

Emotion as Opportunity: Reflections on Multiple Concurrent Partnerships among Young Men in South Africa

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Partner reduction has been shown to be one of the most important aspects of any programme that seeks to contain the spread of HIV. In South Africa, however, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships are a common feature of township life for young people, especially young men. Following on from Swartz & Bhana's (2009) study on young fathers this small, qualitative study comprised a series of in-depth and frank discussions about multiple concurrent sexual partnerships with a group of four young men living in Langa, Cape Town, who had been involved in the previous study of young fathers as either key informants or community recruiters. Three discussion themes emerged: the social dynamics around multiple concurrent partnerships; the reasons for their high prevalence and persistence in the face of HIV; and the emotional complexities and costs of having multiple concurrent partnerships. These conversations highlighted the fact that the literature has tended to focus on the social, historical and practical reasons for multiple concurrent partners, rather than exploring the gendered emotional aspects thereof. We suggest that a greater focus on the latter, especially among young men, will offer possibilities for effective partnership reduction programmes.

Southern Africa has been the region hardest hit by the HIV epidemic in the world. Despite a multitude of sustained prevention and intervention projects and programmes, incidence rates remain high (Rehle *et al.*, 2007). Early AIDS intervention models in Southern Africa focused on reducing HIV infection rates through encouraging behaviour change with the ABC model – abstain, be faithful, condomise. This has had limited efficacy in South Africa, where the age of sexual debut remains young (Makiwane & Mokomane, 2010), notions of faithfulness do not always correlate with monogamy (Parker, Makhubele, Ntlabati, & Connolly, 2007) and there are numerous barriers to consistent condom usage. Condoms when properly and regularly used are highly effective in limiting HIV transmission. Yet, condom usage is now widely recognised to be too erratic in practice to be the principle response to HIV infection. In countries – such as Uganda – that have successfully managed to reduce infection rates, and gained control of the epidemic, it seems

that partner reduction was the most significant role player (Hearst & Chen, 2004).

Consequently, a different approach, which focuses on partner reduction, is now recognized as the most important preventative strategy (Hearst & Chen, 2004; Shelton *et al.*, 2004). This is because multiple concurrent partnerships create sexual networks that facilitate the spread of HIV through partner overlap during initial infection times – approximately one month – when the viral load is higher. The result is prime conditions for the virus to spread. Moreover, sexual concurrency is associated with a higher number of total coital acts and less consistent condom use (Mah & Halperin, 2010), both of which facilitate the spread of the virus. Partner reduction drives are, then, an important strategy for stemming high levels of HIV incidence (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Low-Beer & Stoneburner, 2004). However, continuing high rates of multiple concurrent partnerships indicate that

these need to be more widespread, and more effective.

This paper explores possible avenues for such increased efficacy. It does this by looking at explanations for the reasons behind high prevalence levels of concurrent sexual partners in South Africa, and it looks at the overarching dynamics surrounding the practice of having multiple concurrent partnerships. We suggest that the emotional gains, the vulnerabilities and the costs of multiple concurrent partnerships – especially for and among young men – have not been sufficiently examined in relation to either the reasons for, or dynamics of, multiple concurrent partnerships and that these offer a potential avenue for future study and intervention.

A note on definition, and complexity, is required here. Researching concurrency is complicated by the fact that it takes on multiple forms (Gorbach, Stoner, & Aral, 2002; Jana, Nkambule, & Tumbo, 2008). These may be long term and fairly stable, such as in the case of polygamy, or fleeting as in the case of a single sexual act. These different forms of concurrency have very different social meanings and also diverse implications for disease transmission. Moreover, there is substantial debate in the literature as to what actually constitutes multiple concurrent partnerships. While there is broad agreement that they involve overlapping sexual relationships with different partners (Halperin & Epstein, 2008; Jana *et al.*, 2008; Parker *et al.*, 2007), the length and nature of the overlap regarded as necessary to classify partnerships as concurrent, varies. This can be problematic, particularly in quantitative work, where different measures applied to the same contexts, elicit different results (Nelson *et al.*, 2007). Reported prevalence rates of concurrency, then, are not always comparable (Mah & Halperin, 2010; Mah, 2008). A precise, comparable, definition is critical when trying to quantify the epidemiological effects of multiple concurrent partnerships, but less important in more qualitative discussions

that seek to understand the social reasons for, and relevance thereof. Thus, while Mah and Halperin's (2010) definition of multiple concurrent partnerships as overlapping sexual relationships with more than one person for one month or longer, has, recently gained traction, this research regards any overlap in sexual partners as concurrent partnerships.

