



Published in final edited form as:

Cult Health Sex. 2017 July ; 19(7): 781–795. doi:10.1080/13691058.2016.1262062.

‘Behaving well’: The transition to respectable womanhood in rural South Africa

Christie Sennott^{a,b} and Sanyu Mojola^c

^aDepartment of Sociology, Purdue University, IN, USA

^bDepartment of Sociology, Purdue University, IN, USA; MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt), School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

^cDepartment of Sociology and Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado Boulder, USA

Abstract

Few studies on the transition to adulthood in Africa analyse young people’s own definitions of the events that confer adult status, and how adulthood is actually attained. This paper examines the experience of transitioning to womanhood in rural Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, drawing on interviews with 18 women aged 18–39. Three primary experiences characterised this transition: puberty and emerging body awareness, spending time with boys, and having a child. More important than the timing of these experiences, however, was whether women ‘behaved well’ and maintained respectability as they transitioned to adulthood. Behavioural standards reinforcing ideal femininity were focused on dress, manner, and talk, and were particularly stringent for mothers. Our findings emphasise the value of emic models of adulthood for understanding how youth experience this transition and provide an important counter-narrative to the literature focused primarily on the risk African youth face during this period of change in the life course.

Keywords

South Africa; transition to adulthood; young women; sexual development; womanhood; reproductive health

In most African countries, young people aged 10–24 years constitute at least one-third of the population, and many will come of age in the next 5–10 years (Population Reference Bureau 2013). African youth are confronted with numerous risks and challenges including the risks of being co-opted into war or experiencing early illness and death in the wake of the HIV pandemic, and the challenges of finding employment and living in conditions of extreme poverty. This is reflected by a predominant focus of the literature on the risks and vulnerability African youth experience (see Blum 2007 for a review). Although important

*Corresponding Author. Christie Sennott. csennott@purdue.edu.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that no financial interest or benefit has arisen from this research.

and reflective of the reality in which many young people grow up, what is sometimes obscured is research that describes transitions to adulthood in an unproblematised way, and research that focuses on how transitions are experienced by African youth themselves. A traditional Western transition to adulthood perspective focuses on five experiences that characterise the period of time when youth separate from their parents and make commitments to adult lives and institutions. These include finishing school, getting a job, moving out, getting married, and having a child (Elder 1975, 1998; Settersten 2003). In this paper, however, we examine the embodied experience of transitioning to womanhood in rural Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, and use emic markers of transition to capture the social meanings young women attach to the stages of becoming a woman. We find that more important than the timing of the transition is the manner in which it happens, and as such, we focus the final part of the paper on how women define respectable womanhood.

Background

Research on young women in South Africa today paints a fairly dismal picture of how the transition to womanhood unfolds, with many studies focused on the risks young women face. Recent studies aimed at understanding these experiences, for example, have focused on sexual risk because of HIV, a disease disproportionately affecting young South African women (e.g., Idele et al. 2014; Ruark et al. 2016; Shisana et al. 2014). The risk of unintended pregnancy and the lack of contraception are also common subjects of concern (e.g., Christofides et al. 2014; Harrison et al. 2016; Mchunu et al. 2012), as is the culture of sexual- and gender-based violence in South Africa (e.g., Jewkes et al. 2010; Russell et al. 2014; Waxman et al. 2016). Although collectively these areas of research provide a wealth of important information about the challenging environments in which girls become women, the focus on risk sometimes obscures girls' everyday 'non-risky' lived experiences. In addition to highlighting these experiences, we also build on literature on young women's framing of the process of becoming a woman in South Africa today, and the social meanings attached to the manner in which womanhood is attained (Bhana 2016; Bhana and Pattman 2011; Edin et al. 2016; Graham 2016; Hampshire et al. 2011; Harrison 2008; Pattman 2005).

In particular, we contribute to literature focused on young women growing up in rural parts of South Africa. This is important because in the post-apartheid era, myriad ways to attain womanhood have opened up to South African girls. These include 'traditional' pathways such as marriage and motherhood, as well as 'modern' routes such as education and consumption. Urban women in particular have been noted to seek out relationships with men who can provide the resources they want and/or need and which serve as status symbols. For example, Mark Hunter's (2002 2010) research shows how young women in Durban townships desired to attain a particular form of idealised femininity, in which the deployment of fashion and consumer goods (e.g., cell phones) signaled their status and modernity to others (see also Leclerc-Madlala 2003). However, there is limited research examining the extent to which these types of consuming femininities (Mojola 2014a, 2015) are available or even relevant in South Africa's rural former apartheid homeland areas, where there is inadequate educational training, high unemployment, and relative poverty (Blalock 2014; SSA 2014).

Transitions to womanhood in rural South Africa

Our study is situated within a collection of rural villages in the Agincourt sub-district ('Agincourt') of Mpumalanga Province in northeastern South Africa, approximately 500 kilometres north of Johannesburg and close to the border of Mozambique. The main ethnic group in the area is amaShangaan and they speak XiTonga/Shangaan. While most families live in multigenerational, extended family arrangements, female-headed households have become increasingly common (Madhavan and Schatz 2007; Niehaus 1994). During the time of apartheid, the area was demarcated as a 'homeland' where Black South Africans were forcibly relocated and endured multiple compounding hardships including substandard education, employment, medical care, and infrastructure (Worden 2007). Many of these hardships continue today. For example, local schools are of poor quality (Fiske and Ladd 2004) and provide inadequate preparation for employment. In 2008, the adult unemployment rate was 25.3% among men and 47.8% among women; the latter was 18 percentage points higher than the national average (Blalock 2014; SSA 2010). Additionally, at the time of the study, many residents lacked reliable access to piped water and electricity, and there was no formal sanitation system (Kahn et al. 2007).

