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## **Resisting the binarism of victim and agent: Critical reflections on 20 years of scholarship on young women and heterosexual practices in South African contexts**

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### **Abstract**

The last 20 years have seen a proliferation of research, spurred by the imperatives of the HIV epidemic and reportedly high rates of gender-based violence, on heterosexual practices in the South African context. Research has focused on how poverty, age and gender within specific cultural contexts shape sexual agency and provide a context for unequal, coercive and violent practices for young women. This paper takes stock of what we currently ‘know’ about heterosex and critically reflects on the political and ideological effects of such research, specifically in the light of young women’s agency. A primary concern is that efforts to address gender inequality and the normative gender practices that shape inequitable heterosexual practices may have functioned to reproduce the very discourses that underpin such inequalities. The paper ‘troubles’ the victim–agency binarism as it has been played out in South African research on heterosex, raising concerns about how the research may reproduce gendered, classed and raced othering practices and discourses and bolstered regulatory and disciplinary responses to young women’s sexualities. The paper argues for critical, feminist self-reflexivity that should extend to re-thinking methodologies entrenched in frameworks of authority and surveillance.

### **Introduction**

Twenty years into democratic South Africa presents itself as an opportune moment for critical reflection on gender justice goals. This paper takes stock of one aspect of this – our progress with respect to two decades of addressing young women’s reproductive health in the light of the challenges of the HIV epidemic and the widespread nature of gender-based violence (GBV). More to the point, I attempt a critical reflection of the scholarship on gender, power and heterosex in South Africa. In line with Foucauldian notions of governmentality and knowledge-power, an excess of ‘talk’ and the proliferation of ‘knowledge’ on heterosexual practices in international contexts is by no mean organically ‘liberatory’. Indeed, the contrary is indicated. As Deborah Posel (2005) points out, the emphasised focus on sexual violence and the overwhelming scrutiny of men as perpetrators (read as poor, Black men) in South Africa since democracy, has had less to do with the imperatives of gender justice and more with national anxieties in the post-apartheid era. She argues that ‘the key to understanding this politicisation of sexual violence lies with its resonances with wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of

the national subject and the moral community of the country's newly established democracy' (Posel, 2005, p. 240). Similarly, a growing body of international feminist scholarship asks questions about the 'confessional' emphasis on 'voice' in feminist research and thinking, complicating notions of silence and secrecy in relation to women's agency (Hardon & Posel, 2012; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). Such work argues that the emphasis on 'truth', such as 'disclosure' of HIV status, while appearing to represent agency and voice, is not necessarily always advantageous to women and other marginalised communities given the material and ideological context that constrain certain identities and practices. Recent work by feminist researchers, exemplified by Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson (2013), has in a related vein foregrounded the risks involved in emphasising women's agency in continued contexts of power inequalities and violence. Feminist scholars have begun interrogating the 'ways in which ... current uses of agency ... extend the very oppositions and exclusion (victim/agent; margin/centre; self/other; active/passive; recognised/unrecognised) that they purport to ameliorate' (Hemmings & Treacher Kabesh, 2013, p. 29).

A scholarly and strategic focus on young, poor women in global contexts does not necessarily imply a promotion of their health and well-being, nor discursive or material agency or freedom. Rather such a research focus, and the 'machinery' of policy and other responses generated by such, may be underpinned by and serve to reinstate a range of problematic and constraining discourses on gender, class, 'race', citizenship, and other forms of global markers of inequality. It is this task of unpacking the more subtle and complex ideological meanings, ramifications and impact of our local South African 'expert' knowledge nationally and globally that I attempt to take up. The paper begins with a broad scan of current literature, mapping key areas of emphasis towards thinking critically about how such research has been read. I then elaborate on a number of areas of concern regarding the meanings implicit in such research as well as their effects, with particular focus on thinking in more nuanced and critical ways about women and girls' agency within heterosexual practices in South African contexts.

