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*Gender Scripts and  
Social Interactions of  
Young People in  
Burgersfort.*

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## **1. Introduction**

South Africa is facing a dual epidemic which is driven by HIV/AIDS through heterosexual transmission and poverty. In rural South Africa apartheid policies have eroded traditional lifestyles and agricultural livelihood strategies are unable to support most households making them depend on cash economy. Many of the households in rural areas rely on remittances from migrant labour (38%) and secondary labour market employment - often local, poor prospect jobs, e.g. farm workers: (37%) - to generate a livelihood (May et al. 1995).

With over half of the infected population between the ages of 15 and 25 years old (UNAIDS and Department of Health 2003), the HIV/AIDS epidemic disproportionately affects young people and adolescents. Poverty in South Africa increases social inequality by making young women in particular dependent on their male counterparts thus decreasing power in decision making. Women's greater risk of infection and relative disempowerment with regard to men are critical factors influencing transmission. Subsequently, gender issues sit at the heart of HIV prevention challenges.

Young people's greater risk of infection and young women's relative disempowerment with regard to gender roles are important factors driving HIV/AIDS transmission. Notably, gender roles are culturally defined sets of behavior that are differentiated by gender (Gibbons *et al.*, 1997). Gender predominates as one of the most important social drivers of HIV/AIDS influencing many aspects of sexual relationships and accounting for the frequent imbalance of social power that women and men bring into such relations.

For the purpose of this paper the term 'gender' refers to the social construction of roles, responsibilities, and obligations associated with being female or male (Gagnon &

Parker, 1995). These gender roles are culturally defined sets of behavior that are most inherent within heterosexual relationships (Gibbons et. al. 1997). HIV researchers have long emphasized the importance of recognizing power dynamics between females and males within their intimate relationships specifically noting the subordination of women through socially constructed gender roles (Amaro 1995, Wingood & DiClemente 1998a). Thus within heterosexual relationships gender is seen as the key organizing principle that influences all aspects of unequal social power between men and women.

Limited research has examined the ways in which contextual factors such as poverty shape young people's sexual behavior. Although there are projects and theories that critically evaluate gender scripting and the socio-economic environment influencing sex partner selection and sexual behavior among poor adolescents, yet the data about the South African rural context remain insufficient. As such, this study is designed to gain better understanding of the socio-economic processes influencing the selection of an 'ideal' sex partner. Ultimately, findings will better inform an effective public health response to the rural young people's risk for HIV infection.

This research presents young people's perceptions of sexual behavior as embedded within a complex script governing heterosexual interactions; 'script' refers to a series of culturally stereotyped interchanges between two people (Abelson 1981). Scripts are rooted within a specific cultural and socio-economic setting and in this study, subsequently highlight the varying power dynamics between young women and men in rural South Africa.

## **2. Literature review**

Although gender inequality occurs in all socio-economic groups, studies have shown that women who live in poverty, are more likely than women of higher status to experience social suppression (Heise, L. & Elias, C. 1995, Hargreaves, J.R. & Glynn, J.R. 2002). Rapidly changing dynamics of rural versus urban, 'traditional' versus 'modern' lifestyles coupled with high unemployment rates, put young women and men in a precarious situation infringing their normal gender roles and individual agency.

In recent years research has focused on how varying socio-economic factors at different levels may contribute to young people's choice of an ideal partner as well as decisions made within such relationships. Noting how structural and social environmental factors shape the complex realities in which individual behaviors occur (Sweat et al. 1995). Cultural and socio-economic factors affect individual efforts to avoid relationships that could ultimately lead them to HIV infection (Sumartojo 2000). Gender scripting may provide a useful way to conceptualize adolescents' portrayal of ideal partners in heterosexual relationships contextualized by poverty and gender inequality.

Sexual scripts refer to the cognitive models that people use to guide and evaluate social and sexual interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). A script is defined as "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him as either a participant or an observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). Scripts vary in magnitude and the extent to which they are shared by others. According to script theory, people typically pattern their social responses in order to maximize their control over a given situation; this requires each person to be able to imagine a script or stereotyped event sequence for past, present, and future behavior (Abelson, 1981).

