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PLAYING THE 'LOVE GAME': SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING AMONGST AFRICAN GIRLS IN A CAPE TOWN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Drawing upon critical health and discursive psychology, the study explores the sexual decision-making of 8 sexually-active high school girls, aged 17 to 19 years, living in Masiphumelele, a poor African community in Cape Town, South African. The girls participated in a focus group and 1-2 individual, semi-structured interview/s. The paper describes and explores, firstly, the ideals girls uphold surrounding sexual relationships, on the one hand, and the normative character of sexual relationships as these typically play out in practice, stressing the dissonance between the two. The paper highlights the part that boys and girls play in reproducing a problematic sexual culture that supports sexual relationships that are antithetical to girls’ ideals, and the processes that mediate sexual conformity. Following this, the paper turns to explore the participants’ sexual decision-making and relationships. Three broad sexual strategies are isolated. The paper explores the rationale driving the respective strategies, the extent to which these strategies produce relationships that conform to, or, alternatively, diverge from and counter the norm, and the factors and processes mediating this. Finally, the paper explores and highlights the role of relationships beyond the sexual arena in mediating girls’ sexual decision-making, and how these are implicated in reproducing problematic sexual norms and relationships. The study finds that the barriers to girls establishing and sustaining sexual relationships that promote emotional and physical health and well-being are deeply embedded within aspects of the psychosocial and material environment. Promoting the emotional and physical health and well-being of girls within their sexual relationships requires recognising and addressing problematic elements within their broader relational environments, and providing supportive, advisory figures and contexts, as well as positive role models.

1. Introduction

The study explores the sexual decision-making and relationships of 8 sexually active high school girls, aged 17 to 19 years, living in Masiphumelele, a poor African community in Cape Town, South Africa. The findings indicate that girls typically experience sexual relationships as emotionally unfulfilling, and that these often pose threats to their emotional and physical integrity and well-being, including their sexual health. Why then do they engage in such relationships? The study explores how factors and processes within the psychosocial and material context mediate girls' sexual decision-making, and in turn, are implicated in shaping girls' sexual relationships.

The study is part of a broader research project exploring sexual decision-making among adolescent girls in three neighbourhoods in Cape Town, South Africa, and addressing limitations in HIV/AIDS social research into sexual behaviour (see Kahn, 2005; Kahn, 2007). The study aims to increase understanding of the influences on adolescent sexual decision-making, and sexuality more generally with a broader interest in HIV prevention amongst South African youth.

Developments In HIV/AIDS Social Research: Sex In Context

In the context of South Africa, the influences on sexual behaviour and the mechanisms of behaviour change are not clearly understood. This has produced a limited knowledge-base of what is driving the HIV epidemic amongst young people. This is predominantly a product of the limited understanding of sexuality informing research in this area (Parker, 1995; Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002; Campbell, 2003). Research, particularly in developing contexts, including South Africa, has 'concentrated on the phenomenon of sexuality at the level of the individual, while neglecting societal, normative and cultural contexts' (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001, p. 1614). Sexual heath promotion campaigns have, in turn, conceived of sexuality in terms of de-contextualised, individual behaviours, and have made the assumption that sexual behaviour is the result of rational decision-making based on knowledge around the risks of HIV, and how to protect against these risks. However, within the context of economic and social disadvantage that characterises the lives of many young people, particularly young women, it has become increasingly apparent that, even with

knowledge of how to prevent oneself from infection, such information cannot be put into practice (UNAIDS, 2004).

Critical health psychologists have argued that decision-making around 'health-related' activities, including sexual practices, does 'not conform to rational, logical, value-free ways of thinking, but have their own alternative logic and validity that is related in a complex fashion to the cultural and moral environments' in which individuals are situated (Crossley, 2000, p. 39). Complementing this, a research agenda that utilises a wider view that incorporates levels of influence beyond the individual, and the importance of contextual considerations in understanding sexual behaviour and behaviour change have been strongly advocated in South African literature (e.g. Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Williams, 1998; Campbell, 2003; Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002; Kelly & Parker, 2000; LeClerc-Madlala, 2002; Alexander & Uys, 2002; Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003).

Poverty And Sexual Risk-Taking

Recent studies have emphasised that the factors which promote or perpetuate unsafe sexual behaviour in the South African context, and developing contexts more generally, often lie beyond the individual. Some of the findings that are particularly relevant to the current study will be presented below, as these provide context to some of the data to be presented.

Research on the sexual behaviour of young people in South Africa (much of it reviewed by Eaton, Flischer and Aarø, 2003) has suggested that 'the most significant vector for predicting sustained adoption of risk prevention measures is socio-economic background' (Kelly & Parker, 2000). South African studies have found links between poverty – and associated factors, such as unemployment, overcrowding, and low levels of education - and various unsafe sexual behaviours. As noted by Eaton, Flischer and Aarø (2003, p. 162), 'given the racialised social stratification that still characterises South Africa, problems associated with poverty mostly affect Black youth'.

Poorer young people are reported to have less knowledge of HIV/AIDS and show higher levels of sexual activity (e.g. Du Plessis et al., 1993; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1991; Wood et al., 1997) and begin to have sex at younger ages (Kelly & Parker, 2000). Furthermore, poverty is associated with a number of practices which specifically diminish young women's power to negotiate safe sex, or the terms upon which their sexual encounters play out. Poverty and lack of parental resources are cited as primary reasons for young women to trade sex for goods or favours, or to engage in sexual relationships

that provide financial support, often with older men (e.g. Adams & Marshall, 1998; Hallman, 2004; Kelly & Parker, 2000). In such relationships, sex tends to happen on men's terms, which frequently means without a condom (e.g. Adams & Marshall, 1998). Additionally, sexual domination of young women by their partners, including sexual coercion, physical abuse, and attempted and actual rape, appears to be more common in poor communities (Eaton, Flischer & Aarø, 2003). Within such relationships, documented in qualitative research (e.g. Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998), sexual negotiation of any kind – surrounding condom use, faithfulness, and the nature and frequency of sexual intercourse – is lacking. This is compounded by the low status of South African women within sexual relationships, culturally entrenched gender discrimination, and social discourses surrounding the subordination of women (Eaton, Flischer & Aarø, 2003).

2. Study Method

The paper explores the sexual decision-making of 8 girls, aged 17 to 19 years, living in Masiphumelele, an African community in Cape Town, South Africa. The participants were enrolled in Grade 12 at the local high school. All were first-language isiXhosa speakers, but most were proficient in English. Seven of the girls chose to be interviewed in English, without the presence of a translator. In the case of one participant, who was not proficient in English, a translator was present to assist the interview process. The girls participated as a group in one focus group discussion or group workshop, after which each girl participated in 1-2 in-depth, semi-structured individual interview/s. These were geared towards eliciting reflections upon adolescent sexual experiences, relationships, decision-making and behaviour – as they played out within the participants' communities more generally, as well as in their personal experiences.

The girls participated in the study voluntarily, and in all cases informed consent was obtained. Parents or guardians of participants under the age of 18 years were approached for informed consent for the girls in their care to participate in the study. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in the local community centre in a room that provided privacy, in keeping with the sensitive nature of the subject matter. For the purpose of this paper, and in keeping with ethical codes of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.

The study proceeds from developments made by critical researchers working in the discipline of health psychology, who argue for a need to acknowledge and develop an appreciation of the 'lay' or 'alternative' rationalities regarding health-related or risky behaviours. Researchers working within this critical vein encourage a shift away from the idea that there is 'one single, authoritative, value-free, objective truth or reality associated with health or risk' (Crossley, 2000, p. 55). In other words, critical health psychologists have highlighted the need for a shift in focus from theoretically pre-defined models of 'health' and 'risk' behaviours and factors, towards 'how people themselves subjectively conceptualise 'healthy' or 'risky' behaviours' (ibid, p. 39). This paper takes such an orientation when investigating adolescent girls' sexual decision-making and practices. The study also draws upon theoretical and methodological insights and techniques developed in the area of narrative and critical discursive psychology (Hollway and Jefferson, 2002; Hollway, 1989; Hollway, 1984), which have informed both the data production as well as analytical stages of the research process.

3. Study Setting

Masiphumelele, also known as 'Site 5', and established in 1992, is located on the border of wetlands between Kommetjie and Noordhoek, on the South Peninsula of Cape Town, South Africa. The area was settled mainly by migrants from the Eastern Cape in the early nineties, and has seen a steady influx of people in the past decade. According to Population Census figures (Seekings, 2004) an estimated 8,000 residents inhabited Masiphumelele in 2001, of whom 97% were classified as 'African'. However, current unofficial estimates by the City of Cape Town and local service providers are much higher, suggesting a population of between 12,000 and 20,000 (Gooskens, 2006).

Many inhabitants of African settlements in the Western Cape, such as Masiphumelele, are migrants from the rural, Eastern Cape regions of South Africa. Since the late- and post-apartheid relaxation of restrictions upon labour migration, many South Africans, classified as 'African' under the official population categories of apartheid, and previously affected by apartheid influx control laws have made the transition from rural to urban areas in the hope of securing employment, other forms of livelihood, or re-uniting their families (Ndwega, Horner & Esau, 2004). This migratory pattern, coupled with an already-inadequate local housing supply in urban

areas, poverty and few formal wage-earning opportunities, has meant that poor living conditions and over-crowding are common in such areas.

Although Masiphumelele was initially established as a formal settlement, the housing is predominantly informal: the space between the originally established houses, buildings and streets are filled with shacks, and people live in close quarters to their neighbours. Overcrowding has seen an expansion of informal housing across the wetlands, and shack fires and floods are a regular occurrence. As is the case in many African urban informal settlements in South Africa (see Ndegwa, Horner & Esau, 2004), a range of social problems – including poverty, unemployment, poor educational background, lack of service delivery, inadequate housing, overcrowding, squalid living conditions and the resultant health effects, which include a predominance of respiratory and infectious diseases - conspire to inscribe the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the community with hardship.

4. Presentation And Discussion Of Findings

The first part of the paper describes and explores the ideals girls uphold surrounding sexual relationships, on the one hand, and the normative character of sexual relationships as these typically play out in practice, stressing the dissonance between the two. This is followed by an exploration of the role of both boys and girls in reproducing a problematic sexual culture that supports sexual relationships that are antithetical to girls' ideals, and the processes that mediate sexual conformity.

The second part of the paper turns to explore the sexual decision-making and relationships of the girls participating in the study. Three broad sexual strategies are distinguishable, each of which is associated with varying relational characteristics and outcomes. The analysis explores the rationale driving the respective strategies, the extent to which these strategies produce relationships that conform to, or, alternatively, diverge from and counter the norm, and the factors and processes mediating this. The analysis further underscores the difficulties girls face in establishing fulfilling sexual relationships that realise their ideals.

The final part of the paper locates girls' sexual relationships within the context of their broader relational environment. The analysis explores the potentially mediating role that experiences, both past and present, and

spanning across a variety of relational contexts play in mediating the manner whereby girls approach sexual relationships. In particular, the analysis attempts to give further insight into the 'barriers' to girls realising fulfilling sexual relationships.

Part 1

Adolescent Sexual Relationships: Ideals And Practice

This component of the paper highlights the dissonance between the ideals girls uphold surrounding sexual relationships, on the one hand, and the manner whereby sexual relationships typically play out in practice. The data suggests that girls ideally wish for romantic love, trust, respect and commitment within their sexual relationships. In practice, adolescent sexual relationships play out in antithetical terms to these ideals – within the context of a 'love game', which supports casual, transient sexual relationships, multiple and concurrent partnering, and sustains a culture of infidelity.

