last section of this paper I touch on the subject of self-reflexivity, the ability of men to reflect on themselves as men, as seen by Whitehead (2005:363) where this is defined as the awareness of self as representative of the masculine gender. The dilemma is that this might draw on the grand narrative of maleness. This dilemma raises more questions that I aim to explore then.

Another example of feedback is the thought that when this young man would one day become a taxi driver he is already socialised to have the role of taxi queen represented in the taxi he has to drive. If he does not want to engage in sex in this way, due to another internal conflicting value or gender message, he will nevertheless still have to justify to his peers who uphold the local narrative why he does not have a taxi queen. The message he contributed to creating in the past has become a part of the history of his present system and now impacts on the current interactions between people and messages.

7. Complex systems are open systems

The system I refer to as ‘township gender’ is in constant interaction with the environment in which it functions. It interacts with other gender identities and with the physical urban environment. In Cape Town it is easy to recognise the other complex gender identities that exist outside the township in terms of race and neighbourhood, for example another system that impacts this system would be the so-called coloured population that traditionally live in neighbourhoods such as Mitchell’s Plain, Manenberg and Bonteheuwel. The urban spatial framework of Cape Town has a strong role to play here as the coloured and black neighbourhoods were purposefully placed far away from the then apartheid government’s plans for white neighbourhoods.

An example of an interaction from outside the township system, assimilated under the township gender banner, is the role of gangs and gangsterism. In Cape Town gangsterism had its origin in coloured communities but it has since spread to black areas where crime is increasingly becoming organised with descriptive names of different groupings such as the Israelites and the Palestinians in Gugulethu.

Gangs have a very particular gendered identity, with great importance ascribed to power. Some of the roles are emergent from prison culture where a feminine young man might become a ‘wyfie’ to a more powerful man who cannot access sex with women (Steenberg, 2002).

This system of gendered gangsterism interacts with the systems surrounding it in a variety of ways. The inherent gender messages contained in music that is popular outside of the area of origin is a good example. The example of the music in the taxi to which the young man was listening demonstrates how gender messages travel outside the complex system in which they originated.

One will, therefore, see white teenage boys in Bellville listening to Mandoza and dressing like gangsters from Gugulethu.

8. Complex systems operate under conditions far from equilibrium

‘[T]o yearn for a state of complete equilibrium is to yearn for a sarcophagus’ (Cilliers, 1998).

In the case of gender roles, in particular, the collection and transmission of gender messages are constantly changing and interacting. The system continually adapts and grows, then feeds back upon itself. Within the post-modern condition it would therefore be fallacious to aim for true, or absolute, gender equality. The ideal of gender equality remains an ideal, but it is unattainable. All men and women can never be absolutely equal, as this equality would have to be measured against the very messages in the system that continue to change and move around dynamically, hence this absolute equality

would represent a grand or meta-narrative in the modernist sense, as described by Lyotard (Cilliers, 1998:121).

On the level of the system, however, within a local context such as a family or relationship, the meaning of equality could be constantly updated and examined and could move with the actual behaviour that would constitute equality *within that local narrative*.

In the example of the *Home and Money* sketch the changing role of the man as breadwinner in the household is highlighted. The young man might still carry the internalised socialisation that he should be the person who decides about the use of income into the house, even though he does not fulfil the role and responsibilities of the person who generates that income. Consequently, the woman who earns the income for the household hands over all the money to her son when she gets home and then becomes dependent on how he distributes this money. He is after all a real man as he has been initiated, and according to his frame of reference he is promoting equality with women.

How this local discourse would change could be exemplified by the potential for the young man and his mother to realise that there are other discourses that denote equality, and that they might renegotiate their own discourse. Different messages about gender could influence and interact with this local narrative, such as that equality will be achieved when he gets a job and contributes to the household income.

9. Complex systems have histories

Some feminists might object to the statement that complex systems have histories and they might claim that complex systems tend to have ‘her-stories’ rather than ‘his-stories’! Whichever version one uses, gender identities are as much informed by current gender messages as by traditional clusters of gender messages, some of them actively maintained by culture and others more hidden. Township gender is not new. It has developed as a contemporary gender identity by virtue of a range of elements that interact with each other as a complex system for years. It has emerged as a complex system in its own right as a result of the interaction between several complex gender identities, namely the interaction of the traditional African gender roles and messages prevalent in the pre-industrial African society with so-called western and industrial/urban concepts of gender (Lesejane, 2006).

