SHORT REPORT

Morality and sexual rights: constructions of masculinity, femininity and sexuality among a group of South African soldiers

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Abstract
This paper describes how South African soldiers draw on notions of gender, sexuality and morality in their constructions of identity and heterosexual sexuality. Popular discourses around HIV and AIDS in South Africa and elsewhere have highlighted the centrality of notions of morality, many of them problematic, in the response to the epidemic. In Southern Africa, the centrality of heterosexuality to HIV transmission has triggered a focus on morality in sexuality, including calls for abstinence or, in married relationships, monogamy. This paper discusses the findings of a research study that explored male soldiers’ constructions of masculinity, sexuality and risky sexual practices. Discourses that emerged reflected dominant attitudes regarding men and women’s sexual rights and, in particular, the moralisation of women’s sexuality.

Keywords: South Africa, military, masculinity, heterosexuality, sexual rights

Introduction
A discourse emphasising the strength of the male sexual drive has been identified both in South Africa (Shefer and Foster 2001, Shefer and Strebel 2001) and internationally (Hollway 1989). This is usually coupled with traditional expectations of women’s sexuality as submissive and responsive to that of men. Central to this discourse is the notion that men’s sexual desires, biological drives, are uncontrollable and, therefore, cannot be denied (Hollway 1989). This interpretation excuses men from responsibility for their actions, results in men taking sexual risks and has been used to explain rape and coercive sexual practices towards women (Kottler and Long 1997). The male sexual drive discourse also offers a plausible excuse for not using condoms or practicing unsafe sex.

A number of qualitative studies in South Africa highlight the salience of this discourse of male sexuality (see Miles 1992, Strebel 1993, Shefer and Ruiters 1998, Shefer and Foster 2001). One South African study, which explores men’s talk on gender and sexuality in which the sexual drive discourse features, is that of Harris et al. (1995). In this
investigation, participants’ constructions of gender were found to be organized around the assumption of ontological difference, either natural or social, explained through ‘proof’ emphasising differences in power use, preferences and needs.

Women are generally perceived as lacking sexual rights. The dominant have/hold discourse (Hollway 1989), for example, which links women’s worth and status to their capacity to have and hold a man, is underpinned by religious and moral values that emphasise monogamy and nuclear family life for women. This discourse parallels the male sexual drive discourse in constructing male sexuality as ever-ready, urgent and determined by inherent (uncontrollable) drives. Linking both discourses is the common assumption that sexuality is linked to the cultural imperative of reproduction. Together, these discourses limit sexual expression and the realisation of sexual rights, bringing about ‘moral panic’ if individuals take up certain positions outside of them, for example, women exerting their sexual rights or men stepping out of expected heterosexual roles by engaging in same-sex relations.

Risk sexual practices and condom use

Men’s portrayal as sexual initiators with uncontrollable sexual urges can result in difficulty for many women in negotiating safer sex and condom use, which is exacerbated by their social and economic dependency on men (Shefer 1999, Lesch 2000, Tallis 2005). Studies highlight how traditional patriarchal men in Africa see a woman’s request for condom use as evidence of prior promiscuity (Commercial Sex Information Service 2002). In this context, the question of a woman’s morality arises, creating a sense of anxiety among men if women are allowed to express their sexuality. This suggests that the HIV pandemic cannot be tackled without examining issues of sexual and gender rights and what sexual morality means to both men and women.

Linked to the pressure on men to have multiple sexual partners are the added negative constructions of the condom, especially for men in the South African context (Kometsi 2004). A further complication derives from the fact that engaging in sex with many partners and practising unsafe sexual practices which could result in sexually transmitted diseases (STIs) appears to add status to men (Faxelid et al. 1994). For women, STIs have a different meaning. The stigma of infection is embarrassing and, if women are infected, they keep this to themselves as they do not want to be negatively labelled as promiscuous or loose (Strebel 1993, Shefer 1999, Lesch 2000). Ironically, however, even though women are expected to be sexually inactive, they are seen as immoral and blamed for causing STIs (Shefer et al. 2002).

Soldiers are trained in risk-taking and aggressive behaviour (UNAIDS 1998, Woodward 2000). By virtue of their profession, they may be at risk of injury during training and during conflict. As Heinecken (2000, p. 4) states: ‘War is a bloody business’. Soldiers may be expected to transfuse blood if injured and to assist wounded colleagues. This may expose them to infected blood, especially if HIV testing has not been a policy in the pre-deployment or high-risk training phases (Heinecken 2000, Achery 2004). The risk of acquiring HIV through sexual intercourse, particularly during deployment, may appear minimal compared to the risk of death through military activities. However, for women soldiers, even though they have similar living conditions (such as being far from loved ones and perhaps lonely) it is immoral to step out of the monogamous relationship. Women have no right to fulfil their sexual needs.

