

Safe Sex or Safe Love? Competing Discourses within the Context of HIV/AIDS

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Introduction

HIV/AIDS discourses have not only been successful in making people aware of HIV as a disease entity but have also opened up new ways of thinking about sex and sexuality (Harrison 2000). Furthermore, in South Africa as well as elsewhere, the pandemic has been the site of continuing struggles in the discourses of gender, sexuality, race and sexual differences. The discussion in this paper draws on data that was produced as part of my doctoral research, which explored young adults' sexual identity constructions within the context of HIV/AIDS (see Reddy 2003). This included an exploration of how young adults explore, define, negotiate and represent their sexual identities.

While I am not a linguist by training, the centrality of language to the construction of identities, and therefore any reconstruction of limiting identities, became evident in the process of my research. This paper focuses on the discourse of love (and trust) amongst young men and young women and how these articulate (or not) with the discourses of safe sex. Further, I examine particular versions of masculinities and femininities and how these are constructed by language. Within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it is critical to understand the discursive strategies men and women use to reproduce, re-work or reject limiting sexual identities that lead to unsafe sex practices.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This area of research raises many questions regarding the relationship between the researcher and those that are being researched. There are pertinent methodological questions that need to be asked such as: how does one gain access to what is construed as invisible, and more specifically, to issues that are considered private and personal. These topics have been the focus of feminist research methodology (Lather and Smithies 1997). Since sexual identities are often privately held, not clearly observable, and poorly understood by the participants themselves, a variety of methods were used to generate data about young adults' notions of their developing sexual identities within the context of HIV/AIDS.

The discussion in this paper is based largely on data from group and individual interviews. A gendered approach was employed in the production of data: working with groups of girls; groups of boys; boys and girls together as well as individual girls and boys. This provided opportunities for single sex discussions about the participants' desires, fears and anxieties in relation to the 'opposite sex', as well as opportunities for the girls and boys to confront and challenge gender stereotypes, expectations and assumptions, and to learn from each other about their desires, fears and anxieties. The process of interviewing and discussion in groups was not just about gathering information, but about speaking identities into being, about confronting and reworking limiting sexual identities, and hopefully, appropriating those that contribute to the participants' sexual safety. The participants were male and female learners in a selected co-educational state school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The school is situated in a suburban working class area. A sample consisting of a mix of African and Indian learners aged between 15-19 years participated in this study.

A poststructuralist feminist theoretical approach (Weedon 1997) was combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000) to create a useful tool for meaningful analysis of the very fluid and contingent nature of sexual identity construction. Michel Foucault (1972) provided the initial lead for understanding the subject through discourse analysis. He argues that subjects are created in discourse and cautioned that 'discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject' (Foucault 1972: 55). This paper attempts to offer an approach to the HIV/AIDS pandemic by examining the language used by

teenagers in creating their sexual identities, which are intimately connected to their sexual practices (Reddy 2003).

Weedon's (1997) notions of poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, discourse and power seem to offer useful ways of understanding experience and relating it to social power without resorting to fixed notions of identity. According to Weedon (1997:21), the common factor in the poststructuralist approach to social organisation, social meanings, power and individual consciousness is language. Language is the medium in which actual and possible forms of social organisation occur and where likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our identities and our subjectivities are constructed. Fairclough (2000:164) also supports the view that people live in ways that are mediated by discourses which construct work, family, gender (femininity, masculinity), sexuality and so on in particular ways, which emanate from experts attached to social systems and which come to them through sources such as the mass media. Fairclough (2000: 164) contends that contemporary social life is 'textually mediated' - we live our practices and identities through such texts.

The principles of poststructuralist feminism are 'applied to all discursive practices to analyse how they are structured, what power relations they produce and reproduce, where the resistances are and where we might look for weak points more open to challenge and transformation' (Weedon 1997:132). Within this framework, I attempt to understand how young women position themselves within gendered linguistic performances as well as the discursive strategies employed by young men in their quest to sustain male hegemony.

