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NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL ABSTINENCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FEMALE ADOLESCENTS IN A CAPE TOWN COMMUNITY

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Social Surveys Unit

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Narratives of Sexual Abstinence: A Qualitative Study of Female Adolescents in a Cape Town Community

Abstract

Abstinence from sexual intercourse is the 'A' in the 'ABC' of mainstream interventions to address HIV/AIDS in South Africa. These interventions have been informed by social cognitive models of sexual behaviour that emphasise the individual while neglecting the social context, and emphasise what the individual knows about long-term biomedical consequences while ignoring more immediate psychosocial factors on individual decision-making. The paper draws upon critical health psychology to explore decision-making around sexual abstinence among adolescent girls in Ocean View, a poor, 'coloured' neighbourhood in Cape Town. These girls 'deviate' from the norm in that they have chosen sexual abstinence in a context characterised by high levels of adolescent promiscuity. Their sexual decision-making is found to be a means whereby the participants attempt to challenge and counter destructive sexual norms operating within their community. Abstinence might be seen as part of a broader strategy of making and taking opportunities to escape from the destructive cycles of life in Ocean View. These concerns are both instrumental (in that sex has real consequences) and symbolic (in that abstaining from sex represents a more general approach to independence, self-control and relationships with others). This form of reaction against prevailing norms appeared more likely if a girl has some sources of support, such as a stable and loving home environment. However, in deviating from the norm, the girls are often targets of resentment by their sexually active peers, and have to deal with social isolation and exclusion. Sexual health concerns do not figure in these girls' accounts of their sexual decision-making. This paper finds that sexual decision-making is informed more by the psychosocial and material context than by cognitive factors; in this sense, HIV/AIDS interventions based upon educating adolescents about sexual health are unlikely to have a significant effect upon sexual decision-making and behaviour.

1. Overview

Abstinence (from sexual intercourse) is the "A" in the "ABC" of mainstream interventions to address HIV/AIDS in South Africa. These mainstream interventions have been informed predominantly by 'social-cognitive' models of sexual behaviour and decision-making that emphasise the individual while neglecting the social context, and emphasise long-term biomedical consequences whilst ignoring more immediate psychosocial factors and outcomes.

This paper draws upon theoretical and methodological developments in critical health psychology and critical discursive psychology more generally to analyse decision-making surrounding sexual abstinence amongst adolescent girls in Ocean View, a poor, 'coloured' neighbourhood in Cape Town. These girls 'deviate' from the norm in that they have chosen sexual abstinence in a context characterised by high levels of adolescent promiscuity. More generally, the participants portray the immediate social worlds of their peers as being characterised by many problematic factors which impact upon their sexual decision-making and practices in a manner that generally are associated with negative consequences for the individuals in question. At home, few parents stand as positive role models in terms of the sexual relationships in which they are involved and to which they expose their children. Furthermore, many parents fail to provide supportive and loving home environments, and domestic violence, verbal abuse and substance abuse is not uncommon. Amongst peers, promiscuity and pregnancy actually have a positive value; sexual relationships are 'commoditised' and superficial, their value lying in the material benefits and social status they can accord one, rather than relational and emotional commitment and involvement. The situation is further compounded because there are few positive role models or supportive figures in the immediate neighbourhood or, on a broader level, within the media.

This paper addresses why it is that some girls deviate from prevailing norms and abstain from sex – despite the fact that they are faced with many of the opposing pressures which they identify in relation to the general adolescent population. Crucially, the participants' sexual decision-making stands as a means whereby they attempt to challenge and counter destructive sexual norms operating within their community. For girls with disrupted family lives, the choice of abstinence is in part a reaction against their parents' – and mothers' in particular – sexual decision-making: the girls do not wish to replicate what they see as the mistakes made by their mothers, and particularly wish to ward against re-living the disempowering and self-destructive sexual relationships that have coloured their mothers' experiences. Similarly, high pregnancy rates amongst teenage peers

can serve as a deterrent to having sex, given that pregnancy can lead to rejection by parents and social stigma, and given that parenthood is seen as imposing heavy responsibilities and forecloses opportunities to finish school or pursue a career. Abstinence might be seen as part of a broader strategy of making and taking opportunities to escape from the destructive cycles of life in Ocean View. These concerns are both instrumental (in that sex has real consequences) and symbolic (in that abstaining from sex represents a more general approach to independence, self-control and relationships with others). It appeared that these reactions against prevailing norms were more likely if a girl has some sources of support, such as a stable and loving home environment: however, in abstaining from sex, and choosing a positive path into the future more generally, the girls are often targets of resentment by their sexually active peers, and have to deal with social isolation and exclusion.

Sexual health concerns do not figure in these girls' accounts of their sexual decision-making. This paper finds that sexual decision-making is informed more by the psychosocial and material context than by cognitive factors; in this sense, HIV/AIDS interventions based upon educating adolescents about sexual health are unlikely to have a significant effect upon sexual decision-making and behaviour.

2. Study rationale

The rationale behind the analysis is two-fold. Firstly, social scientists working within the HIV/AIDS field have begun to draw attention to the need to shift the focus of research on AIDS away from purely cases wherein protective behaviour does not occur, and towards positive instances wherein protective behaviours *are* employed. Such an endeavour might provide insight into facilitators of protective behaviours, and not simply the barriers thereto, which is generally the focal point of current studies. As Alexander and Uys (2002: 301) note, it is important to acknowledge that "society has exceptions as well as generalisations, minority beliefs as well as hegemonic discourse, counter as well as dominant culture, and individuals who resist group pressure".

Despite the fact that sexual health interventions have failed in many respects to promote and sustain health protective behaviours, when looking at South African survey data around sexual experience in the youth population one sees that there are still notably high percentages of young people who *are* abstaining from sexual intercourse. In fact, data from a survey of young South Africans (Pettifor *et al*., 2004) indicated that over half of girls aged 15-19 years (the general age category pertaining to the participants in the current study) had never had sexual intercourse. Developing insights into what produces this

variation in behaviour during this stage of development in adolescence requires both an understanding of why some young women choose to become sexually active, as well as why others choose not to do so.

Secondly, there has been a growing critique of the manner whereby protective behaviours – such as sexual abstinence – have been conceived of by theoretical models informing sexual health interventions. This paper aims to explore sexual abstinence in a manner that might provide insights into this aspect of sexual decision-making that are, at present, difficult to access when employing current models of sexual health and decision-making.

Initial campaigns to promote sexual health in the HIV/AIDS era were predominantly information-based. They rested on the premise that if HIV-vulnerable people were informed of the dangers of HIV and how to prevent it they would act accordingly to safeguard against infection. "It's as easy as A, B, C (Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise) became the familiar slogan in many African countries" (Campbell, 2003: 7). However, such optimistic interventions both failed to change behaviour or improve sexual health (Shoveller *et al.*, 2004). In the context of South Africa, particular concern has been raised by the spiralling rates of HIV infection amongst the youth, the population who will shape the trajectory and impact of the AIDS epidemic for future generations (Rutenberg *et al.*, 2001). South African youth continue to practice unsafe sex "despite the concerted efforts of educational and HIV prevention campaigns to influence their behaviour" (Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003). A body of critical research investigating the failure of sexual behaviour change interventions has attributed their failure to the models of behaviour change that have informed them. Dominant among these are social cognitive approaches[1], common within (mainstream) health psychology literature. These models have been criticised for prioritising individualistic, biomedical and behavioural perspectives (Campbell, 2003) which have, in turn, espoused a narrow and instrumental conceptualisation of sexual behaviour and human behaviour more generally (Parker, 1995; Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002).

Critical investigators have recently argued that the fundamental and most problematic assumption common to research and interventions early in the epidemic (which proceeded out of the above-mentioned approaches) was the notion that sexual behaviour is "shaped by the conscious decisions of rational individuals" (Campbell, 2003: 7). Recent theoretical arguments hold that such approaches have discounted the extent to which young people are embedded in their social structures and contexts, and this has resulted in a proliferation of explanations of youth sexual behaviour "denuded of social meaning" and divorced from the social context of the everyday lives of young people in which

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[1] For an overview of these approaches see Bartholomew, Parcel and Kok (2001).

sexual behaviour is carried out (Frolich, Corin & Potvin, 2001: 781). More generally, researchers working in a critical vein in the area of health psychology have argued that, when looking at how people conduct and talk about their health-related activities (such as sexual practices), it is clear that "their 'decisions' to act in certain ways do 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 they live" (Crossley, 2000: 39).

The importance of contextual considerations in understanding sexual behaviour and behaviour change have been strongly advocated within the South African literature (for examples, see Campbell, 2003; Kelly & Ntlabati, 2002; Kelly & Parker, 2000; LeClerc-Madlala, 2002). As LeClerc-Madlala (2002, p. 35) notes: "The need now is to engage with the dis-enabling context that gives sustenance to the dis-enabling attitudinal and behavioural codes that continue to drive the HIV/AIDS epidemic".

There is a growing body of South African literature, much of it taking the adolescent population as the subject of study, which points towards powerful "social pressures" associated with sexual practices (Alexander & Uys, 2002, p. 296). While on the one hand, these pressures often involve physical force, such as violence, rape and sexual coercion (e.g. Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998) there is a body of recent literature that has started to focus on such issues as status, desire and trust, boredom and curiosity, peer pressure and acquisition of commodities, and how these issues intersect with safe/risky sexual practices, such as condom-use and multiple partnerships (see Alexander & Uys for an overview of examples). Currently researchers are advocating a research agenda that takes a "wider-angle" view of sexual behaviour, beyond a narrow focus upon the individual, to include analyses of normative social, cultural and economic influences shaping young people's sexual desires and experiences (LeClerc-Madlala, 2002: 35). By highlighting the contingent relationship between meaning, sexuality, community and identity across historical and social contexts, such authors begin to unravel why it is that the sexual practices of adolescents often contradict their knowledge about safe sex and why, more generally, the relationship between knowledge and practice is not as simple as it appears.

The alarming statistics regarding youth sexual health outcomes cannot be ignored; however, this 'outcomes-based' concern has resulted in a problem-centred approach to the sexual behaviour of the young adult population, one that has resulted in a small knowledge-base that can provide only a fragmented sense of how sexual 'health' and 'risk' figure within, and intersect with other facets of the everyday lives of young adults. Developing research practices that are founded upon theoretical and methodological approaches that can offer an

integrated understanding of the sexual behaviour of young people as it plays out in the social contexts of their everyday lives is crucial if the everyday lived experiences of young people are to be acknowledged and integrated within theory which can, in turn, be put towards the development of effective sexual health interventions.

3. Study aims and methodology

This paper will take as its subject the sexual decision-making of 6 adolescent girls, aged 16 to 18 years, enrolled in their final year of high school and living in the community of Ocean View. This case study stands as a component of a larger study in which adolescent females across three communities in the Fish Hoek Valley of the Cape Town metropole participated in group discussions and individual interviews. These were geared towards eliciting reflections upon adolescent sexual experiences, relationships, decision-making and behaviour – as they play out within the participants' communities more generally, as well as in their personal experiences. Data collection took place through the months of February to June of 2005. The six girls participated as a group in two focus group discussions or group workshops, after which each girl participated individually in 1-2 in-depth semi-structured interview/s. The duration of each workshop/interview was 1 ½ - 2 hours.[2]

Although not purposively selected as such, the six participants were all sexually abstinent[3] at the time of the data collection, and had had little or no experience of forging intimate (hetero)sexual relationships. Furthermore, sexual abstinence appeared to be a conscious decision undertaken on the part of the participants, even in the face of many opposing pressures, and against a contextual backdrop in which the participants figure adolescent promiscuity as pervasive. This paper aims to generate insights into why the young women under study make the decision to abstain sexually and the contextual mediators of this decision; specifically, the paper will attempt to bring to light how factors and processes within the psychosocial and material context in which the participants are located factor into and inform the logic of their individual sexual decision-making.

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 behaviours. Through the process of deconstructing the meaning of

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[2] For the purpose of this paper, and in keeping with ethical codes of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.
[3] Not one of the participants had ever had sex at the time of data collection

various health-related or risky behaviours from the 'lay' point of view, researchers working within a 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: 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*: 39). This paper takes such an orientation when investigating the participants' decision to abstain sexually.

The study aims necessitate directing attention towards an exploration of the qualitative nuances of meaning and value at play within the participants' sexual decision-making and experiences. This involves exploring and, ultimately, developing an understanding of the meaning systems of specific individuals. This, in turn, involves a shift towards qualitative methods that can allow for the analysis of meaning in depth and in context. The study 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 informed both the data production as well as analytical stages of the research process.

4. Study setting

> "In the 1960's, hundreds of black (coloured, Indian and African) residents of Simonstown were forcibly removed under apartheid from their homes by the sea and dumped in a township some distance away where they couldn't see the sea. The apartheid government ironically named this township Ocean View." (Mtyala, Ndenze & Monare, 2005)

Ocean View is a low-income "dormitory town" located in the southern part of the greater Cape Town area (OVDT, 2004: 1). Through the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1949, an estimated 128 000 people were relocated from their original areas of residence[4] to peripheral settlements such as Ocean View, which was established in 1968. With a population of 16, 161, Ocean View is, at present, still a highly racially homogenous community, 98% of its population being classified as "coloured"[5].

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[4] These areas included Noordhoek, Sunnydale, Simonstown, Glencairn, Redhill, Sunvalley and Elsies River.
[5] Data from 2001 Population Census, analysed by Jeremy Seekings.