The use of condoms tends to reflect and reproduce male power in heterosexual relationships. Men want to be in charge of their sexuality and the suggestion of condom use
from a woman can call into question their sexual prowess. According to Geloo (2002) men feel that initiation of condom use by women threatens their masculinity:

By using a condom my wife is demonstrating a liberation I am uncomfortable with. It is as though she cannot trust that I can protect her. For prostitutes yes, they have to look out for themselves, but married women, I don’t think so. (cited in Geloo 2002, p. 2)

Homophobia

Homophobia has been identified as a further barrier to the adoption of safe sex in heterosexual culture. Panic, discomfort and fear of homosexuals and homosexuality is often strong. Various discourses position homosexuality as unnatural and diseased (Flood 2000). The HIV epidemic has to some extent fuelled homophobia. Gay men have been perceived as the dangerous ‘other’, resulting in those in heterosexual relationships distancing themselves from the epidemic. In contrast, heterosexual sex is constructed as natural, giving primacy to male sexual pleasure (Wilton 1994) but limiting women’s ability to negotiate safe sex practices.

In many cultures, same-sex relations hold the potential to trigger moral panic and the denial of rights (McFadden 1992). This is particularly salient in South Africa where homophobia is rife despite a progressive national Constitution protecting rights of sexual orientation and relationship. Hegemonic heterosexuality has been highlighted as a central institution in creating and reproducing unequal gender power relations, patriarchy and male domination (see, for example, Rich 1981, MacKinnon 1989, Jeffreys 1990, Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993, Richardson 1996). Male control over women’s sexuality and self excludes not only other types of sexuality but also the possibility of a positive heterosexual femininity (Holland et al. 1996).

Heterosexuality is the accepted norm in the military context, where, according to Kimmel (2000), homosexuality and celibacy are disdained. Discrimination and stigmatisation against men who have sex with other men contribute to denial and secrecy, making it difficult to reach such men with HIV prevention. Heineken (2001, p. 231) argues that ‘men may be cautious to reveal their sexual preference for fear of victimisation or possible discharge’. She further suggests that the armed forces want people of ‘good moral character’, a standard that historically has excluded those viewed as transgressing ‘normal’ sexuality and moral standards.

Against this backdrop, the present study explored how a group of male soldiers in the South African military construct their sexuality and understand it within the broader context of masculinity and HIV/AIDS. The paper analyses the emerging discourses illustrating their enmeshment with dominant notions of morality and sexual rights. This paper emerged out of a larger qualitative study of a group of South African soldiers, which explored how they construct masculinity, while paying specific attention to the intersection of their constructions of sexuality and reported risky sexual practices with their male identities.

Methods

Participants in the study were recruited from a higher education institution within the South African National Defence Force. Fourteen individual in-depth interviews were
conducted with male officers pursuing a career in the military. Even though participants were students when the study was conducted, they had all been in the military for more than four years. Participants were aged between 24 and 33 years, a group regarded as sexually active and at high risk of HIV infection (Heinecken 2001). Only three participants were married.

Diversity, rather than formal representivity, was taken into account during sampling. There were seven African participants – four whites and three coloureds. Participants were all junior officers with ranks ranging from lieutenant to captain. Some had been on deployment. The decision to interview participants from diverse backgrounds was based on the assumption that a diverse sample might facilitate the possibility of diverse stories and narratives being heard, which could contribute significantly to the nature and content of future HIV programmes and interventions.

Interviews explored the multiple ways in which participants constructed their masculinity. Data were qualitatively analyzed to identify discourses of morality in constructions of masculinity, femininity and (hetero)sexuality and how these intersected with sexuality in relation to dominant discourses on gender, sexual rights and moral panics. The meanings focused on here emerged through repeated readings of interview transcripts analysed primarily on the basis of Edley and Wetherell’s (1997) interpretative discourse analysis. It is acknowledged that the analysis and interpretation of transcripts is by no means exhaustive and should be read as an initial attempt at arriving at an understanding of how men construct normativity in everyday life.

