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SEXUAL ABSTINENCE: A QUALITATIVE  
STUDY OF WHITE, ENGLISH-SPEAKING  
GIRLS IN A CAPE TOWN COMMUNITY

Lauren Kahn

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Lauren Kahn is a researcher and scholarship student at the Social Surveys Unit (SSU) and the AIDS and Society Research Unit (ASRU) within the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR), University of Cape Town (UCT). She is also completing a Masters Degree in Psychology at UCT.

# Sexual Abstinence: A Qualitative Study Of White, English-Speaking Girls In A Cape Town Community

## Abstract

*This paper explores decision-making around sexual abstinence among white, English-speaking adolescent girls in Fish Hoek, a middle-class neighbourhood in Cape Town, South Africa. The girls participated in a focus group and 1-2 individual, semi-structured interview/s. Sexual abstinence is found to be a strategy geared towards promoting emotional and relational well-being, rather than primarily geared towards promoting physical health and well-being. Decision-making around sexual abstinence is found to be value-laden, bound up in the meaning and value the participants attach to sex and sexual relationships, values and ideology surrounding marriage, as well as religious values and moral codes. Adolescent sexual decision-making is found to be socially mediated by dominant peer group sexual norms which value sexual promiscuity over sexual abstinence. Pressure to conform to dominant sexual norms and practices is found to be part of a nexus of social pressures facing young people more generally. Supportive family environments and relationships with affirming peers are found to play a pivotal role in sustaining counter-normative strategies such as sexual abstinence. Problematically, girls who engage in counter-normative sexual strategies such as abstinence experience ambivalence and insecurities which can feed into and reproduce sexual norms which devalue abstinence. Furthermore, counter-normative sexual strategies are underpinned by, and reproduce, other problematic hegemonic sexual discourses. Designing interventions that are geared towards sustaining positive sexual decision-making, and 'safe' sexual practices in the long-term, and not solely towards changing 'risky' sexual practices, is recommended.*

# 1. Introduction

Through the presentation of data collected from a focus group and in-depth interviews, this paper aims to explore decision-making around sexual abstinence amongst a group of adolescent girls. Furthermore, the paper explores how these individuals challenge dominant peer group norms – which attach value to sexual experience, and sexual promiscuity – and sustain decision-making around sexual abstinence in the face of normative pressures.

Articles reviewing studies of sexual behaviour amongst high school students in Sub-Saharan Africa found high prevalence rates of sexual intercourse (Kaaya et al., 2002), suggesting that 50% of South African youth have had sex by the age of 16 years, and a probable 80% by the age of 20 years (Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003). High prevalence rates of sexual intercourse amongst the youth have prompted much concern, as these suggest that young people are not responding positively to HIV prevention campaigns which place emphasis upon sexual abstinence as a key mode of sexual health promotion.

This concern has fuelled problem-focused research investigating why young people fail to take up safe sexual practices, including abstinence. South African literature which makes reference to sexual abstinence amongst South African youth has tended to focus upon barriers to sexual abstinence (see Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003, for a review). There is a notable absence of studies which investigate the perceived *benefits* of sexual abstinence (Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003). There is a need to investigate the importance and salience of positive values that young people attach to abstinence, particularly as it stands as a key mode of HIV preventative behaviour. More broadly, there has been call for HIV/AIDS social researchers to re-direct attention towards sub-populations who *are* taking up safe sexual practices, and develop insight into the factors which support these. Alexander and Uys (2002, p. 301) note that ‘research has tended to focus on “hot spots”, sites of high rates of infection, but “cold spots” could reveal factors that make it less likely that people will become infected, and hence more rewarding’.

Researchers have pointed to the stereotyped and one-dimensional manner whereby adolescents have been treated by and represented in research into adolescent sexuality (Aggleton, 1991; Aggleton & Campbell, 2000; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). Studies have given ‘inadequate attention to young people whose views and behaviours challenge dominant stereotypes’ (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001, p. 1614). In South African research, there has been a tendency to focus upon stereotypical norms of gender and sexuality, particularly those which undermine safe sexual practices, and the manner

whereby young people reproduce stereotypical norms and relationships. There is a paucity of literature which attends to the manner whereby young people develop counter-normative strategies whereby they resist or transform sexual stereotypes and norms (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). Attending to this issue is crucial to realising the goals of sexual health promotion:

‘One of the aims of sexual health promotion is to provide the context for the renegotiation of dominant high-risk behavioural norms, and for the collective establishment of new norms of behaviour. It is therefore vital that research focuses not only on the way in which dominant norms place young people’s sexual health at risk, but also on the ways in which particular young people resist these norms, sometimes leading to alternative and less risky sexual behaviours and practices’. (MacPhail and Campbell, 2001, p. 1614)

The current study aims to address this gap in HIV/AIDS social research. The study is part of a broader research project exploring sexual decision-making among adolescent girls in three neighbourhoods in Cape Town, South Africa, and addressing limitations in HIV/AIDS social research into sexual behaviour (see Kahn, 2005; Kahn, 2007). The study aims to increase understanding of the influences on adolescent sexual decision-making, and sexuality more generally with a broader interest in HIV prevention in South Africa.

In the context of South Africa, the influences on sexual behaviour and the mechanisms of behaviour change are not clearly understood. This has produced a limited knowledge-base of what is driving the HIV epidemic amongst young people. This is predominantly a product of the limited understanding of sexuality informing research in this area (Parker, 1995; Kelly & Ntlati, 2002; Campbell, 2003). Research, particularly in developing contexts, including South Africa, has ‘concentrated on the phenomenon of sexuality at the level of the individual, while neglecting societal, normative and cultural contexts’ (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001, p. 1614). Sexual health promotion campaigns have, in turn, conceived of sexuality in terms of de-contextualised, individual behaviours, and have made the assumption that sexual behaviour is the result of rational decision-making based on knowledge around the risks of HIV, and how to protect against these risks. This has produced a proliferation of explanations of youth sexual behaviour that is ‘denuded of social meaning’, and divorced from the social context of the everyday lives of young people in which these behaviours play out (Frolich, Corin & Potvin, 2001, p. 781).

Critical health psychologists have argued that decision-making around 'health-related' activities, including sexual practices, does 'not conform to rational, logical, value-free ways of thinking, but have their own alternative logic and validity that is related in a complex fashion to the cultural and moral environments' in which individuals are situated (Crossley, 2000, p. 39). In line with this, a research agenda that utilises a wider view that incorporates levels of influence beyond the individual, and the importance of contextual considerations in understanding sexual behaviour and behaviour change have been strongly advocated in South African literature (e.g. see Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Williams, 1998; Campbell, 2003; Kelly & Ntlati, 2002; Kelly & Parker, 2000; LeClerc-Madlala, 2002; Alexander & Uys, 2002; Eaton, Flisher & Aarø, 2003).

## **2. Methods**

The study proceeds from developments made by critical researchers working in the discipline of health psychology, who argue for a need to acknowledge and develop an appreciation of the 'lay' or 'alternative' rationalities regarding health-related or risky behaviours. Researchers working within this critical vein encourage a shift away from the idea that there is 'one single, authoritative, value-free, objective truth or reality associated with health or risk' (Crossley, 2000, p. 55). In other words, critical health psychologists have highlighted the need for a shift in focus from theoretically pre-defined models of 'health' and 'risk' behaviours and factors, towards 'how people themselves subjectively conceptualise 'healthy' or 'risky' behaviours' (ibid, p. 39). This paper takes such an orientation when investigating the participants' decision to abstain sexually. The study also draws upon theoretical and methodological insights and techniques developed in the area of narrative and critical discursive psychology (Hollway and Jefferson, 2002; Hollway, 1989; Hollway, 1984), which have informed both the data production as well as analytical stages of the research process.

The paper explores the sexual decision-making of 6 white, English-speaking girls, aged 16 to 22 years. The girls were enrolled in Grade 12, their final year of school. The participants all lived in Fish Hoek, or close surrounding suburbs, and attended the local high school, or had recently moved from the local high school to attend a local private college. The six girls participated as a group in one focus group discussion or group workshop, after which each girl participated in 1-2 in-depth, semi-structured individual interview/s. These were geared towards eliciting reflections upon adolescent sexual experiences,

relationships, decision-making and behaviour – as they played out within the participants’ communities more generally, as well as in their personal experiences. For the purpose of this paper, and in keeping with ethical codes of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.

### **3. Study Setting**

Fish Hoek is a sprawling set of suburbia, situated on Cape Town’s South Peninsula, 35 kilometres from the city centre. The residential geography and socio-economics of the area are strongly shaped by apartheid history. The implementation of the Group Areas Act saw the forced removal and relocation of non-white people to separate communities. According to the 2001 Population Census figures (Seekings, 2004), Fish Hoek remains a highly racially homogenous area: of its population of 16 000, 96% were classified ‘white’. Fish Hoek is a predominantly middle-class area. It has a relatively low unemployment rate, and most participants in the labour force are professional or white-collar workers. Fish Hoek was established as a small fishing village at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has grown into a chain of suburbs. Fish Hoek used to be home to predominantly seafarers, tradesmen and fishermen, but recent decades have seen a steady influx of people from a wider range of economic backgrounds, which has had an impact on the diversification of the population. While this diversification has been mostly class-related, since 1994 there has also been some growth in the non-white population.

Fish Hoek is known for its ‘Christian ethos’; as Gooskens (2006, p. 14) notes, there are at least 13 registered churches in the area, ‘and banners and boards across the village remind one of the “presence of God”’. Although the well-maintained schools of Fish Hoek offer after-school care and a wide range of extra-curricular activities, outside of school there are few facilities and entertainment spaces accessible to young people. Furthermore, Fish Hoek has a high percentage of elderly people and is ‘typified by teenagers as “Grannyville”, a boring place where you have to be quiet and behave’ (Gooskens, 2006, p. 14). As one girl in the current study noted: ‘if you put a big roof on Fish Hoek, you’d have the biggest old age home in all the world’.

## **4. Presentation And Discussion Of Findings**

At the time of the study, four of the girls [Kate, Lisa, Sally and Helen] had never had sex, while two of the girls [Jane and Laura] had had sex prior to the time of the study, but had since chosen to abstain. The analysis will explore their decision-making around sexual abstinence, and the factors and processes mediating this. For all of the girls, the decision to abstain sexually was multi-faceted in nature, and was rationalised in many ways. The first component of the analysis will deconstruct the many facets of their decision-making, attempt to give the relative weight of the respective factors, and highlight the key factors feeding into their decision to abstain sexually. The second component of the analysis will locate the participants' individual decision-making around sexual abstinence within the context of dominant sexual norms and practices upheld by the adolescent peer group more broadly. The analysis underscores the manner whereby sexual abstinence, as an individual strategy, is neither normative nor socially valued, and is often challenged by dominant peer group norms and practices. Furthermore, this component of the analysis highlights the manner whereby pressures to conform to dominant peer group sexual norms and practices intersect with a nexus of pressures facing young people more generally. Finally, the third component of the analysis will explore strategies of resistance levelled towards dominant peer group sexual norms and practices, and the manner whereby individual decision-making around sexual abstinence is sustained in the face of opposing social pressures.