Ocean View, in common with other historically disadvantaged communities in South Africa, is experiencing economic stagnation and deepening poverty (OVDT, 2004: 6). The community's peripheral location and physical isolation from economic centres in the area, as well as the existence of few commercial activities within the community itself have contributed to high rates of unemployment. The employed sector of the population is mainly occupied as skilled and semi-skilled workers or labourers, earning within the income bands R801 – R1,600 per month and R1,600 – R3,200 per month. A low percentage of adults have matric qualifications, and almost a quarter of the adult population have less than grade 7 schooling.[6]

Since its establishment, and despite the dissolution of apartheid, residents have lived under poor living conditions, characterised by poverty, lack of housing, overcrowding, poor quality homes and inadequate service delivery. Many families crowd into single-roomed "bungalows", used years ago as stables, and given to homeless people in the area as "temporary accommodation"; however, what was intended as a temporary arrangement is still the case twenty years later (Hartley, 2005). Overcrowding within homes is accompanied by many social and health problems, including high incidences of domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse and tuberculosis.

During the course of the current study, angry residents began to protest violently "at unfulfilled promises from government of a better life for all, especially decent housing". As a local paper put it, the main entrance to Ocean View "resembled a war zone as women and youths fought running street battles with police officers trying to stop [the] protest": in scenes reminiscent of the apartheid era, protesters took up stone-throwing and erected barricades of rocks, trees and burning tyres, while police responded by firing rubber bullets at, and arresting protesters (Mtyala, Ndenze & Monare, 2005). These protests in Ocean View "followed on the heels of demonstrations over housing and poor service delivery in other parts of Cape Town and the country" (Mtyala & Ndenze, 2005).

Ocean View has a predominantly young population, projections indicating that 46% of the population is under 19 years of age, and only 5% over the age of 60 years (OVDT, 2004). Many problems affect and are associated with the Ocean View youth population specifically: in particular, there is a high drop out rate for school-goers, related both to inadequate resources as well as to a large degree of low self-esteem, a high incidence of teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse and a lack of motivation to achieve (Moses 2005). This is also related to a more general lack of opportunities available. An Ocean View resident, quoted in a local paper, maintained that poverty is fuelling drug addiction in the area:

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[6] *Ibid.*

"There is the mindset that you get matric, but you get nothing for it. The youth have nothing to look forward to. There is disillusionment, a lack of dreams" (Smetherham, 2005). The environment in which young people are growing up poses further challenges in the form of gangsterism and violent crime. Finally, this is compounded by a lack of organised youth activities and facilities and supportive figures or institutions that might serve as protective or buffering forces against a harsh social backdrop (Moses, 2004) and community apathy and denial in relation to social problems and towards instigating social change (Moses, 2005).

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Participants reflect upon 'typical' trends in adolescent sexuality

Before turning towards an exploration of the participants' sexual decision-making, and investigating their decision to abstain sexually in greater depth, the data will be explored in a manner that will provide an account of the contextual backdrop within which the participants' sexual decision-making and actions are located. This account needs to be considered as the participants' *subjective interpretation* of the surrounding social climate, rather than an objective account thereof. Their subjective perceptions of their social surroundings will later be shown to play a key role in how the participants explain and locate their own sexual decision-making; as such, the significance of this will become clearer, and elaborated upon further within later components of the paper.

Specifically, this component of the paper will turn its focus upon the participants' descriptions of and explanatory models for the typical form sexual relationships and norms take on as they play out around them within the general adolescent population. In particular, this component of the paper will explore how various sites / contexts in which the lives of young people play out influence typical adolescent sexual decision-making. The participants drew upon a number of key sites or contexts in their narratives – the family, the peer group, the local community, and the broader societal context - as a means of explaining and bringing into view the underlying rationale of adolescent sexual decision-making. They highlighted multiple and interacting factors and processes, playing out across these sites and contexts, and operating on the level of the individual, inter-personal and social, which they figured as influencing, mediating and so producing an array of problematic sexual practices and outcomes within the adolescent population. Specifically, the participants generated a picture of an adolescent population characterised by sexual

promiscuity and a casual attitude towards sex and sexual relationships, a proliferation of teenage pregnancy and unwanted children, coercive and self-destructive relationships, and a general disregard for the potentially destructive consequences of their sexual decisions, both with regard to themselves as well as others.

As will become apparent during the course of this analysis, the participants employed two basic causal models whereby they explained adolescent sexual decision-making and its associated behavioural, attitudinal, relational and reproductive outcomes:

- *Modelling theory*: adolescent sexual decision-making and behaviour is a product of normative (and generally destructive) attitudinal, behavioural and relational codes pervasive within the community, entrenched cycles into which young people are *socialised* within various relational contexts, imitate and ultimately perpetuate.

- *Reactivity theory*: adolescent sexual decision-making and behaviour is, directly or indirectly, a *reaction to* the inter-personal and social problems surrounding them; however, the form that this takes is generally figured as one whereby further, often identical, social problems are perpetuated.

As such, both causal models construct adolescent sexual decision-making as reproducing many of the social problems the participants witness around them: the participants appeared to be acutely conscious of the fact that the sexual decisions and strategies employed by young people often serve simply to further erode the already-problematic psychosocial climate in which they are locate, as well as effecting negative outcomes in their own lives. The logic underpinning these strategies is exposed as inherently flawed in many cases, and the participants generate a construction of adolescent sexual decision-making that is, ultimately, to a large extent senseless or self-defeating, and often self-destructive in the last instance.

5.1.1 Descriptions of typical sexual codes / practices in the general   adolescent population

The participants generated an account of the general adolescent population characterised by promiscuity, as evidenced by a proliferation of teenage pregnancy within the community; an orientation towards sex wherein desire for instant gratification often overrides rational judgment; a casual attitude towards sex and sexual relationships, in which little significance or value is attributed to the sexual act or the relationship in which it takes place; and a general disregard for the potentially destructive consequences or negative outcomes of their sexual

decision-making as these have bearing upon self and others. The participants also described a 'commoditisation' of sex and sexual partners within the adolescent population, wherein social image and reputation are valued over relational commitment and emotional connection. Finally, the participants also figured sexual relationships within the adolescent population as being, in many cases, characterised by disempowerment and coercion, particularly in relation to young women. More generally, the participants produced a vivid account of a value-less adolescent population, fallen into sexual disarray. These points will be elaborated upon briefly below, drawing upon extracts from the interviews and focus groups.

The participants maintained that most adolescents viewed sex as "*net 'n* joke" [Chantelle, FG_1], maintaining that most "take sex nowadays too lightly; it's just another thing that happens…like getting up in the morning… For them, it's just another experience; it's not something as sacred" [Faiza, ii_1]. According to the participants, the sexual act is seen by the typical adolescent as something that happens "in the moment…the urge just came over them!" [Karen, FG_2] without any serious contemplation upon the potential consequences thereof. In particular, the participants maintained that sexual health outcomes, such as HIV and sexually transmitted infections rarely held a place of significance, if present at all, in young people's concerns, despite their being informed of modes of transmission as well as protective measures.

The participants held up the highly visible occurrence of teenage pregnancy in their community as an indicator of adolescent promiscuity, as well as an indicator of the lack of concern with engaging in safe sexual practices. They maintained, with irony, that pregnancy was "in fashion" [Nerissa, FG_1] amongst the teenage population, and in many cases considered normative rather than unusual: "in the past it was different, but now, in our community, it's an everyday occurrence" [Karen, FG_1]. They spoke, in tones of moral outrage, of girls - "younger than ourselves!" [Natalie, FG_1] – who have fallen pregnant, and manifest a casual attitude towards their pregnancy; one participant maintains:

> "Like, when they're pregnant and stuff, I don't know if it's true, no, but someone in our class, she says she's pregnant, but it's difficult to believe it, because it's like she *says* she is – but then *laugh* about it. …she's not like worried about this child is gonna need clothes, and how is the family gonna react, and is the father gonna be in the picture, and she's still in school… And she's like nonchalant about the whole thing, so – I don't get it; I don't understand". [Ezlane, ii_1]

Furthermore, the participants described a 'commoditisation' of sex and sexual partners within the adolescent population, wherein social image and reputation

hold a place of greater concern in young people's minds than emotional connection and relational commitment: "I don't even think they know it's about that. They were just sleeping with him; they weren't emotionally there. I don't even think their realise this" [Faiza, FG_2]. In this respect, sex is viewed as a social commodity: the value inherent in having a sexual relationship lies in the external and material benefits that this can provide. A boyfriend is seen as someone who can confer upon one a certain degree of social status, and provide for one materially:

> "If the guy can provide for the girl, then she feels that all her needs are met." [Geraldine, FG_2]

> "If a guy has this very fine girl, and she's sexy…and he's having sex with her, he gets status…and girls also get status from their boyfriends if they have a hunk or something… So it's basically their *egos.*" [Karen, FG_1]

Virginity is devalued, and sexual promiscuity is a valuable commodity in the sexual "competition" in which adolescent girls are seen as being participants:

> "It's like this competition…how young they were when they had their boyfriend… the amount of boyfriends or the type of boyfriends that they've had." [Karen, ii_1]

> "To them it's just like an *accessory*. Like, you know you buy yourself a *bag* or a *bangle* or something, something to make you look, like, good or nice or pretty or something. Like, to them – that's how I see a boyfriend to them. Like, just another accessory that brings them across as being cool, confident or sexy or something…" [Karen, ii_1]

Finally, the participants maintained that many adolescent girls were involved in disempowering and coercive relationships, describing gender relations as inherently skewed to their disadvantage. Male partners were described as overly possessive, and often effecting much control and domination within the lives of their girlfriends: "guys sort of have this thing in their mind: if I go out with you…then you my girlfriend, and you *can't* have a life outside of our relationship" [Geraldine, ii_2]. In many instances, the participants spoke of physical abuse, infidelity and lack of relational commitment. The participants maintained that adolescent girls "don't seem happy in their relationships" [FG_2], yet remain in them despite this. They figured sexual relationships as demanding little from the male partner and placing many pressures upon the girl to fulfil his needs and expectations: "it's always like satisfying the guy… 'if he's happy, I'm happy'…" [FG_1].

5.1.2 Explanatory models for 'typical' sexual practices / codes upheld by the adolescent population

The participants did not only generate a rich descriptive account of the 'typical' sexual codes embraced by the adolescent population, but also provided complex explanatory models in which they frame their accounts. The participants appeared to have reflected consciously and at length upon these models of explanation, drawing upon three key sites in their narratives – the family, the peer group context, and the community context more generally - as a means of explaining the rationale behind adolescent sexual decision-making. They highlighted multiple and interacting factors and processes, operating on individual, inter-personal and social levels within and across these sites, and figured these as influencing, mediating and so producing the above-mentioned behavioural, relational and attitudinal sexual outcomes within the adolescent population.

5.1.2.1 The mediating role of the family

The family context was highlighted by the participants as a key site of influence or mediation upon the sexual decision-making and behaviour of the adolescent population in the Ocean View community[7]. Adolescent sexuality and sexual decision-making was figured as profoundly shaped by the relational dynamics, norms and values upheld and put into practice within the family and into which young people are socialised, and model or imitate. Alternatively, adolescent sexual decision-making was figured as a *reaction* to problematic elements within the family, such as dysfunctional or deficient parenting practices. In both cases, however, the participants held up the family context as producing many of the problematic sexual decision-making and behavioural outcomes elaborated earlier. Problematic elements within the family, highlighted by the participants, included:

i.   **Lack of parental attention, support and affection; poor channels of communication between parents and their children, including parental silence surrounding sexual matters**

For example, young women might be motivated to enter into sexual relationships as a means of seeking out love and attention that they are unable to obtain within the family context, due to neglectful parents, conflict-ridden relational dynamics, or absent parental figures:

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[7] See Shelmerdine (2005) for an in-depth qualitative exploration of the construction of relationships between young people and adults in Ocean View, which gives further insight into relationships and experiences within the family context.

"And if there isn't a daddy maybe in the house, maybe the girl is looking for a [father] figure - and then I think sometimes that, girls especially, they, they go into relationships thinking seeking maybe for that: for the daddy love that wasn't… and they think that now the boy can give them that daddy love that the daddy couldn't". [Geraldine, FG_ 2]

Alternatively, a young woman in an abusive relationship may lack the inclination to take self-protective action due to a lack of supportive or advisory figures within the family: "if you don't have support and stuff, you might as well stay in the relationship because there is no one else to advise you" [Karen, FG_2]. In an extreme case, the participants maintain that falling pregnant is, for some young women, a strategy whereby she may mobilise much-desired yet absent parental attention:

"I think it's either something that the mommy or the daddy did or – say like for instance, maybe in my case, the mommy is forever drinking and never caring, and you don't feel that mother's love that the mommy's supposed to give. And then I think, [they become] emotionally weak, and some of them…they just do it to because, because they not *getting* that love that you supposed to get from your parents. So they going in, so they doing this [thinking]: maybe she will take notice of me now that I'm maybe pregnant." [Nerissa, ii_1]

In another instance, the participants maintained that falling pregnant stands as a condition that reflects a lack of self-worth, and a lack of concern with one's own self-integrity which, in turn, is seen as a product of deficient parenting practices:

"Like, I like know people hey, like *now*, I know like *two* thirteen year olds; thirteen – the one's going to fourteen, and the one is thirteen. The one *thinks* that she's pregnant, and her mommy's just found out; her mommy don't worry if she's pregnant – and then she must just go to the boyfriend's family. *Now* – lately I've also heard, this one girl, she is also at our school, she *also* thinks that she is pregnant now, and her mommy's also not worried – if it must happen, it must happen. I think *all* that, it comes, it really, it goes back to the family, and especially the mommy: if the mommy's not *there* and if your mommy don't *care* I think that you gonna also have that attitude in life: no one cares about me, so I can do what I want to… So, I think that is also why children, that is why they fall pregnant – they *just don't care…*". [Nerissa, ii_1]

Finally, the participants also held up young women's sexual decision-making as an act of frustration or rebellion against certain family circumstances. For

example, sexual experimentation was held up by some participants as a way of "rebelling" against a "vindictive" or withholding mother [Karen, ii_1]:

> "They feel, 'oh, my mother was so vindictive, and we never spoke about sex in our house, so I want to know how it feels'." [Karen, ii_1]

