

# Journal of Interpersonal Violence

<http://jiv.sagepub.com/>

---

## **The Relationship Between Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity and Men's Conceptualization of Sexually Coercive Acts by Women in South Africa**

Erin Stern, Diane Cooper and Bryant Greenbaum  
*J Interpers Violence* published online 13 June 2014  
DOI: 10.1177/0886260514536275

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/06/12/0886260514536275>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children](#)

**Additional services and information for *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jiv.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/06/12/0886260514536275.refs.html>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Jun 13, 2014

[What is This?](#)

# The Relationship Between Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity and Men's Conceptualization of Sexually Coercive Acts by Women in South Africa

Journal of Interpersonal Violence

1-22

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0886260514536275

jiv.sagepub.com



Erin Stern, PhD,<sup>1</sup> Diane Cooper, PhD,<sup>1</sup> and  
Bryant Greenbaum, LL.M., PhD<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

While sexual abuse against women and girls in South Africa has generated much deserved attention, the awareness of men's experiences of sexual coercion is limited, and often restricted to a homosexual context. This article illuminates men's experiences of pressurized sex in a heterosexual context, which were revealed in a broader men's sexual health study. Fifty sexual history narrative interviews were conducted with men purposively sampled from three age categories: (18-24, 25-54, and 55+), a wide range of cultural and racial backgrounds, and in urban and rural sites across five provinces in South Africa. Narrative interviews began with accounts of early knowledge of sex and sexual experimentation and explored the range of sexual relationships and experiences through adulthood. The narratives privileged the diversity of men's conceptualizations of and the impact of

---

<sup>1</sup>Women's Health Research Unit, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Law Society of Upper Canada, Toronto, Ontario

## Corresponding Author:

Erin Stern, Women's Health Research Unit, School of Public Health, University of Cape Town, Anzio Road, Observatory, Cape Town, 7925, South Africa.

Email: erin.a.stern@gmail.com

reportedly sexually coercive experiences by women. Many men described feeling unready for their first sexual experiences but pressured to do so by their peers and female partners, who were often older. There were also some instances of sexual coercion by women against men, some of which would constitute a criminal offense in South Africa. Due to the pressure for men to always be responsive to women's sexual desires, these experiences were often not framed as sexual coercion. Nevertheless, for many of these men, such experiences were uncomfortable and unrewarding. Men's negative responses to such experiences appeared to be linked to the fact that they did not fit social stereotypes of masculine sexuality as being initiative and dominant. Such coercive experiences could influence men's sexual risk-taking, including their use of sexual coercion against women. Research on sexual abuse should not be limited to male against male sexual abuse, but needs to explore the meanings and experiences associated with reported coercion against men by women to more comprehensively prevent and respond to sexual violence.

### **Keywords**

men, sexual coercion by women, male peer pressure, hegemonic masculinity, violence prevention

### **Introduction**

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995) understands societal gender power relations to be underpinned by a "dominant cultural model of idealized manhood" (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, p. 3). This encompasses a set of contextual social norms, values, and practices that men are encouraged to subscribe to, such as being unemotional and aggressive, for them to be legitimized as men (Connell, 1995). The concept also acknowledges that while "hegemonic masculinity" comprises the most valued form of identity and behavior, multiple forms of masculinity are present within a given social, historical, and cultural environment (Coles, 2009; Morrell, 2001). The social norms associated with hegemonic masculinity not only maintain men's power over women, but also produce hierarchies between men, as men who do not adhere to dominant norms of masculinity are often also subordinated and marginalized (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010).

In South Africa, the existence of high levels of poverty and unemployment, and a generally high level of societal violence contribute to the endemic and very high levels of sexual violence (Segal, 1990). There is also strong evidence that hegemonic norms of male sexuality, including notions of being

impulsive and uncontrollable, are additional key contributing factors to the high level of men's perpetration of sexual violence in the country (Peacock, Khumalo, & McNab, 2006; Hunter, 2005). Research by Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, and Dunkle (2011), for example, found that out of 1,686 male study participants, 466 reported having raped a woman. A feeling of sexual entitlement to women was the most common underlying reason men gave for having raped a woman (Jewkes et al., 2011). Less is known about how men's engagement with hegemonic norms influences their conceptualizations of and responses to non-consensual or unwanted sex that they are subjected to. More comprehensively understanding this phenomenon is important for interventions to address sexual violence perpetrated against men and because research suggests that men's own experiences of sexual violence can also influence their use of sexual violence against women. For instance, while no causal associations can be made, Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, and Dunkle (2009) found that in a household survey in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, half of the 10% of men who reported having experienced sexual violence perpetrated by a man in the previous year reported having subsequently raped a woman. Experiencing sexual coercion could potentially contribute to men's engagement in risky sexual behaviors that contribute to the high rate of HIV in South Africa. Numerous studies show that sexually abused children are more likely to engage in high-risk HIV behaviors. These include a greater likelihood of having multiple sexual partners, of using condoms less consistently, and of perpetrating sexual coercion (Jejeebhoy, Shah, & Thapa, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2009; Patel & Andrew, 2001). With this in mind, South African men who have perpetrated sexual violence have been found to be at significantly higher risk of being HIV positive (Jewkes et al., 2009).