Boys are pinpointed as the sex-driven instigators of the 'love game', their gender-based power allowing them to dictate the terms of sexual relationships. However, girls were also seen as complicit in sustaining the 'love game'. According to the participants, girls, unable to build relationships on their own terms, have come to participate actively in the 'love game', taking up the same approach to sex and sexual relationships as boys. While participation in the 'love game' requires girls to relinquish their ideals of romantic love, and despite the fact that their sexual relationships are unfulfilling and pose threats to their emotional and physical integrity and well-being (including their sexual health), it is nonetheless attractive to the extent that it grants girls competitive advantage in relation to female peers, and lays the path towards social integration, status and power.

1.1 Girls' Relational Ideals: 'Romantic Love'

> *In a relationship: I'm looking for honesty, romance of course, and to be loved. I'm looking for someone who will be faithful. And will love me for who I am. [Somi]*

The participants reflected in depth upon what ideals they, and girls more generally, uphold with regards to sexual relationships. They maintained, firstly, that girls ideally desire 'love', 'acceptance' and 'understanding' within their sexual relationships. In particular, an 'ideal' boyfriend is someone who will 'love you for who you are', and be committed and invested in the relationship. Secondly, girls wish for sexual relationships founded upon honesty and open communication: in this, they wish for a partner who is trustworthy and faithful. Thirdly, 'respect' is upheld as a significant factor within girls ideals surrounding sexual relationships; this is embodied in a partner who 'respects women', who understands that 'no means no' (i.e. accords women the right to negotiate sex, and does not pressurise his girlfriend to have sex), and does not perceive it as his right to control, coerce or physically abuse his girlfriend. Finally, 'romance' was consistently highlighted as one of the qualities girls ideally wish their sexual relationships to bear. Abstract ideas surrounding 'romance' included a partner who will 'treat you like a princess' and 'lighting candles, and things like that'. However, concrete ideas surrounding 'romance', when probed, revealed that 'romance' comprises a set of quite 'simple' qualities that girls ideally want in their sexual relationships. These include being 'cared for', spending exclusive intimate time with their boyfriends, walking around the local mall and window-shopping together, and sometimes seeing a movie, or sitting together, joking and talking.

1.2 The 'Love Game': Sexual Relationships In Practice

No one loves anyone; it's just a big game! It's a love game!

Although girls uphold a set of ideals surrounding sexual relationships, centring upon qualities such as love, trust, respect, and romance, in practice, normative adolescent sexual relationships do not play out in a manner that corresponds to these ideals. Dudu explained that, amongst her high school peers, there is a commonly-held belief that:

> 'No one loves anyone; it's just a big game! It's a *love* game!' So everyone should participate, because there is no such thing as real love. Maybe it will come when we are older, but not now … You can't say you're in love at this age, because obviously you're going to move on, and that guy will move on. So it's more like you're keeping each other occupied for the moment.'

> '… No one loves anyone at our age. It's more like we're just playing; it's a game. Because people play with other people's

> feelings; that's the way it is. Girls and guys. But more especially guys; they'll play with girls' feelings; because it's like they don't like feel ashamed to have four to five girlfriends … So, I think the girls are realising that, because now even the girls are playing with guys' feelings.'

As the account suggests, in practice, adolescent sexual relationships play out in terms that are antithetical to girls' ideals surrounding sexual relationships. The 'love game' operates upon the assumption – which runs counter to girls ideals of 'romantic love' - that 'there is *no such thing as real love*' in adolescence. By overturning the notion that there is potential for 'real love', the 'love game' justifies and promotes 'love' that takes the form of a 'game' wherein 'people play with each other's feelings', and simply 'keep each other occupied for the moment'. As will become further evident, the 'love game' supports casual, transient, multiple sexual relationships, concurrent sexual partnering and infidelity. The following analysis explores the nature of the 'love game' in greater depth, highlighting how this particular sexual culture is sustained and reproduced, by both girls and boys alike.

Boys' Role In The 'Love Game': Male Sex Drives, Gender And Power

The participants' accounts pin-point boys as the 'sex-driven' instigators of the love 'game', which is set up on their terms, antithetical to girls' relational ideals. Boys' power to dictate the terms of heterosexual relationships is reinforced by gender-based power imbalances, which translate into, and justify, male-on-female coercion and violence. This limits girls' agency to negotiate sexual relationships that correspond with their ideals.

Sex-Driven Boys

> *Romance: it is a difficult thing to find, because the guys aren't into romance. They just want sex…*

The participants' accounts suggested that girls' romantic ideals are typically not realised within their sexual relationships. Their accounts positioned boys' ideals and desires surrounding sexual relationships in antithetical terms to girls'. As such, boys were constructed as obstacles to girls' realising their ideals surrounding sexual relationships in practice.

> ‘On TV they make it very romantic and all those things…When you see it on TV, it’s like, a girl is being *cared for*, a guy is being romantic and all that …That’s what I *thought* relationships would be like … But *here*, it just happens: done with, and then – over … With boys here, sex is just an appetite. Just have sex; then it’s done; he’s done with you.’ [Xoliswa]

The girls explained that boys tended to equate ‘love’ with sex; they maintained that, when a boy shows interest in a girl – or tells a girl that he ‘loves’ her - ‘he probably just wants to sleep with [her]’:

> ‘Some guy, comes to you, tells you that he loves you. He doesn’t exactly mean that he loves you, wants a relationship with you. He just wants to have sex with you. And then it’s over, just like that.’ [Xoliswa]

Boys were seen as prioritising the physical act of sex over emotional intimacy and connection; consequently, the girls explained, emotional intimacy is uncommon within adolescent heterosexual relationships. The participants explained that boys typically do not see sex as ‘a big deal’, or perceive sex as something that has long-term implications. As such, they held that sexual experiences are typically short-lived, devoid of emotional intimacy, and geared towards the instant gratification of boys: ‘there’re no emotions; it’s like, we did it, so let’s move on’ [Dudu].

Boys’ ideas and ideals surrounding ‘love’ and sex, according to the participants, make for casual, transient sexual partnerships, as boys lose interest in their girlfriends once they have satisfied their sexual ‘appetite’ by having sex with them. The participants felt that, while girls wish for love and romance within their relationships, this was difficult to find, as boys ‘just want sex’.

> ‘A relationship has not to be about sex only. I’m not into sex anyway; and I’m not interested; I don’t like it that much. My friends don’t really enjoy it [sex]. They say, the relationship must not be about sex, you know? You must always … sit together, and joke together; go to the movies. Romance … that kind of thing: not only sex, every time sex … Romance: it is a difficult thing to find: because the guys aren’t into romance. They just want sex …’ [Somi]

Furthermore, a committed, monogamous relationship was seen as difficult to find, as boys are not ‘satisfied’ by one girlfriend, and feel justified having

multiple, concurrent sexual relationships, as a means of satisfying their sexual 'appetites'.

> '[Girls] do want to have love, but it is very difficult to find someone who can love you. It's very difficult … there is a problem with the way boys treat the girls. Because the boys want to have this girlfriend and *another* one, you see. They not satisfied with just one … They're looking at three girlfriends.' [Phumla]

Male infidelity was seen as normative, rather than the exception, as boys see multiple, concurrent partnering as acceptable behaviour. According to the participants, trust was difficult to establish, and experiences of betrayal pervade the sexual lives of young women. They felt that many boys do not view having sex in a serious light, and feel that having sex was solely about 'having fun', and was no more than 'a joke'; by extension, the participants felt, boys showed little respect and consideration for girls, their sexual partners, and rarely take into account how their actions could be hurtful to their girlfriends. Somi explained that many boys are:

> '… just having fun, going around having sex with people. They think it's a joke, having sex. But it's not. It's not a joke. Some of them, they don't think that they will hurt other people. Some of the boys don't really understand girls; how *they* feel about … a relationship.'

Somi explained that girls have difficulty negotiating and realising their own relational ideals within their sexual relationships, as boyfriends see their girlfriends as easily replaceable, and would rather choose to find another girl who will satisfy their sexual needs than negotiate within an existing relationship: boys 'know that I'm not the only girl around; there's other girls that they can go to. So that's what the problem is'. She felt that 'boys are only in a relationship with you because you are a girl' and it is thus hard to be 'loved for who you are'.

Dudu's account, below, echoed the view that boys see girls as 'replaceable' and do not value them 'for who they are'. She likened the 'love game' to a soccer match, wherein boys use girls as a 'practice ball', which they later drop, and replace for a 'new, clean' ball to play in an official 'match' – i.e. when they later seek out marriage:

> '… you go to soccer practice, you practice with this ball. But when you go to a match, you *won't* play with that ball that you

> were practicing with, you going to get another new ball that you're going to play with. So – girls are like this practice ball, but when [boys are] playing at a huge match - when they're getting married – they have to get another new ball; a clean, new ball.' [Dudu]

Her account suggests gender-based double standards at play in the 'love game': while boys feel it is acceptable to have multiple girlfriends, they simultaneously view these girls in negative terms – they are tainted, no longer 'new' or 'clean'.

Gender-Based Power Imbalances

> *If a person beats you, it's the way he shows that he cares; actually, if he lets you do whatever you want to do, he doesn't care.*

The fact that girls accept sexual relationships on boys' terms, rather than negotiating the fulfilment of their own relational ideals, desires and needs, needs to be considered along-side the nature of gender-based power relations within girls' sexual relationships. According to the participants, girls' sexual relationships are characterised by gender-based power imbalances which are inherently skewed to their disadvantage. While girls are often at a disadvantage in terms of physical strength, the participants point out that girls are complicit in sustaining their own disempowerment, as they subscribe to socially-entrenched sexual discourses that justify male domination within sexual relationships, and equate domination, coercion and violence with love.

Male Control And Domination

The participants maintained that many girls in their community are involved in disempowering and coercive sexual relationships. Their descriptions of these relationships revealed a situation in which gender relations are inherently skewed to girls' disadvantage. Boyfriends were described as overly possessive, and exerting much control and domination over the lives of their girlfriends.

> '… my friend's boyfriend keeps telling her she mustn't drink, she mustn't smoke, she must just stay at home. Then, when he comes at home, and says, 'let's go!' she must always be available. Actually, she's stopped everything: she's stopped

> drinking, smoking … and every time she's at home, waiting for her boyfriend. I think she loves him *too much*. More than she loves herself.'

Tensions between love and control, submission and self-respect appeared to characterise girls' experiences within heterosexual relationships. According to the participants, many girls hold the view that being in a heterosexual relationship inevitably entails self-compromise for young women: loving another person comes at the expense of 'loving oneself'. The participants felt that sexual relationships demand little from the male partner and place many pressures upon girls to fulfil their partners' needs and expectations.

Gender-Based Violence

> *Many girlfriends are beaten by their boyfriends. [Zodwa]*

This gender imbalance sometimes leads to gender-based violence within adolescent heterosexual relationships. Alternatively, gender imbalances are reinforced by the prevalence of violence within these relationships. The participants attributed girls' position of limited power and control within their sexual relationships to the fact that their partners often employ physical force as a means of securing a position of domination.

They held up the threat of physical coercion and violence as an explanatory factor for the general reluctance on the part of young women to engage with or confront their sexual partners about instances of infidelity. Many recounted narratives where their female peers had confronted unfaithful partners on this issue, only to be beaten. They also held up the threat of physical abuse as an obstacle barring young women from leaving unfulfilling or disempowering sexual relationships, telling of instances where young women had tried to escape from such a relationship, only to suffer further physical and psychological abuse and disempowerment. Sexual partnerships become a trap in such instances: young women are not able to negotiate a better position within the relationship, nor are they able to escape the relationship, for fear of violent repercussions.

