

Older age sexuality in the context of HIV in rural Malawi

Extended Abstract

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This paper examines ideas and practices concerning sex among older adults living in rural Malawi. The research is set within a context of HIV prevalence among men and women over 50 estimated at 5.8% and 3.9% (Freeman et al. 2011). The findings of the work challenge demography's preoccupation with fertility and chronological age in the collection of sexual health data in Africa by showing that sexual desire and activity do not decline in a linear pattern. The work also highlights some sexual behaviours and understandings that question the relevance of dominant HIV and STI prevention messages for older adults in Malawi. Finally, in identifying a set of complex competing discourses, the study highlights the importance of qualitative approaches to the collection of sexual behaviour data.

Context

In contrast to the growing body of research on HIV infection among older adults in low mortality countries, very little is known about the experiences of older adults in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of new HIV infections continue to occur. Longstanding equating of sex to fertility has been reflected in the overwhelming focus of HIV data collection on those aged within the reproductive span 15-49. HIV prevalence in the population aged over 49 years is likely to reflect both improved survival of adults infected at younger ages as a result of increasing availability of antiretroviral therapy in Africa, and HIV infection acquired through sexual contact more recently. However there is very limited data on the nature of sexual activity after age 49 years in this region. This research contributes to the sparse data on sexual behaviour and HIV risk for populations over 50 in Africa, using rich qualitative data from rural southern Malawi to explore the meanings of sex and sexuality in later life.

Data and methods

In response to the lack of data on older age sexuality in Africa, an exploratory research design was adopted in which previously unconsidered issues could be investigated. Grounded theory was used to produce a data collection and analysis strategy that is inductive, flexible and highly iterative.

The study was conducted under the auspices of the Malawi Longitudinal Study of Families and Health, a field project run by the University of Pennsylvania. Using the Study's southern

region household listing as a sampling frame, qualitative data were collected from 45 adults aged 50 and older using novel in-depth multiple dependent interviews (n=135). In addition, data from focus group interviews with older members of HIV support groups (n=3), and observational data collected over 11 months of fieldwork between 2008 and 2010, are incorporated alongside these dependent interview data.

Results

These conversations with older men and women on a broad range of topics yielded rich data in which the ability of the body is an underlying discourse. How the able body was socially constructed and constituted was central to how respondents' experienced old age and ageing, and how they understood sexuality and how it relates to ideas of adulthood and identity. Based on these understandings, respondents identified an age-related trajectory of bodily decay and declining sexuality. However multiple dependent interviewing revealed that respondents presented themselves as occupying different and contradictory points along this trajectory concurrently. This paper will present two sets of these competing discourses in which sex at older age was at once, limited and facilitated.

Old cool bodies: Competing discourses around fertility

Previous research in African settings in which fertility is important for ethnic or family continuation and securing resources, has identified procreation as an intricate part of what constitutes 'good' sex (Bond and Dover 1997; Meyer-Weitz, Reddy et al. 1998; Coast 2007). These inductively collected and analysed data extend these ideas to the older population for whom ideas about fertility are less important, but remain relevant. Potency of semen and fecundity of a woman were still important markers for the "sweetness" of sex in older age. Young fertile bodies were considered to be "hot" and healthy bodies by older men and women. By contrast, old bodies were usually "cool", unhealthy bodies. For some men and women, the declining fecundity of the body meant that sex was no longer "sweet" in older age and their desire for sex had subsequently decreased.

The declining body was also less able to perform sex, understood primarily as a physical undertaking. Again connected to understandings about fertility, good sex was understood to involve more than one "round" (ejaculation) in a "strong and fast" sexual encounter, and was a strenuous activity. Sex therefore took strength from men and women in old age. Indeed, sex was discussed as a type of work. Reflecting its importance in marriage (and the importance of marriage for securing resources), sex was referred to as "bed work", particularly by older women. As a result, respondents discussed needing to balance this work against carrying out other work tasks, such as farming and housework. Avoiding become dependent on familial networks, married and unmarried respondents believed that it was more important to use limited strength for farming than for sex.

However, respondents also discussed the strength-*giving* properties of sex. Again as identified by previous research on fertility among younger adults in a variety of geographic and historic settings, semen was regarded to give power to a woman. At older age, receiving these vitamins was understood to become more important, as their strength-giving properties could compensate for some of that lost due to ageing.

The idealised elder and the capable adult: Competing discourses around identity

A second set of competing discourses concern the link between sexual desire and ability, and the identities respondents constructed in response to their understanding of a declining ageing body.

The first discourse centres on the identity of the Elder. An elder was wise, controlled, measured. Old age was understood to have transformative power, 'cleansing' a person of behaviours perceived to be negative and enabling them to emerge as some kind of 'ideal' person. Focused on the ascendance of the mind over the failed body, the paper argues that this understanding of the elder represents an attempt to find an alternative, positive old age identity.

Sexual control was a frequently repeated understanding of the elder identity. Sexual control is interpreted by all respondents as sexual restraint outside of marriage. Such sexual control brings respect to the elder. Older men and women presented their behaviours within this framework. At certain points during our conversations men and women would distinguish their sexual behaviour and desires from younger adults and older, 'promiscuous', adults, focusing on those behaviours and desires they perceived to be expected for an elder, both socially and by the interviewer.

However, older men and women *did* talk about having sexual desires and reported having sex with spouses and *chibwenzi* (lovers), positioning themselves further away from the end of the declining body-sex trajectory during other points of our conversations. Again, this position relates to the underlying understanding of the aged body and the identities respondents associated with it. In respondents' discussions, physical ability to support oneself and contribute to the household were definitional of an adult. Those unable to behave in this way because of their failed, old bodies were consistently regarded as "children", or at worst, as being "not people". Here 'child' is used to indicate a sub-person, someone who doesn't 'count'. Similarly, older adults who were no longer able to have sex either to satisfy themselves, their partners or gain resources, were considered children.

The adult identity was the core identity respondents aspired to. Becoming incapable of house, farm and bed work, was fear behaviour, incompatible with this identity of an 'adult'. The data that will be presented in this paper suggest that older men and women were

motivated to maintain their preferred identities as (sexually-)able adults, and did so by aligning their perceptions of their behaviours with those they understood to be required by the identity of an adult. During discussions men and women discursively managed their identities as adults, by emphasising their continued ability to contribute to their relationships or potential relationships through sex. Sex confirmed their strength and identity.

Conclusions

This research is one of few qualitative examinations of the ageing process in Africa. This paper identifies a number of coexisting discourses about sex. Sex was seen as a physical endeavour that was on one hand not suitable for older bodies, but on the other, beneficial to such bodies. Older age sexuality was also an arena that could be used, on one hand, to demonstrate the self-control of an elder, but on the other, to confirm the strength of an older adult and their identity as a capable adult. In doing so, this paper challenges the preoccupation with fertility and chronological age in the collection of sexual health data in Africa by showing that sexual desire and activity do not decline in a linear pattern and older adults are likely to remain at risk of negative sexual health outcomes. Through the presentation of ostensibly contradictory data collected using multiple dependent interviewing, the paper also highlights the importance of qualitative approaches to the collection of demographic data on sexual behaviour.

References

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