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Sexual identity, sexual relationships and risk among young people in South Africa

**M'zamani Benjamin Makhubele*,
Pumla Ntlabati and Warren Parker**

Introduction¹

Identity is a concept that involves the relation between the self and others, including attitudes, beliefs and values about what commonalities and differences exist between oneself and others.

Identity gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live... [it] gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others and to the world in which we live... [it] is most clearly defined by difference, that is, by what it is not. (Woodward 2002, 1)

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Sexual identity relates to the complexity of factors connected to sexuality, in relation to individual perceptions and social constructions of gender. Sexual identity is also linked to the repertoire of sexual practices related to the expression of sexuality.

Sexual identity in contemporary literature often devolves to a focus on non-heterosexual identities, with surprisingly little focus on the dimensions of heterosexual identity. An understanding of heterosexual sexual identity is particularly pertinent in the context of the severe HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, given that the epidemic is primarily driven by heterosexual sexual intercourse.

In Southern Africa, the HIV epidemic is classified by UNAIDS as hyperendemic and in South Africa, prevalence amongst pregnant females exceeds 30% and prevalence for males and females aged 15-49 is 16.2% (Shisana *et al.* 2005). Whilst multiple factors influence the risk of HIV infection during heterosexual intercourse including co-infection with other sexually transmitted infections, the circumcision status of males, sexual practices including anal sex, and consistent and correct condom use, the primary factor related to sexual identity has to do with having multiple and concurrent sexual partners. Expression of sexual identity and risk of HIV infection is also related to underlying socio-economic conditions such as unemployment and mobility, and socio-cultural factors including late marriage and low levels of cohabitation amongst unmarried couples (Parker *et al.* 2007).

This paper draws on qualitative data gathered nationally amongst unmarried males and females aged 20-30 exploring concepts of the individual and the social construction of sexual identity in the context of a severe HIV/AIDS epidemic².

Self esteem and peer values

The concept of self-esteem is related to an individual's sense of self worth and involves an inter-relation between individual psychological perceptions, and values and perceptions of others in one's social context. In relation to sexual identity, self-esteem is shaped by similar factors.

² Details of the methodology are described in Parker *et al.* 2007

According to Kahn (2005), abstinence, as part of the mainstream interventions to address HIV in South Africa, is informed by models that emphasise the individual and individual agency over sexual choice-making, while ignoring the social context within which individuals live. Articulation and perception of peer values influence an understanding of what is considered to be normative and appropriate sexual behaviour. In a study among young males in Mexico, Reysoo (2005) found that young people experienced strong pressure from their peers to achieve their sexual debut in order to be considered men. Anfred (2003) writes that in northern Mozambique, along with initiation rituals, young girls had to have sex to be considered adult and capable women.

In South Africa, late marriage is a key factor that results in periods of two decades or more where the majority of post-teenage young adults are not in long-term sexual relationships. Rates of marriage only increase beyond 50% among populations in their 40s. Additionally, very few young people cohabit with their sexual partners (Parker *et al.* 2007).

In our study, focused on sex amongst 20-30 year olds who are unmarried, sex is considered to be normative by both sexes, in contrast to abstinence which is seen as aberrant and associated with being seen as mad or as a fool.

The guys are full of criticism. They will say you are a fool for not having sex. You have all the nice girls but you are not sleeping with them. (Male, 23, Western Cape)

Interviewer: If people knew you were abstaining, what do you think they'd say?

Interviewee: I can think of many things they can say. Like that I am a fool, or I'll go mad. (Female, 25, Western Cape)

They will say "you are stupid" – the clever ones are the ones who are having sex. (Female, 27, Mpumalanga)

To be perceived as abstinent was also associated with negative gossip and labelling, as well as a sense of need to conform.