Constructions of female and male sexuality

It has been well documented that gender and other inequalities (such as economic resources) render women particularly vulnerable to HIV (Strebel 1993, Lesch 2000). They also make it difficult for women to achieve their sexual rights, which, in current discourses on sexuality and morality, are often denied and labelled as morally wrong. For example, double standards highlighted, whereby women are expected to express their sexuality in monogamous relationships whilst men may be encouraged to have multiple partners, are still prevalent in South Africa as they are elsewhere (Miles 1992, Strebel 1993, Shefer and Ruiters 1998, Shefer and Foster 2001). The salience of moral judgements against women who step out of traditional female sexual roles or their roles as monogamous wives is evident in the extracts below:

Sam: As I said earlier I saw a lot, I mean a lot, of women in uniform, in the military getting involved in intimate relationships, quite easily, you understand, I don’t know why, but quite easily. And you will, will see when you go to a to a function or a social event now, take women soldiers and civilian ladies together with men you’ll see who’s the woman, who is misbehaving the most. Not like in bad manners but in who is like that wilder, that womanly thing, er, walking like women, sitting like a woman, bend like. You can see, this is a soldier, this is a woman. So, I think the military generally take away some of the woman’s, some of the woman’s, um, how can I put it?

John: We were talking about women and how they are. This guy told me that 90% of the ladies, they slept with several guys while being on course. I don’t know why but, I’ve also experienced that, er, there’s a loose, a loose tendency, and ladies will easily submit to or having sex with with guys, even, even when they’re married. Um, I can’t say why, but, um, there’s a there’s a easy tendency to have sex with someone (inaudible) I mean a married girl’s on (the) course. They’re married they still have sex with another guy.
Respondents indicated that married men are also expected to be morally upright and, while it was accepted that, ‘because they are men’ they may experience sexual desire, they are not encouraged to follow those instincts. This view was expressed by both married and unmarried participants of the study. As the above quotations illustrate, however, the stigma associated with having known-about sexual relationships is acute for women, but does not equally apply to sexually active men:

John: Okay, for me it’s not, it’s not well … if a lady goes out with a lot of guys. There’s this, we carry this picture of a woman must be ladylike. And, I don’t know, it’s just, it’s bad character, I don’t know, I don’t know why, but then again for men it’s different. I don’t have a particular reason. I don’t know if it’s just a male thing, but I, okay I realize. I’m a feeling person. What I feel is right, or my emotions help me think this is right and I go with that. The thing is, when I think about a lady doing it, I feel, no. But when I hear about the guy doing that that feeling don’t come.

In this discourse, men may have multiple partners as part of performing their manhood, proving it to themselves and other men primarily. The use of women’s bodies for purposes of sexual pleasure helps make up manhood and male sexuality. Men, irrespective of their marital status, are not culturally frowned upon (in the same way as women are) if they leave their wives and regular sexual partners for other women in the public domain. According to Daniel and Mikobe, below, the best thing for men is to have sex, a lot of it and with as many women if possible. They elaborate:

Daniel: [Men] want a lot of it. For a man sex … generally [is about] the more, the better. If we had our own way, we’d just like to have sex with a woman. Then, two or more nights later … have sex with another woman.

Mikobe: You always need to have a lady around you that you can … call at any time, be with her, I think there’s a lot of people who believe this.

In a similar vein, Mikobe argued that when men think and/or talk about women passing them by on the street, it is highly likely that ‘they are only thinking of sex’. Other participants agreed with this, relating the response to circumstances imposed by military life:

Simon: So when you go to the base area you start seeing a girl. Hey! It’s a girl, you smell it, you smell a perfume. It’s amazing when you haven’t been around ladies for a while, the girl can be walking on the side of the base and you start (sniffing sound, animal like) looking (laughing) and when you go into the community when you go to buy ‘take-away’ or something you go to town, then you try your best to get attention from local ladies because it is so nice.

Tulani: We go to girls having this mind and we tell our mind if she, can arrive here on the base, I will then kiss her, have sex with her.

Here the male sexual drive discourse is constructed in animalistic terms, as stemming from a deep-rooted primitive urge reflected in the sniffing sound made by Simon, above.

Culture, sexuality and women’s sexual rights

Both women and men live and express their sexuality in a context that dictates that it is only appropriate for men (and not women) to initiate sexual activity. This cultural prescription concerning appropriate sexual etiquette constrains women from being (too) open about their sexual desires and needs towards men. According to this discourse, women are
prevented from taking the initiative in sexual matters and are judged accordingly, with ‘culture’ being used to legitimise such practices:

Bongi: … mentality that says men [ ] are supposed to be superior and everything must be suggested, or must come [ ] from a man.

By adhering to this cultural stereotype, women contribute to men’s lack of knowledge about women’s sexual needs and desires:

Bongi: Normally … they just keep quiet, as they will be afraid [to] come out and say, ‘listen, I’m not satisfied’.