With some exceptions (Niehaus, 2002; Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009), the majority of research on men's experiences of sexual coercion neglects a heterosexual context. This may be due to understandable concerns that discussing men's sexual coercion by women may detract from the larger problem quantitatively of preventing sexual violence against women (Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999). It may also result from common societal beliefs that women cannot coerce men into sex and that men are always willing to engage in sex with women (Sleath & Bull, 2009). Indeed it has been found that even when men do experience sexual coercion by a woman, they report fewer negative consequences than women (Struckman-Johnson, 1988). However, this is not a reason to perceive men's reports of unwanted sex with women to be inconsequential (Larimer et al., 1999). Some studies suggest a link between unwanted sexual experiences and negative psychological-health outcomes including guilt, anger, fear, and depression in men as well as women (Jejeebhoy et al., 2005; King, Coxell, & Mezey,

2002). Men may be particularly reluctant to admit to sexual violation by women, as it is perceived to be contrary to hegemonic gender roles in which men are meant to be strong, invulnerable, and sexual initiators. This may lead to men denying or minimizing the negative effects of sexual coercion by women (Krache, Hail, Scheiberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). Reporting sexual coercion by women may also result in men being marginalized by both men and women.

## **Reviewing the South African Case**

While there is a paucity of research in particular on men's experiences of women engaging in sexual coercion in South Africa, some evidence has emerged that this phenomenon does exist. In 2008, a National School Survey was carried out in 1,200 schools across the country in which 127,000 boys aged 10 to 19 were asked if they had ever been sexually abused, and if so, by whom (N. Anderson & Ho-Foster, 2008). The study found that two out of five South African boys reported that they had been sexually coerced. This was most frequently by older women, followed closely by other men. Sexual abuse perpetrated by men against other boys or young men was reportedly more common in rural areas, while sexual coercion of boys or young men by women was reportedly more common in urban areas. Another survey conducted with 1,371 men in the rural Eastern Cape found that 9.7% of men reported experiencing a coerced sexual experience by a woman, and 3.2% by a man (Jewkes et al., 2006). A qualitative study in the Eastern Cape found that boys and young men reported sexual coercion by women to most frequently be carried out by a female partner, who they saw as exercising coercion through temptation and verbal persuasion (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009). In this study, men perceived sexual coercion by women to be much less traumatic than sexual coercion by men, and only perceived the latter as constituting rape (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009). Nevertheless, pressurized sex of men by women could cause great anxiety and feelings of shame, particularly in situations where female family members or much older women were involved (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009). It is important to note that given dominant expectations of heterosexual interactions, some men may perceive female sexual agency in initiating sex as "coercive" sex (Wood, Maforah, & Jewkes, 1998). This makes interpretation of men's reports of sexual coercion by women difficult as men may not be assigning the same meaning to women's conceptualizations of coercive sex. Thus, the above statistics need to be treated with some caution and more rigorous definitions of what men perceive to be coercive sex by women ensured.

## Research Question

Sexual coercion includes a wide range of sexual experiences, from sexual touching to oral or anal penetration, that occur against a person's will as a result of verbal pressure or physical force by another person (Byers & Glen, 2011). This definition is consistent with South Africa's Criminal Law (Sexual Offenses and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007, which was modified in 2007 to broaden the scope of coercion to encompass non-consensual behaviors that are not strictly penile-vaginal. Section 1 of the Act defines consent as voluntary or un-coerced agreement. The act recognizes that non-consensual sex can be perpetrated by means other than the use of physical force, for example, by verbal threats, and it clarifies that both men and women can be victims of rape (Ngwenya, 2005).

This article appreciates the ambiguity and ambivalence in men's perceptions of their consent to have sex with women (Gavey, 1999; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Such ambiguity, as indicated above, can affect how sexual experiences are classified, including whether they are perceived as sexual coercion. As Connell (1995) argues, men's understandings of masculinity are shaped by and reflect their life experiences. This study used sexual history narratives to give voice to how men's reportedly sexually coercive experiences by women could impact on men's emerging sexuality and behaviors. According to Atkinson (1998) a life history refers to narration of people's life experiences whereby they highlight the most important aspects in relation to the domain of inquiry. A sexual life history approach can thus probe how men's notions of manhood and their sexual practices are molded by their conceptualization of sexually coercive experiences. Listening to stories can lead to a rich understanding of cultural and social norms, and recognize the normative masculine repertoires that influence men's understandings of such experiences. With this in mind, this article documents qualitative insights into men's reported experiences of sexual coercion by women including how their understandings and experiences of dominant masculine sexual norms affect their perceptions of and responses to sexually coercive experiences.

## Method

### *Participants*

Culturally, economically, and socially diverse sites were purposively selected to enhance the representation of participants to appreciate how factors such as race, class, environment, and culture intersect with dominant masculine norms. This is particularly important in the South African

context, for being a diverse country with 11 official languages (K. Anderson, Beutel, & Maughan-Brown, 2007). The population of more than 50 million is roughly 79% Black, 9% White, 9% colored,<sup>1</sup> and 3% Asian/Indian (Statistics South Africa, 2012). These racial categories were formalized under apartheid<sup>2</sup> (1948-1994) and remain in use largely for demographic purposes and to monitor changes in inequity based on race. Although apartheid formally ended in the early 1990s, socio-economic inequality and residential separation tend to continue along racial lines in South Africa, as Black South Africans still predominate disproportionately among the poor (Burgard & Treiman, 2006). Interviews were conducted with 50 men in six sites across five provinces in South Africa: Eastern Cape (Grahamstown & Coffee Bay), Western Cape (Cape Town), KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Mpumalanga (Nelspruit), and Gauteng (Johannesburg). At each site, men were interviewed in each of three age categories: 55 years and above, 25 to 54, and 18 to 24 from both urban and rural backgrounds. Participants included 22 isiXhosa speakers, 10 isiZulu speakers, 6 seSotho speakers, 4 seTswana speakers, 4 xiTsonga speakers, 4 siSwati speakers, 4 sePedi, 9 English speakers, and 12 Afrikaans speakers. As this study used a qualitative methodology, it did not intend to be generalizable. The study rather aimed to provide diverse insights into a phenomenon by portraying rich descriptions of individual cases that can be assessed and applied appropriately where relevant to other contexts.