The girls also drew attention to cultural factors that sustain gender-based power imbalances, as well as the social acceptability of gender-based violence, within heterosexual relationships. They felt that gender-based violence within intimate relationships is fuelled by, firstly, a prevailing sexual culture where violence has come to stand as an accepted expression of

'love' and, secondly, a prevailing culture of male superiority, rooted in entrenched gender norms which accord males the right to dominate women.

i. Violence as an accepted expression of love

Some girls drew a link between the high instance of male-on-female abuse and coercion in adolescent females' sexual relationships, and dominant conceptions of 'love' amongst young people, and community more generally. Young women were seen as 'buying into' a dominant sexual discourse that figures love and violence in compatible terms, subscribing to the notion that violence is an active expression of love. Dudu made reference to a friend in her class who was being 'abused' by her boyfriend, and often came to class with bruises. She explained that her friend justified this abuse by saying that 'if someone hits you, it's the way he shows you that he loves you'. Dudu argued with her, asserting that 'someone that loves you can't hit you; make you feel pain'.

> 'For me, if you beat me up, you don't love me; you're just like abusing me, you're making me your punch bag … It's bad; it's wrong. Even, there's a law that says it's wrong for a man to hit a woman.'

In response, the other girls in her class told Dudu, that she does not 'understand' as she is 'still young'. According to Dudu, these girls felt that they 'deserve it' when their boyfriends beat them up, and believe that 'if a person beats you, it's the way he shows that he cares; actually, if he lets you do whatever you want to do, he doesn't care'. Dudu added, 'I think they're in denial; they know it's wrong but they think they love this person …'

ii. Entrenched gender norms

The girls also attributed the prevalence of gender-based violence both to male's superiority in terms of physical strength, as well as to a prevailing culture of male superiority:

> '[Boys] take advantage that the girls will not fight back or something. Because the girls are not that strong to fight with a guy. So it's like, ok, I'm superior, I can do whatever I want to do to you; I've got power – you don't.' [Dudu]

Dudu elaborated upon the culture of male superiority operating around her, linking this go household power hierarchies, and emphasising the manner whereby males hold a position of privilege and dominance within the household by virtue of their gender: 'men are superior in the household'. She explained:

> '… actually the thing with the guys beating up the girls, it comes *way back* when our granny was still young. Because it was allowed for a man to like hit a woman. It was not seen as if he's abusing. Men act as if they are fathers: even if he is my husband he will act as if he is my father. Because now I don't have a father – it's just me and him. So he will act as a father and also as a husband. Because dads are allowed to hit us. So it's like that; if you get married now, a person thinks he owns you or something; you're his. So he can do whatever he wants to do with you.'

Girls' Complicity In The 'Love Game': Sex, Social Positioning And Power

Although the participants pin-pointed boys as the instigators of the 'love game', their accounts suggested that girls are complicit in sustaining the 'love game', both by virtue of their failure to actively challenge dominant sexual practices, as well as by their active participation in the 'love game'. The accounts suggested that girls submit to and accept sexual relationships on boys' terms, due to the social desirability of having boyfriends, the social value attached to having sex, and the socially-valuable material commodities and consumer-driven life-style that sexual relationships provide. This is underpinned by social competition amongst girls, wherein sexual relationships infer competitive advantage in a variety of ways. While participation in the 'love game' requires girls to relinquish their ideals of 'romantic love', it is nonetheless attractive to the extent that it grants girls competitive advantage within the female peer group, as well as laying a path towards social integration, status and power.

Re-Appropriating The 'Love Game': Competitive Advantage And Social Power

The participants' accounts suggested that girls have become resigned to accept the fact that their romantic ideals cannot be realised within the context

of the ‘love game’ that boys have set in motion. Instead of attempting to challenge the ‘love game’, girls choose to turn the ‘love game’ back upon boys. Consequently, girls have come to approach sexual relationships in the same manner as boys do, embracing, multiple, casual, transient partnerships over long-term commitment, emotional investment and monogamy:

> ‘… most of the time, the girls, they’re just in a relationship for this month, and the next month they with another man. Then they go on and on and on …’ [Phumla]

However, girls do not participate in the ‘love game’ solely as a means of ‘turning its effects back’ upon boys, but also as a means of competing with other girls for social status and power. Instead of confronting and challenging unfaithful boyfriends, who engage in multiple, concurrent partnering, girls compete with one another for boys’ attention ‘to impress the public; be known in public’ [Phumla]. For girls, sex and sexual relationships, in practice, appear to play out in the form of a social performance, geared towards achieving social visibility and recognition, status and power. In particular, according to the participants, boys who are ‘attractive’ and ‘popular’ are pursued as boyfriends, as these qualities infer social status upon their girlfriends.

Coupling And Having Sex: Social Integration And Status

Dominant sexual norms, upheld by girls, attach social value to heterosexual coupling, and sexual experience. Being single is a point of exclusion by female peers, and results in experiences of social isolation and inadequacy. Girls who do not have boyfriends feel ‘alone’ and ‘outcast’, and ‘grab the opportunity’ to have a boyfriend to ‘fit in’ amongst their female peers. In this, heterosexual coupling appeared to be an important mediator of social integration amongst female peers.

> ‘… most of the time it’s peer pressure. Your friends *do* have boyfriends and you don’t really have a boyfriend. And *always* they talk about their boyfriends. So you start realising, ‘maybe I’m lonely; maybe no one wants me’. Then, if a guy comes to you, you *grab* the opportunity because you want to fit in.’ [Dudu]

Girls who subscribe to dominant norms that attach social value to being in a couple tend to exclude other girls from conversation – which appear to turn predominantly upon their sexual partners. Girls and their boyfriends also tend

to socialise as couples, rather than individually, and can make their single friends feel inadequate and expendable.

> ‘When you are with your friends and your friends are with their boyfriends, you are alone, you don't have a boyfriend, you will be the outcast: you are not there with your boyfriend; why must you be there? So you will eventually have your own boyfriend. Just to fit in.’ [Xoliswa]

Sexually abstinent girls suffer similar experiences of social exclusion and inferiority within the female peer group, wherein having sex was considered normative. As in the case of girls who are single, girls who are sexually abstinent are excluded from conversation, and are seen as ‘children’ and viewed in an inferior light by their predominantly sexually active peers. Although boys appear to pressurise girls to have sex, it is evident that girls encourage and actively pressurise their peers to have sex, and hold that ‘having sex proves that you love your boyfriend’ and proves how ‘serious’ a boyfriend is about his girlfriend. While the accounts suggested that girls commonly have sex to ‘satisfy’ their boyfriends, this is very much bound up in the social desirability of having and ‘keeping’ boyfriends.

Sex, Material Transactions And Social Power

> *Masiphumelele has a lot of girls who want money from a relationship. They are in the relationship to have money, to drink and to buy stuff. [Zuki]*

Not only do heterosexual relationships stand as a valuable social commodity within the peer group for girls, they also stand as a means of acquiring material commodities. According to the participants, boyfriends are often actively sought out as ‘providers’ of money and material goods by girls. In most instances, these material goods are one’s that confer and reinforce social status and power, and feed into social competition amongst girls. In this sense, material exchanges within heterosexual relationships have both real and symbolic value.

Social competition amongst girls in Masiphumelele appears to be rooted in a material-bound culture, where consumer commodities of material value play an important role in conferring social status and power. According to the participants, girls aspire towards a modern, affluent lifestyle that corresponds with that of the ‘rich’, ‘famous’ and ‘beautiful’, embodied by ‘movie stars’, ‘models’ and musicians who feature within popular music, magazines and

TV shows. On one level, cultivating this lifestyle is bound up with 'looking right', or cultivating a particular, socially-valued external presentation. As one of the participants noted, 'for all young people…outside image is very, very important; it is a big issue to look right, have nice clothes … When you go out, you have to look nice'. For girls, the 'right' 'outside image' is projected through fashionable and expensive clothes and hair-dos, and materially valuable accessories, including jewellery and cell phones. On another level, the lifestyle to which young people aspire is bound up in a culture of 'partying', which is generally accompanied by alcohol consumption. In some instances, 'partying' takes place in local shebeens, but over-18 dance clubs in the city centre – some 40 kilometres away from Masiphumelele - are particularly sought after. Lack of public and private transport makes visiting these clubs difficult, as well as the costly nature of the cover charge imposed by these establishments and pricey alcoholic beverages.

Within the prevailing context of poverty, the participants explained, many girls view sex and sexual relationships as a means of realising these material aspirations, and cultivating this sought-after lifestyle. Specifically, boyfriends who are in a financial position to pay for, or provide material goods that support this lifestyle – who can provide the means to afford expensive clothes, jewellery and cell phones, who can drive their girlfriends around in cars, or who can afford to pay for entertainment and drinks – are sought after. According to the participants, material gain is one of the key concerns motivating girls to have sexual relationships, and sometimes the primary factor governing the manner whereby girls select their sexual partners turns upon their potential to provide materially. As one of the participants held, many girls are not 'in love' with their boyfriends: they are 'after his money and *not him*'.

> 'Most of the time they want money … They say that I can't go out with someone who's still at school, because he's not going to provide for me. I think there's a problem because they don't have money in their families. They think it's a good idea to have someone who's going to support you from outside.' [Phumla]

Discussions with the participants revealed that many girls are 'selling themselves' to older – sometimes married - men 'just to fit in' and to gain social power and status in relation to other girls. Driving this, they maintained, is the fact that most young women are not driven to become self-sufficient and to support themselves independently. However, the participants appeared conscious that giving up one's independence in this manner comes at a cost, and actively avoided this form of sexual practice, as they were

aware of the personal costs entailed in social conformity. They critically deconstructed these apparently material transactions to expose the exchange of power that underpins them, one that inevitably disempowers the young women involved.

Many boys give their girlfriends materially valuable 'gifts', with the underlying expectation that this entitles them to have sex with them. Girls reinforce these expectations, as many feel unable to refuse having sex with boyfriends who have given them material goods. These goods symbolise and stand as reminders to girls of their indebtedness to their providers, rather than as unconditional 'gifts'. The participants explained, further, that material compensation is often only provided *after* a girl has provided her partner with sexual gratification - signifying that the young woman is of no value beyond the sexual gratification she provides.

> 'Its bad; it's more like you're selling your body. It's really wrong… Because he makes you feel as if you're a prostitute; he bought something from you. Because after you have sex, now he gives you money or something; he buys you things. But before you had sex, he didn't give you anything.' [Dudu]

This further underscores the conditional nature of material transactions in girls' sexual relationships, and the fact that material transactions, while apparently benefiting young women, simultaneously serve to further the ends of their boyfriends. Girls are compelled to submit to relational terms set up by their partners if they are to receive material benefits. In keeping with this, the girls maintained that boyfriends also provide for their girlfriends so that they can afford to make themselves 'look beautiful', which boosts their boyfriends' social status amongst their male peers. Girls become 'bought' accessories to their partners in this respect: 'they pay you to look nice'.

The Place Of Sexual Health Within The 'Love Game'

A final factor that should be addressed in relation to normative adolescent sexual practices, and the processes mediating these, is that of sexual health. The participants' descriptions of normative adolescent sexual practices and relationships - which appeared to stress sexual activity over abstinence, and casual, multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships over faithfulness and monogamy – suggested that young people are not embracing practices that sexual health interventions promote and encourage young people to adopt as

a means of preventing HIV infection[1]. Furthermore, according to the participants, unprotected sex is common amongst young people, which they inferred from the highly visible occurrence of teenage pregnancy within their community. They held that young people were exposed to HIV awareness and information campaigns, and that contraceptives were freely available at the local clinic[2], yet young people continued to engage in unprotected sex. Their accounts suggested that the lifestyle embraced by many young people, myths surrounding HIV, and the over-shadowing of concerns surrounding long-term physical well-being by concerns surrounding immediate social integrity play into this.

