



Multiple and Concurrent Partnering in Southern Africa: The Ethnographic Perspective

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Social science that makes a difference



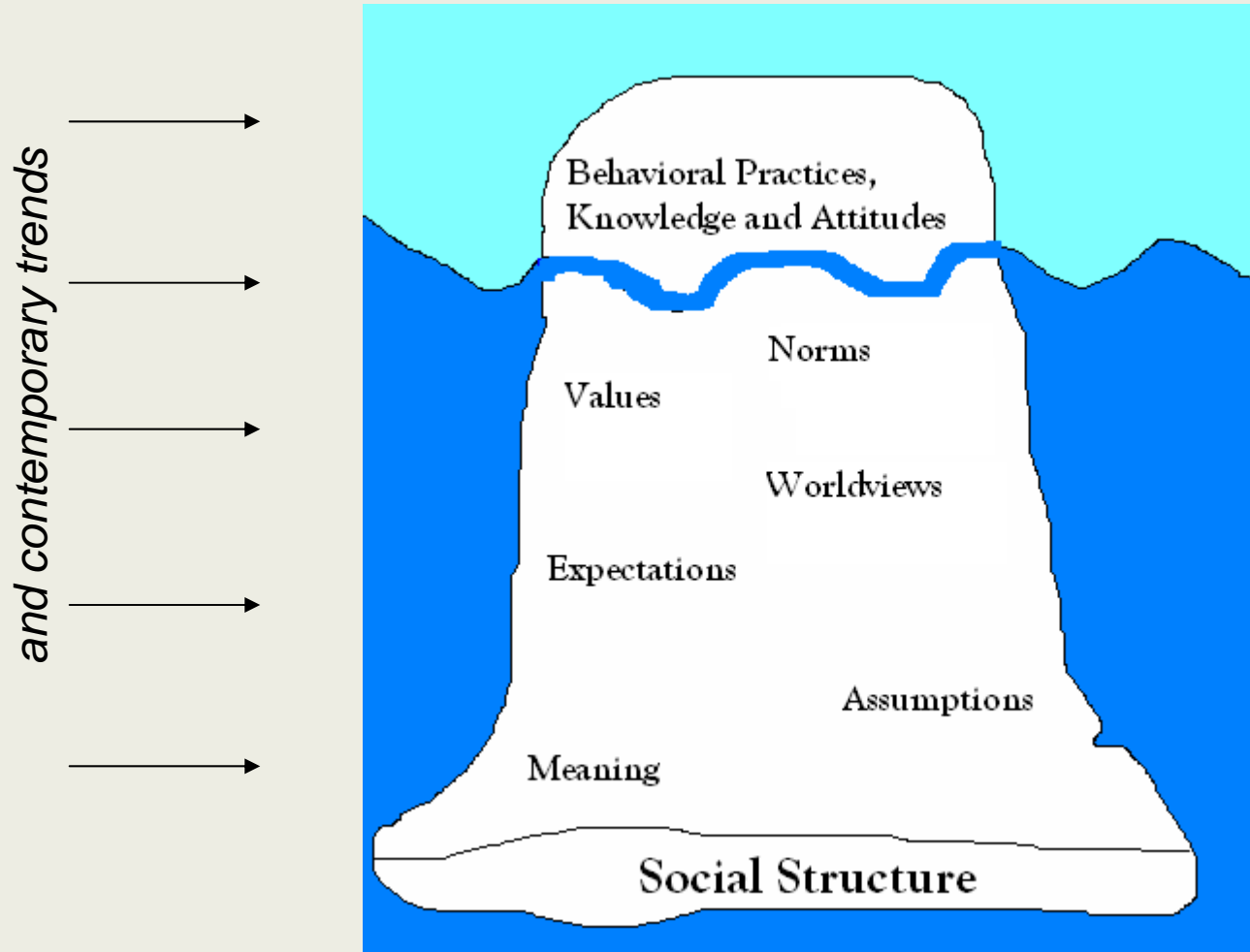
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“Everything you discuss here is just the tip of the iceberg”