Accounts from the 19th century highlight the collective nature of the transition to adulthood, which included rituals signifying that young people were developmentally and socially ready to take on adult roles (Monica Hunter 1961; Junod 1912; Wilson 1959). Circumcision was a defining feature of young men's transition (Monica Hunter 1961; Junod 1912; Wilson 1959). For young women, however, menarche was followed by ceremonies involving a period of seclusion (varying from one week to three months), ritual dances, the use of natural bleaching agents on the skin, and ritual animal slaughter (Monica Hunter 1961). These rituals were experienced collectively (within cohorts) and prepared youth to take on adult roles in marriage and the community (Delius and Glaser 2002; Monica Hunter 1961; Junod 1912).

Demonstrating respect for oneself and for others – particularly elders – was also a fundamental part of social life and an important criterion of adulthood in this and other parts of South Africa (Bhana 2016; Monica Hunter 1961; Niehaus 2002; Stadler 2003). During the pre-colonial and colonial periods, children were taught from a very young age to respect their elders by using familial terms (Mama/Baba), to keep quiet unless spoken to, and to practice physical acts of respect, such as receiving gifts with both hands. Respect was often tied to sexual propriety and fulfilling gendered expectations tied to marriage, household roles, and childrearing. Physically demonstrating respect was also incumbent on new daughters-in-law (*makotis*), who were expected to serve their husband's family in numerous ways (cooking, cleaning) for a period of time after joining the household. Many of these customs continue today.

At the same time, young people in Agincourt and other parts of South Africa today encounter social and structural conditions that complicate their achieving respectable adulthood. For example, marriage—a traditional pathway to adulthood—has declined dramatically among recent cohorts (Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie 2009; SSA 2012). Once nearly universal (Preston-Whyte 1981), by 1995 only one in five Black South African women had married by age 30, a proportion that dropped to one in ten by 2010 (Posel,

Rudwick, and Casale 2011). This decline is often attributed to economic constraints complicating the payment of bridewealth (Casale and Posel 2010; Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011). In Agincourt, the difficulties of attaining 'modern' pathways to adulthood such as completing education and securing viable employment are compounded by labor market shifts away from 'traditional' agricultural subsistence farming to wage-earning work that requires an education (see Blalock 2014). These structural constraints raise questions about how young women in Agincourt are experiencing the transition to adulthood, what they consider critical markers of this transition, and the kinds of femininities that are valued, respected, and enacted in this setting.

Data and methods

This study was designed to examine women's experiences surrounding family formation events such as childbearing, motherhood, and marriage, the larger normative environment in which women navigate these events, and the effects of HIV and the end of apartheid (in 1994) on these experiences. Interview and focus group data were gathered from January-June of 2010 from 85 women aged 18–79. Study participants were selected from households within the Agincourt Health and Socio-Demographic Surveillance System, a long-standing demographic and health research programme (Kahn et al. 2012). Women were invited to participate in interviews based on random quota sampling according to four age groups: 18–25; 26–35; 36–45; and 46 years and above. Age groupings were chosen to capture the breadth of women's perceptions and experiences related to family formation processes across the life course and how these processes might have changed over time. This larger study provides the broader interpretational context for the current paper which analyses interview data from 18 women aged 18–39. Interviews were conducted in Shangaan by two local women in their mid-30s and occurred in private settings at participants' homes or places of work.

Interviews were conducted in two stages. In the first stage, interview themes included first pregnancy, first birth, motherhood, and HIV. After preliminary analysis of the first set of interviews, the second stage involved follow up questions to further develop themes that emerged from analysis, as well as questions about societal changes since the end of apartheid, 'modern' women and relationships, and experiences with work, school, and migration. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted one hour on average. All women provided written informed consent to participate in the study, which was approved by institutional review boards in the United States and South Africa.

This paper focuses on responses to two sets of interview questions and probes: 1) How does a girl become a woman (or an adult) in this culture? How did you become a woman? Are there significant things/events that let you know that a girl has become a woman? And 2) How does a woman gain status and respect in society? Each author conducted structured coding of responses to one of the two main interview questions specified above, using a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 2005; Strauss and Corbin 1990). After initial coding by interview question, we noted the prevalence of each theme across interviews and created analytic memos describing the most prominent patterns emerging from the data. We developed our description of the transition to

womanhood among Agincourt women based on the most salient themes in participants' stories, and include these themes as sub-headings below. All participant names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Findings

Pathways to womanhood in Agincourt

Many participants described a process of transitioning to womanhood that unfolded in a series of developmental stages beginning with the physical transformations that occur during puberty such as menarche (see also Mensch, Bruce, and Greene 1998; Sommer 2009; Sommer et al. 2015). Puberty also set in motion a series of behavioural changes including: increased attention to one's appearance because of a burgeoning interest in boys, more domestic responsibilities, beginning sexual activity, and for many, giving birth. No participants mentioned the collective rituals marking the transition to adulthood that were common among older cohorts (Monica Hunter 1961). In this section, we describe this developmental process using women's words to highlight the embodied nature of these experiences.