A 'Lifestyle' Of Sexual Risk-Taking

> *Here there are a lot of young girls who are going to the shebeens and going out at night, and nobody was controlling them. And pregnancy and everything can come out of that. [Thandi]*

As described in the previous sub-section, part of the lifestyle aspired towards and embraced by young people was bound up in a culture of 'partying', which tended to play out in local shebeens and city nightclubs, and was frequently accompanied by alcohol consumption. Within local shebeens, alcohol is easily available to young people, due to these being, by definition, unregulated and illegal. Sexual liaisons, and particularly unprotected sex, commonly appeared to be an unplanned or unintended by-product of these social activities: 'Shebeens … there you get drunk; you end up sleeping with someone' [Dudu]. Alternatively, 'partying' often appeared to take place outside of the confines of Masiphumelele itself. Young people seemed to position 'partying', particularly alcohol consumption, and having sex in the same category of teenage socially-valued pursuits, which are viewed in a morally questionable and generally critical light by parents and adults more generally. Part of the attraction of city nightclubs is their location, far from the watchful eyes of older members of the close-knit community, who may inform parents of their 'wrong-doings'.

> 'Masiphumelele is not fun. People around here know each other a lot. So, if you are going to *drink*: your parent are going to know; if you have sex, they are going to find out…' [Xoliswa]

[1] Most information campaigns targeted at young people stress the 'ABC' approach: delayed sexual debut ('Abstinence'), reduction in number of partners after sexual debut ('B' for behaviour change, and 'be faithful'), and condom use when sexually active ('C' for condom use).
[2] Issues related to clinic accessibility will be discussed in Part 3

As such, it appeared that this aspect of adolescent social life plays out unregulated and unsupervised by adult figures, which further facilitates casual sexual liaisons. Although the participants maintained that girls who 'like to party a lot…have to carry condoms around', it was evident that, in practice, the unplanned nature of sexual liaisons, and the compromising effect of alcohol upon rational judgment, often overrides intentions to engage in safe sexual practices.

HIV As A 'Myth'

> *It is being preached a lot. You turn this side – HIV/AIDS; you turn that side – HIV/AIDS … All the time – HIV/AIDS; all time, AIDS.*

The participants' accounts suggested that young people are continually targeted with HIV prevention messages, and exposed to information and awareness campaigns. Despite this, they maintained, young people do not perceive themselves as being at risk of infection, in spite of their lack of uptake of safe sexual practices. The participants attributed this to the fact that many young people believe that 'it's a myth that HIV exists', holding that parents invented this myth to 'scare' their daughters 'away' from having sex: 'because the parents don't want their children to get pregnant and to have sex'. More generally, the participants maintained that parents use the threat of HIV as a means of attempting to restrict their daughters' movements: for example, one of the participants said that when girls have 'done something wrong' such as going out too late at night, their parents tell them '*you'll get AIDS!*'. This could further compound girls' suspicions that HIV/AIDS is part of a parental scare-tactic, and a means of controlling them.

De-Prioritisation Of Sexual Health

> *Most of girls, they don't worry about getting HIV. All they're worried about is getting pregnant. They don't think about HIV and AIDS. [Nomhle]*

Finally, the participants highlighted the fact that, while girls showed little concern surrounding HIV, they were concerned with falling pregnant (despite their lack of uptake of preventative practices). Their over-riding concern with falling pregnant was attributed to the immediately visible nature of pregnancy, as compared with HIV.

> ‘HIV is not a big issue. Because if you have HIV/AIDS, some people won’t even notice you have the disease. If you are pregnant, people will see that you’re pregnant.’ [Zuki]
>
> ‘The thing is, if you get pregnant, then everyone will see that you are pregnant. But when you are infected [with HIV], it will take a while for people to see. Because if you’re HIV positive, no one can recognise until you’re in the later stages; you going to die. So I think that’s the problem, you don’t want people to know …’ [Dudu]

The girls explained that HIV and teenage pregnancy are both socially stigmatised ‘conditions’, as these implicate young people, particularly girls, in what adults view as morally suspect behaviour – namely, having sex. It appeared that these social repercussions of unprotected sex were of greater concern to young people than were their long-term implications for physical health. Concern with preserving immediate social integrity appeared to outweigh concern with preserving long-term physical integrity. Concern surrounding social standing appeared to play a pivotal role within this frame of logic: as seen in the quote above, the threat is not directly rooted in HIV or pregnancy itself, but in the potential reaction from others that each bodily or physical ‘condition’ may incite. The ‘problem’ is about *hiding* from others one’s transgression – ‘you don’t want people to know’ – rather than the physical implications of this ‘transgression’. It appeared that young people employed a ‘*what will other people think?*’ frame of logic when weighing up the health and reproductive risks associated with sex. Problematically, concerns surrounding social integrity and well-being did not appear to coincide with, or promote, concerns surrounding physical, particularly sexual, health and well-being.

Part 2

Participants’ Sexual Strategies: Conformity And Resistance

The girls who participated in the study were all sexually active, and engaged in heterosexual partnering in some form. All of the girls upheld the set of relational ideals outlined before – desiring love, trust, respect, romance, communication, emotional intimacy and commitment within their sexual

relationships – and viewed the prevailing adolescent sexual culture – the 'love game' – as a barrier to realising these ideals in practice. Furthermore, the participants were all critical of the manner whereby girls' sexual relationships play out in normative terms, and were conscious and critical of the role of both girls and boys in reproducing the problematic sexual culture mediating their sexual relationships. However, variation was evident in the extent to which the participants attempted to realise, and ultimately were able to build, fulfilling relationships that operate counter to what they perceive as the 'norm'.

Although most of the participants appeared resigned to, and accepted that sexual relationships can only be casual, superficial and transient, and characterised by disappointment and betrayal, there was evidence that some girls do seek out, establish, and sustain relationships that break from the norm. While relationships that matched teenage girls' ideals, encapsulating love, trust, respect, communication and long-term commitment, appeared rare, the participants' personal accounts suggest that these are possible.

The following analysis isolates three broad relational strategies employed by the respective participants, each of which is associated with varying relational characteristics and outcomes. The analysis explores the rationale driving the respective strategies, the extent to which these strategies produce relationships that conform to, or, alternatively, diverge from and counter the norm, and the factors and processes mediating this.

Strategy A: Resigned

The first relational strategy, employed by two of the participants, is rooted in a resigned acceptance that disappointment is inevitable within heterosexual relationships. Girls who employed this relational strategy were involved in enduring sexual relationships, which appeared to be generally unfulfilling, and did not match the girls' relational ideals. These girls remained in such relationships regardless of this, due to a perceived lack of alternative possibility.

Thandi had been involved with her boyfriend for more than a year. She discovered that he was involved with another girl a few months into the relationship. Thandi did not confront her boyfriend, and was still involved with the same boy, despite being aware that he was still involved with other girls. She explained that she had accepted this situation as she did not wish to 'upset the relationship'. She justified the situation by saying that her boyfriend is 'still young' and that girls cannot expect too much from boys at

this age, and particularly cannot expect them to be trustworthy: ‘because they are young, and they’re at that stage of life wanting to have many girlfriends … they can have all those things now, when they are young, but when they are older they can be asked more of’.

Zodwa was also involved in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend at the time of the study. She described a painful experience of visiting her boyfriend, unannounced, and finding him in his room with another girl: ‘I was hurting, I was very hurt; I was trying not to cry’. She did not confront her boyfriend at the time, however: ‘I was just looking. And went back home’. Subsequently, although her boyfriend had wanted to discuss the issue with her, Zodwa had refused to engage with him on the subject, as she ‘knew he was going to lie’, and deny being unfaithful. Despite the fact that she no longer trusted him after this, Zodwa did not break up with him. At the time of the study, almost a year after this incident, Zodwa said she was still struggling to trust her boyfriend completely: ‘I’m trying to trust him. But it’s very difficult’. When discussing her doubts and uncertainties in her relationship, it seemed that Zodwa assigned herself a certain degree of responsibility and blame for her boyfriend’s transgression. She explained: ‘when I have doubts with my boyfriend, I think, maybe I’m not beautiful. So maybe that’s why he found another girlfriend’.

Zodwa’s conception of building trust in her relationship appeared to be of a very one-sided nature, in that responsibility for developing trust appeared to fall only on her – despite her boyfriend being responsible for breaking her trust in the first place. She felt that she had to ‘try’ to trust him, but did not appear to expect her boyfriend to earn her trust. Furthermore, her expectation that her boyfriend would lie to her meant that she erected barriers to open communication which could ultimately form the foundation for trust.

The girls’ ideas surrounding trust and fidelity were underpinned by gender norms surrounding ‘acceptable’ or ‘expected’ behaviours of boys. In both cases, the girls did not appear to feel that boys can be held responsible for their actions and sexual relationships. They did not expect their boyfriends to hold a position of accountability, and even held themselves accountable for their boyfriends’ transgressions. Despite the fact that these girls were betrayed by their boyfriends and were unhappy and unfulfilled in their relationships as a result of this, they indirectly played a role in sustaining a culture of infidelity, by failing to confront their boyfriends, or demand more from them, in such instances. Consequently, boys do not suffer any negative consequences related to their actions, and do not have to face up to the emotional upset that their actions inflict upon their girlfriends, and thus have little motivation to change their approach to relationships.

Strategy B: Avoidant / Noncommittal

The second strategy, employed by three of the participants, is geared towards defending against, and avoiding emotional risks associated with heterosexual relationships. Girls who employed this strategy were wary of investing emotionally in sexual relationships, holding the belief that betrayal and disappointment were inevitable, and that avoiding relational intimacy was the only means of avoiding these outcomes. This strategy is characterised by a noncommittal approach towards sexual relationships, and entails avoiding emotional investment and attachment. This defensive approach results in transient, superficial sexual partnerships which bear a close resemblance to what girls perceive as the norm, and do not fulfil girls' relational ideals. The girls' cynical, wary orientation towards heterosexual relationships appeared to be a product of prior experiences of disappointment and disillusionment within sexual relationships, or a product of witnessing these experiences play out in other girls' sexual relationships.

These girls were reluctant to develop long-term sexual relationships, due to concerns surrounding emotional intimacy, investment and attachment. They felt that long-term relationships involve emotional investment, and lead to emotional attachment, which can have painful consequences if – or *when* – the relationship ends.

> Xoliswa: 'You don't want it to be a long relationship. When you're so close to that person, now maybe you've stayed with him about three years or four years, when you break up with him, it will be so painful, you won't accept that it happens. So I don't want it…'
>
> Dudu: 'That's also what I am scared of: I don't want to stay with a boyfriend for a very long time. Actually what I'm scared of, I don't want to get close to a person…'
>
> Somi: 'Some girls want to have a relationship to have fun, and some want a serious relationship. I'm not ready for a serious relationship yet … We think that … when it comes to the break up, it is very difficult. The other person moves on, and then you have to move on too. It will be very difficult to fall in love again.'

Xoliswa: ‘There are girls that stay in a relationship for a long time. We don’t know *what* they *expect* from it.’

In two of the cases – Xoliswa and Somi – the participants’ expectations surrounding sexual relationships appeared to been negatively coloured after significant sexual relationships that had matched their ideals – surrounding romance, love, open communication, respect and trust - had faltered. These relationships had both ended in disappointment, when the participants’ respective boyfriends had been unfaithful. Their subsequent disillusionment appeared to feed into their reluctance to re-invest themselves in building relationships that realise their ideals, and both had consequently taken up a non-committal approach towards sexual relationships. Xoliswa held that she was currently not involved in a sexual relationship, and:

> ‘I don’t want to be! I have been hurt so many times. So, it’s not so easy to trust a guy, even if he is honest or anything. It’s not that easy. You’ve been there, done it; it’s like it’s going to be repeat itself again. It’s hard to find a guy you can *really* trust … you can’t really trust boys.’

She maintained that, in the foreseeable future, she would only consider having a short-term relationship:

> ‘… If I have been with a guy, maybe about two to three years, then if he breaks up with me, I will be really, really hurt. Because I told myself, maybe we are going further than this. Then your heart will be really, really broken; you will be frustrated … That’s the reason that I say, when you go into a relationship, you mustn’t *expect* much from a guy. It is a safe way; I won’t be hurt.’