Method

Swartz & Bhana (2009) undertook a detailed, qualitative study of 27 young, largely adolescent, fathers in marginalized economic context in three locations in South Africa. The resulting *Teenage Tata* study explored parenthood from the perspective of young men through in-depth voice-centred and showed that, for many of the young men involved in the research, multiple concurrent sexual partners played an important social and emotional role in their lives. This provided a clear path for further exploration, particularly as the trust relationships which had been built up during the research process provided the opportunity for frank discussions about the reasons for, dynamics around, and consequences of, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. The young men who had been involved in the *Teenage Tata* study (both as community informants and as participants) were asked whether they would be willing to discuss, and further elaborate on this issue. Four young men indicated particular interest in the project and they then shared their perspectives on multiple concurrent partners in a series of informal discussions, that took place over six months. These young men all lived in Langa, a historically "black", isiXhosa-speaking township near Cape Town. Sandiso, aged 24, was employed full time as a catering assistant, Mziwethu, 23 years, was unemployed, and Vuyo, 20, and Thembisio, were both 20 years old, and university students.

Conversations were structured to draw out these masculine voices with regards to particular aspects of multiple concurrent partnerships that had emerged in the process of conducting an in-depth review of the literature for *Teenage Tata* and in the

course of the study itself. The aim now however was for conversations rather than mere interviews to take place, with young men talking back to both the interviewer and the literature she cited, and with which they were now aware given their familiarity with the published *Teenage Tata* research report. Two key areas discussed were: (1) How did the themes in the literature on multiple concurrent partnerships resonate with their own experiences and opinions?, and (2) What did they recognize as the most important dynamics in multiple concurrent partnerships amongst young men living in township communities?

The resulting data, recorded through copious and detailed field notes, revealed intimate portrayals of these young men's experiences and perspectives. While by no means representative of all young men living in marginalized South African communities, it transferable insights regarding the experiences, practices and perceived perspectives of their peers. There are however, two limitations to this study. First, the conversations were all with young men – it therefore provides no insight into female views and experiences of multiple concurrent partnerships. This is certainly an avenue for further research. Second, its qualitative, concentrated nature disallows broad generalizations. The findings do, however, indicate interesting areas and directions for future exploration, and possible avenues for further research for effective intervention.

Results

Our results are divided into three sections. First, we explore the dynamics of multiple concurrent partnerships when they are normative. Here we explore the determinants of the acceptability of multiple concurrent partnerships and the peer pressure that drives its pervasiveness. Second, we look at the reasons for the high incidence of multiple concurrent partners – relating these young men's reflections to primary themes in the published literature. At this point we examine the explanations of culture and sexual need as determining forces, and issues relating to identity,

marginalisation and capital (both social and material). Third, we examine in more detail a strong emotionally-laden theme that emerged strongly in the conversations; that having multiple concurrent partners is often a fraught, complex and risky process.

1. Dynamics of high levels of multiple concurrent partnerships

A high level of multiple concurrent partnerships does not mean that they are, necessarily socially acceptable, or respectable (Carey, Senn, Seward, & Vanable, 2010; Carter *et al.*, 2007). Acceptability varies circumstantially and in relation to the unspoken rules that govern the practices of having multiple partners. The literature raises three areas that determine acceptability. Perhaps the most important of these is secrecy. Where concurrency is normative relationships are often patterned by the existence of a main (public) partner and additional (secret) partners serving different needs (Dunkle *et al.*, 2007). Acceptability is increased if additional relationships are sufficiently shrouded in secrecy, or largely conducted covertly (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010: 6). A second determinant of acceptability relates to gender. Having multiple concurrent partnerships is more acceptable amongst men than women (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Mavhu *et al.*, 2011). A third determinant relates to life stage – it is more acceptable, and common, for the young than the old to have multiple partners (Gorbach *et al.*, 2002; Mavhu *et al.*, 2011). Parker *et al.* (2007: 46) find that the “adoption of more stable sexual partnerships [is]... an outcome of a journey through risk, rather than a choice that is made early on in the trajectory of sexual life”.