Puberty and emerging body awareness—Young women described the transition to womanhood as beginning with menarche. When asked how a girl becomes a woman, 21 year old Clara said: 'In our culture they were looking at whether she developed breasts or started to see her periods.' Similarly, 27 year old Pretty's comments focused on the physical changes girls experience during puberty: 'If she is a woman...boys are starting to see her. She developed breasts with buttocks.' Mary (22 years old) elaborated on this

Mary: If they are saying this is a woman, it's like by the time you were young you were doing everything like playing with boys. But by the time your body started to change, you see your periods—she started developing breasts. This means she is a woman.

Interviewer: How did you become a woman?

Mary: I developed breasts and I started to see my periods at the age of 12. Though I knew that I'm not ready for marriage, but I understood that I was no more a child. I was grown up.

These physical changes often triggered an increased awareness about young women's bodies and encouraged a shift in hygiene practices, as 19 year old Akani described it,

Akani: *Haa*...she [a young woman] starts getting a bath frequently. She is always looking clean, make up her face, wearing shoes always. In the past she didn't mind to walk barefooted.

Interviewer: How did you become a woman?

Akani: [*Laughing*] I'm still young. I didn't grow up. I still want to grow.

Interviewer: How did you see that you are a sister [no longer a child]?

Akani: I was bathing. I was able to talk openly with other people, particularly to boys. I started to know myself better than other people. I was cleaning my room always.

Physical changes in girls' bodies were often noticed by household members and matched by increasing domestic responsibilities. For example, 33 year old Wisani said, 'In our culture, a girl becomes a woman when she has responsibilities. She has learned everything at home.' She continued describing how a girl's household activities shifted during the transition to womanhood:

She will start to cook. You find that she was not cooking, but she was making tea only [as a girl]. She must know that she has to cook [as a woman]. In the past, she was making tea, and sweeping the street. But now she will cook porridge. When they plant things [farm], she will also do that or she gets married if she wants it.

Wisani's comments reflect the growing household responsibilities a young woman is expected to take on. Rather than only making tea, she is relied upon to cook food (porridge), participate in farming family plots, and, if she desires, get married. This was reiterated by Ruth (25 years old) who said, '...when you have grown up, we are able to help our mother by cooking, cleaning, and also going to the field and plow.' 29 year old Noma's comments highlighted the connection others made between seeing these activities and realising that a girl was becoming a woman. She said: 'She will sweep the yard, bathe, and go to school. When she comes back she will start cooking, you see? Then you will notice that my child has grown up.' Although these activities are expected, once a girl begins taking on these tasks, others see that she is reliable and may take on more responsibility. This shows others that, in fact, she is 'growing up.'

Spending time with boys—As implied in the earlier quotes, linked to these physical and behavioural changes was spending time with boys. This activity occasionally came into conflict with the expectation to take on more household responsibilities. When asked how she became a woman, 27 year old Nthathi said,

Nthathi: I developed breasts and see my periods. After that I started to fall in love (*laughter*).

Interviewer: Okay, are there significant things or events that let you know that a girl has become a woman?

Nthathi: Yes, if a girl has become a woman, she stopped playing with young children, she starts bathing twice or three times a day, she is cleaning and helping in the house. She's doing every household activity. But late hours in mostly, they go outside to meet with friends where they are with boys.

Nthathi's comments highlight both young women's increased household responsibilities, but also their tendency to spend time away from home with friends and boyfriends. As Mary (22 years old) describes it, this was often a point of household conflict.

Mary: At home she starts to take time when you send her somewhere. Little [every] chance she gets she wants to see her friends or her boyfriend.

Interviewer: Did you do this?

Mary: Yes I did. [*Laughter*] I'm talking from experience.

Interviewer: How did your parents feel about this?

Mary: My mother was always getting angry and sometimes she was upset. Sometimes she was beating me and even if she did like that, you [the girl] will make it worse as you will open the window and jump at night.

Sending youth on time- and labor-intensive household errands, such as fetching water from a village tap, was a common practice. A mother's anger at her daughter taking extra time in these tasks likely reflected annoyance at having to wait, but also worry about what her daughter may be doing with friends and boyfriends, given the commonness of unintended pregnancies in this area, which we discuss further below. In another illustration of this conflict, 33 year old Wisani noted, 'You find that when you send her to do things she was doing when she was young, she won't agree. She will shout at you saying that you are wasting her time.' Indeed, 29 year old Buyisiwe suggests that spending time with boys is itself a sign that a girl is on the cusp of womanhood:

A girl starts to change her behaviour. She doesn't spend most of her time at home; she goes up and down the street. Sometimes she doesn't sleep at home. You will see her in the morning. By that way you will see that she has started something like love affairs. It means she has grown up and she wants to become a woman.

Stories of night-time forays with boys were common throughout the data, and although this shift in behaviour represented a visible marker that a girl was becoming a woman, it often resulted in unintended pregnancies among the women in our sample.

Having a child—Biological motherhood was regarded as an important marker of womanhood. For example, when asked how she became a woman, Buyisiwe (29 years old) said, 'My parents saw me after I was pregnant. *Ehe...* (*laughing*). But I was young and it was a mistake.' Buyisiwe's comments emphasise that her pregnancy was unintended – that is, a 'mistake' – and that she was considered a woman only after her parents found out that she was pregnant. 29 yr old Noma's comments about how a girl becomes a woman also reflect that a pregnancy can signal womanhood:

It's when she gets pregnant and bears a child she is no longer a girl. That one [daughter] of mine who doesn't have a child, her sister, as she has a child, she is no longer a girl, she is a mother. She should be married and called by her husband's last name just the way we have grown up. At home we were not bearing children before marriage; we were bearing children at our marriage. But now there is no marriage; even us adults, we are not married. It is difficult (*laughing*).