Here, cultural discourse has blocked communication and is used to explain and legitimise women’s sexual subordination. Underlying such discourses are the (internalised and external) beliefs, codes and etiquette constraining and regulating male and female sexuality and its expression. In sum, men and women do not discuss their sexual needs and desires openly with one another because of sociocultural constraints and regulations that discourage open communication on sexual issues. Women’s sexuality is perceived as threatening and anxiety provoking for men when it is experienced as transgressing the normative boundaries of expected female sexuality.

Daniel draws attention to the existence of a group of dangerous women who ‘have similar fantasies to men’ as well as those who ‘think about pornographic magazines’. Such women are perceived as sexually/fantastically deviant because in this discourse pornography is regarded as belonging to ‘the man’s realm’. Thus, ‘proper’ female sexual conduct dictates that women do not appropriate for themselves aspects of what is perceived as belonging to men’s sexuality, even if such appropriation happens in their fantasy lives:

Daniel: I don’t want to have a woman [ ] who is comfortable watching pornographic movies with me. I don’t want to have a woman like that. Women who like pornography are not confident about [their] own sexuality.

The notion that women who like pornography are not confident represents an attempt to pathologise women who take an interest in sexuality (outside of their relationship with their partners). Tulani also expressed discomfort with women who are comfortable watching pornography. He said bluntly: ‘I don’t like women who watch pornography.’

Not only does enjoying pornography imply some psychological defect in women, but underlying the critique is the assumption that an interest in pornography symbolizes an active, self-initiated sexuality, too similar to male sexuality (which ‘naturally’ requires pornographic fantasy). Instead, the role of women is to satisfy and respond to men’s sexual needs, and men make decisions on how to have sex.

Closely related to these notions of what is correct for women sexually, is the deterministic idea that men are sexually active and instinctively unfaithful. They cannot avoid breaking moral standards, while women are expected to uphold the morality of the day. Interestingly, while women are not expected to have agency in discussing, requesting or initiating sexuality, they are expected to have sexual agency in refusing unwanted or inappropriate requests for sexuality:

Bongi: If she doesn’t want something, she doesn’t want it. The guy must just accept that she doesn’t want it.
However, women need to account for their refusal to have sex with their male sexual partner. The man has the right to know why the woman is refusing sex:

Bongi: … understand [ ] why she doesn’t want it. She cannot just say, ‘I don’t want to make love’, and that’s it. She must explain to the guy, why she doesn’t want to make love, so that the guy will understand. Whether or not they are in a marital relationship, as long as they are in relationship.

Bongi here positions himself within contradictory discourses: those of human rights (a woman has a right to refuse sex, her right to her body) and the controlling gendered discourse that a woman should be accountable to a man. Although there was awareness that it was a woman’s right to even reject their husbands sexually, it was maintained that, for many men, there is still a sense of ownership over their wives and partners. Thus while Bongi highlights the traditional constructions, he cannot let go of them himself:

Bongi: … stereotypes that once you marry somebody, you own [ ] that particular person. Which is not true.

Another discourse that emerged and highlighted the different versions of morality relating to men and women and ambivalence towards women’s agency hinged around the issue of women initiating condom use. Some participants expressed discomfort when women exercised their rights to safer sex. Women’s initiation of condom use was associated with their having multiple partners and thereby infringing moral codes:

Tshepo: I’m saying you can’t worry about risk, we are sleeping together here. Suddenly, you can’t take out a condom, and [say] ‘now I have to use this’.

Gerhard: The AIDS thing would be a bit more difficult for me to understand because I would like to believe that she is faithful to me and I am faithful to her. So I would immediately ask her, okay, listen I don’t have a problem with the condom thing but the AIDS thing, um, er, I am faithful to you so you must tell me now if you are having something skelmpie on the side or whatever.

If women in the military do not behave as expected, and do not succeed in being the icons of moral standards, they will be stigmatized and called names – ‘state mattresses’ being a popular term of abuse:

Thando: She goes on deployment somewhere and her boyfriend is staying, she’s going to have a relationship, or chances are she might have a relationship. And the fact that the military is like a little … small and almost all the relationships you have its … like everybody knows. They start getting names as prostitutes.

Homophobia

Homophobic attitudes were strong among interviewees in this study. Participants expressed discomfort with the idea of homosexuality which appeared to question the very foundations of military identity based on traditional constructions of masculinity and the achievement of a successful (hetero)sexual identity:

Sam: In the army, you are part of, the fighting part, fighting corps, soldiers. You can’t be a soldier if you are a homosexual.

