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# Masculinity, poverty and body image among older men in Tanzania: connecting intersectionality and Bourdieu's theory of practice

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## Abstract

Until now, the body image literature has largely ignored older men. In particular, little is known about how older men perceive and experience their ageing bodies, despite the importance of the body to men's practice of masculinity and their position within gendered hierarchies. Addressing this gap in the research, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews and ten focus group discussions (N = 60) with older men aged 60–82 years. Drawing upon the intersectionality approach and Bourdieu's theory of practice, we examined how older men with low socio-economic status give meaning to their ageing bodies in relation to ideals of masculinity. The findings suggest that body strength is vital capital for older men with low socio-economic status, and that changes in their bodies as they age affect their ability to actualise themselves as 'real' men and undermine their sense of masculinity. The inability to live up to masculine ideals left most of these men feeling inadequate and ashamed. The findings further reveal that stress caused by ageing bodies, exacerbated by older men's socio-economic conditions, constituted a threat to their survival and overall wellbeing. Interventions should take older men's perceptions of and adaptations to the ageing body into account. In addition, when designing interventions for older men, practitioners should consider the socio-economic and cultural context in which older men are embedded. Particularly important is a gender-transformative intervention that raises awareness of negative masculine norms.

**Keywords:** masculinity; intersectionality; older men; ageing body; low socio-economic status

## Introduction

The state of the body is an important marker of ageing (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2011; Calasanti and King, 2018; Thompson, 2019). Work on body image within social gerontology and feminism is marked by a focus on women's

body image (Thompson, 2019; Twigg, 2020). As a result, later-life body image research is largely 'feminised' and men are virtually absent (Twigg, 2004; Gilleard and Higgs, 2013; Sharma and Samanta, 2020; O'Neill and Ní Léime, *in press*). An ageing body is generally perceived as more challenging for women than for men, as it is assumed that women are more likely than men to lose their physical attractiveness, identity and social visibility as they age (Tulle, 2015; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016; O'Neill and Ní Léime, *in press*). The notion that masculinities are consistent over time and throughout cultures, as well as the perception that older men are genderless (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Glendenning *et al.*, 2017), contribute to the lack of attention devoted to older men's bodies and masculinity (Miller, 2016). For instance, Calasanti and King (2005: 3) argued that 'studies of masculinity neglect the old just as social gerontology avoids theorizing masculinity'. Despite recent increases in studies on masculinities in gerontology (Tulle, 2015; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016; Hurd Clarke and Lefkowich, 2018; Sharma and Samanta, 2020), there is still a dearth of studies on ageing men's bodies.

The small amount of existing research (mainly Western-based) on body image and masculinity in later life has produced complicated and contradictory results (Lodge and Umberson, 2013; Hofmeier *et al.*, 2017; Hurd Clarke and Lefkowich, 2018). While some research suggests that later in life, older men are more susceptible to cultural pressures to embody youthful masculinity (Siverskog, 2015; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016), other research suggests that older men are more appreciative of their physical health and less susceptible to cultural pressures to embody youthful masculinity (Siverskog, 2015; Hofmeier *et al.*, 2017). In various cultural settings, the practice of masculinity, as defined by socially idealised standards of what it means to be a 'man', produces a hierarchy among men. Ideal masculinity arises from practising what is agreed upon socially to be masculine in a particular context, which then enables men to occupy a certain recognisable position in a hierarchical gender system (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Twigg, 2020; Ammann and Staudacher, 2021).

Scholarly work on men and masculinities has increasingly demonstrated that gender identities are interwoven with age and socio-economic factors that have resulted in the socio-economic marginalisation of older men (Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016; King *et al.*, 2020; Sikweyiya *et al.*, 2022). Connell (2016) uses the term 'marginalised or subordinated masculinities' to refer to men whose intersecting social identities challenge their ability to fulfil what Connell refers to as 'hegemonic masculinity'. Chant (2000) uses the term 'crisis of masculinity' to explain how changes and challenges can make it hard for men, even those who used to meet standards, to fulfil dominant expectations of masculinity. In theorising about the body, Tulle (2015: 127) suggested that 'declining bodies can be disruptive, contravening cultural norms, and at the same time subjected to modalities of regulation through biomedicine and consumerism'. Calasanti (2010: 723) referred to these processes as the 'de-gendering' or the devaluation of late-life identities. Thompson (2019), on the other hand, asserted that ageing men's bodies and identities are both durable and unfinished constructions, 'ranging from never-ageing masculinities to the co-production of material and digital bodies'.

The intersections of age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation and other identity-defining factors affect how bodies are experienced or perceived

as ageing (King and Calasanti, 2013; Ojala *et al.*, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017; Sharma and Samanta, 2020). While the masculinities literature is age-blind (Riach and Cutcher, 2014; Ammann and Staudacher, 2021), the omission of intersections between the ageing body and other identity-defining factors is even more significant. The body image and masculinities literature 'has been insufficient in fully uncovering the nuances of diversity and the ways that intersectionality informs older men's lived experiences' (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko, 2011: 505). We argue that analyses of body images and gendered practices in later life should be sensitive to how these perceptions and practices are situated with respect to social location such as race, class, ethnicity and other identity-defining factors (Miller, 2016). Guided by the intersectionality approach and Bourdieu's theory of practice, this study examines how older men with low socio-economic status in Tanzania give meaning to their (ageing) bodies in relation to ideals of masculinity. The data in this article emerged from a larger qualitative study of ageing and gender identities in Tanzania.