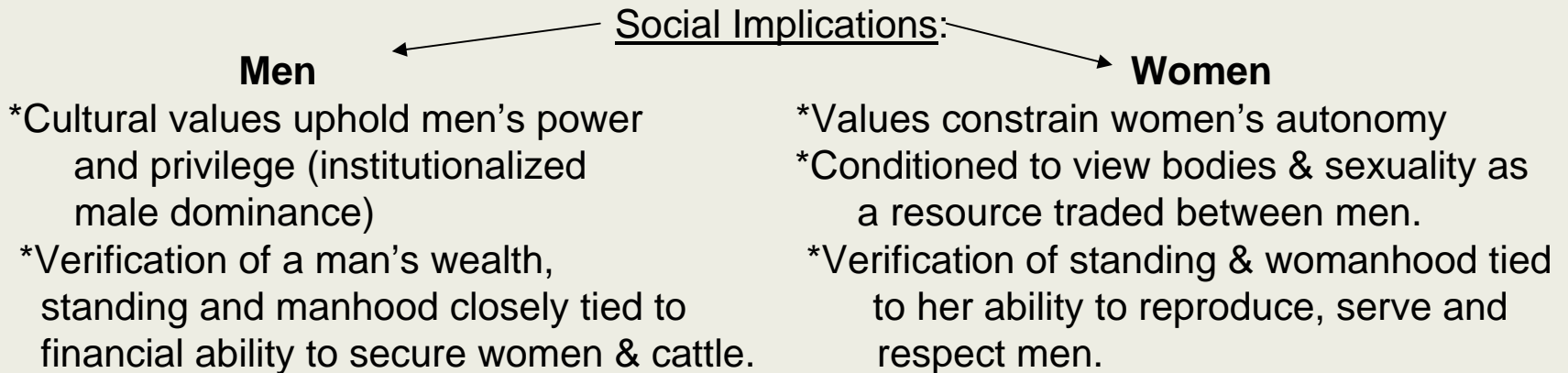
Participant at Swaziland HIV/AIDS Partners’ Forum, 2008

*Historical, political, economic processes,
and contemporary trends*



Southern African societies are ethnographically part of the 'cattle complex' cultural zone

Traditionally **polygamous**, **patrilineal** and **patrilocal**, with large bride-wealths conferred large degree of jural rights over woman and children)



Today: Traditional rules/prescriptions loosening; past ways inform present social biases. i.e. today's modified polygamy or 'monogamy *de jura* - polygamy *de facto*' -- multiple concurrent partnering.

Many norms & values rooted in these social arrangements persist and shape the assumptions, expectations & meanings that people bring to relationships ₃

Ethnographic evidence illuminates a dominant contemporary sexual partnering pattern with 4 key ingredients

1. Multiple and concurrent partnerships are the predominant and common form of sexual partnering; normative for both sexes non-marital, normative for men in marriage.

*Practice is governed by a flexible moral framework.

*Men & women seek multiple partners for a variety of reasons.

*Multiple partnering is legitimized through supportive cultural scripting (i.e. men's sexuality is unrestrainable, women's duty to not question, to tolerate & forgive partner infidelity, etc..)

2. Exchange of money, goods or services for sex is normative cultural expectation in relationships.


*Men have long had, continue to have an ethical obligation/social imperative to share wealth on a scale appropriate to their social standing. This also applies in the sexual arena. (Swindler & Watkins 2006)

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* A woman's 'giving' of sex carries an implicit ethical expectation of compensation. Giving sex for free has meaning as lack of self-respect lack of pride, low self-worth. (Leclerc-Madlala 2008)

*Resource exchange demands sexual exchange
i.e. "bottom-currency", "carpet payments"*

Economic transfers in sex demonstrate love, commitment, appreciation



3. Consumerist desires are increasingly coming to the fore as a driver of MCP with expansion of economies, growing aspirations of women and widening wealth gaps.