The young men in this study also spoke of determinants of acceptability. Mziwethu directly linked secrecy and acceptability, saying, “As long as they keep it secret, it's ok.” Notably, the young men used the word “professional” in reference to those who successfully kept additional partners secret, implying practice, proficiency and perhaps something enviable about the skill it entailed. “Some hide it”, said Sandiso, “They are professionals, others don't, they

don't care". In terms of gender, they were very clear that different standards were applied to men than to women: "Girls will be called *isifebe* [slut] if they have many partners. Because a Xhosa woman is only allowed to have one partner." In terms of life stage, they described multiple concurrent partnerships as a stage to be grown out of, equating the practice with youth, and youth with immaturity. "I want to grow out of it", said Thembiso. Mziwethu described past behavior, "I was immature with no principles. Some men settle down as they mature, others don't. When you are men, you'll stop [having multiple concurrent partnerships]."

High prevalence levels and the normative nature of multiple concurrent partners for young people also create another dynamic – they decrease opportunities for critical questioning of the practice, and increase the space for peer and relationship pressure. Thembiso remarked:

[P]eer pressure always has its own way of getting to people. Because when you are young, most of the decisions that you make are influenced by your peers. You've grown up seeing people having many partners and thinking that was cool. Then you say "Eh, I would like to be like that person one day because he has so many partners". People talk about it being cool. You watch television and it's a cool thing. Media has a major role to play in people having many partners. So, it's very hard.

Thembiso further explained that this made having multiple concurrent partnerships difficult to avoid:

Most of the people who don't live in the location, when you say it is hard to stay out of these things, they say you are just making excuses. But once you're there, you know, you understand, it's very difficult... the mentality is 'be cool, do what other people are doing'.

The young men explained that another reason having multiple concurrent partnerships was difficult to avoid was because, on the whole, sex was an expectation of dating relationships. Vuyo, speaking from the perspective of someone who, as a student at a local university, had access to alternative ways of conducting dating relationships, that excluded sex, said:

We're showing [township girls] a new style. But I don't know if they are too much in the location or what, but they complain that we just went for a movie and we did not have sex. So now we give them what they want: sex only.

It is clear, then, that peer pressure and relationship expectations encourage and support multiple concurrent partnerships. In turn, the normative nature of concurrent partnerships reinforces the possibilities for peer pressure, creating a feedback cycle. But what other reasons do these young men offer for high levels of polyamorousness.

2. Reasons for high prevalence

One of the most pervasive reasons given by the young men for having multiple concurrent partnerships was that the practice was simply part of township life. The *Teenage Tata* study shows that, indeed, in Langa, where the young men lived, having multiple concurrent partnerships was prevalent to the degree of being normative (Swart & Bhana, 2009). This section explores the possible reasons, as outlined in the literature and by the young men themselves, for this commonality.

Culture and sexual needs

Leclerc-Madlala illustrates that a variety of cultural scripts "affirm and lend cultural legitimacy" to the practice of multiple concurrent partnerships (2009:103). In her utilisation 'scripts' are not prescriptive, but rather outline expected sexual agendas. Other authors, similarly, emphasise that cultural norms and gender identities play an important role in shaping the

prevalence, and acceptance of multiple concurrent partnerships (Harrison, O'Sullivan, Hoffman, Dolezal & Morrell 2006; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Eaton *et al*, 2003; Hunter, 2004). However, while culture is easily called upon to justify behaviour as if it has an immutable logic, the ways in which gender roles are formulated and shape sexual practices is a context dependent "dynamic and ever-changing, rather than linear, process" (Harrison *et al*, 2006: 712). Hunter (2006: 391) illustrates this well, by tracing the historical development of *isoka* masculinity, where *isoka* is a man with multiple sexual partners. He illustrates how multiple concurrent partnerships as a marker of masculinity have emerged from conditions of capitalism, the migrant labour system, Christianity, as well as men's' related growing inability to prove their manhood through historical means such as marriage, and being the head of an independent household. Thus, Hunter suggests that while the existence of multiple partners are frequently presented as a seamless part of Zulu culture (and conflated with polygamy) they are, in fact, the exaggerated aspect of a previous cultural practice.