### **Researching heterosex in South Africa**

While frequently not marked as research on heterosexuality within a sustained heteronormative society (Steyn & Van Zyl, 2009), the proliferation of South African research that focuses on heterosexual practices, particularly among young people in poor and Black communities, is more than evident over the last 20 years. Research from the 1990s to the current moment has foregrounded a focus on girls and women in poor communities on the basis of prevalence statistics which emphasised the gendered, raced, aged and classed nature of HIV infection. The latest national prevalence study for example notes continued higher rates of HIV among women and that the estimated HIV prevalence among young women was eight times that of their male counterparts (Shisana et al., 2014). While research has shifted to an expanded focus on boys and young men, Jewkes and Morrell (2012, p. 1729) in a recent piece remind us that the 'unequal impact of HIV on young women' in Sub-Saharan Africa is 'an abiding concern'.

From an early point in this generation of policy and programme-orientated research, and following international emphases (Du Guerny & Sjoberg, 1993; Salt, Bor, & Palmer, 1995; Seidel, 1993), there was a keen acknowledgement of the centrality of gender normative practices and sustained patriarchal power in shaping intimate relations and reproductive health, and a foregrounding of the feminisation of poverty and other intersectional factors in shaping the dynamics of HIV. South African studies have consistently pointed out how economic context, cultural prescriptions, age and gender power inequalities intersect to undermine women's ability to negotiate safer and equitable heterosex (Abdool Karim 1998, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Harrison, Xaba, Kunene, & Ntuli, 2001). Some studies also foregrounded the particularities of the South African colonial heritage of poverty, war and physical dislocation (migrant labour systems) as impacting on women's vulnerability to HIV infection (Campbell, 1997; Hunt, 1989).

The focus has been on normative gender roles and gender power inequalities, especially how they play themselves out in heterosexual negotiation and are implicated in the 'non-negotiation' (Varga & Makubalo, 1996) of heterosex among young people. Relevant aspects of normative gendered, heterosexualised roles identified in the literature include: male power in decision-making in relationships (including with respect to contraception/condom use), lack of communication in heterosexual negotiation, men's resistance to 'safe sex' practices, and the use of or threat of violence in facilitating unequal, coercive and unsafe sexual practices (e.g. Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, 2012; Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Shefer, Strebel, & Foster, 2000). A focus on condom use foregrounded the privileging of male sexuality and male resistance to condoms, and the way in which women's agency may be constrained by gendered perceptions of what the use of condoms might mean for the status of the relationship and stigmatisation of women who assert their use (Abdool Karim, Abdool Karim, Preston-Whyte, & Sankar, 1992; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Selikow, Zulu & Cedra, 2002). Similar complexities of agency for young women in negotiating condom use have been documented in recent research (Bhana & Anderson, 2013a).

Within the interrogation of normative gender roles, researchers have drawn on international feminist work such as the WRAP studies conducted in the UK (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Scott, 1990; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1991) to document the salience of dominant notions of women's sexuality as passive, submissive, responsive to and in service of male sexuality, as well double standards, where men are rewarded for an active sexuality and women are punished, and the lack of a positive discourse on female sexual desires and practices (Harrison, 2008; Lesch & Kruger, 2004; Shefer & Foster, 2001, 2009; Wood & Foster, 1995). While some studies have documented a more positive discourse on women's sexuality and desires (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012), they go on to elaborate the multiple barriers to women's access to sexual pleasure and agency in their heterosexual relationships. The dominant picture remains a binaristic one in which heterosex is framed as masculine and a male preserve, with women's sexuality featuring primarily within frameworks of 'love' and relationship. In contrast, a representation of male sexuality as active and urgent, as framed within a male sexual drive discourse (coined by Hollway, 1989),

was documented at an early point in South African research (Campbell, 1997; Macheke & Campbell, 1998; Shefer & Ruiters, 1998) and taken forward by the growing body of work on masculinities, elaborated below.

