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## Sexual coercion and sexual desire: Ambivalent meanings of heterosexual anal sex in Soweto, South Africa

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### Abstract

Anal sex within heterosexual relationships is usually underreported or not reported at all, yet is increasingly recognised as a potential mode of HIV transmission. Understanding the circumstances of anal sex is critical for trials that seek to assess the efficacy of microbicides. This article draws on qualitative data collected during a feasibility study for a clinical trial of microbicides in Soweto, South Africa. Focus groups of women enrolled in the feasibility study discussed the circumstances under which they and other women in the community had anal sex. Their narratives drew attention to the ambivalent meanings of anal sex; often regarded as a form of sexual coercion but also frequently as sexual pleasure. The article explores the reasons for these apparent contradictions.

### Introduction

This paper draws on qualitative research on sexual behaviours, specifically heterosexual anal sex, among participants in a microbicide feasibility study that was carried out in Soweto, South Africa. Anal sex is a key concern for trials of vaginal microbicides, especially regarding their ability to demonstrate efficacy. For example, during the microbicide COL 1492 trial, 75% of South African research participants reported having had unprotected anal sex during the trial period (Van Damme et al., 2002).

There is a broader concern that rectal transmission of HIV is an under-recognized yet highly efficient route of HIV transmission (Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000) and may occur with greater frequency. This is underscored in various studies (Friedman et al., 2001; Halperin, 1998, 1999; Voeller, 1991). Moreover, a recent literature review suggested that same-sex and heterosexual anal sex occurs with greater frequency in the African context than is usually assumed (Brody & Potterat, 2003). However, heterosexual anal sex is seldom given the same attention as it is for male same-sex relationships (Karim & Ramjee, 1998). Friedman et al. (2001) made the call for further quantitative and qualitative research into the reasons for engaging in anal sex.

In South Africa, evidence of the practice of anal sex between men, and less so in heterosexual relationships, is reported in ethnographic and historical writings. Anal sex between men has been

investigated in specific institutional contexts such as prisons (Achmat, 1993; Niehaus, 2002) and single sex migrant hostels (Epprecht, 2000; Moodie et al., 1994; Niehaus, 2002). Historically, male migrants practised thigh sex and possibly anal sex with men in order to avoid syphilis (Epprecht, 2000; Van Onselen, 1984) and to avoid paying women for sex (Harries, 1994; Niehaus, 2002). Some sources report that both anal sex and thigh sex were practiced by adolescents (Epprecht, 2000).

A handful of epidemiological surveys have investigated anal sex amongst heterosexual populations and its links to HIV in South Africa. In one study, 42% of South African truck drivers reported anal sex with female sex workers, while the combined HIV prevalence of both truckers and sex workers was 56% (Ramjee & Gouws, 2002). In the same survey, of 145 sex workers, 42.8% reported having had anal sex. Within this group, 61.3% were HIV-positive, in comparison to the 42.7% who did not report practicing anal sex (Ramjee & Karim, 1998). In another survey in KwaZulu-Natal, 28% of men from STD clinics practiced anal sex with their partners in comparison to 11% of male university students and 4% of men in the general population (Ramjee et al., 2001). These studies used small samples and therefore their findings may not be applicable to the broader population. More recently, a national survey of adolescent sexual behaviours revealed that more than 5% of male and female adolescents reported having ever engaged in anal sex. Most significantly,

males who reported anal sex were more likely to test HIV positive than those who did not (Lane et al., 2006).

This paper does not purport to support or contradict these findings. It explores perceptions and subjective experiences and the circumstances and meanings of heterosexual anal sex. In particular it draws attention to the ambivalent meanings of anal sex: as coercive and punitive and, at the same time, as recreational and desirable, and seeks to explain these contradictions.