Swartz & Bhana (2009) illustrate that cultural norms and expectations certainly have a large impact on the ways in which young fathers interact (or do not interact) with their children, but in this initial study, cultural norms did not emerge as a particularly strong reason for multiple concurrent partnerships. Rather, the young men referred to history, as synonymous with cultural norms, as an underlying driver for the acceptability of multiple concurrent partnerships. Mziwethu explained this explicitly, saying, "In the olden days you could have more than one wife. It also comes from the olden days for guys to cheat. Some guys, it's like they're still living in the olden days."

The young men, however, hinged their own practice of having multiple partners on the perceived existence of men's uncontrollable sexual urges. Male sexual needs were described as so great, that multiple partners were a necessary precaution against the possibility of not being able to fulfill them (see also Swartz & Bhana, 2009,

and Shelton, 2009). Thus Vuyo said, "I go back to her and use her as far as my hormones are concerned. She is my back-up plan-" implying a biological drive beyond his control. Thembisio, however, acknowledged agency, saying, "You have a choice. It's convenient. When one doesn't have time, there is another one" and, "[Different] girls can satisfy you in different ways sexually".

Identity, Marginalisation and Capital

The context of social marginalisation is one that underscores much of the theory in the literature explaining the high rates of multiple concurrent partnerships. It is in this context that the potential gains in capital, both social and material, provided by multiple sexual partners are seen as driving forces. There are, however, gendered differences in understandings of the reasons for having multiple concurrent partnerships.

Transactional sex – sex for material or financial gain – is seen to be one of the strongest motivators for women to engage in multiple concurrent partnerships (Hunter, 2002; Jana *et al.*, 2008; Mah, 2008). Unlike sex work or prostitution, the concept of transactional sex does not imply a direct, contractual sex-for-money exchange. However, material gains – for survival or consumption purposes – are the primary drive behind the relationship. Transactional sex is of particular concern because, as a wide body of research shows, it is linked to the spread of the HIV epidemic. (See Dunkle *et al.*, 2007 and Luke, 2003 for overviews.) Transactional sex is also a concern because the women involved are likely to have limited capacity to negotiate their sexual relationships due to the power dynamic set up by the flow of gifts (Luke, 2003). Yet, a number of authors point out that women are exercising agency in forming the relationships they establish for their own gain (Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

The young men in this study did, in fact, refer to financial and material gains as a reason, particularly for women, to have multiple partners. Sandiso, referred to this interaction as "support": "(He) is supporting

her with money. I am supporting her with taking her to clubs.” And Themviso, explaining why girls have more than one partner said, “She wants to balance everything [financially], so she takes all of us in.” They also, however, acknowledged that men might have multiple partners for precisely the same reasons, particularly when the relationship is between a young man, and an older woman.

On the whole, the literature tends to emphasize hegemonic or dominant displays of masculinity, and social identity gains as the primary reason for men to be involved in multiple concurrent partnerships. Jewkes and Morrell (2010) illustrate that a history of dispossession and marginalisation has undermined men’s achievement of personal and social recognition through material and social success. In the face of this incapacity, what was previously a youthful past time - securing multiple sexual partners - has taken on exaggerated importance in illustrating masculinity and multiple partners serve the role of validating the individual’s worth. Swartz & Bhana (2009) also found this, when they relate the poignant comment of one young father who says of multiple partners, “Being poor, I don’t have possessions but I can possess lots of women” (2009: 74). In that study, young men held up either being a “*gangsta*” (involved in criminal activity) or being “*pleyas*” (having multiple female partners) as the two options available to them. Similarly, in this study, Sandiso explained:

White people have money and can compete about who’s got the best car. We don’t have that, we can have a competition about ‘I can have more girls than you’. When you’re walking with a different girl every day, people think you’re cool. You’re a role model to young people.