Despite the changed context of first pregnancies (as Noma's comments highlight) and their frequent characterisation as a 'mistake', motherhood is still regarded as the most important marker of womanhood (see also Schaan et al. 2016). Thus, it is more important to have children, even if it happens at a less than ideal time, than to not have children at all (see also Harrison and O'Sullivan 2010; Madhavan, Harrison, and Sennott 2013).ⁱ

As was evident from participants' accounts, however, motherhood was expected to be accompanied by changes in behaviour. For instance, although 25 year old Precious defined her own womanhood as beginning when she had her first child, her comments emphasised how her behaviour changed: 'I won't go to places a lot. Every time I will be at home, staying with my child and taking care of her.' Similarly, 24 year old Beauty's comments illustrated how motherhood affected her behaviour.

Interviewer: How did you become a woman?

Beauty: *Ah...* At the age of 14, I got a child. I was still young. Even now I'm still young as my parents are still taking care of me, though I'm an adult as I have a child. I have to educate my child and I want her to learn from me. I don't want to disappoint her by doing funny things, no. So I can say getting a child made me to be an adult.

As highlighted above, it was not financial independence that mattered to Beauty's adulthood, but rather her having a child, and the way that experience affected her behaviour. While motherhood underscored in the clearest fashion the behavioural expectations accompanying womanhood, it was clear in our analysis that behaviour mattered at every stage of the transition, as we elaborate on next.

Behaving well: Respectability in the transition to womanhood

Our participants often characterised the transition to womanhood as either a respectable or disrespectful in character (see also Bhana 2016). Respectability was not solely based on ideal sequencing of the transitions to adulthood, although that was one way to gain respect (*ku hlonipha or ku xixima*) as 19 year old Leila noted,

I can say the one who is behaving well, she grows up without a child and she gets married, then she bears a child. She must be well educated and have a good job and also be well-known; that is the reason she gains status.

For most participants, however, a respectable transition to womanhood was primarily assessed by how a woman behaved during her transition, regardless of whether she had a birth outside marriage, remained unmarried, was unable to finish school, or was unemployed (see also Johnson-Hanks 2002a, 2002b, 2006 for similar findings in Cameroon).

In Agincourt, behaving well (*mahanyelo ya kahle*) was defined in several complementary ways, including: talking well, respecting others, being humble, avoiding gossip, and taking care of others. In other words, to behave well meant to adhere to socio-cultural norms for ideal—or acquiescent—femininity (c.f. Bhana and Anderson 2013; Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Reddy and Dunne 2007). A common response to the question of how women gained status and respect in their families and communities was: 'She gets respect if she behaves well; also [if she] respects other people' (Buyisiwe, 29 years old). Indeed, good behaviour

¹Women in South Africa who have not had children are not considered full adults and are often subjected to stigma, psychological distress, and economic and social disadvantage (Dyer et al. 2002; Dyer et al. 2005). For example, in the larger project (see Data and Methods), 57 year old Catherine who was barren said that, 'motherhood...it means to grow up...' And, when asked how not having children had affected her life, Janice (63 years old) said, 'I'm meaningless. I'm nothing in life. You can be something in life, but without children you are nothing.'

trumped the achievement of ‘modern’ markers of adulthood such as finishing school or having a high income, as 18 year old Margaret noted,

People don’t respect educated people. That was in the past. In the past, it was only a few people who were educated and drove Volkswagen cars. Nowadays everyone is driving. Nowadays my sister, a woman, is respected by the way she behaves. You can have Honors or Masters in your qualifications, but if you don’t respect people, you are wasting your time. You can also drive expensive cars, but if you lack respect, people won’t respect you.

Talking well—How women talked was also an important marker of respectable womanhood. 29 year old Buyisiwe, quoted above, went on to say that such a woman:

... talks with people in a good way. She doesn’t talk taboo words [insult or curse others]. Sometimes she starts projects in the community, or she is the leader of societies or clubs and she is performing well on her position. People will put trust to you and they always know that you can help them if they have problems.

Similarly, Akani (19 years old) underscored the importance of respecting others by talking kindly and being helpful. She said that a woman gains respect and status, ‘By living a good life. If she is a good person, she will treat her neighbors in a good way. By living a respectful life.’ She went to describe what she meant,

Interviewer: How to [do you] treat neighbors in a good way?

Akani: If you greet them, not talking bad about them and helping them when there is a need.

Interviewer: What do you mean by living a respectful way?

Akani: I mean if you greet anyone, smile to them. *Yah*...and show them love.

Interviewer: How?

Akani: I mean to show them respect.

Thus the typical conceptualisation of respectable womanhood emphasises showing others respect through kindness and providing counsel and assistance (see also Jewkes and Morrell 2012). The belief is that if one respects others, they will also garner respect. As Ruth (25 years old) said, a woman gains respect when

She is behaving well and she doesn’t like lies. She doesn’t gossip. You are giving yourself dignity. When people talk about you, they say that woman or girl, she is very good. She doesn’t do stories like when you are sitting with people, you’re gossiping, you have a lot of love affairs.... That’s what makes us to be good, and even when people talk, they talk good things about you.

In other words, respectability is as much about how you treat others as how others perceive your behaviour. These criteria for respectable womanhood, especially the emphasis on others’ views, ultimately serve as a form of social control (Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Reddy and Dunne 2007). Women who want to be viewed as respectable thus have to adhere to these

behavioural injunctions. A key arena where women's behaviour was monitored and verbally sanctioned was their sexuality.