### **Part 1**

#### **Deconstructing Sexual Abstinence**

This component of the paper will centre upon the participants' sexual decision-making, namely their decision to abstain sexually. The key concerns mediating decision-making around sexual abstinence centred upon emotional and relational factors, processes and outcomes associated with sexual intimacy. These will be outlined below, and elaborated upon in greater depth following this.

The girls constructed sexual intimacy in gendered, dichotomous terms. Sexual intimacy was characterised as an individual, physical experience for males, while, for females, sexual intimacy was constructed as a relational

transaction, and an inherently emotional experience. Concerns feeding into decision-making around sexual abstinence appeared to stem from this, and centred chiefly upon emotional and relational outcomes associated with sexual intimacy. These outcomes were figured as mediated by the relational context in which sexual intimacy develops.

A relationship characterised by emotional intimacy and security - specifically, love and trust - and established relational commitment was figured as a necessary precursor for the development of sexual intimacy. Sexual intimacy developed outside of these relational parameters was associated with negative emotional and relational outcomes, including infidelity, betrayal and abandonment, associated with emotional upset and self-destructive behavioural outcomes; emotionally burdensome or undesirable relational ties; and the diminishment or restriction of sexual pleasure. Postponing sexual intimacy for a relationship that met the criteria of emotional intimacy and relational commitment was figured as a means of avoiding such negative outcomes, while promoting positive ones, including: heightened emotional intimacy; positive reinforcement or concretisation of existing relational ties; and enhanced sexual pleasure. Sexual abstinence was thus bound up in a relational strategy geared towards both defensive as well as productive ends.

Marriage was idealised, and figured as the embodiment of emotional intimacy and relational commitment. Most of the girls wished to abstain from sex until marriage, placing a high value upon marriage as an institution. Pre-marital sexual relations were associated with negative outcomes, and were figured as having negative implications for the future marital relationship. Abstaining from sex until marriage was rationalised as a means of avoiding negative outcomes associated with sexual intimacy more generally, and pre-marital sexual relations specifically, and of preserving and upholding the value attached to marriage, and marital sexual relations. The value attached to marriage had clear moral and religious underpinnings in certain cases. Pre-marital sexual abstinence, in turn, appeared to be a value-laden decision, also bound up in moral and religious codes.

Pregnancy was a key concern feeding into decision-making around sexual abstinence. Concerns surrounding pregnancy centred predominantly, again, upon the negative *relational* implications associated with childbearing at an early age, and out of wedlock: including undesirable relational ties to sexual partner, curtailed opportunity of relationship with ideal life partner, negative implications for future relationships, namely marriage, and parental disappointment. Contraceptives were rarely figured as a substitute for pre-

marital sexual abstinence. The marital context was figured as a relationship wherein pregnancy and childbearing take on a positive value.

Pre-marital sexual abstinence was also rationalised as a sexual health-protective strategy, and the marital context was figured as a protective relationship in this respect. However, although recognised as a sexual health-protective strategy, personal decision-making around sexual abstinence was rarely figured as geared primarily towards this end. Over-exposure to HIV prevention messages coupled with a lack of personal exposure to HIV risk, or confrontation by the effects of the virus appeared to feed into this. Personal exposure to risk in this respect appeared to heighten perceived personal vulnerability to HIV infection, and increase the salience of sexual health-related concerns featuring in rationalisations for sexual abstinence.

The factors outlined above operated both independently as well as interactively in shaping and producing decision-making around sexual abstinence, and will be explored in greater depth in the following analysis.

## **Dominant Constructions Of Female Sexual Experience**

In order to uncover the rationale behind the participants' sexual decision-making, namely their choice to abstain sexually, it is necessary to explore and understand their constructions of female sexuality and sexual experience more generally. Sex, for females, was constructed as firstly, a relational transaction rather than an individual behaviour and, secondly, an emotional rather than physical experience. The girls tended to construct male and female experiences of sex in dichotomous terms: on the one hand, the male sexual experience was figured as individual and physical in nature, while the female sexual experience was figured as relational, and emotional and/or spiritual in nature.

‘... [many girls] think that sex is going to be a *good feeling*. You know? But actually I think it's to do with the people in the relationship: because if you don't have that connection, like communication and stuff, it's not going to work. Because, I mean, everybody knows guys go after one thing – and that's sex; so that they can feel good about *themselves*. That's because it's a good feeling. But for a woman, it's more of the *spiritual level*. You know, not the physical.’ [Jane]

‘... a lot of girls *pretend* that it [sex] means nothing to them. But you can't kid yourself ... I think girls try to be like guys, where

they don't take [sex] in an emotional way. But girls *always* have to remember that they take everything at an emotional level, because that's who they *are*, and that's how they've been made, you know? We take everything at an emotional level.' [Helen]

Concerns which underpinned decision-making around sexual abstinence appeared to stem from these constructions of female sexuality and sexual experience more generally, which echo throughout the analysis. These concerns centred chiefly upon emotional and relational outcomes associated with sexual intimacy, which were figured as mediated by the relational context in which sexual intimacy develops.

## **Relational Ideals Surrounding Sexual Intimacy**

The girls held that sexual intimacy should bear a direct relationship to the level of emotional intimacy in a relationship. Physical or sexual intimacy, from this viewpoint, should reflect – or 'symbolise' – and parallel the level of emotional intimacy of a relationship. Sally asserted:

'[Sex] is about the love; what it symbolises. It has a lot of meaning; it happens between two people who love each other. You can't just go around and sleep with every guy that you can find.'

Sally had recently started dating a boy in her class at college. When he started making sexual advances on her, she told him:

"No, I'd rather wait". I mean, I do like him, but I don't *love* him yet. I mean, those feelings will develop over time. But if I know that I do truly love him, then maybe we'll go a bit further than just *holding hands* or something.'

Not only was sexual intimacy viewed as *symbolic* of the degree of emotional intimacy characterising a relationship, emotional intimacy was seen as a necessary precursor for the development of sexual intimacy. Sally felt that only once her 'feelings develop over time', and she believes she 'truly love[s]' her boyfriend would she consider taking their physical relationship 'a bit further'. Lisa concurred with Sally's views, holding that a relationship should be more than 'just about sex'. She felt a relationship should be established, committed and based upon love before becoming sexually intimate:

‘I think if you’re going to have a relationship where you’re going to sleep with the person, you have to be committed to him, and you have to be quite far into the relationship – you can’t sleep with that person in the first weeks you’re going out. Some people just get drunk and sleep with someone, and sleep with the next person. And, you know, you can’t say that’s love. But, I think, to sleep with somebody, you must love them. Because otherwise your relationship won’t work out...’

Love, trust and commitment were stressed as necessary relational foundations for the development of sexual intimacy. Having sex, for the first time in particular, was seen as an emotional leap of faith, one that placed one in an emotionally vulnerable position, and was associated with sacrifice and loss.

‘I think that ... for the first time, you must love that person, because it’s a big part of your life that you’re giving up. It’s like you’re giving that person something that nobody else could take from you, unless you let them. And, seeing that you trust the person now, you let them take it from you.’ [Lisa]

The importance of relational intimacy and security were stressed as a means of defending against negative emotional and relational outcomes associated with sexual intimacy. In particular, the girls stressed the dangers of ‘losing’ or ‘giving up’ their virginity outside of a committed relationship, based upon love. Waiting for such a relationship, and abstaining from sex until marriage more specifically, was often rationalised as a means of defending against these potential negative outcomes. Sally’s account, below, reflects upon what it means for a girl to ‘lose’ her virginity, and how this can have positive or negative consequences for one, dependent upon the relational context:

‘It’s basically committing yourself to the world. To the world and to your partner, saying, I did this, and I’m proud that I did it. But, if it turns out that this guy is just a big fraud, just going around sleeping with everyone he can find, then you gave up your innocence to a monster. So, rather just wait, find the right guy who would actually be faithful to you, and then sleep with him. You have to know that he loves you, before you commit to him.’

Sally attributed her decision to abstain from, or ‘wait’ to have sex to her experience in a short-lived relationship with a boy she had dated two years earlier. Her account of this relationship stresses the importance she attaches to love, trust and respect as foundations for sexual intimacy, and the

damaging consequences she associates with sex outside of these relational parameters.

‘... It’s from him that I decided to wait. See, he only went out with me for sex ... because he wanted to sleep with me. And when I found out, I confronted him about it; I told him I don’t want to do it; I want to wait. He kept *pushing* me to sleep with him and everything, but I finally had enough, and I told him that I don’t really like the fact that he’s only trying to sleep with me; if he *really* loves me then he’ll respect my wishes. So, he broke up with me for that, because all he wanted was sex ... He didn’t really love me, he just wanted sex.’

Sally discovered, during the course of the relationship, that her boyfriend had slept with another girl. He showed little remorse when she confronted him, attributing his infidelity to the fact that Sally had refused to satisfy his sexual needs, which had compelled him to turn to someone else for sex. Sally suffered betrayal on two levels: due to his infidelity, and upon discovery that his open professions of love for her had simply been lies. This was compounded by the fact that her boyfriend ultimately broke up with her, leaving her feeling confused, inadequate, rejected and abandoned.

‘I mean, he even told me that he loved me. He told it to my face and everything ... I just didn’t understand what I did wrong; I blamed myself for it.’

Despite being ‘heartbroken’ and ‘angry’ she was relieved that she had not submitted to the pressure to have sex with him (despite being tempted at many points), holding that the force of his betrayal would have been even more devastating:

‘It would have been a waste of my time ... It would have torn me apart. He would have taken a part of me, then. But *luckily* he didn’t. I mean, I found out before I actually slept with him ... I could have slit my wrists! I could have jumped off a building; I could have started doing drugs, started doing really bad stuff ...’

Her narrative gives insight into the powerful emotional consequences she associates with sex, and their destructive potential:

‘It goes back to the whole psychological thing: I mean, you feel you love this person; this person tells you that he loves you and everything; you sleep together...And then you find out that he’s

been playing you. And then you're so depressed about it and everything – because you *slept* with him! You *loved* him; you even *told* him that. You *gave* him a part of your innocence; you *gave* him your innocence. And he threw it away. I mean, some girls kill themselves over broken hearts ...'

Sally's narrative is 'prototypical', in that her decision-making around sexual abstinence is underpinned by issues, concerns, and ideas surrounding sex and sexual relationships which echo across the participants' accounts, as well as throughout her own narratives. Specifically, these centred upon issues relating to commitment and emotional intimacy, investment and vulnerability, trust, betrayal and abandonment, sacrifice and loss, and broader issues relating to autonomy and attachment, dependence and independence.