It is really painful when you hear all the stuff that is said about you, girls gossip so much. We really get a lot of pressure from them you know. (Male, FGD 20-30, Western Cape)

The society in which you live will give you negative labels which will lead you to wanting to show them that you are not what they think you are. Then you end up engaging in such activities, just to show them that you can propose and be accepted by a girl. (Male, 28, Mpumalanga)

For some however, it is possible for self-esteem to run counter to social norms (Kahn 2005).

Interviewer: How do people react to your decision (to abstain)?
Interviewee: They talk. People never get satisfied, and you will never satisfy people. They do not believe me, and they will never believe me. The thing is that as a person I know myself and what I live for. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

The findings of our study suggest that many young adults position themselves within perceived norms of masculinity and femininity that require one to be seen as being sexually adventurous. For some, choosing not to fit into this form of identity includes going against the tide of negative comments and labels, while steadfastly holding on to their beliefs and decisions not to engage in sexual activities. Heterosexual identity can thus be seen as incorporating normative and counter-normative constructions, within the context of heterosexual practice.

Constructs of masculinity are strongly related to the notion that male sexual identity is linked to an overwhelming need to be sexually active on a sustained basis.

I believe that there is no man who can voluntarily choose to abstain. Anyone who tells you that they are abstaining, they are lying. The truth is that they are trying to get some but are not getting any. All men will jump at an opportunity to have sex. It is only if they do not know how to present themselves to women, or because they are afraid of propositioning that they will abstain. Those like us will never abstain. (Male, FGD 20-24, Gauteng)

Promiscuity and the need for sex are presented as “involuntary” behaviours that are beyond the control of men. According to this conception, a real man would never miss an opportunity to have sex, and a

man who is not having sex is not doing that out of choice (he is lying), but out of fear of women. Fear is a concept used to denote unmanliness, as a man should be brave and not fear anything, least of all a woman. This dominant discourse of masculinity dictates that a woman should be pursued sexually, and not feared. The ability to proposition women and engage in sexual activities is rewarded with being part of the group, becoming one with the masculine whole, with a high value placed on such exploits.

Mfecane *et al.* write about the “outie” amongst men in Soweto and describe it as a hegemonic masculinity within the context of their study. They describe one of the facets of such identity as mainly characterised by competing for girls and a “constant need to prove oneself to others who share... expectations of this masculinity” (2005, 100). Hunter writes about a similar concept, known as *isoka* amongst the Zulu in KwaZulu-Natal, which describes a man who is successful with women, highlighting the value placed on men who secure girlfriends, particularly multiple girlfriends (2003).

Having many sexual partners is closely connected to notions of manhood and masculinity in our study, with resistance resulting in labels such as being a boy, or “gay”, or scared of women (*isishumane*). In contrast, having many girlfriends secures praise as being a “top dog”.

Interviewer: Can you tell us more about this idea of wanting to be popular? Do your peers expect you not to have many girlfriends?

Interviewee: Like when you do not have many girlfriends it is like you are a *moshemane* [boy]. (Male, 18, Gauteng)

They will say you are gay or something. They can mock you. (Male, 18, Gauteng)

We laugh at you, *usishumane* [scared of women]. (Male, FGD 20-30, Western Cape)

Interviewer: And if they see you with a whole lot of different girls?

Interviewee: They will say, ‘*hayi, uyinja wena* [you are a top dog]! You are the man!’ (Male, 18, Gauteng)

Such constructs are not wholly or exclusively linked to being male, and in our study we found similar comments from females. Concepts of

femininity are also linked, amongst women, to validating multiple and concurrent partner relationships.