Sexual respectability—Girls who had recently begun spending time with boys were differentiated into those with many boyfriends who were 'going up and down the streets' and failed to live up to behavioural expectations, versus those who maintained respect by combining respectable dating with staying home and fulfilling their household responsibilities, as 21 year old Clara described.

Clara: After developing breasts, seeing her periods, she starts dating. Her approach is not good, particularly to her parents. She doesn't listen. But it depends to the type of people. Other girls are still behaving well, even when [they] become to the stage of a woman. They still respect and always stay at home rather than going up the streets.

Interviewer: How did you become a woman?

Clara: I was bathing now and then. Always staying at home but having a boyfriend. I was still respecting my parents as I was staying with my grandmother. I was doing all the household activities like cooking, washing, and doing all these things.

Clara described respectable dating as properly combining spending time with boys with fulfilling household duties. Respectable dating, as described by 24 year old Linneth, was defined in part by adhering to gendered sexual norms reinforcing monogamy for women (Bhana 2016; Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Varga 2003). She said that '...people respect you if you don't talk bad about them, or have boyfriends. You can find that mothers of nowadays, some of them, they are sharing boyfriends with us. It's obvious they can't be respected.' The phrase 'mothers of nowadays' refers to women who employ modern femininities by promoting their own desires and needs rather than adhering to gender norms of 'acquiescent' femininity that encourage deference, modesty, and self-restraint (see also Bhana 2016; Harrison 2008; Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Linneth's comment about these mothers' sharing sexual partners reflects longstanding social and institutional patterns supporting men's multiple partnerships and the resistance to women engaging in the same practices (Mark Hunter 2005, 2010). These perspectives highlight the diversity of femininities on offer in South Africa (Bhana and Anderson 2013; Graham 2016; Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Reddy and Dunne 2007; Sennott and Angotti 2016). In particular, they highlight differences between valued rural femininities in areas such as Agincourt, and valued urban femininities, which are more supportive of young women's consumptive pursuit of modernity and the celebration of women's sexual freedom and right to have multiple partners (e.g., Mark Hunter 2010).

'Proper' motherhood—In this setting, a birth outside of marriage did not disqualify a woman from attaining respectable womanhood (see also Johnson-Hanks 2006). Indeed, behaving well could trump a mistimed birth if a new mother's behaviour reflected that she was a proper mother. Mothers were held to particularly high standards for ideal womanhood and were expected to abide by multiple characteristics highlighted above under the umbrella of behaving well. Participants maintained that a good or proper mother should be quiet,

humble, and engage in caretaking of children, in-laws, and the men in their lives. Disrespectful motherhood was aligned with mothers who continued engaging in youthful behaviours like going to taverns, and refusing to accept the social roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood (see also Graham 2016). 21 year old Clara explained:

Interviewer: I mean how does a woman gain respect from people of the community?

Clara: If she is respecting. Behave well like a mother. People will also respect her.

Interviewer: What do you mean by saying she must behave well like a mother?

Clara: I mean she must have good approach to other people. Always be humble and have love. By loving other people, she will know to treat them in a good way.

Interviewer: Do you still have more to add?

Clara: There are other women who don't respect. They are talking words of taboos [insulting or cursing others] and shouting everywhere, always getting drunk. I think by doing that you can't be a mother who deserves to be respected, no.

In Clara's comments above, we see how behaving respectably was equated with behaving 'like a mother', suggesting that the performance of proper motherhood represents ideal femininity in this setting, regardless of when a women became a mother.

Discussion

This study examines emic understandings of the transition to womanhood among women living in rural Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. This focus brings attention to dimensions of the transition to adulthood that are sometimes obscured because they do not involve risk or are not characterised by women themselves as 'risky.' Even in cases such as unintended pregnancies, which some women in this study characterised as a 'mistake', our findings suggest that biological motherhood served as the most important marker of womanhood. Indeed, what was seen as key by women themselves was not the fact that a woman had a pregnancy out of marriage, but rather how girls were judged as *behaving* as they transitioned to womanhood.

Our work also contributes to literature highlighting the diversity of femininities in rural South Africa (see also Sennott and Angotti 2016), as well as those that are most valued. Although in urban areas of South Africa, consuming femininities, materiality, and the pursuit of modernity are particularly valued by women (Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Mark Hunter 2010), in Agincourt, these femininities were largely minimised or sanctioned altogether (see also Bhana and Pattman 2011 for idealisations of rural femininity). Thus, our findings suggest that women were in some ways reaffirming and enforcing patriarchal norms of femininity and therefore limiting the range of acceptable femininities in Agincourt (Bhana and Pattman 2011; Mojola 2014a).

Importantly, however, privileging respectability—defined in large part by women taking on the social roles, responsibilities, and behaviours associated with ideal femininity in this setting—over other markers of adulthood such as education or financial independence—also

leveled the playing field. By creating pathways that *all* young women could realise regardless of socioeconomic status, respectable womanhood was attainable even if women had a pregnancy outside of marriage or did not marry at all. (As noted earlier, however, women were excluded if they did not attain biological motherhood at some point in their lives). These findings stand in marked contrast to literature on young African men, for whom manhood and adulthood continue to be marked by the ability to financially provide (see Ashforth 1999; Cole 2005; Mojola 2014b). This inability can sometimes lead to their remaining in frustrating social limbo as ‘perpetual youth’, unable to become fully recognised as adults or respected men (ibid). In this paper, we highlight how normative environments around transitional markers for young women are refashioned to enable adulthood to be attainable for all young women, in this case, by shifting the focus from marriage, employment, or a properly timed birth to ‘behaving well.’