The fundamentals of individual sexual scripts, particularly gender roles, are acquired during childhood and adolescence (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Stereotyped gender roles identify roles as possessors of objects of desire and females as the desired objects (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). These notions are evidenced when men assume proactive roles in initiating sex and when women adopt reactive "gatekeeper" roles by accepting or refusing sexual advances (Cate & Lloyd, 1988).

More 'traditional' gender scripts imply that men will initiate sexual interactions with women, and women will acquiesce to their male partners' sexual needs (Seal et al. 2003, Byers, 1996; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992). While evidence indicates that traditional gender roles continue to define courtship today (Byers, 1996, O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992), relationships in other contexts have become more egalitarian (Giddens

1992). Regardless, in contexts where deeper gender inequalities exist, sexual negotiation becomes difficult or non-existent for women (Lucia et. al, 2003).

The current study highlights the complex nature of gender scripts rather than as a simple initiate/acquiesce dichotomy. Gender scripts are used as a tool for conceptualizing how adolescents strategically manage their behavior within their heterosexual relationships. These scripts are further defined within wider socio-economic contexts shaping and constraining young people's choice of an ideal partner and decision making.

It should be stressed however, that focusing on sixteen participants only means that this mini study cannot be held to be representative of the young people's views of Burgersfort area as a whole.

### **3. The study setting**

The villages in the Burgersfort area are located within the densely populated Sekhukhuneland district in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The rapidly developing town of Burgersfort is the major centre of economic activity for residents of the surrounding villages. The villages around Burgersfort fall under Tubatse local municipality, which houses a population of just over a quarter of million.

The region is steeped in the history of the *SePedi* speaking people. Traditional leaderships still maintain a degree of control in some areas, but transitional local councils are now active in many of the villages. HIV prevalence in the region is estimated at 13.2% among antenatal clinic attending women and the unemployment rate is in excess of 40% (Dept. of Health 2000).

However, the continued expansion of platinum mining, which is hoped to bring additional jobs and increased investment to the region, and despite the rapidly changing political landscape in the past decade; many of the realities of life have steadfastly remained the same. A booming platinum and chrome mining industry in the area attracts an increasing number of immigrants from around the country and internationally. Currently the area has 15 mines and is planning to open 10 more in the

next 24 months from which Burgersfort is said to develop into a modern city in the foreseeable future (*Sunday Sun* February 19, 2006).

The social fabric is characterized by very high levels of labour migration and an overall lack of access to water supply, and an increasing crime rate. Lack of sufficient mine housing results in most of the mine migrants workers renting *quarters* (backyard rooms) of some homes within the surrounding mine communities. Recently there have been a growing number of quarters being built by many homes to generate income by renting them out to mine migrant workers.

### **Research Methodology**

Study participants were recruited during the summer of 2005 from among grade 12 matriculants at Sehlaku High School in Driekop village which is ten kilometers away from Burgersfort town. Previously, I visited the school three times for rapport purposes with the school administration. I was given permission by school principal to use that opportunity to invite willing participants in the study and explained the project's goals (i.e. gaining better understanding of the socio-economic factors that influence young people's ideal partners) and provided details about participation in the study.

I selected two participants (one male and one female) from these classes on the basis of voluntarism who in turn recruited their close friends: 17-21 year old men and women with heterosexual experiences. The reason for choosing groups of friends was to ensure a high participation.

A total of 16 young people – 8 men and 8 women participated willingly. All participants completed the participatory interview sessions. Before each interview discussion, participants were informed of the purpose and format of the interview and were asked sign written consent forms. The interviews were conducted by one interviewer and both interview sessions were conducted in a private class within the school. In addition, to ensure the confidentiality of the views expressed in the discussions group rules were generated collectively by the participants barring them from disclosing discussed topics publicly.

Using participatory learning appraisal method (PLA) (c. Chambers 1994a), participants discussed the following key question: What are the characteristics for a perfect partner? Participants were asked to brainstorm and then to list all characteristics of a great partner. After the groups finished making their lists exhausting all desirable characteristic they could think of, they were asked to draw figures of a boy on one side of the list and a girl on the other. Using small stones the participants scored relative importance of each characteristic from the perspective of an average adolescent girl or boy in their community.

