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‘I think it’s about experiencing, like, life’: a qualitative exploration of contemporary adolescent intimate relationships in South Africa

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Intimate or dating relationships play an important role in young people’s psychosocial development and well-being. Yet, we know relatively little about how teenagers conceptualise and experience them. Research knowledge about young people’s intimate relationships is largely gleaned from studies whose primary focus has been on adolescent sexuality and violence. This study explored intimate relationships using qualitative data from 12 focus-group discussions and 25 in-depth individual interviews with Grade 8 (mean age = 14.6 years) and Grade 11 (mean age = 17.2 years) young people recruited from Cape Town schools. Although there is overlap between these findings and previous research, this study delved into the microdynamics of teenagers’ relationship practices and conceptualisations. Their discussions provide insight into a nebulous dating landscape that is highly gendered and greatly influenced by peer relations. There was a heterogeneity of experience with relationships and sex. Implications for intervention development are discussed.

Keywords: adolescent; dating; romantic relationships; peer relationships; South Africa

Introduction

Research findings support the assertion that intimate or dating relationships among young people are developmentally normative and significant. Most teenagers participate in different types of such relationships and these early experiences have a significant impact on their psychosocial functioning and development as well as their later, adult relationships (Collins 2003; Natsuaki, Biehl, and Ge 2009; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, and Collins 2001). Researchers in the US have found that between the ages of 12 and 18 years most young people engage in intimate relationships (Collins 2003; Sorenson 2007). Likewise in South Africa, a cross-sectional study of young people in Grades 8 and 11 in Cape Town found that 87% of respondents had been in or were currently in an intimate relationship (Flisher et al. 2007).

Young people identify intimate relationships as important, but also acknowledge that they sometimes find them difficult to navigate (Grover and Nangle 2003). A particular problem is intimate partner violence (IPV) – 16.4% of young people surveyed in Cape Town schools admitted to perpetrating physical violence against a dating partner.
Such violence is related to risky sexual behaviour and an increased risk of HIV-infection (Jewkes 2002; Jewkes et al. 2010). In a context with a high prevalence of HIV and violence among youth, intimate relationships are an area of concern.

A review of contemporary research relevant to intimate relationships among South African youth reveals that most studies’ primary focus is sexuality or violence and often participants are older teenagers. Few studies have put the intimate relationship at the core of the inquiry. It is essential to understand the nuances and complexities of these relationships themselves as a context within which young people may experience sex or violence, especially to inform intervention programmes seeking to address sexuality, violence and relationships with teens. In this study we examine the microdynamics of young people’s relationships – how teenagers negotiate, shape, invest and understand them – and then consider whether these views are congruent with the findings in the contemporary South African youth sexuality and violence literature and what the implications are for programme development.

Methods

Data were collected during 12 focus-group discussions (FGDs) and 25 individual, in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Grade 8 (n = 37) and Grade 11 (n = 60) students recruited from three schools in Cape Town. Grade 8 and Grade 11 students were selected in order to obtain a cross-sectional view of two points on the developmental spectrum. Single-sex FGDs were conducted for each Grade at each school, thus four FGDs were conducted at each school. School A (n_{FGD} = 24, n_{IDI} = 7) was an English-medium school with the highest annual school fees among the study schools. Students were predominantly Coloured and Black African and many commuted long distances daily. School B (n_{FGD} = 33, n_{IDI} = 10) was an English and Afrikaans dual-medium school with mid-range school fees relative to other study schools. Students were also predominantly Coloured and Black African, but lived in nearby low-income communities. School C (n_{FGD} = 40, n_{IDI} = 8) was an English-medium school with the lowest school fees in the study group. Students were primarily Black African, isiXhosa-speaking youth from very low-income families living in the nearby ‘township’ community.

