

ABSTRACT

Background: Previous studies have not explored how black working-class men perform race, masculinity, and class when they find themselves as a gender minority in a female-dominated environment, occupying a low status job while working in a high-status setting. However, we do know that men enter a low-class, female-dominated occupations like cleaning with male privilege, and it is not constructive to immediately assume feelings of inferiority. **Aim:** The study explored the performances of race, masculinity, and class amongst black men working in a higher academic institution in Johannesburg. The study asked, how do black male cleaners construct their race, gender identity, and class while cleaning at a higher academic institution in Johannesburg? **Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 black male cleaners (ages 32-60) to pursue this inquiry. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, underpinned by Stephen Frosh's psychosocial framework, Judith Butler's notion of performativity and precarity, and Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory. **Findings:** The testimony of the male accounts showed that one way the men tried to deal with their woundedness in finding themselves in an undermined job in terms of a racial, gendered, and classist hierarchy was to point out how much they had sacrificed for the benefit of others. For example, the men complained that they had to carry heavy objects which their female co-workers cannot or would not carry, yet they were paid the same wages. One of the men had years of untreated chemical burns on his hands, while another was willing to risk workplace health and safety regulations to benefit his employer. The men felt exploited by a system that values their labour but had no regard to the consequences to their mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing. To deal with this denied pain and fear of losing one's job in an already elevated poverty-stricken and high unemployment landscape, the men attempted to reclaim their sense of dignity, respect, and self-worth by re-negotiating their work identities in such a manner as to not feel emasculated. **Implications for future research:** The study cautions future studies in black working-class masculinity to pay attention to how racial discrimination, sexual vulnerability, and conditions of precarity can create an exploitative work environment wherein these men may exhibit certain help-seeking behaviours as an attempt to gain a sense of recognition given the layers of vulnerability they face based on race, gender, and class.

Key words: black male cleaners; gendered labour; higher academic institutions; performances of class; performances of masculinity; performances of race