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Social constructions of “being faithful” among university students and the implications for their reception of partner-fidelity messages

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the social constructions of the notion of “being faithful” influenced university students’ responses to messages encouraging partner fidelity, and their sexual practices especially with regard to concurrent and multiple sexual relationships. The discussions are based on the results of a PhD study conducted at three universities in KwaZulu-Natal to explore students’ responses to communication and media strategies relating to the prevention of infection with HIV through abstinence, being faithful to one partner and the correct and consistent use of condoms. Study findings show that a significantly high proportion (39.0%) of the study participants who indicated having had sex in the previous 12 months had more than one sexual partner in the same period. Close to half (48.5%) of the currently sexually active students had more than one sexual partner. The study further established that the socially constructed meaning of “being faithful”, as a commitment towards matrimonial relationship, mainly influenced individual’s engagement in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships. The study points out the need for the development of social communication programmes so as to generate spaces within which socially created meanings, beliefs and values can be renegotiated.

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INTRODUCTION: YOUNG PEOPLE AND HIV/AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The World Health Organization considers 'youth' as comprising people within ages 10-24. However, the term 'young people' is often widely used to refer to a broader category of both men and women between ages the ages of 10-30 years (Harrison, 2005). The western concept of young people refers to that period of transition from full dependence on parents, the society and the state in preparation for adulthood that mainly begins at marriage (Dowsett & Aggleton, 1999). This period of human development encompasses adolescence, a period characterised by powerful physical and emotional changes that begin at puberty (Harrison, 2005). Historically, however, the gap between childhood and adulthood continues to widen as people engage in activities such as education and other opportunities that often delay their entering into marriage (Dowsett & Aggleton, 1999; Harrison, 2005). Some writers have criticised the tendency to perceive young people as "some artificial homogeneity" (cf. Dowsett & Aggleton, 1999).

Studies on HIV/AIDS globally have particularly focused on young people for a number of reasons. First, young people form a significant group of the entire population in many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, young people aged 15-24 years constitute 20% of the entire population (Mba, 2003). It then follows that any threat to young people implies a threat to the core of the society. Secondly, young people live in a transitional period characterised by increased sexual desire, expression and experimentation, peer pressure, and changing socio-cultural norms. This situation, coupled with lack of experience in negotiating the terms of relationships, increases young people's chances of engaging in unprotected sex hence placing them at the greatest risk of HIV infection (Harrison, 2005). A young woman also faces an increased risk of HIV infection, specifically as a result of her immature genital tract and cervix, which provides increased opportunities for the HIV virus to penetrate (ibid).

South Africa is reported as being the epicentre of HIV/AIDS in the world, and the epidemic in the region is not showing any evidence of decline (UNAIDS, 2006). Currently, South Africa has the largest number of people living with HIV in the world (UNAIDS, 2007; Walker & Kotloff, 2004). Research on HIV incidence and prevalence rates in South Africa continues to show an upward trend in the infection rate among young people despite the many initiatives put in place to curb the spread of the epidemic. A study commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation and conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (Human Sciences Research Council, 2002) put the national infection rate of young people aged 15-24 years at 9.3%. The study noted a higher prevalence among young females (12.0%) compared with their male counterparts (6.1%) (see Figure 1).

A similar national survey specifically aimed at establishing the sexual behaviour patterns among 15-24 year-old South Africans in 2003 found that about one in every ten (10.2%) South African youths were infected with HIV (Pettifor, 2004). The prevalence was higher among 20-24 year-olds (16.5%) and lower among 15-19 year-olds (4.8%), signalling an increase in sexual activity as young people grew older. Young women were also found to be disproportionately affected compared with young men, where 77% of those infected were women (see Figure 2). Yet another national survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) two years later (HSRC, 2005) established a national HIV prevalence rate among young people aged 15-24 years of 10.3%. As in the previous study, the rate of infection among females was found to be almost four times higher than that of males (16.9% vs 4.4%) (see Figure 3).

SEX	n	HIV POSITIVE (%)	95% CI
Total	2099	9.3	7.3–11.2
Male	976	6.1	3.9–8.3
Female	1123	12.0	9.2–14.7

Figure 1: HIV prevalence among persons aged 15–24 years by gender, South Africa 2002
(Source: Nelson Mandela Foundation/Human Sciences Research Council, 2002)

		Total	Gender		Age group		Gender by age group			
			Male	Female	15-19	20-24	Male Age group		Female Age group	
							15-19	20-24	15-19	20-24
HIV status	HIV positive	10.2%	4.8%	15.5%	4.8%	16.5%	2.5%	7.6%	7.3%	24.5%
	HIV negative	89.8%	95.2%	84.5%	95.2%	83.5%	97.5%	92.4%	92.7%	75.5%
	Total	11904	5687	6217	7238	4666	3556	2131	3682	2535

Figure 2: HIV prevalence by gender and age group
(Source: Pettifor, 2004)