The questions were open-ended to allow participants to explain and substantiate on topics they considered important. For example, participants were asked “How easy is it to find the ‘perfect partner’, “Is it easier for males or for females,” and “Which characteristics are easier to find than others”. During the course of the study the interview guide was adapted to include questions about emerging themes such as “Do males and females communicate openly about what they want from their partner”, “Do males and females start relationships for the same reasons”, and “Do they have the same expectations and hopes”.

Participants were encouraged to think about key questions to reflect on their average experiences in their communities, and were not pressured to disclose personal and private information. Thus, throughout the discussion, both groups were allowed to change the scores and move the items around.

The qualitative methodology was used because it is the most suitable approach for in-depth exploration into social contexts that influence young people’s gender scripting. Qualitative approaches are suitable because of their emphases on ‘context-embedded behaviour’ (Gilbert 1990). The participatory learning appraisal (PLA) activities and gender scoring method on ideal partner and ideal relationship were used . The advantage of using these methods is not only to gain insight about young people, but also to enable them to brainstorm and reflect upon their own perceptions and conditions (Chambers 1994a).

### **This study**

This study utilizes a gendered perspective to investigate rural young people's perceptions of an ideal partner to find out how young people construct narratives of ideal relationships within a wider social and economic context that influences and constrains expressions of youth sexuality. In order to address these questions, I employed two participatory focus group discussions which were divided by gender. Each group comprised of eight participants between the ages of 17 and 21 and currently in grade 12 at the same high school. Participants live in the same village, and members of each group considered themselves 'close friends'.

## Results and Discussion

The data analysis highlight key themes to gender scripts and sexual interactions of young people. Results are reported for 16 participants narratives conducted through focus group discussions. Figure 1 and 2 below identify key themes in young men and women's responses and their ratings (\*).

**Figure 1.**

Ideal girlfriend	Ideal boyfriend
<b>Good manners:</b> speaking softly and no shouting. ***	<b>Respectable:</b> no drinking and scratch-faced. **
<b>Slender and curvaceous bodied:</b> should move like a model on a catwalk & with no <i>mkaba</i> (big belly) ***	<b>Handsome:</b> good looking with no scary facial scratches. Some liked dark while others liked light skin complexion. ***
<b>Dress attractively:</b> mini skirt and body hugging and body revealing shirts. **	<b>Wearing 'cool' clothes:</b> wear trendy clothes and be tidy. ***
<b>Working and educated women:</b> Males are likely to be unemployed & that woman's salary is an important supplement. ***	<b>Material man:</b> to care for her by providing her with necessities like, money, cosmetics, jewelry, taking me out to KFC and giving me money. ***
<b>Coming from rich family:</b> so she can support him and for comfortable life. ***	<b>Not a partner beater:</b> not oppressing and controlling. **
<b>Respectful:</b> don't have to question his partner and obey his orders. ***	<b>Accountable and reasonable man:</b> need to know why he loves you & be understanding. ***
<b>Not promiscuous:</b> one man type of girlfriend. **	<b>Responsible man:</b> know that sexual relationship come with responsibility &

<b>Need to be in several relationships before committing for marriage:</b> for sexual maturity. ***	able to support his g/friend in case she falls pregnant accidentally.***
<b>Be able to express her love to her potential boyfriend:</b> must show that she fancy me. **	<b>Never been with many girls before:</b> not promiscuous. **
<b>Show that she intends to be married:</b> must be able to do house chores. ***	<b>Working men:</b> so he can take care of me with tripleCs (car, cell phone, & Cash). ***  <b>Die grootmans (older men):</b> boys of our age are sexually and mentally immature & do not have money. ***  <b>Not local men:</b> should come from another village or province. ***

\*\*\* (highest rating), \*\* (higher rating), and \* (high rating).