Let us say I am in a relationship, and I have seen Peter before him; who was giving me good sex. I have to have sex with this guy because he is my boyfriend. But I will still go to Peter now and then because of the good sex that he gives me. That creates a list of boyfriends I have sex with at that time. Also to find that there is Sam as well whom I have not seen for a long time and we meet again. I will also think that I once had a good relationship with him, then we continue and also have sex with him. Because of such things you end up with up to five people that you have sex with at a given period. (Female, FGD 20-24, Gauteng)

Women in the study express a very strong sense of identity as being in control of their sexuality and determining the extent of their sexual relationships. In the context highlighted above, it is the woman who decides with whom and when to have sex. It is apparent from the quote that the woman's need for good sex is an entitlement that may, out of necessity, go hand in hand with having concurrent sexual partners. Such constructions run counter to the idea dominant in many feminist interpretations of female sexual agency among African women as being largely and inevitably determined by structural factors such as socio-economic factors operating in concert with patriarchal cultural values (Campbell, Mzaidume and Williams 1998; Schoepf 1992; Wood and Jewkes 1998; Varga 1997).

You see somebody, very sexy, tight ass, six-pack, well built and you feel you have lust for him. And you feel you just do not want to miss him. (Female, FGD 20-24, Gauteng)

Whilst some young women perceive the norms of their peers to be accepting of multiple sexual partnerships, male views of female promiscuity are disrespectful, with associations made to being "bitches" and "carriers of disease".

I think of them as bitches, because a woman, I mean as a man, when you meet a woman now and she agrees to go and have sex with

you, you wonder how many men she does that with. The same impression that she gave me the first time is the one that I am going to treat her with for the rest of her life. (Male, 21, Gauteng)

Men view women who pursue their sexual desires with suspicion. A woman who readily gives in to male sexual advances is perceived to be operating beyond the confines of male perceptions of feminine sexuality – she is thus an aberration.

Sexuality and love disconnects

Many respondents described situations where they have a “main” sexual partner and one or more “other” partners:

I can have others in the same area but they have to know that there is someone in my life. If they can't accept that then we part ways immediately. I mean I don't lack for nothing, it was more a favour I was doing for her anyway. (Male FGD, 20-30, Western Cape)

Relationships with “main” or primary partners are characterised by intimacy, affection and long-term plans.

Interviewee: We are like friends. We talk about everything and anything. There is communication and I can see that this relationship is going somewhere, unlike the other one which I can say was based on sex. Whenever we met he would like to bang. But I think the current one is going to be a long term thing.

Interviewer: Can you say you are faithful to your current boyfriend?

Interviewee: Yes I am. (Female, 23, Gauteng)

Faithfulness, however, is not a concept that is linked to fidelity. Rather, it is linked to ensuring that one's partner does not know about one's infidelity. This applies to both males and females.

As for me I have my girlfriend, the one that I spend most of my time with. I am faithful to her because even when I have other

girlfriends I do not walk around with them for her to see me. I hide the other girlfriends. But the others that I sometimes have sex with know that I have a girlfriend and I do not spend time with them. Maybe I only see them when we meet at nightclubs and take them to my room. We do not make appointments and stuff. (Male, FGD 20-30, Gauteng)

I started seeing someone else... after the baby was born. He works at the army but I told him that I have a child with someone and it was no problem. We are very tight and I'm still seeing him even now. But the thing is... I continue to see them both... none is aware of the other. (Female, 26, Eastern Cape)

In our study, relationships with “other” partners are characterised by friendships between people who enjoy each other’s physical intimacy but do not aspire to be long-term partners; rather the parties desire temporary relationships purely for sexual purposes:

The others is like, we do not even call each other. Maybe I can call one after a week or we meet at clubs and then become intimate. It is when I meet some of them in a club that I remember; oh by the way she is my chick. Then I invite her to my place. We get there, do our thing and come back. Just like that. It is like I know they are always there but I do not see them everyday. But you know they are there. Sometimes when my friends visit and want some action I refer them to the same girls. (Male, 21, Gauteng)

Sexuality and agency

The study illustrates unexpected balances in sexual agency and openness to having multiple and concurrent sexual partners in expressions of both masculine and feminine identity (see also Makhubele 1999). Both women and men actively engage in behaviours and activities that are aimed at satisfying their sexual urges, including pressurising potential sexual partners into giving in to sexual advances:

Interviewer: Other than women at *shebeen*³, women who are drunk, why do other women who are not drunk have one-night-stands?

