Sugar Daddies and Blessers: A contextual study of transactional sexual interactions among young girls and older men

Abstract:	This mixed method study aimed to gather a contextual understanding of the perspectives of young girls in South Africa with regard to transactional sexual interactions between older men and young girls. Two major narratives of the 'sugar daddy' phenomenon have dominated the public discourse on the topic. One emphasises the girls' vulnerability and experience of victimisation, while the other highlights their role as social agents with control in such interactions. In this study, the participants acknowledged the heterogeneity among partners in such interactions, which suggests that the phenomenon of 'sugar daddies' cannot be explained by a simple narrative. The girls' experiences form a continuum based on the degree of their individual control and the extent of their vulnerability in such an interaction. Contextual factors and social norms influence decisions and experiences in these interactions. The study concludes that these relationships form part of the girls' daily experiences of structural violence as well as gender inequality and can be regarded as a symptom of broader societal structures and norms. Quantitative data investigates the mental health status of the participants while an essentialist/realist thematic analysis of qualitative data explores experiences and perceptions of the girls. Keywords blesser; gender inequality; structural violence; sugar daddy; transactional sex/ relationships

Abstract

This mixed method study aimed to gather a contextual understanding of the perspectives of young girls in South Africa with regard to transactional sexual interactions between older men and young girls. Two major narratives of the 'sugar daddy' phenomenon have dominated the public discourse on the topic. One emphasises the girls' vulnerability and experience of victimisation, while the other highlights their role as social agents with control in such interactions. In this study, the participants acknowledged the heterogeneity among partners in such interactions, which suggests that the phenomenon of 'sugar daddies' cannot be explained by a simple narrative. The girls' experiences form a continuum based on the degree of their individual control and the extent of their vulnerability in such an interaction. Contextual factors and social norms influence decisions and experiences in these interactions. The study concludes that these relationships form part of the girls' daily experiences of structural violence as well as gender inequality and can be regarded as a symptom of broader societal structures and norms. Quantitative data investigates the mental health status of the participants while an essentialist/realist thematic analysis of qualitative data explores experiences and perceptions of the girls.

In South Africa there has recently been growing public concern about the phenomenon of 'blessers', a local term referring to 'sugar daddies'. Both of these terms refer to transactional sex/relationships which have in recent times contributed to social ills such as the rise in HIV-positive status among young women (Richter, Mabaso, Ramjith, & Norris, 2015). There have been growing awareness and concern about the development of this social process and its effects (Public Radio International, 2017). This paper aims to contribute to the development of an understanding of the complexity of factors that influence such interactions which involve material resources exchanged for sexual favours. This study explores the experiential perspectives of female high-school learners in dating older men.

The context in which the participants in this study live is characterised by poverty and social challenges caused by a general lack of resources, this being an oft-cited reason for turning to sugar daddy relationships (Gobind & du Plessis, 2015). The research participants were from a township that had historically been designated for so-called black people by the apartheid government in South Africa. Black townships were under-resourced and continue to be poor areas even two decades after the end of apartheid. These conditions establish a context of structural violence for the girls' daily lives. According to Galtung (1969), structural violence is characterised by social structures or social institutions which may harm people by preventing them from having their basic human needs met, such as poverty and lack of resources and opportunities to better oneself. Lives conducted in poverty and its related challenges have been shown to lead to poor mental health (Sipsma et al., 2013). The researchers used quantitative measures in the form of psychometric instruments to obtain an indication of the mental well-being of the participants in the study. They also gathered qualitative information from interviews with the participants in the hope of giving young girls a voice in the social discourses around transactional sex.

In this article, *sugar daddies* are defined as men who exchange money, material favours, or gifts for sexual favours with girls who are below the age of 18 and are significantly younger

(in most cases at least 15 years younger) than they are. The exchange can form part of a stable relationship or happen in more casual interactions. The clear age difference is helpful to understand the girls' reasoning about older males and sugar daddies. It is important to distinguish these interactions from prostitution. Interactions with sugar daddies are shaped by a negotiation process that is subtler than prostitution and not as clearly defined (Zembe, Townsend, Thorson, & Ekström, 2013). Sexual intercourse is not directly linked to payment but forms an inherent part of an interaction through which the women derive monetary values (Zembe et al., 2013). While the origin of the new term 'blessers' is not clear, it may be seen as an attempt to normalise and legitimise transactional interactions.