Analysis of the Data

The findings are represented in the groupings outlined, that is, individuals and groups of girls; individuals and groups of boys; and girls and boys together. This is neither to essentialise nor reify categories of boys and girls as I look at the similarities and differences within and between these groupings in order to understand the complex ways in which girls and boys represent themselves. I also focus on the public and private language performances of girls and boys in order to examine the particular ways in

which the language used in different contexts is influenced by the nature of the audience. In this paper, I specifically examine the linguistic manifestations of young adults' conceptions of ideal relationships within the context of HIV/AIDS and their responses are discussed below.

Ideal Relationships: To Love and Trust

The participants' accounts of ideal relationships were conspicuously gendered. Girls often talked about *love* and *trust* as integral components of ideal relationships. Such a framework in itself tended to make (often unsafe) sexual activity more legitimate. Boys, on the other hand, remained largely silent about issues of *love* and *trust*.

Girls' Constructions of Ideal Relationships

The desire to love and be loved is one of the principal reasons given by girls for beginning a sexual relationship, and it seems that they engage in unsafe sexual practices and go to great lengths to prove their love in ways that are expected of them (mainly by the boys). For example: '*He says you don't love him if you don't sleep with him*' (Welile). This manner of constructing themselves in ways that meet male needs was a feature of many girls' articulations. Even though Welile uses *you* instead of *I*, the structure of this sentence suggests personal experience. The use of two negatives suggests a fear of loss of love.

Girls often perceived unprotected sex as a way of proving their love for the other and of ensuring a continued relationship. Unprotected sex was seen to be insurance for benefits such as emotional intimacy and trust. For example: '*It is thought that having unprotected sex is having complete trust in your partner*' (Rita). This example indicates a direct relationship between unprotected sex and *complete* trust, and that each implies the other. The phrase 'in your partner' suggests the second person, which was not common among girls. Women in this society rarely speak about sexuality, and virtually never about their own sexuality and when they do, it is done haltingly and seldom in the first person.

In the focus group discussions, some girls expressed recognition (and perhaps acceptance) that boys often used promises of love in order to gain access to sex. In the following extract the girls display awareness that

there are differences among girls and among boys. Again it was also interesting that they mostly referred to others and seldom themselves.

Gugu: *Boys think that if they tell you they love you then you will have to do anything to please him.*

Zubi: *And some girls are scared that if they refuse him then they will get dumped.*

Ayesha: *Some boys are only interested in one thing.*

Gugu: *Not all boys, Ma'am. Some boys, not all, know how to treat a girl (Excerpt 1).*

It is also evident from the above excerpt that the girls seemed to be more interested in what boys wanted and expected. They seldom talked about their own expectations and desires, and did not seem to have the language to do so. It is possible that even if they did have the language, they were not free to express themselves because of social expectations that girls are objects of desire rather than desiring subjects. The use of the conditional *if* and *have to* by Gugu in the first instance suggests that boys' declaration of love is conditional and would demand a mandatory response of *anything to please him*, and this would include unsafe sex. There is also reference to the fear of being 'dumped'. This colloquial term was used frequently by the girls and it has strong implications of being permanently discarded and having no further value.

Throughout this discussion the girls referred to *some boys* and *some girls* which meant that they had some understanding of differences among girls and differences among boys. This understanding is articulated directly by Gugu (in Excerpt 1) and is significant in that it provided spaces for understanding and constructing alternative identities that are more conducive to sexual safety. It is also evident from Ayesha's use of *one thing*, which refers to sexual activity, that girls were not free to talk openly about sex and used euphemisms in their communication. Boys, on the other hand, were able to talk freely and directly about sex, for example: *'Because the sex is better (without a condom) and the feel of the vagina rubbing against my penis is very nice'* (Bheki). This is an interesting use of the words *vagina* and *penis* by an African language speaker. This was not uncommon among

young Black males, while females' use of language was more restricted (see Excerpt 2, below).

Interestingly, for girls, love and trust are seen as protection against HIV/AIDS. This construction of ideal relationships is seen to reduce sexual risk. For example: *'It (HIV/AIDS knowledge) teaches us that having sex is something serious. If you have sex you must be sure and be able to love and trust the person it happens with'* (Kogie). The participant articulates a conditional relationship between 'sex' and 'love and trust'. She also positions girls as passive in this process, in her use of the word *happens*. This word suggests that women cannot choose the person that they want to have sex with and must therefore compensate by taking charge of their attitudes.