Interviewee: It is because they are too used to sex. They like it a lot. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

Participant 1 : Sometimes you find that it is the woman who asked the man to go and have sex, simply because she is drunk.

Participant 2: But some women do that even when they are sober. Some go out to drink knowing exactly what she wants to do once she is drunk. So in that case she does not do that because she is drunk, she just drinks to make us think that what she does she does because she is drunk whereas she has planned to do it long before entering the tavern.

Participant 2: Some know that so and so, a guy they like, drinks at a certain tavern so they go there and drink and make advances towards him. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

I have had some women who pressurised me to have sex with them to prove that I like them. Sometimes you feel that you are not there and this woman pressurises you to do it to show your love. (Male, 23, Gauteng)

Women's expressions of sexuality, particularly their power to seduce men, are generally reported to be undesirable and destructive in patriarchal societies, and therefore need to be controlled (Fataneh 2003). This line of thought is influenced by the belief that women's sexuality has to be subservient to that of men – that women do not have sexual desires for their own sake and interests. It is unfortunate that the idea of women's subservient sexuality, that women have sex to satisfy men, dominates sexual and reproductive health literature to this day. This conceptualisation of women's sexuality denies women agency and invalidates women's right to sexual pleasure independent of men.

Our findings reveal that young women in South Africa see their sexual identity as linked to self-gratification, including going to places where alcohol is consumed, where they can feign drunkenness, and get people to satisfy their sexual desires. Particular meeting places – predominantly bars and *shebeens* – provide a social space where this is possible. By presenting themselves as being at a *shebeen* to drink, they downplay their intentions of finding a male partner.

³ Drinking establishment

Both men and women trade sex for economic advantage, often with people who are older than them.

You may be at a party and there's this older woman who has you "sniped" (meaning she has you marked) and you're also interested in her money, after all most guys are swayed by money. I know a case where the guy woke up on her couch and she was busy with him. He took her to ask about what she was doing she told him she'd take care of him after all. (Male, FGD 20-30, Western Cape)

Male: Age is not that important, you can have an older partner if she's monied and has a car. In fact, this also applies to women.

Facilitator: Are you saying it's common for men to get involved with older partners?

Male: It's only done for the money... (Male, FGD 20-30, Western Cape)

I think we get blinded by money and this often leads to cheating. (Female, FGD 20-30, Eastern Cape)

It is worth noting that there is very little stigma attached to this type of relationship. Wojcicki (2002) writes about the concept of *ukuphanda* (sex-for-money exchanges) and notes that women who engage in this behaviour in Soweto and Hammanskraal, South Africa, do not describe themselves as commercial sex workers, experience less stigma in society, and are considered to be engaged in this type of activity for survival purposes.

Sex-for-money exchange by males challenges the dominant notion of masculine identity that presents males as providers in sexual relationships. This was not seen as unmanly however, even in a focus group of male-only participants, where the issue was discussed extensively. This is perhaps partly linked to underlying economic conditions where unemployment is widespread, and thus masculinity is reshaped in relation to the contemporary situation people find themselves in.

With regard to transactional sex, young people in this study construct a discourse of AIDS that points to desperation as the reason for their vulnerability. Although older partners regard transactional sex as a risk for HIV infection, such behaviour is rationalised and recast as a means of survival among younger people.

Condom use is another area where certain constructions of

female agency have suggested that women are disempowered (Woods *et al.* 1998; Varga and Makubalo 1996). Such arguments are also pervasive in the literature that argues in favour of the costly development of microbicides for HIV prevention, where assumed lack of control over male condoms is seen to necessitate the development of a “female-controlled” barrier method (International Partnership for Microbicides 2005). In our study, many women were confident and assertive when it came to male condoms usage.

Interviewer: When do you use it [condoms]?