## Relational Ideals And Pre-Marital Sexual Abstinence

In some instances, it was clear that the set of relational ideals that the girls' upheld as necessary precursors to sexual intimacy were bound up in a broader set of values around pre-marital sexual abstinence. There was an underlying assumption, in some instances, that marriage unquestionably represents or conforms to the 'ideal' relational parameters that can 'support' the development of sexual intimacy, which is used to justify pre-marital sexual abstinence.

'I make a choice literally not to [have sex before marriage]. I've set that boundary: I want it [sex] *only when I'm married*. I'd rather my husband, someone who is so precious to me, have that thing that is precious to *me*. I know if I get married to someone it's a *helluva* lot like more stabilising. I couldn't bear for me to give something so *precious* – so *intimate* – to some arbitrary guy. And then he just disappears, you know? I couldn't bear ...'  
[Kate]

Kate's account rests upon the notion that marriage serves a 'stabilising' function that can protect against the 'dangers' – i.e., in this instance, abandonment and loss – associated with sexual intimacy. Helen idealised marriage in a similar manner. She maintained that she could only become sexually intimate with someone after establishing a trusting relationship with this person: 'it has to be like a whole respect thing, you know, and a whole trust thing'. Furthermore, she felt that complete trust could not be ensured in a non-marital heterosexual relationship. She idealised the institution of marriage, constructing this as the only relational context in which complete

commitment, trust, fidelity and emotional openness are guaranteed. Helen maintained that, in a non-marital sexual relationship:

‘... *he* could sleep around, and not feel guilty at all, because you’re not like tied to that person. I mean, it’s different if you’re *married* to a guy, because there is that commitment.’

‘And you financially aren’t joined together. You know, and in a sense, by the *court* it’s not recognised as a partnership, you know. And that’s what marriage is about; it’s a partnership, you know?’

‘... and you don’t *always* know something about someone you’re going out with; you don’t know *everything* about him. Whereas in a *marriage*, you *need* to know everything: because there’s that whole trust and honesty and stuff going on.’

She held that relational commitment outside of the marital context ‘is too uncertain’, and that a non-marital heterosexual relationship was not a relational context wherein she felt she could safely open up emotionally, as she would feel too emotionally vulnerable:

‘And also, it can be too *unemotional*. Because I think that’s one of my *very* vulnerable spots; I think I get quite emotional, I feel things really heavily. I could never show that if I was *going out* with someone, [unless] I got married to them ...’

## **The Emotional ‘Bonds’ And ‘Burdens’ Of Sex**

Not only was sex constructed as a physical act that reflects or symbolises the emotional bond characterising the relationship in which it is enacted, it was also constructed as an act that reinforces or concretises the existing emotional or relational bond between two people. As Sally maintained:

‘... sex is actually supposed to bring you closer together, because you’ve experienced it with the person you love. Once you sleep with someone, there’s a tie that can’t be broken, except for by death. But even then, it probably still exists in a way. If you really love this person, then that tie is very precious to you.’

However, Sally added:

‘Some people feel uncomfortable with being a virgin. But I think it’s better that way ... You have to wait for the right person, because once you have sex with that person, you have an emotional tie with them; you can never break that tie; you’re forever tied to them ... With every person you sleep, basically you take a part of them; you have a part of them with you. And you carry that around like a burden on your back. And at some point, that person will come back to haunt you again.’

The ‘bonding’ effect of sex was thus viewed as having potentially positive as well as negative implications: it could be both ‘precious’ and also a ‘burden’. The burdensome nature of this bond was incited as a justification for sexual abstinence. Jane, who had had sex, also justified her subsequent decision to abstain from further sexual relations in similar terms. At the time of the interview, she was involved in a serious, long-term relationship with her boyfriend, and had had sexual intercourse for the first time within this relationship. They first had sex after careful deliberation, and Jane attributed this decision by her certainty that they would marry in the future. Jane described the progression towards sexual intimacy and her first sexual experience as follows:

‘We spoke about sex and stuff. But we were just gonna have fun, you know? And just have basically a friendship type thing. And we would wait a while [for sex]. And then, we both decided that we were ready to do it. And then we had sex. And we found it – it bonded us; it really did. It was like, you know, now your soul is a part of another person; we’re sharing each other’s souls, kind of thing. And it’s like, almost like an umbilical cord, you know? That’s how it feels ... And it’s like, if he’s not with me, then I feel so *alone* ...’

Her account supports the notion that sex reinforces the existing relationship between two people. Furthermore, her reflections upon her first sexual experience suggested the ambivalence around the nature of the sexual ‘bond’: on the one hand, she figured this ‘bond’ in romantic terms of ‘shared souls’; however, on the other hand, she also spoke of the ‘burdensome’ effect that this experience has placed upon the relationship. She maintained that new pressures had emerged in her relationship with her boyfriend since they had become sexually involved. She described feeling both insecure when she was not with him, while feeling claustrophobic and overwhelmed when they were together, particularly as they were also living together and sleeping

together. Thus, the emotionally bonding nature of this sexual experience appeared to have had both positive as well as negative implications for the relationship. Jane explained that she and her boyfriend had since decided to abstain from sex until they married, a decision that, in part, stood as an attempt to ease some of the relational pressure that she associated with sexual intimacy. Her account suggests ambivalence around and tension between the desire to have ‘fun’ and ‘friendship’ versus intimacy within her relationship.

Kate also reflected upon the ‘burdensome’ effect that sexual intimacy can have, and the stress it can place upon both the existing relationship as well as future sexual relationships. She referred to her friends at college who have had sex, making reference to Jane in particular, holding that had seen their lives and relationships become more complicated and pressurised after having had sex:

‘There’s so much *pressure* now; it’s like they’re sleeping together and they’re living together – so there’s like *no* alone time, you know? It’s so much easier to just wait.’

In particular, Kate emphasised the complications she felt that pre-marital sex can cause within future marital relations. Her decision to abstain from sex until marriage is, in part, a means of warding against pressures and complications both within present relationships, as well as her anticipated future marital relationship:

‘Like, I know for me, I’m looking towards the future ... You come into a marriage already with so much negative baggage from your life, your each life. Life is so much easier if you just ... come into a marriage without sex before marriage ... without the negative baggage.’

## **Sexual Pleasure**

Having sex within the ‘right’ relational context was also seen as a means of facilitating or maximising sexual pleasure. The participants tended to figure female sexual pleasure as a function of the nature of the relationship in which sex is enacted. They held the view that sex is more pleasurable – or *only* pleasurable – when enacted in a positive relational context. Within this model of understanding, the better the relationship, or the greater the emotional intimacy, the more sexual pleasure experienced. Furthermore, female sexual pleasure was constructed as emotional rather than physical in nature. For example, Jane, reflecting upon her first sexual experience, explained:

‘... but sex, to me, it’s not like, it *is* sort of a pleasurable thing, but it’s not *actually*. You know? On a physical level, it’s not *pleasurable* – but *emotionally* ... I don’t know how to explain: it doesn’t *feel* nice, but ...’

‘I expected it to be like the physical-type thing; you know, the pleasure and stuff? But actually, afterwards, I realised it’s more of an *inside* connection, you know? To this person.’

‘[Many girls] think that sex is going to be a *good feeling*. But actually I think it’s to do with the people in the relationship: because if you don’t have that connection, like communication and stuff, it’s not going to work. Because, I mean, everybody knows guys go after one thing – and that’s sex; so that they can feel good about *themselves*. That’s because it’s a good feeling. But for a woman, it’s more of the *spiritual level*. You know, not the physical.’

Jane’s account suggests that female sexual pleasure is not about a ‘good feeling’ on a ‘physical level’, but is bound up in relational connection and communication. In her own experience of sex, she derived pleasure from the ‘inside connection’ to her boyfriend that she had felt subsequently. She added that:

‘... the key is the *relationship* – and if the relationship is good, sex will be good, you know? If, say now, for instance, a girl and a guy are having a relationship, and the guy’s not gonna do all the things Dave\* does for me, it’s not gonna work. It’s not. Because the girl is gonna feel *used* and left out, and he’d just forget about her and move onto the next victim, you know?’

Sally supported Jane’s notion that sexual pleasure is a function of the relationship in which it takes place, in is ‘emotional’ or ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘physical’ in nature, maintaining that:

‘I don’t see the point in just sleeping with someone, just for the fun of it. I mean, sure, it feels good – but there’s no point in it. If it’s with someone you love, the experience is more pleasurable, should I say. It’s more on the emotional side than the physical side. I mean, if you really love this person, you really want to do

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\* Pseudonym

it, then – when you’re *ready*, you *know* you’re ready, that’s where the pleasure comes from.’

One of the rationalisations given for pre-marital sexual abstinence related to the perceived negative effect that pre-marital sex could have upon sexual relations within the future marital context. In particular, some of the girls held the view that pre-marital sex could diminish the pleasure of sex within the marital context, which could have negative implications for the marital relationship. Pre-marital sexual abstinence was viewed as a means of preserving the novelty and pleasure of sex for marriage. Jane partially rationalised her decision to abstain from further sexual relations until marriage in these terms:

‘And then we just decided, maybe just wait until we married or something. Because I kind of felt like, not that it’s *wrong*, but just that it’s not really *fun* to do it now. Because I mean, say now me and Dave do get married in the end, it’s gonna be like: “Uuurg! We’ve done it *before*. And it’s so *boring* now”, you know?’

Sally held similar views, suggesting that pre-marital sex can have negative implications for marital sexual relations, and can undermine and threaten the marital relationship:

‘I mean, if you sleep with someone now, and you’re fifteen or sixteen, then you’re basically spoiling your experiences in the future. So if you have sex with someone now, you know what it feels like, and when you get married, it’s *boring*, and you go and find someone else, and then get into trouble for that. And then sex is just another part of life, and it’s just as boring as life. So, I’d just wait.’

## **Pregnancy**

Abstaining from sex was also seen as a means of warding against its more ‘real’ consequences, namely unwanted pregnancy. Specifically, the girls felt that falling pregnant within the ‘wrong’ relational context can have negative implications both for existing as well as for potential future relationships. In this, the girls’ concerns around pregnancy centred upon the *relational* rather than practical or material implications of childbearing and rearing. Their decision-making around sexual abstinence was informed by these views, outlined below.

Firstly, the girls maintained that having a child together forges an irreversible tie between two people. Echoing their views surrounding the ‘tie’ or ‘bond’ that the sexual act itself can forge between two people, the girls felt that this reproductive tie could too be a burdensome connection. Specifically, they felt an unexpected pregnancy can force an undesirable yet unavoidable long-term connection between two people. Abstaining from sexual relationships was viewed as a means of avoiding this. Helen justified her view that sexual intimacy should only be developed within the context of an established and committed relationship in these terms. She argued that, to have sex with someone, the relationship ‘*has to be permanent*’:

‘It can’t be like, I’m just gonna sleep around with you, and maybe in a years time we’re gonna break up. Because *maybe* something could happen, and I fall pregnant ... Now this guy is going to be tied to me for the rest of *his* child’s life, as well, and it’s just like another complication altogether. It is a complication. And it might not be what *I* want, or what he wants, you know?’