There was more agreement amongst girls that love necessarily makes sexual behaviour clean and pure, eg., *'If you love someone, you should be able to do anything with them'* (Nelisiwe). In this sentence *should* indicates the obligatory character that love seems to have for women, that compels them to accede to *anything* through the discourse of romance. While these constructions are clearly contrary to sexual safety within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, this did not seem apparent to the girls.

However, some girls do demonstrate some recognition of the contradictions between safe sex choices and sexual practices based on satisfying partners and keeping relationships. There is some evidence of girls taking the lead in organising their own lives, and consequently exerting more power within relationships. Some girls suggested that they are not always passive victims and are able to decide on the terms of a relationship. For example:

Gugu: *There's a lot you can do with your boyfriend. It does not mean that you have to sleep with him to prove your love for him...Trust is the most important thing in a relationship.*

Thabisile: *No, I told them that if you love me, you love me; you don't love my private part.* (Excerpt 2)

In Excerpt 2, Gugu challenges the conditional status of love and sex. Thabisile's reference to *private part* once again suggests the restrictions on

girls' talk whereas the language used by boys (see Bheki's statement discussed above).

Many girls also expressed concern about the negative connotations of introducing condom-use into a relationship, since it not only suggested distrust in the sexual partner, but also suggested that they (the girls) have been promiscuous. For instance, there was the comment: '*You can't mention condoms, he will think you sleep around*' (Jenny). Once again, the silences to which the girls are subjected indicate the importance of what boys think and expect.

Boys' Constructions of Ideal Relationships

Boys tended to be very silent on issues of love. When they did mention it they mainly talked about love as being something that girls were interested in. Boys talked about feelings in terms of physical contact, for example: '*They (boys) want 'flesh to flesh' so that they can feel what their partners feel for them*' (Bheki).

The first 'feel' refers to (boys') physical contact and the second 'feel' refers to (girls') emotional response. This is related to the issue that for many boys, having a partner is often associated with access to sexual pleasure. For example, one of the reasons that was given for having a girlfriend: '*They feel lonely and get horny and they want to get it on*' (Rishi). Here sexual activity is explained through the use of a trendy phrase, *get it on*, as a way to cure loneliness.

Linguistically what is interesting is that while males are perceived as the ones with power, the use of the third person plural pronoun *they* also reflects their inability to speak directly about the issue. The silence is therefore not just relegated to females but to males as well and that the two groups have different strategies to cope with the issue.

Some boys expressed resentment at girlfriends' expectations of attention and affection. They felt that being associated with one girl was damaging to their masculine reputation. For example:

Shakila: *Do you have girlfriends?*

Alan: *Yes, girlfriends. We can't be tied to one girl and she wants to be with you twenty-four- seven. You can't be with the guys and...*

Shane: Sometimes girls like to show other girls that they own you and stuff. You have to be with her and hang around at lunchtime and after school. (Excerpt 3)

While girls are often treated as commodities, as reflected in the language used by boys (e.g., '*as we get bigger we have certain needs such as sex, so by having a girlfriend, we can obtain these needs*' (Jay)), Shane indicates that he does not like to be owned. He uses the plural *we*, which the boys frequently did in the presence of other boys, suggesting a common experience. When I enquired about differences among boys, Sibusiso said, 'O.K. Some. There are some boys who are caring and patient'. The slow *O.K.* and the qualification *some* suggested that this was a reluctant admission about something that boys are not proud about.

It was evident that context is an important sociolinguistic variable that may help explain changes in speech patterns. This was demonstrated by the strikingly different statements produced by individual boys in the group and in private. In private, some boys mentioned that love is important, but that it is not a good idea to declare your love for someone. Stereotypically for boys, declaring love is regarded as showing weakness while receiving love is regarded as a show of strength. Having their declaration of love rejected was a concern, for example: '*If you tell a girl that you love her, she may laugh at you and tell all her friends and everyone will come to know that and the other boys will make fun of you.*' This admission of 'weakness' was not a feature of group discussions. The manner in which they expressed themselves in-group situations indicated their understanding that boys' relationships should be about 'sex' and not 'love'. However in private, they admitted to emotion and expressed a fear of rejection. These dissonant public and private verbal performances were very prevalent in boys' articulations about feelings and love.