> "I know, one of the girls I know, the reason she fell pregnant, because she doesn't know who's her father, and she wants her mother to tell her, and her mother doesn't want to tell her… And *that's* why…she's actually doing the things that she's doing…". [Geraldine, FG_1]

Teenage pregnancy in particular was often held up as a relational strategy employed by young women as a reaction to problems within the home; for example, a young woman might fall pregnant "out of spitefulness" [Nerissa, FG_1], as a means of bringing social disgrace upon parents who she feels have failed her in some manner:

> "Sometimes it's just to get back at their parents… The parents might have split up from divorce or whatever. Then because the child feels that the child is the product of that divorce, is the cause of it, then to get back at the parents for splitting up, they, like go and make a baby…". [Geralidine, FG_1]

ii. Lack of parental guidelines and discipline

In many instances, the participants attributed problematic aspects of adolescent sexual decision-making to a lack of parental guidance, discipline and authority within the family context. For example, the participants felt that many young women entered into coercive and even abusive relationships as a means of finding a relational context in which they might find the kind of boundaries and discipline that they felt were not adequately laid out by their parents:

> "And I think girls, our age, if their parents don't give them a set of rules [agreement], they might want to be in a relationship where they feel that, ok, you giving me the guidelines and the way to go, and the way: show me what to do and when to do it". [Natalie, FG_2]

More generally, the participants attributed the value-less orientation and casual attitude held by young people in relation to sex and sexual relationships as being a product of a lack of moral guidance from parents: "I think it starts with the growing up of parents, you know, the discipline…I think when you don't have that sort of guidance to tell you: no, this is right and wrong, you just sort of go out and do what you please" [Faiza, ii_1].

iii. Poor relational role models

Finally, the participants held up the family context as a site in which young people are socialised into relational patterns and roles, which they later enact in their later sexual relationships. The participants felt that, in many instances, parents stand as poor relational role models for their children, who later take up these problematic roles in their own sexual relationships:

> "…if you look at the way the mother treats the father, is the way that the husband will treat the wife, or the wife will treat the husband. …In most cases, the guy, if he sees his mother being beaten by his father, then he will *become* like his father; he will end up abusing his wife…And if the wife sees, if the mother says, you supposed to behave like this; you supposed to clean the house, and be a slave – and then the daughter will tend to become like the mother when she's older." [Geraldine, ii_2]

In particular, the participants felt that skewed gender relations and male dominance and coerciveness within heterosexual relationships in adolescence and later life were often a product young people being socialised into this role of dominance within the family context:

> "I mean, sometimes you meet guys that are, they have been abused when they were smaller, and, and like it's moulded them into this person that they are today. And – other times, when they were younger, they used to manipulate their parents into giving their, giving into their demands, by yelling or screaming at their parents, or crying for no reason at all. And other times, they, the guys…when they are smaller, they learn to *dominate* their younger brother or sister, and that's also something that, when they are older…they tend to be *dominating* other people in their relationship". [Geraldine, ii_2]

5.1.2.2 The mediating role of the peer group

The second site held up by participants as a key mediator of adolescent sexuality was the peer group itself. Many of the participants characterised the peer group as one of the core sites in which they first were exposed to issues surrounding sex, holding up this context as an important trigger of young women's emerging sexual awareness. The participants maintained that, for many girls, there is much direct pressure from their female peers to have sex, and are subject to constant urging to undertake this step: "go try it out!...do it!...[it's] a once-off experience!" [FG_1]. Furthermore, there is also indirect pressure upon young people to engage in normative sexual decision-making stemming from their own desire to find a sense of integration and acceptance amongst peers:

"I also think it's like the pressure that all your friends are doing it, and you're the only one who hasn't been there, or whatever. And it's also like some girls are soft, so they don't like say no…[But] I mean – *if it's gone, it's gone*; can never get it back – you know? And they just, they throw that away in an instant. Without thinking about it, like, thoroughly, you know? It's like just to be *in* – with friends…". [Natalie, ii_1]

As the extract above suggests, virginity is de-valued and, as many of the participants maintained, being a virgin can render one subject to stigmatisation and exclusion:

I think the status is more emphasized on not being a virgin. Because of everybody else going around and sleeping around, not being virgins, so – if you are a virgin, then you're like looked down at – *what's wrong with you? Something must be wrong; the guys don't want you…* [Karen, ii_1]

As such, within this context, the pressures of conformity to the normative sexual codes embraced by the adolescent population on the part of surrounding peers, and the desire to "fit in" or find acceptance and integration within the peer group on the part of the individual adolescent were seen as interacting in a manner that overrides individually-held values or other influencing factors that may run counter to the norm:

"I think girls are losing their sense of who *they* are, and what *they* want – because my friends have had sex, so I can also go out and do that, because – *her* parents aren't doing anything about it, so *my* parents won't do anything about it. Because *her* parents don't know, so *my* parents don't have to know". [Karen, ii_1]

"I mean, your parents know what you do in the house, but, my mother's constantly telling me, 'I don't know what you do when you around the corner'…your friends can influence you *so easy!*" [Karen, FG_1]

"…my mommy always say that: you [are] not her child if you outside…the door, because then you're like a whole different person. [Nerissa, FG_1]

The participants figured the peer group as a potentially dangerous site of influence in two main respects: firstly, it can expose one to corruptible influences and, secondly, one's position within the network is extremely unstable and insecure, and reputation and social status are often and easily attacked and tainted by others. As such, the participants characterise the peer

group context as a tenuous environment in which it is difficult to establish enduring connections and invest trust in those around them:

> "…because what I sometimes don't understand is, *they* may be the people that encourage you to like, they didn't actually force you, ok, open your legs, but they encourage – they [are] the people that sometimes encourage you, *no, do it, cos it's nice and that!* And when you fall pregnant, then *they* the people that actually turn their backs on you". [Natalie, FG_1]

> "It's actually two-faced. Cos when you there, they like, no, we'll be there to help, things like that; but behind your back…". [FG_1]

> "Or they tell you, oh it's nice, and they pretend like they've had sex, and they just push you forward enough that you'll go through with it. And then, you've had sex at the end of the day, and you fall pregnant, and then they say: oh, but I forget to tell you – I'm a virgin. Sometimes friends also do that". [FG_1]

5.1.2.3 The mediating role of the local community / broader societal context

Finally, the participants draw upon factors within the broader community and wider societal context as factors influencing and mediating adolescent sexuality. Many of the participants drew attention to entrenched sexual norms pervasive within the local community context, figuring these as a powerful mediator of young people's sexual attitudes and behaviour.

> "…I think for a young child, growing up, seeing what is happening now in society, seeing all these people pregnant, they assume or they think that, 'oh, that's the norm of everything'; or 'that's the way things should be'. So then they grow up with a sort of, you know, knowledge or whatever, that that is how people should react, or how people act. I think that's what people have lost; they don't feel that [sex is] sacred to them, or it's something important to them… because…they see all these other people do it, and they just think it's the norm, and they just do it as well". [Faiza, ii_2]

The participants portrayed a community backdrop in which many social problems are produced by and, in turn, reproduce problematic sexual codes. The participants listed a variety of intersecting social problems, related both within and beyond the arena of sex and sexual relationships. They described normative sexual trends operating on a community level as including skewed gender relations, domestic violence, often prompted by substance abuse, infidelity and

teenage pregnancy. These problematic aspects of sexual relationships were seen as a part of a broader problematic social context in which unemployment, lack of educational opportunity or possibility for upward mobility, poverty, substance abuse, crime, violence and general community apathy prevailed.

On a broader societal level, the media was also highlighted as serving to produce the value-less orientation that many young people were figured as bearing in relation to sex and sexual relationships:

> "…I think TV is one of the major contributors to the corruption in society…five year old, six year old people are watching Days of our Lives, and they showing people kissing and stuff like that that…the point is, young children…some of them are still unaware…they see these things and they think it's fine then to do it. And then they grow up with that sort of mentality of – they saw it on the TV; you know, Brooke and Ridge are doing it, and so…you know? I mean, they make [sex] seem so *cheap*, so, like, 'ok, I'll sleep with this one, and then I can sleep with that one'; it just makes it seem like it's…*ok* to do those sort of things. And people sort of believe that it's ok to do those sorts of things". [Faiza, ii_1]

The participants described a social climate lacking in positive role models or supportive figures available to young people. The only 'role models' available to young people are figured as being of a negative nature; as elaborated earlier, many of the problematic elements of adolescent sexuality as it manifests in Ocean View were attributed to young people modelling their own sexual codes upon those upheld by their parents or peers. Additionally, as has already come to light in the material explored thus far, young people's lives are figured as sorely lacking in supportive figures, as evidenced in the contexts of the family, peer group and community more generally. Inter-personal networks often stood as sites in which the participants described young people as finding little sincere support, understanding or empathy.

Furthermore, on an institutional level, which includes schools, clinics and general health care facilities, the participants maintained that there were few services available to, and catering towards the physical and mental well-being of young people. The participants asserted, drawing upon personal experiences, as well as those of others, that young people are often received with mistrust, disregard or rejection by the very figures who, by virtue of profession, are supposed to serve such needs. Particularly in the case of adolescent girls, the participants held that voicing a need for any form of care or support is viewed with suspicion by carers, as well as others in the community: girls' problems tend to be sexualised, and any expression of need is perceived as the outcome of (sexually) deviant behaviour. Furthermore, seeking support in this context often

implicates one in morally suspect behaviour, and many young people, including the participants themselves, were said to avoid mobilising support networks out of fear of exposure or shame.

In light of this, the participants felt that young people growing up in Ocean View were exposed to few positive role models whereby they might become conscious of the possibility of an alternative pathway into the future, and were surrounded by few supportive figures who might facilitate this; in many instances, the participants felt that there was an active suppression of attempts to break from destructive cycles. As such, according to the participants, young people simply uphold and reproduce entrenched norms, rather than challenging them:

> "…they see what is happening around them, and they see that everything is, you know, nobody is really getting up and doing something with their lives, and they just feel like that is the norm, and I just feel that if – and I feel also that, you know, they don't get the support most of the time from their parents and from their friends, because if someone says, oh, I'm going to be this… then they're like, 'oh, but you's too stupid!'. Instead of saying, 'if you'd work hard, you will be able to do that' but instead they just press the person down, and concentrate on their negative instead of encouraging the person, so…" [Faiza, ii_2]

The participants held up community apathy as lying at the root of the destructive cycles surrounding them; they described individuals who attempted to break out of destructive cycles as being "pressed down" [Faiza, ii_2], and a general stance of denial and avoidance in relation to social problems. The participants maintained that social problems pervasive within the community, such as those listed earlier and, in relation to sex in particular, the issue of HIV often goes unacknowledged and thus unchallenged by the community at large:

> "…there is a lot of things that actually happen *in* Ocean View that people are just – they don't want to own up and say look, that *is* happening here, but we gonna do something about it. Because they're scared if they say that that is happening, and people are going to ask them, but what are *you* doing about it? So they're just going to keep quiet and say absolutely nothing about it". [Karen, ii_1]

5.1.3 Consequences of adolescent sexual decision-making

Finally, the participants reflected in depth upon the consequences of adolescent sexual decision-making. The participants exhibited a keen awareness that the sexual strategies and decision-making described above often serve simply to

exacerbate an already-problematic situation for the young people deploying these. The logic underpinning these strategies is exposed as inherently flawed in this sense, and the participants generated a picture of adolescent sexual decision-making that is figured, to a large extent, as self-destructive or self-defeating.

This was particularly apparent in relation to the issue of teenage pregnancy. Although falling pregnant is often figured as a deliberate inter-personal strategy engaged in by young women, none of the outcomes thereof are figured as ultimately desirable to the young woman in question, effecting self-destruction rather than empowerment: one participant maintains that, despite the fact that a woman may effect her primary goal of "spiting parents or others" this strategy "is kind of stupid, because you end up hurting yourself in any case" [Natalie, ii_1]. Some of the destructive outcomes that a pregnant young woman might experience include social stigmatisation, isolation and rejection, as well as burdens associated with the responsibilities of child-bearing and rearing.

Firstly, pregnant teenagers are often faced with social stigma, operating on a community level, which effects feelings of personal shame, and involves enduring snide comments from community members, being considered "easy" [FG_1] by men in the community, and suffering a multitude of sexual advances. Additionally, although often the intended outcome of pregnancy was described as in the aim of harnessing parental attention, parents often are described as rejecting their pregnant daughters still more, sometimes even throwing her out of the home; when parental attention is sparked, this is directed towards the baby: "their own children get ignored in all cases" [Nerissa, ii_1]. The participants also maintained that the pregnant teenager is faced with a rudely curtailed "end" to her "childhood" [FG_1]: she is figured as being burdened with new, adult responsibilities associated with child-bearing and rearing, and is figured as unable to participate in the activities that typical teenagers around her are enjoying.

> "Especially when you so young. There's a girl in our community – she never got past her primary school, I think she's two years younger than me, and she's already got a child, and she's like an *old, an old woman! …*Pushing this child up and down!" [Natalie, FG_1]

> "And if you look at it, married people can't even cope with it – how can they?!" [Karen, FG_1]

> "…and you know what's so sad: when you see all your friends getting ready to go out and stuff… and here you… [need so much baby stuff--] I just laugh. Because my neighbour, the parents warned her about having sex and stuff like that… And it happened at the after party of

the matric ball. Three years later, she's still living with it…" [Karen, FG_1]

Finally, one of the key negative outcomes that the participants associate with teenage pregnancy is that the young women involved indirectly perpetuate, or reproduce the very circumstances in the lives of their children that their sexual strategies stood as a reaction to in the first instance: through their actions, young women effect fatherless and dysfunctional relational circumstances in the lives of their own children, who are then at risk of following in the same self-destructive path of their mothers. The participants figured pregnant teenagers as not being "motherly enough to take responsibilities" [Chantelle, ii_1] that childbearing and rearing entails, and this having negative implications for the future of their own children.