Lisa also emphasised how undesirable relational ties can be forged due to pregnancy, and can undermine the potential for a sexual relationship that adheres to ideals around love. She explained that her cousin had fallen pregnant as a teenager, and that she and her boyfriend had stayed together because of the child, despite the fact that, according to Lisa, they no longer love each other:

‘I think most cases it is because of the child, so many people stick together ... My cousin fell pregnant a few years ago. And her boyfriend stuck by her ... he still supports the child, and he supports her as well. To me it’s just weird: what I don’t get is ... if you have a child by somebody, even [if] you don’t love that person any more, you just stick by them because there’s a child.’

Lisa also felt that an unexpected pregnancy could have negative implications for future relationships. In particular, she felt that having a child outside of a marital relationship could have a negative effect upon one’s future marital relationship. Her resistance towards having a pre-marital sexual relationship is reinforced by these views:

‘... it just changes things – being with somebody; being in a serious [i.e. sexual] relationship. Because I know, if I’m in a serious [i.e. sexual] relationship, and I fall pregnant or something, and then I don’t really love that person, and I still

want to find the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. And I have a child. It's just going to make everything complicated, because that's going to be somebody else's child and not his.'

'... some people fall pregnant, and get married to someone else later on in life. And the husband will go through this, knowing that the child isn't his. So I think I'll rather wait ...'

For some of the girls, waiting for sex until marriage was rationalised as a means of avoiding the 'complications', outlined above, associated with pregnancy in the context of a pre-marital sexual relationship. The marital context was figured as a relationship wherein pregnancy and reproduction are 'expected', and take on a positive value, rather than being negative 'complications'. For example, Helen maintained:

'... when you're going out with someone, you're not expecting to have a baby; you're not expecting that *whole* like thing. Whereas if you get *married* and stuff, then you know, as a partner, you know you're going to expect something.'

Jane, who had had sex with her boyfriend, Dave, but subsequently decided to abstain from any further sexual relations until they got married, also rationalised this decision in a similar manner. Although Jane held that they had used a condom when having sex, she admitted that she was very concerned about becoming pregnant, particularly out of the context of marriage.

'And it won't be so hectic [if we are married] ... not so many worries, because you will be *expecting* it, you know? I mean, we'll be older then, and we'll be thinking about it.'

Jane further rationalised her decision to abstain from sex until marriage with the argument that not only is pregnancy 'expected' within the marital context, but that sex serves a primarily functional purpose: that of procreation within the context of marriage.

'[Sex] is more like for someone who's going to have children. You know: if you're ready to have kids and stuff, that's basically you know, how sex is, you know? To have kids, and whatever... That's also one of the other reasons I said to Dave maybe we should just wait until we're married, you know? Because then at least we'll have more of a *cause* to actually have

sex and stuff. So we both decided we're rather just going to wait till we get married and stuff...'

Finally, some of the girls rationalised their decision to abstain from sex as a means of avoiding parental disappointment associated with unplanned or early pregnancy. In particular, the girls felt that this could negatively impact upon their relationships with their mothers, and limit their potential to fulfil their mothers' expectations of them:

'Like, my whole life, my mom has been like, if you come home pregnant, I will support you but I will be disappointed. I *never* want to disappoint my mom; I *hate* disappointing my mom.'  
[Kate]

'My mom would kill me if I fell pregnant. Because she wants me to, like, finish studying, and, like go overseas and make money and stuff there. And if that had to happen now, that could ruin everything, because – I'd have a baby as well.' [Lisa]

Once again, the perceived negative effects of an unplanned pregnancy were related to the manner whereby this could affect the girls' existing relationships (with their mothers in this instance) rather than the effect of pregnancy upon themselves as individuals. Even in the case of Lisa, who referred to the limiting effect that an early, unplanned pregnancy could have over her future opportunities, her concerns focussed on the manner this would upset her *mother's* vision for her future, rather than its direct implications for herself personally.

Interestingly, the girls viewed sexual abstinence – until involvement in a relationship that they view as 'permanent', which they generally felt would necessarily require marriage – as the key means of avoiding unwanted pregnancy and its associated consequences. The employment of protective measures, namely the use of contraceptives was, with the exception of one case, not viewed as a substitute for the 'protective' function of a stable relationship in general, and marriage in particular. This was despite the fact that all of the participants appeared knowledgeable about the contraceptive measures available to them, and of how to obtain these.

## **Sexual Health**

While references to sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, were made by all of the participants at some point during their interviews,

and during the focus group, concerns surrounding HIV/AIDS did not appear of central importance in determining decision-making around sexual abstinence. Although all of the participants appeared to be aware that sexual abstinence was a means whereby HIV infection could be protected against in a fail-safe manner, in few cases was sexual abstinence figured as a strategy geared *primarily* towards this end. Despite the fact that pregnancy and HIV are both outcomes of the same behaviour – namely unsafe sex – pregnancy appeared to be a far more salient concern than HIV.

In one of the few instances in which the participants drew an explicit link between their personal decision-making around sexual abstinence and sexual health-related concerns, Kate rationalised abstaining from sex until marriage in terms of its perceived sexual health protective function:

‘... *keep* yourself for marriage, and you won’t get AIDS. It’s logical for me. You know? I kind of just used it in my logic, and just said: ‘You know what? There’s no *point*; I don’t want to *have* to risk ... It’s just *so* much easier; it’s so much less complicated.’

Kate felt that relationships were ‘complicated enough’ without the adding the ‘life and death’ threat of HIV/AIDS posed by sexual intimacy. In this respect, she maintained that she did not feel ready to have sex with someone, as she felt that this literally required putting her life, or physical integrity, into somebody else’s hands:

‘... it’s way too hectic. Well, because I am a control freak so it’s not really easy for me: putting basically my whole life into somebody else’s hands, if I did [have sex]. You know? I don’t think I could do that.’

However, in most instances, the participants did not draw a direct link between their personal decision-making around sexual abstinence and sexual health-related concerns, despite being aware that abstinence was a key mode of HIV prevention. For example, Sally explicitly drew attention to the fact that sexual abstinence is the only guaranteed protection against HIV/AIDS infection:

‘Some people actually do get freaked out by all the things that can happen to you: if you do get infected and everything, I mean, you *will end up dying*. [And] ... condoms aren’t exactly 100% safe. I mean, there’s nothing that can guarantee you 100%

protection. Except abstinence. If you don't have sex, then you won't get those diseases.'

She admitted, only when probed however, that concerns surrounding HIV infection did play a part in her personal sexual decision-making around abstinence: 'I mean, I don't want to end up having AIDS'. While pregnancy was explicitly voiced as a key concern feeding into sexual abstinence, HIV was rarely made reference to, unless when probed. In certain instances, the girls openly denied having sexual health-related concerns. For example, Helen, while voicing great concern about falling pregnant before marriage, did not feel that HIV featured strongly in her concerns feeding into her decision-making around sexual abstinence:

'I don't, it's something I don't *really* like focus a lot on, on AIDS and HIV, because I don't think I'm really *worried* about it myself so much. You know?'

Many of the girls did not feel that young people, in general, took the threat of HIV infection seriously. They felt that this was a product of two independent as well as interacting factors: an over-saturation of prevention messages levelled at young people by HIV prevention campaigns, coupled with a lack of personal confrontation with the effects of the virus. Thus, young people suffered from 'HIV overload', yet still did not take the threat of HIV infection seriously, with regards to their personal vulnerability.

'These people are sending out so many messages that teenagers are getting sick of hearing these messages and everything. They know what it is; they've heard it all; they're sick of hearing about it. But, they've never really experienced the consequences.' [Sally]

'I don't think it's such a big issue, because I think the media has sort of shoved it down everyone's throats: so, like, all the teenagers now are AIDS aware. And *if you go to school*, you have to *learn* about AIDS, like, every year: 'if you're gonna have sex – *use a condom!*'. And it's like the *whole* thing, the *whole* time. I mean it's so insane, because they teach it to you at school *every single year*. And like, it's so much that it becomes: oh, well! It's just AIDS; you know, nobody cares, you know? And then they show you these pathetic videos on it – where it doesn't show the *true* impact of what AIDS is, you know? They might show you some skeleton of a person – but it's *nothing* to someone. It's not going to give you an impact if you're just

going to show a video on it. Because they show videos on everything nowadays. Like, there's *so many* movies on killing and stuff like that ... And it's become nothing now, you know? Or they give you the statistics: we don't care about the statistics...' [Helen]

Helen's comment suggests, in the second extract above, that HIV/AIDS is not 'such a big issue' for teenagers, and 'nobody cares' about it, because they have been over-saturated with prevention messages. A paradoxical situation was described, wherein over-saturation with HIV education has resulted in a *desensitisation* of young people towards the threat of HIV infection, rather than a heightened awareness. Furthermore, the extracts draw attention to the fact that HIV-awareness campaigns are not giving young people a sense of the 'real' effects of HIV – 'what AIDS really does'. Both girls quoted above drew attention to the fact that the personal 'consequences' of HIV/AIDS are not put forth strongly enough by educational campaigns, which tend to place emphasis upon prevention messages: 'If you're gonna have sex – *use a condom*' [Helen, quoted above]. Specifically, Helen felt that many young people do not take the threat of HIV/AIDS seriously, as many are not in contact with people who they know to be infected with the virus. She added, defensively, on a personal note:

'I don't actually, to be honest, know anyone with AIDS. *I don't*. I mean, unless they're like hiding it; I don't know anyone with AIDS. You know?'

Laura was the only participant who had actually experienced personal exposure to HIV risk, and associated fears surrounding personal infection. She, like Jane, had been sexually involved with a previous boyfriend, but had since decided to abstain due to negative experiences in this relationship. Laura had trusted her boyfriend implicitly, as they had had a long-standing friendship before becoming sexually involved, and had believed that they were involved in a monogamous relationship. Because of this, she explained, she had been unconcerned about HIV, as both she and her partner had been for HIV testing. While she had used the contraceptive injection as mode of birth control, they had not used condoms. During the course of this relationship, she had discovered that her boyfriend was involved in a concurrent relationship with her best (girl) friend. The double betrayal by her two closest friends had shocked her, and was compounded by the fact that she knew her girl friend was sexually promiscuous, and was often involved with older, married men. Fearing for her sexual health, Laura went for an HIV test, and ultimately tested negative; however, the scare that this experience gave her in this respect gave sexual health related issues a new,

high priority in her concerns, and appeared to inform her decision-making around sexual abstinence. Personal exposure to risk in this respect appeared to heighten perceived personal vulnerability to HIV infection, and increase the salience of sexual health-related concerns featuring in rationalisations for sexual abstinence.