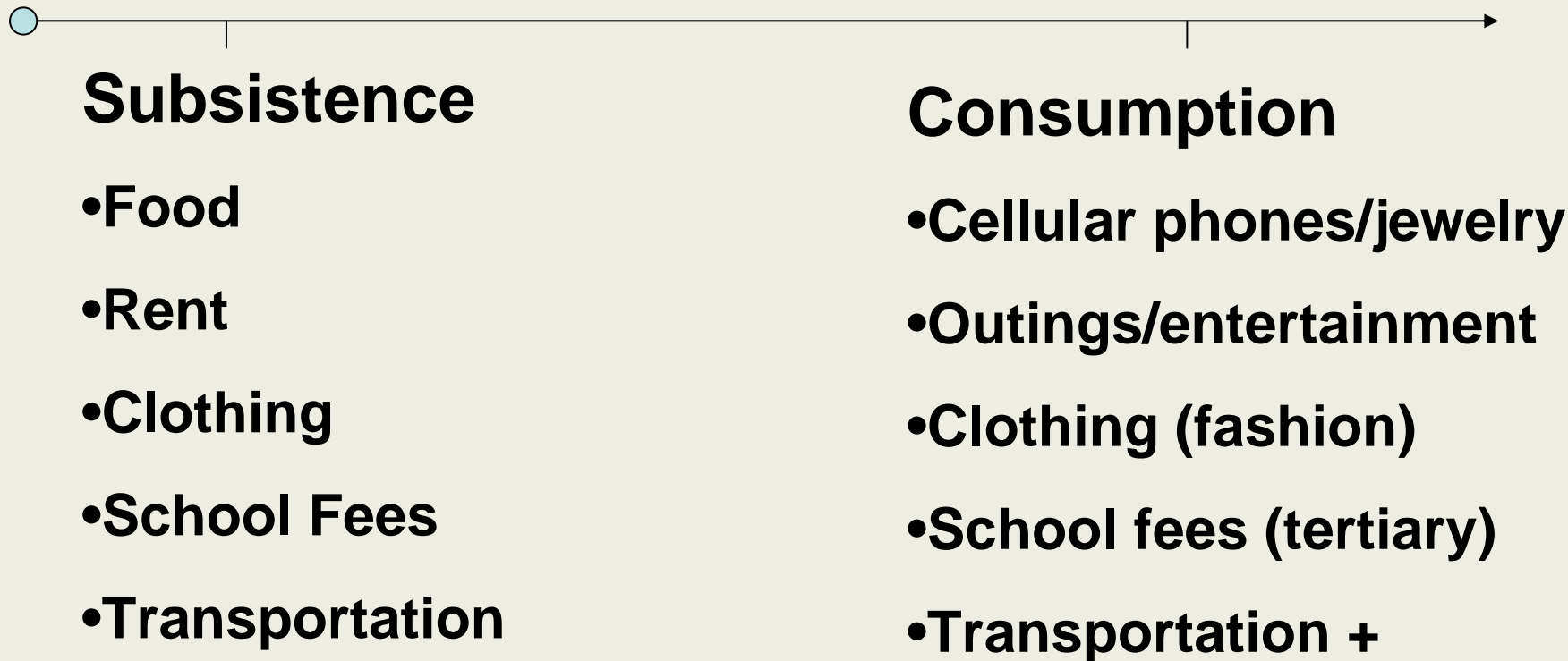
*Women are aware that their bodies are a valued resource that can be used to their advantage.

*Many urban young women today are active agents in seeking multiple partners.

*Current attempts by many to eschew conventional gender roles & self identify as modern empowered women are premised upon overt pursuit of sexual pleasure & exploitation of partners for gain.

“Today a woman needs money, its not like before. That’s why we have many boyfriends. Before it was just men who could enjoy everything they liked. Now its our time, I can say.” (20 yrs urban South Africa)

Continuum of 'needs' in sexual exchange



Women can move in and out of different forms of sexual exchange without being stigmatized

4. Intergenerational sex is not an uncommon component of MCP. Long been the model for marriage & is culturally familiar.

*Widely age-disparate relationships viewed as primarily transactional:
Condom use is rare.

*HIV risk perception especially low:
Young women seen as clean, older men seen as stable, less risk taking.

“Older men are nicer than the young ones, they listen, they are patient and tender. They appreciate you and want you to have nice things. Sometimes girls fall in love with them but it is no use because they are married.” (18 yrs urban Botswana)

These 4 ingredients combine to lend support & legitimize MCP. Incentives & ‘pay-offs’ for participants are social, economic, & symbolic —add value and give meaning to life.