### ***Intersections of gender, age and ethnicity in Tanzania***

Tanzania is a patriarchal society, implying that men are regarded as heads of households with vested household decision-making power (Ezer, 2006). Men are believed to have social advantages over women (Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2022). In regard to rights and privileges, men have more opportunities and rights than women in Tanzania (Ezer, 2006; Otiso, 2013). In Tanzania, normative gender roles are associated with marriage, which is in and of itself a heteronormative institution. Traditionally, the construction of masculine identities in Tanzania has been defined and enforced through male initiation rites, or Jando (Abeid *et al.*, 2014; Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2018). Through Jando, young males have traditionally carried messages about gender norms, roles, authority, and proper expression and expectations for a man (Abeid *et al.*, 2014; Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2018, 2019). In essence, the function of Jando is to reproduce the values of a culture, as it provides a cultural script that regulates gender performance (Butler, 1990). It is therefore important to examine how individuals negotiate these gendered cultural scripts later in life.

While there is promising research on the power, authority and masculinity of younger men, little is known about the lived experiences of today's older male population in Tanzania. The invisibility of older men in Tanzania also means that their experiences and concerns are marginalised. We argue that men in Tanzania are not homogenous; rather, their experiences are shaped by their social locations (Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2022), and without understanding this, we risk collapsing masculinities into one hegemonic version. Men's lives are complex, though often not analysed in this way in the context of intersectionality theory. Thompson and Langendoerfer (2016) argued that at the intersections of masculinities and age, the cultural blueprint for 'being a man' is deficient in guidelines for older men, who struggle with the pressure of traditional masculinities. Elsewhere, studies have shown that older men experience unique challenges in later life that alter the forms of masculinity they embraced at younger ages (Krekula, 2007; Thomeer, 2014). Arguably,

this is due not merely to ageing per se but to the intersection of age relations with those of gender, class, race, and sexuality in ways that alter the masculinities on which they had based so much of their privilege. (King and Calasanti, 2013: 706–707)

The basic argument we put forward in this paper is that an individual's experiences of ageing are shaped by his or her intersecting identities, including his or her socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, nationality and other socio-demographic markers (Krekula, 2007; Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016; King *et al.*, 2020; Sikweyiya *et al.*, 2022). Making any one of these dimensions visible within an analysis of intersectionality is likely to make the others visible as well. The intersectionality approach provides a useful framework for focusing on men's diverse experiences, allowing for a better understanding of men's masculinity narratives, and accounting for the fluid nature of identity embedded within specific cultural settings. Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a valuable analytical framework for analysing how men in later life give meaning to their bodies.

## Theoretical framework

### *Intersectional approaches*

Intersectionality, a concept invented by Crenshaw (1989), suggests that people have multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, context, history and the operation of structured power. A key premise of this theory is that social statuses are interlocked and have simultaneous effects (Choo and Ferree, 2010). Consequently, these 'interlocking systems of oppression' (*e.g.* patriarchy, ageism, sexism, racism and able-ism) affect people's lived experiences (Richardson and Brown, 2016; Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2022). Emphasising the intersection of gender and age, intersectionality scholars such as Collins and Bilge (2016) and Crenshaw (1989) argue that individuals are members of more than one category and can simultaneously experience advantages and disadvantages related to those different social groups.

Contemporary masculinity research shows that different intersections, such as age and gender, produce new types of masculinity, marginalisation and dominance (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017). Intersectionality provides a conceptual lens that illustrates how social structures intersect in particular contexts to either enable or hinder the agency of individuals. In essence, intersectionality exposes the concomitant privilege and/or marginalisation of men in later life (Dowd and Robertson, 2020). However, very little research has applied the theory in the context of developing countries in the global South (Calasanti, 2010; Gulbrandsen and Walsh, 2015). We argue that the voices of older men in the global South, especially in Africa, deserve special attention. Collins (2019) recently suggested a need for new metaphors to think about the interconnection of experience with systems of oppression. She invited theorists to imagine new forms of doing critical theory outside the Western linear narrative of progress that centred on intersectional goals for comprehensive social justice.

In this study, we complement intersectionality theory with Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly the concepts of capital and habitus. In essence, these two theories inform each other. While Bourdieu's theory of practice allows us to show the

intersections of each of the forms of capital older men possess, intersectionality helps us track the location of older men within the system of social stratification in their socio-economic context. We argue that individual locations can be determined by a variety of factors, such as capital (*e.g.* social capital, economic capital, cultural capital and body capital) and other identity-defining factors (*e.g.* gender, age and class). This understanding of social location allows us to examine how they inform older men's perceptions of their ageing bodies in relation to masculinity. Like age and class, gender defines one's capital and shapes individual and collective habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Skeggs, 2004).

### ***Bourdieu's theory of practice***

Fundamental to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice are the concepts of capital, habitus and field, which emphasise the simultaneous workings of both the macro- and micro-level processes involved in social action. According to Bourdieu (1986), a person's practices or acts are the result of how their habitus and capital interact with a particular field. Capital refers to real or symbolic resources related to specific fields or arenas in which a form of capital is utilised (Bourdieu, 1986). The four basic forms of capital are economic capital, symbolic capital, social capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital includes money, income and property (*i.e.* refers to the real capital of a person). Symbolic capital includes status, reputation or prestige; knowledge; titles; and power. Social capital includes social position, or the advantages of connections in networks or membership in social groups (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can take three forms: embodied (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body, such as literacy); objectified (cultural goods); and institutionalised (*e.g.* educational degrees) (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1984, 1986) suggested that social stratification is the result of the uneven distribution of four forms of capital.

According to Bourdieu (1984), the body is the primary source of capital in the realm of masculinity. The body is capable of being converted into other forms of capital that become the site of tensions that contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986; Shilling, 2003). Social location, such as classes, tends to produce distinct bodily forms that are assigned symbolic value and where physical capital is valued in parallel with class dispositions (Coles, 2009). Put simply, intersecting social locations (such as class) have an impact on the body as a marker of physical capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Shilling, 2003). Feminist scholars have argued that gender is a form of embodied cultural capital when it is converted into symbolic capital and, as such, legitimised (Skeggs, 2004). The centrality of the male body to men's masculinities means that physical capital requires critical attention.