The standards for respectability seem to be particularly stringent for mothers. Mothers were supposed to embody ideal femininity – spending more time on domestic duties and care-taking, demonstrating respectability in their dress, manner, and talk, and serving as role models to their children. As such, becoming a mother was a double-edged sword, especially for those who transitioned at a young age. It served to both usher girls into womanhood, while at the same time marking the end of childhood freedom to engage in a wider range of behaviours. These findings parallel Jennifer Johnson-Hanks’ (2006) analysis of childbearing among young women in Cameroon where, in Beti culture, one must strive for respectable or honorable womanhood. The immense value placed in maintaining respect and honor in the transition to womanhood in Cameroon, (above and beyond the timing and ordering of events) led young women to engage in a variety of difficult actions, such as aborting the pregnancy (illegal and dangerous in this setting) or giving up their child to be raised by the father’s family (Johnson-Hanks 2002a, 2006). Though obviously challenging, these options allowed young women to successfully postpone ‘motherhood’ and maintain their identities as ‘girls’ which afforded the freedom to do things such as continuing their education (seen as incompatible with motherhood).

In sum, our findings illustrate how the transition to adulthood is navigated in the context of dramatic social change, especially in settings where widely accepted pathways such as marriage and wage-based employment are in flux and difficult to attain (see also Ansell 2004). Overall, these findings highlight the importance of examining emic models of the transition to adulthood, as they are likely to be particularly valuable for understanding young people’s lived experiences.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the following organisations that generously provided support and funding for this project: the University of Colorado United Government of Graduate Students, Graduate School, and Department of Sociology; the Sociologists’ AIDS Network; a Sherri Aversa Memorial Foundation Dissertation Completion Grant; a William and Flora Hewlett Foundation/Institute of International Education (IIE) Dissertation Fellowship in Population, Reproductive Health, and Economic Development (Hewlett Grant No. 2007-1542; IIE Program No. F480000); a grant to the University of Colorado Population Center (R24HD066613) from the US National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD); a grant from the US National Institute on Aging (R24AG032112) to the University of Colorado (Jane Menken, PI) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Stephen Tollman, PI) for the Partnership for Social Science AIDS Research in South Africa’s Era of ART Rollout; a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2009-4069) to the University of Colorado (Jane Menken, PI) for the African Population

Studies Research and Training Program; and a grant from the Wellcome Trust (085477/Z/08/Z). The authors are grateful for the assistance of the CMH Research Team, Meriam Maritze and Sizzy Ngobeni, and to the women in the Agincourt sub-district, whose generosity in sharing their experiences made this research possible.

References

- Ansell, Nicola. Secondary Schooling and Rural Youth Transitions in Lesotho and Zimbabwe. *Youth & Society*. 2004; 36(2):183–202.
- Ashforth, Adam. Weighing Manhood in Soweto. *Codesria Bulletin*. 1999; 3(4):51–58.
- Bhana, Deevia. Virginité and Virtue: African Masculinities and Femininities in the Making of Teenage Sexual Cultures. *Sexualities*. 2016; 19(4):465–481.
- Bhana, Deevia, Anderson, Bronwynne. Desire and Constraint in the Construction of South African Teenage Women's Sexualities. *Sexualities*. 2013; 16(5/6):548–64.
- Bhana, Deevia, Pattman, Rob. Girls Want Money, Boys Want Virgins: The Materiality of Love amongst South African Township Youth in the Context of HIV and AIDS. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2011; 13(8):961–72.
- Blalock, Casey. Labor Migration and Employment in Post-Apartheid Rural South Africa. University of Colorado; Boulder: 2014.
- Blum, Robert W. Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2007; 41(3):230–38. [PubMed: 17707292]
- Casale, Daniela, Posel, Dorrit. The Male Marital Earnings Premium in the Context of Bride Wealth Payments: Evidence from South Africa. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 2010; 58(2): 211–30.
- Charmaz, Kathy. Grounded Theory. In: Emerson, Robert, editor. *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press; 2001. p. 335-352.
- Christofides, Nicola J., Jewkes, Rachel K., Dunkle, Kristin L., McCarty, Frances, Shai, Nwabisa Jama, Nduna, Mzikazi, Sterk, Claire. Risk Factors for Unplanned and Unwanted Teenage Pregnancies Occurring over Two Years of Follow-up among a Cohort of Young South African Women. *Global Health Action*. 2014; 7:23719. [PubMed: 25150027]
- Cole, Jennifer. The Jaombilo of Tamatave (Madagascar), 1992-2004: Reflections on Youth and Globalization. *Journal of Social History*. 2005; 38(4):891–914.
- Delius, Peter, Glaser, Clive. Sexual Socialisation in South Africa: A Historical Perspective. *African Studies*. 2002; 61(1):27–54.
- Dyer SJ, Abrahams N, Hoffman M, van der Spuy ZM. 'Men Leave Me as I Cannot Have Children': Women's Experiences with Involuntary Childlessness. *Human Reproduction*. 2002; 17(6):1663–68. [PubMed: 12042295]
- Dyer SJ, Abrahams N, Mokoena NE, Lombard CJ, van der Spuy ZM. Psychological Distress among Women Suffering from Couple Infertility in South Africa: A Quantitative Assessment. *Human Reproduction*. 2005; 20(7):1938–43. [PubMed: 15774542]
- Edin, Kerstin, Nilsson, Bo, Ivarsson, Anneli, Kinsman, John, Norris, Shane A., Kahn, Kathleen. Perspectives on Intimate Relationships among Young People in Rural South Africa: The Logic of Risk. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2016; 18(9):1010–1024.
- Elder, Glen H. Age Differentiation and the Life Course. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 1975; 1(1975): 165–90.
- Elder, Glen H. The Life Course as Developmental Theory. *Child Development*. 1998; 69(1):1–12. [PubMed: 9499552]
- Fiske, EB., Ladd, HF. *Elusive Equity: Education Reform in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press; 2004.
- Glaser, Barney, Strauss, Anselm. *Grounded Theory Methods and Qualitative Family Research*. 2005 Nov.67:837–57.
- Graham, Lauren. 'I Am a Mother': Young Women's Negotiation of Femininity and Risk in the Transition to Adulthood. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2016; 18(3):265–79.

