

Deconstructing the 'sugar daddy': A critical review of the constructions of men in intergenerational sexual relationships in South Africa

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Abstract

Since a recent Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) prevalence study highlighted the relationship between intergenerational sex and risk of HIV infection, a range of studies in southern Africa have documented the commonality of sexual relations between older men and young women. For the most part, these studies have focused on the material and status benefits for the young women, and on their vulnerability to HIV, violence and unwanted pregnancies, within the context of gender power inequalities to negotiate safe and equitable sex. In this Focus we review this literature and argue that there is a relative absence of focus on attempting to understand the older men's positions. We suggest the need for research that offers a more nuanced account of the complexities of men's performances of sexuality, which will move beyond depicting older men as inevitable perpetrators of unequal sexual relationships with younger women. In order to better understand and address the complexities of intergenerational sexual relationships, men's constructions of their sexuality and their gains and investments in such relationships require more critical analysis.

Introduction

A focus on transactional sexual relationships, especially those identified as intergenerational, has been a growing area of research in the larger literature on sexual practices, spurred by attempts to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (Clowes *et al*, 2009; Dunkle *et al*, 2004; 2007; Gukurume, 2011; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Luke, 2005; Maganja *et al*, 2007; Masvawure, 2010; Ulin, 1992). In South Africa there has been an emerging literature that foregrounds the way in which many sexual relationships hinge around material exchange. The evidence suggests that older, better resourced men engage in sexual relationships with younger, poorer women, who may construct this exchange as a resource for general material assistance, and not necessarily only dire poverty (Bhana and Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2002; 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008).

There are concerns regarding the vulnerability that such relationships, framed in inequalities of age and resources, may imply for young women's ability to negotiate safer sex. Initially the focus of researchers and policy-makers identified sex

workers as a particular 'risk' group with respect to the role of transactional relationships in unsafe sexual practices (Varga, 1997; Gould and Fick, 2008). However, there has been a growing acknowledgement and interrogation of the dynamics of transactional sex in 'normative' relationships. As a result, much of the research that looks at older men's sexuality does so through the lens of inter-generational transactional sexuality.

This paper emerges out of our own research on transactional sexual relationships, together with our grounding in the literature on critical men's studies that has applied a gendered lens to boys, men and masculinities. In documenting reported transactional sexual relationships in two recent studies, both among young people in South Africa (Potgieter *et al*, in press; Shefer *et al*, 2012a; Shefer *et al*, 2012b; Shefer *et al*, 2011), we have become increasingly aware of the complexity of such relationships. Moreover, they cannot be understood outside of dominant gendered performances intersecting with a range of other forms of inequalities and narratives on difference, and shaped by local cultural textures and dynamics. We review contemporary work on intergenerational transactional sex towards a critical reflection of the implications of both academic and popular readings of this scholarship for the larger project of theorising gender, including a feminist analysis of men and masculinities.

Intergenerational sexual relationships and the salience of transactional sex

Within the context of attempts to address high rates of HIV infection among youth, specifically young black African women, a wide range of studies have focused on the commonality of transactional sexual relationships. The literature on transactional sex primarily raises concerns about the unequal nature of such relationships and young women's vulnerability to coercive and risky sexual practices in such relationships (Dunkle *et al*, 2007; 2004; Kaufman and Stavros, 2004; Ragnarsson *et al*, 2009; Steffenson *et al*, 2011).

Research shows that in many contexts such intergenerational sex is considered to be the norm (Chinake *et al*, 2002; Luke and Kurz, 2002), and to pose a significant challenge to the negotiation of condom use, and thus a risk factor for HIV infection in the young women (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Luke, 2005; Luke and Kurz, 2002; Motsemme, 2007) (also see M Savides & S Masuku, 'Blitz on sugar daddy teachers', *Sunday Times*, July 8 2012). The most recent National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey conducted by the HSRC (Shisana *et al*, 2009) specifically identified intergenerational sex between young women and older men ('sugar daddies') as a significant 'risk factor' for young women with respect to HIV infection. In their unpacking of the phenomenon of transactional sex, the study reported further that the percentage of women with sexual partners more than five years older than them had increased from 18.5% in 2005 to 27.6% in 2008. The researchers suggest that material considerations are driving relationships, and that this places young poorer women at particular risk of contracting HIV and of unwanted pregnancies.