South African researchers, in line with international attention to the intersections of HIV and violence against women (Campbell et al., 2008; Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2000), have focused on the centrality of GBV, exacerbated by contexts of material disadvantage, in understanding the dynamics of HIV infection (Dunkle et al., 2004; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2003; Vetten & Bhana, 2001). Violence and coercion as pervasive and endemic to normative heterosexual intimate relationships has been widely documented internationally (Gavey, 2005; Jackson, 2001); and similarly evident in local research among young South Africans which also highlights the deployment of notions of 'love' in rationalising such violence (Buga, Amoko, & Ncayiyana, 1996; Clowes, Shefer, Fouten, Vergnani, & Jacobs, 2009; Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood, Maforah, & Jewkes, 1998).

Focus on the materiality of 'love' and sex has also generated much research in South Africa. While early research focused on sex workers as a particular 'risk group' with respect to HIV infection (e.g. Campbell, 2000; Varga 1997), normative practices of transactional sex have received increased attention with emphasis on material and generational differences, assumed to determine conditions for unsafe and coercive sexual practices (Dunkle et al., 2004, 2007; Shisana et al., 2014). National research and public campaigns have emphasised the extent and 'dangers' of intergenerational and transactional relations (see Shefer & Strebel, 2013 for a critique).

More nuanced, qualitative research has unpacked the way in which transactional sexual interactions are embedded in popular notions of gender, love and exchange in local contexts. The assumption that transactional sex is necessarily based on poverty and survival, given the enmeshment of love with material aspirations has also been problematised (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2002, 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Shefer, Clowes, & Vergnani, 2012).

A notable development within the South African heterosexualities research has been the 'turn' to men and boys. This was in part framed as a response to concerns that the emphasis on girls and women was creating a blaming discourse for women as responsible for HIV, while boys and men were constructed as inevitable perpetrators (Pattman & Chege 2003; Ratele, Shefer, & Botha, 2011). The last decade has seen a proliferation of research and civil society engagement on male (hetero)sexualities and male violence in particular, corresponding to a global imperative to include men and boys in gender justice agendas (Connell, 2011). Research on male sexualities emerged out of the larger field of work on boys, men and masculinities which both drew on and contributed to the international field of critical masculinities studies (Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger 2012; Shefer, Stevens, & Clowes, 2010). South African scholars have drawn on the international masculinities scholarship, particularly Raewyn Connell's (1995) concept 'hegemonic masculinities', to unpack how dominant discourses and practices of masculinity and male sexuality shape

young men and women's understandings and are drawn on to 'legitimate unequal and often violent relationships with women' (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1729). A plethora of research has explored the significance of heterosexual prowess, together with a distancing from 'feminine' or gay youth, and male physicality and violence in performances of hegemonic masculinities among young men in diverse South African communities (Ratele et al., 2007; Shefer, Ratele, Strebels, & Shabalala, 2005). Empirical studies have also reported high rates of men who admit to perpetrating rape or sexual coercive practices and foregrounded the link with hegemonic masculinities (Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher, & Hoffman, 2006; Jewkes et al., 2006; Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle, 2009).

In sum, the now dense literature on heterosex in the light of HIV/AIDS in the South African context has over the last 20 years foregrounded the way in which young women's sexual agency is complicated and cannot be understood outside of an intersectional understanding of the multiple contexts that constrain heterosexual practices. Importantly, the focus on HIV/AIDS and the research that it has inspired globally and locally may have facilitated a wider realisation of 'the essential and extremely problematic nature of sex and sexuality' (McFadden, 1992, p. 158). While this large and growing body of work may in some ways be viewed as advantageous for providing the space to look critically at normative heterosexual relationships, as a 'window of opportunity' to challenge normative gender roles and power inequalities, such research and the interventions it has supported, has not come without a 'price'. I turn now to unpacking some concerns about the effects – ideological, political and pragmatic – that are arguably inherent in and facilitated by the scholarship and related public discourse, specifically in how they speak to the complex issue of young women's agency.

**The reproduction of normative gender roles: Troubling the victim–agent dichotomy**

A key concern regarding this broad body of scholarship, is that the overriding picture of young women (and men), is one that reproduces the very gender stereotypes that we are apparently addressing. As Bakare-Yusuf (2003, p. 11) argues:

If we assume that women are automatically victims and men victimizers, we fall into the trap of confirming the very systems we set out to critique. We fail to acknowledge how social agents can challenge their ascribed positions and identities in complex ways, and indirectly, we help to reify or totalize oppressive institutions and relationships.