Given the focus of this study, efforts were made to recruit participants who self-identified as heterosexual. Participants representing a variety of characteristics, including age, racial, cultural, and urban/rural, were recruited through purposive sampling. The first author distributed a project information sheet explaining the project and the benefits and risks of participating, to a community contact well acquainted with one rural and one urban community in each study province. Community contacts were developed through two non-governmental organizations with whom the researchers were in contact, the Sonke Gender Justice Network in Mpumalanga and Western Cape, and the Centre of AIDS Development, Research, and Evaluation (CADRE) for the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal. Each community contact randomly distributed the information sheet to potentially eligible people in terms of the age, racial, gender, and sexual orientation selection criteria. The first author contacted individuals who expressed a willingness to participate to set up a suitable time and venue for conducting an interview. Community contacts were able to establish initial contact through their rapport with the potential study participants, which was important given the sensitive and personal nature of the topic. The community contact person was given R100 (~US\$9.50) as a stipend for carrying out the task

of recruiting participants. To supplement this purposeful sampling method, snowball sampling was also used to recruit further participants. Snowball sampling is a method in which initial participants recommend further eligible participants for potential study recruitment to the researchers (Browne, 1981). An advantage of this sampling technique is that it enables the inclusion of otherwise hard to reach participants. It can also reduce the bias involved in relying solely on community contacts for initial potential participant referral to researchers.

### *Procedure*

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Cape Town Health Sciences Faculty of Human Research and Ethics Committee and all participants provided informed consent in writing before the interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the participants who were paired with same-sex interviewers due to the private and sensitive nature of the topic, and to appreciate how men perform to constructions of masculinity in dialogue with other men. Interviewers were experienced qualitative researchers. Narrative interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were designed to elicit stories, which is beneficial for probing personal experiences. A narrative approach also avoids asking participants to summarize their experiences into close-ended categories, which can oversimplify the range of emotions they may have about their sexual experiences, particularly coercive experiences (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Interviews began with accounts of early knowledge of sex and sexual experimentation and explored the range of sexual relationships and experiences through to the present. Men's engagement with risks of STI and HIV infection were also explored. While participants were not asked in particular for experiences of sexual coercion, they came up naturally as a result of asking them about their previous sexual relationships and particularly sexual debut experiences. This may have minimized respondent bias around sexual coercion. When participants provided information about their sexual experiences, the interviewer asked them to elaborate on the circumstances in which such experiences occurred. Examples of the interview questions and probes include "what did it mean to you to have sex for the first time?" "talk about the events surrounding and leading up to that." Interview questions and probes were also designed to elicit attitudes to gender norms and engagement with these, for example: "Do men and women have different thoughts about the connection between love and sex?" "What makes you say this?" "Tell me stories that illustrate what you mean?"

## **Data Management and Analysis**

To analyze the data, thematic networks were created to reveal prominent themes in the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). After reading the transcripts to identify patterns, a preliminary coding structure for analyzing the data systematically was established. In this process, the first author analyzed the responses to the research questions and mapped out the most important constructs that shaped the respondent's responses. The first author deliberately worked to bracket assumptions and to build an inductive understanding to ensure identification of themes that had not been anticipated during background research. The transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes by sorting key findings that could be ascribed to each basic code. NVivo 7 qualitative data management software was used to manage the data coding. The first author synthesized the coding list, which was then reviewed and commented on by the other two authors. Once all the text segments had been given basic codes, the codes were categorized into basic themes by placing similar codes together. Additional themes were created during this process, which required continually going back to the transcripts to select relevant latent meaning in the text. The first author identified the themes that emerged in consultation with the other two authors. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all the participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

## **Findings**

The narratives revealed a diversity in sources of pressure for men to engage in sex as well as men's meanings attributed to and responses to coerced sex. Some men described feeling unready for or uninterested in their early sexual experiences. A few men also relayed experiencing pressurized sex by their female partners or acquaintances. Men often felt obliged to perform sexually to both their female partner's desires and their peer led expectations to always be responsive to initiatives by women to have sex. Doing so regularly provided a platform for men to gain social status. Such experiences were therefore rarely framed as sexual coercion, even though they were regularly seen as uncomfortable and unrewarding. This was particularly the case when the situation was perceived as conflicting with dominant heterosexual norms, such as women being older or initiating sex. Pressurized sexual experiences usually occurred among youth at a time of vulnerability and sexual inexperience, and thus may have been harder for men to resist. Depending on the context, men had various levels of agency in their sexual encounters with women, attesting to the need to examine individual narratives.

## *Unwanted Sexual Debut*

Men who reported unease about their first experience of sex most commonly related this to situations where mostly older and more sexually experienced women initiated their first sexual experience. They reported feeling unready to begin having sex or being sexually disinterested. Some of these encounters would meet the definition of rape in South Africa's revised Sexual Offenses Act, for example, where the man was under the age of 16, below the legal age of sexual consent. Some of these experiences included reports of women taunting boys for their lack of virility. Despite their personal preferences or anxieties, men almost always engaged in such encounters. These were narrated as being in response to peer pressure and conceptions of dominant masculinity, where sex was regularly framed as a signifier of manhood, and thus an opportunity that should not be resisted. Yet such experiences were also often accompanied by negative sentiments including feelings of anxiety and shame. Many men also indicated their surprise at the situation, which was regularly accompanied by a strong sense of sexual performance anxiety.