> "And if you see the amount of children being born – you wonder where are the fathers, and they're like, no, he's not in my life anymore… So *why* do you have to punish your *child?* For *your* mistake: if the guy's not in your life, he can still be in his child's life… why do you have to take out your frustration because he is moving on with his life? And he wants to be a part of his child's life… but you're punishing him, to get back at him, you're not going to let him see the child. Whereas you're punishing your child actually by not giving the child a fatherly figure or a role model to look up to. And then you get those women that, they're still with their boyfriends, and the child sees this father, he's *abusing* the mother, and then they think: oh, that's what's supposed to be…" [Karen, ii_1]

5.1.4 Summary

In brief, the participants describe the problematic sexual codes embraced by the adolescent population as being a product of factors and processes within their social worlds; furthermore, generally stated, adolescent sexual codes are both *produced by* as well as *reproduce* pre-existing and entrenched destructive attitudinal, behavioural and relational cycles in operation within their social worlds. In the absence of supportive figures or positive role models, a dire picture with little room for constructive change or alternative possibility is painted.

5.2 Explaining deviation from the norm: Sexual decision-making amongst sexually abstinent adolescent females

This component of the paper will turn its focus upon the sexual decision-making of the participants themselves, highlighting the types of concerns that factor into this. As noted in the introductory components of the paper, the participants are all sexually abstinent, and all have had little or no experience of forging intimate (hetero)sexual attachments. As will be elaborated upon below, sexual abstinence appeared to be a conscious decision undertaken on the part of the participants, even against a contextual backdrop in which the participants figure adolescent promiscuity as pervasive. Despite the fact that the participants face many of the opposing pressures that they described in relation to the general adolescent population in the preceding component of the paper, the participants are deeply motivated to hold fast to their decision to remain sexually abstinent, the logic of which will be explored in the following components of the paper.

Two core elements factoring into the participants' sexual decision-making will be presented, considered under the categories of 'instrumental' and 'symbolic' concerns respectively. In the first instance, it will be shown that the participants' sexual decision-making serves as a means whereby they attempt to challenge and counter destructive sexual norms operating within their community. In this sense, their orientation towards sex and sexual relationships more generally is a productive attempt to forge themselves as 'positive exceptions' within a harsh psychosocial climate, rooted in an orientation towards or concern with securing, in an *instrumental* manner, psychosocial and material 'goods' in their future lives that have been inaccessible to them in the past, and are also missing within the lives of surrounding others. When considered in this light, the participants' orientation towards sex appears to be a constructive one, geared towards self-empowerment and social change.

However, underlying this is a second core element featuring within the participants' orientation towards sex and sexual relationships, one that suggests that their sexual decision-making – specifically their avoidance of sex and sexual relationships – is rooted in a fear of and wariness towards relational intimacy. As will be elaborated, this wariness reflects an orientation towards sex and sexual attachments that figures these as sites of loss to self. In this sense, the participants' sexual decision-making needs to be considered as also serving a psychologically defensive function that, in many ways, reflects a resistance towards relational intimacy. The concerns factoring into this element of the participants' sexual decision-making have been categorised as 'symbolic', and will be elaborated upon in depth following an exploration of the 'instrumental' concerns identified above.

5.2.1 Going against the norm: Countering destructive cycles in Ocean View

Within this component of the paper, it will be argued that the first of the two key concerns underpinning the sexual decision-making of and sexual codes upheld by the participants is rooted in their frustration with, and desire to counter or avoid being absorbed into the destructive attitudinal, relational and behavioural cycles at play in their immediate social worlds. Specifically, it will be argued, the participants wish to ward against embracing normative sexual codes which have negative implications for self and surrounding others, and would ultimately serve to reproduce the destructive cycles already in operation around them; abstaining from the sexual act and avoiding intimate sexual relationships will be shown to be an element of a strategy whereby this may be effected.

This component of the paper will highlight the dissonance between the manner whereby the participants describe and explain their own sexual decision-making and that of the general adolescent population respectively. Specifically, the participants will be shown to figure themselves as *exceptions* in relation to the general adolescent population and surrounding others, employing narrative strategies and explanatory models for their own and other's sexual decision-making and concerns respectively that serve to separate and distinguish themselves from the destructive behavioural, attitudinal and relational cycles that they witness around them in their families, peer group and community more generally.

The core concerns voiced by the participants in this respect were instrumental in nature, and directed towards securing positive outcomes in two key areas of their future lives; these included their reproductive and productive futures respectively. An additional factor to be explored within this category of 'instrumental' concerns is that of sexual health-related concerns; this will be included in order to highlight the relative lack of weight that such concerns hold within the participants' sexual decision-making, rather than standing as a core concern voiced by the participants.

5.2.1.1 Concerns related to reproductive futures

The participants all felt that their personal orientation – including their ideals, values, attitudes and decision-making - towards sex and sexual relationships had been profoundly shaped by elements within their family circumstances. Within this context, the participants had both indirect and direct exposure to the nature and consequences of sexual relationships, through witnessing the effects of sexual relationships in the lives of their parents, as well as through experiencing

some of the consequences of their parent's sexual decision-making and relationships directly.

Two of the participants were brought up within stable, unified families, and both held up their parents' marriages as modelling an enduring and loving union between two people. They both felt that they had been instilled with similar ideals by their parents: those of remaining a virgin until marriage, the sanctity of sex, and the value of self-worth. However, the participants maintained that the family context in most households in the Ocean View community rarely took this form. Four of the six participants described family circumstances that they figured as more closely resembling the norm in their community. All described having had unstable, dislocated and unpredictable family lives. In most instances, the source of this disruption was rooted, directly or indirectly, in parental sexual decision-making and relationships.

Most of these participants were from families fragmented due to parental divorce, or were born out of wedlock; in all cases, the participants described a lack of familial cohesion. Sexual relationships, as modelled or exemplified within the family by adult/parental figures, were characteristically unstable, impermanent and fraught with abusive relational dynamics.

Fathers played little role as direct relational role models, as most were absent, often having abandoned the participants' household unit to become involved with another woman, and begin another family; in cases where the participant had contact with her father, his orientation towards her was rejecting or disinterested. Fathers figured as rejecting or abandoning figures within the lives of the participants (and of the participants' mothers). Mothers were described as present – in terms of physical proximity – but figured as emotionally distant or completely absent, with lives centred almost exclusively upon their sexual partners, to the perceived detriment of their daughters.

The participants' narratives figured their lives as directly and deeply inscribed upon by their mother's sexual relationships, most commonly in relation to their step-fathers as opposed to biological fathers. Mother's lives were held up as overly-dominated by coercive and dysfunctional sexual relationships, characterised by disempowerment upon multiple levels, due to financial and emotional dependence upon their sexual partners, socially-entrenched gender norms that de-value and subjugate women, and dysfunctional relational dynamics and behavioural patterns including verbal, physical and substances abuse. Their narratives depicted a cycle of disempowerment, wherein their mother's disempowerment in relation to her sexual partners transmitted downwards to figure strongly upon the participants' experiences. Mothers' lives are seen as controlled by their sexual partners, and their sexual decision-making effects, in turn, much disruption and emotional turmoil within the lives of their

daughters, and often rendered many aspects of their own lives beyond their personal control.

In many instances, the participants felt themselves to be bearing a burden of responsibility that was not their role or duty to carry: in many cases, the participants were compelled to take on parental duties and roles towards their younger siblings to compensate for their parents' deficiencies in this respect, and also took on a protective role in relation to their mothers when their welfare was threatened by their sexual partners, or their own self-destructive behavioural patterns. The participants expressed feeling that neither their mothers nor fathers were adequately fulfilling their roles as parents, offering little guidance, authority, protection or nurturance.

The participants evidenced ambivalent feelings towards their parents, both desperately craving parental love and attention, and simultaneously feeling resentment in relation to their perceived failure as parental figures, and a desire to separate completely from the reach of parental influence over their lives. Accounts centring upon experiences within the family were characterised by an emotional tone of frustration and isolation, and many narratives turned upon experiences of being disregarded, neglected and sometimes even actively rejected by parental figures. In the absence of other close networks of potential support – which some of the girls actively avoided mobilising out of shame, and a wish to conceal family circumstances – such feelings appeared to have little outlet, and pervaded across many of their experiences more generally.

As has become evident, in many instances the participants' family circumstances mirrored many of the problematic elements that they figured as negatively impacting upon the sexual decision-making and behaviour of young people in Ocean View. However, while other young people are figured as absorbed into and reproducing these problematic cycles, the participants worked constructively in their accounts to figure themselves as exceptions to the rule, characterising the strategies in which they themselves engage as serving to counter or avoid the negative influences surrounding them.

The overriding continuity across the relevant participants' accounts was a deep desire to construct their own lives in antithetical terms to those of their parents, and mothers in particular, and thus avoid reproducing destructive attitudinal, relational and behavioural cycles within their own lives. One participant reflects upon her own sexual decision-making as follows:

> "I wouldn't follow my mother…I'd like to make my own rules, and make my own mistakes. Because I wouldn't want to…re-live my mother's mistakes, and like being thrown in my face. So – make my

own choices, and my *own* decisions…I think by, you can learn by other people's mistakes; and it *is* true".

"…I always ask my mom about my dad, and then she tells me about their relationship. So …I'll not take a man like my father, because he was this and this and this. And then I say the things that I know about him, that are true, and then…one day when I get married, I'll look for a guy that does not have those…qualities…" [Geraldine, ii_2]

Another participant, Nerissa, maintains that, having watched as her mother was drawn into a cycle of alcohol abuse while simultaneously suffering under the hand of an abusive husband had made her conscious of wanting something different for her own sexual and reproductive future - both for herself as well as her own children:

"It do make me see things differently…I always say, like, now the other day I was talking to my cousin, and then I told her, I don't want to drink like my mommy; I don't want to be like my mommy, and I don't want to be – be a *drunk mommy* to my children one day; and I want a good husband: I don't want a husband that's gonna *hit* me and *threaten* me, things like that. I was just talking to her…I said that I don't want to give my children what I've been through; I want to give my children *better*. Everything in my ability that I can do, I want to give my children. I don't want to do what my mommy did to us". [Nerissa, ii_1]

The family backdrop also stood as a powerful influence over Chantelle's experiences and sexual decision-making: she too is motivated to seek out a future sexual relationship that will break from the destructive sexual relationships that she has watched her mother endure, and have effected severe consequences upon her own life. She reflects upon the qualities she wishes her future sexual partner to have in a manner that is set up in antithetical terms to the qualities characterising her step-father:

"I want a person, not similar to the step-dad I have…The first thing is, I don't want my boyfriend to run away from my family. Like, he's now going to be my husband. What [my step-father] did is, he ran away from my, from our family, and he was beating [my mother]…And he was drinking… and … stuff like that, man; I don't want those qualities to be in my boyfriend; I want someone – *special*… I don't know what other people feel, but I want to have sex with someone special, the person I want to marry". [Chantelle, ii_1]

The participants exhibited a serious, contemplative attitude towards sex, inscribed with a keen awareness of the consequences of the act for self and

others. The manner the participants figured their own attitude towards sex stood in strong contrast to their characterisation of that of other young people. As Chantelle maintains, other young people see sex as "*net 'n joke*…they just think it's for the *nice time* and stuff like that". She ascribes her own, more "serious" attitude towards sex, and the discrepancy between her own and that of other young people to that fact:

> "I don't think that they think the same way I think about it. Because, why, they not going through the things *I'm* going through, and they not *thinking* what *I'm* thinking, you know? They maybe think that, ok, sex is sex. And blah blah blah. But I'm thinking in a *different* way; a more *serious* way, you know? From talking from experience: like, seeing how my mother and children being out of the house… so forth, man. And they not thinking the same way like I'm thinking…Ja, they don't know how it – what pregnancies and stuff like that can do to you…"

> "Like, you know, I always take me, myself, as an example, you know: they can fall pregnant, then they have a child…out of marriage. And…they don't think about that little one that has to come into the world; facing the world. And they have to…be *motherly enough* to take responsibilities and – stuff like that man". [Chantelle, ii_1]

Both Nerissa and Chantelle reflected in-depth upon the powerful shaping effect their mother's sexual decision-making and relationships had had upon their own lives, and upon their own ideals, values and conceptions surrounding sex and sexual relationships.

The powerful shaping effect of her mother's sexual decision-making upon her own orientation towards sex and sexual relationships is clear in Nerissa's statement: "if I was to have sex now, I would…probably kill myself. I *think* that I'm not; even if I'm 18 or so, I think that I'm not mature enough – for the whole sex thing" [Nerissa, ii_1]. When probed, she maintained that it was not the physical experience of the sexual act itself, but rather the "emotional" consequences thereof that produced her wariness and hesitancy towards sex: "I think it's about the *emotional* effect, after that…It's a very powerful experience". She believes she formed this conception of sex from "my family and from my mommy," although she has never communicated with her mother about such things; rather, she has experienced directly the powerful shaping force that sex can have over people's lives: "Just – from my mommy…the things I saw and the things I know, like we came from different daddies and that: *that* also made me stop and think…".

Both Nerissa and Chantelle upheld the values of virginity and family – emphasising the importance of remaining a virgin until marriage, and of having a stable and integrated family unit – figuring this as a product of their being living consequences of what can happen when sex is enacted outside of these ideals. Both described experiencing rejection by their biological as well as step-fathers, and feeling like outsiders within their own families, due to an absence of biological ties with their siblings and step-father. As Chantelle [ii_1] maintains, "I don't want that kind of thing to happen to my children one day…". Abstaining from sex until marriage is inseparable from the value attached to having a stable and integrated family unit: both participants feel their lives would have been very "different" and "better" had their own parents upheld these values, and hope to avoid reproducing their own experiences in the lives of their own children one day. A stable and integrated family is desired, maintained Nerissa [ii_1], "so that I can give my own children what *I* didn't have," and the means of achieving this is intricately bound up in approaching any form of sexual attachment with great caution.