Habitus is defined as a set of 'durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures primed to serve as structuring structures, that is, as principles that produce and organise practices and representations' (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). According to Bourdieu (1977), habitus is inscribed in the body, and an individual's relationship to the dominant culture can be seen through a variety of bodily activities, such as the way he or she walks, speaks and acts (Bourdieu, 1977; Shilling, 2003). Habitus elucidates the process by which social practices like 'masculinity' are incorporated within the body and renewed through embodied activity and competence

(Bourdieu, 1984: 22). Gender is one of the most powerful habitus that people use to regulate their conduct (Bourdieu, 2001; Skeggs, 2004). Bourdieu's concept of habitus was seen as particularly useful for this study as it explores unconscious beliefs and the internalisation of masculinity norms. He suggested that the internalisation of objective structures is often manifested in bodily form to become a materialisation of class taste.

Bourdieu (2001) asserts that habitus can be acquired formally or informally through a socialisation process. In traditional Tanzania, gender habitus (such as masculinity) is culturally acquired in a uniformed and structured way (*i.e.* through Jando). Through Jando (male initiation), young men acquire habitus from trainings, practices and experiences – the product of the internalisation of the structures of the social world (Abeid *et al.*, 2014; Rutagumirwa *et al.*, 2020). Men are expected to draw on habitus of various masculinities at their disposal to lead their lives according to circumstances. Because people's habitus can also be shaped by intersecting factors such as age, class, religion, ability and other identity-defining factors (Miller, 2016), intersectionality theory is a crucial analytical tool for comprehending these complexities.

According to Bourdieu (1984, 1986), 'a field' is a system of social locations where each individual is objectively ranked by the amount of capital (resources) they have relative to others (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Different fields have different forms of logic as to what forms of capital are valuable (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). For instance, in the field of agriculture, physical strength represents dominant versions of masculinity, and the body is valued as physical capital. The practices of an individual within a field, which are guided by habitus, are judged by criteria internal to the domain of activity (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Arguably, individuals with a high volume of valuable capital will hold power within the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As there are a multitude of fields in which masculinities operate, so too are there necessarily different versions of dominant (and subordinate) masculinities (Mutua, 2013). Ratzenböck *et al.* (2022) assert that when dominant masculinities interact with intersecting factors such as ethnicity and age, a complex matrix of masculinities is produced.

In this article, we argue that although the concept of hegemonic masculinity is central to the study of men and masculinities, it needs to be put in the context of Bourdieu's theory of practice and intersectionality theory in order to account for multiple hegemonic masculinities. In particular, it is critical to explore how men later in life navigate these gendered habitus/scripts/expectations. Bourdieu's theory of practice is criticised as being deterministic. For example, habitus is often criticised as having a tendency to be constraining and deterministic, as prioritising social reproduction above transformation (Adams, 2006). By integrating intersectionality theory with Bourdieu's theory of practice, we are able to reveal the dynamics of habitus in the construction of practices. We argue that habitus can change and be changed by the social fields we negotiate over the course of our lives (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a useful theoretical framework for exploring body image and masculinity later in life. By combining Bourdieu's theory of practice and intersectionality theory, we are able to highlight the dynamics of identity categories and their role in shaping perceptions and practices.

## Methodology

### *The study site*

This study was carried out in Tanzania (Coast Region) between November 2012 and June 2018. The Coast Region (Pwani) was selected because, when this study was being designed, Pwani was among the regions with the highest proportion of older adults in Tanzania, at 8.5 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013), slightly higher than the national average of 5.6 per cent. Pwani is located in the eastern part of mainland Tanzania and has an area of 33,539 square kilometres. Pwani borders Tanga to the north, Dar es Salaam and the Indian Ocean to the east, Lindi to the south and Morogoro to the west.

### *Ethical considerations*

This study was approved by both the Coast Region Administrative Secretary's Office in Tanzania and the University of Groningen Ethics Committee in the Netherlands. Participants were informed about the goal of the study. Participants' confidentiality was ensured using an anonymous data collection process. Before starting the interviews, we asked the participants to sign consent forms or to provide verbal consent. Most of the participants opted for verbal consent. Verbal consent was preferable due to low literacy levels among older people.

### *Recruitment strategy and sample*

After getting permission from the right institutions, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select participants. To be eligible, a man had to have been born, raised and still live in Pwani, Tanzania, and be at least 60 years old. Seventy-five participants were involved in the study. Sixty of the 75 participants took part in focus group discussions (FGDs), while the remaining 15 participants took part in in-depth interviews (IDIs). The participants were recruited with the help of the village executive officers, ward executive officers and leaders of older people's organisations. Participants were recruited once, with no overlap between focus group participants and IDIs. Most of the participants had no formal education and very few had completed higher education. While the socio-economic status of the participants varied, the majority were from poor and low-income households, typical of the research setting (for characteristics of the study participants, see Table 1).