Dudu, on the other hand, explained that she had never been involved in, or invested herself in building a ‘stable’, ‘long-term’ relationship. She attributed this to the fact that she was ‘scared’ of becoming ‘close to a person’: ‘Because my cousin was in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend. Then they broke up. And she actually tried to commit suicide’. She described the emotional impact of having discovered her cousin close to death, and the subsequent anxious wait in the hospital. Dudu maintained that, although her cousin had recovered from her attempted suicide, she was still emotionally tied to her ex-boyfriend, and cried every time she passed him in the street.

The incident impacted strongly upon Dudu, her sister and her other cousins: they had since made a joint 'commitment' that they would never enter into a long-term sexual relationship: 'because we don't want to end up in that position'. They 'gave each other a limit' that they can 'stay with a boyfriend for four or five months, not more'. Dudu was thus in the ironic position of having 'committed' to non-committal relationships. Since making this 'commitment', Dudu found herself in a position where she actually terminated a functional and fulfilling relationship, based purely on the fact that she had made this vow. She explained that 'I'm good at ending things', and her narratives surrounding other sexual relationships suggested that she dealt with problems by terminating relationships, rather than negotiating better terms from within the relationship.

The girls' fears surrounding intimacy and commitment appeared to feed into the fact that, rather than pursuing committed sexual relationships, they tended to have 'one-night-stands' with boys, and subscribed to a casual, superficial approach to sexual partnering that bore a close resemblance to what they constructed as the 'norm'. At times, the girls evidenced ambivalence surrounding this approach towards sex and sexual relationships, and appeared conscious of its problematic aspects. However, they appeared 'committed' to non-committal relationships nonetheless.

> 'I feel like I deserve more than one-night-stands. Sometimes it makes me feel cheap; like he took advantage of me, or something. That person thinks that you were this … slut … you sleep around with everyone and you don't *care* … But I'm scared to be attached to someone. Because I've seen people who've really had bad experiences … It was scary. Maybe I'll find love some day when I'm older – but not now; I'm not actually needing at the moment to be in love … A part of me … *wants* to be wanted. But I've told myself, and that's that, I won't break this promise …' [Dudu]

Relational Strategy A and B participants both expected little and appeared to get little from their relationships. Importantly, this was due, in part, to the fact that they did not invest themselves in developing more fulfilling relationships. In this sense, their orientation towards relationships becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: i.e. because they expect little from their relationships, they do little to effect fulfilling relationships and, in turn, get little from these. The strategies taken up by these participants produced relationships that bear a close resemblance to the norm, despite their viewing normative sexual relationships in a problematic light. In this, these strategies

indirectly, and sometimes overtly, sustain problematic aspects of the prevailing sexual culture.

Strategy C: Optimising

This approach towards relationships, evidenced in the case of three of the participants, appeared to be a less dominant, counter-normative strategy, geared not only towards avoiding risk, loss and disappointment within sexual relationships, but also towards optimising gains. These girls worked productively to build relationships in positive terms that break from the norm, encapsulating trust, long-term commitment and intimacy – despite personal experiences of betrayal, despite an opposing sexual culture, and in the face of overt peer pressure to conform to the more casual, superficial approach to sexual relationships promoted by the prevailing sexual culture.

This counter-normative approach appeared to be sustained by a number of factors, including: the establishment of a positive relational foundation – embodying trust, love and commitment – as a precursor to sexual intimacy; a flexible approach to negotiating problems within a relationship; and a discerning approach towards partner selection. Partners were selected according to the criteria of love and trust, as well as shared values and aspirations, particularly those concerning independence and self-empowerment.

Delayed Sexual Intimacy: Establishing Love And Trust

These girls were involved in long-term relationships with their boyfriends, which ranged from one to three years in duration at the time of the study. In all three cases, their current boyfriends were also their first sexual partners, and all had delayed sexual intimacy until developing emotionally intimate and committed relationships with their partners. They prioritised the importance of establishing emotional intimacy and trust prior to developing physically or sexually intimate relationships.

Zuki had felt it was important to ‘wait for the right time to have sex…for someone who loves me, and I love him. Some one I trust’. When her current boyfriend had first asked her out, she had been uncertain: she had told him they ‘must first be friends’ before becoming boyfriend and girlfriend. Four months later, she had felt ‘ready to be his girlfriend’: at this point, she said, ‘I was feeling that he was loving me *really*; he was loving me all the time’. Even when she had started dating her current boyfriend, she had not

immediately become sexually involved with him: ‘I waited. Because I am not a person who does things fast. No: do things slowly. So I said to him, we might be boyfriend and girlfriend, but it doesn’t mean we will do sex now’.

Similarly, Phumla held that she had decided in her early teens that she would not have sex with someone, until she found someone ‘special’ – despite the fact that most of her female peers were already sleeping with their boyfriends.

> ‘Because I’ve seen that the way most of the girls, when you sleep with someone, you sleep with him today, and then tomorrow he’s going to say that, *oh, I don’t love you, it’s like this and that*…’

She described how a friend had:

> ‘Slept with this boy, and the next thing the boy had another girlfriend. When she went to confront him, he told her, ‘you are not my girlfriend! I just slept with you because I wanted to; I just felt like it; I didn’t love you – I just had sex with you’. So I just told myself that I have to get someone who’s right. I must just find someone who wants something special with me; then maybe I can sleep with them. I want to have sex when I am ready, [with] the perfect person.’

Phumla explained that, when her boyfriend had first approached her, she had treated his advances very cautiously, but had gradually started trusting him as he had shown a genuine interest in her well-being, and showed his commitment to building a relationship with her.

> ‘At first I didn’t trust him. I didn’t trust him. But when he *called* me every day, calling and calling, I started trusting him. He asked, ‘Did you go to school today? How was school? And stuff. He liked to talk about school all the time: ‘Did you do your homework?’ And he told me that I love you *very* much.’

Trust And Agency

Building trust was sometimes a tenuous process, and there were instances where these girls were betrayed by, or had betrayed their partners. However, instances of infidelity only characterised the early stages of relationship-building. Through open communication, these issues were resolved, a greater

level of intimacy reached, and trusting relationships founded. For example, Phumla, who had slowly begun to trust her boyfriend, was devastated when she found her boyfriend with another girl:

> ‘I was hurting; I was hurt. Because I didn’t expect that: I *did trust him* very much. So I asked my sister, ‘what can I do?’ And she said to me that I must just talk to him, and solve the problem through. So we sat down and talked, and everything is fine now.’

The manner whereby Phumla dealt with betrayal in her relationship diverges from her counter-parts, in that she did not simply terminate the relationship at the first sign of trouble, nor did she passively accept her boyfriend’s infidelity. Rather, she enforced open communication, and confronted the problem directly. Ultimately, her boyfriend acknowledged his guilt, and apologised, after which Phumla forgave him. Reflecting upon the incident, she felt that the experience had actually made their relationship stronger, rather than undermining it. Although, like other girls, she had feared that he had cheated on her because he had wanted sex, she had expressed these fears to him, and he had stressed to her that she should only have sex with him when she was ready.

Nomhle, on the other hand, had been in a position where she had considered being unfaithful to her boyfriend. He lived and studied in another province, where Nomhle had grown up. She missed him a lot, although they communicated regularly by phone, and saw each other during holidays; however, she had started questioning the viability of their relationship. At one point in their relationship, she developed a ‘crush’ on a boy in her class; he approached her, and told her that he ‘loved’ her, and they had started seeing each other. However, she soon started questioning her judgment and his intentions: a week into their relationship, he had demanded and tried to coerce her to have sex with him. She managed to resist his advance, and came to realise that ‘he doesn’t love me; he just wants to use me’. Reflecting upon the experience, she admitted that ‘I never trusted him’. She had since resolved to ‘wait’ for her long-distant boyfriend, and ‘quit getting other boyfriends’ because ‘it’s not right, man’: ‘Because I know that he loves me. Wait for *him*; that’s what I’m doing’.

Girls who experience problems in their relationships can thus manipulate moments of relational difficulty to produce positive relational outcomes. This suggests that it is not only the presence of negative elements in their relationships, but the extent to which girls perceive themselves as agents, and

the manner whereby they react and deal with these problems, that ultimately determines the level of fulfilment these relationships provide.

Partner Selection: Shared Values And Aspirations

These girls evidenced a more discerning approach to partner selection, and had actively sought out partners who respect their values, who were similarly invested in building a loving and committed relationship, and who would help rather than hinder them in achieving their goals and realising their dreams in the future. Potential boyfriends were evaluated not only according to the criteria of love and trust, but also according to shared values and ambitions. In particular, these girls sought out and built relationships with partners who encouraged them to complete their schooling and focus on their schoolwork, who were similarly engaged in building successful productive futures, and who could provide a point of mutual identification and understanding. All three of the girls were involved with boys who were 2 to 3 years older than they, who had completed their schooling, and were enrolled in tertiary education institutions.

Phumla explained that, before she became involved with her current boyfriend, other boys had sought out a relationship with her; however, she had turned them away as they were not her 'type':

> 'Because the other boys … they not going to school. I like someone who is still at school. So I like someone who's *doing* something, not just sitting around, not just staying around in Site 5. What can I learn from him, [if] he's just staying around in Site 5?'

Her boyfriend was different from, and more attractive to her, than most other boys, as he had finished school and was completing tertiary studies at a local technical college. She explained that many girls are involved in relationships with boys who are 'doing nothing' – out of school, unemployed and ambitionless – which had a hindering effect upon girls' abilities to sustain their own ambitions: 'girls are badly influenced by their boyfriends'. She felt that boys who were not studying encourage their girlfriends to 'leave their homework' and join them at parties until late into the night. Then, when their girlfriends want to go to school in the morning, 'he doesn't want you to go to school because … he doesn't understand. Because he doesn't himself go to school'. It was important to Phumla that her boyfriend would support her investment in her schooling: 'I want someone who can support me, say 'it's right, you have to go to *school*; you have to do your *homework*' and stuff'.

Phumla viewed herself as more ambitious than most other girls and boys, explaining that 'I want to do something for myself. I can't just stay around Site Five doing *nothing* …'. Investing in her schooling is seen as a means of securing a good job in her future, which can afford her a means of material success, and a passport out of the problem-ridden community she lives in:

> 'Because I want to have my own things, my own cars … I want to live a life which is very good. And go out of Site 5; I mustn't stay in Site 5 … In Site Five, you see people *stabbing* each other, fighting each other, *drinking*. So, the population here is not fine; I don't like this place. I just live here because my parents live here.'

She felt that, while she wishes to have a relationship because she wants to find love, many other girls are only motivated by material gain. She feels she is different to other girls, in that she wants to be self-sufficient, and does not wish to be materially dependent upon a man.

Discussions with these girls around what they valued in their partners revealed that some young men hold similar ideals around relationships to young women, and do not fit the problematic stereotype upheld by many girls. For example, Zuki described her boyfriend in the following manner:

> 'He's good to me; he's [taught] me a lot of things that I didn't know. He taught me about love; how to love a person: if you love a person, you don't love them with money, or stuff; you love them in your heart. You have to have the feelings for someone you love. And he also explained, if you want to be someone in the future, you have to do that and that and that …'

As the extract suggests, girls who invested themselves in building counter-normative sexual relationships were involved with boyfriends who encouraged them to resist dominant sexual practices, and gave them insight into alternative pathways and possibilities.

Conformity And Resistance: The Role Of Peer Group Processes

The following component of the paper explores the difficulties the participants' faced in developing and maintaining counter-normative sexual strategies, and sexual relationships that matched their ideals. Specifically, the analysis highlights the role of opposing peer group processes and pressures

which give insight into why such sexual strategies and relationships are typically rare amongst girls.