The participants figured their decision to avoid sexual relationship and abstain from the sexual act itself as a strategy whereby they may re-articulate their own lives in better terms: through this, they may avoid the disempowerment and dysfunctional relational cycles that they have witnessed and experienced within their own families, and thereby revise their own futures in positive terms, thus effecting a break with the past. As Chantelle [ii_1] emphasised:

> "Why I feel like this is because I've seen the way my parents is living; and I've seen the way things is turning out, you know? I'm in this situation… And I just feel it's *not right*. And I can do better one day. And sometimes my mother tells me that, um, that she wants me, she wants everything for the best for me; she don't want me to end up like *her*; like in that situation – having a child out of a family – out of a marriage and stuff like that… I think it's just that that motivated me to like, to do something better in life, you know".

Nerissa [ii_1] also held up her sexual decision-making as a means of doing "something better in life" than that which she witnessed in the lives of "others" surrounding her. Despite the fact that Nerissa felt that many girls' sexual decision-making – such as becoming pregnant - was a drastic and self-defeating resort whereby they attempted to claim much desired yet absent parental attention, she maintained that:

> "I won't. It's because – if you know what you want in life, and if you believe in something, then I don't think you do those stupid things. That is what I want: I don't want to fall pregnant now, I want to go

study and whatever… get my life on track, and – just be, make a success of my life. So obviously, I won't do something too stupid…"

While she maintained that other girls "*just don't care*" about their own welfare or the consequences their decision-making and actions may have for others, holding the attitude that "no one cares about me, so I can do what I want to", Nerissa held, in relation to her own life:

"I think my experience, *all* the things that I went through, that is what makes me, like, *care*. And just, to see what – what, all my experiences that I had, and what that is doing to *other* families, *and* doing to my family. So I think that is what makes me care…"

5.2.1.2 Concerns related to productive futures

Nerissa's statement above, wherein she asserts that she will not do the "stupid things" that other adolescent girls do – such as falling pregnant – because she wants to get her life "on track" and make a "success" of it, draws attention to the second key instrumental concern underpinning many of the participants' decision to abstain sexually, and refrain from entering into a sexual relationship more generally. This concern related to their productive futures, centring specifically upon career goals and financial independence. Such concerns are deeply related to the social and material context in which the participants are located, whereby unemployment and poverty are common, opportunities for realising career aspirations, particularly for young women, are limited, and gender-based inequality and disempowerment is often a function of women being financially dependent upon their male partners. Such themes ran across many of the participants accounts, and linked both explicitly and implicitly with elements of their orientation towards sex and sexual relationships.

The case of Nerissa

Nerissa, mentioned above, maintained at another point in her interview that she did not wish to enter into a sexual relationship, at least until she had completed her final year at school, feeling that a relationship would distract her from her school work and compromise her ability to achieve academically:

"I *told myself*: this is my last year of school, I can't – I think, sometimes boyfriends, they like, if you have a boyfriend and then it's almost like, if you in *love*, like, and then you *just want to be with the boy*; and you just want to *communicate,* be in his space. And then you *forget* about your school work, and your studies and things… It's gonna be like a big interference in my school work. Ja, so I don't want to get *involved* now". [Nerissa, ii_1]

For Nerissa, finishing school and achieving academically is bound up in securing herself financial independence in her future life and relationships. She maintains that:

> "...what I see in our community, if…the wife don't work, if she's unemployed and she's at home, and then the husband works…then it's like they feel that they have like this *right* that they can like control the lady because she's at home: I bring in the money, so I will control. I think that it's the money…"

She feels that her step-father took just this stance with her own mother:

> "…my mother was like unemployed like when she was with him. He used to like bring in the money and that. And then… when she started to drink …he *don't* give her money…he used to do everything himself, because he was like scared she's now gonna go drink up the money, and whatever… He used to do like everything: like buy the food and everything. And I think, I don't know if that also made my mommy, like, drink *more* because…he just took that away from her, and then he was like the self-formed mother…"

Following from this, she asserted that finishing school and securing financial independence was an importance means of warding against disempowerment in her future relationships:

> "I don't want my husband to work for me; I also want to work, so I can be independent. And then maybe, if [he] decides to leave me, then I can say that I'm independent, I can take care of myself and my children and whatever".

Her narratives exemplify the manner whereby she attempts to regain personal control over her life in a manner that breaks from her mother's experiences of disempowerment in relation to her sexual partner, as well as her own experiences of powerlessness that transferred downwards upon her as a result thereof.

The case of Faiza

Faiza's motivation to refrain from entering a sexual relationship is rooted within her career aspirations, and the belief that a successful career will grant her the potential for upward mobility. She feels this will provide a route for her to follow whereby she can avoid being absorbed into the destructive cycles she sees in operation around her, and a means of moving beyond the Ocean View community in a literal sense. She expressed much despondency in relation to the social conditions characterising the community, maintaining: "I don't want to

live in this community, it's just that I feel I need to *get out*; I need to – *see life*…I feel we sort of secluded and away from everything".

Faiza maintained that she decided a couple of years earlier that she did not wish to have a boyfriend out of a desire to do something more productive with her life than those around her: "I realized that I want to… do something constructive with my life, and that I just don't want to be another nobody, and whatever". She figures her decision to avoid entering a sexual relationship at this point in her life as a means whereby she can maintain a hold upon her own dreams and goals, holding – in concurrence with Nerissa - that the emotional involvement of the relationship would stand as a distracting influence.

She maintained that she did not wish to end up following the typical life trajectory of girls in Ocean View: one wherein she finishes school and then works in the local supermarket to bring in money for her family until she can find a man to marry who will provide for her. She lamented upon the wasted potential of many girls in Ocean View, holding that, although people have dreams, they lack the motivation to put in the effort to effect these in reality. She maintained that, in many cases, serious intimate relationships and marriage often have a stunting effect upon young women: people get married and "forget about what they *really* wanted to do with their lives…they're not really the person they wanted to be – they're just *someone's wife*. So I don't want to be that one day – just someone's wife". She cited examples of friends who have entered into long-term relationships and thereby placed certain limits upon their own potential:

> "I've noticed that they've had *goals*, and now that they're in the relationship, they're just fine with being whatever; just so long as they get money in… They *had* goals, but now, because 'no, but I'm going to get married in two years, so…I can't really go do that or that or that…'".

Faiza expressed a strong desire to avoid doing this in her own life, holding up financial independence as the key to this:

> "I suppose it is about independence: like, I want to be my own person *before* I get married; I want to have my own success before I get married; I don't want to go into a marriage, and then, because, say for example I marry a rich husband, I'll be rich because I'm married to somebody rich; I won't be rich on my own *before* I get married to someone rich, so…"

She maintains that women are often "trapped" or "captured" within their marriages, figuring this experience as a product of the fact that women take up

positions of self-sacrifice due to their concern for their partner overriding self-related concerns:

> "…they sort of feel like, because they're in the marriage now, they have to worry about more important things than themselves, and therefore they neglect themselves. And after a time, you become unhappy, and then you feel trapped in your relationship and you're unhappy… I think that people put their husbands before themselves".

Her wariness surrounding entering a sexual relationship is rooted in a fear that she will be expected to be something that she is not and, more importantly, that she will be unable to stop herself from compromising her values:

> "I think because, especially if you get into a physical relationship, and then, you know, you're sort of expected to have sex if the guy is, you know… And, I don't know, I suppose I am sort of hesitant about that, because I don't want to compromise myself for someone else. And I'm a very pleasing [person] – like, I always want people to be happy. So, I always sacrifice certain things for people. So I'm very scared of going into a relationship, and then people expecting me to do things and then I know that I will probably compromise, so…"

She feels that when one begins to compromise oneself in this manner:

> "that's the starting block of when you sort of deteriorate into becoming this person who cares more about…other people than you care about yourself, and you'll probably end up, you know, being in a marriage, and not being happy, because you constantly pleasing your husband and not pleasing yourself."

Her narratives reflect a negotiation of the desire for independence on the one hand, and a desire for a fulfilling relationship on the other. However, at this point in her life, these two values seem mutually exclusive; one has to come at the expense of the other: "I feel like if I were to get into a relationship now, it will distract me, and then I would be like off the road of where I want to be".

5.2.1.3 Sexual health-related concerns

A final concern to be explored under the category of 'instrumental' concerns implicated in the participants' sexual decision-making is that of sexual health. As noted in Part 1 of the data analysis component of the paper, the participants described the general adolescent population as holding little concern surrounding their sexual health, despite their engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours and despite their knowledge of the sexual risks implicated in their

behaviour and means of protecting themselves against such risks. While the participants held this up as problematic, and while the participants did maintain that they would have concerns in this respect should they engage in sexual intercourse, it is significant to note that the participants rarely figured their own sexual decision-making – specifically, their decision to abstain sexually – as being rooted in a deep concern with potential sexual health outcomes such as HIV or STIs. In fact, sexual health-related concerns were notable by their absence or cursory treatment in this respect. Far greater weight was given to psycho-social as opposed to health-related concerns in this respect, which will become further apparent in the following component of the paper which will turn towards an exploration of 'symbolic concerns' featuring in the participants' sexual decision-making. The issue of the relative weight accorded psycho-social and physical health-related risks respectively within the participants' accounts of their sexual decision-making will be returned to and explored in greater depth in the final conclusions at the end of the paper.

5.2.1.4 Discussion: instrumental concerns

The preceding components of the paper explored the participants' sexual decision-making strategies in terms of the manner whereby these are shaped by instrumental concerns related to their reproductive and productive futures. Regarding their reproductive futures, the participants express a desire to avoid reproducing in the lives of their children the kind of disruption their parents effected in their own lives due to their sexual decision-making and relationships. They also express a desire to effect that which they felt was lacking in their own lives in the lives of their children. Regarding their productive futures, the participants figured their sexual decision-making – i.e. avoiding sex and sexual relationships – as constituting a strategy whereby they might hold onto career-directed goals, and thereby afford themselves the possibility for upward mobility and financial independence in their future lives. As such, it is clear that the participants' sexual decision-making is rooted in concerns that lie beyond the sexual arena in a narrow sense. Furthermore, the participants' account suggest a conception of sex and sexual relationships as having powerful reach and shaping power over other facets of life.

In both instances, the primary motivation behind the participants' sexual abstinence (in both behavioural and relational sense of the term) is rooted, firstly, within a desire to break out from, or ward against being absorbed into, the destructive behavioural, relational and attitudinal cycles operating within the various relational sites across which their lives play out and, secondly, within a desire to avoid reproducing these negative cycles in their individual lives, and on a social level. Furthermore, in both instances, the desire to abstain sexually is built upon a concern with retaining personal control over their lives – both

present and future, and often implicating a break with past experiences of powerlessness – in the context of many powerful forces operating within the immediate psychosocial and material context that threaten individual agency.

5.2.2 Symbolic concerns

This component of the paper will now direct its focus upon a second level at which the participants' concerns implicated within their sexual decision-making operate. While the elements of the participants' sexual decision-making explored above were rooted within *instrumental* concerns, the participants' sexual decision-making will now be shown to be rooted simultaneously in *symbolic* concerns which, it will be argued upon the empirical evidence available, are rooted in a conception of the sexual arena as a site of loss. Specifically, as will be expanded upon below, the participants hold an orientation towards sexual attachments that suggests a fear of and wariness towards intimacy at play within their decision to abstain sexually.

5.2.2.1 Loss of independence

As a route into the 'symbolic' level at which the participants' concerns appeared to be operating, some of the material elaborated upon thus far under the category of 'instrumental concerns' will be focussed upon in greater depth, and shown to feed into this parallel level at which the participants' concerns appeared to be operating upon.

Returning to the case of Faiza, whose decision to postpone entering into a sexual relationship is rooted in the concern that this will pose restrictions upon her ability to realise career-oriented goals, it is also apparent that these concerns are underpinned by less concrete concerns: specifically, these centre upon negotiating and retaining independence, and the potential threat thereto that (sexual) attachments may pose. She describes her hesitancy in relation to sexual relationships as being rooted in the concern that her desire to adhere to expectations placed upon her by surrounding others, and please others may override her personal values of independence. Her narrative suggests that she feels that self-sacrifice and compromise are implicated in attachment.