Cultural meanings & motivations

For Men: Beyond possibilities for finding love, a spouse, companion

- Affirms self-worth, validates manhood,
- Provides opportunities, culturally expected way to show generosity,
- Clear cultural marker of normal masculinity

Young men: Peer pressure to prove normality/ masculinity reported as #1 motivation. Concurrency viewed as 'strategic', hedge against disappointment, recreational, meets desire for constant availability of a woman, provides excitement in life.

Older men: Report need for variety, relief from stress or boredom, respite from domestic discord, desire for 'clean' partners, desire for sexual rejuvenation, social pressure to demonstrate manhood & social worth, some overtly challenged/taunted to perform (i.e. disabled men)

As a man's wealth increases so does his sexual access and social expectations of sexual access increase.

This is symbolically represented in colloquials such as:

BMW= 'Be My Wife'

MBA = 'Married But Available'

Z3ed= To be HIV infected

For Women:

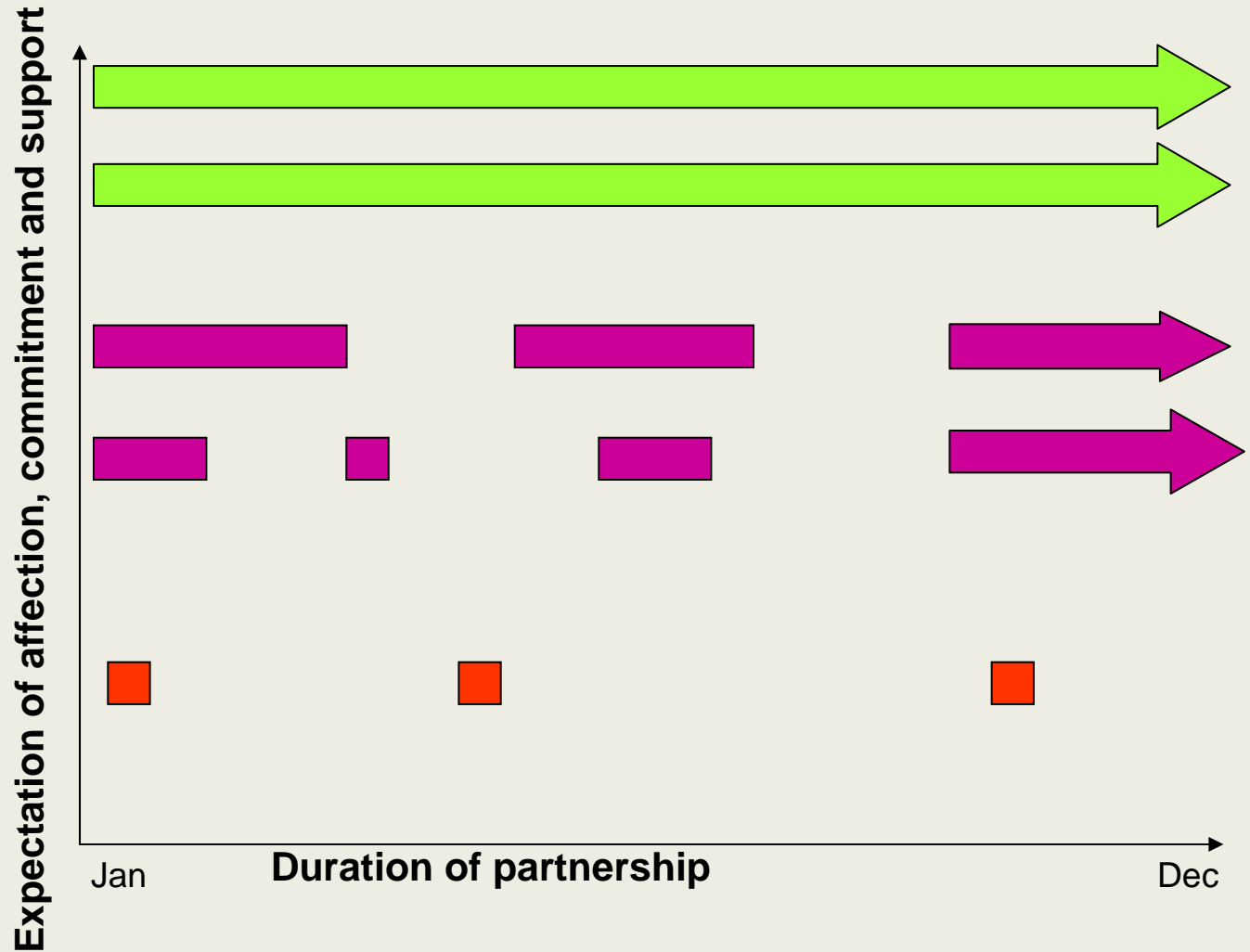
- Affirms her value, self-worth,
- Proves that she is lovable/desirable,
- Boosts self-esteem & status among peers,
- Helps build social networks & capital,
- Provides opportunity to gain materially, financially