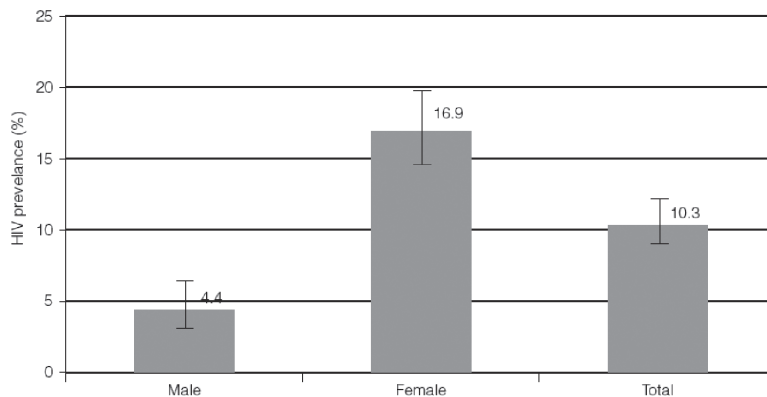


Figure 3: HIV prevalence among youth aged 15–24 years by gender, South Africa 2005
Source: Human Sciences Research Council, 2005

Two trends can be observed from these three national surveys, although the differences could arguably be a result of the variation in the research approaches employed in each study. First, there seems to be a continuous, albeit slight, increase in the infection rates among South African young people. This could be an indication that the many behavioural change programmes initiated to influence sexual behaviour change among young people are not achieving their objectives. Secondly, the epidemic seems to be disproportionately affecting young females compared with young males, with the statistics showing a continuous rise in the infection rate among females, while there is a continuous decrease in infection rate among their male counterparts. This could arguably be a result of trans-generational sex, where more females have been found to engage in sex with partners five or more years older than themselves compared with their male counterparts (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Reddy, 2005).

The three studies further reveal a decrease in the age of initiation into sexual activity and worsening sexual behaviour patterns among young people, which are seen to put them at greater risks of HIV infection. The HSRC Survey noted a “trend towards earlier sexual debut amongst younger respondents” (HSRC, 2002). The median age for sexual debut among the 35-44 year-olds was found to be 18 years, 17 years among 25-34 year-olds and 16 years among the 15-24 year-olds. In the 2003 national survey (Pettifor, 2004), 48% of 15-19 year-olds and 89% of 20-24 year-olds surveyed reported to have had sexual intercourse. Almost one in every ten (8%) respondents in this study reported having had sex at the age of 14 years or younger. Although there was a significant number (17%) of young people who had engaged in sexual practices previously and who reported not having had sex in the previous 12 months in this study, mostly of them gave either lack of sexual partners or of opportunities as reasons for not engaging in sex and not a deliberate choice to abstain. Close to a third (27%) of the respondents who had had sex in the previous 12 months reported having had more than one sexual partner and only 33% of them reported having used condoms. This implies that the majority of young people still engage in unprotected sex. In the 2005 HSRC national survey, the median age among the 15-24 year-olds was found to be 17 years, although more youths (57.9%) compared with the 2002 survey (56.8%) had ever engaged in sex (HSRC, 2002; 2005).

1. HIV/AIDS SITUATION AMONG STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

The majority of university students fall within ages 16-30 years (Raijmakers & Pretorius, 2006), which is the age category at the highest risk of HIV infection (HSRC, 2002; 2005). There has never been a systematic attempt to establish the general HIV prevalence rates in South African universities¹. However, a number of researchers have made projections among university student populations using small-scale HIV-prevalence surveys that have been conducted at a few university campuses in South Africa. Others use prevalence rates of comparable groups in the general population.

¹ Centre for AIDS Development Research and Education (CADRE) in conjunction with Epicenter conducted the first national study between August 2008 and April 2009 to determine the prevalence and distribution of HIV; to assess the knowledge, attitudes and risk sexual behaviour patterns; and to investigate the risks posed by HIV among students and staff in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. The study, whose findings are yet to be released, is being conducted on behalf of the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) with funding from the European Community (EC) and the Republic of South Africa.

Abt Associates Inc. (2000) estimated the HIV prevalence among University of Technology (Technikon) students at 25% and among university students at a slightly lower rate of 20%. These rates were projected to increase to 35% for technikon students and to 30% for university students by 2005. Fowler (2001) estimated that 25% of the undergraduate students and 20% of the postgraduate students were HIV positive. Another projection by SAUVCA estimated the prevalence rates among university undergraduate students at 22%, 11% among university postgraduates and 24.5% among the technikon undergraduate students in the year 2000. These figures were projected to rise to 33 per cent among university undergraduates, 21 per cent among university postgraduates and 36 per cent among the university of technology undergraduates by 2005 (Chetty, 2000). SAUVCA also estimated that up to 240 students could develop AIDS by 2005 (Chetty, 2000 cited in Phaswana-Mafuya, 2005).