Siyanda, a 29-year-old man from Grahamstown, a small town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, recalled that his sexual debut experience occurred at the age of 6 or 7 years, while still a child, with a woman who was 10 years older than him. He recounted how this woman would buy him and his friends sweets to convince them to go to her house and have sexual relations with her. He reflected on his worries that this was wrongful, as the woman was much older than him. He described the lack of physical enjoyment from this encounter and noted how painful the experience was. Nevertheless, he felt like a "hero" for proving his manhood to his friends. He recalled the enormous pressure on him to be sexually responsive to this woman at such a young age that overrode his worries and physical discomfort:

Even at a young age man, I mean even by the time I was six. If I ran away from a woman offering herself to me, I'd be called gay from the peers at my time. By the time of six you know what people are doing out there and you're trying to emulate what they are doing. So there was a lot of pressure involved for my first time because the person who came to fetch me from my house was my friend. And this woman was his next door neighbor so it had a lot to do with peer pressure.

Hence, even in this context of child sexual abuse, Siyanda was familiar with sexual norms that men should conform to in order be perceived as heterosexual. He recalled how in his early teenage years he became sexually

involved with women mostly because of similar peer pressure. He embarked on various casual relationships, usually under the influence of alcohol, but regularly regretted these experiences. He also sought multiple sexual relationships, desiring attention from more than one woman to boost his ego. He confessed however that the best sexual experiences for him remained in intimate relationships where physical intimacy was part and parcel of a broader sexually meaningful experience. Yet he also conceptualized much of his later sexual experiences as emotionally detached with a lack of concern for his partners:

But I didn't love her enough to be her boyfriend right. But whenever we got drunk we'd end up sleeping together. And because of that she ended up falling in love with me, right. But I'd just be having sex, know what I mean? (laughing). Women are fragile. They're not like us. We are very egocentric. We don't care. And we'll say things to one another that will hurt the next man. But then again cause he's a man he's not supposed to get hurt by certain things or hurt easily. So men have generally got that approach to life. I can say whatever I wanna say, do whatever I wanna do.

Another young male participant in Grahamstown described being touched sexually by his cousin who was 5 years older than him when he was 10 years of age. He recalled his confusion around how to make sense of the situation:

She once touched us on our privates. Well, now they say it's abuse or what what, but to me it never felt like it. I was confused at that time, but it was basically just touching, man, and we would have sex on top of the panty. She would climb on top of us, and then start having "sex" with us.

Yongama, a 21-year-old man from Grahamstown, recalled his first sexual experience at the age of 14 with a partner of a similar age with mixed emotions. His main reason for debuting sexually was out of pressure from his older brother and his friends. His reflection on this experience displays a strong sense of inadequacy on one hand, but on the other, a desire to prove his "manhood":

I did not know what to do, it was the girl who was proactive. She was lying on the bed, and told me to undress and after that she stripped and I was so shocked. I did not know what to do. It was like I wanted to go away, but I don't have a way to go. Because I want to be a man at that time.

After relaying his encounter to his peers, they mocked him and said that as a man he was meant to be the one to initiate sex. As a result, he recalled

subsequently feeling embarrassed and doubtful if he had been “man enough” for this first sexual partner. His insecurities were exacerbated when he discovered his first sexual partner’s subsequent infidelity. He perceived this unsatisfactory first sexual experience and his partner’s infidelity as contributing to his emerging sexuality, which was characterized by pursuing sexual encounters with multiple women to boost his social status. He reported that if one of his girlfriends did not want sex he would threaten to cheat on them with another woman, as he felt this would retain their sexual interest in him. He also described how he forcefully tried to persuade one of his girlfriends, who was a virgin and for religious reasons wanted to wait for sex until marriage, to have sex with him:

We had started dating in April. Around June I finally persuaded her. But she was crying and crying and I stopped. She was still crying and dumping me and leaving and going home. I found myself lost because it was going to seem like I had raped her. I had a problem because now I was thinking who was I going to date? I do not have a person to be with.

Despite his narrative conveying the fact that his girlfriend was severely traumatized by this coercive experience, he reported that his key concern at the time had been that she might accuse him of rape, which would hinder his ability to attract other sexual partners. This is in strong contrast to the feelings of commitment and respect he had expressed having for his first sexual partner when he had been younger.

Sanjay, a 31-year-old man from Johannesburg, described his first sexual experience at the age of 14 with a 26-year-old woman. He was working at his uncle’s shop when the woman initiated sex with him by questioning his virility linked to his youthfulness:

She said hey, you’re a naughty boy, what standard are you? I said that doesn’t count. She said you’re still small. I said but I’m not small everywhere.

He found the experience physically sexually satisfying but he described a later sense of disappointment and guilt:

It was a quick thing. To be honest with you, when I’d done it, I didn’t want to see her for some reason. I didn’t want to look at her face. I felt like oh, it’s not such a big deal after all. I never enjoyed it the first time, although the sensation was there of the ejaculation and stuff.

Yet he also reported feeling a sense of pride when he related this experience to his peers who confirmed his sense of “manhood”:

Yes. I boasted to my friends later, and they said welcome to the party, now you're a man.

He eventually developed casual sexual relationships with various women often in the context of drinking alcohol. At university he regularly attended escort agencies, attributing this to peer pressure to have sex with beautiful women. He reported that although he was in a committed intimate relationship at the time, he found it difficult to remain faithful to his partner when presented with opportunities to have sex with other attractive women.

### *Men's Experiences of Unwanted Sex With Women*

A few men recalled experiencing coerced sex in their relationships with women at other times, apart from those at sexual debut. These situations involved emotional or verbal abuse, sometimes threats of physical abuse, or being taken advantage of when drunk. The men who recounted these experiences referred to instances in which they perceived women to draw on "male" sexual norms, such as being sexually aggressive or having a "strong sexual appetite" to coerce men to engage in sex. Prince, a 19-year-old man from a rural city in Mpumalanga province, recalled an experience in which a woman made unsolicited sexual advances and taunted him to pressure him into having sex:

**R:** And then by that time, she called me and then she just kissed me. And then I said stop. I don't wanna do that cause she was not of my age. She was three years older than me. So she asked what kind of guy am I? And then I said I'm like other guys. She said no, can a dog bark? Then I said no.