**Figure 2.**

<b>Which characteristics are easier to find?</b>	
Females	Males
Older partners. Working boyfriends. Hand some boyfriends Men who provide material resources	Slender and curvaceous girls Mini skirts girls A girl in at a tavern Promiscuous girls
<b>Which characteristics are difficult to find?</b>	
Females	Males
Honest boyfriends Boyfriends who do not put sex first One woman man No partner beater	Good looking girls Educated women Steady girlfriends Girlfriends from rich families

**Ideal characteristics of boyfriend and girlfriend.**

**Physical appearance.**

Past research has suggested that in interpersonal contexts women are judged more by their weight than are men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1998). Additionally other scripts supported findings that the female role as the object of desire reinforces an emphasis on physical appearance among women (Davis 1990, Green, Buchanan & Heuer 1984). While other past researches have suggested that in interpersonal context women are judged more by their weight than are men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1998).

However, current findings suggest that attractive and ideal girlfriends were not only characterized by being slender but also by being fuller-figured and curvaceous.

Similarly, women participants stressed the importance of physical appearance of men in terms of look and dress code. Findings suggest that both young men and women highly rate physical appearance when defining an ideal partner.

From the perspective of women, the ideal boyfriend is someone who is good looking, tidy and who wears smart clothes. Women's discussion attributed good look to handsomeness and cleanliness. However, description of handsomeness varied amongst participants as some described handsomeness in terms of personality, for instance, as someone with good manners while others attributed physical attributes like having a smooth face with no 'facial scratches' and not looking violent.

Most women suggested that their ideal boyfriend was the one who looks trendy by wearing 'cool' clothes and designer labels. Traits such as good looking, tidy and wearing smart clothes emerged as a salient theme in girls' narratives about an ideal boyfriend and were given highest scores.

Men attributed the physical appearance of an ideal girlfriend to 'good body shape'. This trait was rated amongst the highest characteristics of an ideal girlfriend. In defining a good body shape and most agreed that typical young males of their community would want to go out with 'slender and curvaceous' women. They said that girls with *mokaba* - big bellies are an opposite of what most young males in their community define as beautiful female body.

However, a third of males argued that it is not necessarily true that all young men want slender bodies for there are some men who prefer full-figured girlfriends. Nonetheless they seemed to agree that a beautiful girlfriend should ‘show her stuff like model on a catwalk’. The notion of good body shape was equated with dressing attractively, while ‘sexy’ was equated with wearing ‘mini skirts’, body hugging and body revealing shirts.

### **Women ideal partner.**

Women’s discussion of an ideal boyfriend was about man’s long commitment to her and the possibility that the relationship will lead to marriage. Such a boyfriend should be able to spend quality time with his girlfriend. Although they did not agree on what constitutes quality time, they did agree that it includes spending enough time with her than with friends and at taverns.

Women also agreed that quality time includes trips to eateries like KFC in the nearby town of Burgersfort or even in some distant town like Polokwane, which is about hundred kilometers away from the village. Two female participants argued that those boyfriends who are unable to take their girlfriends out to KFC should at least spend quality time with them by hanging around with them in the neighborhood. Looking for an ideal boyfriend who can provide them with the *Triple Cs* (car, cell phone, and cash) was scored highest by the female group.

Most women agreed that dating boyfriends who own cars is ideal because it shows that they can afford financially. It also meant that they would take them to big cities such as Johannesburg and Durban. The Triple Cs boyfriends were also seen as ideal because they are likely to buy them expensive cellphones and give them money. They emphasize that school-age and unemployed men have true love but due to the high cost of living love without material resources seem not adequate.

### **Ideal partner has one-partner and is sexually mature**

There was a strong desire for an ideal boyfriend to be a one-woman man (monogamous), educated, and have a ‘good career’ women expressed that they want to be taken care of. For instance men should buy their girlfriends toiletries and clothes and also give them money to look after themselves. All participants agreed that apart that they prefer going out with older men because they are resourceful, they are more mentally and sexually mature than their peer school boys who are regarded as not intellectually stimulating and boring. They did also say that it is difficult to distinguish between a serious boyfriend and the casual one because all men want to have sex early in the relationship.

However, women sometimes do engage in casual relationships for two reasons: unwittingly when a boyfriend takes advantage of them by promising ‘heaven and earth’ and only later realizing that men were only interested in sex, or consciously because of the flexibility the relationships provide. Most women agreed that sex should not occur too early in a relationship. Women often wish for an ideal boyfriend who will show his emotional support and commitment in the early phases of the relationship with sex occurring when couple gets used to one another.