10. Individual elements are ignorant of the behaviour of the whole system in which they are embedded

The role of the taxi queen or the role of the Palestinian does not require knowledge of the entire complex system that I call Township Gender. The assimilation and interaction of the elements occur in a local context. The young man experiences the gender messages he receives from the taxi, his home and his friends as an unconscious adjustment of his own gender values. He is not aware that he is participating in the general system and contributing to the emergent properties generated by the system. As the interactions are

multiple and non-linear, the influence of small local discourses are impossible for individual elements to comprehend. For example, the young man has contributed to the social acceptance of the role of the taxi queen, but he will not know of all the effects that the acceptance has in the wider range of systems in which his action is embedded, like the practice spreading to other areas, for example. No comprehensive perspective on the whole system of which he forms a part is available to anyone – not even to arrogant researchers.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER IDENTITY GROUPINGS AS COMPLEX

In this section I intend to examine gender with some reference to the literature on complexity thinking and postmodernism. It is by no means a comprehensive literature survey, but covers some contributions I have come across. I also include a comment on a popular book that in my view exemplifies a modernist approach to gender. Considering gender within a complexity thinking approach is not a new idea. It has been applied within the feminist literature as an alternative to the clear-cut modernist approach, sometimes called the masculine or patriarchal approach (El Bushra, 2000; Butler, 1999; Sosnoski, 1989). I proceed to highlight some examples of the application of complexity to gender and then conclude by naming some of the questions with which we are left.

But first a brief background context in terms of complexity and postmodernism. In the previous section I described gender identity groupings as complex systems. I used the characteristics of a complex system as described by Cilliers (1998:120), who examines the relationship between post-structuralism, complexity, connectionism and postmodernism. Lyotard, a writer often quoted with reference to postmodernism, both in this book and elsewhere, regards the postmodern condition as a collection of local, smaller narratives or discourses, each relevant for its local context. He distinguishes between mythic narratives that point to the past and grand narratives that aim towards an idealised future outcome (Longo, 1995). Lyotard identifies modernism as the search for the ultimate solution or grand narrative, or single idea that would explain everything and then describes postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards this grand narrative’ (Cilliers, 1998:114.) According to Lyotard, the ultimate grand narrative, or metanarrative, can be defined as ‘emancipation for all’ (Longo, 1995). If one considers these ideas as a context for the socialisation of gender roles, an interesting question arises. As mentioned above, gender is often seen as being a social construct, (Hackney, 2005; Miller & Scholnick, 2000). In the brief discussion below I explore the tension between two viewpoints on the potential origins of this construct: first the perspective that gender constitutes a grand narrative, in other words a modernist example of understanding gender, and then some literature that places gender as complex, in a post-structuralist world. I believe the perspective of local narratives in a complex system can be of some use in understanding a system like the gender identity grouping I call township gender.

Let us begin by judging a book by its cover.

Judging a book by its cover: Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus

Part of the blurb on the back cover of the book reads:

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus will show you how to:

- *build lasting, loving male-female relationships*
- *learn how to read moods and respond effectively*
- *get what you need without seeming to nag or bully*
- *communicate difficult feelings*
- *avoid the pain of arguments*
- *understand your partner, colleagues or friends better than ever before*

(Gray, 1993, my italics)

This section is not a critique on John Gray or on modernism. It would be easy to place the meta-narrative of complexity over the grand narrative Gray puts forward. I intend to highlight some modernist qualities I see represented in the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Modernism has a useful and necessary place in our society, well summarised by the comment ‘I want to fly in an aeroplane designed by a modernist, I do not want to fly in an aeroplane that is based on a postmodern approach to engineering’ (Classroom quote, Cilliers 2007).

I believe that the book represents a popular view on gender that is deeply embedded in social systems that influence people’s behaviour. I agree with Hackney (2005) that ‘[s]tereotypes have been described as the cognitive component of an attitude, prejudice the affective component, and discrimination the behavioural component’.

It is also my view that the book exemplifies stereotypes that are useful in the management of stereotypical personal relationships. It provides us with ‘the definitive guide to relationships’ and explains some of the traits ascribed to women, or Venusians, and men, or Martians (Gray, 1993). I contrast this popular approach to gender with a more complex one, placed in the postmodern context highlighted below. I hope to refrain from making value judgements about modernism against complexity. My aim is to highlight complexity, where solutions are not always at hand. The desire to provide solutions is one of the attributes Gray ascribes to men.

Chapter 2 of the book is named: *Mr Fix-It and the Home Improvement Committee*. Gray provides us with a definition of masculine identity:

A man’s sense of self is defined through his ability to achieve results.