Girls and Boys' Constructions of Ideal Relationships

In the mixed sex settings, some girls continued to talk about love and trust, and notions of ideal relationships, which made sexual relationships safe. This idea was challenged by other girls, while the boys remained largely silent about the possibilities of being affected by 'love'. Instead they were

concerned with projecting masculine characteristics, as emerged in their discussion of sexual technique.

Mbuso: *Yes, you must practice.*

Nelisiwe: *Why do you need practice? It's (sex) something within you. You should know how to do it without any practice.*

Smanga: *Let's say you never had sex then you would be with your wife who has done it then that will be a problem when she has to teach you.*

Mbuso: *That's very embarrassing.*

Nelisiwe: *No, it isn't.*

Mbuso: *It is, it is.*

Nelisiwe: *You shouldn't be embarrassed if you love someone, you should be able to do anything with them (Excerpt 4).*

In this discussion it was clear that both boys and girls agreed that it was boys who should take charge of sexual activity and should therefore be experienced and knowledgeable about it. Smanga indicates that if it were the woman partner who had experience in and knowledge about sex, it would be a problem. Nelisiwe challenges this idea, but her main counterargument is that *love* is a solution to any problem in a relationship. Her contradictory and confusing constructions are also evident in her response that *it's (sex) something within you*. This shows that she shared the view that boys are expected (*should know*) to be innately (*something within you*) knowledgeable about sex.

In mixed sex interviews, some boys challenged the traditional notions of power within relations. Consider the following extract:

Lucky: *One thing for sure, I won't be forceful.*

Themba: *There are two different kinds of 'no'. There is 'no' with a smile in it and there's a strong 'no'.*

Lucky: *'No' is 'no' anytime (Excerpt 5).*

In this conversation Themba displayed a fairly common male view that girls who say 'no' (to sex) do not necessarily mean 'no', and that presumably he would be able distinguish between the two kinds of 'no'. Lucky, on the other hand, challenged this view within this mixed group setting, demonstrating

that there were differing ideologies between the two. Interestingly, his discussions within boys' only groups were vastly different. On those occasions he either agreed with or reinforced dominant masculine constructions.

Discussion

The data presented in this paper suggest that that the language of young men and women positioned them within dominant versions of masculinity and femininity. It is evident in the language used by the girls that they experienced immense pressure to conform to aspects of traditional femininity which include: appearing sexually unknowing, aspiring to an ideal relationship, being trusting and loving and making men happy. The language used by the boys suggested that they also experienced pressure to conform to aspects of masculinity, which included having multiple girlfriends, having sexual knowledge and prowess and distancing themselves from 'feminine' interests such as 'love'. In the following sections I discuss the implications of these dominant discourses of love for safer sex practices.

Safe Love or Safe Sex?

The girls articulate a powerful discourse of romantic love, along with the promises that accompany it. The language used by the girls suggests that the need to love and be loved is a powerful determinant of the extent to which they are prepared to assert or compromise their agency in a relationship. These findings add to the existing research, which suggests that teenage girls link sexual activity with love, and love is a legitimate reason for sex. According to Lees (1993), the 'legitimacy' of love is precisely its role in steering female sexuality into the only 'safe' place for its expression. The boys, on the other hand, recognizing the significance of love in the lives of the girls, mainly used promises of love to gain access to sexual satisfaction.

The manner in which the participants (especially girls) talk about love further complicates their notions of sexuality, in that 'love', which is closely tied to 'trust', in itself makes sexual practice safe and pure. Following on this, risk is then assessed in terms of love and trust for a partner. As a result, demanding condom-use, for example, undermines those constructions of love and trust. It is clear that when sex is constructed in terms of trust, romance or love, sexual safety becomes a contradictory

practice. The language of the girls suggests that their experiences of sexuality are closely tied to the competing discourses of romantic love and sexual safety. Some girls and boys manipulate the knowledge they have about safe sex to rationalise their risky behaviour and explain why safer sex is not necessary for them. Positioning themselves within patriarchal versions of femininity that disallowed female desire, the girls often talk about the need to satisfy their loved ones, rather than about their own needs or desires, or what they know to be unsafe. Boys, on the other hand, talk about satisfaction (sexual and otherwise) as being their right.