Perceptions of girls who are dating sugar daddies

Two contrasting perceptions of girls and young women who enter transactional transgenerational relationships dominate the literature and the public discourse (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau, Heise, Wamoyi, & Bobrova, 2016; Zwane, 2016). Both perceptions are concerned with the power imbalance that shapes such interactions, which is seen as being caused by the different gender, age, and economic status of the younger female compared to the older male (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al., 2016; Zwane, 2016). On average, men are in a privileged economic position compared to girls who seek money and monetary favours that they have difficulty accessing by themselves or through their families (Bandali, 2011; Hunter, 2002).

One perception sees girls in a passive role in their interaction with older men (Shefer & Strebel, 2012). The girls are perceived as victims (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al., 2016), inevitably placing men in the position of perpetrators (Shefer & Strebel, 2012). Their role is seen in terms of their vulnerability in such an interaction, which makes it impossible for them to negotiate the conditions in which to have protected sexual intercourse (Bandali,

2011; Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al., 2016) and influences their experience of force, coercion, and abuse (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al., 2016).

In an alternative perception, women are seen as active social agents who consciously influence the interactions with older men and negotiate the terms and conditions to their advantage (Luke & Kurz, 2002). Instead of being seen as vulnerable or powerless (Shefer & Strebel, 2012), the women are seen to have agency as they realise that their sexuality is an economic potential that they can use to uplift themselves financially. They have a certain level of control in the relationship and can decide whether to start or end a relationship or with whom to have sexual intercourse (Harling et al., 2014). Females can try to secure as many monetary benefits as possible prior to offering any sexual favours (Luke & Kurz, 2002). However, they have less power to influence the conditions of a relationship and, as much as they can engage in a process of bargaining, their scope of action is defined by the larger context that is shaped by gender inequality (Luke & Kurz, 2002).

Possible reasons for young girls to date older men

Previous studies suggest that the position of girls and young women in interaction with older men is a combination of these two contrasting roles (Luke & Kurz, 2002). Their decision to enter into such a relationship may be based on various reasons that differ in relation to a specific context. Money is still considered to be the main motivation for such an interaction; however, it may have different meanings depending on the specific nature of the need to get money or other benefits (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004). Some young girls may be striving to meet their basic needs or to be able to support their families owing to their poor background (Smith, 2002). Other women may claim money for items that are not essential but allow them to live a desired lifestyle and are in keeping with the image of a sophisticated woman, such as clothes, jewellery, cell phones, or fashionable hairstyles (Hunter, 2002). A third possibility is that the monetary favours and gifts from the men change the girls' status among their peers as

they are acknowledged for their assets and respected for their behaviour, further encouraging them to date older men (Zembe et al., 2013).

Other reasons to date older men are that the girls might have a preference for older men who are more experienced or sexually active and they might be curious to try a relationship with an older man (Luke & Kurz, 2002). It takes some courage to date an older man and it is also considered, by some teenagers, to be an important step in the process of growing up and becoming more mature (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004). Apart from that, some girls also enter such a relationship for romantic reasons and seek emotional intimacy (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004).

Influence of social norms

Social norms play a role in shaping public perceptions as well as the actual interaction between the male and female partner in such relationships. Responsibility is commonly attributed to women and young girls in respect of the phenomenon of sugar daddies: attempts may be made to evaluate such relationships from a moral standpoint, blaming girls for what may be perceived as their lack of values and morals (Shefer & Strebel, 2012). In addition to that, young girls are expected to abstain and protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted diseases (Harling et al., 2014). On the other hand, society tends to praise men for having multiple sexual partners and providing for more than one woman (Shefer & Strebel, 2012). The notion that a man has to provide for a woman is a patriarchal understanding of the role of a man, leading many women to expect financial support, while men compete to fulfil that role. It is frequently assumed that a man is entitled to dictate the sexual interaction with the female if he is providing for her (Jewkes, Morrell, Sikweyiya, Dunkle, & Penn-Kekana, 2012).

