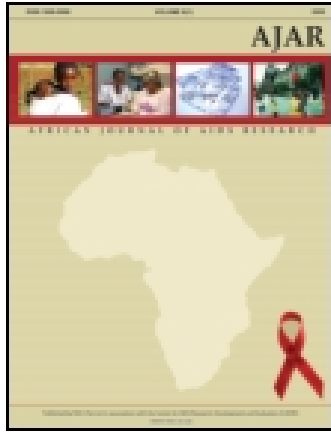


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Erin Stern^a & Diane Cooper^a

^a University of Cape Town, Women's Health Research Unit, School of Public Health, University of Cape Town, Anzio Road, Observatory, Cape Town, 7925, South Africa

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Experiences and conceptualizations of sexual debut from the narratives of South African men and women in the context of HIV/AIDS

Erin Stern* and Diane Cooper

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

*Corresponding author, email: erin.a.stern@gmail.com

Given the pivotal role of first sex in the development of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) practices, there is a need for more contextualised and nuanced understandings of young people's early sexual debut experiences. This study used sexual history narratives to investigate how South African men and women experience and attribute meaning to their sexual debut, and their SRH practices. In light of the gendered disparities among young people's SRH awareness and risk, differences between men and women's narratives of sexual debut were assessed. Fifty sexual history interviews were conducted with men and 25 sexual history interviews with women, with participants purposively sampled from three age categories, a range of cultural and racial backgrounds and urban and rural sites across five provinces. Narrative interviews were designed to elicit stories around participants' early knowledge of sex and sexual experimentation, their range of sexual relationships and SRH practices. The data were analysed using a thematic approach. Participants generally reflected on their early sexual experiences with feelings of inadequacy and disappointment. While men appeared to hold greater decision-making power than women at sexual debut, descriptions of men's early sexual experiences were often characterised by respect, intimacy and vulnerability. Many men attributed the timing of their sexual debut to peer pressure, which typically generated higher social status and rarely included consideration of the need to practice safer sex. Several women felt pressured by their partner to sexually debut, which could have informed their perceptions of men being sexually controlling and aggressive. The study demonstrates the value of a narrative approach for generating insights on young people's sexual debut experiences and SRH practices, and the underlying gendered norms and expectations that shape these. The findings indicate the need for gender transformative HIV interventions to take into the diversity of young people's SRH needs and social realities.

Keywords: gender norms, HIV/AIDS, narratives, sexual debut, South Africa

Introduction

Using narrative methodology, this paper details the motivations behind and meaning given to participant's first sexual experiences and their early sexual and reproductive health (SRH) practices. This is important to assess given the pivotal role of sexual debut on the development of SRH practices. For instance, the Third South African National HIV Communication Survey (2012) found that condom use with one's most recent partner was greater (68%) if one used a condom the first time one had sex than if not (43%). Indeed, the experience and circumstance of sexual debut has become recognised as a critical focal point of HIV prevention among youth (Gevers et al. 2012). The paper also presents reported differences between men and women's narratives of their sexual debut, which are necessary to examine given the significant gender disparities among South African young people's sexual health awareness and risk of acquiring STIs, including HIV (MacIntyre et al. 2004). South African women aged 15 to 24 have an HIV prevalence three to four times higher than their male peers and incidence peaks at an earlier age than in males (Shisana et al. 2014). Factors influencing

this include the common practice of young women having sex with older men (Katz and Low-Beer 2008), the fact that women have less control in negotiating protected sex than men (Campbell and MacPhail 2002) and the vulnerability of young women to sexual abuse (Jewkes et al. 2002). This study provides a relevant and unique contribution to the literature on early sexual experiences in the context of HIV prevention given that the majority of studies do not compare young men and women's sexual debut experiences and SRH practices, nor use a narrative approach to do so.

The literature on young women's sexual debut notes that girls typically receive more support from family members to adopt safer sexual behaviours than boys (MacIntyre et al. 2004) and may be subject to harsher controls around retaining their virginity (Pettifor et al. 2009). This may implicate on young women's risk perceptions of their sexual debut experiences. For instance, one study in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, found that engaging in sexual intercourse was a significant predictor of perceived HIV risk for young women but not for young men (Anderson et al. 2007). There is also a wealth of literature attesting to the risky nature of young women's early sexual experiences in South Africa. A relationship between early age of sexual debut for women

and lack of contraception has been noted (Cooper et al. 2007, Pettifor et al. 2009). Zuma et al. (2011) found that women with earlier sexual debut had a significantly higher general risk profile, including multiple lifetime partners, not completing high school and engaging in sex work – factors which increase the probability of acquiring HIV (Pettifor et al. 2004). Girls who report their first sexual intercourse during their early teen years have also been found to have higher rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing than girls who have later sexual debut (Shisana et al. 2009). Teenage pregnancy has been found to be a strong predictor of HIV infection among 15–24-year-olds given similar risk factors, including unprotected sex (Pettifor et al. 2004). Various studies have documented the commonality for young women to report being coerced into their first sexual experience by their partners (Manzini 2001, Pettifor et al. 2009). An association between younger age for women and the likelihood of first sex being coerced has also been noted (Dunkle et al. 2004). Several studies have found that young women are more likely to experience non-consensual sexual debut in age-disparate sexual relationships, where their male partner is at least five years older (Luke and Kurz 2002, Pettifor et al. 2009).