All Grade 8 and Grade 11 students (n = 1031) at each of the three participating schools were eligible to participate in the study. Letters describing the study in the three predominant languages of the region – Afrikaans, English and Xhosa – were sent to students’ legal guardians, who were asked to return a signed form if they consented to their student’s participation in the study. At the insistence of school principals, school staff controlled the distribution of these letters and forms and the reminders to return them. The researchers were unable to track how many young people took a letter and consent form, how many showed this letter and form to their parent or guardian or how many were given permission but did not return the form. Students were reminded by school staff to return their forms at least three times before data collection took place. Up to 10 participants of each sex from each Grade were randomly selected to participate in FGDs from the group of students whose legal guardians consented to their participation (n = 103). At the end of the FGDs, students interested in participating in an IDI were asked to provide their contact information. The group facilitators identified two-to-four potential candidates from the group based on their participation in the discussion and their willingness to participate in an interview. A total of 28 students were selected, 2 students did not attend several scheduled meetings and 1 student could not be contacted.

Permission for this study was granted by the University of Cape Town’s Health Sciences Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee, the Western Cape Department of Education, and school principals at each school. Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from legal guardians. Informed assent was obtained from participants.
in FGDs and IDIs. All participants were given a small incentive, a snack and information about various help resources. No adverse events occurred during data collection.

**Procedure**

The 45–60 minute FGDs were conducted with groups of up to 10 students with 2 trained facilitators. In-depth interviews were conducted by the first author and a translator was present for interviews conducted with isiXhosa-speaking students. Facilitators used a flexible interview guide during FGDs and IDIs covering topics such as general ideas or experiences about adolescent intimate relationships (e.g., ‘Tell me about relationships between boyfriends and girlfriends’), motivations and expectations, dating activities, sex, violence, substance use, influences, concepts of healthy and unhealthy relationships and advice about intimate relationships. Participants in this study were open, willing and enthusiastic to discuss their perspectives on these topics.

**Data analysis**

All FGDs and IDIs were audio recorded and then transcribed. Afrikaans and Xhosa transcripts were translated into English for coding and analysis. NVivo software was used to code and analyse data. A framework approach was used to code the data to initially group data by commonly discussed topics. Further coding involved identification of themes within these topic areas. Analysis involved identifying and interpreting thematic links between various topics (e.g., gender role theme in relationship initiation and dating activities topics) and comparing the themes and content of girls’ and boys’ reports grouped by Grade. Throughout the report, data are co-identified by the age (e.g., Grade 8 or younger versus Grade 11 or older) and sex of the participants.

**Participants**

Female \((n = 53)\) and male \((n = 44)\) students participated in the FGDs. From these groups, 25 students (14 girls, 11 boys) – 14 Grade 11 students (age range = 16–20 years; average age = 17.2 years; \(n_{\text{girls}} = 8\)) and 11 Grade 8 students (age range = 14–16 years; average age = 14.6 years; \(n_{\text{girls}} = 6\)) – participated in IDIs. All names reported in this paper have been changed to protect participants’ identities.

Questions were asked without specifying a sexual orientation or judgment on sexuality. Participants discussed only heterosexual intimate relationships, therefore we acknowledge a heterosexual bias in this report. Participants were not obligated to disclose their personal relationship history or status, however some chose to elaborate on their personal experiences. Two Grade 8 girls and one Grade 8 boy disclosed that they had never had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Two Grade 11 girls described their current relationship in detail and two Grade 11 boys mentioned that they decided not to be in an intimate relationship because of their previous experiences of being hurt and feeling that relationships required a big time investment. This report presents young people’s discourse of how they perceive adolescent intimate relationships are or should be conducted.

**Results**

**Gender**

The influence of gender on young people’s intimate relationships is evident from the very beginning of them. Participants agreed that intimate relationships were usually initiated
by boys who would ‘ask a girl out’ often via MXit (cheap cellphone text-chat service), SMS (regular text message via cellphone), a message passed via their friends or, rarely, in person. Lina, a Grade 11 girl, explained:

The first step is you must ask each other out. No not each other. The guy must ask the girl out.

But these days a girl can ask a guy out. But mostly its guys that ask girls out.

Lina’s report, similar to many participants, indicates some flexibility in gender roles, but often these statements were followed by a preference for the maintenance of the gender status quo. Indeed, all participants reported that it was rare that a girl would initiate a relationship and Edwin, a Grade 11 boy, commented that he would think it ‘weird’ if a girl asked him out. Julian, a Grade 8 boy, surmised that this gendered expectation was:

... because, like, you see your friends ask the girl out. Or some boys would say they, like, take control of that relationship. You’re the man in the relationship and you show the girl, like, you’re not shy.