**I:** But why did she ask can a dog bark at what?

**R:** At meat. You should eat it [have sex] she said. And she asked, you, why you are barking and not eating? So I just looked down, and that was it.

In this excerpt, Prince reported feeling that he did not want to have sex as he was a few years younger than the woman, indicating the social unacceptability of this. He expressed the embarrassment he felt at having his masculinity questioned, to be enticed into having sex. While he did eventually have sex with the woman concerned, he strongly attributed this to succumbing to the pressure he felt had been exerted on him to engage in sex.

Wendall, a 21-year-old man from Cape Town, used derogatory language to explain his discomfort about a woman who he felt had consistently pressured him to have sex with her:

But she would attack me. It took her three years for me to get into bed with her. She was always trying to convince me when I didn't want it. But she was a "hoer." I didn't know she was a "hoer" at the time.

Perhaps through his use of language in calling her a "hoer,"<sup>3</sup> he was able to undermine the experience of a woman attempting to coerce him into sex. Nial, a 22-year-old man from Pietermaritzburg, recalled how when he was younger, he feared engaging in sexual intercourse with his girlfriends because of the potential for pregnancy, transmission of STIs including HIV, or due to fear that his partner's father may discover their sexual encounter. At this stage, even though his girlfriend pressured him for sex, he reported refusing her advances because of these concerns. However, he found her demands to have sex became so verbally and physically aggressive that he found it sufficiently disturbing to run away:

I was never the guy to go around and just "thump." Not that I was offered it for a while. I never really had the opportunity until one time when a "chick" nearly raped me. I had to climb out of her apartment veranda, slide down the drainpipe, and run as if my life depended on it.

Nial recounted a further experience with another female sexual partner who sexually harassed him:

She told me if I don't sleep with her she's going to rape me . . . How do you sleep with a girl when she tells you she's going to rape you? I thought I was going to get murdered that night . . . I was turned off and it was fear, but mainly turned off. She proceeded by punching me in the back of the head and scraping me with her nails.

Nial expressed his belief that this woman was demanding because she was beautiful and did not expect him to refuse her sexual advances. In both cases, Nial reported that he did not have sex with these women but was able to resist their advances. While he reported that he had initially sought to have sex in committed relationships, he later treated women as a "competition to be won," with little concern for intimacy with and the well-being of his sexual partners. He also pursued sleeping with virgins for the social status he perceived that this would bring him. In doing so, he conformed to a form of hegemonic masculinity that he felt would be more rewarded by both his male peers and women:

Then I got a bit older a bit more confident. Girls started to notice me more than they did in the earlier stages in my life. Then I went through a stage when I was

a dog, where I wanted to break as many girls' virginities as possible. So I would only sleep with a chick if she was a virgin. I had gotten nasty. It was like I can take something that means something to someone and not care about it.

Thando, a 31-year-old man from Grahamstown, reported using a condom at all times. This was as a result of perceiving himself to be at risk of HIV infection when his girlfriend had tested positive for HIV and he subsequently tested HIV-negative. However, he recalled a time during this period when one of his sexual partners refused to use a condom:

I was drunk, like seriously drunk at the time, you see, I woke up and this girl was on top of me and this girl she was doing it for herself on top of me, I tried to stop her because there was no condom, but she wasn't paying attention to what I was saying and she wouldn't stop you see.

Thando reported feeling that he had been coerced into unprotected sex as a result of having been taken advantage of while inebriated and that this had placed him at risk of acquiring an STI including HIV.

## **Discussion**

The broad definition of sexual coercion used in this article captures men's wide range of experiences as well as their ambivalence with respect to how they conceptualized their coercive sexual experiences. Interpreting the context surrounding the sexual experiences that respondents described as unwanted is made difficult given these conflicting and ambiguous narratives. Nonetheless, a common theme throughout these reported experiences is the way in which social expectations of hegemonic masculine behavior and identity frequently informed how men responded to and made sense of such situations (Marston, 2005). Some of these situations conformed to accepted definitions for coercive sex. Others are related to notions of what is differentially acceptable for men and women in sexual initiation or behavior. From a young age, many men reported communication from peers and society that as a "right to manhood" they should always initiate and desire sex. If a woman initiated sex, they believed they should respond even if it was an uncomfortable, unwanted, or coercive situation. Men's sexual debut experiences often occurred before they were ready to commence sex. These first sexual experiences revealed the pressures on young men to prove their manhood through sexual activity with women generally and shaped their response to sexually coercive situations. This occurred in strong part as a result of male peer pressure, which supports findings that while men's debut is more likely to be

self-willed than that of young girls, there is likely to be great social pressure involved (Barker, 2005). While all members of society are influenced by norms of their social groups, this is especially true of young men and has been well documented in the literature (Holland et al., 1994; Simpson, 2005). Although men were interviewed across three age categories, stories of sexual coercion were concentrated among younger men. This may denote that it was harder for men to resist coerced sex at a younger age. Research also suggests that young men's sexuality in particular is highly susceptible to the influence of prevailing hegemonic conceptions of masculinity (Flood, 2003; MacPhail, 2003). Despite South African men experiencing relatively high levels of sexual violence perpetrated by other men (Jewkes et al., 2009), none of the male study participants reported this. This may be due to the fact that men's experiences of sexual violence by other men were not specifically probed in the interviews. It may also reflect the fact that sexual violence by men may be perceived as a greater threat to a man's masculinity than sexual coercion by women (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009).