In seeking to answer the critical question of why large sexual networks continue to exist despite the biological risk of HIV, Thornton (2009) argues that the gains of multiple concurrent partnerships need to be understood as related to social capital. He suggests that people build sexual networks

not because they do not know about HIV, but because they are seeking to limit their social risk by building social capital. He suggests that involvement in sexual networks may, in fact, be a rational response to instability, as people create webs of social capital, that are all the more powerful due to the secrecy that surrounds them. As such, Thornton looks at the social, rather than material, value of multiple partners. In doing this he shifts analytic attention away from the notion of higher-risk sexual practices of individuals towards consideration for the structure and dynamics of social and sexual networks at a societal level. In this Thornton shows that focus on high-risk individuals misses the fact that the most vulnerable are often those who are at the edges of sexual networks, themselves having few sexual partners. Moreover, he points out that people might be prioritizing other risks, and that the risks of multiple partners (and non condom usage) are apparently offset by the social gain, thus “the risk of not wearing a condom is offset by the gain in social capital of appearing to be (or actually being) serious, committed to, and fully involved in a social relationship” (2009: 417). Thus Thornton argues that people prioritise “risk to relationship” over “risk of infection”. This suggests that there is not enough research, or emphasis on the sociality of multiple concurrent partnerships. Thornton’s argument, then, relates to the balancing of possible negative social outcomes.

Similarly, in this study, the young men indicated that there were numerous hazards involved in having multiple concurrent partnerships (discussed below), but these were not as hazardous as not having a partner at all. We discuss these hazards below, in our exploration of the complexities and risks of having multiple concurrent partnerships.

3. Complexities and risks of having multiple concurrent partnerships

Thus far we have explored the fact that while multiple concurrent partnerships may be normative, their acceptability is subject to a number of criteria. We have also examined the primary reasons for the

existence of multiple concurrent partnerships. These have largely been in terms of the social and material benefits they bring, and the risks they mitigate. The literature engages with these issues extensively. In this study, however, the young men repeatedly brought – unprompted – other, less frequently discussed, issues into the conversation. These related primarily to emotional vulnerability and ‘incompetence’, and the everyday personal risks encountered by having multiple concurrent partnerships.

These topics are far less extensively dealt with in the literature. Swartz & Bhana (2009) reflect on the fact that the emotional need for multiple sexual partners could be a psychological response to a lack of early childhood attention, possibly leading to insecure attachment styles, hence the desire for multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Though they do not argue this conclusively, their initial suggestion of multiple concurrent partnerships as a consequence of emotional need is one that is supported elsewhere. Parker *et al.* (2007: 27) argues that “having concurrent sexual partners provides a sense of confidence and provides a supportive framework that ensures that emotional support is always available. In particular, having another partner provides a cushion of support, should a current relationship end”.

The young men clearly recognised that involving themselves in multiple concurrent partnerships as a response to emotional vulnerability. This was expressed in various ways. For example Mziwethu explained:

You don’t want to lose the ones you have. So keep one and add another one. If one disappoints you, you move onto the next. A table has four legs. If one leg falls, three legs can still hold the table up.

This metaphor indicates the degree to which additional partners are seen as a requirement that bolsters and supports the individual in the case of being emotionally let down, or disappointed. Thembiso concurs when he says: “Girls cheat. But if you have many partners and someone tells

you I saw your girl with another guy, you don’t mind, because she’s not yours.”

At the same time, these young men argued that multiple relationships were maintained (rather than sought) because of the discomforts involved in breaking up. Such emotional ‘incompetence’ was referred to a number of times. “Some of the girls I’m sleeping with think they are my girlfriend but they are not. We don’t have the guts to tell them it’s over. That’s the main thing that leads us guys to having multiple sex partners,” said Thembiso. “I do mind about hurting her, but the most thing that makes me not want to tell her, is that I don’t want to lose her,” said Mziwethu. Frequently these young men spoke of maintaining a relationship due to because of the jealousy that a partner is receiving attention elsewhere: “You get possessive, jealous, so you want to keep her.” Mziwethu explained. The informants also spoke about using multiple concurrent partnerships as a form of revenge for infidelity, but added that this was a response that young women used more than young men. It seems, then, that multiple concurrent partnerships should, perhaps, be viewed partly as a consequence of a sense of emotional vulnerability, and emotional incompetence to deal with the tricky aspects of intimate relationships.