It has also been noted that AIDS-related deaths and sicknesses among students in South African universities have been on the increase, even though proper records on AIDS mortality and morbidity do not exist in most higher education institutions (Dube & Ochola, 2005). Some universities have also reported rising cases of tuberculosis, which is often associated with HIV/AIDS, whereas the number of students dropping out of university as a result of issues related to HIV/AIDS have been reported to be on the increase (Kelly, 2001). Importantly, researchers have pointed out that most students are infected just a few years before they join university or during their studies at the university and therefore most of those infected succumb to the epidemic a few years after graduating (Chetty, 2000; Coombe, 2000; Kelly, 2001; Van der Merwe & Gouws, 2005).

2. HIV PREVENTION: THE ABC APPROACH

In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV is mainly spread through heterosexual intercourse (Mba, 2003; UNAIDS, 2006), hence young people within the sexually active age group bear the brunt of the HIV epidemic. Intervention efforts aimed at HIV prevention have therefore focused on persuading young people to avoid engaging in risky sexual activities. Effective communication is critical in mobilising the young people to change their sexual behaviours from high-risk to low-risk sexual activities such as reducing the number of sexual partners or using condoms (Parker, Dalrymple, & Durden, 1998).

Several communication campaigns have been initiated in South Africa in an attempt to encourage sexual behaviour change among the young people (Parker, 2006). These include mass-media entertainment education programmes such as *Soul City* and *Khomanani*, and television, radio and billboard advertisements. Others include interpersonal communication programmes such as *DramAidE*, peer education programmes in schools and institutions of learning, condom social marketing and distribution programmes. A variety of other approaches have also been implemented, especially in institutions of learning (Department of Education, 2001; Deutsch, 2003). The Abstinence, Being Faithful and Condomise (ABC) strategy has been the rallying call of most HIV/AIDS communication programmes, especially those funded by organisations such as the President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

In 2003, for example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through PEPFAR, pledged a total of US\$15 billion to be used in a five-year programme to fight HIV/AIDS (PEPFAR, 2005). Much of this funding is used to support programmes aimed at preventing new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa through the ABC strategy (Green, 2006). The ABC strategy (conceived by PEPFAR as Abstinence, Being Faithful and "Prevention Other") "employs population-specific interventions that *emphasize abstinence for youth and other unmarried persons*, including delay of sexual debut; mutual faithfulness and partner reduction for sexually active adults; and correct and consistent use of condoms by those whose behaviour places them at risk for transmitting or becoming infected with HIV" (PEPFAR, 2005: 2) (italics, mine). While PEPFAR states that "[E]very country program must include all three elements of the "ABCs" promoted strategically to appropriate populations and drivers of the disease" (2005: 5), it also insists that:

- Emergency Plan funds may not be used to physically distribute or provide condoms in school settings;
- Emergency Plan funds may not be used in schools for marketing efforts to promote condoms to youth; and
- Emergency Plan funds may not be used in any setting for marketing campaigns that target youth and encourage condom use as the primary intervention for HIV prevention (PEPFAR, 2005: 6).

These conditions laid down by PEPFAR limit those prevention programmes that exclusively target unmarried young people in their drive to promote abstinence-only-until-marriage and being faithful to one sexual partner among sexually active young people above the age of 14. Condom use is only promoted as a secondary strategy "for those most at risk for transmitting or becoming infected with HIV" but with emphasis on the condom failure rates (PEPFAR, 2005: 3). In PEPFAR's perspective, people considered to be at risk of transmitting or being infected with HIV include men who have sex with men, sex workers and people who work away from home. Sexually active young people such as those at institutions of higher learning are excluded from this category, hence condom use cannot be promoted among this group as a primary HIV prevention intervention. This is in contrast with the UNAIDS approach to the ABC strategy that encourages condom use for all sexually active populations, hence emphasising safer sexual practices².

2.1 Criticism against the ABC strategy

The ABC strategy has received considerable criticism from several scholars and health practitioners in especially sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Cohen, 2004; Okware, et al., 2005; Reddy, 2005; Thornton, 2006; Wawer, Gray & Serwadda, 2005). The common argument in all the criticisms levelled against the ABC strategy is that it focuses on the individual as an agent for sexual behaviour change. Many scholars agree that individual-centred approaches are effective in changing individuals' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding HIV/AIDS (Swanepoel, E. 2005; Swanepoel, P. 2005; Viswanath & Finnegan, 2002; Yzer, 1999). However, individual-centred approaches have been faulted for failing to critically address the

social, cultural and economic conditions that may inhibit individuals' ability to carry out certain decisions at the individual level (Airhihenbuwa & Obregon, 2000; National Cancer Institute, 2005; Swanepoel, P., 2005).

Several scholars now perceive human sexuality as a social construction that needs to be understood within the broader context in which it is practised (Foucault, 1979; Giles, 2006; Richters, 2001; Vance, 1991). It has thus been suggested that the design of effective HIV prevention programmes should be based on a clear understanding of how sexual behaviour is shaped by the context within which it is practised (Airhihenbuwa & De Witt Webster, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; UNAIDS, 1999). Others have also suggested a shift in focus to address social change rather than individual sexual behaviour change (PANOS, 2006).