Men's sexual debut experiences are significantly less likely to be coerced than women's (Pettifor et al. 2009). Nonetheless, there is evidence that strong societal pressure and competition for young men to engage in sex for the first time can contribute to experimentation with sex in risky ways (Barker 2005, Lindegger and Maxwell 2006). Gendered expectations typically assert that men should hold greater decision-making power than women at sexual debut (Harrison 2005, O'Sullivan 2005). The expectation that men should be knowledgeable about and in control of sex may make them more reluctant to seek SRH information, which can promote their engagement in higher-risk sexual behaviours (Aggelton and Rivers 1999). Some studies have found that the frequency of multiple sexual partners was greater among men who had an earlier sexual debut than those who sexually debuted in later teen and young adult years (Harrison 2005, Zuma et al. 2011). Overall, there is a need to more adequately consider diverse forms of masculinity in relation to the dynamics of men's sexual debut experiences and conceptualisations. For instance, in focus group discussions with young men, MacPhail (2003) found that many dominant norms related to sexual debut, such as negative attitudes towards condom use and being in control of the sexual encounter, regularly conflicted with young men's preferences. In this study, many men were against the use of pressure or force in sexual encounters, and were committed to having protected sex.

More contextualised understandings of young people's early sexual experiences and how these relate to gendered norms are warranted to provide a stronger foundation for HIV-prevention efforts among youth (Kelly and Ntlabati 2002). Bhana and Pattman (2009: 69) argue that:

Currently, we know very little about the world inhabited by young adults, how they see themselves, what they wish for, their desires and passions, their fears and the ways in which the performance of masculinities and femininities are constructed.

Narrative research, which seeks to elicit participant's individual stories (Bauer and Gaskell 2000), was used to shed light on how young people experience and conceptualise their sexual debut. Listening to stories can add to a rich understanding of the cultural and social gendered repertoires that shape young people's SRH practices. According to Atkinson (1998), a life history refers to a narration of one's life experience whereby one highlights the most important aspects in relation to the domain of inquiry. In prioritising the diversity of and subjective meaning given to individual's experiences, the analysis of life histories appreciates multiple masculinities and femininities. This study used sexual history narratives to investigate how South African men and women experience and attribute meaning to their sexual debut and their related SRH practices. Differences between men and women's narratives of sexual debut and SRH practices were assessed given the documented disparities between men and women's early SRH practices, risk perceptions and vulnerabilities to poor SRH including acquisition of HIV.

Methods

Participants

Sexual life-history interviews were conducted with 50 men and 25 women at six sites across five provinces in South Africa (Eastern Cape [Grahamstown and Coffee Bay], Western Cape [Cape Town], KwaZulu-Natal [Pietermaritzburg], Mpumalanga [Nelspruit] and Gauteng [Johannesburg]). The overall study on which this paper is based sought to assess the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and men and women's SRH; as such, men were oversampled in the study. Culturally, economically, and socially diverse sites were purposively selected to enhance the representation of participants. At each site (apart from Coffee Bay, which is a rural village), the research was conducted in both the urban centre and nearby rural areas, with men and women in three age categories (ages 18–24, 25–54, and 55+ years). Participants represented a range of first language speakers, cultural and racial backgrounds. Appendix 1 details the demographics of the participants. The diversity of participants is particularly important in the South African context for having 11 official languages and continued divisions along racial and cultural lines (Anderson et al. 2007). Efforts were made to recruit participants who self-identified as heterosexual. According to Butler (1999), it is by constructing oneself as a heterosexual being that people emphasise their gender differences. By comparing heterosexual men and women's sexual debut narratives, differences in reported gender norms and sexual behaviours could be assessed. Given the diversity of South African cultures and contexts, the limited sample of 75 individuals is not sufficient to infer generalisations about South African youth, or a particular social or cultural group. However, the aim of qualitative research is not to generalise a phenomenon but rather to generate meaningful insights. By providing rich and nuanced descriptions, the sexual history narratives contribute insights relevant to the study research questions as well as potentially to those in other similar study contexts.