These norms form part of a broader "masculine discourse" and serve to reproduce certain gendered power structures and specific expectations of women and men (Hunter, 2002).

Interventions that target young girls who are dating older men

Most interventions that aim to reduce the frequency of intergenerational sex are based on these patriarchal values and focus on changing the girls' behaviour so that they will abstain from relationships with older men (Harling et al., 2014). The underlying goal is to create a taboo that shows the girls that their behaviour is not socially accepted, and the aim of such interventions is to keep them away from older men (Harling et al., 2014). These interventions are based on studies that focus on the negative consequences such relationships have for the health of young girls.

A frequent concern is that girls are more likely to contract HIV/Aids through such interactions, even if the empirical evidence does not clearly suggest that (Hunter, 2002). Nonetheless, several studies have indicated that risky sexual behaviour is closely linked to the power dynamics in sexual interactions between older men and younger women (Dunkle et al., 2004; Harling et al., 2014). However, most interventions have a narrow focus on symptoms while not considering either the unequal power relations (Shefer & Strebel, 2012) or the motivation for each partner to be in such a relationship.

The research question: What are the perceptions of girls in Tembisa regarding blesser relationships?

In the current discussions around the phenomenon of blessers and sugar daddies in South Africa, it becomes apparent that the broader socio-political and economic experiences of the girls are often neglected or even ignored. The campaign by the Minister of Health, Dr Aaron

Motsoaledi, to "wean girls of sugar daddies" (Department of Health, South Africa, Budget Speech 2016) aims to target girls but is neither based on a clear understanding of the lived experience of girls nor does it include them in the development of such interventions.

In adopting a mixed-method approach, the study aims to attain new insights into the sugar daddy phenomenon and thus promote a more complex perspective of this societal problem. The qualitative data targets the girls' perceptions of the phenomenon.

The qualitative interviews in this study explore whether young girls perceive it as a challenge that older men are dating girls in high school. The interviews further focus on the actual experience of girls in such interactions and their reasons for entering a relationship with an older man. While the participating girls were not selected for, nor asked to disclose, being in such relationships, all the girls who were interviewed identified a variety of challenges they face daily.

The quantitative data aims to provide a measure of the mental health challenges the girls may be dealing with, in the light of which their perceptions and experiences may be interpreted. This helps to convey the context of structural violence in which such girls live.

Challenges which emerged include the high rates of teenage pregnancy, a fear of falling pregnant, academic challenges and difficulties focusing on schoolwork, as well as experiences of multiple forms of violence. The girls described emotional violence, mainly in the form of bullying or peer pressure at school, physical violence at home and at school, sexual harassment, mainly from older boys, as well as sexual abuse at home and at school. These elements provide the context in which the sugar daddy phenomenon occurs.

Methodology

Study Design

This mixed-method study served as a needs analysis, as part of the development of a programme aiming to assist young women in overcoming their challenges while growing up.

The study was implemented in close co-operation between Itsoseng Clinic at the University of Pretoria and the local NPO "Get Informed Youth Centre", between May and June 2016.

The quantitative data was collected using psychometric instruments in order to gain a picture of the mental health context of the girls being interviewed. The qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted and the data was analysed within an essentialist/realist thematic analysis paradigm, in the manner proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

This study targeted girls in grades 8 and 9 who attend high school in Phomolong, Tembisa, a township near Johannesburg that continues to be characterised by a lack of resources.

Participants

32 girls in grades 8 and 9 (M_{age} = 14.56 years, age range: 13-16 years) at two high schools in Phomolong, Tembisa (Ekurhuleni North) were randomly selected to be invited to participate in the study.

Ethics clearance was issued by the University of Pretoria in South Africa and the Universität Konstanz in Germany, and permission was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the study at the respective schools in Ekurhuleni North. Ethical considerations determined by these institutions were carefully observed in order to protect the vulnerable participants, who provided informed assent while their caretakers provided informed consent. Follow-up counselling was made available to the participants.