## Methods

Soweto, South Africa was one of several African sites selected by the Microbicide Development Programme of the British Medical Research Council to investigate the feasibility of a Phase III clinical trial of vaginal microbicides. Between August 2002 and November 2003, 755 HIV-negative women were enrolled in the feasibility study. Community health workers interviewed study participants during clinic visits using case record form questionnaires. The interview included questions on sexual partnerships, condom use, vaginal insertions and anal sex.

In addition, a social scientist held six focus group discussions on anal sex with 32 women already enrolled in the feasibility study, who had been randomly selected from the research clinic register. These discussions focused on their knowledge and experiences of anal sex. The group discussions were recorded onto digital audio files, translated and transcribed. The texts were coded according to the themes that emerged and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA2.

## Results

### *Awareness of anal sex and HIV*

Focus group participants used several terms to describe anal sex; however, no phrase or word translated literally as anal sex. The term '*pata pata*' ('touch touch') takes its name from a song made popular by the singer Dorothy Masuku in the 1980s. The dance style associated with this song is extremely sensual. Another term 'bump and grind' refers to a disco dance style. Informants also used the phrase '*matanyula*', which refers to 'high' sex, masturbation, oral sex and, in this case, anal sex. The term 'dog style' was most commonly used, although this also described penile-vaginal penetration from behind.

Women in the focus groups talked openly about what they knew of anal sex in their own communities. They were familiar with gay identities and

sexualities and associated anal sex with gay men and male prisoners. Images of anal sex were also recalled from pornographic films and television.

Heterosexual anal sex was not mentioned spontaneously in the focus group discussions. However, minimal probing revealed that most of our informants were well aware of it. Conversations with friends about anal sex were common, as a young woman described:

'You hear them laugh and they say, "my boyfriend asked me to have anal sex with him but I was scared". You know. Other people are very open, especially when it comes to discussions about sex.'

Generally, the focus groups did not consistently associate anal sex with HIV. A few participants in the discussions regarded anal sex as a safe alternative to penile-vaginal penetration. Anal sex during menstruation protected the male partner from menstrual blood, which was believed to be highly polluting. Others, such as the two women quoted below, talked about anal sex as contraception or as a method of prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV:

'Some people are doing this [anal sex] because they don't want to be pregnant. Let's take your boyfriend refuses to use a condom. So, I think that is why some people prefer to have anal sex.'

'People have anal sex because they think you cannot get HIV and STDs if you do anal sex.'

Another informant elaborated on why she thought anal sex was less risky than vaginal sex:

'If you sleep with a man, obviously the womb is open and at that time, the virus will get inside [the womb]. But how does HIV or STD get in there [the anus] because there is no womb. There is a hole but it is not the same as the vagina. The vagina is very soft; it will absorb STD quickly.'

Likewise, our informants were unsure whether or not HIV could be transmitted through anal sex. A young woman commented: 'I have heard people saying that anal sex causes HIV and STD but I don't have any proof.'

However, some were emphatic that anal sex increased the risk of HIV infection. The young woman quoted below expressed this view:

'Blood is all over your body so if you have anal sex you can have AIDS. Let me explain to you. At the back [the anus] it is very soft. Sometimes if you have sex you don't feel anything there but later

after having sex you will feel something is amiss. Then you will realize there is a wound. When you go for a blood test they will tell you that you are HIV [positive] and you will not understand why. You cannot feel all the wounds. But you cannot get AIDS without a wound—you get AIDS when you have a wound.'

In the same focus group discussion, another woman drew on her personal experiences to corroborate this statement:

'My friend told me her boyfriend had AIDS and he died. So I asked her if she had sex with him. She said yes. She said that she had sex when she was sick [menstruating]. They were doing it dog style [anally]. I asked her if she had a cut or a wound or if he had a wound. I buried my friend this year because of dog style. That is why I was saying to the other women that you can have AIDS from dog style.'