Edwin elaborated on the idea of an expected male role and an inherent capacity within boys accounting for this norm: ‘that’s, like, the boy’s duty ... because it’s like the boy is the strong person.’ Several girls echoed these sentiments saying it was ‘easy’ for boys to ask a girl out. However, this idea was challenged by a group of Grade 11 boys who confided: ‘The girls think ... it’s easy for a boy to ask a girl out, but I think it’s hard’, ‘All boys fear rejection’. Even though boys experienced initiating relationships as difficult, mainly because a girl could decline the advance, several girls reported that boys would not always accept a rejection. Lina explained: ‘A girl can say no, but if a boy really loves the girl, the boy won’t stop until the girl says yes.’ She described that some boys bully or beat girls into accepting their proposition whereas others might send ‘sweet SMSes or make a lot of promises.’

According to most participants, friends played an active role in the initiation of relationships often acting as intermediaries through whom communication about a potential relationship and advising on the suitability of a potential partner would be directed.

Although some older participants, particularly girls, described initiating a relationship through a series of discussions and interactions with a potential partner, they still ultimately relied on the boy to either ask them out or declare her his girlfriend. Irene, a Grade 11 girl who shared the story of her current relationship, described an atypical negotiation process before she agreed to become involved in a relationship with her current boyfriend. Although she faced a great deal of pressure from her friends to begin a relationship with this particular boy, something commonly reported, Irene heeded her feelings and instead asked the boy for some time to decide. She described:

I decided to go to this new guy and talk. [He told] me all these things about girlfriends and relationships and how he was hurt by his other girlfriend, what he’s looking for in a girlfriend. So I thought, ok, this guy is just like me ‘cause he’s just come out of a relationship ... so we started talking a lot. There was communication. ... We didn’t talk a lot, with the other one, so it was a new thing for me this talking ... I told him we mustn’t rush anything ... I didn’t want to do the things that I did with this other boy. I didn’t want to hurt myself.

Older girls maintained that whether a relationship became either serious or casual depended mostly on the boyfriend. Older boys confirmed this view by saying it depended on what they wanted from the relationship or girlfriend. These boys reported that usually a quick progression to sex occurred in casual relationships whereas in serious relationships boys would be more patient about waiting to have sex and they would spend more time getting to know one another and discussing hopes, dreams and struggles.
Reports about this type of personal disclosure varied. While some participants in each group described intimate relationships as ones in which a couple would share personal thoughts, feelings and experiences, other participants, again across groups, maintained that they shared less with a dating partner than with a friend because they felt more comfortable with friends. One group of Grade 11 girls explained: ‘You don’t really have to fake it with your friends’, ‘With your friends you, like, be yourself . . . you must be more mature if you want a boyfriend’.

In contrast to the initiation of relationships, termination could be executed by either partner. According to the girls, boys most often terminated relationships whereas boys perceived that girls did so more often. Several girls and boys reported that girls were more likely to feel upset or hurt about a break up primarily because boys could easily find another girlfriend:

The boy . . . will just, like, say it’s over without having any feelings or anything. Without thinking of how the girl feel. . . . ‘Cause it’s almost like there are many other girls out there for the boys. It’s, like, easy for them to get. (Nazeeya, Grade 8 girl)

This description indicates a gendered differential in relationship investment and may explain girls’ perceived greater hurt – they invest more and thus lose more. Nazeeya described, ‘break ups’ would be accomplished ‘sometimes face to face, or over MXit, or sending a friend.’ These actions would signal a formal end to the relationship, however many participants described that one partner may begin to ignore the other partner or they may begin to have less contact and thus the relationship would be assumed to be over. As found elsewhere (Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Wood and Jewkes 2001), several participants described that teenagers would not formally end relationships in case they wished to rekindle them.

Within a relationship, couples are faced with a variety of decisions about what, how, when and where they will engage in relationship activities. Almost all participants reported that decisions were made by both partners together, but their descriptions of decision-making behaviour contradicted this belief. Several suggested that many issues are not discussed and as such there is little collaborative decision-making. Curtis (Grade 11 boy) said: ‘You don’t actually decide. It’s just something that is spur of the moment. There’s no real planning.’ Girls’ and boys’ reports indicated that boys usually initiate relationships, contact during the relationship and sexual behaviour. Older boys described that it was the boyfriend’s role to suggest an activity and the girlfriend’s role to accept or decline it. Indeed, older boys said that unless a girlfriend explicitly objects, they assume that she consents to the activity, including sexual activity. A few participants, primarily older girls, described discussing choices related to sex (mostly when to have sex) and future life choices with a partner. Previous research with youth in South Africa found that both girls and boys said that boys held the decision-making power in relationships (Harrison 2002; Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene 2001).