Karen also reflects upon sexual relationships in a manner that indicates a concern with independence, and a view of sexual attachments that holds these as potentially threatening in this respect. She figures sexual relationships as a site wherein one's relational position removes from one a certain degree of independence. Such hesitancies surrounding sexual attachments are voiced with reference to the effects she sees these have upon the lives of her female peers:

"…Seeing from my cousins and my friends…they're forever having to answer to their boyfriend, which I don't want – because I have to answer to my parents already; why do I need to answer to someone else? Or, if they want to go out…their boyfriends are like: 'but we have something planned'… *When* is there 'me' time? When you're single, you have a lot of 'me' time, and you can do whatever you want to without discussing it with another person, or considering someone else – besides your parents. When you're in a relationship, it's as though you forever have this *baggage* with you: like, wherever you go, he had to go; wherever he goes, you have to go, sort of thing, so… That's what scares me; there's no independence: because you're always trying to please your partner or something. You don't wanna like say something, because you're scared you're going to offend that person, or, what will he think of me if I tell him, 'no, tonight I want to be alone' or something…"

"But what if he says he wants to be alone? Will I wonder if he has another girlfriend; if he's two-timing me or something…? And I don't want to be like over-protective and nagging and whining when you in that relationship: when are you coming? Or, I miss you. And then you've just seen each other two minutes ago. And I'm like, no, that doesn't, they doesn't sound like me…" [Karen, ii_1]

Sexual relationships are, as such, figured as a site that can effect a loss of independence, incite undesirable insecurities in one, and generally pervade across all aspects of life. Karen is strongly motivated to avoid becoming a slave to the demands of the relationship more generally, and her partner more specifically, in the manner that she has witnessed her friends have: "What if I become like that when I am in a relationship one day? I don't want to become like that!". Her words imply, however, that she fears that the possibility is there, despite her strong motivation to avoid this. The following extract suggests that, within a sexual relationship, the desire for attachment and a sense of belonging may override one's individually-held values, that emotion can cloud rational judgment and result in self-compromise; she maintains that her greatest concerns surrounding sex and sexual relationships is that:

"…someone else might inspire me to *want* to have relationship right now, and I might do something *stupid* then, because love can blind people, believe you me, it can! And – I'm just scared that I won't be able to think as clearly as what I'm thinking now – being outside of a relationship, and knowing what I want. Because then, I'm scared of, of putting *my* values and *my* beliefs aside for someone else…"

She figures intimate sexual relationships as a site in which it is easy to lose control of oneself. Interestingly, she ascribes this effect to the fact that people in sexual relationships:

> "…have someone [with whom they can] be themselves…I suppose that you become independent, because sometimes your parents and your cousins and your family, they tend to classify you as a certain person, or certain thing. And then someone else comes along, and re-discovers that you're something else…And this person could also teach you something about yourself that you never knew, also…there might be some things that you don't know that this person would just like spark. And then a reaction would just – you know? And, not knowing, or not being in that situation before, you wouldn't know how to be able control it, so…"

5.2.2.2 Loss of self-control

The motif of self-control was a common thread across many of the accounts. There was a general consensus amongst the participants that the sexual arena is a site in which self-control is easily lost, and wherein rational judgement can be "blinded" or "lost". Chantelle reflects upon sex and sexual relationships in the following manner:

> "…they tell us, you know, these teachers here, they told us, in Afrikaans, *jy kan vir lus skeer* – that, you're so busy, your hormones and stuff like that, sometimes it *is* an accident. I *don't know* if it is an accident, but I think that sometimes accidents *do* happen; you feel like you now, you're *madly in love* now…"

> "…And the other time, like, my friend told me that she was, whenever she's with this boy, it's almost like she lose her mind; not *lose her mind*, but she feels so *different* when she's *with* him, and they busy *kissing*, and stuff like that, it's just like – everything is ok. Ja, nothing matters. But when she's like, when he's away from her, and when they not together, then she starts to think about it: ok, what did I do now?"

> "…It *does* worry me a lot. Because I tell, I ask, I *tell* myself a *lot* that, that kind of a thing, I don't want that kind of a thing to happen to me. I want to be, I want to *think*, I want to think *straight*; I want to know what I'm letting myself in for; I just don't want… that thing to happen to me… I want to know, ok, it's almost like I want to *plan* it, man. I just don't want it to happen by itself: your feelings taking *over*; that kind of a thing, I mean". [Chantelle, ii_1]

Natalie also refers to the sexual relationships in a manner that figures these attachments as ones that can, as Chantelle maintained in the extract above, cause one's emotions to "take over". She recounted a recent experience, wherein a young man led her to believe that he had strong feelings for her; however, when she pursued him, ending an existing relationship to do so, she maintained that she then realised he had "no feelings" for her; that he was simply "messing with me, my mind, my emotions" and "playing games" [Natalie, ii_1]. Despite the fact that she knows rationally that pursuing him is futile and will only cause her more pain, she is unable to shift her thoughts from him and cannot break the emotional tie she feels she has with him: she describes herself as being "madly in love" and "obsessed". She figures her emotional attachment to him to be beyond her personal control; she is imprisoned by her feelings, maintaining that, despite the pain rejection it is causing her, she has "no choice but to" hold onto her feelings for the young man:

> "I'm constantly in *tears* because I'm so – I don't know – *attached*. And so…I feel that I *want* to be with him and that, and it's like I *need* to be with him… And it's like a *one-sided* thing, man! But I'm so, I don't know, I *can't*, I can't – forget, or not feel anything, or try to get over him… I don't know why; I don't know why".

Much of the relationship appears to play out in her head rather than being enacted in reality: the emotional hold of her attachment to someone with whom she barely has any contact has made her wary towards a physical sexual relationship. She maintains:

> "My friends, they also in love with their boyfriends…because like they had a sexual relationship with him. And I *didn't*, and *I'm also* head over heels, and so I actually think – what if I now had to sleep with him; then what?".

> "…Because, in the beginning…I was so obsessed…then that was like a major issue for me, because I'd get thinking about 'should I or shouldn't I?' [have sex] – so man! And then it's like – *why not?* And then it's like – I'm going to get more attached, and I'm going to this and I'm going to that'. And then I'm like, ok, no, that's not going to work out for me…I don't know, I'm *confused*…"

> "And then…I think at one stage *I* was like willing to sleep with him, you know, just for – it was like for that *moment*, you know? …for like a once-off thing, you know? The once-off thing, and then not *again*. And then I also kept thinking about, what if it's like, you do it, and then I have the *urge* to now have sex, you know? And then I was like, no that's not going to work out".

She fears the power another person can have over one's own emotions – and actions - asserting that if what she is currently experiencing is the strength of emotion one feels *before* entering a sexual relationship, entering into one will render her emotions all too over-powering and beyond her control. She illustrated this with a narrative wherein she told of a friend whose boyfriend keeps dumping her, causing her to fall into a deep depression each time which, in turn, would result in her boyfriend returning to her out of guilt, thus causing her mood to level again: "so man, I don't want to be like that! It's like – you're making a fool out of yourself!".

The power carried by the sexual act is figured by Natalie as located in its potential to incite emotions which may override rational judgement and actions. She maintains that this is particularly the case when young people do not use contraceptives, despite being informed of the dangers of unprotected sex: "They are so involved with what is happening *now* that they don't think of the future – this could happen; that could happen". She maintains that what is going on "in the moment" is a "very physical and emotional thing…It's the being together; the being as one…feeling that togetherness".

5.2.2.3 Sexual attachment and loss to self

The participants also reflected upon intimate sexual attachments in a more abstract manner, one wherein they figured this form of relational connection as coming at the expense of, or effecting certain forms of loss upon the self. In this respect, remaining sexually abstinent stands a means of warding against these forms of loss. Geraldine held, reflecting upon her past sexual decision-making and experiences, that she has maintained integrity of self through preserving her virginity:

> "… one of the things I thought about last night when I went to bed: if I had to not be a virgin today, … what would I have been doing? How many guys would I have been with? And how many boyfriends would I have had to my name? That's all the things that were running through my mind. And then, and at the end of the day, I'm glad that I'm *this* person, and I'm glad for the choices and the mistakes that I've made – and I can't go back and change anything; but I'm grateful for the fact that, I am who I am; I'm not half who I am; or - there're not pieces of me missing. Like, the whole picture is complete, I think".

> *Interviewer: Do you feel that pieces of you would have been missing if you'd had sex?*

> "Yes. There would have been pieces of you missing: because, every time when you sleep with someone, you give them a piece of yourself

that you don't even realise… Maybe you, maybe you give him…a small piece of you that you won't even *think* you *need*. That's why, sometimes when people break up, and they had sex with the person, that's why they always think about the person: because, that person still has a *piece* of *them* in – like, they've still got a piece of that person so… It's like, basically like that, so that is why couples break up and then they come back together: I think that's the *main* reason why they keep on coming back to each other; I don't know, but that's what *I* think". [Geralidine, ii_2]

She follows by giving an example of a couple who are friends of hers, wherein the girl cheats repeatedly on her boyfriend, yet they remain together despite the heartbreak it is causing:

"The one of the questions that I used to ask was also: why don't they break up?; they can't stay away from each other. And it's the same thing I told you earlier: about, if you sleep together, then like you come back to each other. And I told them that exact same thing".

Faiza extends Geraldine's reflections by elaborating upon the loss to the individual that she perceives sexual relational bonds can effect: she believes that the sexual act has a dual function within a relationship: the act has a productive effect for the relationship, but effects loss upon the individual within the relationship:

"I think it *should* take the relationship to a next level, but I also think for the person, you sort of lose a part of yourself, and you give a part of yourself to that person, because, you know, something that was pure, it's not *not* pure, but it's like, but I think you sort of give a part of *you* to that person, and that person will for always have it, because he was your first, and everything…" [Faiza, ii_1]

More generally, the participants spoke of virginity in terms that suggested that the loss of one's virginity is not simply bound up in a physical act with physical consequences, but is deeply bound up in self-hood: the sexual act is figured as one wherein (a woman) irrevocably loses a part of herself: as Natalie expressed this, "*if it's gone, it's gone*; [you] can never get it back". She goes on to add:

"I think for men and women it's like different, you know? [Men are] not so the virgin type, and the pure clean type as women… you don't see men as losing anything… and they often compare with each other how many people they've been with, or how many girls they *can* sleep with; like a competition or something. And with women, it's like you're labelled as being slutty and dirty and sleeping around with people, you know". [Natalie, ii_1]

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She sets up the sexual act – in a manner that echoes Faiza, as quoted above – as being one wherein that which is pure and clean becomes tainted and disreputable. She also calls attention to the social consequences of the sexual act, these being bound up in reputation and the damage that the sexual act can effect upon one's social standing. More generally, the participants put forward a view upon the sexual act itself as devaluing to the self; Karen felt that most young people have sex:

> "To have a good time; to enjoy themselves. *Not thinking* about the consequences. And they don't realize the mistake they're making, because on day when they're married, what will they have to offer their husbands?" [Karen, ii_1]

5.2.2.4 Narratives centring on trust and betrayal

Finally, the participants also voiced concerns related to forging intimate sexual attachments which appeared to be rooted in issues surrounding trust and fears of betrayal. Many narratives centring upon trust and betrayal coloured the participants' accounts, and their wariness in this respect appeared to be a product of experiences within relational contexts beyond the sexual arena, both as these played out in their own lives, as well as in the lives of significant surrounding others.

Karen [ii_1] described one of her chief concerns underpinning her resistance to forging an intimate sexual relationship in the following manner:

> "…Another thing is, I don't know whether…that person might just be *using* me at that point in time, just to go through a rough patch or whatever. And, because of me being so sensitive to others, and, you know, always wanting to please everybody, or see that people at least have a smile on their face…it would make me wonder: is this person really in it for me? Or is there an ulterior motive? Not that there *will* always be… [But] I've been hurt once with a best friend, I'm not going to go that route again, and burn my fingers twice. Because I felt hurt, but I've gotten over it, but – there's still that trust issue… That is one of the big issues…"

She located the source of her wariness towards investing trust within the context of an intimate sexual relationship within a past experience of betrayal by one of her best friends. She described how, unknown to her, her friend had become involved in a sexual relationship, and had taken up drinking and smoking; when Karen discovered this, her friend began to place pressure upon her to become similarly engaged in such activities. Karen, who was opposed in all respects to

such behaviour, felt betrayed, as she felt that her personal values and ideals had been disregarded and undermined:

> "And I was like, I don't think that we should be friends anymore, because if you can't accept me for the person I am, and what I believe in, and if you weren't *honest* enough to tell me that you were doing those things, then I don't need you in my life. It was kind of sad, because we were best friends, and ever since then I've been, like, I don't trust people; it's not that I *don't* trust them, I won't tell them like personal, personal things because – what if the same thing happens? So now I just tell my mother everything; so she's become like my *best friend*".

She maintained that this experience had caused her to take a suspicious attitude towards the intentions of others, particularly her peers, and take up a wary stance in relation to investing her trust in and forging intimate relationships with surrounding others.

> "… you don't know whether they're *lying* or telling you the truth… And you're also scared to confide in them, because of girls being tattle tales; not all of them, but the majority of them are: you can't trust them with a secret or anything…"

Her wariness towards forging intimate connections appeared to be a defensive manoeuvre, whereby she feels she may protect herself against the pain future betrayal:

> "It's not that it's dodgy to make connections: you can make a connection with every single person you come into contact with. But you just won't tell them *every little thing*. You're like: ok, you're my friend, but you're not my best friend; I won't share this with you. I'll go home and I'll share that with someone else who I can trust. That won't, like – it's just your way of protecting yourself from getting hurt. You know?"

Geraldine also took a reluctant stance in relation to the idea of forging an intimate sexual relationship due to concerns rooted in issues of trust and betrayal; she maintains that in the past sex had featured as a pervasive issue in her life, but "not any more":

> "It's not a big issue, because I'm not in a relationship, and I don't want to *be* in one where I have to, where I get forced to do things that I don't *want* to. And I think that, because of my life, and this, of everything that's happened, I don't think I have to give everything to that person that they want me to give to them". [Geraldine, ii_1]

Her words "because of my life" are a reference to personal encounters with and experiences of relationships with members of the opposite sex: these male figures include her father, her step-father and a boyfriend. Her experiences have given her a cynical outlook upon men's intentions within relationships in general, and her narratives centre upon past experiences of betrayal and a present resistance towards placing trust in men. Firstly, she recounts experiences of rejection, abuse and neglect by her own father, and described holding an attitude of mistrust towards men that she felt was a product thereof:

> "…he made all these promises to me and he never kept them. And whenever somebody makes a promise to me, I always say, ag – you not going to keep it, because nobody else like keeps their promises to me".

She feels that her current reluctance to place trust in others around her, and men particularly, is rooted in these early experiences of betrayal by her father: "I think that's where it all started. And they say that character, when you are between the ages of three and five, your character starts building… Sometimes I can't stand up to people, even if I know I'm right…And I think it all started back then".