- Hampshire, Kate, Porter, Gina, Mashiri, Mac, Maponya, Goodhope, Dube, Sipho. Proposing Love on the Way to School: Mobility, Sexuality and Youth Transitions in South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2011; 13(2):217–31.
- Harrison, Abigail. Hidden Love: Sexual Ideologies and Relationship Ideals among Rural South African Adolescents in the Context of HIV/AIDS. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2008; 10(2):175–89.
- Harrison, Abigail, Hoffman, Susie, Mantell, Joanne E., Smit, Jennifer A., Leu, Cheng-Shiun, Exner, Theresa M., Stein, Zena A. Gender-Focused HIV and Pregnancy Prevention for Schoolgoing Adolescents: The Mpondombili Pilot Intervention in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Journal of HIV/AIDS & Social Services*. 2016; 15(1):29–47. [PubMed: 27642267]
- Harrison, Abigail, O’Sullivan, Lucia F. In the Absence of Marriage: Long-Term Concurrent Partnerships, Pregnancy, and HIV Risk Dynamics Among South African Young Adults. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2010; 14:991–1000. [PubMed: 20354777]
- Hosegood, Victoria, McGrath, Nuala, Moultrie, Tom. Dispensing with Marriage: Marital and Partnership Trends in Rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa 2000-2006. *Demographic Research*. 2009; 20(13):279–312. [PubMed: 25729322]
- Hunter, Mark. The Materiality of Everyday Sex: Thinking beyond ‘Prostitution.’. *African Studies*. 2002; 61(1):99–120.
- Hunter, Mark. Cultural Politics and Masculinities: Multiple-Partners in Historical Perspective in KwaZulu-Natal. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2005; 7(3):209–23.
- Hunter, Mark. *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; 2010.
- Hunter, Monica. *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa*. Second. London, New York, and Toronto: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press; 1961.
- Idele, Priscilla, Gillespie, Amaya, Porth, Tyler, Suzuki, Chiho, Mahy, Mary, Kasedde, Susan, Luo, Chewe. Epidemiology of HIV and AIDS Among Adolescents: Current Status, Inequities, and Data Gaps. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. 2014; 66(Supplement 2):S144–53.
- Jewkes, Rachel K., Dunkle, Kristin, Nduna, Mzikazi, Shai, Nwabisa. Intimate Partner Violence, Relationship Power Inequity, and Incidence of HIV Infection in Young Women in South Africa: A Cohort Study. *The Lancet*. 2010; 376(9734):41–48.
- Jewkes, Rachel, Morrell, Robert. Sexuality and the Limits of Agency among South African Teenage Women: Theorising Femininities and Their Connections to HIV Risk Practices. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2012; 74:1729–37. [PubMed: 21696874]
- Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures. *American Anthropologist*. 2002a; 104(3):865–80.
- Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. The Lesser Shame: Abortion among Educated Women in Southern Cameroon. *Social Science and Medicine*. 2002b; 55(8):1337–49. [PubMed: 12231013]
- Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. *Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 2006.
- Junod, Henri. *The Life of a South African Tribe*. Neuchatel, Switzerland: Imprimerie Attinger Freres; 1912.
- Kahn, Kathleen, Collinson, Mark A., Gómez-Olivé, F Xavier, Mokoena, Obed, Twine, Rhian, Mee, Paul, Afolabi, Sulaimon A., et al. Profile: Agincourt Health and Socio-Demographic Surveillance System. *International Journal of Epidemiology*. 2012; 41:988–1001. [PubMed: 22933647]
- Kahn, Kathleen, Tollman, Stephen M., Collinson, Mark A., Clark, Samuel J., Twine, Rhian, Clark, Benjamin D., Shabangu, Mildred, Gómez-Olivé, Francesc Xavier, Mokoena, Obed, Garenne, Michel L. Research into Health, Population and Social Transitions in Rural South Africa: Data and Methods of the Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance System. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health Supplement*. 2007; 69(785022301):8–20. [PubMed: 17676498]
- Suzanne, Leclerc-Madlala. Transactional Sex and the Pursuit of Modernity. *Social Dynamics*. 2003; 29(2):213–33.
- Sangeetha, Madhavan, Harrison, Abigail, Sennott, Christie. Management of Non-Marital Fertility in Two South African Communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2013; 15(5):614–628.