2.2 The ABC study

It is within this perspective that a study was conducted to establish how students on seven campuses of three universities in KwaZulu-Natal (five campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and one campus each at University of Zululand and Durban University of Technology) respond to the ABC campaigns³. Using social constructionism theory (Burr, 2003) hermeneutics and reception theory (Fiske, 1987; 1989; Hall, 1996), this study investigated how the notions of 'abstinence', 'being faithful', 'condomise' and 'VCT' are socially constructed within the students' social networks and how this influenced the way students made sense of the ABC and VCT messages. The study utilised a multi-method approach which included a survey involving 1400 students (200 from each campus), in-depth interviews involving 24 students drawn from the seven campuses, and non-participant observation. Three HIV/AIDS coordinators, one from each of the three universities, were also interviewed. This paper discusses study results focusing on the social construction of the notion of "being faithful" and the students' responses to messages encouraging partner fidelity. The patterns of students' sexual behaviours especially with regard to concurrent multiple sexual partnerships are examined in relation to their understanding of the notion of "being faithful".

3. STUDY FINDINGS

3.1 Students' sexual experiences

The study established that the majority of students engage in sex and that most of them are currently sexually active. Through the questionnaire survey, it was established that the majority of the participants (69.6%) had previously engaged in sex; more than half of them said that they had already had sex by the age of 18. This is consistent with the age of sexual debut in the general population, as reflected in the national survey conducted by HSRC/Nelson Mandela Foundation (HSRC, 2005). Most (77.1%) of these sexually experienced participants indicated that they had had sex in the previous 12 months. These findings add

³ This research is part of a composite ABC Study involving four PhD theses and one MA dissertation (Moodley, 2008) conducted in conjunction with Johns Hopkins Health and Education South Africa (JHHESA), with funding from United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The ABC study explores the responses of students at universities in KwaZulu-Natal to communication and media strategies relating to prevention of infection with HIV through abstinence, being faithful to one partner and correct and consistent use of condoms (ABC).

to those from previous studies that have brought into sharp focus the assumption by the abstinence-only-until-marriage strategy that young people can be persuaded to delay sexual debut. Despite intensive communication campaigns, the results of this and previous surveys (cf HSRC, 2002; 2005; Pettifor, 2004) have shown no sign that young people are beginning to delay their age of sexual debut.

3.2 Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships

In this study, a significantly high proportion (39.0%) of the 756 participants⁴ who indicated having had sex in the previous 12 months had more than one sexual partner in the same period (see Table 1 below). Only 309 of them indicated being sexually active at the moment, with close to half of them (48.5%) indicating that they currently had more than one sexual partner (see Table 2 below).

		Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	One	461	61.0	61.0
	Two	157	20.8	81.7
	Three	64	8.5	90.2
	Four	28	3.7	93.9
	Five	16	2.1	96.0
	Six	10	1.3	97.4
	more than six	20	2.6	100.0
	Total	756	100.0	
Total		756		

Table 1: Number of respondents’ sexual partners in the past 12 months

		Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	One	159	51.5	51.5
	Two	90	29.1	80.6
	Three	36	11.7	92.2
	More than three	24	7.8	100.0
	Total	309	100.0	
Total		309		

Table 2: Number of participants’ current sexual partners

⁴ For some participants, certain questions were not relevant, depending on how they had responded to previous questions. Thus, the analysis of their responses according to percentages was based on the total number of participants who had responded to particular questions, rather than the total sample size.

A correlation analysis revealed that there was a strong correlation between the year of study and the number of current sexual partners. It is interesting to note that third-year students were more likely to have more sexual partners than any other categories (Table 3). This situation, perhaps, is due to the nature of relationships, where continuing male students were often involved in relationships with first-year and second-year female students. Due to power inequalities in these relationships, third-year males, perhaps, would be involved in multiple relationships while expecting their partners to be faithful. It is also instructive that the majority of students indicated their most recent sexual partners as having been older or younger than they themselves were (see Table 5).

As expected, a correlation analysis also revealed that males were more likely to have more sexual partners than females (see Table 4 below). This, perhaps, was a result of symbolic significance among black male students of having concurrent sexual partnerships, as will be explained in subsequent sections. There was no statistically significant correlation between participants’ race category or campus and the number of sexual partners that they had.

		Number of current sexual partners				Total
		One	Two	Three	More than three	
Respondents’ year of study	First year	18	22	10	8	58
	Second year	31	24	4	0	59
	Third year	57	29	18	12	116
	Postgraduate	53	15	4	4	76
Total		159	90	36	24	309

Table 3: Cross-tabulation: number of current sexual partners versus academic year

		Number of respondents’ sexual partners in the past 12 months							Total
		One	two	three	four	Five	six	more than six	
Respondents’ gender	Male	194	99	47	15	13	8	16	392
	Female	267	58	17	13	3	2	4	364
Total		461	157	64	28	16	10	20	756

Table 4: Cross-tabulation: gender versus number of sexual partners in the past 12 months

		Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Same age as me	247	25.2	25.2
	1-2 years younger than me	186	18.9	44.1
	3-5 years younger	136	13.8	57.9
	6-10 years younger	33	3.4	61.3
	More than ten years younger	6	.6	61.9
	1-2 years older	149	15.2	77.1
	3-5 years older	147	15.0	92.1
	6-10 years older	48	4.9	96.9
	More than 10 years older	30	3.1	100.0
	Total	982	100.0	
Total		1394		

Table 5: Age of respondent’s most recent sexual partner

3.3 Perceptions of “being faithful”

Ironically, the majority of the participants supported ‘being faithful’ as a realistic approach to preventing HIV infection. Close to a third of the respondents (27.5%) strongly agreed with the statement, ‘being faithful to one uninfected partner is a realistic HIV prevention option among students’. The other 39.4% agreed, while 17.1% disagreed, 6.9% strongly disagreed, and 6.6% didn’t know or found the statement to be not applicable. When presented with the statement, ‘it is ok for a man to have more than one sexual partner’, only 3.5% strongly agreed and 7.1% agreed. Of the rest, 33.1% disagreed, 52.2% strongly disagreed, while only 4.0% said they did not know or that the statement was not applicable. Similar responses were also noted when participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement, ‘it is ok for a woman to have more than one partner’. Here only 2.8% indicated that they strongly agreed, while 3.8% indicated that they agreed. The rest chose ‘disagree’ (32.5%), ‘strongly disagree’ (57.5%) and ‘don’t know/not applicable’ (3.3%) (see Table 6).

Statement	Participants’ perceptions									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Don’t know/ not applicable	
	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.
Students on my campus frequently discuss abstinence, being faithful and condom use in their ordinary conversations.	118	8.7	303	22.2	482	35.3	231	16.6	230	16.9
Being faithful to one uninfected partner is a realistic HIV prevention option among students.	383	27.5	549	39.4	230	17.1	92	6.9	89	6.6
It is ok for a man to have more than one partner.	47	3.5	96	7.1	445	33.1	701	52.2	54	4.0
It is ok for a woman to have more than one partner.	37	2.8	51	3.8	437	32.6	771	57.5	44	3.3

Table 6: Participants’ attitudes towards the ABC campaign strategy

The statistical data generated above provide a clear picture of the common sexual behaviour patterns among students with regard to concurrent and multiple sexual partnerships. Nevertheless, these statistics lack explanations for the observed behaviours. Thus, further research was conducted to investigate the socially constructed meanings of, and reasons for engaging in, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. This was pursued through in-depth interviews with 24 students drawn from the seven campuses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the respondents at venues suggested by themselves. This involved the use of a set of questions that acted as a guide on issues to pursue rather than a strict format that had to be followed. The interviewers raised the question and then let the respondents guide the direction in which they wanted to respond. Where respondents seemed to digress from the topic of discussion, probes were used to guide them on issues that the researcher expected them to speak about. Smith and Osborn (2003) highlight the importance of allowing respondents to contribute in determining the direction the interview takes. They point out that such an approach would enable respondents to move into fresh areas that the researcher may not have thought about while developing interview questions. This study was interested in issues taking place in respondents’ psychosocial world, much of which could not have been accurately anticipated by the researcher. The interview questions were carefully worded to avoid narrowing down responses to particular issues (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

3.4 Constructions of being faithful

3.4.1 Commitment

The study established that the notion of 'being faithful' was understood by the majority of informants as a commitment to either a marital relationship, or one that culminates in marriage. In this view, the 'be faithful' message was seen as appealing only to those who were engaged in a 'serious relationship' – one ultimately leading to marriage – or to those who were already in a marriage. When asked what he understood by 'be faithful', Sithole⁵, a black male undergraduate student at Howard College, said that it meant *that you are supposed to be in a marriage*. Similarly, Amina, a postgraduate black female student at Howard College, intended to begin practising 'being faithful' when she got married, her view being based on her religious belief in which 'being faithful' to a marriage partner is a precondition:

When I get married I should be able to observe the, erm, the conditions that surround the Christian marriage and being faithful is one of those conditions.

In this view, the perceived reason for engaging in a sexual relationships greatly influenced the perception of the necessity to 'be faithful' to a sexual partner. Others, like Zama, an undergraduate black female student at University of Zululand, thought that females engage in sexual relationships with concurrent sexual partners because *they just [want] to experience the different things from different people*. Such sexual relationships seem to be driven by the desire to have fun derived from sexual pleasure, rather than engaging in a committed relationship. Those who did not consider themselves to be in a 'serious relationship' did not find it necessary to practise partner fidelity. When asked what he thought of 'being faithful to one partner', Dlamini, an undergraduate black male student at Westville campus, explained that such notions did not work because students were in relationships for fun and not for marriage:

It doesn't really work, it doesn't...here at varsity you can't be like with one person you're with and think that this is the person you will spend the rest of your life with. This is varsity. You are here to have some fun, study and leave ... you can't start talking about being faithful. ... even girls know wuti [that] their boyfriends sleep around cause this is varsity. Cause no one has promised someone marriage or anything, it's just having fun.