‘Troubling’ current research on intergenerational, transactional relationships

While economic necessity is recognised as a major motivator for involvement in sexual relationships in exchange for material benefits, writers also point to other factors which contribute to these relationships, for example aspirations toward middle-class consumerism, status for both the young women and men, as well as emotional investments (Hunter, 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Maganja *et al*, 2007; Masvawure, 2010; Wamoyi *et al*, 2010). Thus, Bhana and Pattman (2011) illustrate how ideals of love amongst a group of poor, young women in a township in KwaZulu-Natal are bound up with material aspirations and the desire for popular commodities. And Oxlund (2009: 206) suggests the “concept of reciprocity of love [that] points to broader definitions of exchange” that are not inherently exploitative.

Such work begins to destabilise a binaristic and simplistic account of the older man/perpetrator engaging actively in such relationships for sex, while the younger woman/victim engages passively in these relationships out of financial or material need, and thus is inevitably vulnerable to risk behaviours. A recent study on the phenomenon of ‘taxi queen’ relationships between young school-going women and public mini-bus taxi drivers in the Western Cape suggests that, in the relationship with an older man, a younger woman may also derive considerable social status among peers, as well as other non-material benefits (Potgieter *et al*, in press; Shefer *et al*, 2011; Strebel *et al*, in press). The study locates this practice in the wider subculture of young girls accessing material goods through older men, who are perceived to be better resourced than younger men. Exchanges were reported as not only about material benefits but linked also to status (for both parties) and access to varied resources such as alcohol and drugs.

In a further recent study among young people at a Western Cape tertiary institution, Shefer and colleagues (2012a; 2012b) found that while sugar daddies or ‘ministers of finance’ were reportedly a common phenomenon, transactions were similarly not only of a material nature but linked to exchanges around a range of resources particular to the social and material context of this campus life. For example, those in positions of power on campus, such as members of the Students Representative Council (SRC), were apparently able to ‘trade sex’ with women students who were younger, less confident, and newer to campus and urban life. A further manifestation of the complexity of these relationships is highlighted in this study through the way in which transactional sex intersects with other localised areas of difference and inequality, such as the recent history of attacks against Africans who are not South African citizens. In a context of violence against those constructed as ‘foreign’, students spoke of how men from other African countries were engaged in transactional relationships with South African women, who would gain academic support while the male partner would be attracted by the additional advantage of a sense of security in being associated with a local citizen. This study further emphasises the way in which multiple contexts of power inequality cut across gender and age inequalities, and that the benefits for both parties are also multiple, contextual and complicated.

Another important feature of the relationship between older men and younger women that appears in the taxi queen study cited above, is the reported importance of emotional support from an older male figure. In this study, both community participants and taxi queens highlighted emotional factors as contributing to this practice, arguing that girls who experienced family problems, neglect or stress received the affirmation, acknowledgement and affection from taxi drivers that was often absent at home. Thus relationships with taxi drivers were not only experienced as transactional in nature, but could also involve various forms of emotional intimacy (Shefer *et al*, 2011; Strebel *et al*, 2012, in press).

Moreover, some writers challenge the notion of the powerlessness and vulnerability of young women in negotiating safe sexual relationships, and point to accounts of personal agency and indeed power in such relationships (Cole, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Nkosasana and Rosenthal, 2007; Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2000). Thus, the taxi queen research showed that while drivers were depicted as exploiting the young girls, through gifts in exchange for sexual favours, there were also examples of agency and control in the ways that the girls negotiated the terms of the relationship. The authors argue that while:

“the intersection of social inequalities on the basis of gender, age and material wealth in particular, may undermine the young woman’s ability to negotiate an equitable and safe sexual relationship at the time, her lack of agency should not be a knee-jerk assumption” (Shefer, *et al*, 2011: 19).

The acknowledgement of the complexity of transactional intergenerational relationships has been important for the development of scholarship and for social change policy and practice. Nonetheless, as we argue below there are still further issues that need to be unpacked.

Critical reflections

A scan of the literature on intergenerational sex in South Africa and more broadly on the continent, shows that the bulk of the focus on older men’s sexuality and relationships has been through the framework of transactional sex, as discussed above. Understandably, this has emerged out of imperatives to halt the spread of HIV and address other gendered challenges such as coercive and violent practices. This contrasts starkly with concerns in western and northern contexts which have tended towards a medicalised focus on male sexual problems that are believed to be associated with age (Marshall, 2007; 2006). Such a focus appears to be virtually absent in the African and South African contexts.

The concern to address what seems to be an increasing practice of intergenerational sexual relationships, which hinge around transaction and which do appear to carry greater risks of unequal, coercive and unsafe sexual practices, is understandable. However, we argue it has also served to marginalise any other consideration of male sexuality. Moreover, such literature has then for the most part depicted older men in relationship with younger women as inevitable perpetrators. We cannot disavow the layers of inequality that are

inherent in some relationships between older men and young women, and how such overlays of inequality, given dominant constructions of masculinity as bound up with control and violence, may locate these women in a space of potential vulnerability. Nevertheless, we also need to acknowledge the complex nature of such relationships, as has emerged in some recent literature cited above. Arguably, it is important to shift attention to understanding and challenging normative gender roles, including those of men.