## Religious Values And Moral Codes

Decision-making around sexual abstinence, and pre-marital sexual abstinence specifically, was also bound up in religious values and moral codes. The high value placed upon the institution of marriage, and values around pre-marital sexual abstinence which echoed across the participants' accounts were clearly rooted, in some cases, in religious values, and codes of morality more generally.

Two of the participants made explicit reference to religious beliefs and values within their narratives. These girls made frequent reference to the importance of pre-marital sexual abstinence. Both girls were brought up in Christian homes, and felt that pre-marital sexual abstinence is an important facet of Christian values. Helen maintained:

‘... as a Christian, it is like a thing if you're a Christian, it is like you should be married [to have sex] ... It's like *your* morals and who *you* are.’

She figured her decision to abstain from sex pre-marital sex in value-laden terms, attributing this decision to Christian and family values. She explained that her decision-making around sexual abstinence is reinforced by the fact that a female cousin, of a similar age, who she respects greatly, and with whom she spends much of her time, shares ‘similar morals’.

‘I think we would feel a total regret if we just went and slept around ... We just don't feel *comfortable* just sleeping around.’

Helen's account suggests the manner whereby religious values, and family values more generally, can be taken up by individuals on a deeply psychological level, one that operates outside of, or beyond, conscious choice: ‘it's like your morals and who *you* are’. Individuals become self-regulating in this respect, as suggested by Helen's remark that she and her cousin ‘just don't feel comfortable’ and would feel ‘total regret’ if they behaved contrary to their ‘morals’ by ‘sleeping around’.

In many instances, it was difficult to find explicit references to religious or moral codes governing decision-making around sexual abstinence. However, the ideals around relationships and sex, marriage and reproduction, upheld by the participants, and echoed across the accounts up to this point, adhere to Christian ideals associated with monogamy, partnership and family life. Furthermore, moral over-tones characterised the narratives at times, suggesting that sexual abstinence was not only associated narrowly with relational ideals, but was located in notions of moral or social 'rights' and 'wrongs'. Such views were echoed by other participants, even when explicit mention of religious or family values was not made. For example, Lisa maintained that she would wait to have sex with 'the person I get married to ... and spend the rest of my life with'. She felt that, if she had sex outside of marriage:

'... it would be that now I've got this guilt, because I know the first guy I slept with, I didn't actually love him. And I really don't want to spend the rest of my life with him. And, for me, it's a big deal; I will feel comfortable knowing that I've only slept with one person since I've been married.'

Her narrative illustrates the emotional weight that values may carry: Lisa refers to the 'guilt' she would feel if she did not uphold her values surrounding sex and marriage, and the manner whereby this anticipated guilt operates to reinforce her decision to abstain sexually. Moral over-tones also pervaded Kate's rationalisations for pre-marital sexual abstinence. Kate maintained that waiting for marriage until having sex is a 'moral' or value that she upholds strongly, and adamantly wishes to avoid compromising. She figured this as the most important value in which she was invested and, while she has compromised other values that she has upheld in the past, she wishes to avoid compromise at all costs when it comes to this one:

'I seriously felt like all my morals from when I was young - you know, like, don't do drugs; don't do this; don't do that - they've just all like fallen on the wayside. So, not having sex before marriage is like the *only* moral that I have, you know? That's *still there* ... And also like I still have *control* of, and I *can* have control of. I think, *having* sex, all those consequences that *could* come from having sex, I think this value is like the most important out of all of them. It's a *very* weighty thing. It's like one of those serious decisions in your life ... Your whole life may be over in one second.'

Kate maintained that she had always upheld three important values: not to do drugs, not to shoplift, and not to have sex before marriage. She felt she ‘messed [her] life up so badly in the past’ by engaging in the first two practices, and did not wish to let go of her final value – remaining a virgin until marriage. This is her most ‘important’ value, because she associates the most negative consequences with failure to uphold this value. Interestingly, however, she associated pre-marital sex with behaviours that are both associated with moral (and legal) transgression and social deviance. This suggests that abstaining from sex did not serve only instrumental objectives – such as avoiding the many emotional, relational and physical ‘complications’ or ‘consequences’ that the participants associated with pre-marital sex – but actually serves a moral objective.

## **Part 2**

### **Sexual Decision-Making And Social Pressures**

The second component of the analysis will explore the manner whereby key social spaces, social networks and relationships figure upon adolescent sexual decision-making and experiences. Specifically, the analysis will centre upon the manner whereby high school life, and peer group relations and social hierarchies operating within this context, figure into adolescent sexual decision-making in general, and into the participants’ decision-making around sexual abstinence specifically. The analysis highlights the manner whereby teenage sexuality intersects with social positioning, and the contradictions in operation between the participants’ individual and social levels of experience. Specifically, sexual abstinence is figured as neither normative nor socially valued; as such, the analysis underscores the manner whereby sexual abstinence, as an individual strategy, is challenged by dominant peer group norms and practices. In particular, the analysis will centre upon the manner whereby individual values can come under attack by social pressures, and individual insecurities can feed into and reproduce these social pressures.

### **Sex, Social Integration And Status In Teenagehood**

The participants described Fish Hoek, and the surrounding suburbs in which they lived, as an insular community, characterised by a lack of personal

privacy. They described feeling under continuous social scrutiny – levelled at them by peers, as well as parents and adults more generally – and positioned within inescapable networks of gossip and speculation. Narratives surrounding community gossip were common, and gossip networks appeared to bridge both adolescent and adult populations. In particular, gossip, rumour and speculation appeared to surround the sex lives and sexual exploits of young people. Teenager's lives, and girls' lives and experiences in particular, appeared to be sexualised. Sexual experience appeared to be publicised, and often manufactured and fabricated through the working of rumour networks. Community information networks often appeared to render teenage sexuality out of individual control. Teenage sexual development and experiences were figured as neither individual nor private, but socially mediated, produced and enacted within the public sphere. Defending their personal privacy, and maintaining separation and autonomy from these social processes appeared to be of much concern, and a continuous project for teenagers in general, and the participants specifically.

However, while there was a sense that young people are involved in a constant battle to defend their personal privacy, and retain a sense of separation and autonomy from those around them, they appeared, simultaneously, to be deeply concerned with finding a sense of connection, integration and acceptance. Having a place to belong as an individual appeared as important as finding a place to belong as a social being. Finding integration and acceptance within the peer group is characterised, within classic texts surrounding adolescence, as a key facet or social 'goal' of this stage of development (Thom *et al.*, 1998). Simultaneously, adolescence is characterised as a time of psychosocial and physical changes associated with sexual development and maturation. During the group discussions and interviews conducted with the participants, it appeared that these two facets of adolescent development coincided, such that teenage peer group integration became inextricably bound up, at times, with teenage sexuality.

One of the driving concerns characterising the girls' accounts centred upon finding acceptance and integration within the peer group. Specifically, all of the girls had experienced many struggles and difficulties associated with finding peer group integration and acceptance, particularly within the high school context wherein much of their interaction with peers appeared to play out. High school life was associated with much social competition and social segregation. The participants described a ruthless system, wherein one either makes the grade of 'popular' or is 'nobody': 'everyone else is a loser'. Furthermore, they felt that popularity and reputation were inherently unstable entities in high school, and it was easy to become the subject of negative gossip, and an object of belittlement and mockery, and the persecution of

peers. High school peers were described as ‘unfriendly’, ‘cliquey’, and very judgmental, and friendships fickle. Many of the girls highlighted feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and social rejection, isolation and exclusion as characteristic of their high school experiences. Much of high school life appeared to be bound up in a desperate quest to find social integration, acceptance and status: ‘in high school, you were always trying to get your popularity up, so you can be cool’.

## **Cultivating A ‘Cool’ Social Image**

‘... it goes back to image; it all goes back to image. I think there’s such a pressure to be a certain way, to look a certain way, you know.’ [Helen, speaking of social pressures in teenagehood]

‘Popularity’ or peer group social status and reputation appeared to be bound up with conformity to certain codes of behaviour and physical presentation, which are implicated in a ‘cool’ social image. Specifically, the girls listed three key pressures facing young people, and young women particularly, in their quest for popularity. These concerned heterosexual coupling and sexual experience; external/physical appearance presentation; and social ‘deviance’, including substance use, including smoking, alcohol consumption and drugs. The pressures associated with these three factors stem from their link with teenage social positioning and status hierarchies, and were all – implicitly or explicitly – bound up with sexuality in various ways. Popularity and teenagehood more generally appeared to be highly sexualised. These facets of teenage social positioning and status, and their link with teenage sexuality and sexual decision-making will be elaborated upon below.

## **Heterosexual Coupling, ‘Image’ And Social Status**

Having a boyfriend was figured as an important means whereby girls find social acceptance and status amongst same-sex peers, and was bound up in dominant teenage norms around what is considered a ‘cool’ social image. Single girls are faced with overt pressure from peers to conform to sexual norms around coupling:

‘They start pressurising you ... if you don’t have a boyfriend. They’re like, you must get a boyfriend, man! You’ll be *so* cool once you get a boyfriend ...’ [Sally]

The attraction of 'being cool' and its associated social power and status drive girls to conform to these norms. Additionally, the sense of social exclusion, isolation and inability to identify with peers that accompanies non-conformity were seen as key factors motivating girls to engage in heterosexual coupling: 'I think it's when most of your friends have boyfriends, and you feel left out, you know: when is it my turn?' [Jane].

Pressure around heterosexual coupling is bound up in a more general social pressure to be 'cool' or popular, and intersects with pressure to conform to certain norms of physical appearance and presentation. Heterosexual coupling and physical appearance and presentation are both facets of social competition amongst teenage girls.

'... I always worry, you know, I think every girl every girl worries about what they look like.' [Helen]

According to the participants, one of the greatest pressures facing teenage girls entails conformity to a socially desirable physical appearance or 'look'. External presentation and appearance – including dress, grooming as well as body shape and size - appeared of utmost importance in the game of 'fitting in' and becoming 'popular' within the peer group, particularly for girls. Meeting the criteria associated with this socially desirable 'look' caused much anguish for the girls participating in the study, particularly because these criteria appeared to be based upon an ideal that can rarely be achieved in reality. There was a sense that meeting these criteria was an almost impossible task, given that only perfection will do, as suggested by the following extract drawn from the focus group discussion. To be 'popular', the girls maintained, it is necessary to have:

- Jane: 'A perfect *body* and perfect *hair* ... the perfect skin...'
- Sally: 'And you have to be a walking stick insect to be 'in'...'
- Lisa: 'And you have to have the right clothes ...'
- Kate: 'Ja, you have to dress right, really well ... you've got to be like a model.'
- Sally: 'These days, it's all about your figure: you have to be thin...I mean, it's part of the social rules: if you're not thin, you're a loser ...'