Taking into account the importance of dominant discourses around heterosexuality can help clarify the context and competing demands young men might weigh up when faced with the prospect of unwanted sex. Several men reported that to be perceived as "real men," they needed to set aside their personal desires and concerns to meet peers' and societies' sexual expectations. Reasons for men engaging in unwanted sex were also attributed to partner pressure, which often involved emotional pressure or being taunted. Sikweyiya and Jewkes (2009) argue that men's sexual coercion by women through temptation should not be viewed the same as physical sexual coercion by other men, as it is generally accepted that temptation can be resisted. This is open to diverse interpretation, however, and is not considered voluntary under South Africa's sexual offenses law. Nevertheless, unwanted sex occurring as a result of perceived temptation seems to fulfill perceptions of dominant male narratives in which men are seen to be sexually voracious and unable to refuse sex on offer (Moore, Madise, & Awusabo-Asare, 2012). Men's uneasiness, inadequacy, or worry about the wrongfulness of the situation in the contexts they described frequently caused them to feel a sense of shame and anxiety. Yet pressures on young men to fulfill a socially prescribed dominant masculine social role often overrode such concerns. Even in aggressive situations, these experiences were often trivialized and not framed as sexual abuse despite the fact that they would be considered as such in social definitions of sexual abuse and where child sexual abuse had occurred, in terms of South Africa's sexual offenses laws. Even though these experiences may have been trivialized, contrary to some assumed societal beliefs, the majority of these experiences were not positive or enjoyable (Byers & Glen,

2011; Platt & Busby, 2009). Men's negative responses to such sexual experiences also appeared to be linked to the fact that they did not fit social stereotypes of masculine behavior as needing to be sexually controlling and dominant. This was particularly the case when women were older and the men were young, sometimes children, and at a vulnerable age. This supports evidence that both women and men tend to condone dominant norms of masculinity with respect to sex and marginalize those men who do not confirm to such norms (MacPhail, 2003). Such experiences communicate messages to men that sex, even if undesired, is a strong signifier of manhood. Experiences of coerced sex could either threaten or confirm men's masculinity, sometimes simultaneously, depending on the context in which coercion took place and the meaning attached to it.

The narratives support Seidler's (2006) findings that the pressure on men to enact physical and emotional toughness is promoted by hegemonic conceptions of masculinity that can obstruct men in acknowledging their emotional vulnerability and feelings of intimacy. The norms men learn from such pressurized experiences seemed to underpin many men's understandings of sexuality and shape their subsequent sexual behaviors. Moreover, adhering to "performance" of a certain kind of manhood that is built on sexual prowess and lack of emotional engagement or interest could influence men's sexuality. This has potential implications for men's subsequent sexual risk-taking behaviors and could also communicate a false understanding of what constitutes sexual consent. This could also contribute towards risky sexual behaviors, such as seeking multiple partners in order to gain status, placing both men and their partners at greater risk of STIs including HIV. Better understanding of the connection between men's experiences of coercive experiences by women and their subsequent sexual behaviors is important in adding to our understanding of the links between dominant conceptions of masculinity in South Africa and the pervasive levels of sexual violence.

## **Implications**

This study indicates the need to challenge harmful norms, values, and behaviors of young men and women in which men are assumed to be the primary initiators, and women passive recipients to sex. Social interventions that challenge stereotypes of sexually dominant men and passive women and promote gender equality are critical components of successful sexual coercion prevention (Jewkes et al., 2011). As male sexual norms appear to be learned at the peer group level, it is essential to work within peer groups to challenge dominant masculinity constructions and promote alternative and health-enhancing understandings of masculinity (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002).

Individual men need to be provided with opportunities to talk about their sexual experiences, in a safe space without pressure of fitting into one's peer group or where sexually coercive experiences may be trivialized. Young men, who are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure, should be made aware at an early age as to what constitutes sexual consent and readiness to engage in sex. Young men and women also need to be better informed about broader definitions of sexual coercion, so that feelings of ambiguity due to gender stereotypes are addressed and the perception that it cannot occur if no physical force is used is corrected. Despite South Africa's 2007 comprehensive Sexual Offences Act (SOA), many participants (both as perpetrators and survivors) appeared to be unaware of the criminal nature of some forms of sexual behavior, underscoring the need for greater education to occur on forms of sexual coercion and the rights of sexual violence survivors in terms of the SOA to be more thoroughly communicated. Women also need to be aware that it is possible for them to coerce men sexually through means other than physical force such as through psychological manipulation (Anderson & Sorenson, 1999; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). Anderson and Aymami (1993) note that traditional gender roles may promote the belief among women that men are always willing to have sex.

In addition, the findings from this article underscore the critical need to go beyond interventions that are aimed primarily at changing individual sexual intentions and behaviors. Sexual violence interventions that address gendered norms at the community level are critical as societal tolerance of sexual violence and community or social inaction against such violence underpins much of its continued high levels (Flood & Pease, 2006). Prevention in Action (PIA) is a South African example of a community-based sexual violence intervention, which seeks to reduce high levels of HIV by addressing social norms related to sexual violence against women (Parker, 2012). The initial research for the project found community members generally understood that violence against women was unacceptable. However, high levels of violence against women continued to be perpetrated as a product of a culture of silence and lack of concerted action by a critical mass of community members to address such issues (Parker, 2012). The project introduced interventions to encourage social action against violence against women by promoting greater gender sensitivity, dialogue in men's and women's relationships, and creating spaces and means for community members to unite in opposing sexual violence. In a project evaluation, approximately a third of participants reported that sexual violence had decreased in intervention communities over the previous this year, attributing this to increased action by the police, community, and family members. It was acknowledged that both men and women experience violence in relationships, and although women

generally experience it more frequently, the victimization of men should be included in the gender-based violence agenda. Experiences from the PIA project show that socio-behavioral interventions where community members discourage norms that underpin sexual violence and act systematically against incidents of violence can be effective and sustainable in addressing sexual violence.