Vulnerability: poverty & hunger, coercion, manipulation, pressure to conform & 'keep up', pressure to obey and show 'respect', provides protection, employment opportunities, distraction from emotional problems.

Active agency: boast of taking charge, 'milking the cow' (Mozambique expression for exploiting older men), seeking fun/adventure/opportunities to make contacts among 'sponsors', 'investors' or 'ministers' (popular terms throughout region for boyfriends who assist in various ways with present or future well-being & social mobility).

Women are keenly aware of the competition they face from other women

Types of Concurrent Partnerships



❖ **Ongoing** (main partner),
(co-wife, mistress, 'small
house')

❖ **Intermittent or
occasional** (co-parents,
location dependent
relationships, 'little
girlfriends')

❖ **One-off** (sex-worker,
casual encounter, 'take-
aways', 'local bicycles')

From: S. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) Age-disparate and intergeneration sex in southern Africa: the dynamics of hypervulnerability. *AIDS*, 22 (supp 4): 1-9.

2 Key Underlying Drivers of MCP

1. In most all cases different partners fulfill different needs; one for companionship, good sex, transportation, help with school work, one for food or clothes, one for entertainment


“My true boyfriend helps me with school work, but he’s not working. So my other one has a sister with a salon where I can do my hair for free. We need many things, that’s why we do it” (17 yrs. rural Mozambique)

“This guy, he’s had many young ones. But we like him because he takes us places like hotels. He bought one girl a nice watch and one for her boyfriend. He doesn’t mind.”

(19 yrs urban Swaziland)

2. Young men & women largely perceive sexual fidelity as nonstrategic, even ‘stupid’. Concurrency is a back-up strategy, a way to cope with inevitable disappointment (‘Justin Case’)

“What’s the use? You know how men are, they disappoint you, its like that. Its good to have another shoulder waiting there for you. Some girls they go mad because of this thing...it means they are stupid, really. They need to wake up.” (21 yrs. peri-urban S.A.) ¹²



Multiple and concurrent partnerships in southern Africa are part of an *interlocked system that includes transactional and intergenerational sex.*

Inequalities of gender and wealth


- + Norms that link love & sex to material giving and receiving
- + Needs and aspirations growing faster than the ability of local economies to meet those needs and aspirations

= Generalized HIV epidemics where young women are exceptionally vulnerable.

Concluding thoughts

- Great need in the region to raise awareness of the HIV risks involved in multiple and concurrent partnering.
- In that context, need for greater awareness on the especially high risks involved in age/wealth disparate (intergenerational) relationships.
- More effort and resources required to directly engage men for change, both young and old, and identify/support male leadership.
- Need for programs that prompt people to reflect upon and challenge the cultural constraints that undermine the possibility of safer sex.
- HIV prevention in the region thus far has been all about the disadvantages of un-safe sex (no condom use). **Are there any advantages to safer sex?**
Let's promote advantages of mutual faithfulness and/or partner reduction

(i.e. less STIs, less expensive, less stress due to deception, possibly contribute to building trust & partner faithfulness, more stable homes, happier children? etc)



Young people in southern Africa today are living in an era where they measure modern lifestyle by having a mobile phone, eating out, and wearing trendy clothes. The materialism fuelled by television, videos, internet, and magazines, especially in the cities has increased young women's aspirations as they strive to match the standard of living of their peers in the global village. Their efforts are putting them at direct risk for HIV.

Thank you

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