The value attached to conforming to the 'right look' is bound up in social competition amongst teenage girls, wherein social status and power are inferred upon a girl to the extent to which she meets this 'look'. Meeting this

'look' infers social status and power, both in itself, as well as in the extent to which this grants access to other socially valuable commodities - namely, male admiration and boyfriends – which reinforce competitive power. As noted earlier, having boyfriends, as well as being the object of boys' attention infers power and status within the female peer group. The desired 'look' is closely bound up in what girls perceive will render them sexually appealing to boys. Revealing clothes and expensive brand-names are sought out and worn as vehicles of sexual appeal, and girls strive to shape their bodies according to values which equate thinness with sexiness.

'... at the high school, girls wear the shortest skirts. And, I think they do that because that's what they think the guys 'go for': like, how short your skirt is or something. Girls think that guys go for girls who wear almost next to nothing ... they all dress this way because they think guys like girls who are dressing in short skirts ...' [Lisa]

'... in some cases, just walking down the street, you'll see a group of girls wearing just certain brands, like 'Diesel' or 'Nike' or something. I think there is competition between girls about the way they dress. And they think that what guys go for is the brand and that.' [Lisa]

'Basically I think some girls just want to get a guy, and they think that if they are thin, if they look like super-models, then they will get a guy ... Some girls starve themselves just to get a boyfriend.' [Sally]

Although conformity to the socially-desirable 'look' is directed towards attracting boys on one level, on another level this serves as an important means of competing with other girls for social status: attaining the 'right image' is 'kind of to get the guys, but it's *for the girls*' [Kate]. In this, girls strategically market themselves as 'sex objects' to boys in order to empower themselves amongst female peers.

## **Sex And Social Status**

A young person's degree of sexual experience was also constructed as directly related to a better social position within high school popularity hierarchies. According to the participants, for many girls (and boys alike), becoming sexually active is part of a social positioning strategy geared towards achieving social visibility, integration and status within the peer

group. The extract below, drawn from a focus group discussion surrounding what motivates girls to have sex for the first time, illustrates this:

Sally: 'I think what, what they're trying to do, they're trying to *stand out*; show them that they are brave – or something. They have to show off to get somewhere in the community, so ...'

[LK]: 'Who are the people they are showing off for?'

Sally: 'Their *friends*, and guys – so that they know: I'm here, look at me...'

Lisa: 'To become popular or something...'

In many instances, for girls, losing their virginity was figured as a social 'rite of passage' or form of initiation, one that granted acceptance into and a position of respect within the adolescent community.

'It makes you more – *manly*. More, more *acceptable*. Girls think it's a good thing that you've slept with a guy, or something ... Probably because it just shows people that they *know pain* and all those things; and that they've *been through it* and everything.' [Sally]

Paradoxically, in the extract above, for a girl, losing her virginity was figured as something that actually made her more 'manly', rather than signalling initiation into womanhood. There appeared, at times, to be a form of male bravado behind the value placed upon female promiscuity. Interestingly, it appeared that virginity status was of equal significance in both the female and male adolescent population, and was valued in a similar manner. The following extract draws attention to the manner whereby virginity is a source of male insecurity, while losing ones virginity promotes manliness:

'Guys, they're very insecure about being a virgin; they just want to find a chick and lose their virginity and everything. Because it's a *big man* thing that you have slept with someone; you have to *feel* like a man, you have to *be* like a man; you have to smell like one.' [Sally]

The girls emphasised that virginity was devalued within the adolescent population, while a high value was placed upon sexual experience, and sexual promiscuity. It appeared that, for teenagers, having sex was closely

bound up in cultivating a positive reputation amongst peers. Promiscuity appeared to be publicised with pride, while virginity was perceived as a mark of shame, and something to keep hidden:

‘I think that a lot of girls and guys think that if you want to be popular, you must lose your virginity ... because they think it’s cool to sleep around with people ... Some people, even though they don’t want to, just to be popular will sleep with somebody. And they’ll tell their friends, and almost everybody they know, who they come across, they tell...’ [Lisa]

‘... They don’t want to mention the fact that they’re virgins and everything, because that will brand them a loser: it’s one of the unwritten social rules, that if you’re a virgin, then you’re a loser ... Some people think if you still a virgin, then you’re a loser.’ [Sally]

Sexually abstinent girls can be subject to stigmatisation by peers who conform to dominant norms which attach value to promiscuity and sexual experience more generally. This was the experience of some of the participants. For example, Sally described being labelled a ‘nun’ by a girl in her class because she is still a virgin, while her classmate is known to be sexually promiscuous, which left her feeling both angry but also inferior.

While stigmatisation and pressure surrounding virginity appeared common within the peer group at large, in most cases the girls made a distinction between close or ‘real’ friends, and peers more generally. They maintained that they received little or no overt pressure from within their close friendships, which were generally figured as accepting and supportive in nature. In most cases, the girls felt that their close friends shared the same values as themselves with regards to virginity, and felt that this reinforced their decision-making around sexual abstinence. However, counter-normative values which feed into sexual abstinence can come under attack by dominant norms which value promiscuity, and produce insecurities and ambivalence among non-conformers. These insecurities can produce reactions that can serve to reproduce dominant sexual norms, and undermine counter-normative sexual strategies. In this, girls who engage in counter-normative sexual strategies – such as abstinence – can also play a part in reproducing dominant sexual norms which devalue virginity, as was evident in the group participating in the study.

Despite the fact that all of the participants appeared strongly motivated to abstain from sex, and despite the fact that four of them were virgins, there

was evidence that their decision-making around sexual abstinence was surrounded by ambivalence. Sally described being in a paradoxical situation wherein she is teased by two close friends (participants in this study) – Kate and Lisa – about the fact that she is a virgin, despite the fact that they too are virgins, and openly proud of the fact at times. Virginity appeared to be a contentious and sensitive issue in this respect.

‘... if you’re a virgin, everyone still calls you sexually frustrated. Kate and Lisa are constantly saying that to me. I don’t know why they go on about it, because they’re still virgins. Because that’s one of the things that Kate openly talks about, is her virginity. And, I mean, Lisa’s never slept with anyone. I mean, I know Lisa for a fact is proud of being a virgin; I think she is also waiting. But, I just think they also feel slightly insecure about being a virgin, and everything, and then take out their frustration on me sometimes, yes. I think they also feel pressure, the pressure of having to sleep with someone.’ [Sally]

The force of the ambivalence and contradiction around sexual abstinence became further apparent when, during the course of the study, Sally started dating a boy. Kate and Lisa expressed deep reservations around Sally’s relationship, concerned that her boyfriend was only involved with her because he ‘wants to get into Sally’s pants’ [Kate]. Thus, they teased her for being ‘sexually frustrated’, but were also concerned when they perceived that her values around sexual abstinence – shared by them – were under threat. The close-knit friendship between the three girls appeared to suffer a great rift at this point, as Sally felt that her friends were trying to undermine and even sabotage her new relationship. She ascribed her friends’ critical attack of her relationship to their own insecurities and reservations around having heterosexual relationships. As Sally remarked, ‘I think they’re jealous, because they don’t *have* boyfriends’, yet were too afraid of commitment to ‘actually go out with a guy’. Her opinion was supported by Lisa, who expressed much ambivalence around having a boyfriend: while she was reluctant to commit to a relationship, she also felt pressure to have a boyfriend, on account of the social value attached to having boyfriends within the peer group. As such, Sally’s involvement in a heterosexual relationship sat uncomfortably with her. These accounts indicate that non-conformers can sustain pressures to conform to dominant sexual norms, and can also be threatened when their non-conforming peers show evidence of conformity.

## Teenage Sex And Social Deviance

The value teenagers attach to sexual experience and sexual promiscuity appeared to be part of a broader nexus of socially-valued practices. According to the participants, social integration and status within the teenage peer group hinges, to a large degree upon conformity to certain behavioural codes. These comprise of a set of socially valued – yet often socially deviant, and sometimes self-destructive – activities, and include practices such as smoking, drinking and illicit drug-use, which often form the basis of teenage socialising or ‘partying’. On the other hand, seemingly ‘productive’ activities – such as doing well at school, participating in class, and being involved in sports – tend to be devalued by teenagers. For example, according to the participants, teenagers who visibly present themselves as ‘clever’ in the classroom suffer rejection and exclusion, rather than being valued by their classmates. Kate pointed to the paradox inherent within this value system in the following extract:

‘... it was *so strange*, because you would think that clever people, sporty people, that kind of people would be popular. It wouldn’t be the ‘bad-ass’ people – the people who do drugs, you know?’

The participants tended to speak about teenage sex and sexual promiscuity in relation to the former set of practices, locating this as part of a morally dubious, but attractive and sometimes irresistible, ‘package’ of ‘unwise’, ‘immoral’ activities, done partly in rebellion against adults (in that this is antithetical to the alternative, ‘proper’ package of what one ‘should’ be doing) and partly to gain acceptance in the peer group. Kate emphasised that sexually promiscuous behaviour was part of this nexus of ‘deviant’, yet socially valued behaviours, and also a key facet of adolescent socialising: ‘Because that’s what people do on the weekend: they get sloshed, they get high, they smoke, and they jump into bushes [i.e. have sex]’. Young people, in the quest for popularity, can be drawn into, and lose themselves, within this cycle of self-destructive activities:

‘[Young people] will change their whole self to become popular, and that’s basically what you are: you lose your self identity. You *lose yourself* in this *whole messy cycle* of popularity. That’s what happens: it’s like a rock star ...’ [Kate]

Kate described her personal experience of being drawn into this ‘messy cycle of popularity’. She described how she and a close friend had ‘slowly’ started becoming popular at her high school, and how this process was paralleled –

and fuelled – by her own uptake of ‘deviant’ behaviours. She had started drinking, smoking cigarettes and experimenting with drugs, despite the fact that she had a strong moral stance against drug-use:

‘We were kind of popular, but we were on the outskirts. We were just *s-l-o-w-l-y* becoming popular. And then, as it was happening it was like, ok now it’s the next level; now we must take drugs. It was like all my morals were being thrown by the wayside because I wanted to be popular so much.’

She felt that the ‘next level’ of popularity would have entailed further compromises to her self-integrity: namely, giving up her virginity in the name of popularity, in spite of her strong values around pre-marital sexual abstinence. She maintained that, had she had the opportunity, she ‘probably would have’:

‘... which is *really* sad, because it’s one of the huge morals of my life. I *don’t* want to lose my virginity before I get married. You know, it’s one of the big values I have in my life.’

