

Sexual discourse in the context of AIDS: dominant themes on adolescent sexuality among primary school pupils in Magu district, Tanzania



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Abstract

School pupils in Tanzania have been identified as a risk group for HIV/AIDS, so a large part of TANESA'S anthropological research is aimed at charting and understanding forms of sexual risk behaviour among adolescents with a view to influencing change. This study presents the dominant themes of sexual discourse among adolescent primary school pupils in Magu district along the south-eastern shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania. The themes are: love and sex; sexual desire; money and rewards; and deception. The fear of pregnancy also emerges as a dominant theme. Because of the nature and extent of their sexual relationships, school pupils will be increasingly exposed to the risk of HIV and STD infection. This is exacerbated by the lack of condom availability and the proscribed nature of sex (and therefore condom use) among primary school pupils.

Methods: role play

Because it is difficult to study sexual behaviour directly, we decided to use discourse analysis. We started by recruiting two ex- primary school pupils who in collaboration with us, interviewed their fellow pupils. During the preparatory phase the two 'peer' researchers visited all 11 primary schools in Kisesa ward, Mwanza town. Pupils from six schools near the workshop venue were selected for the narrative research. During the Christmas break we arranged two workshops with 15 girls (13-15 years) and later with 16 boys (5-18 years). Each workshop lasted for two days.

The study area (Kisesa ward) had 11 primary schools. Study subjects were selected on the basis of two criteria: distance between the workshop venue and each school, for transport purposes; and the presence of higher classes: not all schools went up to the highest class. Pupils from the schools near the workshop venue were selected because they could more easily attend. The participants for the workshops were also selected on the basis of likelihood of sexual experience, literacy, and not being shy. The majority of pupils in the higher classes (standards 6-7) had their first sexual encounter at the age of 12. For effective facilitation, each workshop involved 10-14 participants. Therefore we had to recruit two pupils, one boy and one girl, from each of the six schools. The recruitment was done by the pupils themselves through voting. Besides the age limit we proposed, it became clear that the pupils had selected the brightest individuals to participate in the workshop.

During the workshops pupils were asked to develop a story line on how sexual relationships between pupils develop. This was then made into scripts which the pupils performed; these performances were recorded on video. The videos were played back to the group for discussion and comments. We stimulated the pupils to be particularly critical on the

extent to which the performances reflected how they actually experienced relationships rather than on the ideal or the socially acceptable. Interpretation of the discourse contained in the mass of transcripts was facilitated by use of the Ethnograph software program.

Although the role-plays were the central part of the research, the dialogues presented below are based on the discussions of the role-plays between the pupils and the facilitators. This is largely because these discussions are more succinct and to the point than the dialogues in the role-plays.

Findings

The dominant themes which emerge from school pupils' discourse on sexual relationships are love and sex, sexual desire, money and rewards, and deception. They are dominant not only in the sense that the pupils devoted most of the discussion to them, but also in the sense that pupils' perceptions of sexual relationships are formed and informed by them.

The ambiguity of love and sex

Quite clearly the narratives indicated that pupils initiate relationships through letters: 'A good relationship always starts with a letter', as one girl put it. The boy generally initiates contact by sending a letter to the girl he fancies; she then replies, and these letters lead on to meetings. Sometimes the letters are skipped and relationships are initiated through meetings.

Script: The boy approaches the girl.

Facilitator: How?

Girl: He starts by telling her: I love you (*nakupenda*).

Facilitator: What really makes a girl accept a boy? Is it just love (*ni kwa kuwa nampenda*) or is there something that induces her to accept?

Girl: Because she loves him (*anampenda*).

Girl: Because she is given money.

Facilitator: What really attracts her to the point of having sex? (*Ni kitu gani kinamvutia mpaka wanaamua kushiriki?*)

Girl: The boy may buy a pen and give it to the girl. If the girl accepts they go and do their thing (*wanaenda kufanya mambo yao*).

Girl: The boy loves her (*amempenda*).

Facilitator: If he loves her what is the money for?

Girl: He may give her money in order to make their relationship last longer.

Facilitator: Assume they have already met before: what does the boy do then?

Boy: They talk about love-sex (*mapenzi*).

Facilitator: What kind of love-sex?

Boy: *Mapenzi ya kukutana kimwili!* [Here the sexual meaning of *mapenzi* is made quite explicit by adding *kukutana kimwili*, which refers directly to sex.]