She followed by recounting narratives of her mother's relationship with her step-father, wherein she was "blinded" by love, sacrificing her own values for her partner and ultimately privileging her partner at the expense of both herself as well as Geraldine:

> "…before she got married to this guy, I told her: don't get married to him… Because, whenever I meet someone, like especially when it comes to guys, when I meet them, then I always like pick up an either *good* vibe or a *bad* vibe. Like, I can pick up, ok, I can trust you – or not. Or, and that's how it happened: I felt I couldn't trust him. And then later, when it came out, a lot of stuff happened, and things came out, and *I* was *hurt* at the end of the day. And I, I'd *throw* it in her face; I would, like, two years ago, I'd throw it in her face constantly for – probably like six months – for up to a year, I'd throw it in her face and say, if you'd *listened* to me, I *wouldn't* have had to *go* through this *stupid* thing; your *stupid* problem; that's the kind of things that I'd tell her".

> "…he was *lying* and, and he wanted to *control* her and stuff like that. And I told her, it's *not supposed to be that way*…What about all the things that you wanted before you got married? She said, no, it doesn't matter…And one of the things was, she was neglecting me… Like I

said, he…put a blind across her eyes, and made her believe things that weren't even true".

She described how it came to light, at a point in her mother's relationship with Geraldine's step-father, that he was involved in a prostitution ring, whereby he was earning money to send to his children of a previous marriage. Even at this point, her mother did not immediately terminate the relationship, which further reinforced Geraldine's experiences of powerlessness, neglect and betrayal:

> "… [The] pastor phoned my mom, and he was telling her, put the guy out! … He had to be put out by the next morning. Otherwise, me and my mom was going to be totally lost, and she was also gonna end up prostituting in some sort of way…And I cried and I said, 'mommy, if you don't put this man out, then *I* might just end up like *you*, and I don't want to end up like you!'. And – eventually she put him out. And I said, 'thank you, because, for the first time, you listened to me; you put me first'. And…she was, I think, in her heart, maybe half-hearted – it was like – *broken*; stuff like that. I don't know".

Finally, she recounted a relatively recent experience within a dating relationship with a young man wherein she was nearly coerced into having sex with him against her wishes:

> "…that made me like think that all guys…are the same in *every* way: that they *only* think about *them*selves, and *their* needs, and never about what *other* people need. And it's just about *them* and, and what *they* want at the time. And if they want it, then nobody else can stop them".

> "I thought, from here on, I'm gonna *remain* the way that I am – until I get married… When I left that house…that afternoon…I also made the decision of, regardless of what, I am not gonna let other people influence my decisions…"

Narratives turning upon the issue of trust also colour Chantelle's accounts. The issue of trust within the context of sexual relationships has pervaded across many of her experiences in both a direct and indirect manner. Firstly, she recounted the recent distress she has felt in the context of her family life: her step-father abandoned her, her mother and her three half-siblings four years prior, leaving them struggling financially. He returned, unannounced, a few months prior to the interview, expecting to simply take up his position as head of the household unquestioned. She maintained that she is "not used to living with the man; I can't trust him, I mean, I don't know what he was *doing* with the four years…I'm trying to live with it, but actually I don't want to live with it".

She is also struggling with her mother's decision to simply accept him back into her life without question:

> "But actually my mother say she should accept him because he's her husband…the day she did her vows, she says that she would stay with him through thick and thin, you know? …And she's just sticking to the rules with staying with her husband… in the Church, you have…almost like rules, man. Where you shouldn't *lie*, and you shouldn't do *this*, and you shouldn't steal… That kind of thing I'm talking about, man. And that's now her – she must stay with her husband, because that's her husband; she married him. That kind of a thing…I'm talking about…"

> "…But I didn't forgive him yet; …my mother asked me if I forgive him. But I told her yes, but actually I'm still finding it hard to forgive him. And sometimes I wonder: but how did she do it man? How did she forgive him? How *can* you forgive a person like that, you know? … But it looks like my mother forgave him. But it's so *weird* to think about it, man: how she forgive him, and I'm still trying to, you know?" [Chantelle, ii_1]

After recounting her feelings of mistrust towards her step-father, she slipped directly into a winding narrative about her own direct experience regarding issues of trust and betrayal in her own heterosexual relational experience. She described how she had recently entered into what she believed to be an exclusive dating relationship with a young man in her grade at school; however, the day prior to the interview she heard rumours, originating from her friends as well as his, that he was seeing someone else simultaneously – who also believed she was in an exclusive relationship with him. Chantelle was told by one of her friends that he was simply "playing with the girls' feelings". When she approached her boyfriend directly, however, he denied this; as such, she was, at the time of the interview, unsure whether to believe him or their friends, maintaining that she was unsure in whom to place her trust.

She asserted that issues of trust and betrayal were common within the relationships she witnessed, maintaining that many girls around her were in tenuous positions within their relationships; she exhibited, in this respect, a cynical attitude towards the intentions of the opposite sex:

> "Actually, [girls] don't know what they're letting them[selves] in for. Because…a lot of the boys in Ocean View, they tend to use the girls, you know? Like…they would date you, and when they finished with you - they had sex with you and stuff like that – they would dump you, and then would say for everybody: ok, I had sex with her, and I

know her. And when they finish with you, they *dump* you; they don't want to do nothing. They just leave you".

Chantelle maintained that her ideal future relationship would be founded upon trust, holding this up as the most important quality for a relationship to bear:

> "My biggest issue is the trust thingy. That's my biggest issue now; that's the trust thingy. Then, *also*, with the HIV thingy; that's also an issue in my life. But the most important thing is, I want trust in my relationship; I don't want to be like this, like other girls and boys here: you know, everybody, when we are finished doing our thing, everybody in Ocean View suddenly know. Like, here sometimes at school, you know, then when a girl walk past the boy, he will just say, 'no, I already had sex with her'. You know? And that's the kind of thing I don't want to happen; I don't want to happen to me. But then it's also that HIV thingy…"

5.2.2.5 Discussion: symbolic concerns

This component of the paper explored the less concrete concerns shaping the participants' sexual decision-making and orientation towards sex and sexual relationships. It was shown that these 'symbolic' concerns were bound up in the psychosocial implications of sex and intimate sexual attachments more generally: specifically, their narratives suggested a wariness or hesitancy in relation to forging intimate sexual attachments, one that is rooted in direct and indirect experiences of (hetero)sexual attachments as effecting various forms of loss to self. These forms of loss included loss of independence, individual agency and self-directed action, loss of personal values and ideals, and types of loss that take the form of broken connections and trust, and experiences of betrayal.

5.2.3 Summarising and interpreting the participants' concerns

On one level, the participants *rationalise* or *intellectualise* their decision to abstain from sex, and to refrain from entering into sexual relationships more generally as one that serves the *instrumental* purpose of securing for them psychosocial and material goods in their future lives. Underlying this, however, is a second core element to the concerns featuring in the participants' sexual decision-making, this being a wariness or resistance towards the emotional intimacy entailed within a sexual relationship. This wariness is rooted in a conception of sex and sexual relationships as a site of loss, an arena

characterised by many threats to self. This aspect of the participants' concerns brings to light *emotional* elements at play in their sexual decision-making, which are rooted in concerns surrounding relational intimacy. At many points, their narratives suggest that the participants hold doubts surrounding their capacity to uphold the very ideals and values mentioned in relation to their instrumental concerns from *within* a sexual relationship.

In this respect, it should be noted that, to some degree, sexual abstinence in the behavioural sense of the term is, in the case under study, pre-determined by an inclination towards what might be termed 'relational' abstinence, a wariness towards forming relational connections with others. This indicates the need to move beyond a purely behavioural conceptualisation of sexual abstinence itself, and towards one that incorporates relational aspects of this form of sexual decision-making. Furthermore, it is important to note that both the cognitive – the rational/intellectual - as well as emotional aspects of the participants' sexual decision-making are not simply intra-individual processes, but ones that are deeply shaped by the psychosocial and material context in which the participants are located. The continuity across the accounts, and the shared meanings and understandings that become apparent when considering the individual narratives collectively, further reinforce the need to acknowledge the socially-produced nature of the individuals' cognitions and emotions and subsequent decision-making and actions. This calls for innovations in theories modelling the relationship between the psychological and the social, which moves beyond a dualistic and towards a mutually-constituting understanding of the relationship between the two.

5.3 The implications of 'countering the norm': narratives of exclusion and isolation

This component of the paper will now turn to the consequences of the participants' sexual decision-making: specifically, it will be shown that 'going against the norm', while primarily a strategy geared towards positive ends in the future, also has indirect negative implications which feature strongly within the participants' current experiences. Furthermore, it will be argued, these negative outcomes, as they figure upon the participants' present lives, could have a potentially restricting effect upon the participants' capacity to sustain their stance as positive exceptions, and thus the potential for desired positive future outcomes to be ultimately realised.

As noted earlier, the participants worked constructively within their accounts to figure themselves in counter-opposed terms to the destructive behavioural, attitudinal and relational codes in operation around them, thus separating and distinguishing themselves in positive terms from surrounding others and

prevailing social norms. However, as is both explicit and implicit in the participants' narratives, and will be elaborated below, this stance can serve to curtail, and sometimes bar completely, the opportunity for important points of connection and identification with others. In many cases, feelings of isolation, disconnection and neglect characterise the participant's narratives: being a 'positive exception' can effect exclusion in a community where destructive norms prevail.

5.3.1 Subject to exclusion / objects of resentment

One of the most forceful implications or consequences that the participants figured as stemming from their attempt to break from the normative sexual codes in operation around them was a sense of social exclusion. In particular, the participants described facing great difficulty in finding social integration and acceptance within the peer group due to their decision to act counter to the sexual norms in operation within this context.

In many instances, the participants referred to the status attached to having a boyfriend, and the sense of insecurity and inferiority amongst their peers that not having such an attachment incited in them. Faiza [ii_1] maintained that, when she was at primary school:

> "I'd never, ever thought about a boyfriend. And everybody was like, having boyfriends. And I was like, huh!? How can this be happening now? When you like Standard Four! And…I couldn't understand because… I don't know, I just felt that I was sort of *out* because *everybody* was there and I didn't *know* if I was supposed to have a boyfriend… I'm not saying, to be cool, but everybody had, so…"

> "Like when we would go to the movies, and then everybody would be coupled, and I would be like, 'oh, my goodness!'; but then, I suppose what doesn't kill you makes you stronger… I was really…*depressed*; I really, I actually *thought* that…you *should* have a boyfriend… I wasn't very self-confident. Because, I wanted to fit in, and therefore I wanted to do what everyone else did, and the fact that I *didn't* do it, and everybody else did made me feel very excluded, and I felt very, you know, I wasn't very self-confident".

Despite the fact that the participants figured themselves as having different priorities to their peers which could often override their desire to conform to surrounding others, there was still evidence that the pull to conform and desire for integration and acceptance often incited a conflict in values and desires and experiences of social and emotional difficulty. As Geraldine [ii_1] maintained, although "inside" she "never really wanted anything" on Valentine's Day,

"because everybody…was making a big deal about it, saying, 'you *supposed* to get something today; you *supposed* to'…I think that's what also made me also *want* something…and when I got nothing I was upset…I were disappointed".

In other instances, the participants reflected upon the difficulties inherent in being a virgin in a context where promiscuity is valued, and social status is inferred upon one by virtue of one's sexual experience. Karen [ii_1] maintains:

"I think the status is more emphasized on not being a virgin. Because of everybody else going around and sleeping around, not being virgins, so – if you are a virgin, then you're like looked down at – *what's wrong with you? Something must be wrong; the guys don't want you…*"

She recounted a recent experience at a youth camp, wherein she felt barred from the opportunity to forge connections with the other girls there due to the fact that she did not have sexual experiences she was able to share with them:

"…the girls were bonding, and they were like telling of their [sexual] experiences and stuff. And then, when it cam to my turn, I was like: I've got *nothing to tell*… and they were like, *what?* I'm like: I can't say anything; I've never *had* a boyfriend, number one. I've never, I don't even know how to flirt with a guy – *please!* What do I know? And they were like, they were laughing. So, sometimes I feel excluded, and sometimes…"

Natalie [ii_1] remarked that many of her female peers had had sex for the sole purpose of finding social acceptance within the peer group, "just to be *in* with friends". She followed by adding that, within her friendship group:

"I'm *mos* now the out one. Because they, they like, all of them have been there, done that, and they like have their like *sex discussions* and like, if they like together, then they talk about this, and how it was, how they felt – all of this stuff; and then, *I'll* like be sitting there, and the one would go 'you can't talk with'; I'm like, 'it's alright… I'm just listening'."

More generally, the participants also voiced experiences which suggested the difficulty of being a 'positive exception' and maintaining a stance orientated towards securing positive future outcomes within a community wherein destructive norms prevail. In many of their narratives, the participants figured themselves as being both subject to social exclusion as well as objects of active resentment from surrounding others as a consequence of their attempt to counter destructive social norms.

This was particularly evident in the cases of Karen and Faiza. Both participants came from family circumstances that they felt ran counter to the norm in Ocean View: they described having supportive parents, who encouraged them to strive to reach their goals and realise their dreams, and instilled them with the values of virginity and family that ran counter to prevailing sexual codes in Ocean View. Both participants described being very goal-orientated, achieving well academically at school, and both were actively involved in leadership positions within the school student body. Despite these positive family background influences, these participants described the difficulty of maintaining their position as a positive exception due to many opposing forces around them outside of the family context.

The case of Faiza

Faiza [ii_2] asserted that being an "achiever", or someone who was successful at their endeavours could often render one the object of resentment. She admitted that sometimes she wished she was not as successful as she was, so that she could avoid being such a target:

> "Sometimes I'd wish, 'ah! I wish I wasn't in this situation'…I always say that I wish that I just didn't have a brain, because I feel like I'm constantly being looked at…I'm constantly saying things like, 'you need to stand up' …And, um, I just feel like me doing that sort of isolates me, and makes me then stand out. And sometimes I wonder whether, you know, it's the right thing for me to do…"

She described wishing that she could literally leave Ocean View, so that she could avoid the negativity and resentment surrounding her:

> "I just feel like, you know, all the bad things that happen in the community, and you just feel you want to break out; you just want to, you know, get out…It's just that, when you're *in* this community, you constantly feel like everyone is – say for example, you do something that is different to what everyone else does, then they say, 'ag, look at what…she thinks she's *kwaai* and whatever'. And then, you know, you sort of get pressed down in the community – yet nobody is standing up and doing something, but when someone *does* stand up and does something, you know, the community just sort of says, 'ag, they think they cool, and whatever, doing that' and so…I just don't want to stay here, because, for me, it's just constantly, I'm not saying there's nothing positive in the community, but, you know, people always, in the community, concentrate on the negative things".