Similarly, Thenjiwe, a black undergraduate female student at University of Zululand stated that the main reason why students did not practise being faithful was because they were in sexual relationships for reasons other than marriage:

...they don't even get into relationships because they really like the person... They know they are not in the relationship for the right reasons so it's really hard for them to try and trust the person and remain faithful.

⁵ For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality of the respondents in this study, pseudonyms have been used in the discussions rather than the real names.

3.4.2 *Liking vs. need for companionship/fun*

'Liking' the partner was seen in the above account as the basis of a 'serious relationship'. This, in contrast, seems to suggest that other forms of relationship were not driven by the 'liking' of the sexual partner, but by other factors. In the quantitative survey, close to half of the students (38.9%) claimed to be in a sexual relationship for fun/companionship whereas others cited economic reasons (7%) or just because everyone else was in a relationship (10%). By confining 'being faithful' to a marital or a committed relationship, this discourse seems to exclude those who do not consider themselves to be in such a relationship from practising partner fidelity. Zama, for example, explained that she was not practising 'being faithful' because she was not ready to commit herself to her current sexual partner:

I am not ready for commitment, you know, and, erm, being this appreciating that it means being faithful.

3.4.3 *'Lack of trust' vs. 'be faithful'*

The notion of 'trust', which was associated with 'serious relationships', was seen as a determining factor in deciding whether to 'be faithful' to one partner or not. In this particular account, 'trust' seems to have been associated not only with fidelity but also with the sexual partner's commitment to a long-term relationship. Sexual partners could be trusted only when they were considered to be prepared for marriage in the future. Those who were not considered to be 'serious' with the relationship were not trusted, hence there was no reason to be faithful to them. In fact, practising fidelity with such partners was considered a risk by some, like Thenjiwe:

By sticking to one partner you are actually endangering your life ...cause you don't even know what the other person is getting up to.

The danger here seems to refer to the possibility of the sexual relationship breaking up, in which case a concurrent sexual relationship was considered a fallback option.

3.4.4 *Competition for women*

The majority of young males reported that they were currently engaged in concurrent sexual relationships. These young men conceptualised their concurrent sexual relationships as either competition or fun. Sex, to them was seen as a game in which individuals competed on the basis of the number of women with whom they had had sex. Mnqanyi, a black undergraduate male student at Westville campus who reported having three sexual partners at that particular moment, explained:

We usually don't talk about abstaining. We are always talking about 'ok, eeish, I wish I could sleep with that chick', eeh, because people take it as competition where everybody wants to show that they can outdo the other or something.

The specific purpose of sexual relationship mainly informed an individual's decision to engage in concurrent sexual partnerships. Among these young males, concurrent sexual relationships were highly approved and seen as a competition for superiority. For them, 'be faithful' was neither considered a desirable option - since they were not in relationships for marital purposes - nor based on whom they loved, but because of the desire to prove their 'conquering' abilities. Having more sexual partners, for them, was purely a source of pride. As Sihle, a black undergraduate male student at University of Zululand, explained, young men often seemed to derive self-esteem from the number of sexual partners they had succeeded to 'convince':

There is no having faith to the other girlfriend because you deal with convincing. You come to Pinky, you convince her. Nonhlahla, you convince her. Nomthlebi, you convince her, you see.

For most females, however, engagement in concurrent sexual relationships was not driven by competition, but by other factors such as revenge, material needs and sexual experimentation. Knowledge of a boyfriend's other girlfriends or the perception that their partners were engaged in concurrent sexual relationships, according to Thenjiwe, drove some females to seek 'revenge' by themselves engaging in concurrent sexual relationships:

People do dodgy things, erm, ...cause people think people don't really trust each other, so they just think, erm, 'what if, erm, being faithful and the other person is not?' They just don't have the trust.

3.4.5 *Concurrent open relationships*

Having a concurrent sexual relationship appeared to be a socially acceptable phenomenon among students. In some cases, sexual partners mutually agreed to pursue concurrent sexual relationships with others while they were still sexually engaged with each other. This form of concurrency was referred to by students as an 'open relationship', which contrasts with 'cheating' where an individual engages in concurrent sexual relationships without the partner's knowledge. Sithole, a black undergraduate male student at Howard College, explained the nature of concurrent open relationship among students:

Two people decide that they're gonna pursue a relationship with each other, where they're emotionally attached, but the clause is that they can actively pursue others whilst being in this relationship. They can actively just go out and kiss so-and-so and sleep with so-and-so but at least they are still in this relationship.

The majority of the male informants and a few female informants reported being currently engaged in an open relationship. It seemed here that males often revealed their concurrent relationships while women did not. Some researchers have also pointed out the tendency among South African youth where males tend to overreport while females

tend to underreport the number of current sexual partners (Pettifor et al., 2004). Open relationships often occurred among individuals who were engaged in sexual relationship for companionship, fun, or financial reasons, but less often among those who saw their relationship as being geared towards marriage. Mnqanyi, who reported being involved in a concurrent open relationship with three girls, explained that in this form of relationship, one partner was always considered as the main girlfriend/boyfriend, who acted as a fallback in case other relationships failed:

- Interviewer: So when you're having a relationship with her she also has somebody as well?
- Interviewee: Yeah, they are having somebody else. Firstly you have your own person and I have mine so that's why we think without any consequences.
- Interviewer: Erm, so that if you break up they can also go back to their own relationships?
- Interviewee: To their own relationships, yes.