Young people’s reports reveal the highly gendered nature of their relationships, described in terms of expected roles and behaviours as well as a power differential favouring boys. Decision-making was not collaborative, but rather depended on an implicit process of boys initiating action and girls either accepting it or expected to explicitly refuse. Other studies in South Africa have similarly found that boys expect to play an initiator or leader role in a relationship, while girls play a more passive role of accepting (or not-objecting) or declining advances including relationship initiation, relationship type, dating activities and sexual behaviour (Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene 2001; Harrison et al. 2001; Jewkes et al. 2010; Noonan and Charles 2009; O’Sullivan 2005).
Fluidity and lack of structure

Participants across age and sex groups described two main types of intimate relationships – serious or very close relationships, which were referred to variously as ‘real’, ‘love’, ‘serious’ or being ‘stuck together’, and casual or fling relationships, referred to as ‘koppie’, ‘jolling’, ‘speening’ or ‘playing’ (cf. Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Harrison (2002, 2008) similarly described these relationship types predominant in adolescent dating. The consensus among participants was that casual relationships were more common than serious relationships. Sizwe, a Grade 11 boy, explained: ‘Boys our age are playing only, not having serious relationships where you love only one girl.’

After relationships were initiated, participants were less clear about what constituted a relationship and commented: ‘I don’t know really’, as if they had not considered this question in detail before, and mentioned group and couples-only activities typical of girlfriend-boyfriend pairs within their peer group. Older participants reported communicating frequently via MXit and spending time together as a couple at school, where many people met their partners. Younger participants reported less contact with intimate partners and more group than couple-only activities. A few participants in both age groups described that sometimes partners would do schoolwork together. Perhaps participants struggled to describe what constitutes a relationship because their relationships lack structure and are fluid, especially among younger adolescents. In all groups, participants’ reports suggested that they seldom had formal, planned dates, however some mentioned dating activities including going to the mall, the movies or the beach.

Although relationship initiation is relatively structured, the ensuing relationship and relationship termination are significantly less so. The inherent informality of young people’s relationships described by participants may undermine their ability to engage in collaborative decision-making, planning and risk management.

Another theme prevalent in all participants’ reports, echoing Harrison’s (2002) earlier work, is that of multiple concurrent partners, or ‘cheating’ as several participants described it. Young people described typical scenarios where a person may have fleeting encounters, sometimes sexual in some way, but not ongoing, with other people while they are in an intimate relationship. There was agreement in girls’ and boys’ reports that boys are more likely to engage in multiple concurrent partners. Young people interviewed in KwaZulu Natal reported similar gendered patterns of multiple concurrent partners (Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene 2001). However, interviews with adolescent girls in the Eastern Cape indicated that girls, too, engage in multiple concurrent partners (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Although participants usually discussed multiple concurrent partners as a common occurrence in the adolescent dating domain, the majority of participants viewed multiple concurrent partners negatively, similar to other adolescent girls who voiced a desire for monogamy (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Indeed, ‘cheating’ was a significant source of stress in relationships often causing arguments and feelings of distrust and hurt and precipitating the ending of the relationship.

Sex

There was a prevailing perception among participants that most young people were sexually active, even by those participants who said that they and most of their friends were sexually inexperienced. Joanne, a Grade 11 girl who confided that she had sex, said: ‘maybe there’s different reasons why teenagers have sex. Maybe to feel in or to be in a crowd and to please their friends.’ As with initiating relationships and dating activities, boys were said to initiate sexual intimacy. Reports from girls in both groups, and
similar to other work (Harrison 2008; MacPhail and Campbell 2001), suggested their common belief that boys expected to have sex or engage in non-intercourse sexual behaviours with girlfriends. Whereas some older girls disclosed their own position of sometimes wanting to have sex with a boyfriend, younger girls in the study all asserted not wanting to have sex, but feeling pressure to have a boyfriend and to become sexually active (also described in Jewkes and Morrell [2012]).