Public and Private Language of Love

The language these young people used to construct their sexual identities in relation to love and safe sex was different in the different groupings (see section on methodology and theoretical framework). The findings of this study draws attention to three important sociolinguistic variables, namely, participants, topic and setting. The dissonances between private and public language were more resounding in the accounts of the boys than the girls. Through a poststructural feminist lens, the issues of power and ideology become clear in the reportage of the boys, which displayed more inconsistencies than that of the girls.

Love is an important factor through which the girls understand their sexuality. Conforming to dominant versions of femininity, for many girls there was a close connection between love and sex, and 'sex' was understood as 'making love', while for the boys, talking about *love* is embarrassing. This is not surprising in a society that associates 'soft' emotions with girls and 'aggressive' emotions with boys. 'Love' is not part of the boys' discussions about sex, except when they talk about promising love to gain access to sex. They understand 'love' to be something that occupies the minds of girls, and admit to manipulating this knowledge for their own purposes. Positioning themselves within dominant versions of masculinity, the boys largely distance themselves from being interested in love, otherwise it would mean that they are 'soft' and 'weak' and they could be hurt and rejected by girls. This loss of power is inconsistent with the performances of hegemonic masculinity of the majority of the boys. Falling in love makes boys vulnerable, and it seems that achieving successful

masculinity puts them under pressure to mask the vulnerability associated with loving, caring or any characteristics usually associated with girls.

Some of the boys, especially in private discussions, revealed conflict between how they really felt and masculine performances that were expected from them (from other boys as well as from girls). Away from their peers, some boys say that love and emotional pain is a feature of their lives as well, but in conforming to hegemonic masculinities, they neither acknowledge, nor display these 'feminine' characteristics. Boys also appeared to be more sensitive in mixed-sex discussion groups. Since the girls, in their construction of ideal partners, indicated that they value sensitivity and some of those 'feminine' characteristics that boys often mask, it is possible that the boys who were aware of this displayed more sensitivity and appeared less macho in mixed-sex group interactions than in boys-only groups.

McLeod (1999) explores the idea that because love is considered to belong in the private realm and is not to be spoken about, it is women's business, whereas men's business lies in the public realm. She contends that sexuality education must at least examine the constitutive effects of maintaining the silence about the discourse of love, and that ideally, students should be given the chance to examine talk about the profound tensions between safer sex practices and the discourse of love.

Conclusion

The language practices used by these young men and young women in constructing their sexual identities affords some insight into the monitoring and regulation involved in maintaining the gender/sexual order. It became clear from the language used by the girls and the boys that they variously attempt to challenge as well as to reinforce dominant gender relations. For women to negotiate safer sex practices with their male partners would require questioning the traditional basis of sexual activity, where men usually determined how and when sexual activity took place. In trying to adhere to certain stereotypical assumptions about being masculine, many boys attempt to project the required image. However, a closer analysis of the language they use to communicate this image reveals certain inconsistencies between the 'perceived' and the 'real'. This raises serious questions. So, instead of merely understanding language to reflect identity it is more useful to understand language as contributing to identity construction, where

language is not only the expression of unique identity but constructs the individual's identity under socially given conditions, which include structures of power and social conditions, institutional constraints and possibilities as well as the available cultural codes. This opens up spaces for identities to be sociolinguistically challenged and reconstituted to effect transformation.

The shifting nature of the language practices of these young adults is determined by structural influences, and the extent to which they are free and responsible agents are evident in their different performances to different audiences. It is clear that the conventional sexual scripting that young adults receive in our society (such as, "Just say 'No' to sex") needs to be challenged directly. It is important that the language of HIV/AIDS interventions articulate with the realities of young adults, taking into account the social confusions and contradictions. The dominant language offers young men and women limiting gender identities which are often contrary to their sexual safety, especially within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This study suggests that young women and men have limited access to alternative ways of mobilizing language. It is necessary to provide forums where they can learn new ways of constructing and speaking about their emotional and sexual interests.

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