To recruit participants, the first author distributed an 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 the NGOs, the Centre of AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) (in Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal), and Sonke Gender Justice (in Mpumalanga and Western Cape). Each community contact randomly distributed the information sheet to potentially eligible individuals along the age, cultural, race, and gender selection criteria. Community contacts could establish rapport with the interviewees, which was important given the sensitive and personal nature of the topic. Community contacts were given the equivalent of US\$10 as a stipend for each participant they recruited in order to reimburse them for the transport and communication costs of recruiting participants. Snowball sampling was used to recruit further participants, whereby initial participants recommended further eligible participants for potential study recruitment to the researchers. This sampling technique enabled the inclusion of participants otherwise hard to reach. It also reduced potential bias involved in relying solely on community contacts for initial potential participant referrals.

Procedure

Ethical approval to undertake the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town (REC Ref 115/2011), and from the Human Sciences Research Council (Ref 3/23/06/10). Before each interview, informed written consent was obtained from the participant. Data collection occurred between August 2010 and December 2011. Interviews were conducted in various locations that provided quiet and secure environments, including university, and NGO offices. Interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the participants, and participants were paired with same-sex interviewers. This was important given the sensitive nature of the study, and also to assess how men and women perform to gender norms with same-sex interviewers. The first author conducted most of the interviews with English-speaking women. Among the remaining participants, experienced qualitative researchers were hired to conduct the interviews and were provided with narrative interviewing techniques prior to data collection. Participants were given the equivalent of US\$10 as a token of appreciation for their participation. Interviews lasted approximately two hours, allowing for a rapport to be built between the interviewees and interviewers and in order to sufficiently probe the narratives. Interview questions were designed to elicit stories of early knowledge of sex and sexual experimentation, and explored the range of sexual relationships and experiences as well as SRH through adulthood. Examples of the narrative questions include 'What did it mean to you to have sex for the first time?' and 'Talk about the events surrounding and leading up to that'. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and in some cases, translated into English.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to extract key themes, allowing for a detailed and holistic account of the data. The first author read the raw data several times to familiarise herself with the content and meanings. Data were then analysed for content using nVivo 7 qualitative data management software. Text segments were assigned basic codes, and these codes were then organised into major trends and cross-cutting themes. Coding was regularly discussed among the first author and the researchers who conducted the interviews, for the sake of conceptual alignment on existing and emerging codes. An overall interpretation of the findings of the study was formulated in response to the original study question. Illustrative quotes relevant to each theme were extracted from the raw data: these reflect sexual debut experiences that emerged from similarities and differences in study participants' narratives. All illustrative quotes include demographic details of the participants (see Appendix 2 for abbreviations); names used in this text are pseudonyms.

Findings

The majority of male and female participants reflected on their early sexual experiences with feelings of inadequacy, misunderstanding and 'un-readiness', and also reported risky SRH practices at sexual debut. Yet, men and women also generally discussed quite different motivations behind, experiences of and meaning given to their sexual debut.

Sexual debut experiences among women

Partner and peer pressure for women's sexual debut

Many of the women spoke of debuting sexually not primarily because of their own sexual desire but in response to partner pressure and to maintain their relationships. One woman commented on the pressure to have sex with her partner to prevent him from seeking sex elsewhere:

'If I do it [sex], maybe I'll keep him. This guy is good-looking and maybe other women want him as well. So if you satisfy him, he will be yours, but it's a gamble. Most teenagers go through the very same thing.' (Rhejanna, PMB F Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 25–55)

Many women recalled a sexual debut experience with an older partner, which could hinder their agency around sexual decision-making. One interviewee recalled the manipulation and deception she experienced by an older partner to have sex:

'I think he already knew about sex because he was older. He knew what he wanted from me and spoke to me until I agreed to have sex with him. I tried to refuse but he tricked me, I ended up agreeing. It was not easy to refuse because I loved him.' (Bina, PMB F Black Sesotho-speaking 25–55)

She also recalled the fact that her first partner was not only older but also had more money, which made her feel compelled to engage in sex with him. Several women reported sexually coercive debut experiences:

'So we started dating and he forced me to have sex with him. I loved that guy at that time, but I wasn't ready.' (Aphiwe, NELS F Black siSwati-speaking 25–55)

Overall, young women reported poor sexual agency with their first partners. It is important to note that predominantly older women reported greater agency in their sexual relationships, indicative of the fluidity of dominant feminine norms:

'Before that, you are more trying to please the man. When you get to our age, it's a partnership we're here to please one another. At my age now, I'm not going to be stuck with somebody where he does not satisfy me.' (Ilham, PMB F Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 25–55)

Several women also reported strong peer pressure to have sex for the first time. One woman reported pressure from her close friends to not only have sex but also to have a child, indicative of women's status in this context being linked to fertility:

'We were four friends. I got pregnant after all three already had children. They called me stupid that I don't have a child because they were younger than me. I was 18 and they were 16.' (Bongekile, NELS F Black siSwati-speaking 25–55)