Initially, we intended to recruit participants solely through gatekeepers such as village executive officers, ward executive officers and leaders of organisations for older adults, but following the pilot study and field visit, we learned that there were hidden and hiding populations (Westwood, 2015) – these are older men who could not be accessed through that strategy. Thus, following the field visit, pilot study and reflective process, we modified our strategy. Instead of just using gatekeepers, we placed greater emphasis on snowballing. Thus, once the the initial participants had been identified, a snowballing technique was used whereby the participants were asked to facilitate the recruitment effort by recommending others who fit the criteria for participation. We also asked interviewees to recommend other possible interviewees who could not be easily accessed in public. This proved

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Level of education	Occupation (includes those retired)	Marital status
MzeeAli	70	Urban	Primary education	Small business man	Married/polygamy
MzeeAmani	72	Urban	Secondary education	Retired unskilled manual	Married/polygamy
MzeeAyubu	68	Urban	Secondary education	Retired	Married/monogamy
MzeeBabu	68	Urban	Primary education	Other non-manual	Widower
MzeeBwaki	70	Rural	No formal education/attended Madrasa	Farmer	Divorced
MzeeChande	74	Rural	Primary education	Fisher	Married/polygamy
MzeeChilingi	69	Rural	No formal education/attended Madrasa	Farmer/fisher	Married/polygamy
MzeeKimbau	72	Urban	Primary education	Retired unskilled manual	Married/polygamy
MzeeKyondo	71	Urban	Graduate	Retired/professional higher managerial	Married/monogamy
MzeeMagari	72	Rural	No formal education	Farmer	Married/monogamy
MzeeMbwiga	75	Urban	Primary education	Former businessman	Married/monogamy
MzeeMdundo	72	Rural	Primary education	Farmer	Married/monogamy
MzeeMutoka	80	Urban	Secondary education	Retired professional lower level	Married/monogamy
MzeeNassoro	78	Rural	No formal education/attended Madrasa	Farmer	Married/polygamy
MzeeKimari	70	Rural	Vocation skills	Farmer	Widower

to be the most successful criteria for recruiting participants of low socio-economic status.

### **Data collection methods**

Data were collected primarily through FGDs and IDIs. The purpose of the FGDs in this study was to explore shared masculine norms and the perceptions of ageing bodies. The use of FGDs as a method for qualitative data collection has been deemed useful in gerontological research and cross-cultural research of elderly people (Knodel, 1995; James and Buffel, *in press*). FGDs provide rich insight into shared views, perceptions and group feelings about a phenomenon (Rutagumirwa *et al.*, 2020). FGDs were also used to identify an initial set of themes, which were then used to guide the individual interviews. A total of ten FGDs, which



consisted of groups of six participants each ( $N = 60$ ), were conducted with older men. The FGDs lasted between 90 and 125 minutes and were tape-recorded.

The moderator was in charge of leading the FGDs and asking the important questions listed in the discussion guide. The moderator also had to keep the discussion on track and make sure that everyone took part. The following were some of the focus group questions: In Tanzania, what does it mean to be a man? What are the traditional masculine norms in Tanzania? How do these expectations affect older men's perceptions of manhood and ageing bodies? The focus groups convened in places that the participants chose. Participants were divided into groups based on similar characteristics such as age (60–69, 70–79 and 80+) and marital status (married-monogamy, married-polygamy, widowed or divorced/single). This eliminated social norms and hierarchies that could have inhibited open conversation (see Table 1). This approach increased the likelihood that participants would feel comfortable with each other and would therefore contribute openly to the discussion. The small number of group participants (six per group) allowed the moderators to engage the groups effectively and explore the research topics in depth. We made sure that the common opinion had been expressed and agreed upon by all the participants. At the end of each session, the moderator summarised the main topics discussed and asked the participants to double-check that the information provided was an accurate summary of the discussion.

After conducting the FGDs and gaining insight on the norms of masculinity, a guide for IDIs was made to gather deeper information about individuals' perceptions of masculinity and ageing bodies. In total, 15 IDIs were conducted among older men. The interview guide included open-ended questions that were mostly based on the focus group's findings (*i.e.* FGD questions were re-worded to reflect individual experiences). Questions like 'How has the experience of ageing (physical change) altered your masculinity?' drove the interviews. After each interview, the researchers looked at the transcripts and wrote detailed memos about the new ideas and themes that came out of the interviews. These findings were shared with the rest of the study team, and the issues raised were further investigated in follow-up interviews with other participants. We continued to collect and analyse data by interviewing new participants until saturation was reached (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). All IDIs and FGDs were led by the first author, assisted by two qualified qualitative male researchers. The IDIs and FGDs were audio-taped (with the participants' consent), transcribed and then translated from Kiswahili to English.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to organise the data into meaningful themes and sub-themes. Following each FGD and IDI, the research team listened to the audio recordings generated to familiarise themselves with and make sense of the views presented (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). The audio files were then transcribed and processed into Atlas.ti. Each interview and focus group transcript was read, and then coding began with sentence-length phrases in the text. These codes were grouped together to create themes and were adjusted after each interview. An effort was made to move from descriptive codes to interpretive codes to identify the broader connections among older men's experiences. The research team

iteratively reviewed and revised the code book to identify the key components of the participants' experiences. These latter codes were then further distilled into three abstract analytical themes (*i.e.* Jando's masculine habitus; the older man's body capital and masculinity; and the shame of not being a real man). The study's validity was further enhanced by analysing memos.

## Findings

These findings are categorised into three analytical themes that emerged from our analysis. They are as follows: (a) Jando's masculine habitus, (b) the older man's body capital and masculinity, and (c) the shame of not being a real man.

### *Jando's masculine habitus*

A recurring theme among the majority of participants was the role of Jando (male initiation rites) in the construction of masculinity. Participants identified the Jando rite as one of the most essential procedures in the development of masculine identity. In Jando, young males learn about 'proper' masculinity as well as the roles that come with it, such as their tasks and responsibilities, and are expected to fulfil these roles throughout their lives. As one participant put it:

We learned a lot at Jando – it was the only place for young men to learn about gender norms and acquire the traits that constitute 'manhood'. For instance, in Jando, we learned that a man who can't provide for his family is an incomplete man. (Urban, FGDs)

Jando serves as a model that governs gender-normative practices in participants' cultural contexts. The fundamental function of Jando was to instil cultural values. Young men in Jando were taught about their obligations and duties as mature members of society. For example, when asked why it was so important for men to attend Jando ceremonies, the participants stated that:

It was a scandal in the past when it was revealed that a man had not passed through Jando. (Urban, FGD)

In the past, a man who did not pass through Jando was viewed as incomplete. (Rural, FGD)

There was no way for a young man to grasp so much about life skills, gender roles and sexuality without going through Jando training. (Urban FGD)

In general, the goal of scripting masculinity (through Jando) is to teach young men how to get along with other people and teach them life skills and gender issues. Participants in the FGD summarised this point by saying that:

...Jando was the greatest men's school ever!