Women emerge in the research as primarily passive, submissive and asexual and men as aggressive, controlling, violent and hypersexual in their relations with each other. Such a representation lends itself neatly to a protective (and as argued below, disciplinary) framework of policy and programmatic response to young people's sexuality, and young women in particular, which emerges in the growing body of work on young women's sexuality at school, as elaborated in the next section.

Debates about the reification of male power in work on heterosex and challenges to the assumption of power as the inherent preserve of (all) men, and women as inevitably



disempowered victims of male power have been prominent in international feminist work (Hollway, 1995; Smart, 1996). The continued emphasis on women's passivity and powerlessness may serve to silence the times that women do resist male power and do challenge men, and further constrain women's capacity to articulate positive sexual desires and even lived experience(s). Notably, authors have begun expressing concern about the way in which responses to HIV/AIDS have further constrained the possibilities of a positive discourse on female sexual desire in African contexts (McFadden, 2003). It seems an important political imperative to allow for imagining young women as performing gender differently, with sexual desires and needs, and possibilities for asserting them in ways that are equitable and pleasurable. It is interesting that so little of the earlier feminist call for a positive discourse on women's sexual desire has been taken up in the educational work in South Africa or documented in research. In spite of being assailed by popular images of women's sexuality, research reviewed above continues to highlight the operation of double standards whereby young women who do transgress moralistic prescriptions and articulate sexual desires are punished.

Reflecting critically on the reproduction of gender stereotypes and the overriding image of male power and female submission in the literature does not however mean we should focus more on the representation of women as 'agents', but rather calls attention to how the questions we ask, and how we present our findings, may reflect researchers' own gendered expectations and obscure alternative narratives and experiences of heterosex. It is arguably dangerous to set up this critique in the framework of agency, since we need to be extremely careful of falling into the trap of glorifying women as agents, as powerful, as strong, as 'survivors' in our reaction to the reproduction (and legitimisation) of normative gender roles. It is important to resist reversing the image to one of women as of normative gender roles. It is important to resist reversing the image to one of women as always 'survivor' and agent as arguably has taken place in much of the literature on HIV/AIDS in Africa and comes with its own dangers (Jungar & Oinas, 2004, 2010, 2011). Taking forward this work therefore requires avoiding a binarism where women and girls are either presented as helpless victims or super-women survivors, bearing in mind that 'despite its apparent policy relevance and rhetorical attractiveness, the agency-victim dualism is a counterproductive one which leads to a political cul-de-sac' (Jungar & Oinas, 2011, p. 250). Jungar and Oinas (2011, p. 255) go on to argue that both sides of this binarism – both researchers who exalt women's agency and those who emphasise victimhood – serve the same political ends, reflecting a problematic neo-liberal individualism while extending the privilege of the author/researcher: 'It is "we" who have the power to welcome her to join "us"'. Having consistently 'troubled' dominant readings of HIV, sexuality and gender, particularly those transferred from global Northern to global Southern contexts, they insist that resisting what has been viewed a damaging picture of Southern women as passive, silenced victims, should not be replaced by a denial of the complex and multiple material inequalities that constrain women's lives, and that researchers, in a location of privilege, cannot presume the agency they may hold.

The flipside of women being constructed as inevitable victims (or resistant agents) is the reproduction of the stereotype of men as inevitably powerful and controlling in relation to women in heterosexual relationships. While the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse has been frequently documented in talk on heterosex, the literature itself appears to reproduce this stereotype. Although multiplicity in the performance of masculinity is widely acknowledged in the literature, the negative construction of men, boys and masculinity, particularly Black and poor young men who are constructed as ‘the problem’ and ‘dangerous’ continues even in the public and academic terrain (Bhana & Pattman, 2009; Pattman, 2007; Ratele, 2014; Shefer et al., 2010). This may indicate an ‘outsourcing of patriarchy’ (Grewal, 2013) and arguably bolsters a racist othering of African sexualities – similarly highlighted by researchers deconstructing discourses on HIV/AIDS (Jungar & Oinas 2004; Patton, 1997) – within a long historical trope of racist sexualisation (Lewis, 2011; Ratele & Shefer, 2013).