She described a social climate of envy and spoiling in relation to successful figures:

> "I think because they don't have the courage to stand up and do something; now they feel like everyone should be like them, and not have the courage, and when somebody does, you know, they sort of see how they, where they *wanted* to be, and then they sort of press that person down because they can't, you know, get there".

She reflected upon a recent experience wherein she had been elected as a prefect, and had become subject to her class-mates' envy and resentment because of this; she described how they had attacked her on this point with such persistence that she "snapped…and allowed [her] feelings to take over"; she felt she was reduced from a "cool, calm, collected person" to a position that lost her a degree of dignity: "I think I sort of lost a certain amount of respect from…the people, because I snapped, and now they see a different side of me…I had sort of become like everyone else".

The case of Karen

Karen [ii_1] also recounted narratives that voiced the difficulty of finding both social acceptance and integration while also making a success of oneself as an individual. She told of a neighbour, who was a teacher at her school, who was being abused by her husband:

> "…she tells you, and you see the bruises, and you hear the sounds and everything. And it's – I don't know how – it's just *impossible* to believe that people with *so much intelligence* could allow something like that to happen".

> "…I supposed it's because they need a sense of belonging. Because, you know, if you're intelligent then everybody regards you as a nerd, or someone who has to be excluded or whatever… Ja, because that's what a lot of the children has been doing with – a lot of intelligent people. They, like, exclude them or poke fun at them, and stuff like that. Which is unnecessary…"

She drew a parallel with herself in this respect, maintaining that, as someone who achieves well academically at school:

> "…it's like you don't feel accepted by society sometimes. You feel as though – because of the jealousy, and you're perhaps making them feel inferior, or not *worth* them selves or whatever. Or you're exposing their flaws, [so] that they regard you as a threat of some kind. So…you kind of need to defend yourself in the capacity that –

you don't want to be intelligent anymore; you don't need that, because of the *crap* that a lot of people are giving you, so…"

She returned to the subject of her abused neighbour, explaining her lack of motivation to leave the relationship as such:

"Because she was the only one working; she was the only one bringing in money, or something. And for her to allow something like that – she had all the power in the relationships, because of her job, her degrees and everything. And he was like *nothing compared to her* – and I suppose that was what he felt threatened by. And sometimes he would say that 'nobody else will take you when I'm done with you' because of certain things…"

Like Faiza, she described a situation wherein success is met with resentment and a desire to spoil, exclude and deny rather than congratulate and share. She attributes this stance to the fact that:

"I suppose it's way of protecting themselves from getting hurt or from being exposed. Because, deep down, I suppose all of us want to be like, the autocrat: whatever I say goes. Instead of finding a solution to getting your way, you would like disadvantage someone else just to get something. Which is sad".

She feels this forcefully in her own life, reflecting upon the challenges of being an exception, particularly the experiences of exclusion that follow from this. She describes her school life as being fraught with such difficulties:

"I mean, you get the popular nerds, and you get the dumb, like the excluded people. Because you do everything right, they know that what they're doing is wrong, and there are certain people *out there* that are doing the right thing, and that's what they can't…"

"I don't think I always do the right thing; I don't know why everybody else regards me as perfect… They say it out loud; they say that: 'as if *you'd* know anything, because you're little Miss Perfect. You don't do anything'. Or - '*what would you know*? Your parents are open and honest with you about certain things'… And I'm like – there are times when your parents are open and honest, but I'm feeling the exact same thing as a child whose mother is not at home – you're *angry* and I also feel that sometimes. And I also have friends that do drugs and stuff, but it doesn't mean that I have to join them doing that. And 'what would you know? You've never been in a relationship!' And I'm like, I'm *in* a relationship every single day with different people – just not in the sense that *you* are. Or 'nothing bad will ever

happen to you, because you, you're just at home, or you're just at church, or you're just at the library, or you're just at your granny's or something' – which is *utter nonsense*, because I can be walking to church, and someone might rob me, or they might rape me. And they don't *see* that from my point of view, they just think, 'ag! You're Miss Perfect; you get everything your way' – which is *not* true. If I got everything my way, I'd probably be a spoiled little brat that just, whenever I snapped my fingers, I'd get what I want. I wouldn't be *getting* the grades that I'm getting; I wouldn't be *in* the struggle that I am with children around me, not speaking, or… You know? All those other things…"

5.3.2 Narratives of isolation

As has been elaborated above, the participants figure themselves as being deeply invested in concerns which allow them to reject the sexual codes embraced by the general adolescent population. However, despite the fact that the participants appear to be strongly invested in the positive ideal that they uphold, and despite showing a strong motivation to break from the destructive cycles operating around them, their narratives suggest a sense of ambivalence or doubt in relation to their personal capacity to maintain and realise this ideal in their own lives and, on the other hand, truly ward against simply being absorbed into and perpetuating the destructive cycles they view around them. At many points across the accounts, it appears that the participants are engaged in a constant struggle to retain personal control over their lives, decisions and actions. Chantelle [ii_1] asserted that she was "motivated…to do something better in life" because "I've seen the way my parents is living; and I've seen the way things is turning out, you know? I'm in this situation… And I just feel it's *not right*. And I can do better one day". However, she follows by adding:

"Though sometimes I feel like I should *give up* and end up like others; then there's always something that reminds me: no, Chantelle, that won't help you… You know, sometimes I think, like, why don't you just go and *drink*; get yourself *drunk*. Or – just *smoke* a cigarette… or something like that. And – or *do things* that's not good for me, or stuff like that man. Sometimes I just think, feel like doing that. But then I always tell myself, no, it's wrong; I still have school, and – so sometimes I feel like leaving school also, when things get too much for me".

"I mean, if I do this things now; if I maybe have a child now, fall pregnant now, what would it bring for me, you know? But yes, if I have a child now – where – the house is so little, so small, you know.

And my child will now, I'll be sitting with a child; my mother's already having so much problems, and I don't have a job. You know? Then I should *go out*; go *working*, *working* for my children and stuff like that. Like, now I can, for not doing, falling pregnant, and stuff like that, I can at least finish school, get a proper job – all things like that. Although I know I won't have money to study. But at least I've finished school and stuff like that man… you know, sometimes it's so difficult at school. Like now, I can't cope with the tests, you know? Sometimes it's problems at home, then you still have to come to school; you're having problems at school – everything is getting for you *so much*, you know? But – *I'm dealing with it*. I know I can…I don't have a choice; I have to deal with it".

"…Just trying to be that *strong* person; but deep inside, you just feel like *crying*. There's many times when I feel I want to cry, you know? But then I just hold it back, you know? I don't want to cry – because it makes me look just like a baby. But sometimes it's just…"

Her narrative exposes the struggle that her decisions have entailed, and the difficulty she has in maintaining a positive stance in a material context of little support, possibility or future opportunity, and many demanding and trying circumstances. As in many of the other participants' narratives, there is an underlying sense of hopelessness at times, and clear evidence of the emotional struggle entailed in remaining positive in spite of this.

As elaborated above, the participants often figured their stance as rendering them subject to social exclusion and objects of resentment. However, while this understandably posed a challenge to the participants, it appeared that, in many instances, it was not the *presence* of such negative or opposing factors, but the *absence* of positive and facilitative forces that stood as the most powerful influence over their experiences.

A key factor feeding into the difficulties the participants have in maintaining the stance they have taken in relation to their sexual decision-making, as well as their lives more generally, relates to the fact that they have few close, supportive figures who might provide acceptance, comfort and encouragement. Narratives of isolation pervaded across many of the accounts. The participants describe having few experiences, past or present, of forming close and secure attachments with supportive others. This trend has its roots in childhood attachment patterns, wherein the family context provided few opportunities to form secure attachments in the participants' formative years: the family context provided little opportunity for close, emotional connections with significant and supportive others, and experiences within this context were characterised by neglect and abandonment. Furthermore, such experiences also appeared to

characterise the participants' current or more recent relationships in this context. Accounts of more recent experiences within the peer group, within the context of heterosexual dating relationships and within institutional contexts such as the school and clinics serve to further underscore the apparent inaccessibility of emotionally containing and supportive relationships in the lives of the participants.

When considering the evidence, it appears that the participants have had few opportunities to forge intimate attachments with potentially supportive others, and are presented with few examples of the potentially empowering or protective possibilities that such attachments can provide. It appeared, in many instances, that the participants perceived themselves to be thinking and acting in isolation. Despite the fact that the participants appear to be strongly invested in the positive ideal that they uphold, and despite showing a strong motivation to break from the destructive cycles in operation around them, it is also apparent that maintaining this stance involves sacrificing important sources of connection with surrounding others: as seen above, the participants often figured their stance as rendering them subject to social exclusion and objects of resentment. At many points it seemed that the participants were caught in a double bind, wherein the strategy employed to secure themselves certain psychosocial and material gains as isolated individuals is also, in some respects, a strategy that bars them from fulfilling needs pertaining to their relationships with surrounding others. There appeared to be a tension between individual and relational needs that the participants found difficult to reconcile.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Implications of countering the norm

Whether the girls manage to effect the ideal in which they invest in their future (sexual) lives seems to be constrained by the isolation in which they are thinking and acting. While the participants hope to break from destructive relational cycles, norms and values prevailing within their community, they are attempting to do so independently, without relational ties. Being the 'positive exception' comes at the expense of relational intimacy, resulting in an isolation from others that could itself stand in as a barrier to their realising the very ideal they are attempting to uphold.

The potential negative consequences implicated in being an exception – isolation and exclusion – have particular bearing in the case of the adolescent population, adolescence being a stage of development in which the peer group stands as a site of central importance to and influence upon the developing

individual, and conformity to peer group norms and values is a characteristic route to integration within the peer group context. The conclusion to be drawn from this points towards the need to develop alternative spaces in which young people can find a sense of belonging and acceptance. Such spaces should be supportive environments in which non-conformity to, and the desire to break from, destructive behavioural codes and cycles is fostered, valued and nurtured.

6.2 General conclusions

More generally, the findings suggest that the manner whereby individuals construct sexual risk-taking is deeply related to the psychosocial and material context in which they are located, rather than being a value-free, objective calculation thereof; the data indicated that the participants perceived the risks attached to sexual decision-making as first and foremost psychosocial rather than physical in nature. Studies which take as their focus the sexual health outcomes of adolescent sexual decision making are often rooted in theoretical models which assume that sexual decision making is primarily shaped by health-related concerns. As researchers who are motivated to investigate this population in the interest of sexual health promotion, we must ward against projecting our own concerns upon the models we develop: for, while sexual decision-making has implications upon sexual health outcomes, these sexual decisions may be independent of health-related concerns. In this regard, HIV/AIDS interventions based upon educating adolescents about sexual health are unlikely to have a significant effect upon behaviour.

Findings from one research site should not be generalised hastily. The sexual decision-making of the adolescent girls discussed in this study is deeply rooted in psychosocial and material factors in their immediate social world. Their decision to abstain from sex is informed by their understanding of the relationships within their family and neighbourhood. In other settings, either the context of relationships might be different, or the actual process of sexual decision-making might be different. Further analysis - incorporating data derived from the broader cross-community study through which the current data was produced - will explore the transferability of the findings, whether the 'relational' nature of sexual abstinence in this case marks a contextually-specific 'form' of sexual abstinence, and whether similar contextual conditions necessarily produce the same behavioural outcomes.

The findings also point towards the utility of directing focus upon 'exceptions' and 'positive' behaviours (such as sexual abstinence in the youth population) and generating insights from these positive or counter-normative examples who are not engaging in sexual risk-taking and not simply 'at risk' populations. However, to qualify this point further, the findings also emphasise the need to

incorporate psychosocial determinants, indicators and outcomes into theoretical models of sexual health. In particular, there is a need to re-define what is considered a 'positive' outcome within these models. The current study indicates that sexual abstinence, while associated with positive health outcomes, is not necessarily associated with positive psychosocial outcomes for the individual in question. Furthermore, sexual abstinence as a behaviour appeared to be pre-determined by psychosocial and material factors that are deeply embedded in the social context in which the individuals were located. As such, this indicates a need to move towards multi-dimensional models of sexual health, which entails a shift beyond the individualistic, biomedical and behavioural orientation of current models.

Although this stands as a challenge to prevailing biomedical and physical health-orientated models, it should not be seen as undermining the importance of maintaining a sexually healthy population; rather, this will be in the interest of *maintaining* one. For, although the current health outcomes of the group under study may appear positive within models employing behaviour and physical health as indicators and outcomes, the means through which this is being effected appear unsustainable and inherently tenuous unless supportive environments are developed that may foster these strategies.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the utility of acknowledging and developing insights into the 'lay' or 'alternative' rationalities regarding 'health-related' behaviours (such as sex), and 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" (Crossley, 2000: 39). Not only does this contribute towards a more detailed understanding of the meanings of such behaviours, but also has implications for health promotion practices. If health promotion strategies are to be effective, "the co-operation of those receiving such strategies is essential and, in turn, if those receivers are to co-operate, then health promotion 'knowledge' must be made accessible and meaningful" (Cooper cited in Crossley, 2000: 39). This cannot be achieved if the theoretical models espoused by health psychology render practitioners incapable of adequately understanding and explaining the full complexity of health-related behaviours.

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