Data Collection Methods

17 of the 32 learners volunteered to participate in eight qualitative interviews, which took slightly different formats. The interviews took place over three days at one of the high schools. One participant was interviewed individually, 10 were interviewed as pairs (five interviews), and six were interviewed as groups of three learners (two interviews). The

interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, a research assistant, and two women

working at a local youth centre who acted as translators. All interviewers were trained

together in the question and interview process prior to the interviews taking place. Interviews

were conducted in isiZulu and seSotho through a translator and transcribed by the researchers

in English. The length of the interviews varied between 40 minutes and 110 minutes.

Instruments

The instruments used for the quantitative data collection reported on here consisted of the

Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) of the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders

(PRIME-MD) diagnostic instrument for common mental disorders, consisting of nine items

and an additional item assessing the overall functionality of an individual; and the Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptom Scale – Interview for Diagnostic and Statistical Manual -

5 (PSS-I-5) (Foa & Capaldi, 2013).

The PHQ-9 was developed by Robert J. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke,

and colleagues from Columbia University in the mid-1990s with funding supplied by the

pharmaceutical company, Pfizer. It was validated in 2001 (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams,

2001).

Interviews

The interviews explored with the participants the main challenges experienced by the girls at

high school. They were encouraged to speak about their own challenges or share the stories

they had heard from other girls. The researcher placed an emphasis on giving the participants

this option to avoid possible discomfort in sharing their own stories. All participants referred

to girls who had relationships with sugar daddies, but none explicitly acknowledged being in

such a relationship. Probing questions were used to inquire more about specific challenges

they might encounter, such as those that they face in class, at home, with other learners, or in

relation to their future. The participants were also asked what they knew about sexual intercourse and about protection for safe sexual intercourse.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis following the six-step guideline of Braun and Clarke (2006). The study aimed to identify themes that form the perception of young girls, which influence their opinions and inform their decisions. Thus, the researchers considered the participants' descriptions as the most important outcomes of the study and did not aim to theorise the socio-cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that formed the girls' environment. The limitations concerning the interpretation of the data are discussed below.

In order to create a safe space for the participants, the interviews were not recorded; however, two interviewers were present at each interview. One acted as an interpreter while the researcher transcribed the girls' responses. After the data had been gathered, the notes were typed into a text document for further analysis. The analysis results of the data were discussed in the research team comprising two researchers and an assistant.

The data was analysed in a "bottom up" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12) approach, to identify the main needs and challenges that the participants identified without any predefined theoretical model. In the fifth step, the themes were defined and named as main categories grouping various sub-themes. Themes are used as headings in the results and the sub-themes are listed in each section.

Results

Quantitative Data

The overall score in the PHQ-9 Questionnaire is used as an indicator to determine the severity of a possible depression and ranges from 0 to 27. The average PHQ-9 score for all girls was

7.22 with a standard deviation of 5.55. Of all the girls, 37.5% showed no signs of depression. 31.25% showed mild signs of depression. 15.62% showed moderate signs of depression. 12.5% showed moderately severe signs of depression. 3.12% showed severe signs of depression. Treatment for depressive symptoms is recommended for 21.88% of all the girls. Concerning the functionality of the girls in everyday life, 46.86% said that it was not at all difficult for them to do their work and their chores in the house and get along with other people. 37.5 % said it was somewhat difficult, 3.13% said it was very difficult and 12.5 % said it was extremely difficult.

Based on the results of the PSSI-5, 84.38% of all the girls had experienced trauma, of whom 15.62% had directly experienced a traumatic event, 34.38% had witnessed a traumatic event, and 50% had been confronted with or learned about a traumatic event. 15.62% had not experienced any event that fits the DSM-5 definition of a traumatic event. Based merely on these symptoms, 25.93% of all the girls who participated in the interviews meet the criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD. 18.52% meet the criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD when the duration of symptoms, the significant impairment in the functionality of the girls, as well as the condition of a traumatic event that meets the requirements of the DSM-5 diagnosis were included in the diagnoses.

Qualitative interviews

The main themes that were identified based on the girls' description of the phenomenon of sugar daddies are grouped in three categories below. All the girls were asked specifically about the sugar daddy phenomenon and their responses reflected their experiences of this phenomenon.

Perceptions of girls who are dating sugar daddies

The participants in the interviews described what they saw as a negative emotional impact on the lives of girls who are dating sugar daddies. They explained how a girl constantly re-evaluates her decision to have a sugar daddy and might develop regrets. They reported the effects of isolation.