### *Limitations*

Reports of unwanted sexual contact are of necessity retrospective and subject to problems of recall. Faulty memory may have affected the reliability and validity of the results as time had elapsed for all the men since the reported events had occurred. This could affect the possibility of a sexually coercive experience being denied or its negative impact abating over time. The difficulty of defining sexual coercion for men by a female partner may mean that men's coercive experiences by women were under-reported (Flisher, 2005; Moore et al., 2012). For both men and women, perceiving oneself as a "victim" of sexual coercion can contribute to feelings of passivity and helplessness (Gavey, 1999). Despite the limitations, these findings suggest the value of a qualitative research and applying a narrative approach to men's experiences of sexual coercion in being able to reveal the layers of meaning including ambivalence and ambiguity in interpretations of such experiences.

Future research in this area should continue to include questions about unwanted sexual experiences among young men and capture in greater depth the context and reasons for sex being unwanted. Continued research is needed to better understand factors that enhance men's vulnerability to peer pressure to have unwanted sex. More definitive research is also needed on the emotional and long-term consequences of unwanted female sexual engagement for men.

### **Conclusion**

Understandably, given the burden of sexual coercion on girls and women, boys' and men's vulnerabilities in relation to sexual coercion have been less researched in South Africa and abroad. The magnitude of sexual coercion among girls and women and boys and men is very different, with sexual violence perpetrated by men against girls and women constituting a public health problem of enormous impact. Nevertheless, capturing the varying accounts of sexual coercion from men experienced by women and the different meanings and consequences that sexual coercion has for male survivors deserves attention in its own right. This is important for men's well-being and in

addition because this may contribute to men's higher risk-taking behavior, including their use of sexual coercion with women. Finally coercive sexual interactions, irrespective of individuals' varying interpretations, constitute criminal offenses and are violations of human rights to sex free of force, and subject to individual choice.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants who were willing to share their stories with us. We would also like to acknowledge CADRE (Center of AIDS Development, Research & Evaluation) for their initial facilitation of this study.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The research was funded and made possible by USAID through Johns Hopkins Health Education South Africa (JHESSA), University of Cape Town Research Associateship, and Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

### Notes

1. In the South African context, the term "colored" was created to refer to a diverse group of people who had ancestry of a previous generation classified as White and another classified as Black. Colored also refers to descents of the Khoi-San peoples or slaves brought from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Madagascar.
2. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation by the National Party governments.
3. Whore in Afrikaans.

### References

- Anderson, K., Beutel, A., & Maughan-Brown, B. (2007). HIV risk perceptions and first sexual intercourse among youth in Cape Town South Africa. *International Family Planning Perspectives, 33*, 98-105.
- Anderson, N., & Ho-Foster, A. (2008). 13,915 reasons for equity in sexual offences legislation: A national school-based survey in South Africa. *International Journal for Equity in Health, 7*, Article 20.
- Anderson, P., & Aymami, R. (1993). Reports of female initiation of sexual contact: Male and female differences. *Archive of Sexual Behavior, 22*, 335-343.
- Anderson, P., & Sorenson, W. (1999). Male and female differences in reports of women's heterosexual initiation and aggression. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 28*, 243-253.

- Atkinson, P. (1998). The life history interview. *Sage University Papers Series on Qualitative Research Methods*, 44. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytical tool for qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385-405.
- Barker, G. (2005). *Dying to be men: Youth, masculinity and social exclusion*. London, England: Routledge.
- Bauer, M., & Gaskell, G. (2000). *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook*. London, England: SAGE.
- Browne, K. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 32, 148-170.
- Burgard, S., & Treiman, D. (2006). Trends and racial differences in infant mortality in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62, 1126-1137.
- Byers, S., & Glenn, S. (2011). Gender differences in cognitive and affective responses to sexual coercion. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27, 827-845.
- Campbell, C., & MacPhail, C. (2002). Peer education, gender and the development of critical consciousness: Participatory HIV prevention by South African youth. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55, 331-345.
- Coles, T. (2009). Negotiating the field of masculinity: The production and reproduction of multiple dominant masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*, 12, 30-44.
- Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Flisher, A. (2005). Non-consensual adolescent sexual experiences: Policy and implications. In S. Jejeebhoy, I. Shah, & S. Thapa (Eds.), *Sex without consent: Young people in developing countries* (pp. 269-285). London, England: Zed Books.
- Flood, M. (2003). *Addressing the sexual cultures of men: Key strategies in involving men and boys in HIV prevention*. Brasilia, Brazil: United Nations Expert Group Meeting.
- Flood, M., & Pease, B. (2006). *The factors influencing community attitudes in relation to violence against women: A critical review of the literature*. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Health Promotion.
- Gavey, N. (1999). Unsexy sex: Unwanted sex, sexual coercion, and rape. In N. Gavey (Ed.), *Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape* (pp. 136-166). East Sussex, UK: Routledge.
- Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1994). *Wimp or gladiator: Contradictions in acquiring masculine sexuality*. WRAP/MRAP Paper No. 9. London: Tufnell Press.
- Hunter, M. (2005). Cultural politics and masculinities: Multiple-partners in historical perspective in KwaZulu-Natal. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 7, 389-403.
- Jejeebhoy, S., Shah, I., & Thapa, S. (2005). *Sex without consent: Young people in developing countries*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Jewkes, R., Dunkle, K., Nduna, M., Levin, J., Jama, N., Khuzwayo, N., Koss, M., Puren, A., & Duvvury, N. (2006). Factors associated with HIV sero-positivity in young, rural South African men. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, 1455-1460.
- Jewkes, R., & Morrell, R. (2010). Gender and sexuality: Emerging perspectives from the heterosexual epidemic in South Africa and implications for HIV risk and prevention. *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, 13, Article 6.