Sexual debut experiences and meaning among women

For many of the women, losing one's virginity was a negative experience, especially for those whose experience was coerced. Such pressurised experiences could also influence women's understandings of masculine sexual behaviour as sexually controlling. One woman related her sense of sadness and loss after her first sexual experience:

'I felt pain, sorrow, and ashamed. The issue of sex made me shy. I felt like he took something away.' (Bina, NELS F Black Sesotho-speaking 25–55)

The experience of losing one's virginity was significantly undermined for the women whose first partner was unfaithful to them. One woman expressed regret and self-blame after discovering her first partner was unfaithful to her:

'After having sex, I regretted it. The boyfriend was not going out with anyone except me, but after, I saw him going out with other girls; I thought he just wanted to have sex with me. It was love to me, whereas to him it was just sex. I hated myself and never shared that with anyone in my family.' (Noxolo, Rural-GTOWN F Black isiXhosa-speaking 18–24)

For many of the women, having sex for the first time outside of marriage made them feel guilty, indicative of dominant norms of femininity that promote chastity and virginity until marriage. One woman believed she had lost respect in her religious community for having first sex before marriage:

'To be a woman meant growing up, getting married, not having sex before wedlock. I rebelled from all this. But having the knowledge I have right now, I wouldn't have done it then. I would have much respect from friends, family, my church, if I had my virginity now. Because now they know any man that will marry me will know I'm not a virgin.' (Nomzamo, GTOWN F Black isiXhosa-speaking 18–24)

A few women described waiting to have sex in marriage or with a partner whom they intended to marry because it would enhance the value of first sex:

'My mom was very old-school, and they said once you're married you take your vows, that is how I was brought up. We were both virgins at the time, so it was a great experience for both of us.' (Yumna, CPT F Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 25–55)

Women's sexual risk behaviour at sexual debut

Many of the women, especially those in rural areas, reported that they did not know how to adequately protect themselves from the consequences of sexual activity, predominantly pregnancy. Yet some women who had a solid awareness of contraception also reported feeling uncomfortable initiating condom use at sexual debut. One woman said her first sex was enjoyable and had enhanced her desire to have sex again, yet she worried about unintended pregnancy as a result:

'I said, "I don't want to fall pregnant," but he says, "It's fun. I'm not going to cum in you," so you hope in hell that he doesn't, but you don't know what the meaning of that is. You are scared, but you want to go back for a second time. But you don't know whether you are going to fall pregnant, and whether he pulled out or didn't.' (Rhejanna, PMB F Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 25–55)

Her story revealed her lack of knowledge of sex and SRH, and that the sexual decision-making was primarily made by her male partner.

One participant (Farannah, PMB F Indian English 18–24) refused to use a condom with her first partner because it made her feel 'dirty', which may reflect norms of femininity that disapprove active sexuality. However, there was evidence of some women having initiated condom use at their sexual debut. A few of the women, predominantly those in rural areas, reported becoming pregnant by their first partner, indicative of unprotected sex. Most of these women related that their partner did not want to be involved in the pregnancy, and, in some cases, had ended the relationship:

'I only slept with the man, and when I became pregnant he left me and went away. It was too difficult for me. I had to work for the child all on my own.' (Eleanor, Rural-CPT F Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 55+)

Men's sexual debut experiences

Partner and peer pressure for men's sexual debut

While it was much less common for men to experience partner pressure or coercion at sexual debut, a few young men recalled situations where mostly older and more sexually experienced women initiated their first sex where they either felt unready or were uninterested in the woman sexually. Sex was regularly framed by men's peers as a signifier of manhood and status and an opportunity that should not be resisted. For instance, one man recalled his first sexual experience at age 7 with a 17-year-old girl, which would meet the definition of rape according to South Africa's 2007 Sexual Offences Act (SOA), as one partner was younger than age 16 and the other was older than

age 16 (the legal age of consent). He recounted how the girl would buy sweets for him and his friends to persuade them to go to her house. He reflected on his worries about the wrongfulness of the situation and his physical displeasure during their encounters. Even at such a young age, he recalled the enormous pressure from his peers to be sexually responsive to women in order to be recognised as a heterosexual man, which seemingly overrode his emotional worries and physical discomfort:

'Even at a young age, by the time I was 6, if I ran away from a woman offering herself to me, I'd be called gay from the peers at my time. 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 neighbour, so it had a lot to do with peer pressure.' (Meliliswe, GTOWN M Black isiXhosa-speaking 25–55)

Although men could gain status with their peers through having sex, pressurised situations often caused men shame and anxiety, and were overall reported as unpleasant.