...In Jando, there was a lot of teaching going on.

...In Jando, young men were taught what it takes to be a real man and what their responsibilities are.

Jando invariably involves male circumcision. Circumcision marks the passage from boyhood to manhood. As one participant expressed it:

I still remember the episode perfectly, even though it happened a long time ago ... Ngariba [circumciser] never used an anaesthetic because that part [the sexual organ] symbolises a man's core and shouldn't be numbed because doing so would harm a man's sexual abilities. Oh, how unbearable the pain of circumcision was ... I wanted to shout and scream, but I restrained myself after recalling what the Nyakanga had stated regarding the qualities of a man. I didn't want to embarrass my father or become a laughing stock. (MzeeChande, age 74)

Similar sentiments were expressed by a participant in the rural focus group:

The circumcision was the first and most crucial test of manhood. We had to endure far too much pain in order to prove our manhood ... we had no choice but to do so.

While the cutting of the foreskin is an important part of the circumcision ritual, it was only a small part of the overall procedure. During the teaching, the initiate often had to show that he was brave and a man to prove that he was ready and worthy to join the community as an adult.

The inductive and deductive analysis identified certain attributes (*habitus*) connected with masculinity in the cultural context of the participants. These *habitus* are learned in Jando and internalised by men in their youth gradually through habit over a long period of time to the point that they seem natural. After graduation, young men are expected to display masculine *habitus* such as *perseverance, courage, emotional control and family responsibility*. It was common for older men to compare their own manly achievements to these internalised masculine *habitus*.

Some examples of these *habitus* are as follows: 'A man is a protector and provider for his family'; 'a man is supposed to be productive'; 'a man needs to be courageous'; 'a man is supposed to be strong and tough'; 'a man is supposed to be independent, responsible and decisive'; 'A man is supposed to be 'hardworking', 'a decision-maker', 'head of the family', 'superior', 'noble', 'reserved', 'domineering' and 'brave'.

Our findings suggest that the *habitus* older men acquired from Jando at an early age were internalised and have an impact on their perceptions, expectations and the meaning they attach to their masculinity later in life, as explained in the subsequent themes.

### ***The older man's body capital and masculinity***

Another theme interwoven throughout participants' accounts was that body strength is core capital for men, especially for men with low socio-economic status. Participants' accounts show how ageing bodies affect and are affected by normative gender ideals around functionality and wellbeing. Bodies are measured according to masculinity ideals in relation to their functionality. The majority of participants lamented that:

- Ageing is the main obstacle to older men's realisation of their duties as men.
- Men's bodies are compromised by their age, but their responsibilities are still the same.
- Ageing does not excuse men from their traditional role as providers and breadwinners for their families.
- Decline in body function pushes older men into poverty.

In general, the ageing body was perceived as a barrier to older poor men's ability to actualise themselves as 'real' men, which had an impact on their everyday lives. A sense of being entangled between their past selves and their current situation was depicted when older men from low socio-economic status discussed the change in their daily schedules due to ageing and the physical pains that come with it. MzeeMagari explained his predicament as follows:

A man is the head of the family ... A man must provide for his family for people to respect him. An uneducated man like me depends entirely on the body to survive ... When I was young, my family never starved because I didn't depend on one particular source of income, like farming. Even though farming was my primary source of income, I would still venture into the woods looking for logs that could be used to build beehives in order to sell them and make money ... I would also burn charcoal for sale, and engage in many other income-generating activities ... You know, a young body possesses a lot of energy, courage and opportunities ... there are many ways to earn an income when you are young, because the young body supports whatever you do. Ageing becomes painful, especially when one's body strength is weakened ... It becomes difficult for poor men to support their families. (MzeeMagari, 72)

The findings revealed that body strength is the most essential asset for low-income men. MzeeMdundo, like the majority of research participants, is a poor farmer from rural Pwani (see Table 1). He relies solely on the strength of his body to survive. He is forced into poverty due to the weakening of his body. He explained:

In the past, I could wake up at 5.30 am. This is a normal schedule for farmers here because when you wake up early, before sunrise, you have more time to farm ... but I can no longer wake up as early. I'm suffering from severe body aches, particularly in my back and legs. I'm waking up around 7.30 am lately ... This has a significant impact on my harvest ... I used to be able to harvest 50 or more sacks of paddy per year, but now I can only manage five sacks or less per year ... *Mtaji wa masikini ni nguvu zake mwenyewe* [the body is the only capital for a poor man]. I can't afford to pay someone to farm for me ... I'm not sure where I'll find the money to pay them. Poverty now runs in my family ... It is a great pity when a man fails to provide for his family. (MzeeMdundo, 72)

MzeeNassoro, like many other older men in Pwani, believes that his socio-economic condition burdens his ageing body. He believed that his body's capital had diminished not only due to ageing but also due to his low socio-economic status. He felt that although, culturally, men own land, merely owning land is not

enough to relieve poverty among older men. Ageing bodies do not allow poor men to use land to its greatest advantage. MzeeNassoro narrates:

Throughout my life, I depended on my body to earn income. I use hand hoes to cultivate because I don't have tractors. I overstretch my body, causing it to become too weak to produce in my old age. Just like scrappers... (MzeeNassoro, 78)