Boy: The boy may approach the girl by telling her: I love you, I want to have sex with you (*nakupenda natakutushiriki kimwili*).

In the initial translation (by a Kiswahili speaker) of the dialogues presented above, the terms *mapenzi* and *kupenda* were glossed simply as 'love'; the word sex did not occur in the English translation at all. The meanings of *mapenzi* and *kupenda* are, however, more problematic than would appear at first sight. On a closer examination of the use of the terms in the discourse presented above (interaction between young people of the opposite sex) the

noun *mapenzi* seems to refer exclusively to sex, and the verb *kupenda* either refers indirectly to sexual intercourse or becomes highly ambiguous.

Money and rewards?

If sexual desire emerges as the main motivating factor for boys in their relationships with girls, then for girls that factor seems to be money, or some other form of material gain. In boys' perceptions of their relationships with girls their main intention is to have sex, but they see girls as being out to get as much money as possible from the boy in exchange.

Boy: She may feel unwilling [to have sex with you] because of what you tell her. Probably you have told her the real situation [i.e. that you have no money] and that does not please her, so she will avoid you.

Facilitator: Which words, when uttered by a boy to a girl, make her willing?

Boy: The girl's first interest is money. So if you fail to give her money then she will definitely be dissatisfied and unwilling.

Even though money is central, there are clearly limits as to the person from whom it is acceptable to obtain it. When it was suggested that they could have relationships with 'old' men in their forties or fifties, men with even more money than village youths, schoolgirls tended to laugh and say that they could not have sex with a man who was as old as their own father. Girls claimed that the ideal age of a partner was two years older than themselves.

Girls claim to find youths who have left school more attractive as potential sexual partners than schoolboys because they are older and often have full-time jobs (and therefore more money to spend), and because of their superior sexual experience. Girls also think that they are more likely to keep their illicit sexual relations hidden from parents and teachers, and that they are more 'respectable' (*jiheshimu*); they are seen as potential husbands who are more likely to support girls in the case of pregnancy.

Delays and false promises: negotiation strategies

If we view sexual relationships among pupils from the perspective of exchange theory then the 'goods' traded are sex on the one hand and money or material rewards on the other. However, in a situation of scarcity, since schoolboys do not have much money and schoolgirls cannot give sex away easily for fear of being labelled prostitutes, we can expect bargaining and negotiation to be important (Ankomah 1992). Indeed, in the absence of money a boy's success depends on the extent to which he can persuade the girl that he does have money and that she will receive it later. For her part the girl delays and postpones in order to increase her chances of actually obtaining the money and, where possible, to maximize the amount. This is what Sahlins (1965) has referred to as 'negative reciprocity'.

Facilitator: How should a boy explain himself in order to be accepted or rejected?

Boy: There are various ways; some are true, others are lies. You may lie by telling her you will give her everything. You may tell her the truth that you have no money and only want to have sex with her. She may agree or she may refuse.

Facilitator: So what kind of conversation (*mazungumzo*) makes the girl agree?

Boy: The conversation of lies (*mazungumzo ya uongo*).

[all laugh]

Boy: The girl may give the boy a false promise (*ahadi ya uongo*). For instance, when she tells you to meet her somewhere in the evening and you go but she doesn't show up.

Facilitator: Why do you think that the girl makes such a promise?

Boy: She does so to see your response.

Boy: She gives false promises because she was afraid to tell you the truth that she did not like you in the first place.

Facilitator: Can boys give such false promises?

Boy: You can tell her that you will buy her a *kanga* and then not do so.

Facilitator: Why do you tell her lies?

Boy: So that she will meet my needs (*ili anitimizie shida yangu*)
[laughter].

Facilitator: What is your need?

Boy: To have sex (*kukutana mimwili*).

What emerges from the above fragments of discussion is a clear picture of deception. Boys lie to girls to win them over, girls lie to boys (by making appointments they do not intend to keep) either to get rid of them if they do not like them or to assess their character. Here 'character' (*tabia*) is indeterminate. Sometimes it may simply boil down to money as well. A boy with a good character is one who provides a girl with sufficient presents and money but on the other hand, when a girl says she is postponing having sex with a boy because she is assessing his character, she may also mean that she is looking for signs that he feels something more for her than just sexual desire. Here, then some of the indeterminacy of *kupenda* re-emerges.