Many of the men related experiencing pressure from their peers to sexually debut: *'The peer pressure did contribute, to an extent, actually in a big way, to my first sexual intercourse'* (Eugene, CPT M Coloured Afrikaans-speaking 25–55). Having sex for the first time could result in men feeling accepted by their peers, and thus many men boasted to their peers about their first sexual experiences. One man reported lying to his friends about having had sex before his actual sexual debut because of the pressure from his friends to have sex:

'Amajita¹ had always lied and said that they were doing this thing [sex]. I used to lie to them [by saying I already had sex too].' (Siyanda, GTOWN M Black isiXhosa-speaking 25–55)

However, once he realised his peers had also lied about having had sex, he related being angry for being misled into having sex because of the assumption perpetuated by his peers that everyone has sex at a young age. Pressure from peers to sexually debut was often accompanied by sexual performance expectations:

'My friends were asking me, "Did you ejaculate?" And I didn't know what that was about. I said yes, and then they said, "How many rounds?" So I said four. I was answering questions about things I didn't even know what they meant at that time. Some of the guys could tell this was a lie.' (Sipho, JHB M Black isiZulu-speaking 18–24)

For some men, associating themselves with peers who did not pressure them to engage in sex was helpful to resist such peer pressure.

Sexual debut experiences and meaning among men

Sexual debut was regularly perceived of as a rite of passage to manhood. However, in many of the men's descriptions of sexual debut, what happened did not meet peer-led expectations and was less enjoyable than anticipated. One man said there was little intimacy accompanying his early sexual experiences because, in his opinion, he engaged in sex due to 'forced' peer pressure:

'At the time when you have been forced by your friends, there is not love in it, the sex is cold. It has no warmth.' (Mawanda, Rural-CBAY M Black isiXhosa-speaking 25–55)

Many of the men's narratives revealed feelings of shame, intimidation and sexual inadequacy at first sex, in contrast to society's general portrayal of men as confident and in control of sexual encounters:

'I did not know what to do, it was the girl who was proactive. She was lying on the bed and she was telling me that she is horny and told me to undress. After that I stripped, and she stripped. I was so shocked. 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, you see. A real man.' (Yanga, Rural-GTOWN M Black isiXhosa-speaking 18–24)

When he told his friends about this experience, they mocked him and said that as a man he was meant to initiate sex rather than the woman. Having originally appreciated that sex with this partner was about the intimate connection they had, his peers made him feel anxious and fear that his first sexual partner would end their relationship. One man (Malik, GTOWN M Black isiXhosa-speaking 25–55) recalled how he gained status with his friends for having debuted sexually, yet his friends also teased him for having sex with a young woman who was considered unintelligent, unattractive and sexually experienced. This reflects a double standard where young men are pressured to gain sexual experience, yet young women are stigmatised for being sexually active.

One man expressed concern for his first partner's future and his own readiness to commit to her should she become pregnant, which counteracts dominant conceptions of young men's sexuality and irresponsibility:

'But the time when I had sex with her I was shy. It was not easy to look at her in the eye. Only when she was gone did I become happy. I understood that was what men do. But I was afraid of how my parents would react if she fell pregnant and how the girl's future would be. I had to be responsible for the baby. Will I marry her?' (Mabotse, JHB M Black Sepedi-speaking 18–24)

Another man related how he waited for a year to first have sex with his girlfriend. He described his belief in an inherent connection between love and sex:

'I'd been waiting a whole year for her to say let's have intercourse, because it [virginity] was hers to be broken. The concept of virginity didn't mean anything to me. We loved each other. I thought they went hand in hand. You only had sex if you were in love.' (Nial, PMB M White English-Speaking 18–24)

His early attitudes towards sex revealed patience, love and respect for his first sexual partner.

Men's sexual risk behaviour at sexual debut

Several men reported that peer pressure to have sex was often not accompanied by the need to practice safer sex, and that their sexual debut was often unprotected. Many of the men relayed misunderstandings of the consequences of sexual activity. One young man said he had not contemplated the possibility of pregnancy at his sexual debut:

'You don't have the thought of her getting pregnant. I wasn't even at the stage of knowing if you put in your thing, there will be kids as an end result. There was no condom.' (Luzuko, CPT M Black isiXhosa-speaking 25–55)

For the most part, men did not report feeling as responsible for the prevention of pregnancy at sexual debut as much as women did. Given the high frequency of unprotected sex at sexual debut, a few men reported contracting an STI from their first sexual encounter. The few men who said they used a condom at first sex were often in an established relationship and they discussed feeling more adequately prepared for their sexual debut including practicing safer sex. One man discussed how he and his established partner had an open conversation about their sexual readiness and contraception options. This reflects a responsible and mature form of masculinity at sexual debut:

'At school you don't want to become a dad. And we started talking about, are you taking birth control, about STDs and that kind of thing, and that's when we decided that condoms would be the best way to go, and to prevent numerous effects from having intercourse.' (Franz, GTOWN M White Afrikaans-speaking 25–55)