The research on transactional sex in South African contexts, which has likewise mostly concentrated on Black, poor communities, may have similarly contributed to this global story. Notwithstanding the universal salience of a materiality of love and sexual relations (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002), the focus on transactional sex as facilitating unsafe and violent sexual practices in African contexts serves to render such practices peculiar to the global South. Thus, the assumption that materiality is bound up with notions of love only in African contexts may reflect and reinforce a northern othering and racist discourse on African sexualities.

The binaristic way in which gender is researched in heterosexual research may also be reproducing a binaristic approach to victimhood. Not only are men inevitably perpetrators but their location as victims is rendered unimaginable. Of course male violence is highly problematic for women, but it is also problematic for men, and according to statistics in South Africa, especially so for young, poor men. As Kopano Ratele (2014), a critical feminist and masculinities scholar, has tirelessly pointed out, young black poor men in South Africa are by far the greatest group at risk of male violence (Ratele, 2008; Ratele, Smith, Van Niekerk, & Seedat, 2011). It is further notable that there is very little literature that highlights men’s resistance to dominant forms of masculinity, or speaks of men’s vulnerability to women and other men, and the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. In some research, narratives of male vulnerabilities and resistant, alternative voices of boys and young men are beginning to emerge (Anderson, 2010; Ratele et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, little work documents different ways of being men, and the way in which dominant masculinities are constrained by material contexts, such as being poor or living with HIV (Mfecane, 2008), that offers alternative and more nuanced versions of maleness in heterosexual relationships.

The regulation and policing of young women’s (and men’s) sexualities Arguably related to the lack of a politicised feminist understanding of gender, much of the response to HIV and women’s sexuality within this body of research is framed within a disciplinary,

authoritarian and mechanistic approach concerned with a public health agenda of defining and controlling human behaviour, in this case (mostly young) sexual practices. The ABC (abstain, be faithful, condomise) prevention strategy, with its didactic and disciplinary framing, although no longer taken up with enthusiasm in contemporary South Africa, has been clearly indicative of the dominant response to young people's sexuality, reflecting a lack of appreciation of the complexities of negotiating safe and equitable heterosex (Epstein, Morrell, Moletsane, & Unterhalter, 2004; Jungar & Oinas, 2010; Morrell, Moletsane, Abdool Karim, Epstein, & Unterhalter, 2002; Mitchell & Smith, 2001). Indeed, the dominant framing of HIV responses in terms of prevention, with an imperative to regulate sexual practices, is telling. As Jungar and Oinas (2010, p. 179) comment:

The urgency to implement any prevention measures that could curb the spread of the epidemic has placed sexuality firmly in the public domain to such an extent that the private element of intimacy is seriously questioned in African contexts. The private is made public. Prevention efforts work through constructions of sexuality and explicitly invest in breaking silences – but what does this mean in terms of policing and surveillance of every day lives and emotions? Or in terms of sexual integrity and dignity?

The disciplinary response to young people's sexualities, including its strongly gendered nature, is similarly illustrated in research on responses to teenage pregnancy and parenting at schools, as evident in recent literature which foregrounds continued discomfort with, resistance to, and stigmatisation of sexually active young women in particular, and resistance to human rights discourses and policies which promote the rights of young people to education (Bhana, Morrell, Shefer, & Ngabaza, 2010; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013; Nkani & Bhana, 2010). At the core of this response are a range of prescriptions about young sexualities, shaped by heteronormative and moralistic discourses on parenting and families. In her deconstruction of scientific and popular literature, Macleod (2011, p. 5) unpacks the way in which such responses are framed in a discourse of 'degeneration' in which the pregnant teenager is viewed as symptomatic of larger social disorder and decline. For Macleod, such responses are underpinned by dominant social discourses on the authority of adulthood and notions of civilisation within a post-colonial context, which conflate children and youth with developmental primitivity, requiring guidance and discipline. Studies at school show how pregnant and parenting learners are seen to represent a 'loss of "proper" relations of authority and systems of morality', while resistance to young people's active sexuality – implicit in the pregnant and parenting body, since 'pregnancy hails an active sexuality which underlies the 'moral decay' discourse' – is evident (Shefer, Bhana, & Morrell, 2013, pp. 4–5).