Most boys asserted that while they did not always expect to have sex with a girlfriend, they often tried to ‘get’ sex from girls. Several older boys reported sex as a goal of engaging in intimate relationships and described several strategies to achieve this goal including ‘sweet talking’ the girl, getting girls drunk, organising opportunities to be alone with a partner or initiating sexual behaviour such as kissing and progressing toward sexual intercourse unless the girl verbally objected. In contrast to the minimal communication about or planning for sex between partners that teenagers reported in this and other studies (Harrison et al. 2001; O’Sullivan et al. 2006), older boys described peers helping them to devise plans to have sex such as by securing a private location. As found elsewhere in South Africa, peers were an accepted source of information about sex and contraception (Wood and Jewkes 2006).

Participants described the social status that accompanied both being in a relationship and being sexually active. As found elsewhere (MacPhail and Campbell 2001; Selikow et al. 2009), adolescents may experience explicit pressure from their friends or peers to have sex and implicit pressure to ‘fit in’ to a peer group that is perceived to be sexually active. Nevertheless, participants unanimously reported that every person had a choice not to have sex and a group of Grade 11 girls asserted that ‘not everybody has sex’. However, some participants elaborated that the consequences of this choice may differ. For example, a group of Grade 11 boys reported that their friends would tease them if they chose to abstain (also found in MacPhail and Campbell [2001]).

There was little agreement between participants about who in a relationship was responsible for contraception. In general, contraception, like sex, was said to be rarely discussed by partners, even if they were sexually active. In contrast, Harrison (2002) found that both boys and girls agreed that boys were responsible for obtaining and using condoms. Only one participant, Grade 11 girl Irene, described that she and her partner had agreed on a sexual health strategy:

I told him that I was [HIV] negative and he told me that he was negative, but I told him there was no proof. . . . And so we went [to the clinic] together. We still go together.

Irene’s relationship was unique among the study participants in that she and her boyfriend discussed many issues openly that most participants reported avoiding.

Despite Irene’s motivation to have a healthy relationship and implement safe sex practices with the support of her boyfriend, she said: ‘I thought he was cheating the first time he told me that we must use protection.’ She explained that she worried that his insistence on condom use meant that he was or would ‘cheat’ or that he did not trust her. This association between condom use and distrust was commonly discussed by older participants who described the pervasive belief among young people that condom use was a sign of no or less trust and love between partners. This finding is supported by previous work with South African youth (Harrison 2008; Harrison et al. 2001; MacPhail and Campbell 2001; Pettifor et al. 2005; Selikow et al. 2009).

Several girls’ reports suggest a discourse of modesty around sex, portraying abstinence as the most desirable option and suggesting high levels of coercion around sex. For example, they might have sex with a boyfriend because he wants to or because they feel it is expected
and not because they want to have sex. Nevertheless, older girls indicated their willingness to have sex, especially to achieve their goal of having a committed boyfriend. Boys’ reports promote abstinence to a lesser degree and leave a greater impression of normative casual sex encounters. These reports are similar to findings in other studies with South African adolescents (Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene 2001; Harrison et al. 2001; O’Sullivan et al. 2006). If teens are having sex with an intimate partner, then it is occurring within the fluid, amorphous, gender-in equitable types of relationships typical of this age group and this relationship context makes planning, decision-making and communication about sex difficult.

Peer influence

Intimate relationships are an important part of adolescent peer group and social culture. Many younger and older teenagers feel pressure to become involved in relationships in order to ‘fit in’ with and gain social status among their peers (Selikow et al. 2009). A group of Grade 11 boys explain:

Like at this stage it’s not that we are bored of staying alone, it was pressure. You find that you are not dating and your friends are. Now when you all talk they talk about [relationships] and you wish that you could also be able to [join in].

... when they tease a person who does not have a girlfriend they would normally say ‘so and so is weak!’ Then you get that pressure where you feel you have to go out there and find a girl to date.