Discussion

Both male and female participants recalled how sexual debut was typically unprotected because they were not aware of how to prevent pregnancy or STIs, or did not perceive themselves to be at risk of sexual consequences, as found in other studies (Cooper et al. 2007, Zuma et al. 2011). Most of the men's first sexual partners had been the same age or younger, whereas the women's first partners were generally a few years older in congruence with other findings (Pettifor et al. 2009). For many of the women, this age difference, which was sometimes accompanied by disparities in income, hindered their ability to insist on protected sex. This finding supports the literature suggesting that transactional and/or age-disparate relationships are often characterised by unprotected sex, where the older partner/provider holds more sexual decision-making power (Jewkes et al. 2012). Women were more likely than men to recall sexual debut as an uncomfortable and negative experience, and in large part as a result of partner pressure, which also hindered their sexual decision-making agency, including whether or not sex was protected. This supports other findings that women find it more difficult to initiate or insist on condom use at sexual debut (Cooper et al. 2007, Pettifor et al. 2009).

The perceived 'insignificance' of first sex was exacerbated among those women who discovered their first partner's infidelity. A few young women reported becoming pregnant at first sex, when they tended to assume sole responsibility, as documented in other reports of the commonness of men's denial of paternity, especially with regards to teenage pregnancy (Hunter 2006, Nduna and Maseko 2008). As women gained experience and got older, they generally reported greater sexual agency, as similarly found by Shefer and Foster (2009). More women than men expressed guilt and regret for having sex before marriage,

which attests to the greater societal pressures for women to retain their virginity. This could enhance the stigma of young women's sexuality and hinder open communication, as has been found elsewhere (McLaughlin et al. 2012). The women who reported their first sex to be emotionally satisfying and physically enjoyable were invariably those who said they had their first sex in a trusting and committed relationship. Several instances in the data point to how women 'consent' to hegemonic masculine norms such as the idea that men are expected to control their sexual impulses or cannot be expected to be responsible for unintended pregnancy. This is important to appreciate given the production and maintenance of hegemonic masculine norms *by women* (Hearn 2004).

Contrary to general perceptions of men as in control of and demanding of sex, many of the men's descriptions of their early sexual experiences seemed to be characterised by qualities of respect, patience and intimacy (Schneider et al. 2008). MacPhail and Campbell (2001) also noted that young men's sexuality is often accompanied by a desire to disguise their vulnerability. Similarly to young women, men were more likely to report enjoyment and significance of their first sex in established and trusting relationships, which diverges from the exploitative and aggressive sexuality often attributed to South African men (Ratele 2014). Some men also reported being more likely to discuss and use contraception in an established sexual debut partnership. This generally changed as men got older and gained sexual experience, whereby men were less likely to report condom use in established relationships for being associated with trust and safety (Stern and Buikema 2013). The fluidity of men and women's SRH practices over their lifespan highlights the need to target sexual behaviours and attitudes at sexual debut as a unique set of sexual risk-taking and agency.

Although this was much less common among the male participants, a few men did report feeling pressured into their first sexual experience by a female partner, mostly by older women. The severe peer pressure on men to engage in first sex meant that men felt compelled to respond even if it was an uncomfortable, unwanted, or coercive situation, which is elaborated on in Stern et al. (2014). Indeed, many men recalled that their primary motivation for sexual debut was to be esteemed as men by their peers, which supports the literature suggesting that young men's sexuality will be undermined if they do not have sex by a certain age (Flood 2003). Some men reported lying about having had sex to achieve such status, in congruence with the suggestion that young people frequently overestimate the proportion of their peers who are sexually active – and attempt to align their own behaviour with these perceived norms (Messer et al. 2011). Gender norms communicated through peers often encouraged sexual risk behaviour, such as the notion that men should always initiate and be in control of sex and be detached from emotional intimacy (Lindegger and Maxwell 2006, Gevers et al. 2012). Peer-led expectations of men's sexuality as linked to adept performance could contribute to men's fear of inadequacy and disappointment with themselves at sexual debut. Some men were critical of this significant peer pressure to sexually debut and reported how their peer-generated expectations of first sex were not met.

The fact that some men expressed concern for their partner's sexual health and preference for emotional intimacy in sexual relationships points to the necessity of appreciating multiple masculinities, rather than a common portrayal of men conforming to one type of hegemonic masculinity (Morrell 2007). The concept of hegemonic masculinity identifies a set of social norms men are encouraged to subscribe to, such as being unemotional and aggressive, in order to be socially legitimised (Connell 1995). These standards not only maintain men's power over women but also produce hierarchies between men, since men who do not adhere to dominant norms of masculinity are often marginalised by both genders (Jewkes and Morrell 2010). Yet hegemonic male behaviour has arguably been overemphasised to the neglect of alternative and resistant masculinities. Understanding the latter is necessary in order to undermine rather than reproduce male hegemony (Morrell 2007), and this study importantly contributes to such insights.