If one puts one’s critical, postmodern, complex perspective aside for a moment and reflects on this statement, it could be surprising how accurate it is. It is certainly reassuring to have a succinct definition of the masculine sense of self. This is the ideal of

modernism: to have simple, clear explanations for wide-ranging representations, to ‘find the basic principles that govern all of nature’ (Cilliers, 1998:9).

I found that when I step out of my role as clever complexity theorist I enjoyed reading the book, a ‘definitive guide to relationships’ that describes exactly the way that men and women work. Gray essentially describes popular grand narratives of being male or being female. A valid question might be: If this is what everybody essentially believes, why not ascribe to it? We might just achieve what Lyotard puts as the ideal of modernism: ‘emancipation for all’ (Longo,1995). If one could ‘*avoid the pain of arguments*’, what would be the need to ‘enter the agonistics of the network’ (Cilliers, 1998: 116).

The book provides simple step-by-step actions that would facilitate ‘lasting and loving’ relationships (Gray 1993: page). It is an instruction manual for assembling the ideal relationship. It is easy to see how the book has been able to sell over a million copies. I believe that the sales of the book demonstrate how embedded the need for the solution is. At last we have found the solution to our complicated partners! I believe that it would be a valuable contribution to the health of any relationship if the partners could ‘build lasting, loving male-female relationships, learn how to read moods and respond effectively’ and ‘communicate difficult feelings’ (Gray 1993:4-5).

These are indeed valuable and useful contributions. As the book mentions in its introduction: ‘If you find yourself nodding your head while reading this book, saying “Yes, yes this is me you’re talking about,” then you are definitely not alone’ (Gray 1993). He goes on to admit that he is making many generalizations and acknowledges that individuals are unique. He calls the experience of men relating to some of the female aspects and vice versa ‘role reversal’ and assures the reader that ‘everything is alright’. The reader should either ignore the confusion that arises, or ‘look deeper into themselves’ (Gray, 1993:7).

I place this next to a quotation from Derrida to lead us into the discussion of a complexity thinking perspective on gender: ‘[I]f things were simple word would have gotten around’ (Cilliers, 1998:56).

In terms of complexity, gender is often viewed as a relational feature determined by relational factors (Butler, 1999; Hackney, 2005). From this perspective it is actually highly contingent and would make sense in terms of a local discourse that is not fixed into a grand narrative. One South African example of this contingency is the study of domestic violence and relationship roles in a small town called Griquatown by Waldman (2006:86). The roles and behaviour she identifies is highly contingent and reactive to the local context.

Gender identity groupings as complex systems

In all my experience passing back and forth between [being] male and female – often going out in public as both a man and a woman in one day – I rarely if ever interacted in any significant way with anyone (even store clerks) who didn't treat me and the people around me in a gender-coded way, or freeze uncomfortably when they were uncertain whether I was a man or a woman. It was the freezing that always struck me most.
(Vincent, 2006:223)

Before we examine the implications and applications of complexity to gender I would like to distinguish in brief between gender and gender roles once more. Gender is the socially constructed *attributes* of being male or female. Gender roles would refer to socially prescribed *behaviours* that are appropriate to one's sex (Cleaver, 2002, Freedman, 1993). The book *Self Made Man* by Norah Vincent chronicles her experiences when she is disguised as a man, Ned. In support of the generalizations in a book like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* we can see how her experiences underline how deeply the grand narratives of maleness and femaleness are embedded, so much so that people will 'freeze' without a relevant frame of reference within which to act (Vincent, 2006). I would equate this to the tension between the local narrative and the grand narrative. In this instance the grand narratives include gender and gender roles to constitute what Vincent calls 'gender-coded behaviour'.

The complex system and self-organisation

I define gender messages and people as the elements of the complex system I describe. I would see gender and gender roles as emerging properties of this system. According to Cilliers (1998:5) '[t]he complexity emerges as a result of the patterns of interactions between the elements.' In terms of the complex system I am describing, gender and gender roles emerge as a result of the interactions between people and their gender messages. In the taxi ride the young man shifts over and remains quiet as a result of the interaction between the messages he carries and transmits. He is fulfilling a gender role and is gendered. His experience is contingent and valid for the local narrative within which he is interacting. It might have been informed by some grand narratives, but has now been locally determined in the prolific barrage of gender messages through which he is moving. What constitutes being male or female for him changes the whole time. He was affected by what he interacted with in the taxi, and it informs the gender identity grouping in which he participates. The gender identity grouping, consisting of a large group of people and a large group of messages, consequently changes the whole time and self-organises.