Mandisa (Grade 11 girl) similarly said: ‘sometimes it’s not like you love the person. It’s about you. You want to brag about your boyfriend to other people and compare ... and tell them my boyfriend is better.’ As documented elsewhere (Selikow et al. 2009), having a boyfriend or girlfriend was socially desirable and socially rewarded. Peers’ influence permeated most aspects of intimate relationships. Participants described their friends’ involvement in partner selection, facilitating relationship initiation and termination, and advising and supporting one another. Peer group evaluation held a lot of power and, as noted by a Grade 11 boys’ group, ‘you don’t want to disappoint them’. Peers were the preferred source of information about relationships and partners for almost all participants. Similar to other research findings (Selikow et al. 2009), Curtis (Grade 11 boy) acknowledged that although peers may be equally inexperienced in relationship issues, adolescents turn to one another because they feel more comfortable discussing these issues amongst themselves:

We will speak to our peers because we feel that it’s better. You can communicate with them more than what you communicate with your parents. We might not know a lot about relationships, but we teach each other about relationships because maybe the one has been in a relationship and now the other one also want to go in a relationship then that one can tell the next one about the relationship.

Participants described choosing intimate partners primarily based on friends’ approval and a variety of desirable characteristics. Girls reported that a boy’s appearance or physical attractiveness including his clothing and his assumed wealth were important factors in partner desirability for casual relationships. Previous research has found similar attitudes (Harrison 2008; Harrison et al. 2001; Jewkes and Morrell 2012). For more serious relationships, the girls maintained that ‘personality’ and how the boy treats them – ‘he must care for you’ – became more important. They described that ‘if you in love ... the clothes and stuff won’t matter anymore’ (Grade 8 girls’ group). Boys noted the importance of physical attractiveness, particularly a girl’s figure. They also identified honesty and caring as important. Although there was some overlap in girls’ and boys’
concepts of caring in terms of emotional supportiveness exhibited in talking to one another (especially about family problems), they departed in other gendered interpretations. For example, girls associated caring with gift giving by boyfriends whereas boys associated caring with sexual behaviours and caretaking by girlfriends.

Peer pressure and status were not the only motivations identified by participants for engaging in relationships. Lina (Grade 11 girl) said: ‘I think it’s about experiencing, like, life. As you go through life you want to experience things so [intimate relationships] is one of them.’ This thought was expressed by many participants, including a group of Grade 8 boys: ‘just experiencing life, just taking one step further. . . . Trying, like, to interact with the different sex so that [we] can, like, know more and . . . experience new feelings.’ Older boys and girls described intimate relationships as fulfilling a need for love, support and companionship:

I think a relationship is like two people who find out more stuff about the person, get to learn the person more better. Her likes and dislikes, the stuff she would like to do, stuff she want to be in life one day. (Grade 11 boys’ group)

Some boys, both older and younger, discussed wanting girlfriends to provide guidance, particularly to discourage them from engaging in risk behaviours such as substance use, truancy or neglecting school work. As discussed earlier, many of the girls’ perceptions and the boys’ reports suggested that sex motivated many boys to become involved in intimate relationships. Among the older girls, there were discussions about the purpose of intimate relationships as finding a ‘soulmate’, ‘Mr Right’ or ‘the one.’ A few of the older girls stated that girls got boyfriends ‘for money’.

Although some participants discussed the desire for a supportive person as motivation for becoming involved in a relationship, more dominant were motivations related to peer pressure and peer status, similar to findings among adolescents in other regions of South Africa (Harrison et al. 2001; Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Selikow et al. 2009; Wood and Jewkes 2006) and internationally (Harper et al. 2004). Indeed, based on young people’s uncertainty about how a relationship is built and inconsistent or limited contact with a partner, it seems that it may be more important to have a boyfriend or girlfriend to gain peer status than to engage in and build a relationship. The importance of status was also evidenced in participants’ ideals around desirability of the partner’s exhibited wealth. Young people in this study added that seeking life experience was an important driver to begin relationships. Participants’ discussions of their ideas about and experiences with intimate relationships revealed contrasts between their knowledge, ideals and behaviours, suggesting that knowledge alone does not produce desired behaviours.