The findings revealed that, while body strength is important for low-income men, the enactment of masculinity later in life is also influenced by a variety of intersecting factors, including educational background, marital status and employment history. For instance, the majority of the older men in this study were not only poor, but also lacked a good education and had no official, stable and reliable work in their youth, making them ineligible for pensions (*see Table 1*). As they get older, their bodies get weaker, so they cannot rely on them for economic stability or security or to do their male responsibilities. Even for the small number of older people who do receive a pension, it is not enough to cover their daily costs. While burdened by ageing bodies, sickness and a lack of stable income, the majority of them find it difficult to adjust to a new life (to engage in new revenue-generating activities), which pushes most of them into poverty and distress. MzeeKimbau narrated:

Soon after I retired, I started having money problems, which made it harder for me to take care of my family and pay my children's school fees. My pension is insufficient to cover even a weekly budget. So I decided to sell my assets. I had a number of plots at [name of place]. I sold them all. I sold all my property. I currently have nothing to sell. I can't even repair my house. You see, I built this house while working. Look now (showing cracks in the walls); it has large cracks in every area. There's no money for maintenance ... I don't have the strength to generate an income ... I'm just a man with a name; there's nothing left ... anything that makes me worthy of respect. (MzeeKimbau, 72)

The majority of older men in this study believed that being poor rendered them powerless and socially worthless, and that wealthy older men with economic capital are afforded more symbolic capital. Also, it was found that poverty jeopardises older men's marital stability and brings shame. Older men, particularly polygamists, and those with young wives felt the most pressure in their marriages given that failure to provide effectively for one's family was viewed as a major reason why men lost control over their wives. MzeeBwaki, for example, talked about how his wife left him because he could not meet her basic needs. This was embarrassing for him, he explained:

She left me for someone else because I couldn't offer her what she needed ... I'm making an effort, but I won't be able to meet all of their requirements [the wives] ... Without strength, it is impossible to produce a good harvest and generate enough income to feed the family, which is, without a doubt, a source of embarrassment. (MzeeBwaki, 70)

The majority of our participants drew attention to their perceived disadvantaged position as older men. They argued that the only way they could exercise power and

attain prestige was to conform to the ideals of masculinity. Their ageing bodies, on the other hand, continue to cause shame, anxiety and insecurity about the long-term viability of their social position.

### **The shame of not being a real man**

Shame at not being real men emerged as a prominent theme when participants expressed fear of not being able to fulfil their responsibilities as men. The majority believe that they have lost authority, which challenges their manhood and causes them to feel ashamed. For example, the majority of the participants perceived themselves as 'incomplete' since they could not live up to the ideal masculine characteristics and hence could not be considered real men by themselves or others. The feelings of being incomplete and anxiety were commonly highlighted when men discussed their failure to fulfil their duties (providing for the family), forcing their wives to take on all responsibilities around the home. Most of the time, shifts in roles and responsibilities (to their wives) go hand in hand with shifts in decision-making, authority and respect (symbolic capital). As a result of this sentiment, it was reported that men are more likely to suffer in silence because of the effects of shame. One participant aptly noted:

I'm ashamed to eat food bought by a woman ... But what are my options? *Nitakufa na njaa* [I will starve to death] ... By the way, what can I brag about while I'm broke and unable to provide for my family? So ... for poor men, old age is disgusting and unbearable ... You lose your authority and respect. (MzeeAyubu, 68)

The participants' testimonies underlined the discrepancy between internalised habitus and actuality (of their bodies), which was acknowledged to have consequences for their esteem and self-worth, keeping them in tension. For example, MzeeAmani said that he is losing respect and/or authority in the family and that he feels weak as a man because he cannot fulfil his responsibility as the family's provider:

For men, the situation is difficult ... *Wanaume wengi tumebaki wanaume kwa majina tu* [the majority of older men are just men by their names] ... Because we don't fulfil our responsibilities, we are no longer 'real men'. In actuality, women are in charge of their households and have assumed the role of breadwinners. This does not reflect well on us. (MzeeAmani, 72)

The majority of older men feel a loss of self-respect when their wives take on the role of breadwinner. Some men, especially those whose wives are extremely young, claim that their wives test their manhood by interfering with their control at home. They further stated that failure to provide for the family lowered the prestige he held and lessened the respect his wife had for him, which could result in her leaving. Under many circumstances, this puts older men's status, respect and authority in jeopardy. As MzeeAli stated:

When I was the sole provider, everyone in the family respected me. Whatever I said, everyone would listen. But now no one listens to me. Who would listen to

an old, penniless and sick man like me? What do I have to offer? *Mikono mitupu hailambwi!* [the literal translation of this proverb is that empty hands cannot be licked]. I can't do much; my body is weakening, and I'm feeling bad. Older men are no longer respected by their wives and other people around them. Things are changing; people will respect you only if you have money or property ... whoever has the money controls the family. Marriage is no longer respected, wives no longer respect their husbands and children no longer respect their fathers as we used to ... children pay more attention to their mother than they do to me. This is disrespectful. But of course, she is the one who leads the family now! In the olden days, things were different. A man aged with power and respect. (MzeeAli, 70)

The majority of older men routinely recognise themselves as being at risk of failing to meet gendered societal expectations. Anxieties about the negative social implications of ageing as men appeared to reinforce their vulnerabilities as heads of families. Feelings of inadequacy in failing to provide for the family and the shame that their wives are becoming breadwinners lead some of them to vices such as drinking, and some come home very late to run away from their responsibilities:

Dealing with an ageing body is challenging for men, and it's even more difficult if one is destitute. It's difficult to retain the level of respect needed to keep things going. The majority of us are stressed about money and family issues, and to cope with the stress we face on a daily basis, some turn to alcoholism or find solace in *bao* [a traditional game that involves moving seeds around eight holes]. (MzeeChande, 74)