"Some kids come to school and sit alone. They don't talk to anyone, they can't even concentrate [on] what teacher is saying because they think about their situation."

They spoke of poor concentration in the classroom, and sometimes dropping out of school. The participants described how the academic performance of girls who are dating sugar daddies may deteriorate as they struggle to focus on their work at school. They become preoccupied by their experiences with their sugar daddy. The girls neglect their roles as scholars.

"Sometimes they will have regrets. Some quit [school]."

The isolation can extend to alienation from families as they keep their relationship with the older man secret, fearing parental disapproval. A tactic to hide the sugar daddy is to simultaneously date a younger boy (boyfriend) who is then used as a decoy to hide the provenance of gifts and rewards. The parents are deceived into thinking the boyfriend buys the gifts. The boyfriend, in turn, is deceived into thinking that the parents buy the gifts.

"Sometimes, it can be a secret relationship … they know their parents won't allow them to do such things."

"Some have a sugar daddy and a boyfriend so that they can hide that they have a sugar daddy. People will think that the boy buys everything. The boy will not know, thinking it is their parents [who buy the gifts]."

The fear of being judged or punished for their behaviour forces the girls to remain silent and can result in feelings of shame. Their interactions with older men usually start in clubs or places they have been to without their parents' permission. The fear of reprimand and parental

disapproval results in girls hiding possible mistreatment or abuse. They are reluctant to report

matters to the police or adults who could help them.

"Most of them don't want to go to police … nobody forced you to go to a club. They didn't

ask at home. So they are afraid … you should be honest with parents. "

Influence of the phenomenon of sugar daddies on the interactions of girls

The participants indicated that it may be seen as a status symbol to date an older man. By

identifying herself through her relationship with an older man, a schoolgirl might be regarded

as superior by other learners. They perceive it as "special", trendy, fashionable. They want to

be viewed as such by their peers.

"When you date someone older then you – it's a date, a fashion, a trend. They want to

be trendy, they want to be seen."

"The girls who are going out with guys brag about it. They go to places over the

weekend. Then they brag on Mondays."

Some learners said they perceive a change in the character of girls once they start dating

older men. The girls are said to be careless and not afraid to be judged for their behaviour.

They aim to be autonomous and resent instruction or direction by their parents, other authority

figures, and other learners. They are consequently perceived and experienced sometimes as

arrogant, feeling superior, judgemental, bullying, demeaning of other learners, and distant

 from peers.

"They don't want to be told anything. Not by their parents and not by any girl. They

are also bullies…"

"They get to be full of themselves … They end up being mean to others. … When the

other girls are around, they laugh at them, saying they are wearing filthy clothes."

According to the participants, the interactions among the girls at school are filled with

tension, suspicion, and jealousy in relation to the general competition they experience,

especially with regard to taking a position in the matter of the sugar daddy phenomenon. Girls who are dating older men will present a rather biased picture, showing off their experiences and monetary gains from relationships with older men. In return, the other learners will judge them for their behaviour, specifically with regard to risky behaviour and dangerous situations.

"They are looking for money, also for older boys outside the school, we are getting bored to see that. When we tell them, they fight back."

The participants also report rumours and gossip, with girls guessing who is in a relationship with an older man. The girls who do not date older men feel challenged.

"We warned the girls, but they didn't listen, because they think others are jealous because they have everything, money and alcohol."

In the interviews, the younger participants also explained how they are introduced to certain behaviours by older girls who put pressure on them to start dating, firstly older boys at school and eventually older men. They experience this as bullying, becoming intimidated by the older girls.

"Peer pressure. Sugar daddies. Maybe your friends tell you how sex is. Then you think, okay, let me try it."

"The older girls from grade 9 put pressure on [a] grade 8 [girl] by saying that she should get a sugar daddy so that he can buy you clothes and give you money also for your hair."

Possible Reasons for Girls to Date Sugar Daddies

Perceived diversity among girls that are dating sugar daddies

The participants emphasised what they perceived as the heterogeneity of girls who are dating sugar daddies. When providing reasons or intentions, they referred to specific girls rather than generalising, recognising a variety of reasons why girls might engage in this type of behaviour, and why some might experiment but give up.