Attacks Upon Counter-Normative Sexual Relationships

Counter-normative sexual relationships that matched girls' ideals were vulnerable to attack from peers who are critical of sexual non-conformity. The participants who had succeeded in establishing committed sexual relationships explained that even close friends continually pressurised them leave these relationships, and conform to the more normative, casual approach to relationships to which they subscribed. For example, Nomhle (Strategy C), who had been involved with her boyfriend for two years, explained that Dudu (Strategy B), who embraced a noncommittal approach towards sexual relationships was unsupportive of Nomhle, and encouraged her to 'forget' about her boyfriend, and be 'like her':

> 'Dudu, I tell you, she doesn't support me! Like, the thing is, she *wants* me to be like *her* … she doesn't like a long, long relationship. She just – got him – and then quits; go finds another one. She doesn't support me. She's just telling me: just forget about him! Stop thinking about *him!* Stuff like that … and I said, he's my man, and I really do love him.'

These pressures give insight into the difficulties girls face in maintaining committed sexual relationships. However, there was evidence that girls faced even greater difficulty in establishing, let alone sustaining such relationships, as will be discussed below.

'Waiting For The Right Time To Have Sex': Sex And Peer Pressure

Girls who employed counter-normative sexual strategies which, in particular, involved delayed sex activity, and prioritising the establishment of love and trust, were faced with much opposing pressure from their female peers. For example, Zuki (strategy C) had felt it was important to 'wait for the right time to have sex … for someone who loves me, and I love him. Some one I trust'. While her boyfriend had been patient, and agreed to these relational terms, it was from her female peers that she was levelled with pressure to have sex:

> ‘It was hard. Because they said, ‘boys want to have sex, they don’t want to wait … When boys have a girlfriend, they want to have sex. Who [is] this boy who don’t want to have sex? You’re lying!’’

It appeared that girls who are self-professed virgins, particularly those who have boyfriends, are viewed with suspicion and disbelief by their sexually active peers, and labelled as ‘liars’. Phumla had had similar experiences to Zuki, before she later became sexually involved with her current boyfriend:

> ‘The girls at my school used to ask me, ‘are you still a virgin?’. Then I told them, ‘yes, I am’. They said, ‘you’re lying. How can you be?’ They say, ‘you’re too old for not having sex’ … It upset me. But I told myself that I mustn’t have sex because people want me to have sex, I have to have it when I want to.’

The other participants, whose sexual relationships took a more normative form, appeared to have succumbed to external pressures around having sex. Many of these girls attributed their decision to become sexually active primarily to external pressures: perceived pressure to satisfy their boyfriends and powerful peer pressure from their female cohorts had played a key role in their sexual decision-making. The majority felt that they had not been ‘ready to have sex’, or had had other motivations to abstain sexually, and had compromised themselves, and their personal values, by succumbing to external sexual pressures.

> ‘My friends were telling me, you know, having sex is nice, and having sex proves that you love your boyfriend. So that’s why I did it: I was proving how serious he is about me. I was trying to satisfy him.’ [Somi]

> ‘I wasn’t ready to have sex. But I was trying to make my boyfriend happy.’ [Zodwa]

Dudu first had sex at the age of sixteen. Before this, she had wished to delay having sex until she had completed her schooling. She was concerned about falling pregnant while she was at school, as this would compromise her schooling career which, in turn, would have negative implications for future career opportunities. She held that peer pressure, levelled at her from her female peers, was the key factor that had motivated her to lose her virginity:

> ‘… all of them were having sex. That was the main thing that was pulling me to do that … they were stressing me – talking

about sex and all of that. And they were like, 'Dudu, we like girls who have sex.''

'… peer pressure is the *most* powerful thing. You want to fit in. People like people who are not virgins, so it's better for you to not be a virgin so that you can fit in. When I was still a virgin – people were saying, *no, Dudu, you're lying; you're not a virgin* … And I actually thought, what's the point for me to stay as a virgin when everybody else thinks I'm not a virgin? So, what the hell, I must just do it and get it over with and be the same with them.'

Like many of the participants, she held that 'non-virgins' create a culture of superiority whereby virgins are excluded and made to feel inadequate, and their womanhood denied:

'You actually feel less than them; because they are like saying: no, you are still a kid, and they are adults and stuff. And you actually want to be on the same level as they are. Because, if they are going somewhere, they like, 'no, we're not going with *kids*; we're older than you' … even if they're younger than you by age, since they're not virgins they're older than you; now you're this *kid*, you mustn't go with them; you mustn't go walk around with them at school or something, because you're this *kid*; they don't want to talk things with the *kid* …'

She experienced ambivalent feelings in relation to her first sexual experience. On the one hand, she felt that, on a social level, losing her virginity had had positive repercussions:

'…*Everything* changes. Because now people will accept you, because now you're no longer a virgin yourself. And you'll no longer be laughed [at] at school or something: *ja, you're still a child; you're still a virgin!'*

However, on the other hand, she felt that this had had negative repercussions on a personal level. She felt 'dirty' and 'angry' with herself, as she had compromised the important 'promise' she had made to herself to postpone having sex until she had passed matric: 'I *told* myself that I want to lose my virginity when I finish school … But it just happened. It happened – because of friends'.

A Cycle Of Sexual And Social Conformity

It appeared that the participants who had initially succumbed to peer pressure around having sex became caught up in a cycle of sexual conformity from which it was difficult to break. On the other hand, the participants who had remained sexually abstinent until they had developed committed relationships with their boyfriends did not appear to be drawn into this cycle of sexual conformity, and the casual approach to sex and sexual relationships that this promotes. Dudu explained that it is difficult for girls to return to a sexually abstinent lifestyle once they have lost their virginity, and easy to fall into a pattern of 'sleeping around'.

> 'When you lose your virginity, it's more like you've opened the gate to – now I'm not a virgin – so I can sleep around with anyone that I want. But when you were still a virgin, you were like, no, I'm scared to do this; I shouldn't do it; it's wrong – or something. But now, once you're not, it's like, 'what the hell! I did it, so let me continue …''

Part of what draws girls into a cycle of sexual conformity, and the difficulties girls face in extricating themselves from this cycle, appears to be connected to the manner whereby casual sex intersects with a lifestyle of 'having fun' and 'partying' – accompanied by alcohol consumption – that many young people embrace. Girls who got caught up in a cycle of sexual conformity tended to subscribe to this lifestyle, and sometimes got carried away 'having fun', drinking and socialising, resulting in unplanned, casual sexual liaisons. On the other hand, the participants who resisted conforming to the dominant, casual, superficial approach to sexual relationships saw themselves as 'different' to their female peers. They undertook a more serious approach towards sexual relationships, which appeared to be a facet of a more serious approach towards life in general. These girls appeared to be less focussed upon 'having fun' and 'partying', tended to avoid socialising more generally, and appeared to be more committed to their schoolwork.

Part 3

Contextualising Sexual Decision-Making: The Broader Relational Environment

The second part of the analysis illustrated that the majority of the participants wary of intimacy, commitment and trust within their sexual relationships, and consequently employed sexual strategies that did little to realise relationships that conformed to, or embodied ideals surrounding trust, love and commitment. As such, their sexual relationships were, for the most part, unfulfilling, and in many respects bore a close resemblance to what the participants constructed as the problematic 'norm'. The final part of the analysis aims to generate further insight into both the difficulties girls face in developing and sustaining counter-normative sexual strategies, and, in particular, why girls tend to exert little agency in the direction of developing more fulfilling relationships.

Analysis of the participants' accounts showed that the manner whereby many of them characterised and approached their sexual relationships was broadly congruent with the manner whereby they characterised and approached relationships more generally. Relationships, both present and past, and spanning a variety of relational contexts, including the family, peer group, and community relational life more broadly, were figured as: disappointing and unfulfilling; tenuous and uncertain, and rarely enduring, secure or dependable; lacking in trust and intimacy; unsupportive, and often abusive and destructive. These general relationship narratives suggested that girls are socialised into a problematic relational culture, and conditioned from an early age to expect little from their relationships, and to be wary and mistrustful towards relationships with others in general.

It is thus necessary to consider the general character of 'normative' adolescent sexual relationships as a part of a broader relational trend. Furthermore, the participants' cynical and wary orientation towards trust and intimacy within their sexual relationships many be seen as an extension of a broader orientation towards relationships in general. This has explanatory power in accounting for their lack of motivation to pursue or negotiate more fulfilling sexual relationships.

The relational contexts that will be explored in order to underscore and expand upon these points include 1.) unstable family environments, 2.) tenuous relationships with peers, 3.) a harsh and unforgiving community

context, and 4.) a socio-relational context generally characterised by an absence of positive input or support surrounding sexual decision-making and experiences.

3.1 Unstable Family Environments

The participants' narratives concerning their family context and upbringing suggested that experiences of disruption, dislocation and confusion were more common than not in this context. In general, due to parental divorce and, more commonly, child-bearing out of wedlock, the participants were brought up within the context of fragmented family units: nuclear families were virtually absent, and most of the participants had not grown up within the same household, or even in close proximity to biological parents and siblings.

Born to teenage mothers, or young mothers who did not have the support of the child's father, the participants were often raised by family members other than their biological parents. The role of child-rearing often fell upon maternal grandparents, grandmothers in particular (generally in rural locations), but was also sometimes taken on by uncles or aunts (more generally located in urban centres). The participants experienced much disruption in relation to their living arrangements: most of the participants' childhoods and young adulthood was characterised by frequent migration between various family household units situated in geographically dispersed locations. Predominantly, migration occurred from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town and, within the broader Cape Town metropolitan area, involved migration between various urban African townships, particularly between Khayelitsha and Masiphumelele.

In many cases, migration was prompted by the participants' care-givers or guardians seeking to shift or delegate responsibility for their care and upbringing to other family members; due to this, the participants often recounted feelings of displacement and rejection, and feeling like unwanted outsiders within their own families. Migration often involved adjustment to different community contexts, values, and ways of life, particularly when occurring from rural to urban areas. Furthermore, migration between various familial household units entailed transitions between multiple care-givers or guardians, and involved much adjustment to adult authority figures and household rules, regulations and relations. General issues concerning their relationship to authority figures within the family context arose consistently across the narratives: there appeared to be a commonly-held sentiment that the adults surrounding them had not earned the right to take on this role, and

that the adults who were responsible for taking on such a role had generally failed – often by active choice – in this task.

The participants experienced much confusion and uncertainty surrounding their true parentage, which often produced emotional disruption relating to issues of personal identity, family history and structure, and their position within family relations. Often late childhood and the onset of young adulthood or teenage-hood were marked by emotionally disruptive revelations surrounding the participants' true parentage. As noted, in many cases, the participants were brought up by family members other than their biological parents: however, they often grew up under the impression that these adult guardians were indeed their biological parents, only to discover in later years that this was not the case. In such cases, their entire sense of family, identity and relationship to significant others was revealed to be a farce, resulting in identity confusion, emotional turmoil and disbelief, and requiring much adjustment.

Often, the participants' first contact with their biological parents was initiated in late childhood or early adulthood. This experience was generally fraught with emotional difficulty. In many cases, their biological parents had, by this stage, formed 'new' family units, in which they had become deeply involved and invested; often they did not have the physical and emotional resources or the inclination to actively facilitate their daughters' (i.e. the participants) integration within these family units. There appeared to be a general denial of responsibility and lack of genuine concern for the well-being of their biological children. The participants often found themselves in a situation in which they were living within households comprising of few of their biological relatives; particularly in relation to step-parents, the participants described experiences of active rejection, and described being perceived as a drain upon the financial resources, time and energy of the family by these figures.