Although the deception-money theme is central in adolescent relationships, the importance of pure economic exchange is often tempered somewhat by the non-instrumental and non-sexual aspects of the love-*kupenda* complex described earlier. The relationship between gifts or money and sex may not always be as direct as the texts presented above suggest, and it is also possible (though unlikely) for gifts to be given without sexual intent.

Inequality, power and seduction

After having examined the dominant themes in school pupils' discourse on sexual relationships, we now turn to a discussion of the role of gender inequality in sexual relationships: do boys use force and intimidation to seduce girls, and do girls comply because they are powerless and unable to negotiate adequately with boys, or are girls active and competent participants in the negotiation process?

Force, or the threat of force, or at least the belief in the possibility of force, does play a role in sexual encounters, and it is clear that boys do sometimes resort to bullying and intimidation in order to get girls to consent. When a girl refused to comply with a boy's request for sex in the role plays, the boy sometimes resorted to calling the girl a child or a peasant, implying immaturity and lack of sophistication. Also, when a girl refused to agree to have sex with a boy and said she was going home, the boy often took hold of her hand to prevent her leaving.

The use of force is still very ambiguous, however. Although the pushy, macho approach by the boys and the reciprocal resistance and delaying tactics by the girls may be interpreted as proof that girls are, to some extent at least, innocent victims of male sexual desire and intimidation, it seems more likely that this is all just part of the courting ritual. After all, the 'force' used by the boys could more accurately be described by the milder term 'pressure' (although the word *nguvu*, 'force', does occur, pupils more often describe boys' behaviour as *kubana* - to squeeze, to put pressure on).

As was portrayed by the pupils, relationships are most often initiated by boys. However it is not uncommon for a schoolgirl to take the initiative herself if she fancies a particular boy. More often however this will be more indirect, through prompting a boy to take more direct

initiative. The fact that most girls fear to give a blunt refusal to a boy whom they do not fancy, may however lead to forced sex. Instead of giving a blunt rejection, girls often use the tactic of giving false promises. Occasionally the delaying tactics provoke the boys to the use of force. This was clearly reflected in the role plays.

Discussion

This study suggests that sexual relationships are common among school pupils in Magu District. Adolescents start having sex at an early age and by the time they are 15 or 16 most seem to have experienced sex and many are regularly involved in sexual relationships or one-time sexual encounters. Multiple partners seem to be common and relationships short. Condoms are not readily available to primary school pupils and do not appear to be much used by them.

Relationships between schoolgirls and ex-students or young adult men seem to be common. Schoolgirls consider young men to be more attractive potential partners than schoolboys because they earn more, have more experience and are thought to be more suitable as future husbands.

Sexual relationships have an important transactional component, with girls exchanging sexual services for money or other material rewards. In the case of boys sexual desire is an important motivating factor, whereas for girls there is an ambiguous mixture of attraction, and financial gain.

The role of force is ambiguous. Although it is clear that boys do put pressure on girls to respond to their advances, it does not seem likely that this is often the main reason for girls consenting to have sex. In spite of the fact that boys are bigger, stronger and older, and that girls do appear to defer to them in practice, girls are often quite competent in negotiating sexual deals that are financially rewarding for themselves, and they are adept in avoiding boys with whom they do not want to have sex.

Although HIV and STD prevalence among school pupils is still low, the extent of sexual activity and the almost total lack of protective measures justifies considering them a potential high risk group. Relationships with adult men increase the risk factor.

Given the nature of sexual relationships as presented above, any appeal to monogamy or abstinence is likely to have little effect. The serious promotion of condom use among school pupils, and the men who have relationships with schoolgirls, appears to be the most obvious intervention. The moral acceptability of condom distribution in schools has recently been endorsed by the Tanzanian National AIDS Committee (1994). It has several advantages: it is relatively cost-effective in terms of inputs in relation to potential effects, it does not require radical behaviour change and it does not contradict any of the fundamental aspects of the culture of adolescent sexual relationships, except the belief that condoms imply distrust in a regular relationship.

Condoms are not widely used by school pupils for contraception or in preventing STDs including AIDS. Risk perception about AIDS among the pupils is lower than that about becoming pregnant. Because pupils are more concerned with pregnancy, which they see as a shorter-term problem, than with HIV/AIDS infection, condom promotion with emphasis on preventing pregnancy might be positively received by both schoolboys and girls. STD and AIDS prevention, however, must remain part of health education and condom promotion.

References

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