What is particularly evident in the review of this body of work, that reflects the intersection of scholarship on intergenerational sex as well as transactional sex, is the lack of work that documents the stories of men, in particular the older men who are engaging in intergenerational and/or transactional relationships themselves. When we do hear about older male investments in such relationships it is generally through the perspective of the younger women and/or broader community constructions. Research on the subjective narratives of men who engage in such relationships may allow for both scholarship and intervention, not to mention popular discourse, to move beyond a simplistic account of the older man as a 'baddy' with low morals who exploits young women. We suggest it is important to draw on the insights of local and international work that applies a feminist lens to boys, men and masculinities, that of critical men's or masculinities studies. In this respect, there is a growing body of work on men, boys and masculinities in southern Africa, reflecting global trends (for example, Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005; Reid and Walker, 2005; Richter and Morrell, 2006; Shefer *et al*, 2010; Shefer *et al*, 2007).

Two areas of this work emerge at a first glance as important in understanding older men who engage with younger women through a transactional sexual dynamic. Firstly, the research on male sexuality has illuminated the pressures on men to prove their sexual prowess through a hyper- (hetero) sexuality and the taking of multiple partners, as a key component of masculine identity (Anderson, 2010; Lindegger and Maxwell, 2007; Pattman and Chege, 2003; Ratele, 2006; Shefer and Foster, 2009). Secondly, the strength of the breadwinner/ provider discourse in the achievement of successful masculinity has also been well illustrated in local studies (Hendricks *et al*, 2010; Mfecane, 2008; Morrell, 2007). Arguably, both of these frameworks of hegemonic masculinity may contribute to a more rigorous analysis of the dynamics of intergenerational transactional sex in local contexts.

Finally, it is important that as researchers and practitioners we avoid what Grewal (2012) calls an 'outsourcing' of patriarchy, in which certain cultures and communities are considered 'backward', unchanging and inherently problematic, thus serving as the 'dumping ground' for social problems at global and local levels. Thus the 'expert', 'scientific' gaze on intergenerational relationships, and in particular, their transactional nature, may be serving the function of 'othering' African and poor communities. Within the larger project of patriarchy and its complex intersection with neo-liberal commodification, exchange of sex for material goods or other gains may be understood rather as a global practice embedded

in normative heterosexual relationships, an argument familiar to second wave feminism (de Beauvoir, 1982; Cronan, 1973; Okin, 1989).

Notwithstanding these reservations, it should also be remembered that most of the relationships described in current research involve men in the position of the sugar daddies and women as those who provide sex. Also importantly, it appears that it is the young women who are stigmatised for engaging in transactional, intergenerational sex, while the men were regarded as 'playas', and admired for having multiple partners (for example, Potgieter *et al*, 2012, in press; Shefer *et al*, 2012b). Thus a hetero-normative model of transaction still prevails which is powerfully linked to dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. While some of the studies foreground the complexity of transaction, arguably a stereotypic model of men as primarily driven by sexual need and women as strategically appropriating that to gain materially emerges. We have argued that a more complex lens is required to address men's investments in such relationships that goes beyond the reiteration of popular narratives on masculinity.

However, we also need to acknowledge the salience of the male sexual drive discourse and a lack of a positive discourse on women's sexualities in local contexts, highlighted in other studies on sexual practices among young South Africans (for example, Lesch and Kruger; Shefer *et al*, 2012b). Indeed, there are few accounts of women who exchange money for their own sexual desire (ie 'sugar mommies') or of gay and lesbian intergenerational and/or transactional sexual relationships, which clearly reflects the continued patriarchal shaping of sexual practices. On the other hand, researchers' own embeddedness in such normative gender and moral positions may be generating certain blind-spots in knowledge production.

In concluding, we suggest that challenging relationships that are founded on power inequalities and that allow for coercive and violent practices through an intersectional lens, is clearly a priority for South African scholarship. In addition though, we also need to recognise the importance of self-reflexive research that offers a more nuanced account of the complexities of men's and women's performances of sexuality and relationships, and that are not simply invested in positions that assume that all intergenerational relationships are inherently problematic. Researchers and practitioners need to interrogate their own gendered constructions and how we may be reiterating the gender binarisms we supposedly challenge in the way in which we go about our research, what we choose to research, the questions we ask, how we interpret our data, and the conclusions and recommendations we make.

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