Swartz & Bhana’s (2009) study is an in depth exploration of the one of the most obvious consequences of multiple sexual partnerships at an early age – early parenthood and possible uncertain paternity. This was confirmed as one of the risks by the young men, particularly Thembiso:

What if the second option got pregnant? That can ruin everything because in most cases you get forced to marry her because you impregnated her. Which is part of the reason why there is high divorce - because you marry the wrong person for the wrong reason.

A further risk the young men spoke of included the risk of losing the primary partner. “When my bank book finds out about *amakhwapeni* [secret partners] then your future with her is vanished,” said Sandiso. Being found out also carried the

risk of revenge infidelities, “She’ll try to do the same thing that you do. She’ll try to make you feel that pain,” concluded Sandiso.

Discussion

The young men in this study were engaged and passionate in the discussions that took place over the course of six months. Their responses were emotional, and many discussions were heated and left all participants exhausted. One of Thembiso’s concluding comments spoke of multiple partners as being ‘an easier life’ when he says: “When we grow up we have a dream girl, dream car, dream job, dream life. [The] first disappointment makes you angry and you give up on committing to girls. And you adopt an easier life”. Yet, as he and the other young men have so coherently explained, this ‘easy life’ of multiple concurrent partnerships is by no accounts easy. Instead it is wracked with accusations of immaturity, being trapped by township style, and the constant emotional stress of ‘managing’ the fraught relationships. In summing up these young people’s responses to the topic, and again in conversation with the dominant literature, we identified three primary areas of emotional tension in young men’s responses to the question of multiple concurrent partnerships. These tensions include how obtaining social kudos requires public displays of multiple partnerships but acceptability thereof requires secrecy; how sex indicates, but undermines attachment; and how multiple concurrent partnerships act as a buffer to singlehood should the primary relationship fail, *yet also* provides a reason for that relationship to fail. Each tension offers an opportunity in which the very emotion undergirding the tension provides spaces for intervention. Each will be discussed in turn.

1. Public display for social kudos versus acceptability requiring secrecy

A primary tension is between the social kudos multiple concurrent partnerships provide, and the need for the secrecy thereof. Parker *et al* (2007: 6) found that, where multiple concurrent partners are pervasive, the concept of “faithful” or

“faithfulness” is adapted to mean “keeping infidelity secret”. The primary partner must have the sense of being the sole partner, and appear to be so under certain circumstances. Moreover, as described above, social acceptability of multiple concurrent partners is partly dependent on keeping subsidiary partners covert. Yet at the same time, hegemonic masculinities require the public display of multiple partnerships, for it is the pervasive social knowledge of men’s multiple partnerships that provides status.

Here we have a tension that requires the presentation of different social faces in different realms. Such dissembling also creates a complex situation relating to condom usage. Condoms act as a currency of trust – they indicate that a partner is the sole partner. Requesting condom use with a primary partner, therefore, indicates that there are additional partners. This undermines condom use and in seeking to decrease their social and emotional vulnerability, those not using condoms increase the physical vulnerability of all involved in a sexual network to HIV infection. Young men are not unaware of the emotional exhaustion this tension creates. Interventions that offer emotional respite in addition to sexual safety may obtain traction here.

2. Sex indicates, but undermines, attachment

A second tension lies in the complex, and often contradictory, role sex plays in young men’s lives. Sex, as these conversations revealed, has a huge emotional currency. It indicates an attachment, and is, as such is sought out, and seen to be a requirement of dating relationships. Yet its very ubiquity undermines its capacity to signal attachment. The young men spoke this about, with regret. “I end up not knowing myself. Like what is the meaning of love”, said Sandiso; and, “I’m not giving any love to any of them”, said Thembiso. As such, the very importance placed on the presence of sex in relationships undermines the role sex is said to play and this causes emotional discomfort. Arguably here, interventions that speak to identity and

attachment provide opportunities for young men to access more emotionally fulfilling sexual relationships.