As noted, mothers frequently only became active figures within in their daughter's lives during the latter part of their childhoods and early teenage- or young adult-hood. However, even at this point, mothers were often unable to engage in active and functional parenting due to substance abuse problems, and over-prioritisation of their sexual partners at the expense of their daughters. Mother's sexual relationships often had a problematic influence within the lives of their daughters: the men in their lives were often overly-dominating, frequently engaging in verbal and physical abuse of their partner or spouse (the participants' mothers), and attempting to take up an authoritarian role within the household – the traditional role of the father – in

relation to the participants. This was met with much frustration, difficulty and resentment by the participants.

Biological fathers were generally absent from the lives of their daughters. Some participants did have some contact with their biological fathers; however, this generally involved limited stays during school holidays. More generally, fathers often lived in households situated in geographically distant locations and, due to financial constraints, these participants had very limited contact, if any, with them. The participants found it difficult to maintain ties with their fathers, and felt out of touch with their fathers' lives, and the paternal branches of their families. In other instances, the participants did not know the identity of their fathers. Mothers often closed channels of communication on this matter, and participants in this position experienced great frustration due to the many questions they had surrounding their paternity to which they could glean few answers.

More generally, the participants struggled with many unanswered questions surrounding their personal history and identity: Why their mothers had abandoned them at birth, why their parents 'don't want' them, the identity of their fathers, whether their fathers were even alive, and general knowledge about the life histories and experiences of their biological parents. As one participant questioned, how is she to 'become something in life' without having many of these questions surrounding her personal identity and history answered? In some cases, continued reflection upon and absorption in relation to these many unanswered questions resulted in the participants generating many alternative imaginary scenarios; one participant, whose mother refused to speak of or reveal the identity of her biological father, had even come to the conclusion that her father had raped her mother, and suffered great anguish at the possibility that she was fathered by a rapist. The many uncertainties and gaps in knowledge surrounding their personal identities and relationship to others appeared to generate, as such, much anxiety within the participants' emotional lives.

In summary, the participants' formative years and young adulthood within the context of the family played little role in exemplifying or providing stable relationships, wherein intimacy, trust and secure, enduring emotional connections could be fostered, and upon which identity formation could be firmly grounded.

3.2 Tenuous Relationships With Peers

> *My secrets, I don't tell anyone. [Zodwa]*

More generally, and particularly within the context of the (female) peer group, the participants' narratives suggested that they had few close confidants or relationships based upon trust and intimacy, and had few people in their lives who sincerely cared about or supported them. Specifically – and in common with their normative portrayal of sexual partnerships – the participants' friendships tended to be superficial and short-lived, and they perceived these as bearing little potential for the development trust and intimacy.

While many of the participants described having friends at school, they held that these relationships were not intimate: Phumla maintained that she had 'friends' at school 'but they're not close; they're my friends at school', while another participant held that 'no serious things' were the subject of discussion between her and her school-friends, which generally took the form of 'jokes' about one another's boyfriends or superficial 'talk about boys' more generally [Zodwa]. Furthermore, the participants maintained that these 'friendships' did not generally extend beyond the boundaries of school life.

Reasons for avoiding close connections, intimacy and confiding in others within the peer group included a general fear that confidences would be made public, and privacy violated. Friendships were generally figured as fickle and superficial. In most instances, the participants could support this fear by concrete examples of how these fears had been realised and confirmed. For example, Nomhle explained that she had 'decided to quit having close friends' after she had confided 'everything' about herself, including family 'problems' and 'secrets, to a friend. Her friend reacted by divulging these confidences to girls who had used these to taunt her. Nomhle had been 'shocked', and could not understand why her friend had done this to her.

> 'And then I said, no, I will quit having friends now. No, now I've got me; no friends, just me. Then ja, I decided to stay at home.' [Nomhle]

Other participants echoed these sentiments when reflecting upon their friendships, and the potential for trust and intimacy within these relationships:

> '… if you tell someone your problems, she's going to tell another people; another people going to tell another people. So that's going to spread.' [Zuki]

> '… for me, I don't like telling people my problems. I just keep them to myself. I don't like sharing my problems with other people … They going to tell other people what I told them. That's why I keep them to myself and not tell them.' [Somi]

> 'It's just that, you can't trust anyone, anybody that much. You have to have a limit. Because you will talk to your friend, believing that … she won't tell anybody. Then, after weeks or so, you find out that she has told some people.' [Xoliswa]

The issue of trust operated in a bi-directional manner: not only did the participants feel that they could not trust those around them, but also struggled with the fact that they did not feel that they had the trust and confidence of those around them; as Phumla maintained, 'I want people to trust me … and they *don't* trust'. She attributed the mistrustful attitude of those around her to a prevailing culture of mistrust and betrayal:

> 'Because most of the time, you tell someone about yourself, then he'll go out and tell the others. So they can't trust you because they don't know how I am; they think I'm the same as the others. So I think that's why they don't trust me …'

As such, the issue of trust within relationships beyond the narrow confines of sexual relationships seemed pivotal. Phumla maintained that young people such as herself struggled to find people who they could trust, and struggled to trust other people: 'Because you can't trust people; it's very difficult to trust someone'. She described feeling isolated from those around her as a result of feeling mistrusted by others as well as unable to confide in many others: 'I do feel lonely; like, I think to myself, why can't this person trust me? Why can't she open up to me?'. She described feeling powerless to change this situation: 'Because it's, if someone doesn't want to open up to you, you *can't* force them to'. She maintained that 'it's not that they're scared to open to you; but they scared what you going to say after she told you that …'.

3.3 A Harsh And Unforgiving Community Context

On the broader level, community relations and social networks appeared strained and tenuous in Masiphumelele. Social problems, including lack of

service delivery, lack of adequate housing, unemployment and poverty formed the backdrop against which the daily lives of the participants were enacted.

Both prior to and following the data collection phase of the study, the community was ravaged by fires, and daily life disrupted by protests surrounding lack of service delivery in the area. During the course of the data collection phase of the study, the participants were beginning their final year of schooling. While all were strongly motivated to succeed in their schooling – and achieve an accredited education barred from many of their parents due to apartheid legislation – they faced many obstacles, many a legacy of apartheid. At the time of the study, inadequate high school facilities meant that the participants' schooling took place across various venues within the community; they were attending extra classes on the weekends due to disruptions arising form this. To add to these existing frustrations, violent pupil protests erupted at the high school during the course of the study over a dispute with the headmaster. In scenes reminiscent of the Soweto uprisings in 1976, pupils stormed the school, armed with planks and sticks, dancing, singing and stoning police vans responding to the disruption: 'Two teachers were injured, a pupil was arrested, another was hit on the forehead by a rubber bullet, and a third was bitten by a police dog' (Bailey & Khoisan, 2005, p. 12). It was believed that more than 50 rubber bullets were fired. The incident severely affected the participants: some were physically hurt in the protests, while all experienced much frustration at the disruptions in their schooling, as teachers failed to turn up to teach out of fear of pupil violence. There was a prevailing mood of deep resentment, but also depression and resignation: their despondency reflected a situation wherein their strong motivation to succeed in their schooling, and future lives, was met simply with one barrier after another.

More generally, the participants described their daily lives as playing out against a harsh and unforgiving community backdrop. Many felt trapped within these trying circumstances, and deeply unhappy within their immediate surroundings:

> 'In Site 5 you see people *stabbing* each other, fighting each other, *drinking*. So, the population here is not fine; I don't like this place. I just live here because my parents live here.' [Phumla]

Participants who had migrated from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape often drew comparisons between their current lives in the urban context of Masiphumelele, and the rural areas in which they had spent their formative

years. They described urban locations in negative terms, holding that city life was fraught with problematic social relations, and a lack of values:

> ‘People who are living here, man … I don’t trust them. They can’t be trusted. But in Eastern Cape, man, you can. It’s very different … In Eastern Cape, I grew up there … And I *know* how to live there; what’s respectable. And my grandparents, they would tell me what’s right and wrong.’ [Nomhle]

As Nomhle noted, she felt that people in Cape Town, particularly young people, lived a valueless existence, one that ran counter to the value systems in operation in the Eastern Cape, where she was raised: young people in Cape Town do not know ‘the difference between right and wrong … and they don’t respect people who are older than them, you know’.

> ‘… sometimes I feel like I [wish] I hadn’t come here. Ja, I just wanted to go home … Even the school – it’s not the same. In the Eastern Cape I got a better education; here – *they don’t teach!* I just wanted to go home … *man*, I wish I could go back! [But] it’s too late now!’

3.4 Absence Of Positive Input Or Support Surrounding Sexual Decision-Making And Experiences

Finally, the participants constructed a general portrayal of a socio-relational context lacking in supportive figures. In particular, the participants’ narratives suggested that there was an absence of positive input or support surrounding their sexual development, decision-making and experiences. This was apparent in the context of their relationships within the home and within the peer group, and also in relation to institutional contexts, such as the school, the clinic and the church, where potential sources of support could be located. Not only was there a deficit in positive input or support within these contexts, but there was much discontinuity across these contexts in terms of the types of messages they disseminated with regards to sexual issues, which produced much uncertainty and confusion amongst the participants. The participants’ sexual decision-making and partnerships, and the outcomes of these, need to be considered in light of this socio-relational backdrop, which suggests that their sexual partnerships are entered into in a manner that is divorced or isolated from sources of potential external sources of positive input, or the influence of advisory figures or positive role models.

I. Sex and the family context

The participants held that they received little supportive or positive input from parents and other adults within the home on issues arising from their developing sexuality. There appeared to be a silence within the home in relation to sex as a 'normal' and acceptable part of adolescent development. Rather, parents only engaged with their daughters on the subject of sex in a manner that figured this in deviant or problematic terms. In its problematic or deviant manifestations, female sexuality appeared to be hyperbolised by parents. The participants maintained that a strong negative attitude towards female sexuality prevailed within the context of the home (but that this was directed from adults within this context, rather than young people such as siblings).

> '… sometimes you hear in the home from your parents, saying don't have sex … it's better to have sex when you older. So you don't hear good things about it.' [Xoliswa]

They maintained that the message that their parents conveyed surrounding sex was: 'It's *bad, bad, bad* …' and that one 'mustn't have sex before you get married, must first get married then have sex'. They felt that parents assumed that whenever their teenage daughters moved beyond the confines of the home, they were 'probably having sex':

> Xoliswa: 'If you are out with your friends, they think you are having sex.'
>
> Nomhle: 'If you go out to a party, they think you are going to have sex.'
>
> Xoliswa: 'It's always about sex, sex, sex.'
>
> Zuki: 'Even when we are out with friends, they'll [parents] say, oh, all you think about is boys! Boys, boys, boys …you don't clean the house, you don't do this, you don't do that …all you think about is boys.'

The participants felt subject to many parental restrictions affecting their sex lives, and felt frustrated at parental mistrust and over-regulation of their decisions, actions and movements. Their frustration was exacerbated by the fact that they perceived a sexual double standard to be in operation in this respect: the participants felt that their position was a gendered one,

maintaining that it was not a general mistrust of young people, but a specific mistrust of and restriction over young women in particular that was in operation. They felt that, where young women's sexuality was hyperbolised and continually subject to adult regulation and scrutiny, young male sexuality was 'ignored' completely:

> 'If a boy is having sex, it's not a big deal. But if a *girl* is having sex, it is a big deal. Because they're like, 'You're gonna get *pregnant' whatever* … but it's also boys!' [Dudu]

> 'A boy can come back from wherever he went any time. But when a girl comes home: 'Where do you come from? Ah, you have been with boys!'' [Xoliswa]

> 'Like, my cousin, sometimes he usually goes away for the *whole* weekend, nobody knows where he is. And when he comes back – *no one asks him!* It's like fine, it's ok … But if *you* do that – *then* it will be a family meeting!' [Dudu]

Many of their frustrations were rooted in what the participants perceived to be a generation gap between themselves and their parents or care-givers. As grandmothers were frequently one of the key providers of care, this generation gap was even more exaggerated:

> '… my granny grew up differently from me and my sister. Because she got married when she was 17. So she was like a child from an early age, then when she was 17 she became a woman and gave birth to my uncle and my mom. So that's what's different because she didn't have a chance to experience the real world: how is it like to be a teenager, how is it like to have fun and do whatever I want to do.' [Dudu]

The participants described great difficulty in communicating with their parents or adult care-givers on issues surrounding sex and sexual relationships and decision-making. It was common for such communication with fathers or older adult males within the household to be entirely absent, and often stilted between the participants and their mothers.