These texts reveal a divergence of opinion about anal sex. It was often regarded as a normative, protective practice for preventing STIs, HIV and pregnancy. Yet, this was challenged by a relatively sophisticated perspective informed by biomedical knowledge about HIV infection and the role of bodily fluids in facilitating HIV transmission.

#### *Anal sex as punishment and coercion*

Anal sex was portrayed as physically painful and uncomfortable, as well as emotionally distressing. It was regarded as improper and unnatural; it did not express love but hate and the desire to inflict pain. One woman commented that 'anal sex is a way of hating each other through sex'.

'Sometimes if you have a partner he will ask you to do something you never do that is not common—like "everyone is doing it". But it feels like he doesn't love you he is just playing with you.'

Anal sex was also portrayed as a method for punishing women, as one woman commented, 'that is the way she pays'.

'Men discipline their girlfriends by demanding anal sex when she doesn't want it. Many people use sex as a way of punishing someone. A man cannot go directly to a woman [and say why he is angry]. Instead he will punish you through sex.'

The notion of anal sex as punishment was associated with rape in prison:

'Other men do this to women, because for them it is like some sort of punishment to women. The time they were in prison—it is what they were doing to them.'

Women's narratives did not give the impression that physical coercion was common but rather that men used subtler means of persuasion. Acquiescence to anal sex was the result of indirect forms of coercion, as the following commentary illustrates:

'Sometimes it involved violence but not to such a large extent because there are girls who can scream and it would look like he is raping me. The guy probably felt intimidated and was scared of going to jail so he used smooth talk and worked his way around and actually made me feel like "anal sex is the way to go—it is what everybody else is doing".'

At times coercion was expressed as a fear of breaking up with a male partner. On these terms, men could make whatever demands they wished:

'Lots of girls feel that the only way they can keep their guy is by sleeping with him. If he is not happy with the sex he will sleep with one of the other girls, you know. So they do what ever he wants and that's the only way they feel they can keep the guy.'

One woman stated bluntly that other women agree to anal sex because, as she put it, 'no pain no gain'; anal sex was a necessary hardship that had to be endured. Another woman elaborated: 'I mean if you are doing something you feel pain to show that you are really working on it'.

Dependency on men for material support and women's fears about losing their support was also cited as a reason to acquiesce to anal sex, as the following extract illustrates:

'If your boyfriend asks you to have that type of sex [anal sex] you cannot refuse because if you don't let him he will think you don't love him. Even if you feel painful that will be your problem as long as he gets what he wants. This will also stop him from breaking up with you.'

Agreeing to anal sex was considered as a way of avoiding domestic quarrels. An unmarried woman talked about her boyfriend's demands for anal sex:

'He isn't a bad guy; it's just when he is drunk or if he has been smoking dagga [marijuana]. I do it so that we don't fight. But hey our boyfriends demand a lot. If he is drunk he will say "mama,

baby can I have anal sex with you” then I will say no and he will start touching me at the back.’

In these accounts a strong impression is created of anal sex as coercive and often punitive, and acquiescence to anal sex as a result of subtle and at times not-so-subtle coercion.

#### *Sexual experimentation and desire*

In contrast to those narratives that represented anal sex as punitive and coercive, the same groups of women also associated anal sex with sexual experimentation and play. A young woman put it simply:

‘There are some people who just want to experience it [anal sex]. They want to know the difference between anal sex and vaginal sex.’

Curiosity arose from watching pornographic movies and from sex talk with their school peers. A younger woman recalled:

‘We were just talking about what we were doing at home and we started talking about the styles. One said, “ah there is a style that I tried, like a dog style you know”. So, you teach each other, you know?’

Contrary to the negative attitudes outlined in the previous paragraphs, the following passages from the focus group texts portray anal sex as extremely desirable. One of our participants agreed that anal sex was a painful experience but commented that ‘you can do it until you enjoy it and by that time it will feel the same as vaginal sex’. The quotes below emphasize that anal sex was even seen to enhance sexual satisfaction and enjoyment:

‘It is wonderful and you can feel it afterwards.’