Interviewer: Okay. You mean you can’t fight if you love another man?
Sam: Yes. When you go to the field, you work in teams, men, men, mostly men. Say for instance you are a team of six, you sleep in one tent, you drive in one vehicle, everything you do you do in your teams. And if there’s one guy who’s a homosexual, what do you think would be the consequences of the team? You understand? They won’t be that productive as a team as straight men ... It’s just logic. There’s also our, our buildings at the [naming the unit], even here, two men sharing a shower, in the other places there’s a communal shower so, thirty men sharing a shower, now with one guy there being a homosexual in that place. It’s chaos. They will, they will, I’m telling you they will chase that guy out or they will hit him.

Sexual relations between women were rarely openly acknowledged but were viewed with greater acceptance. Sam described some of the behaviours he had witnessed:

Sam: Okay, they won’t cuddle in front of us, but you can see, these two, there’s something going on.

Similarly, Gerhard stated:

I think there are not many cases and, um, I’ve come, come across some, not many, but I’ve come across some of them, some of the girls, here [ ] tended to, to more go more to the to the lesbian side. Maybe not hard-core or full lesbians, but maybe just experimenting.

According to John, a woman may be in a (hetero)sexual relationship when she joins the military but may become a ‘lesbian’ while in the military. Same-sex partners are viewed as being chosen for the same reasons as choosing opposite sex partners – that is as a means of coping with frustration and loneliness:

You choose that person that you can associate with more, I mean, there’s many people but there’s only that certain person you can associate with.

While same-sex relations between women appeared to be tolerated, (hetero)sexuality is set up as normative best practice and male homosexuality, especially, was viewed as problematic, pathological and morally reprehensible.

While participants questioned the normality of homosexual practices, there was some recognition of the need for acceptance, on the part of some respondents at least. Gerhard explained:

Maybe they’ve got a valid reason that they became, why they became homosexual, maybe they’ve had a very sad past, that that won’t make them different in my eyes. If he, he must just not, he mustn’t force himself onto me, like come with his, oh hello, and that type of things, then he will make me uncomfortable. But as long as he’s happy and he’s, he’s, um, he’s professional in his way in which he deals with other people, then I’ve got no, no problem with that.

**Conclusions**

Perhaps the major finding to emerge from the present study was the existence of a continued double standard with respect to morality. Women are viewed as the repositories for conservative moral standards. It is they who must remain chaste by being faithful, while it is expected that men will have multiple sexual partners. Women are heavily stigmatized for breaking with dominant social norms of responsibility and fidelity, while men need to do so in order to achieve masculinity.
Significantly in this study, men employed a rights discourse when discussing women’s rights over their bodies and sexuality and, therefore, their right to refuse sex with their partners. But, on the other hand, there was a pervasive counter-discourse questioning a woman’s refusal of sex. For some men, a female partner’s assertion of ‘no’ to sex is interpreted as questioning a man’s sexual abilities and performance. This represents a challenge to male power and control over a woman’s sexuality. Women are expected to explain to men why they lack the desire to engage in sexual activity. While men accept that women have the right to insist on a condom, sometimes the same men cannot help but interpret this as a slur on women’s morality – in other words these women must have been unfaithful or they suspect unfaithful men.

This study showed evidence of homophobia and a rejection of homosexuality, even in contexts where same-sex relations are legally protected. While respondents were aware that same-sex relationships must be accorded respect in line with the sexual and human rights discourse of South Africa, same-sex attracted individuals were pathologised and viewed as a problem. Men acknowledged human rights discourses but resisted in different ways. Some participants expressed an ‘arms length’ tolerance of homosexuality. Others felt more comfortable with women’s same-sex relations than with men’s.

The contradictions emerging in this study signal space for change in dominant masculinity and sexual practices, but also cause discomfort for men. The military is a powerful masculine institution and threats to traditional masculinity can be anxiety provoking. Such discomfort may be constructive; it may be facilitative of change if it can be brought to men’s consciousness in constructive ways. The contradictions highlighted here reveal something of the multiplicity of discourses on masculinities and sexualities and show how participants could be positioned within different, even contradictory, discourses. In making sense of what is said, it is important not to view men’s accounts as fixed or representative of ‘true’ selves (Parker 1992). Rather, they reflect some of the multiple discourses currently on offer for men in South Africa, some of which may hold the potential to facilitate change with respect to sexual identity and sexual practice.

Notes
1. This is a South African terminology for mixed race.
2. Pseudonyms are used.
3. ... indicates hesitation; [ ] indicates where information has been omitted; brackets indicate clarification of a word or filling in of the missing words, e.g. (the).

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