3.4.6 *Sharing men*

Some males considered females as being 'jealous' of men hence willing to 'share' a man if he was perceived to possess material wealth. This was perceived by some male informants, such as Sihle, as being some form of jealousy that prompted competition for such men and willingness among women to share them:

My friend has got that open relationship...we actually lived in the same staff house where he had one girlfriend there. That girlfriend knew that this guy has more than three girlfriends. She loved him because she was jealous of the other girlfriends, yeah, she wanted to share my friend with the other girlfriends. She knew he had more than one girlfriends but she loved him...they don't understand it, they are jealous you see.

While most of the informants supported concurrent open sexual partnerships, some preferred to keep their other sexual partners a secret because they thought revealing them would jeopardise their sexual relationships. Dlamini reported that in some cases, knowledge of concurrent partners could be a source of conflict in a sexual relationship as some girlfriends developed 'jealousy' over time, and would seek to topple the 'main' girlfriend:

You tell the girl that you have a girlfriend, initially she understands. Then you go out and everything becomes good for the first 2, 3, 4 months. Then suddenly she's becoming more demanding, she wants more time than the other one and if you not around her, she knows that you probably with the other one. When you come to her place she starts having attitude, next thing she wants all the time... It's better that she doesn't know.

A similar view was also expressed by Mnqanyi:

Interviewer: So how do [your other girlfriends] feel about it, I mean when you tell them that you have somebody else?

Interviewee: Sometimes they feel like, eei, ok if you're telling, maybe telling the person at the first time, that your having someone, a particular person can just say 'ok, it's fine'. After some time, she will say, 'no, I'm not comfortable with your partner so you have to drop her and you must go out with me. Cause I think I give you everything... what do you want?'

4. DISCUSSIONS

Given the study findings discussed above, one could argue that even though students had positive perceptions regarding HIV prevention options such as partner fidelity, the social meanings of sex and sexual relationships - rather than HIV prevention communication - often informed their sexual practices. The underlying connotative meaning of "be faithful", as understood here, is that you only need to be faithful to your sexual partner if you are married or in a committed relationship. Individuals who are not in a committed relationship do not necessarily need to be faithful to their partners. The significance of this view is that the 'be faithful' message was mainly seen to appeal only to those who were engaged in a 'serious relationship' – one that leads to marriage – or to those who are already in marriage. In this view, the perceived reason for engaging in a sexual relationship greatly influenced the perception of the necessity to 'be faithful' to a sexual partner. This poses a huge challenge to the approach proposed by PEPFAR and other organisations seeking to promote "abstinence-only" and "be faithful" messages among sexually active youths.

The ABC communication strategy aims to encourage sexually active, unmarried young people to reduce the chances of being infected by HIV by sticking to one sexual partner of known HIV status (The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, 2005). This approach is based on the fact that the higher the number of sexual partners one has, the greater the chances of being infected with HIV. The PEPFAR strategy is based on reports from countries such as Uganda, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya where evidence of decline in national HIV prevalence have been recorded. Reports from these countries show a strong correlation between the decline in HIV prevalence and a decline in the number of people engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships and casual sex, even though several other factors such as political will and increased AIDS-related deaths also contributed to this success.

A study conducted in Senegal in 1997 based on baseline data since 1993 established significant progress in adopting behaviour-change strategies advocated by the National AIDS Programme. The study, whose findings are reported in Putzel (2003), revealed that the proportion of respondents who reported to have engaged in a sexual encounter with at least one casual sexual partner had reduced by half between 1993 and 1997. A group of researchers also argue that the Ugandan HIV decline resulted from a decrease in sexual activities with non-regular partners, rather than

from increased condom use or increased mortality (for example, Cohen, 2004; Epstein, 2004; Epstein, 2005; Shelton et al., 2004; Stoneburner et al., 2004). Shelton, et al. (2004) cite the data generated in a survey by the Global Programme on AIDS, which showed a drastic reduction in the numbers of men reporting having had one or more casual partners in the previous year - from 35% in 1989 to 15% in 1995 - while those reporting three or more non-regular partners dropped from 15% to 3% during the same period. The study also notes that the women reporting more than one partner fell from 16% to 6% during the same period.

In Zimbabwe, a study conducted in four socio-economic strata in Manicaland in eastern Zimbabwe, where a downward trend in HIV prevalence among men and women was recorded in surveys conducted between 1998 and 2003, provides evidence of a strong link between the decline in HIV prevalence and sexual behaviour change (Gregson et al., 2006; Hayes & Weiss, 2006). Gregson and colleagues found that HIV prevalence among men between 17 and 29 years and women aged 15 to 24 years had fallen by 23% and 9% respectively. Reduction in casual sex was also reported, respectively, by 49% and 22% of sexually experienced men and women participating in this study. Using mathematical models, UNAIDS (2005) established a strong association between the HIV declines recorded in Zimbabwe and sexual behaviour change. This report, however, points out that the observed decline could be partly due to migration and the rise in adult mortality in the early- and mid-1990s.

Reasons for HIV decline recorded in Kenya are still unclear. However, sexual behaviour change is said to have contributed profoundly to this decline as has been the case in other sub-Saharan countries that have recorded similar declines. According to KDHS data (1993; 1998; 2003) analysed by Cheluget et al. (2006), significant changes were found especially with regard to the percentage of respondents reporting having had sexual encounters with more than one partner in the previous 12 months, the percentage of those, especially among women, who reported using condoms in their last sexual encounter, and the proportion of women in polygynous unions.

One aspect that these studies have failed to highlight sufficiently is the fact that the campaign strategies employed by these countries emphasised horizontal communication through religious and community-based organisations and other non-governmental organisations to generate discussions about HIV/AIDS at the local, community level. Senegal's strategy included systematic public education programmes combining both the mass media and social communication channels and spearheaded by state agencies, the private sector and community organisations such as women groups and faith-based organisations. Communication through social networks was particularly instrumental in influencing sexual behaviour change. The Senegalese government took advantage of the public education principles of the country's Socialist Party to roll out a nationwide education programme against HIV/AIDS (Boone & Batsell, 2001). It drew upon the support of prominent traditional, Christian and Muslim leaders to mobilise communities to undertake preventive measures against HIV (The Panos Institute, 2003).

The involvement of community organisations and non-governmental organisations helped in establishing open communication on HIV issues. By the year 2000, an estimated 400 women

groups with membership of about half a million, together with about 200 NGOs, were involved in HIV/AIDS activities in Senegal (UNAIDS, 2001). This helped to foster the open discussions on HIV/AIDS reported to be common in Senegalese schools, market places, professional associations, recreational areas, football fields, homes and in virtually every other public gathering (Diop, 2000). Similar strategies were also employed in Uganda, Kenya and Zimbabwe (Boone & Batsell, 2001; Green et al., 2006; Putzel, 2003; Singhal & Rogers, 2003; The Panos Institute, 2003; Wawer et al., 2005). As pointed out by The Panos Institute (2003: 5), "what works are interventions taking place within the context of societies which have strong internal communication structures".

There is general consensus that the sub-Saharan African HIV epidemic is mainly driven by the existence of sexual networks that result from high rates of engagement in concurrent multiple sexual partnerships. Dismantling such sexual networks is widely acknowledged to be the key to success in the fight against the HIV epidemic in the region (Epstein, 2007). However, as pointed out by several critics of the ABC strategy, the weakness in the approach lies mainly in its focus on the individual as the unit of change (Cohen, 2004; Okware et al., 2005; Reddy, 2005; Wawer et al., 2005). The ABC strategy seems to be underpinned by the assumption that individuals make rational choices on when and how they can involve themselves in sexual activities and can therefore easily be persuaded to practise partner fidelity.

This assumption has been challenged by results from several previous studies in sub-Saharan Africa, which have shown that individuals engage in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships for a variety of reasons. Some engage in multiple sexual relationships for reasons of economic survival (Dunkle & Jewkes, 2004; Luke & Kurz, 2002); others do so in pursuit of desirable lifestyles that may not be within their own financial abilities (Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004). In some communities, the social constructions of masculinity and femininity generate the social pressure for young males to engage in multiple sexual partnerships to prove themselves (Hunter, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2005).

The results of the present study have contributed to this debate by demonstrating that individuals' sexual lifestyles are often informed by the meanings that are socially attached to sexual practice. The study has shown that, among university students, the socially constructed meaning of "being faithful" as a commitment towards matrimonial relationship mainly influence the individual's engagement in multiple and concurrent sexual relationships. The number of sexual partners that individuals had, often depended on the perceived purposes of their sexual relationships. Individuals who perceived themselves to be in sexual relationships geared towards marriage often reported being in monogamous sexual relationships, while those who were in sexual relationships for reasons other than marriage did not see the reason for being in monogamous relationships.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that HIV prevention programmes should focus more pointedly on social change rather than individual behaviour changes. Social communication programmes are urgently needed to generate spaces in which socially created meanings, beliefs and values

can be renegotiated. It should be noted that students at the three universities were actively involved in social movements such as, among others, the ANC Youth League, their Students Representative Councils, and the Socialist Student Movement, which could actively be engaged in generating student-centred responses towards the HIV epidemic. Survey results also showed that participants in the study favoured an approach actively involving students in the development and implementation of the HIV/AIDS response strategy. Unfortunately, universities have not explored these avenues to create opportunities for student-driven dialogue, which, according to Figueroa et al. (2002) and PANOS (2006), could be useful in mobilising social change.

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