‘It is very nice, yes it is nice whether it is the vagina or the anus, it is very nice, because you know it is touching, touching each other and you will feel it.’

‘It’s like having sex in the right spot and if it’s like that both of you will start screaming, and that time you know that this is my favorite spot.’

This woman was very explicit about how she enjoyed anal sex. Her words highlight her dominant role in the sex act, compelling her partner to continue:

‘Yes I enjoy it until I say “*Hau bava*” [oh darling/father IsiZulu] and say “some more please”. So he will say “I am tired”. I will say “Again, just a little—it feels nice”.’

Another woman commented on how anal sex increased her sense of intimacy with her partner:

‘I do it because I feel close to him and I really enjoy it. This means our relationship becomes strong and we experience things together, you know—so it makes us close.’

This difference of attitude towards anal sex did not provoke debate in the focus group discussions. Indeed, the negative and positive attitudes towards anal sex seemed to mesh together without difficulty in the discussions. After one of the discussions had taken place and the group was leaving one of the participants remarked ‘I am not saying I will not try it [anal sex] one day because even I can be curious’.

#### **Discussion**

The key aim of this paper is to understand the circumstances and meanings of heterosexual anal sex. As noted elsewhere, motivations for anal sex such as avoiding menstrual blood and preserving virginity were voiced in the focus groups (Halperin, 1999). Sometimes, alcohol and marijuana were associated with men’s desires to have anal sex. However, there was some debate whether or not anal sex was a route for the transmission of HIV and other STI. Yet, by far the most dominant narratives expressed in the group discussions were those that concerned the coercive and the pleasurable aspects of anal sex.

Women’s narratives about anal sex in the focus groups represented a distinctly ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, anal sex was regarded as punitive and coercive. It caused physical discomfort, pain and increased the risk of HIV infection. Yet, on the other hand, the same women alluded to anal sex as a form of playful experimentation that could increase sexual pleasure and intimacy.

The ambiguity expressed about anal sex brings to light to the problematic nature of reported sexual behaviors and social and cultural representations. Holy and Stuchlik (1983) caution against interpreting what people say they do as representing actual behavior and stress that norms and actions ought to be regarded separately. This is particularly relevant for research into the emotionally-charged and extremely intimate arena of sex behavior (Lindenberg, 1991). The material presented in this paper suggests that although discourses about anal sex stress coercion and punishment, it is possible that this conflicts with women’s subjective experiences and meanings. By emphasizing the coercive and punitive aspects of anal sex, women in our focus groups may have attempted to avoid moral opprobrium associated with female sexual desire.

The assertion of sexual pleasure or sex for pleasurable purposes needs to be conceptualized in the light of the significant social, economic and political transformations that have taken place in South Africa over the last decade. In 1994 South Africa underwent a major political transformation and experienced a sexual revolution coinciding with the end to the repressive and oppressive apartheid regime and resulting in the freeing up of sexual identities (Donham, 1998). In contexts such as Soweto a new liberated sexuality that embraces pleasure and pursuit of desire emerged. This countered notions of the absence of female sexual pleasure in African society (Caldwell et al., 1989). Spronk (2005) argues along similar lines that women in Nairobi challenged conventional gender roles through their pursuit of sexual pleasure, yet managed to avoid moral condemnation by deferring to male authority.

The material presented in this paper has also raised the need to broaden our understanding of what shapes sexual behavior, particularly that which is considered high risk for HIV infection (Donovan & Ross, 2000). Writings on sexual relationships and their relationship to HIV infection in South Africa have stressed their coercive and transactional nature (Dunkle et al., 2004; Jewkes et al., 2003). Sexual passion and desire may frequently be strong motivations for unsafe sexual behavior (Bolton, 1995; Collins & Stadler, 2000) yet are often ignored in HIV-prevention awareness messages.

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