Differences between rural and urban participants' sexual debut experiences confirm the value of conducting research in sites that are diverse geographically, economically, and culturally. Participants who had experienced an unplanned teenage pregnancy most commonly resided in a rural area. This may be attributed to poor knowledge of contraception and contraceptive services, which was also more pronounced in these areas. It may also support the finding that stigma around being sexually active, particularly as youth, tends to be greater in more traditional rural than urban environments (Steinberg 2008). The South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012, found significant disparities in HIV prevalence according to factors other than gender, including age, race, locality and province. Thus, it is also necessary to examine differences in sexual debut experiences and SRH practices along such factors (Shisana et al. 2014). While the scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth understanding of how these factors shaped participants' sexual debut experiences and SRH practices, it points to the ways in which they should be considered in further research.

The narratives draw attention to the many ways that certain gendered norms make men and women differently vulnerable to HIV at sexual debut, supporting the idea that HIV prevention programmes should do more than attempt to alter individual behaviours, and must also address conceptions of masculinity and femininity that frequently underlie risky and gender inequitable sexual practices (Jewkes and Morrell 2010). Men appeared to hold greater decision-making power than women did at sexual debut, indicating the need for interventions to teach young men and women sexual negotiation skills and promote gender equality. Indeed, a 2007 WHO review of 57 SRH interventions found that gender-transformative programmes – those that promoted a shifts in gender norms and fostered more gender equitable relationships between the sexes – were more effective in encouraging safer SRH attitudes and behaviour than programmes that were 'gender sensitive' or 'gender neutral' (Peacock and Barker 2012).

The narratives highlight the need to target youth with sexual health education that takes into account their societal realities, such as the severe pressure young men

and women may experience to have sex to be accepted by their peers or to maintain relationships, and the disjuncture between young people's sexual risk behaviours and perceptions. Peer education, which seeks to target social norms by using a group of individuals who typically share socio-economic characteristics as educators, has been found to be a valuable way to improve young people's sexual health (Swartz et al. 2012). This may be a particularly important tool to engage young men given the pivotal role of men's peers as found in this study on their sexual debut and SRH behaviours. Yet, peer education initiatives have also been found to have a limited impact without addressing the broader social including gendered environment (Campbell and MacPhail 2002). It would be valuable to locate peer education interventions within efforts to create more enabling social environments for individuals to implement and sustain sexual and gendered behaviour changes, and develop skills to resist peer pressure.

Limitations

Reports of sexual history are, of necessity, retrospective and subject to problems of recall and faulty memory, which may have affected the reliability and validity of the narratives, although this is not a particular disadvantage to this approach only. Men and women may have narrated their responses in order to meet gendered and social expectations, especially given the potential evasion from detailing intimate sexual experiences to researchers and the related secrecy among young people to reveal stigmatised sexual activities such as teenage pregnancy and rape (Hardon and Posel 2012). As noted in the literature on masculinities, men's dialogues about their sexual behaviour may be more performative than a reflection of reality, and contrast between a *macho* persona and a more anxious and insecure self (Connell 1995, Frosh et al. 2002). Checking the narratives for inconsistency and incoherence was done to account for how the narratives may have been influenced by the relation between the interviewers and the interviewees. Furthermore, the way men and women perform to gender norms is insightful to the study objective. The study also may be limited by only capturing participant's narratives at one point in time. Through a series of sexual narratives with the same Vietnamese young men more than once, Martin (2010) found that respondents modified their narratives and rejected aspects of previous narratives. If participants were interviewed on more than one occasion for this study, shifting narratives may also have been uncovered. Where data were translated into English for this study, only some of the interviews were back-translated because of the prohibitively large number of interviews, which may have affected the accuracy of the raw data.

Conclusion

Inquiring about men and women's sexual history narratives provided an effective tool to generate in-depth insights into young people's sexual debut experiences, conceptualisations, SRH practices, as well as the underlying gendered norms and expectations that shape these. Our study adds

value by privileging the diversity of young people's SRH values, needs and interests across a broad range of South African men and women from diverse contexts. This kind of information is critical for shaping interventions that target young people's SRH attitudes and behaviours for gender transformative HIV prevention efforts.

Notes

¹ *Amajita* is an isiXhosa term for 'mates' often in reference to one's direct peer group.

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The authors — Dr Erin Stern is a research and advocacy associate for the NGO AIDS Free World, and an honorary research associate for the School of Public Health at the University of Cape Town. Her main research interests and activities concern health community participation, prevention of and responses to sexual violence, gender transformative public health programming and the link between hegemonic masculinities and sexual and reproductive health. Erin holds a Master's degree in Health, Community & Development from the London School of Economics & Political Science and a PhD in Public Health from the University of Cape Town.