Poverty exacerbates the negative effects of a lack of economic capital, jeopardising the wellbeing and symbolic capital of older men. Results indicate that attaining masculinity in old age is challenging for older, disadvantaged men. The pressure comes from the responsibility of providing for and caring for families while battling a deteriorating body. Poverty makes it difficult for older poor men to see themselves as valued members of their communities. Fears of being disrespected spread beyond the family to the larger community. Men who are poor are said to be treated with disdain and contempt. MzeeBabu elucidates:

A poor man like me cannot sit and converse with better-off neighbours. I don't have anything to say. What shall we discuss? They'll be discussing how they will collect rent from their houses or how many bags of coconuts they picked last year, while I'll be wondering about what I'll eat for dinner. People will avoid you if you are a destitute beggar because they are afraid you will start asking for money, if not food. As a result, you stay indoors to maintain your dignity and respect. If you go two days without eating, it's a secret that no one knows about. They'll only discover it when I'm dead. (MzeeBabu, 68)

The results also showed that for some men, especially those from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds, declines in physical abilities are compensated for by their social status (privileges such as economic capital). MzeeKyondo, for example, does not need the body's strength to embody normative masculinity due to his

economic capital (*i.e.* money, business and investments) – he continues to play his role as a provider and breadwinner – he gains respect and keeps his position (symbolic capital). He described his experience as follows:

I don't have the strength to cultivate or do business, but I honestly thank Almighty God that I haven't reached the point of asking for financial help from my children... I prepared myself well when I was energetic, so I don't have to beg ... I have a lot of investments. I am just the supervisor. I am respected in my family and community ... Things have changed. Men are no longer respected by their age ... Whenever you start asking for financial help from your wife or your children, they will start disrespecting you. I have seen this happen with my colleagues. The moment they call to ask for financial help from their children, they [the children] hang up on them. They begin to make fun of you, saying, 'Oh! Dad is now ageing badly!' They do that intentionally to evade their caring responsibilities. But if you are self-sufficient like me, they respect you; they even ask for your opinion on their affairs. (MzeeKyondo, 71)

While the majority of participants reported that as men get older, their strength and levels of activity decrease, altering the forms of masculinity they embraced at younger ages, a few claimed that age brings with it wisdom, power and authority. This authority and power that comes with age overshadows the shame that emanates from failure. For example, MzeeMutoko asserted that old age is a form of capital that offers wisdom and profound respect to older men, especially when a family grows up in a religious culture:

I can honestly say that after more than 35 years of working, feeding the family and paying the children's school fees, it does not really bother me that I am no longer the sole breadwinner. Age works to my benefit, my wife and kids still respect me as a man and as the head of the family, regardless of my financial situation. The holy book says that a man is the head of the family no matter what ... I am glad I am respected and well cared for by my wife and children despite my inability ... As I said, this has to do with how they have been raised ... If you raise them well, they will never disrespect you in your old age, even in your worst condition... (MzeeMutoka, 80)

In the same way, MzeeKimari says that getting older gave him respect. He claims that as he aged, he gained seniority, influence and power:

I feel good that I am still alive. Being old is a respect and life credit given by almighty God. Most of the people in my age group have already passed away. I must feel proud of myself ... Some people respect me for my age. The fact that I am still breathing is enough for me. I must feel proud. Reduced strength at this stage of life is a fact of life, not something to be ashamed of ... As a man grows older, he becomes wiser, and that's what's important at this age. I did what I was supposed to do when I was able-bodied... (MzeeKimari, 70)

Overall, the results indicate that men can maintain their status, power and respect (symbolic capital) by adhering to traditional masculine norms. The



age-related decline in body strength (which is the major challenge for the men in this study) means that poor older men are not able to perform their masculine roles well, e.g. as providers and breadwinners. This inability to perform masculine roles lowers older men's self-esteem, leading them to question their manhood.

## Discussion

This paper examines how older men with low socio-economic status give meaning to their (ageing) bodies in relation to ideals of masculinity. Results suggest that the 'habitus' that older men acquired and internalised through Jando cultural indoctrination continue to influence their perceptions of their bodies and masculinity in later life. This backs up Bourdieu's claim that structural (dis)advantages can be internalised into relatively durable dispositions that can be transmitted intergenerationally through socialisation and produce forms of self-blaming behaviour. Similarly, this research backs up Butler's claim that once internalised, gender traits (habitus) provide a framework or script through which individuals assign meaning to their daily lives, develop a sense of identity and organise their perceptions (Butler, 1990: 25).

In addition, the results indicate that body strength is a vital capital for older men of low socio-economic status to achieve ideal masculinity. The majority of older men have a negative perception of their ageing bodies. Their narratives were rife with body-related shame and guilt. This characterisation of the body is linked to the inability of ageing bodies to live up to men's gendered lives. Simply put, older men believe that their inability to fulfil masculine roles is connected to their bodies weakening with age. This finding confirms Bourdieu's (1984) claim that the body is an important form of capital.

Nevertheless, our findings extend Bourdieu's (1984) concept of capital, showing that the body is not only a capital by which older men of low socio-economic status embody their gendered selves but also a capital by which older men earn a living and accumulate symbolic capital. Thus, the ageing bodies not only inhibit gender performance but also jeopardise the wellbeing, economic capital and symbolic capital that men of low economic status have earned in the past. This finding is in line with earlier studies, such as that of Shilling (2003), who suggested that people's ability to transfer body capital into other resources deteriorates as they age. By incorporating Bourdieu's concept of capital and the intersectionality approach, we were able to demonstrate that as bodies age, other forms of capital, such as economic, symbolic and cultural capital, are in jeopardy. The results, in particular, show that older men's inability to fulfil their gender roles as household providers not only challenges their identities but also pushes the majority of men into poverty and distress. These findings refute Skeggs' (2004) claim that gendered capital can be used by disadvantaged agents to halt losses such as the loss of bodily ability.