3. *Multiple concurrent partnerships act as a buffer to singlehood should the primary relationship fail, and provide a reason for that relationship to fail.*

Social and economic marginalization and disruption have resulted in a context where sexual relationships have exaggerated importance - both material and social. Thus sexual relationships are used for identity formation, and for access to capital, both material and social.

The risk of not having a relationship is experienced to be so great that individuals avoid exposing themselves to this by having additional partners who could, it seems, be shifted into the role of primary partner should the present one leave. The sense for many young people, then, is that being single is to be avoided at all costs. The young men in Swartz & Bhana's (2009) study referred to additional partners as "spare wheels", and, in this study the young men spoke of additional "table legs" (necessary but only providing extra support). In contrast, main partners were referred to as "bank books" - there for stability. The irony is that multiple concurrent sexual partners place the primary relationship (which is idealized as a monogamous relationship) at risk if the main partner from whom it should be secret discovers it.

The informal, structured conversations these young men participated in were not geared towards discussing the emotional risks and complexities of multiple concurrent partnerships, but these repeatedly came to the fore. We suggest that this is because multiple concurrent partnerships require continual social dodging and weaving, as different presentations of self are required in different social relationships. These tensions are, therefore, an everyday reality for those who have multiple concurrent partnerships.

In contrast HIV did not feature as a large part of the discussion with the young men

in this study - rather, it was dismissed. "People hear about it (AIDS) but don't keep it in mind. They realise AIDS is really there when they start having it," said Mziwethu. It is clear that the risk of HIV contraction is not sufficiently felt in an everyday way to encourage either consistent condom use, or partner reduction for it is difficult to internalize the risk. Consequently, the young men were clear that they did not feel that further HIV knowledge dissemination would have any substantial impact on the presence of multiple concurrent partners, no matter how effectively that information was delivered.

A number of scholars emphasise that alternative approaches to HIV education are necessary for partner reduction. Jewkes and Morrell emphasise the value of tackling HIV through gender identities, rather than individual sexual behaviours arguing that in "real terms, this means focusing attention on building more gender-equitable and caring masculinities, and less acquiescent femininities" (2010: 7). Jana *et al.* (2008) suggest that education about how to communicate about sex with partners without fear of negative reactions is an important intervention in cultivating more sexually satisfying primary relationships. Additionally, this study suggests that, perhaps, partner reduction strategies could, and should, focus on the everyday, lived experiences and difficulties experienced by young people in relation to multiple concurrent partners. These are pressing concerns for those with multiple concurrent partners and, as such, provide real issues around which partner reduction programmes and skills training can be built.

Conclusion

With partner reduction playing a critical role in the reduction and control of HIV infection rates, it is essential that efforts at encouraging it are effective. As the young men in this study clearly stated - merely being offered more knowledge about HIV is not the answer. Much of the existing research into multiple concurrent partners has focused on elucidating the reasons for the high prevalence levels of HIV. While we focus on these reasons and explanations -

the intertwined issues of marginalisation, poverty, culture and identity make it easy for the problem of partner reduction to seem insurmountable. This is particularly the case when we regard sex as necessary for transactional processes – be they social or material – in a context of relative deprivation. However, the lens of instrumental acquisition seems to be quickly applied to sexual interactions when it comes to marginalised populations. In the public health literature, in particular, this seems to have resulted in a general distancing from the emotional aspects of sexual interaction.

This article suggests that while sexual scripts, cultural norms and socio-economic context are important, truly understanding the role and relevance of multiple concurrent partnerships requires an analysis of the emotional gains and losses of ascribing to, or countering, normative sexual practices and patterns. Having multiple concurrent partners requires living with numerous tensions –requiring balancing of public display and secrecy; indicating but undermining attachment; and existing in case primary relationships fail, but itself provide reasons for such failure. In certain township contexts these tensions are felt and experienced as more pressing and relevant than the threat of HIV contraction. It is therefore essential that new research should be focused more closely at the emotional and personal gains and costs of multiple concurrent partnerships than at present. Such research holds multiple possibilities and potentially scaffolds for working effectively towards partner reduction.

Acknowledgements

The Human Sciences Research Council acknowledges funding from Save the Children Sweden for the initial research study that led to this paper. Authors are also indebted to the young men who voluntarily participated in this follow up study.

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