These views seem to support other researches that found that men between the ages of 16-25 desired significantly higher levels of sexual activity on first date than women in the same age group, however, both desire similar levels of sexual activity after several dates or when going steady (McCabe and Collins 1984).

Women highly desired boyfriends from other villages and places far from their own. Although most women felt that dating someone living far away is emotionally stressful because they do not see them as often as they would like to.

However, they agreed that it has to be someone that comes from other villages and places far from their own because they are able to do house chores and be at home almost all times as expected by parents. The other reason is that women agree that dating a man from far increases the likelihood that his social history such as the

number of women he has dated and slept with is unknown in the girlfriend's village for she will be appreciated by friends and the community members.

### **Ideal partner is educated and financially independent**

Most male participants prioritized for an ideal girlfriend as someone with good educational backgrounds, gainful employment, and strong career goals. Men argued that 'in the world where cost of living is too high, women should be also bringing income into the relationship'. Some also showed a strong desire for a girlfriend from a rich family, because she could provide them with much needed resources like money and gifts.

Another reason why men preferred employed girlfriends is that men are likely to be retrenched than women in the new democracy. Unemployed men view their girlfriends' salary as much needed supplement. They reiterated that boys in their community do not want dependent women.

All of the male participants agreed that previous sexual experiences for both men and women are important and necessary on two levels: First, men need to have sexual partners before getting into romantic relationships because the experience makes him a better lover, and second, although most men want one-man women (not promiscuous) they prefer to marry women with previous sexual experiences because they are deemed sexually matured.

### **Difficulties in finding a partner.**

Both men and women participants agreed that finding an ideal partner varies by situations and is generally difficult. However, most men argued that many women get into the relationships on the basis of money; men are still culturally expected to *go fereya* – woo a woman into a sexual relationship. For several male participants, wooing

entails subtleties such as ‘engaging smiles from women, constantly looking at him and generally showing of interest by asking friends and relatives about him. However, any woman who would express her feelings openly to a man is regarded as ‘*easy* - not be taken seriously for a steady relationship and often seen as *sefebe* – promiscuous partly because she is emulating men’s gender.

Women participants did agree that although many women are desperate for money and material goods to the extent of dressing in revealing tops, and skimpy skirts to draw attention to men, they agree that not all women who dress in this manner are ‘hunting men’. They link these dressing styles to current fashion trends and that it is not demeaning because they feel good about themselves and express love for their bodies. Several women agreed that culturally men are supposed to initiate the first move but argued that women do propose to potential boyfriends directly (declare love one-on-one) and indirectly (sending of an SMS messages, telling his close friends or relatives, winking her eyes, smiling, and ‘sexy’ dressing code).

Our findings support other research whose results suggests that a new norm characterized by the equal interest in men and women may be developing and supports developing theses that sexual identities are in the process of fundamental change (Lucia 2003).

Many men have discussed difficulties in finding an ideal girlfriend because most women do not want to date school-age boys and they instead they prefer *die grootmans* (older men, or sometimes called sugar-daddies or old timers). They agreed that these *grootmans* drive nice cars, are educated and are employed. They acknowledged that there are ideal school-going girlfriends in the village but because many women are looking for partners with the *Triple Cs* (nice cars, nice cellphone, and cash) it makes them feel less valued and not respected.

However, some did say that they have seen friends allowing their girlfriends to go out with *grootmans* so they can also benefit materially. However, they did emphasize that while this trend is new in their community, it is getting widespread gradually that

unemployed and school-going young men would allow their girlfriend to date working men so they can gain resources like money.

In contrast, from the women's perspective it is not hard to find a boyfriend with the *Triple Cs* because the local platinum mines have brought in many of them who come from other provinces and neighbouring countries. Women argued that there are many young Black mine engineers, land surveyors, and administrators working in the local mines who are renting houses within the village, living along and also looking for young girls in the community. A number of female participants said that *triple-C- men* can easily be found at the social parties, local taverns, through friends and during football tournaments in and around the village.