The link between teenage sex and social deviance, specifically substance use, was re-iterated across the girls’ accounts. Substance use was seen as reinforcing dominant sexual codes which devalue virginity, while attaching value to promiscuity, in a number of ways. As noted, sex, and sexual promiscuity specifically, were figured as part of a nexus of deviant, yet socially-valued adolescent practices, such as substance use. Additionally, teenage sex was figured as an unplanned outcome of substance use, due to the relationship between substance use and lowered inhibitions and impaired judgement, and the fact that much of teenage socialising, as well as heterosexual coupling, plays out in contexts, such as clubs and bars, wherein alcohol is readily accessible. This is compounded by the fact that, according to the participants, many girls use alcohol or drugs as a means of gaining the confidence to approach boys to whom they are attracted. Additionally, sex was figured as a *means* whereby girls obtain drugs, and in this sense a commodity in a material transaction. Finally, the participants also explained that girls often turn to drugs when their sexual relationships fail, as a means of escaping the pain of betrayal or abandonment.

## **Part 3**

### **Strategies Of Resistance**

As explored in Part Two of the paper, there appeared to be much contradiction in operation between the participants' individual and social levels of experience respectively. Specifically, it appeared that individual values around sexual abstinence were often challenged by dominant peer group norms and socially-valued practices, in that abstinence did not conform to the nexus of socially-valued practices feeding into teenage social status hierarchies.

The girls appear to be faced with a difficult trade-off – one wherein finding social integration and status appeared to entail compliance to a set of norms and practices that run counter to personal values and ideals around sexual abstinence, while upholding these personal values and ideals comes at the expense of social integration and status. However, as will be explored below, the girls work constructively to develop strategies whereby they counter pressures to engage in dominant peer norms and practices, through which they simultaneously retain their personal values and ideals, and also establish a socially integrated and valued position amongst peers.

Specifically, the girls resist pressures to conform to peer group sexual norms and practices through subverting the value attached to these, and reassigning them with a negative value. Simultaneously, they assign positive value to their own, opposing set of norms and practices sustaining their decision-making around sexual abstinence. Additionally, they draw upon a source of supportive relational environments, which mitigate the pressures of dominant peer group norms, and provide a sense of acceptance and value.

### **'Pathologising' Teenage Sexual Activity**

Despite the value attached to sexual promiscuity, and social pressure upon girls to engage in a sexually active lifestyle, there appeared to be dual and contradictory values attached to sexual promiscuity, and teenage sexual activity more generally. Sexually abstinent girls defend against pressures to conform to teenage sexual norms which attach value to promiscuity through a process whereby they pathologise teenage sexual activity and promiscuity, and re-figure these in deviant, undesirable and problematic terms. This may be seen as a social positioning strategy, whereby the positive social value

placed upon sexual promiscuity is over-turned and figured in negative terms, while virginity implicitly comes to bear a positive value.

## **Virginity, Promiscuity And Ambiguity: ‘Sluts’ And ‘Nuns’**

Although sexually abstinent girls can be subject to stigmatisation and exclusion, there is also evidence of a reverse form of stigmatisation in operation, whereby sexually abstinent girls denigrate their promiscuous peers. Sally, cited before, explained that, because she was a virgin, she was labelled a ‘nun’ by one of her classmates, who, according to Sally, ‘sleeps around with basically every guy she meets’ even though she is engaged. Sally gave her response to being labelled a ‘nun’ in the following extract:

‘... that is *so rude*; I mean, I *choose* to be a virgin. I’d rather wait than going around screwing every guy I can find. Girls think it’s a good thing that you’ve slept with a guy, or something ... But, personally, I just think it’s a way of telling people that you’re a slut. I mean, sleeping around with so many guys, obviously will brand you a ‘hoe’ ...’

Thus, while sexually abstinent girls suffer stigmatisation associated with their being virgins, there is a ‘reverse’ form of stigmatisation in operation, whereby they label their sexually active peers as ‘sluts’ and ‘hoes’ [whores]. There was even evidence of envy directed at young people who had not succumbed to sexual pressures, which further suggests the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding virginity status, and the value attached to this. Sally, who was branded a ‘nun’ by her classmate, on account of being a virgin, followed by adding that her sexually promiscuous classmate later told her:

‘... that she’s jealous of the fact that I haven’t slept with anyone. Because she gave up that innocence *long* ago. But I still have mine, because I *chose* to wait. So, I even told her that: I wouldn’t go sleeping with *any guy* I can find. And that got her really angry, and she just stormed off.’

Sally reflected upon the incident, expressing the belief that her classmate had called her a ‘nun’ out of jealousy or envy. She felt her classmate both respected yet simultaneously resented the fact that Sally was a virgin, resulting in her ambivalent and attacking stance: ‘She was trying to compliment me and insult me at the same time ...’.

Girls are thus positioned within – and perpetuate – a set of double standards, wherein virginity is socially devalued, while a sexually active lifestyle can be simultaneously deplored. As such, while there is social pressure to engage in a sexually active lifestyle, sexually abstinent girls resist pressures to conform by manipulating the dual and contradictory values attached to sexual promiscuity. Problematically, however, in such instances, counter-normative sexual strategies are underpinned by, and reproduce, other problematic hegemonic sexual discourses.

## **Sexual Promiscuity As An Outcome Of ‘Social Problems’**

The girls made many references to problematic elements within young people’s social worlds which they figured as mediating factors in their sexual decision-making. There was a tendency to link teenage sex and sexual promiscuity with deficient, deviant and/or dangerous social conditions and practices and, even more predominantly, with problematic elements within the family contexts of young people. Through this, the participants overturn the positive value attached to sex and sexual promiscuity, and construct these in problematic terms.

First, the tendency to link teenage sex and sexual promiscuity with deficient, deviant and/or dangerous social conditions and practices – which the participants implied were absent from their own social worlds – was a means whereby the girls explained early teenage sexual activity and sexual promiscuity. Specifically, they felt that girls are unlikely to sustain sexual abstinence in certain social contexts, due to opposing cultural or social pressures.

Jane: ‘It’s also the areas you living in. It’s a culture ... well, these girls, they stayed in Ocean View. And they’re more mature for their age. They mature much quicker...they’re *forced* to grow up quicker. Like, your parents will tell you to take responsibilities and stuff...’

‘Also, they used to hang out with gang members and stuff. So it’s also really peer pressure: you know, you should have sex and whatever ... And they also used to smoke dagga and ... drink alcohol. So it’s like drugs and alcohol combined...’

Lisa: 'What I find really scary ... in South Africa, like Lavender Hill<sup>†</sup>, if a girl wants to get into a gang, she has to sleep with like every guy in the gang. Just to get in. It's like initiation or something.'

As the extract from the focus group suggests, there is a tendency to link teenage sex with 'Other' communities: teenage sex is promoted by harder living conditions, which require young people to 'mature' or 'grow up quicker', and by social contexts characterised by substance abuse and gangsterism. There was a tendency to draw a divide between 'Us' and 'Them', wherein certain 'other' groups, distinguished by their location in different social contexts, were figured as more likely to engage in sexual activity.

In the second instance, the family context was held up as a key mediator of girls' sexual decision-making and practices. In particular, sexual promiscuity was figured as a by-product of problematic elements within the family context. In this respect, sex was constructed as a substitute for love that is not received within the context of the home, and pursued by girls who were missing or lacking love and intimacy elsewhere in their lives. Girls' sex lives were also figured as sites wherein they react against certain negative aspects in their past and present lives and relationships, particularly those within the context of the family. For example, Sally maintained:

'And some girls ... some of them are pretty beautiful and everything. But they take that to their advantage and they use guys; they use guys for their own ways, and sleep with them and once they get tired of them, they throw them away like a piece of toilet paper. I think what happens is, they lack love at home ... So now they're taking it out on society, and turning into these *things* walking around on the streets ... one of those *oestrogen bombs*.' [Sally]

Sally went on to give an account of a classmate, attributing her tendency to engage in substance abuse and sexually promiscuous behaviour (despite being married) to conditions in her home environment. Specifically, Sally figured her treatment of the men in her sex life as a symbolic punishment for her father, who was absent from her life.

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<sup>†</sup> A Cape Town suburb that is often highlighted in problematic terms within the local media. This area is represented as 'tough', 'troubled' and 'gang-ridden', and media reports emphasise the manner whereby boys become interpellated into a form of masculinity that rests upon open displays of violence and wielding sexual power over girls and women.

‘... she’s been all around the block: she slept with about twenty, thirty different guys last year. And she used to *tik*, and do all of these horrible drugs. ... I don’t want to end up like that.’

‘She does have issues at home: I mean, she’s constantly fighting with her mother ... [And] she doesn’t have a father, so I think she’s taking out her frustration about her father out on other guys by sleeping with them. She sleeps with them, and then the next day, she gives them the cold shoulder.’

‘I think it’s the whole thing at home; the whole family issue. Because, even though she is married, she still sleeps around. But, it all points to the home. But she could be such a nice girl; she could be so nice. But she has to spoil it by doing all these things ... She’s hurting herself and she doesn’t know it.’

‘It’s probably just a psychological thing. I mean, I get a lot of love from home, so I don’t need to go out and seek love ...’

Jane also made reference to this classmate when reflecting upon the tendency for many girls to engage in sexually promiscuous and self-destructive behavioural patterns. She maintained that their classmate’s behaviour was symptomatic of a lack of self-worth, and that her sexually promiscuous behaviour was, in fact, part of a quest to find love and acceptance, and a result of feeling unloved and abandoned:

‘I mean, she’s married; she’s slept with more than ten guys; she’s still looking for more: *she’s looking for that key*. And she can’t find it.’

Jane maintained, further, that girls, in their quest to find love and acceptance, engage in sexually promiscuous behaviour, and ultimately risky sexual practices.

‘I think that’s where it [HIV/AIDS] evolves; like, you get so careless after a while that, you’re so desperate to find that key type thing. And it’s like, well, maybe I should try it without a condom; maybe it’s gonna be different. And that’s how HIV and AIDS is created, and you get pregnant and stuff.’

Lisa also drew a link between ‘risky’ sexual practices, on the one hand, and lack of self-worth and self-respect on the other. She felt that many girls

‘don’t care’ about themselves and what happens to them – once again attributing this to a lack of love in the home context – and thus engage in self-destructive behaviours, such as risky sexual practices. She emphasised the negative consequences that a lack of self-respect can amount to, when this is enacted in the context of sexual relationships:

‘... if you don’t respect yourself, then you could end up with AIDS or something. So I think that does happen ... Some people, they don’t respect themselves, they don’t care like what happens to them ... I think, most of the time, it’s comes from like people from broken homes and stuff: where they don’t have a mother or they don’t have a father, and they feel that they’re not *loved* or something. And then it just breaks down their respect also. And it’s actually quite sad...’

Helen echoed Lisa’s notion that girls who sleep around do so because they ‘don’t care’ about themselves, or lack a sense of self-worth. She constructed adolescent sexuality as a product of family dislocation, due to divorce, and poor parental role models, who promote extramarital sex as well as sexual promiscuity.