Furthermore, the findings largely support Butler's (1990) assertion that gender is a performance, as we found that masculinity is given meaning through repetitive and recurrent performances. A majority of men in this study reported that they perceive themselves as failures because they are no longer expressing their gender correctly. We argue that gender performances continue to be important to older men with low socio-economic status, and that their inability to perform gender

in ways that represent real manhood generates feelings of fear, anxiety and distress, leading to feelings of low self-esteem (Butler, 1990; Rutagumirwa and Bailey, 2019). On the other hand, our findings affirm Spector-Mersel's (2006) argument that older men's struggles to embody youthful masculinity are due to the absence of distinctive cultural guidelines as to how to be an ageing man (*cf.* Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016: 137); the rules that older men followed are nuanced versions of the idealised masculinity script.

The use of intersectionality and Bourdieu's theory of practice allow for a shift away from homogenising older men's experiences. We found that the practices of masculinity in later life are the result of a complex interaction between different structures and interlocking identities. We argue that masculinity is a continually contested identity and that a man's social position and the capital at his disposal (*e.g.* body capital, economic capital and cultural capital) affect his ability to enact ideals of masculinity. These results are in line with previous studies suggesting that age, gender, class and other identity-defining factors influence how men perceive or experience their bodies as they age (King and Calasanti, 2013; Ojala *et al.*, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017; Sharma and Samanta, 2020).

Our findings further suggest that at the intersections of age, gender, class and other identities, men lose many of their privileges, putting their power, prestige and respect (symbolic capital) at risk in a patriarchal social system because they are no longer able to embody culturally legitimate masculinity. These results are consistent with earlier research which demonstrated that, at the intersections of gender, age and class, the shrinking of corporeal capital often reads into poverty in later life (HelpAge International Tanzania, 2011), aggravating the poverty of marginal and degendering identities (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Calasanti, 2010; Rutagumirwa *et al.*, 2020). The findings further reveal that gender expectations surrounding masculinity not only generate multiple disadvantages that hamper older men's processes of self-identification but also result in levels of emotional distress that threaten their wellbeing. This study appears to support Tulle's (2015) assertion that old bodies can be disruptive and contravene cultural norms, as well as feminist gerontologists' idea of 'degendering' late-life identities (Calasanti, 2010).

### Limitations and future research

In general, the findings indicate that old men's diminished wellbeing and diminished sense of manhood are a consequence of both corporeal ageing and the cumulative disadvantage of an agrarian life on bodily integrity. Their acquired habitus regarding 'manhood' is situated both in terms of income production and familial respect for having long provided a living income. One of the study's drawbacks is that the findings are based on older men from low socio-economic backgrounds who reside in rural and semi-urban areas. It is likely that these men developed an instrumental relationship with their bodies as a result of their rural or agrarian lifestyle and poverty, and that the effects of poverty may overshadow the effects of ageing. Future research should look into how men with high socio-economic status perceive their ageing bodies in connection to masculinity ideals. It is also necessary to conduct large-scale studies on the intersections of masculinity, age and socio-economic class. Future large studies should examine how the intersectionality of

class, gender (masculinities) and age (lifestage) affects the subjectivities of older men.

In Western gerontological research, the downward slope of privilege, power and influence as men age has been widely discussed, and the slope is thought to be more severe within modern societies with prevalent ageist discourses, compared to agrarian societies that witnessed old men slowly losing income-generating strength but retaining their patriarchal honour and respect within their families and on their land. Our data show otherwise: older males lose power, respect, position, prestige and authority when they fail to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Put simply, growing research in Africa indicates that many older people complain that they do not feel respected by today's youth and that they feel their authoritative position is being undermined. So, more research is needed to figure out why older men are not getting as much respect as they used to.

Our findings are based on older men, many of whom are polygamous, and who are likely to have similar levels of wealth and education (socio-economic status) (see Table 1). Low income, polygamy and the influence of a couple's age gap are likely to have outweighed masculinity's influence. Future research should focus on how men of various socio-economic and marital positions view their bodies and masculinity. Furthermore, the results cannot be generalised due to the limited sample size used in the study. Future large-scale studies should investigate whether or not ageing reduces masculinity (in agrarian societies). How can becoming old earn some men respect and status but not others?

Finally, one of the limitations of this study is that it was conducted between 2012 and 2018. However, the majority of the findings are still relevant, especially for the cohort. The current research in Tanzania indicates that the social construction of gender remains virtually unchanged and resistant to change, and gender roles continue to hold sway especially in rural areas (Badstue *et al.*, 2021; Lundh, 2022). Additionally, this study presents information that is both novel and advances current understanding of masculinity in later life in Tanzania and other countries in the global South. In this case, the paper should be considered purely on its merits, not the timing of the study. Future research should, however, seek to uncover the diversity of experiences of masculinity across generations.

## Conclusion

Although patriarchal norms seem to be in favour of men, they are destructive to men and do not always privilege them. There are many unfavourable expectations for men that are a result of patriarchy and the hegemonic masculinity that dominates society. The participants' testimonies underlined the discrepancy between internalised masculine habitus under the patriarchy system and actuality (of their ageing bodies), which was acknowledged to have consequences for older men's esteem and self-worth, keeping them in tension. These traditionally masculine values have persisted over time to establish a culture of toxic masculinity in which men become imprisoned. Thus, the findings highlight the importance of considering the cultural context in which men are embedded when studying body image, including men's internalisation of masculine norms and the cultural narrative of decline, which positions later life as a time of loss of power, authority

and prosperity. Finally, the findings have practical implications as they can potentially inform future body image interventions aimed at enhancing later-life health and wellbeing.

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