Dr Diane Cooper 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 24 years' 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, for which she is known nationally and internationally. She has developed links with the public health sector services through collaborative health service research and also with organisations 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. She is author of over 100 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters or commissioned research reports.

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Appendix 1: Demographic background of interview participants

Participant #	Sex	Age group (years)	First Language	Race	Location
1	Male	18–24	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown (rural)
2	Male	18–24	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown
3	Male	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown
4	Male	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown
5	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Grahamstown
6	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Grahamstown
7	Male	25–55	English	Asian	Grahamstown
8	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Grahamstown
9	Male	55+	English	White	Grahamstown
10	Male	55+	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown (rural)
11	Female	18–24	Afrikaans	Coloured	Grahamstown
12	Female	25–55	English	White	Grahamstown
13	Female	25–55	Afrikaans	White	Grahamstown
14	Female	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown
15	Female	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Grahamstown (rural)
16	Male	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town
17	Male	18–24	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town
18	Male	18–24	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town (rural)
19	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town
20	Male	55+	Afrikaans	White	Cape Town
21	Male	25–55	English	White	Cape Town
22	Male	18–24	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town
23	Male	55+	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town
24	Male	18–24	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town
25	Male	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town
26	Female	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town
27	Female	55+	Afrikaans	Coloured	Cape Town (rural)
28	Female	25–55	English	White	Cape Town
29	Female	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town
30	Female	55+	isiXhosa	Black	Cape Town (rural)
31	Male	18–24	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg (rural)
32	Male	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg
33	Male	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg (rural)
34	Male	55+	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg (rural)
35	Male	18–24	Sesotho	Black	Pietermaritzburg
36	Male	25–55	Sesotho	Black	Pietermaritzburg
37	Male	25–55	English	Indian	Pietermaritzburg
38	Male	55+	English	Indian	Pietermaritzburg
39	Male	18–24	English	White	Pietermaritzburg
40	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Pietermaritzburg
41	Female	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg (rural)
42	Female	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Pietermaritzburg
43	Female	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Pietermaritzburg
44	Female	18–24	English	Indian	Pietermaritzburg
45	Female	25–55	Sesotho	Black	Pietermaritzburg
46	Male	18–24	isiZulu	Black	Johannesburg
47	Male	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Johannesburg
48	Male	18–24	Sepedi	Black	Johannesburg
49	Male	25–55	Sepedi	Black	Johannesburg
50	Male	25–55	Setswana	Black	Johannesburg
51	Male	55+	Setswana	Black	Johannesburg (rural)
52	Male	25–55	Sesotho	Black	Johannesburg
53	Male	25–55	English	Indian	Johannesburg
54	Male	18–24	Afrikaans	White	Johannesburg
55	Male	18–24	English	White	Johannesburg
56	Female	55+	English	White	Johannesburg
57	Female	25–55	isiZulu	Black	Johannesburg
58	Female	18–24	Setswana	Black	Johannesburg (rural)
59	Male	18–24	isiXhosa	Black	Coffee Bay (rural)
60	Male	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Coffee Bay (rural)
61	Male	55+	isiXhosa	Black	Coffee Bay (rural)
62	Female	25–55	isiXhosa	Black	Coffee Bay (rural)
63	Female	55+	isiXhosa	Black	Coffee Bay (rural)
64	Male	18–24	siSwati	Black	Nelspruit (rural)

Appendix 1: (Continued) Demographic background of interview participants

Participant #	Sex	Age group (years)	First Language	Race	Location
65	Male	25–55	siSwati	Black	Nelspruit
66	Male	25–55	Afrikaans	Coloured	Nelspruit
67	Male	18–24	Xitsonga	Black	Nelspruit (rural)
68	Male	25–55	Xitsonga	Black	Nelspruit (rural)
69	Male	18–24	isiZulu	Black	Nelspruit
70	Male	25–55	Sesotho	Black	Nelspruit
71	Female	25–55	Sepedi	Black	Nelspruit
72	Female	25–55	siSwati	Black	Nelspruit
73	Female	25–55	Xitsonga	Black	Nelspruit (rural)
74	Female	18–24	Xitsonga	Black	Nelspruit (rural)
75	Female	25–55	Sesotho	Black	Nelspruit

Appendix 2: Codes for participant referencing

Category	Code	Meaning
Gender	M	Male
	F	Female
Location	CBAY	Coffee Bay, Eastern Cape
	CPT	Cape Town, Western Cape
	GTOWN	Grahamstown, Eastern Cape
	JHB	Johannesburg, Gauteng
	NELS	Nelspruit, Mpumalanga
	PMB	Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal