

Sexual Coercion in the Lifeworlds of South African Men

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Background to the study

- Little known about men's experiences of sexual coercion in heterosexual relationships
- Need to explore meanings associated with coercion of men by women and that it does exist
- Study explores the use of a narrative approach for understanding this phenomena

Reviewing the Evidence

- National School Survey (BioMed, 2008) found 2/5 boys had been sexually assaulted; most frequently by adult women, followed by male schoolchildren
- Sikweyiya & Jewkes (2009) found 9.7% of men in Eastern Cape disclosed being forced into sex by a woman
- Little indication of long term risk implications yet this form of coercion often causes anxiety & feelings of shame (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2009)
- What is impact of sexual coercion of men by women on men's sexual risk taking behaviors?

Research Questions

- How do men's understandings and experiences of masculine sexual norms impact on their sense making of sexually coercive experiences in heterosexual relationships?
- How can a narrative approach illuminate the impact of such experiences on the shaping of male sexuality?
- How can insights into men's experiences of sexual coercion by women guide public health responses to the benefit of men and women's SRH?

Methodology

- ❑ Narrative sexual life history interviews with 36 men
 - Age and range: 21- 79 years
 - Cultural range: Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi, Indian/Asian, Coloured, Afrikaans, English, Sotho, Tswana
 - Locality range: Grahamstown, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg (rural and urban sites)
- ❑ Male interviewers. Race and language matched
- ❑ Asked accounts of early knowledge of sex& early sexual activity, and and range of sexual relationships and experiences
- Engagement with risks of STI and HIV infection as well as SRH
- Data analyzed using narrative analysis

Findings

- Many men described feeling unready for their early sexual experiences but pressured to do so by their female partners
- A few men related aggressive instances of coercion against them by women
- Men often performed to their female partner's desires & peer norms to meet expectations as men
- Experiences not framed as sexual abuse, though sometimes anxiety provoking & shameful
- Almost always occur in youth at time of vulnerability and sexual inexperience

Young men being pressured to have sex by older women

- 7/36 men spoke of situations where older women pressured them to have sex at a young age
- Framed as opportunity to signify manhood
- Often accompanied by anxiety & shame
- Regularly surprised by situation, accompanied with a strong sense of performance anxiety
- Frequently unrewarding experiences
- Some situations met definition of rape in South Africa since men were under 16 and the women older than 16

Case Study: Siyanda (29 years, Xhosa, Grahamstown)

- Debut experience at the age of 7 with a woman who was 9 years older than him
- Woman bought him sweets to convince him to go to her house to embark on sexual activity
- Worry about wrongfulness of situation
- Painful experience
- Also feels he is “a hero” for proving his manhood to his friends

Siyanda

- *“ Even at a young age man. I mean even by the time I was six man, if I ran away from a woman offering herself to me, I’d be called gay. By the time of six you know what people are doing out there and you’re trying to emulate what they are doing. So there was a lot of pressure involved for my first time because the person who came to fetch me from my house was my friend. And this woman was his next door neighbour so it had a lot to do with peer pressure.”*

Siyanda's Story Continued

- In early teenage years, becomes sexually involved with women because of similar peer pressure
- Embarks on various casual relationships, usually under the influence of alcohol, but often regrets them
- Embarks on multiple relationships to boost his ego
- Confesses best sex for him is in intimate relationships
- Masks such desires with detachment and lack of care and concern for his partner

Siyanda

- *“But I didn’t love her enough to be her boyfriend. But whenever we got drunk, we’d end up sleeping together. And because of that she ended up falling in love with me. But it just be having sex, know what I mean? Women are fragile. They’re not like us. We are very egocentric. We don’t care. And we’ll say things to one another that will hurt the next man. But then again cause he’s a man he’s not supposed to get hurt by certain things or hurt easily. So men have generally got that approach to life. I can say whatever I wanna say, do whatever I wanna do right.”*

Sexual aggression against men

- 3 men accounted for instances of sexual aggression against them by women
- Involved emotional/verbal abuse, threats of physical abuse, being taken advantage of when drunk, and being put at health risk (i.e partner refusing to use a condom)
- Feelings of emasculation were often traumatic
- Peers would trivialize such experiences so men rarely told anyone

Case Study: Nial (22 years, English, Pietermaritzburg)

- Feared sexual intercourse when he was younger for pregnancy, transmission of STIs and if his partner had a boyfriend/father
- Had a girlfriend pressure him for sex in a verbally aggressive a way that he found so disturbing, he ran away
- Had another experience with a partner who was sexually aggressive and demanding;
- *She told me if I don't sleep with her she's going to rape me. ...How do you sleep with a girl when she tells you she's going to rape you? I thought I was going to get murdered that night... I was turned off and it was fear, but mainly turned off. I've never had a girl say I'm going to rape you. She proceeded by punching me in the back of the head and scraping me with her nails.*

Nial's Story Continued

- Notes women expect men to always be ready for sex and regularly initiate sex with beautiful women
- Initially wants sex only in committed relationships, but eventually conforms to such expectations
- Has various sexual encounters as competition with his peers
- Objectifies women with little concern for intimacy with partner
- Also pursues sleeping with virgins for status

Nial

- *“Then I got a bit older a bit more confident. Girls started to notice me more than they did in the earlier stages in my life. Then I went through a stage when I was a dog, where I wanted to break as many girls virginitities as possible. So I would only sleep with a chick if she was a virgin... I had gotten nasty... It was like I can take something that means something to someone and not care about it.”*

In Summary...

- Norms of masculine sexuality have a strong presence within peer groups; condoned by men and women
- From young age, men are taught to always initiate and respond to sex with women
- Power of sex in the making of manliness often overrode concerns of unreadiness & inadequacy
- Even in aggressive situations, these experiences are trivialized; not framed as abuse

So what?

- Must challenge dominant constructions and give rise to alternative understandings of masculinity
- Provide opportunities for men to talk about sexuality
- Men need to be educated about sexual consent
- Young men, for being vulnerable and malleable age group should be targeted with healthy sex & relationship education

Conclusion

- Coercion of men by women is a phenomenon that needs to be better understood
- Need to acknowledge that coercion can take on a variety of forms; broaden our definition of it
- Interventions to reduce sexual coercion must seek to change certain masculine sexual norms
- Value of sexual biographies in understanding the impact of such experiences on men's emerging sexuality

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