Further indication of the regulatory response to young people's sexualities is implicit in the methodologies of the research undertaken on young people's sexualities. Arguably, much of our research practice reflects a tradition of surveillance, directed towards much of our research practice reflects a tradition of surveillance, directed towards management and control. Research methodologies are designed by and for the researcher, frequently generate data that is invasive and potentially humiliating, that reflect particular ideological, even



moralistic biases, and which certainly are seldom concerned with the agency of the young people who are objectified as 'subjects'. Notably, efforts have been made by some researchers to challenge such 'traditions', even within non-positivistic, qualitative and feminist research, which reproduce an adult, othering gaze on young people, attempting to destabilise such research by facilitating young people's participation as active agents in the research process (see Pattman, 2007, 2013).

## **Conclusions**

Researching the way in which normative gender practices and inequalities, intersecting with other forms of material and discursive inequality, constrain more equitable and pleasurable practices of heterosex has been important in the South African context, as it is globally. However, this body of work has arguably reproduced a range of problematic global discourses in which African sexualities and bodies continue to be the repository for universal discomfort with sexuality, violence, illness and death. Authors have shown how this body of work reproduces existing racialised and classed othering, and moreover fail to destabilise the normative binarism of gender, representing girls and women in relatively unitary terms as passive, submissive and inevitably vulnerable. Yet attempts to alter this image, as poignantly argued by Jungar and Oinas, amongst others, have brought their own dangers of a patronising reading informed by neoliberal individualist discourse that ultimately serves to deny and obscure the material and discursive inequalities shaping sexual practices of young women (and men). The paper has also attempted to show how the literature bolsters an underlying governmentality that seeks to monitor, regulate and discipline sexualities in general, and young and women's sexualities in particular, within a continued moralistic, authoritarian and heteronormative framework with respect to young people's sexual practices. I have argued further that our very research methodologies and instruments are part of the 'problem', with their employment of 'confessional', often voyeuristic and invasive strategies of surveillance which feeds the larger discursive framework that ultimately criminalises young people's sexual desires and practices.

For critical and feminist researchers, critical reflexivity is an imperative in order to avoid our work being 'deployed in the rehearsal of brutal and demeaning legacies' (Bennett & Pereira, 2013, p. 9). Such a reflexivity importantly means a labour of self-interrogation, not in the trite self-referential way of 'I am a middle class, white woman...', but rather to begin to reflect on what drives our research, what underlying assumptions we hold, how our very questions may reflect particular ideological investments and what (unintentional) meanings may be made of our research within existing political and historical frameworks. Acknowledging the fraughtness of our research, its own imbrication in power, remains an on-going and incomplete project for feminist researchers. The return to more participatory research methodologies that decentre the researcher to resist the othering and 'subjection' of participants may be a further important strategy in this project.

The growing, but still marginal body of work that provides a more complex picture of young men and women (e.g. Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Reddy & Dunne, 2007) remains an

important project. Bhana and Anderson (2013a, 2013b) for example, unpack both the structural and ideological frameworks that shape and constrain young women's agency in their relationships with men, but also how they are invested in such unequal performances, yet at times also resist these dominant gender scripts. Research that is contextually located and centred on dialogic constructions of gender and sexualities, that acknowledges constraints and opportunities within the performances of masculinity and femininity, that resists a binaristic picture of women as either victim or agent, and which articulates a more nuanced picture of young women's contested and complicated agency, is an important imperative. Such scholarship not only destabilises determinist, unitary and acontextual accounts, but may also serve to facilitate different imaginings and different possibilities for equitable and pleasurable negotiations of heterosex.

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