Several women also reported that because of *mo aino* - the resources men bring into a relationship most girls in the community have defined '*hottest mo aino*' – as a boyfriend who in addition to driving a luxury car, can also give her money and pay for gifts such perfumes, jewelry, trips to the salon, and cellphones. Additionally, several women did acknowledge that owing to the resources such ideal boyfriends bring to the relationships, they are likely to have more than one girlfriend because many women are after them.

Several women added that working men are not necessarily ideal boyfriends because most women go out with them for the sake of material resources they bring into the relationships. Some said that an ideal partnership should take more than more than material things in that they should also be about love. Thus some young women participants have argued that for this reason there are some women who would still keep their unemployed boyfriends for 'love' on one hand, while dating Triple C men on the other . This study seems to agree with other findings that other non-material needs seem to be met by these secondary relationships (Lucia, 2003).

However, this study did not find what was reported in the study conducted in rural KwaZulu/Natal, which reported that it may be the norm for young people, including women, to have more than one partner, perhaps for more material needs (Hunter,

2002). The women in the study said that ideally women do keep two partners for two reasons. One is kept for ‘true love’ and he is often still at school or finished but unemployed. While the second boyfriend provides material things and often he is working. However, they did also emphasize that triple-C-men are likely to replace school or unemployed boyfriends to become sole steady partners when they show commitment and propose marriage. It was also agreed that the only time school and unemployed boyfriends are opted for by girlfriends is when the Triple-Cs-boyfriends become physically abusive and unable to provide as expected.

### **Cultural norms and change in sexual identities.**

Most women participants also emphasized that though women would want to have one-woman type of boyfriend it is not easy because in their culture there is saying that: *monna ke selepe o robala a adinywa* – loosely translated as: it is culturally permissible for any man to have more than one girlfriend.

Women’s discussion on ideal personality was characterized by respectfulness when strolling down the street with her partner. Violent partners were not desired, some women reasoned that school-going men ‘do not reason’ and are rather quick to beat up their girlfriends, often under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Women prefer ‘matured older men’ who use *mo nagano wa batho ba ba rotegilego* – the mind of an educated person and who can provide support and give informed advice. These participants also recognized that older men do not only provide emotional support but also financial support in case she becomes unexpectedly pregnant.

They also agreed that having a respected and dignified boyfriend is important because the community sees the girlfriend through him and having a boyfriend with a bad personality would reflect badly on the woman. In terms of personality, men suggested an ideal girlfriend should show respect by not questioning their authority; she also needs to demonstrate that she can do house chores.

## **Implications for addressing HIV transmission dynamics.**

This paper has highlighted the use of scripting approach to learn and examine sexual interactions and ideal partnership between young women and men. It presented youths' perceptions of ideal partnership and factors affecting such relationships, which reflects a particular cultural and socio-economic setting.

Parikh (2003) argues that any interventions on HIV/AIDS have to take into account the context-specific social dynamics, because the rapid spread of AIDS in South Africa comes from the deep multifaceted crisis in political economy and health. Thus AIDS is surrounded by thick descriptions and meanings to which cultural and socio economic manifestations of gender roles are central. The gender scripts of young people have been altered by socio economic conditions they find themselves in, which increases their risk of unhealthy lifestyles and limit choices to decision making and the practice of safer sex. I have three main recommendations.

First, lack of long term youth sexuality programs further increase young people's risk of HIV/AIDS. Thus youth-driven programs have to be established by public health NGOs involving as key stakeholders parents, civil organizations, traditional and civic authority. In addition, curricula that enable youth to delay sexual activity and deal with masculinity/femininity issues are necessary.

They should also include effective AIDS prevention programs that highlight centrality of structural factors such as poverty, gender inequalities and gender based violence. Such services should be provided in schools and after school involving community structures such as community based organizations (CBOs), youth organizations and others.

Secondly, local mine industry should also play a role in improving the quality of life of youth and community at large in the area by establishing community information center where access to global information can be made possible. Sport center will also be an advantage because it will keep youth off the streets.

Thirdly, local health providers have to be empowered to understand the socio-economic dynamics affecting youth's sexuality through workshops. There is also a need for user friendly patient services and to encourage contraceptive use among sexually active teens in order to prevent HIV/AIDS and pregnancy.

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