"Some girls enjoy it, some they don't."

"… some don't enjoy [it]. They are just doing it for their situation at home."

Changes during high-school

The girls referred to the phenomenon of sugar daddies as an experience interlinked with their other challenges. The participants outlined several changes that they experience upon entering high school and that influence their decision to enter a relationship with an older man. They also drew a lot of comparisons between their interactions with older boys at school, younger adults, and older sugar daddies, suggesting that these interactions are similar. Their perception of most interactions with males, irrespective of their age, was centred on money, with the boy or the man offering the girls gifts or money or attempting to provide for her. Male partners will variously manipulate or negotiate sexual favours with the girl. Boys at school may expect a kiss or sexual intercourse as a "proof of the girl's love", while older men will directly refer to the monetary favours they bestow.

Elements of manipulation and abuse

The participants' descriptions showed that some girls might experience manipulation or be abused by the older men. They described how girls will get confused in such interactions with older men and attributed this mainly to the power imbalance between a girl and an older man.

"I think they just do … something friendly for the men to give them money. The older men make the girls do things she doesn't feel comfortable doing but … she will get confused [and] ends up doing them anyway."

They also explained how an older man will adopt certain behaviours to create trust in the girl, such as presenting himself as a father figure suggesting that he will protect her. A girl may end up entering the house of the man where she will experience a certain element of force or pressure to engage in sexual activities that the man expects.

"Girls … feel safe. The guys will be very nice while they are still at the club. They will say 'Yes my child…'".

"Then they buy drinks. Afterwards, they say 'Let me take you home, where do you stay? That's far – let me take you to my house so that you can sleep and go home tomorrow morning.'"

In the participants' perception, such older men are prepared to use intimidation and violent force to pressurise the girls, and their descriptions of sexual intercourse suggest that the girls are not always actively participating or willing to sleep with the men.

They suggest that the girls are coerced with violent threats to either pay back the money or be sexually complicit.

"The girl has no right to say 'no' to sex in the house of the sugar daddy."

"The guys tell the girls that they should concentrate on what they do. [The guys say], "When I bought you a beer, it came straight, it didn't look away"".

The fact that men dictate the behaviours of the girls and attach their favours to certain expectations is perceived as a major challenge in such interactions by the participants. The men also introduce gradual changes in the relationship. An example is how the men will initially use a condom and later expect the girls to sleep with them without any form of protection. The girls feel that they are not in a position to insist on the use of a condom.

"…when the day comes when they have skin to skin sex and the girl falls pregnant, the sugar daddy will run away because they have a wife and children to look after."

The role of money

Interviewees identified money as the main reason why younger girls will enter a relationship with a sugar daddy. The men will buy the girls drinks or certain valuables beforehand and will refer to that when they expect sexual intercourse and having unprotected sex.

"When they get home, the guys start touching the girl and tell them they have to pay back all the money they bought drinks with, meaning they have to sleep with him".

And without a condom: "When I bought you a beer it didn't come in a plastic, it comes clear".

"Mostly, the relationship, it's all about money and sex… They don't speak most of the time they spend together".

The influence of the girls' experience of poverty and inequality

The participants explained how a girl's background of poverty and inequality influences her to look for money to provide for her basic needs through a relationship with an older man who gives her a regular amount of money or certain presents. Once girls start dating older men and see how it can alleviate their personal struggle and that of their family, it is difficult to leave this situation. Secondly, young girls feel pressurised to improve their situation if they perceive it as inferior to that of other girls. The element of social comparison has an impact on the girls' decisions.

The participants believe that girls who feel they do not receive enough support from their families are more likely to date older men.

"When you are in need, he will provide for you. The reason is comparison, especially when you don't have money in the family and the girls want to fit in, so she will date an older guy so that she can have what her friends have. Money and clothes."

Discussion

The quantitative data sets out to establish a mental health context in which the interviews were conducted. The qualitative interviews give more insight into the lived experiences of the girls and the particular challenges and problems that impact their well-being negatively. Their perceptions of the sugar daddy phenomenon can be interpreted against this background. The

purpose was not to establish prevalence but rather to access a range of experiences around the sugar daddy phenomenon.