I shall not discuss all the characteristics of a self-organising system here but shall match one of them to our example. I focus on the creation of the structure of the system through the interaction between the system and its environment. It is not the result of external conditions, nor is it based on some *a priori* design (Cilliers, 1998:91). The young man represents an element in the gender identity grouping that interacts with surrounding

systems. This interaction between the systems contributes to the gendering of his grouping. Katz (2006:149) uses the phrase ‘it takes a village to rape a woman’ to describe the cultural construction and systemic nature of gendered behaviour. It is an expression of the well-known feminist notion of a ‘rape culture’. One can see how this applies, in the local narrative sense, to gender roles emerging as a result of the interactions between people and gender messages that are localised. As Katz (2006) points out, the shocking part of this concept is that millions of middle-class men are complicit in maintaining and supporting the rape culture that leads to these dangerous gender roles. It also conflicts with the myth that violence against women is perpetrated by unknown strangers. In South Africa in 2004 a woman was killed every six hours, on average, *by her partner*. (Southern African Media and Gender Institute, 2004).

If we take gender roles to be locally determined by the local contingent complex systems with which we interact, it follows that we contribute to these gender roles that emerge from the gender identity groupings of which we are part, as they also impact on our roles and gender. Consequently we find ourselves in the postmodern world where the fragmentation and multiplicity of discourses now rather begs for a greater responsibility for behaviour from individuals, than a negation of responsibility. The complex systems in which we interact are self-organising – we can neither step out of them, nor deny their emerging gender roles.

In this perspective we can neither blame nor aim nostalgically at grand narratives of gender. Fukuyama (1997, in Whitehead 2001:351) states that ‘the end of grand (gendered) narratives, universal (gendered) role models and shifts in (gendered) public and private power/space, signal a new social “disorder”’. I believe that we are in a complex system of gender identity groupings.

Is there a man in the mirror?

I only described the first half of the exercise ‘gender boxes’ in the introduction of this paper. After the facilitator has listed all the messages that tell us how to act like a man, a box is drawn around them. The participants are then invited to see all those messages as one way of being a man. They are then invited to contribute more messages that would fall outside the well-known box (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Flipchart sheet from the discussion groups (box added)

This raises the issue of self-reflexivity again, in other words, to realise that one has a gender and that one acts out certain gender roles. If gender is constituted by local narratives, where is the self, and how is the self constituted? Is it free floating and ‘above the culture’, or is there no self, but merely an expression of the discursive subject as Whitehead (2001:353) puts it?

Whitehead quotes Foucault: ‘The subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group’ (Foucault, 1988:11 in Whitehead, 2001:354). To relate this point to our discussion, we may ask whether we are able to see the gender boxes in which we find ourselves. Whitehead (2001:356) also quotes Michael Kimmel as eloquently phrasing the dilemma by saying that when he looks in the mirror he sees a human being ‘...a white middle class male – gender is invisible to me because that is where *I* am privileged. I am the norm’. In our example of a complex system this would be a question of to what degree one becomes aware of one’s local interactions in the gender identity groupings with which one interacts. As mentioned in our description of a complex system, an individual element can never be aware of the whole system’s influences.

One response to this dilemma would be to acknowledge the multiplicity of roles for being valid within their local contexts. This has led to the field of Men’s Studies often being referred to as masculinities, rather than masculinity (Whitehead, 2001; Cleaver, 2002; Connell, 1995; Butler, 1999).

The questions with which we are left include this theme, of questioning the notion of self in the discursive system, and of recognising that multiple systems exist and interact with other. The tension is clear between the grand narratives of gender and the localised narratives. I conclude this paper with an example of this tension.

CONCLUSION

They all said I am a bad woman, when I went to them to complain about what he was doing to me. They are the elders, they have to look after us as a neighbourhood, but they rejected me, so I left the area.

Why did they do that?

It is my culture.

Do you support what they did?

No.

(Interview with anonymous, 2005).

Engaging with the complexity of local narratives

This is an extract from an interview with a black woman living in a township in Cape Town, reproduced with her permission. As the conversation continued, it became clear that her rejection of the elders' actions allowed her to step out of her accepted frame of reference. It gave her some perspective of the gender identity grouping with which she was interacting. She had gained a local perspective, based on her own experience, not linked to a prescribed grand narrative.

What I found surprising and encouraging about subsequent conversations with her was that this realisation had led her to embrace her culture, as she saw it, rather than reject it. In other words, she acknowledged and accepted the complex system of which she was a part, and this, according to her, had enriched her life.

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