> 'It's not easy to talk with them. Like, I don't know if *we* are the ones that are supposed to be open with them, or are they the ones that are supposed to be?' [Xoliswa]

> '… when I want to talk about those kind of things, I only go to my sister. I find it hard to go to my mother.' [Phumla]

Generally, the participants described there being a strict division between the sex lives and the family lives of young women. While adolescent girls were more often than not involved in heterosexual relationships, the participants maintained that these relationships were kept hidden from their parents. They noted that, while these relationship were not condoned by parents, parents were aware of them nonetheless; however, they tended to remain in a state of denial in this respect, turning a blind eye on this aspect of their daughters' relational lives.

> '… most of the families, like, they don't want girls to have boyfriends... So that's why you don't introduce them with the family … We keep separate.' [Zuki]

Many of the girls wished that they could bring their boyfriends home, and be more open about their sexual relationships with their parents. Some of the girls were envious of girls in other communities who had such relationships with their parents, attributing this variation in parental attitudes to 'cultural differences':

> '… there are cultural differences. Because, to *us*, it's really hard to take your boyfriend home, or let your parents meet your boyfriend. And you're not allowed to actually *have* a boyfriend. Till you get married. It's really irritating, because I've got *loads* of white friends, and they talk to their parents about their boyfriends, and *I'm* not allowed to say anything about boyfriends, and stuff. I really wish I could have that kind of relationship. It's an African culture. The thing is, they know you, you're in a relationship with someone, but they don't want to accept that…' [Dudu]

The girls explained that their parents had been socialised into an 'African culture', wherein they 'grew up with the belief' that girls should not have boyfriends, and should remain sexually abstinent until marriage. In some instances, the girls held that parents' fears that their daughters could become pregnant out of wedlock was at the root of their ideas surrounding pre-marital sexual abstinence, as it is 'a shameful thing for a girl to get married with a child already.

In general, it appeared that 'communication' on the part of parents and guardians most commonly took the form of constraints over their daughter's

freedom, laying down parental rules, regulations and restrictions, or involved reprimands. There was little opportunity wherein two-way communication and recognition on an intimate emotional level could take place, and the participants described feeling that they were missing out on intimate connections with their parents due to closed channels of communication; as one participant maintained, she wishes it was possible 'just to talk to each other'.

II. Sex and the peer group context

Within the peer group, sex appeared to be a far more acceptable topic of conversation, and appeared to comprise a large proportion of all communications within this context. The participants felt that they had the freedom to instigate open communication with their peers on the subject of their sex lives, which was not the case within the context of their families:

> '… when you are at your friends place, that's where you all, that's where you talk about it – 'oh, I had a great time with him, and do that and that and that' – that's where you get open and talk with your friends – like *anything you want to talk about*…because it's the [place] where you feel free … to talk about anything.' [Dudu]

However, the peer group was also, in many instances, a context in which sincere support was difficult to find and, when found, easily lost. As Dudu added:

> '… but *also* if you get pregnant, that is the place where you fear most: what are your friends going to say? They're going to gossip about *you*, because there you've been gossiping about everyone else …'

In common with the other participants, she emphasised the tendency for girls' friendships to be fraught with rumour, gossip and back-stabbing; she described feeling reluctant confide in her 'friends' with regards to her sex life, as she felt that confidentiality was not possible:

> 'I don't feel comfortable talking to friends … If you are friends with a girl and you open up to her, sometimes there is some point in your lives, she will tell someone. She can't actually keep it …'

She recounted a narrative wherein she had seen this play out between two of friends; one girl was publicly shaming the other by announcing to all who could hear that her friend had undergone abortions:

> ‘There was this fight, when I was coming back from school, there was two girls fighting. And this other girl was saying, ‘you had an abortion! You have three children, but you killed them, all of them!’. And this girl was like, ‘What! Why are you like saying this in front of the people?’. And she actually cried and ran away. And then this other girl was not even feeling sorry. She continu[ed] saying what she was saying …’

As such, the peer group stood as a tenuous and dubious source of positive input or support for young women; apparent support appeared easily reversed or detracted, and replaced by open ostracism and attacks.

III. Sex and institutional contexts

Finally, within institutional contexts – such as the church, schools, and the community clinic – there appeared to be little positive input or support in the direction of young women’s sexual development, decision-making and experiences.

Firstly, within the context of the church, the participants described a pervasive silence surrounding sexual issues. The only instance wherein sex was featured within religious discourse was in the form of restrictions and moral condemnation:

> ‘[At church] they only say that if you want to have sex … first you have to get married, and not before marriage; you have to have sex after marriage.’ [Phumla]

> ‘… at the church, we’re always told, we mustn’t have sex before marriage… It’s because they think it’s a sin or something … because the Bible tells them that: no sex before marriage.’ [Dudu]

In many cases, the participants described parental figures as very involved in church-related activities, and religion being a centre-point in their lives. On the other hand, most of the participants did not figure religion as being a salient feature within their lives and decision-making. Religious factors did not appear to play a role in their sexual decision-making. Messages

surrounding sex levelled at the participants – particularly those surrounding sex and marriage - did not appear to be taken up within their own sexual decision-making and behaviour.

Secondly, within the context of their school lives, there did not appear to be many institutionalised programmes in operation which might provide support to young people. Externally-run programmes (such as a peer education programme with which some of the participants were involved) did host talks at the school, upon a 'supply-and demand' basis; however, there did not appear to be a continuous system of support in operation. Any sex-based discussions within the classroom appeared to be (as with regards to parents) a one-way form of communication, wherein teachers told scholars what *not* to do: 'In school, sometimes they talk about sex … your teacher [tells] your class, don't do this and this' [Zodwa].

Thirdly, the role of local clinics and other medical services was also explored insofar as these contexts provide knowledge and support around sex and sexual relationships to girls. In general, the participants appeared to feel that the local clinic was a context wherein they could potentially access information around sex and sexual decision-making, as well as contraceptives, and it was evident that some of the girls did utilise the clinics for obtaining contraceptives. However, many of the participants were hesitant about utilising the clinic, for fear of being stigmatised, and becoming the subject of community gossip and rumours. Their accounts suggested that girls' health problems tend to sexualised, and girls who seek out support from medical services are implicated in morally suspect behaviour, namely having sex. Popular perception appeared to hold that girls who use the clinic are 'having sex', or dealing with the 'repercussions' of having sex, such as pregnancy or HIV/AIDS (both socially stigmatised conditions). Many girls, for this reason, appeared to avoid mobilising this potential support network for fear of exposure or out of shame. This is compounded by the fact that, according to some girls, they are often received with suspicion, disregard or even rejection by health workers, who, by virtue of profession, are supposed to serve their needs. The girls felt that health workers often breached health worker-patient confidentiality, and even fuelled community gossip around girls' sexual health and reproductive problems.

Finally, the participants held that, in addition to a relative absence of supportive figures who might provide positive input to young women across a variety of socio-relational contexts, there were also few positive role models who young people might look to for guidance. They explained that girls often chose problematic figures – such as 'gangsters' and 'party girls', who are 'cool' and 'free' – to aspire towards:

> ‘They don’t actually know what qualities you should choose from a role model…and sometimes there’s nothing in that person. He or she needs a role model of his own.’ [Dudu]

Young people appeared to be exposed to a proliferation of negative (sexual) role models. In particular, the participants drew a link between gender-based power imbalances and violence within young people’s sexual relationships, and the sexual relationships of adults in the community

> ‘… it’s quite stressful when you see older people, the older women, because their husbands are like drinking and they’re abusing them and whatever… Because every time, let us say 95% of women here in Masiphumelele, they have been abused by their husbands.’ [Dudu]

Intimate relationships within the younger generation can thus be seen to be modelling much of the dysfunction of relationships in the older generation, in which violence and substance abuse are inextricably connected.

5. Conclusions

The first part of the discussion highlighted the dissonance between the ideals girls uphold surrounding sexual relationships, on the one hand, and the manner whereby sexual relationships typically play out in practice. It was found that girls ideally wish for romantic love, trust, respect and commitment within their sexual relationships. In practice, adolescent sexual relationships play out in antithetical terms to these ideals – within the context of a ‘love game’, which supports casual, transient sexual relationships, multiple and concurrent partnering, and sustains a culture of infidelity.

Boys are pinpointed as the sex-driven instigators of the ‘love game’, their gender-based power allowing them to dictate the terms of sexual relationships. However, girls are complicit in sustaining the ‘love game’. They accept sexual relationships on boys’ terms, influenced by the social value attached to having boyfriends and having sex, the socially-valued consumer-driven lifestyle and material commodities that sexual relationships provide, and by social competition within the female peer group, wherein sexual relationships infer competitive advantage in a variety of ways. While participation in the ‘love game’ requires girls to relinquish their ideals of romantic love, and despite the fact that their sexual relationships are

unfulfilling and pose threats to their emotional and physical integrity and well-being (including their sexual health), it is nonetheless attractive to the extent that it lays the path towards social integration, status and power.

The second part of the discussion indicated that the participants were critical of the normative character of sexual relationships, and conscious and critical of the role of both girls and boys in reproducing the problematic sexual culture mediating these. However, this critical consciousness had not, in the majority of cases, resulted in an active uptake of counter-normative sexual strategies. This appeared to be underpinned by resignation, disillusionment, and a perceived lack of alternative possibility. A small minority employed counter-normative sexual strategies, and had succeeded in building relationships that matched their ideals. These participants prioritised relationship-building over having sex, evidenced a flexible approach to negotiating problems with a relationships, and selected partners in a discerning manner, according to the criteria of love and trust, as well as shared values and aspirations, particularly those concerning independence and self-empowerment. Their accounts suggested that not all boys fit the problematic stereotype upheld by many of the girls.

Counter-normative sexual strategies and relationships were vulnerable to attack from conforming peers, making these difficult to develop and sustain. Girls who succumbed to sexual pressures appeared to become caught up in a cycle of sexual conformity from which it is difficult to break, reinforced by the manner whereby normative sexual practices, such as casual sex, intersected with valued social activities, such as ‘partying’ and alcohol consumption. Girls who resisted sexual conformity appeared to do so as part of a broader strategy of building positive futures more generally, and tended to avoid involvement in the instantly-gratifying social activities of their peers.

Finally, the third part of the discussion showed that the difficulties girls face in developing and sustaining positive, counter-normative sexual strategies, and the lack of agency many girls exerted in the direction of establishing more fulfilling sexual relationships was rooted in a broader pattern of socialisation, wherein they had been conditioned to expect little from, and invest little in relationships. Relationships, both present and past, and spanning a variety of relational contexts were found to be disappointing and unfulfilling. This was reinforced by an absence of positive input and few supportive, advisory figures or positive roles models surrounding girls’ sexual decision-making and relationships.

To conclude, the study suggests that the barriers to girls establishing and sustaining sexual relationships that promote emotional and physical health and well-being are deeply embedded within aspects of the psychosocial and material environment. Promoting the emotional and physical health and well-being of girls within their sexual relationships requires recognising and addressing problematic elements within their broader relational environments, and providing supportive, advisory figures and contexts, as well as positive role models. This may facilitate the sustained development of counter-normative sexual strategies and relationships.

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