Interviewee: When I tell him that we should use it. We use it when I bring condoms and tell him that I want us to use them. (Female, 26, Mpumalanga)

Interviewer: Do men agree to use condoms?

Interviewee: With me if he does not want to use condoms he better leave me alone. Even my ex-boyfriend I used to tell him that if he does not want to use a condom he should just leave me alone and sleep. (Female, 27, Mpumalanga)

For some women, relationships were terminated to their discontent because their male partners did not want to use condoms. Examples of lack of agency amongst women who wanted their partners to use condoms were few and far between.

When asked if there is anything that they do not understand about HIV and AIDS, participants generally responded that there was nothing that they did not understand. Despite such a level of understanding, respondents engaged in risky sexual behaviours such as having multiple partners:

We know that we are committing suicide [by having multiple partners], but you may be infected even when you are faithful. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

In this context, despair and fatalism about death from HIV/AIDS plays a significant role in sexual identity. There is recognition of risk for one's own actions and, given the normative acceptability of having multiple partners amongst both sexes, a sense of inevitable risk prevails because of the actions of other partners.

Knowledge of risks associated with non-condom use does not necessarily translate into condom use for some respondents in our study. In particular, condom use was seldom sustained with main partners:

Facilitator: Which HIV prevention information is strong enough to be acted upon?

Participant: Condoms.

Facilitator: Is it easy to use condoms?

Group: Yes it is.

Facilitator: It is easy but we do not use them?

Participant: Yes we do not. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

Facilitator: I am talking here about the main one [main partner], do we use condoms with those? [Silence].

Participant 1: They are very few who use condoms with those, most of us do not condomise with our main boyfriends.

Facilitator: What HIV prevention strategies are used with the main boyfriend?

Participant 1: There is nothing.

Participant 2: Nothing.

Facilitator: Are we aware that we can get HIV because of that?

Group: Yes.

Facilitator: So what do you do about it?

Participant 3: There is nothing that we are doing about that. (Female, FGD 20-30, Mpumalanga)

Condom use and sexual pleasure are interlinked – with condoms being associated with diminished sensation and intimacy (Preston-Whyte and Zondi 1991; Abdool Karim *et al.* 1992).

Conclusions

Heterosexual sexual identity is a generally unexplored area of research, yet particularly pertinent in the context of burgeoning heterosexual HIV epidemics in many African countries. Sexuality and sexual identity are interlinked, and in a context of high rates of HIV infection, such a risk is intertwined with expressions of sexual identity; heterosexual intercourse being one of the main vectors of HIV infection.

In our analysis of heterosexual identity amongst young adults in South Africa, we find that masculine and feminine identities have many common elements. Our findings contradict prevailing discourses that position men as sexually acquisitive and dominant over women, in a context where women are positioned as largely disinterested in sex, and predominantly oriented towards monogamy and faithfulness.

We find there is a prevailing pattern of concurrent sexual partnership that is acceptable within the normative frameworks of both sexes. Underlying factors include the normalisation of sexual desire, the perceived need for sexual pleasure, and sex as a means to address other parallel needs, notably economic needs. In this context, there is a blurring of common assumptions about the severity of gender power, where it is assumed that males wield ultimate power. Instead, it is found that similar rationales, practices and levels of agency prevail between the sexes. This is also evident when it comes to male condom use, where it has been assumed that men have ultimate power to determine whether or not a condom is used.

In the present context of a severe HIV epidemic, a range of psychosocial factors related to self-esteem and sexual identity come together to work against HIV risk reduction. The challenge is to understand how these identities can be called into question with a view to mitigating risk. Simplistic concepts that focus on individual behaviour, such as “abstain, be faithful, and condomise” (also known as ABC) have little resonance in this social context, and there is no heightened understanding that having many partners, in particular concurrent partners, is a significant risk factor for HIV infection. It is in this area that sexual identities need to be reframed – and in particular in this context of high risk of HIV infections that the normative views associated with risky practices need to be challenged.

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