‘I know that some girls sleep around; I don’t kid myself: I know that they do. I think they don’t actually care. Especially like here in Fish Hoek, it’s like a major thing, because most parents are divorced here, or there’s some family issue, so they just like sleep around. Because, *most* people that I’ve met here, their dad or their mom is having an affair with so and so, and they’ve had an affair with so and so.’

The participants’ own family environments appeared, in general, to be supportive in nature. Most of the participants had close, open relationships with one or both parents. Although family conflict was not absent, and while the participants voiced frustration towards parental figures at times, particularly in relation to what they perceived as overly-restrictive parenting practices, parents appeared to play an active role in their lives. In many instances, the girls openly expressed appreciation for the role their parents played in their lives. Families in general – including parents as well as siblings – appeared to be important relational contexts wherein the girls sought refuge from the pressures they received within the peer group.

Four of the six girls came from homes wherein parents were still married, and one of the girls explicitly held up her parents as relational role models of a loving and stable marital union. One of the six girls came from a family

fragmented by divorce, but felt that her mother, with whom she lived, provided a stable home, and figured her mother's parenting practices in highly positive terms, despite feeling neglected by her father. Finally, one girl had been born out of wedlock (see Laura's case, discussed in Part One of the paper). Her mother and father, while still involved with one another, never married, and her father is simultaneously involved with another woman, with whom he has children. He also has children by another woman, who he divorced after becoming involved with Laura's mother. Despite these unconventional family circumstances, Laura drew much support from the many units of which her family is comprised, and has a close relationship with her own parents, as well as her half-siblings and their mothers.

## **The Popularity Paradox: 'Pathologising' Popularity**

Despite what appeared to be impossibly rigid codes of popularity, when examining the narratives more closely, there appeared to be space for, as well as clear evidence of, successful resistance to and subversion of dominant norms and practices feeding into teenage social positioning and status. As illustrated, the girls appeared conscious of, and highlighted the inherently self-destructive aspects of the nexus of factors feeding into teenage social status and hierarchies. This appeared part of a broader strategy of resistance, whereby the girls constructed 'popularity' in negative terms. In fact, as was evident with regards to sexual promiscuity, there appeared to be dual and similarly contradictory values attached to popularity, and teenage social status hierarchies more generally. Through this, the participants devalued and thus subverted teenage popularity structures and, in so doing, normative practices and values – such as sexual promiscuity – associated with popularity.

Kate reflected in depth upon the nature and function of popularity hierarchies at high school. In particular, she highlighted the paradoxical nature of popularity – specifically, that the characteristics of the 'popular' people defy the meaning of popularity:

'The thing is they make your life a living hell; they seriously do. Like, it's just so awful. Oh, they're horrible. It's so irritating: *nobody* likes them! So why call them popular? Because you'd think the popular people would be friends with everybody: therefore the 'popular' word comes in, you know? Like, they're popular for total *wrong* reasons: because *nobody likes them*, you know?'

‘I was aware of the illusion; everybody is. You know, nobody likes them, you know? But it’s kind of like a coup: they like took over the school you know? And seriously, they think the whole school revolves around them.’

Like many of the participants, Kate’s account drew attention to the manufactured and ‘illusionary’ nature of popularity. Furthermore, as evident in the extract below, she highlighted the manner whereby popularity structures and hierarchies were sustained not only by the domination of the ‘popular’ over the ‘non-popular’, but through a ‘vicious cycle’ that is perpetuated by the popular and non-popular alike. The rigid popularity hierarchy was figured as self-sustained and reinforced by all levels of the hierarchy, and not in a simple top-down manner.

‘... we feed off each other. Like, the popular people [will say:] Ha! There’s a loser! That kind of thing ... And then, because they said that, their popularity stays high. Then, the losers – i.e. me – will be like: Oh gosh, there goes the popular person! And then, because the popular person said, oh there goes the loser, the *hate* for the popular people will grow. So, like, we all feed off each other; it’s like a whole vicious cycle. So that’s basically how it works.’

There appeared to be great deal of dislike – and even hatred, to use Kate’s term – directed towards those who were figured as ‘popular’. Feelings of resentment and dislike towards the ‘popular’ were echoed across the participants’ accounts. This ‘vicious cycle’ of popularity appeared to reinforce divisions between levels on the social status hierarchy, promoting group division and segregation. This, in a paradoxical manner, appeared to create a means of countering the dominant norms and practices feeding into teenage social status: specifically, the girls separated themselves from ‘the popular group’, setting up ‘the popular group’ in negative terms and, implicitly and explicitly, figuring their own social circle in positive terms. Helen’s account, below, wherein she reflected upon ‘the popular group’, exemplifies this:

‘... *all* they concentrate on is like, we can’t wait to get out of school to get totally pissed [drunk]. And that seems like their life; all they care about is partying; they don’t actually care about anybody else. If, for instance, someone in that popular group fell pregnant, she would be *totally kicked out* of that group. They wouldn’t allow her in that group, you know? Whereas the other groups, if it was your friend, they would give

you support. I know, for instance, if *I* feel pregnant, my group would like support me.'

## **The Empowering Role Of Close Confidants And Friendships**

Despite the fact that the girls described feeling subject to stigmatisation and rejection within the peer group at large due to their failure to take up socially-valued norms and practices, they did not appear to suffer complete social isolation. Finding social integration did not hinge solely upon being 'popular' and conforming to the dominant popularity codes explored in Part Two of the paper. Rather, the girls found social integration via alternative routes, which allowed them to retain their individual values, simultaneously. Specifically, they drew attention to the importance of having close friends and confidants, generally of the same sex, who, even if these were not many in number. The extract below, drawn from the focus group discussion, centres upon the significance attached to such relationships, namely the therapeutic and supportive nature of sharing ideas, values and views within these contexts:

Jane: 'We just chill in the lounge and we talk about everything ... And it's nice: you have someone who has the same ideas as you; has the same opinions ... It's very nice to talk to someone.'

Kate: 'We all just talk about crap, and we talk about deep stuff ... we're all in a very deep kind of relationship; a right and a wrong...'

Helen: 'We don't even have to talk and you know what's going on. Our relationship is cool...'

Relationships with like-minded peers, with whom the girls were able to identify, and find affirmation and acceptance, appeared to play a pivotal role in empowering the girls to resist pressure to conform to dominant norms. These relationships appeared to stand as a significant buffering factor against peer pressure to engage in socially-valued, normative practices – such as sex – which fed into teenage social status hierarchies. Such relationships appeared to provide girls with a supportive environment wherein they were able to retain personal values and ideals – such as pre-marital sexual abstinence – in the face of peer group norms and values that appeared, in many instances, to run counter to these.

## 5. Conclusions

### **Sexual Abstinence: Beyond Physical Health And Well-Being**

The findings indicated that concerns surrounding emotional and relational outcomes associated with sexual intimacy were the key driving force behind decision-making around sexual abstinence. Sexual abstinence was a strategy geared towards promoting emotional and relational well-being, rather than primarily geared towards promoting physical health and well-being.

The findings suggest the need to refigure the manner whereby ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ sex are conceptualised by sexual health promotion campaigns and interventions. For the participants, concerns feeding into sexual abstinence were bound up in notions of ‘protective’ versus ‘risky’ relational contexts, rather than sexual behaviour per se. Sexual ‘risk’ was figured in terms of negative emotional and relational outcomes associated with sexual intimacy, rather than physical health outcomes.

Building protective sexual relational environments was prioritised over engaging into protective sexual behaviour. However, this amounted to a sexual strategy that was health-protective – i.e. sexual abstinence. As such, strategies geared towards promoting emotional and relational well-being can simultaneously promote physical well-being. This suggests the utility of a holistic approach in sexual health promotion campaigns and interventions – one that conceives of health in terms of emotional and relational well-being, as well as in terms of physical well-being.

Interventions need to move beyond the assumption that individuals consciously have their physical health in mind when they choose to take up certain sexual practices and strategies – even when these sexual practices and strategies may support or facilitate physical health and well-being. Decision-making around sexual abstinence was found to be a value-laden decision, bound up in the meaning the participants attached to sex, values and ideology surrounding marriage, as well as codes of morality and social ‘goods’. Following this, sexual health promotion campaigns and interventions need to be developed with an understanding of the meaning and value individuals attach to sex, rather than viewing sex in individualistic, behavioural terms.

## **The Socially-Mediated Nature Of Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making**

Sexual experiences and decision-making in adolescence were found to be socially mediated, and influenced by concerns relating to factors beyond the narrow confines of the sexual arena. Specifically, adolescent sexual decision-making was found to be bound up in, and strongly influenced by peer group relations and social hierarchies, and mediated by social needs for peer group integration and status. Pressures to conform to dominant peer group sexual norms and practices were found to be part of a nexus of pressures facing young people more generally. Sex in adolescence was bound up in a nexus of practices that, while socially valued, have self-destructive consequences for the individual. The findings point towards the need to develop insights into the paradoxically high value placed upon self-destructive practices in teenagehood more generally, and how unsafe sexual practices feed into this. More generally, the findings point towards the need to develop an understanding of how adolescent sexual development and decision-making intersect with other facets of adolescent development and experiences, and into process fuelling peer group conformity.

## **Strategies Of Resistance: Sustaining Safe Sexual Practices**

Finally, the findings suggest the need to develop insight into how individuals resist dominant norms which run counter to safe sexual practices. Sexual abstinence was not viewed as normative, and was figured as a strategy that ran counter to dominant sexual norms and practices within the adolescent peer group more generally. However, the participants manage to sustain their own set of values and practices, and resist pressures that counter these, and negotiate positions of value and acceptance amongst peers.

Supportive, stable and integrated family environments, parent-child communication, positive parental role models appeared to play a role in sustaining counter-normative practices such as sexual abstinence. The importance of relationships with like-minded peers, with whom girls can identify, and find affirmation and acceptance, also appeared to play a pivotal role in empowering girls to resist pressure to conform to dominant sexual norms. The therapeutic and supportive nature of sharing ideas, values and views with peers appeared to be an important means of sustaining personal values and ideals feeding into decision-making around sexual abstinence, while simultaneously finding social integration and acceptance.

However, despite appearing to be strongly invested in sustaining their individual sexual strategies and values surrounding sexual abstinence, evidence of ambivalence was apparent at times. This is significant to note, as such ambivalence could form the foundation for submission to pressures. Additionally, there was also evidence that the girls participate, at times, in reinforcing dominant sexual norms and practices, despite engaging in individual strategies that run counter to these. In light of this, it is important to develop interventions that are not only geared towards changing 'risky' sexual practices, but ones that are also geared towards sustaining positive sexual decision-making in the long-term. It is important not to allow 'low-risk' populations to slip under the radar of sexual health promotion campaigns.

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