- Jewkes, R., Sikweyiya, Y., Morrell, R., & Dunkle, K. (2009). *Understanding men's health and use of violence: Interface of rape and HIV in South Africa*. Pretoria: South African Medical Research Council.
- Jewkes, R., Sikweyiya, Y., Morrell, R., & Dunkle, K. (2011). The relationship between intimate partner violence, rape and HIV amongst South African men: A cross sectional study. *PLoS ONE*, *6*(9), e24256.
- King, M., Coxell, A., & Mezey, G. (2002). Sexual molestation of males: Associations with psychological disturbance. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *181*, 153-157.
- Krache, B., Hail, P., Scheiberger-Olwig, R., & Bieneck, S. (2003). Men's reports of nonconsensual sexual interactions with women: Prevalence and impact. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *32*(2), 165-175.
- Larimer, M., Lydum, A., Anderson, B., & Turner, A. (1999). Male and female recipients of unwanted sexual contact in a college student sample: Prevalence rates, alcohol use, and depressive symptoms. *Sex Roles*, *40*, 295-308.
- MacPhail, C. (2003). Challenging dominant norms of masculinity for HIV prevention. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, *2*, 141-149.
- Marston, C. (2005). Pitfalls in the study of sexual coercion: What are we measuring and why? In S. Jejeebhoy, I. Shah, & S. Thapa (Eds.), *Sex without consent: Young people in developing countries* (pp. 287-301). London, England: Zed Books.
- Moore, A., Madise, N., & Awusabo-Asare, K. (2012). Unwanted sexual experiences among young men in four sub-Saharan African countries: Prevalence and context. *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, *14*, 1021-1035.
- Morrell, R. (2001). *Changing Men in Southern Africa: Global Masculinities*. Durban, South Africa: University of Natal.
- Muehlenhard, C., & Peterson, Z. (2005). Wanting and not wanting sex: The missing discourse of ambivalence. *Feminism and Psychology*, *15*(1), 15-20.
- Ngwena, C. (2005). Synchronizing traditional legal responses to non-consensual sexual experiences with contemporary human rights jurisprudence. In S. Jejeebhoy, I. Shah, & S. Thapa (Eds.), *Sex without consent: Young people in developing countries* (pp. 227-235). London, England: Zed Books.
- Niehaus, I. (2002). Renegotiating masculinity in the South African lowveld: Narratives of male-male sex in labour compounds and in prisons. *African Studies*, *61*, 77-97.
- Parker, W. (2012). *Prevention in action: A model for social mobilization to address violence against women*. Cape Town, South Africa: Project Concern International.
- Patel, V., & Andrew, G. (2001). Gender, sexual abuse and risk behaviours in adolescents: A cross-sectional survey in schools in Goa. *National Medical Journal of India*, *14*, 263-267.
- Peacock, D., Khumalo, B., & McNab, E. (2006). Men and gender activism in South Africa: Observations, critiques and recommendations for the future. *Agenda*, *69*, 71-82.
- Platt, J., & Busby, D. (2009). Male victims: The nature and meaning of sexual coercion. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, *37*, 217-226.
- Segal, L. (1990). *Slow motion. Changing masculinities. Changing men*. London: Virago.

- Seidler, V. (2006). *Young Men and Masculinities*. London: Zed Books.
- Sikweyiya, Y., & Jewkes, R. (2009). Force and temptation: South African men's accounts of coercion into sex by men and women. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 11*, 529-541.
- Simpson, A. (2005). Sons and fathers/boys to men in the time of AIDS: Learning masculinity in Zambia. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 31*(3), 569-586.
- Sleath, E., & Bull, R. (2009). Male rape victim and perpetrator blaming. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 25*, 969-988.
- Statistics South Africa. (2012). *Mid-year population estimates*. Pretoria, South Africa: Author.
- Struckman-Johnson, C. (1988). Forced sex on dates: It happens to men, too. *Journal of Sex Research, 24*, 234-241.
- Wood, K., Maforah, F., & Jewkes, R. (1998). He forced me to love him: Putting violence on adolescent sexual health agendas. *Social Science & Medicine, 47*, 233-242.

### Author Biographies

**Erin Stern**, PhD, is a research and advocacy associate for the advocacy organization AIDS Free World. She also counsels survivors of sexual abuse at Rape Crisis, Cape Town. She holds a master's degree in Health, Community & Development from the London School of Economics & Political Science and is a PhD candidate at the Women's Health Research Unit at the University of Cape Town. She also holds an honorary research associate position at the University of Cape Town's School of Public Health.

**Diane Cooper**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Women's Health Research Unit in the Department of Public Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town. She has 25 years of experience in sexual reproductive health, gender and health, and women's health research. Her current main research activities are in the linkages between HIV and reproductive health issues and care. She has developed links with the public health sector services through collaborative health service research and also with organizations in the non-governmental health sector. She has sat on a number of National and Provincial Department of Health Consultative committees on sexual and reproductive health issues and HIV.

**Bryant Greenbaum**, LLB, LLM, PhD, barrister and solicitor, is a Canadian lawyer who has extensive international experience formulating criminal justice policy. Director of Legal Services at the African Canadian Legal Clinic in Toronto. He has worked in Canada at the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board and in South Africa as the director of the Integrated Justice Cluster at the Department of National Treasury. He also has provided direct frontline assistance to domestic violence victims at a legal aid clinic in Toronto, and he has assisted South African victims of apartheid violence in an offender mediation project.