- Madhavan, Sangeetha, Schatz, Enid J. Coping with Change: Household Structure and Composition in Rural South Africa, 1992 – 2003. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health Supplement*. 2007; 69:85–93. [PubMed: 17676508]
- Mchunu G, Peltzer K, Tutshana B, Seutlwadi L. Adolescent Pregnancy and Associated Factors in South African Youth. *African Health Sciences*. 2012; 12(4):426–434. [PubMed: 23515418]
- Mensch, Barbara S., Bruce, Judith, Greene, Margaret E. *The Uncharted Passage: Girls' Adolescence in the Developing World*. New York: 1998.
- Mojola, Sanyu A. *Love, Money, and HIV: Becoming a Modern African Woman in the Age of AIDS*. Oakland: University of California Press; 2014a.
- Mojola, Sanyu A. Providing Women, Kept Men: Doing Masculinity in the Wake of the African HIV/AIDS Pandemic. *Signs*. 2014b; 39(2):341–363. [PubMed: 25489121]
- Mojola, Sanyu A. Material Girls and Material Love: Consuming Femininity and the Contradictions of Post-Girl Power among Kenyan Schoolgirls. *Continuum*. 2015; 29(2):218–229. [PubMed: 28344428]
- Niehaus, Isak. Disharmonious Spouses and Harmonious Siblings: Conceptualising Household Formation among Urban Residents in QwaQwa. *African Studies*. 1994; 53(1):115–135.
- Niehaus, Isak. Bodies, Heat, and Taboos: Conceptualizing Modern Personhood in the South African Lowveld. *Ethnology*. 2002; 41(3):189–207.
- Pattman, Rob. 'Boys and Girls Should Not Be Too Close': Sexuality, the Identities of African Boys and Girls and HIV/AIDS Education. *Sexualities*. 2005; 8(4):497–516.
- Population Reference Bureau. *The World's Youth 2013 Data Sheet*. 2013. p. 1-17. <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2013/youth-datasheet-2013.aspx/>
- Posel, Dorrit, Rudwick, Stephanie, Casale, Daniela. Is Marriage a Dying Institution in South Africa? Exploring Changes in Marriage in the Context of Ilobolo Payments. *Agenda*. 2011; 25(1):102–111.
- Preston-Whyte, Eleanor. Women Migrants and Marriage. In: Krige, EJ., Comaroff, JL., editors. *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa*. 1981. p. 158-172.
- Reddy, Shakila, Dunne, Mairead. Risking It: Young Heterosexual Femininities in South African Context of HIV/AIDS. 2007; 10(2):159–172.
- Ruark, Allison, Kennedy, Caitlin E., Mazibuko, Nonhlanhla, Dlamini, Lunga, Nunn, Amy, Green, Edward C., Surkan, Pamela J. From First Love to Marriage and Maturity: A Life-Course Perspective on HIV Risk among Young Swazi Adults. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2016; 18(7): 812–825.
- Russell, Marcia, Cupp, Pamela Cupp, Jewkes, Rachel K., Gevers, Anik, Mathews, Catherine, LeFleur-Bellerose, Chantel, Small, Jeon. Intimate Partner Violence Among Adolescents in Cape Town, South Africa. *Prevention Science*. 2014; 15:283–295. [PubMed: 23743796]
- Schaan, Michelle Marian, Taylor, Myra, Gungqisa, Nontombi, Marlink, Richard. Personal Views about Womanhood among Women Living with HIV in Botswana. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2016; 18(2):171–183.
- Sennott, Christie, Angotti, Nicole. Reconsidering Gendered Sexualities in a Generalized AIDS Epidemic. *Gender & Society*. 2016; 30(6):935–957.
- Settersten, Richard A. Age Structuring and the Rhythm of the Life Course. In: Mortimer, Jeylan T., Shanahan, Michael J., editors. *Handbook of the Life Course*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers; 2003. p. 81-98.
- Shisana, O., Rehle, T., Simbayi, LC., Zuma, K., Jooste, S., Zungu, N., Labadarios, D., Onoya, D., et al. *South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012*. Human Sciences Research Council; Cape Town, South Africa: 2014.
- Sommer, Marni. Ideologies of Sexuality, Menstruation and Risk: Girls' Experiences of Puberty and Schooling in Northern Tanzania. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2009; 11(4):383–398.
- Sommer, Marni, Ackatia-Armah, Nana, Connolly, Susan, Smiles, Dana. A Comparison of the Menstruation and Education Experiences of Girls in Tanzania, Ghana, Cambodia and Ethiopia. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. 2015; 45(4):589–609.
- Stadler, Jonathan. Rumor, Gossip and Blame: Implications for HIV/AIDS Prevention in the South African Lowveld. *AIDS Education and Prevention*. 2003; 15(4):357–368. [PubMed: 14516020]

- Statistics South Africa. Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa 2008. Pretoria, South Africa: 2010.
- Statistics South Africa. Marriages and Divorces, 2011. Pretoria, South Africa: 2012.
- Statistics South Africa. National and Provincial Labour Market: Youth Statistical Release P0211.4.2. Pretoria, South Africa: 2014.
- Strauss, Anselm L., Corbin, Juliet. Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1990.
- Varga, Christine A. How Gender Roles Influence Sexual and Reproductive Health among South African Adolescents. *Studies in Family Planning*. 2003; 34(3):160–172. [PubMed: 14558319]
- Waxman, Aliza M., Humphries, Hilton, Frohlich, Janet, Dlamini, Sarah, Ntombela, Fanelesibonge. Young Women’s Life Experiences and Perceptions of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Rural KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2016; 18(10):1122–1136.
- Wilson, Monica. The Early History of the Transkei and Ciskei. *African Studies*. 1959; 18(4):167–179.
- Worden, Nigel. The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy. Fourth. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2007.