**Discussion**

Similar to previous work with South African teenagers (Harrison et al. 2001), participants’ enthusiasm to discuss intimate relationships, together with the content of their reports, indicated that these relationships are very important to them and a developmentally new area of exploration. This conclusion is perhaps unsurprising given the prevalence of young people’s involvement in dating (Flisher et al. 2007). However, in contrast to survey findings of factors influencing South African young people’s identity that reported boys found relationships more important than girls did (Alberts et al. 2003), girls in this study seemed equally interested and at times more invested in intimate relationships in comparison to the boys. There is congruency between the findings in this study and previous sexuality and violence research with adolescents in South Africa. What is unique about the findings in this study is the insight into the gendered and unstructured, fluid
dating landscape of adolescents that is highly influenced by peer relations, and how this context impacts on relationship and sex ideas and practices of the teenagers. It is important to consider what implications these findings may have on intervention and programme development to promote healthy relationships, prevent intimate partner violence, reduce sexual-risk taking and prevent HIV.

The adolescents’ reports reveal highly gendered expectations, understandings and practices within intimate relationships. Generally, boys seem to have more power in leadership-type roles than the girls, who are ascribed more passive roles. This inequity is potentially highly problematic as girls have little agency or confidence in creating a relationship they want and are comfortable in, and they are often left feeling hurt or disillusioned by relationship experiences. At the extreme, girls are left vulnerable to abuse (Jewkes 2002). It is particularly worrying that young girls are experiencing and learning such inequities that may shape their later, adult relationships. Boys, too, have voiced their feelings of vulnerability to hurt and rejection and struggles with the gendered relationship scripts that hold them responsible for thinking of and initiating relationships and activities with girlfriends. Given this gender inequity, it is important that interventions address gender issues and engage both boys and girls.

The descriptions of teen intimate relationships give us a sense that they are often nebulous and informal. This fluidity makes it difficult for adolescents to engage in proactive and deliberate collaborative decision-making within these relationships. Without a shared conception of how a relationship might grow and develop or a shared social script or schema for how it progresses, it is difficult to engage in future-oriented activities such as planning and considering consequences. In addition, the assumed active roles for boys and passive roles for girls within these relationships present another layer of complexity and vulnerability within decision-making. Furthermore, challenging these power dynamics within such an unstructured dating model may prove difficult. Programme developers cannot assume that there is a structure to South African young people’s intimate relationships and dating practices. Interventions need to empower girls and boys to use health-promoting decision-making strategies that are workable within the fluidity of their relationships.

Although many young people explore intimate relationships and sex, their involvement is not uniform. These differences are crucial for intervention developers to consider such that the material and targeted skills are accessible to teens with varying experience with relationships or sex. Safe sex messaging is important, especially in the context of high HIV-infection risk. However, a focus on sexual intercourse may not be accessible to young people who are not yet sexually active and it may unwittingly convey ideas about sexual intercourse as a norm and narrow the range of sexual practices to heterosexual intercourse. Others have similarly critiqued the focus on condom use in HIV-prevention efforts, adding that it is a simplified approach to a very complex, nuanced issue, suggesting that the discussion on sexuality should be broadened (Harrison 2008; Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene 2001; Pettifor et al. 2005). The stories of participants in this study suggest that prevention programmes should include attention to sexuality, especially sexual decision-making skills.

Given the influential role of peers in young people’s intimate relationships, addressing peer relations and building skills to identify and deal with peer pressure in healthy and acceptable ways would be very useful. Indeed, the friendship context may be more accessible for young adolescents to initially access and engage with programme material – interpersonal skills could then be generalised to intimate relationships. Further, as suggested elsewhere (Selikow et al. 2009), it is important to help teens take a critical view of assumed group norms and values around dating, sex, violence and gender and this critique may help to define and create healthier group norms. Participants in this and other
studies (MacPhail and Campbell 2001) noted that they appreciated openly discussing intimate relationships, sex and peer culture within a non-judgmental and non-punitive interaction because it gave them the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, choices and behaviour and they felt it would be useful for their peers to have a similar experience.

This study may not be representative of intimate relationships of all South African adolescents and the sample recruitment methods might have resulted in selection bias. Yet, this study provides a useful reference and in-depth insight into these relationships from the perspectives of urban youth. The gendered context of teenage intimate relationships, as well as the varying levels and types of dating experiences within this study sample, indicate that commonality of experience and understanding of these relationships cannot be assumed. The informal, fluid nature of these relationships adds to their complexity and suggests that a simplified model of South African young people’s intimate relationships may not be fit with their lived experience.