The analysis of the quantitative data shows that more than half of the participants interviewed consider their everyday lives to be difficult, while experiencing mild to severe depressive symptoms. A significant number of girls were offered the recommendation that they attend psychotherapy. One in five participants met the criteria for PTSD. As the girls were randomly invited to the interviews, these findings show that the mental health of a significant number of girls in this setting may be affected. It is also indicated that the girls face severe challenges and problems in their everyday lives which cannot be identified based on the quantitative data alone. These results provide a picture of the impact on mental health of the environment in which young girls currently live while attending school. While it cannot be deduced from the analysis of the data that girls in sugar daddy relationships experience PTSD or significant levels of depression, the quantitative results indicate possible general levels of mental health challenges experienced by girls in this context.

The phenomenon of sugar daddies was identified as occurring in a complex social context impacting strongly on the well-being of the girls. The analysis of their descriptions highlights that the girls' role in their interaction with older men can be reduced neither to that of a victim who is completely vulnerable, nor to that of a social agent who is in full control irrespective of the unequal power dynamics. The results suggest the tension caused by the ambivalence of such relationships within a context of factors influencing mental health challenges.

The girls in the interviews acknowledged the heterogeneity of interactions, showing that the phenomenon of sugar daddies may not be explained by any simple narrative. At the one end of a continuum of such interactions, girls described a sense of manipulation and confusion due to a lack of experience, or feelings of coercion in a relationship with an older man to get much-needed resources. At the other end, the girls use their youthful sexuality in their negotiation to benefit from relationships with older men. In general, their decision to start

interacting with older men forms part of a process that the girls become gradually more open to. In this process, the girls develop their identity and sexuality and start dating in general. The girls experience their interactions with older men as a progressive step after dating boys. In this process, the behaviour and the expectations of their peers, as well as general social judgement, are experienced by the girls as major influential factors pressuring them to date older men.

In analysing the role of the girls, it is important to consider both their vulnerability and their agency in the specific context that shapes their everyday lives and their social position. The situation of girls in systematically disadvantaged communities forms a sub-stratum of the South African society that is shaped by inequality, poverty, unemployment and high levels of gender inequality. The girls' constant re-evaluation of their interaction with older men, as well as their diverse opinions and behaviours in relation to the phenomenon of sugar daddies, reflects how they grapple to find their position within unequal societal power structures that disadvantage them in so many ways.

The phenomenon of sugar daddies forms part of the girls' daily experiences of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and gender inequality, and can be regarded as a symptom of broader societal structures and norms. Women all over the world have used their sexuality as a source of economic potential; however, their use of transactional sex to provide for themselves and their families is fuelled by a difficult economic environment (Luke & Kurz, 2002). The participants in this study live in a systemically disadvantaged community indicative of structural violence in society. As a way out of the socio-economic stressors they experience, they believe that their daily struggles and financial troubles will become easier or disappear when they enter sexual relationships with older men (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Shefer & Strebel, 2012). They may see these relationships as positioning them as superior to other girls. As a social group, the girls introduce certain norms and put pressure on each other to normalise or legitimise their relationships with older men in order to have access to the financial rewards.

Conclusion

The girls have certain insights into their interactions with older men that are neither obvious to the outside nor identifiable merely by observing their behaviour. The girls elaborated on transactional sex interactions with older men, explaining the negative effects on emotional, physical, and sexual levels. The focus of the public discourse tends to emphasise perceived problematic outcomes of such interactions, such as high levels of teenage pregnancy or HIV infection. A better understanding of the girls' perspectives contextualises a complex social discourse that highlights the importance of a holistic view on the phenomenon of sugar daddies.

Limitations

The study included a limited number of girls, was conducted in a limited time frame and was restricted to a specific geographical area. Consequently, the findings are not representative of the general population. There can also be no causal inference between the mental health measurements of the girls and the engagements in sugar daddy relationships.

It was not possible to identify the background of the men who interact with the girls referred to in this study. The girls' descriptions reflect common effects of an imbalance of power that is shaped by gender and age (Shefer & Strebel, 2012), thus there is no suggestion that there are specific elements of these interactions with older men that are unique to this environment or to members of the societal groups these girls identify with.

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