The findings of this study have uncovered several future research questions. Future studies should consider exploring the developmental progression of intimate relationships to better inform developmentally appropriate programming. Further exploration of decision-making and negotiation within these relationships and the interaction between individuals’ pre-conceived ideas and expectations about relationships and their ensuing relationship practices and experiences would also provide important understanding of this important domain of young people’s lives. Such studies will hopefully contribute to building a framework to understand healthy or positive intimate or dating relationships.

The insights into the micro-dynamics of these relationships from young people’s perspectives were surprising and valuable in building a nuanced understanding of these relationships that is a crucial consideration during intervention development. Even evidence-based interventions need to be carefully adapted to particular groups and their contexts, needs and experiences. Incorporating the perspective of young people themselves is essential to appropriately and effectively engage teenagers and impact their dating behaviours (Noonan and Charles 2009). The challenge is to design a programme that engages younger adolescents and is relevant to their experiences of fluid, informal relationship practices. Such programmes should be accessible to young people with varying levels of experience with relationships and sex and should allow adolescents to critically engage with their knowledge about relevant relationship issues and practice relationship-building and negotiation skills that are practical within their complex relationship contexts. It is important that interventions balance promoting healthy relationships and challenging potential vulnerabilities or risks such as gender inequity and various types of intimate partner violence. Programming should try to consider multiple models of intimate relationships and a broader focus on interpersonal relationships instead of only dating relationships may be useful for universal-type interventions, especially for younger adolescents. In order to help young people to generalise relevant skills, explicit links and skills practice to illustrate common ground between friendships and intimate relationships may be useful. As study participants suggested, it is important to create a non-judgmental and non-punitive space that allows young people to actively engage with the topic and discuss how to integrate healthy relationship practices into their lives.

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References


Résumé
Les relations intimes ou les rencontres amoureuses jouent un rôle important dans le développement psychosocial et le bien-être des jeunes. Nos connaissances sur la manière selon laquelle les adolescents les conceptualisent et les expérimentent sont toutefois relativement limitées. Les connaissances sur les relations intimes chez les jeunes sont largement fondées sur des études ayant eu pour centre d’intérêt principal la sexualité et la violence parmi les adolescents. Cette étude a exploré les relations intimes en utilisant des données qualitatives provenant de 12 groupes de discussion thématique et de 25 entretiens individuels en profondeur avec des jeunes scolarisés en troisième (âge moyen=14,6 ans) et en terminale (âge moyen=17,2 ans), recrutés dans des écoles de la ville du Cap. Bien que ces résultats recoupent ceux de précédentes recherches, cette étude a procédé à un examen profond des micro-dynamiques des pratiques et des conceptualisations des relations parmi les adolescents. Les propos des participants ont donné un aperçu d’un panorama confus des relations amoureuses, fortement lié au genre et influencé par les relations entre pairs. L’étude a révélé une hétérogénéité de l’expérience des relations et des rapports sexuels. Les implications de ces résultats pour l’élaboration des interventions sont discutées.

Resumen
Las relaciones íntimas o de pareja desempeñan un papel importante en el desarrollo psicosocial y en el bienestar de los jóvenes. Sin embargo, poco se sabe sobre cómo los adolescentes conceptualizan y experimentan tales relaciones. La información académica disponible sobre las relaciones íntimas de los jóvenes proviene en gran parte de investigaciones cuyo objeto de estudio principal ha sido la sexualidad de los adolescentes y la violencia. Este ensayo examinó las relaciones íntimas usando datos cualitativos de 12 diálogos en grupos focales y de 25 entrevistas a jóvenes del octavo grado (edad promedio: 14,6 años) y del undécimo grado (edad promedio: 17,2 años) de escuelas de Ciudad del Cabo. Si bien los resultados obtenidos coinciden con los de investigaciones previas, en este estudio se pudo profundizar en las microdinámicas de las relaciones entre los jóvenes y sus conceptualizaciones. Sus diálogos arrojaron información nueva sobre una compleja dinámica de citas que está determinada en un alto grado por el género y por las relaciones entre pares. Las experiencias en cuanto a relaciones personales y sexo son heterogéneas. Se analizan las implicaciones para el desarrollo de intervenciones.